

## Prologue

There are rivers that carve mountains, shaping the land over centuries. And then there are rivers that carry the sky—holding reflections of the heavens upon their surface, never grasping, never keeping, only flowing onward.

I have lived like such a river.

Once, in a childhood half-forgotten, I reached for the sky. I spoke with an angel who whispered of wisdom hidden in the rustling leaves and the hush of the wind. But like all rivers, I kept moving, leaving those memories behind.

Years passed. Hands calloused, roads walked, laughter shared, and still, I thought myself at peace. Until one day, a voice in the wind called a name I had long buried.

Ciel.

It was then that I realized—the sky had never left me. I had only forgotten to look.

## The River That Carries the Sky

I was born in a quiet village, the kind where days passed in the rhythm of seasons, where the scent of fresh bread and tilled earth filled the air. My parents were simple folk—my father, a woodcutter, my mother, a weaver. They worked hard and laughed often, teaching me the value of a steady hand and a kind word.

As a child, I was restless. The village felt small, the paths too well-trodden, the sky always just out of reach. I spent my days wandering the hills, chasing the wind as if I could catch it in my hands.

One autumn afternoon, when the air was crisp and the scent of fallen leaves filled my lungs, I ventured deeper into the woods than ever before. The trees stood taller here, their canopies thick, filtering sunlight into golden patches on the moss-covered ground. The world felt different—quieter, as though it were holding its breath.

I followed the sound of running water, my small hands brushing against the rough bark of ancient oaks, until I reached a clearing. A stream cut through the land, its surface shimmering with the reflection of the sky. And there, on the other side, stood a girl unlike any I had ever seen.

She was dressed in white, her deep blue hair flowing like the river itself, her feet bare against the soft earth. She knelt beside the stream, dipping her hands into the water, and for a moment, she seemed part of the forest itself—something ageless and untouchable.

I stepped forward, twigs snapping beneath my feet. She lifted her head. Her eyes met mine—crimson, like embers in the twilight.

“You’re lost,” she said, her voice carrying across the water, light as the breeze.

“I’m not lost,” I replied, though I wasn’t sure if it was true. “Who are you?”

She tilted her head, as if considering the question. “I am no one, and I am everyone. I am the voice in the wind, the whisper in the leaves. But you can call me Ciel.”

I frowned, not understanding her words. “That’s a strange name.”

She smiled, and it was the kind of smile that made the world feel lighter. “Perhaps. But names are only what we make of them.”

Something about her fascinated me, though I couldn’t explain why. I wanted to ask more, to understand who she was, but before I could, she stood up, stepping into the stream. The water barely rippled around her feet.

“Come,” she said, holding out her hand. “If you wish to see the world as I do, follow me.”

And without thinking, without questioning, I did.

Perhaps that was a point in my life which would decide my fate for years to come.

As I followed her across the stream, I noticed an ancient tree standing at the edge of the clearing. Its