

The Oregon Street Scene

The Fall

It was raining when I found him.

Face down on an Oregon sidewalk, the concrete slick with rain and blood—his blood. The smell hit first. Metallic, like burnt copper and panic. Then the sight: Red's body twisted, crumpled in a way no warrior should ever fall. Too still. Too quiet. A predator shouldn't lie like that.

I don't remember screaming, but I know I did. Something animal tore out of me.

I hit my knees so hard the pain barely registered. My hands scrambled over him, slick and shaking, until I found it—an artery, open and pulsing, pumping his life away in thick, desperate surges. I jammed two fingers into the wound, hard, like I could plug a hole in a sinking world. I felt it fight me. Death itself, writhing under my grip, trying to rip him away.

"Stay with me," I whispered. Or maybe I begged. "Don't you fucking do this to me."

His eyelids fluttered. Just a twitch. But it was enough to punch all the air from my lungs.

Blood soaked my wrists. My arms. My soul. It felt like the world was unraveling at the seams, and I was too small, too broken, to hold it together.

I couldn't breathe.

This couldn't be happening.

Not him. Not him.

Panic clawed up my throat, white-hot and shaking. I was losing him. I was losing him. And somewhere in that spiral, a brutal truth carved itself into me with all the mercy of a dull blade:

If he died, I'd follow.

Not out of some tragic, star-crossed bullshit. This wasn't poetry. This was gravity. This was physics. This was a truth deeper than any vow I'd ever sworn: if Red Knight left this world, I would walk into the ocean and let it claim me. I would die with my teeth bared, but I would die. Because what was left? What was the point?

And even as I fought to save him, another war raged inside me.

How could this have happened? How could he—this stupid, loyal, infuriating man—love me? A creature born in blood and fire, forged in pits, drowned in shame. I wasn't worth this kind of grief. I wasn't made for it.

He knew me. The real me. The monster. The rage. The ruin. And still—he stayed. Still, he looked at me like I was something worth having. Something worth loving.

How?

How the fuck could anyone love me?

And worse—how had I not seen it? How had I ignored it?

Because I was terrified. That's the truth. Terrified to reach for something good and watch it rot in my hands. I'd spent so long building walls around the wreckage that I forgot what it felt like to want something without hating myself for wanting it.

But now here he was. Bleeding out in my arms. And I knew. Gods help me, I knew.

"I can't lose you," I choked out, voice cracking as I pressed my forehead to his. "If you go, I'll go too. I'll die with my teeth bared, Red. But I'll die. Because I love you. I fucking love you."

There. Out in the open. Too late and too raw.

And then—I broke.

Tears spilled, hot and unrelenting. I cried like I hadn't since I was a kid—like the night Xavier's bones crunched under fists too big and too angry, and all I could do was scream. I cried for the pain I'd buried and the boy I never got to be. I cried for the monster I became. I cried because somewhere along the line, he had become the light I followed, and I didn't even realize it until it started to go out.

I wept over him like he was a goddamn altar.

When help finally arrived, I didn't move. I barely heard them. I rode in the ambulance with one hand still clamped over his wound, fingers cramping, arms shaking, mouth whispering a dozen bargains to a dozen gods I don't even believe in.

They sedated him. Stabilized him. Prepped the shift-stim. "We'll try," someone said.

Try. Like the outcome wasn't already written.

But it wasn't. Not yet.

The adrenaline worked. The shift took.

Still, I didn't move.

I climbed into the hospital bed beside him like I belonged there—because I did. I curled around his half-shifted frame and stayed. I didn't sleep. Didn't eat. I just held on, as if letting go would undo everything.

Eventually, he stirred. Eyes cracked open, dazed and bloodshot and already irritated.

"You look like shit," he rasped, voice like gravel dragged across broken glass.

"You died, asshole," I growled, brushing back his matted hair. "And you took me with you."

Red coughed a laugh, wincing. "That why you finally grew a pair and told me?"

I winced harder. "I was trying to protect you. From me."

He blinked slowly, then gave me that lopsided, dry-as-sandpaper smirk that always undid me. "You don't get to decide that for both of us, jackass."

"I was a monster," I whispered.

"You still are," he said, voice soft now. "But you're my monster. And I've always known."

Silence settled between us—not cold, not broken. Just raw. Real. Like the world had finally stopped spinning long enough for us to breathe.

And for the first time, I let myself believe maybe, just maybe... I was worth being loved after all.

Aftermath – Oregon, Night Two

Hospitals have their own kind of silence. Not peace—just absence. Of life. Of certainty. Of anything solid to cling to.

Red slept, shallow and twitchy, his breathing uneven even as the worst had passed. The machines had quieted, but the noise inside me hadn't. I sat beside the bed, elbows on my knees, blood still dried in the cracks of my knuckles. They offered me a blanket hours ago. I didn't take it. I didn't deserve warmth if he couldn't feel it.

I watched his chest rise and fall like it might stop again.

Every breath was a miracle. And a curse.

Because now that I'd said it—that I love you—I couldn't unsay it. Couldn't lock it back in the vault I'd buried under two decades of violence and shame. The truth sat between us now, undeniable. And it terrified me.

He knew. He always had. And he'd waited anyway.

Gods, what kind of man does that?

What kind of man sees the monster and still reaches for its hand?

His hand twitched, weak and instinctual, brushing the edge of the sheet. Searching. I took it, without thinking. Without fear. Just... need. My fingers laced through his, and his grip tightened—just enough.

He didn't open his eyes, but he didn't need to. That touch said everything.

I'm still here.

You didn't lose me.

I heard you.

That night, when the nurses left us alone, I climbed back into the bed like I had before. Not like I was entitled to it—but like I needed it. Like I needed him to remind me I hadn't already slipped into the kind of grief that doesn't let go.

I curled behind him, arms around his ribs, careful not to press where stitches lived. He didn't stop me. Didn't flinch. He just let out a long, shaky breath and leaned back into me, like he'd been waiting for this shape to return.

There weren't any words. There didn't need to be.

Just breathing. Skin. Warmth.

He was alive.

And for the first time in a long time, so was I.

Later—later, when the hallway lights dimmed and the night thickened around us—he turned in my arms. Leaned into me. Pressed his forehead to mine with a softness I didn't know I still had the capacity to feel.

I closed my eyes. Let the world fall away.

There was no war in that moment. No shame. No past.

Just the quiet gravity of two broken things finding home in each other.

The Aftermath – Oregon, Night Three

He didn't say anything when I shifted to hold him.

No jokes. No barbs. Just silence and the slow, careful way his body settled into mine. The tension bled out of him inch by inch, like air leaking from a balloon stretched too tight for too long.

And then it came—that breath.

That goddamn breath.

It was quiet, barely there, but I felt it more than I heard it. A shuddering, bone-deep exhale like he'd been holding it in for years. Like surviving gave him permission to finally let go.

That sound undid me more than the blood ever had.

Because I hadn't realized he was waiting for me. Still waiting. Through all the years I treated him like a satellite orbiting something broken. Through every time I pushed him aside to protect him from a danger he never asked to be spared from.

Through every moment I refused to see him.

I stayed a while, long enough to feel his breathing deepen into something close to sleep. He was warm now. Safe. My arms around him didn't shake like they had the night before. The danger was over.

But the damage?

That was still mine.

So I got up.

I moved slow, careful not to wake him. His hand twitched as I pulled away, searching again, even in sleep. I pressed my lips to his temple and whispered, "I'm not gone. Just need to breathe."

Lie. Half-lie. Truth enough.

I stepped into the hospital bathroom, turned the light on, and locked the door.

And then I fell.

Not physically. Not this time. But inward. Like my ribs had caved in. Like my bones were splinters barely holding a shape.

Because now that he was safe, I wasn't.

Now that I knew what he meant to me—what he always had—I couldn't hide behind ignorance. I couldn't pretend I didn't know.

I had. I'd always known. Somewhere deep in the place where monsters aren't allowed to love, I'd known.

And I'd ignored it.

I looked in the mirror. Saw the blood still crusted at the corners of my nails. The bruises on my forearms. The hollowness in my eyes. I looked like a villain in someone else's story.

How could he love this?

How had I let him carry that alone?

He'd been right there the whole time, steady as a rock, patient in ways I didn't deserve. I told myself I was shielding him. Protecting him. But the truth was simpler—and uglier.

I was afraid.

Afraid that if I touched something that pure, I'd stain it. That my dirt, my ruin, would mark him. And I loved him too much to let that happen.

So I denied him the truth.

Not because I didn't love him—but because I did. And now, with him whole again and finally breathing free, I couldn't share that peace. Not yet.

Not with this guilt still clinging to my skin.

I gripped the edge of the sink until my knuckles turned white. Squeezed until the tendons ached. I wanted pain. Needed it. Needed something physical to match the break inside me.

I mouthed the words into the mirror.

"I don't deserve him."

Again.

"I don't deserve him."

My throat closed.

The tears didn't come. I'd already spent them. But the shame stayed. Heavy. Stubborn.

I thought about the look in his eyes when I told him I loved him. How he hadn't looked surprised—just relieved.

Gods, he'd been waiting so long.

And I'd let him suffer.

No matter how close I'd stayed, I'd made him carry that weight alone. His love. His need. His loyalty. All held in his chest like that breath he'd only just now released.

That guilt carved something permanent in me.

Even years later, on our wedding day, it would still live in my bones. When I stood before him, in front of gods and kin and spirit, I'd say it plain:

"If I planned it in advance, I'd run. And you know it."

Because I'm still afraid.

Not of him. He's never wavered.

But of me. Of what I could destroy. Of what I might ruin.

Because love like his? It's a light.

And monsters like me weren't made to stand in it.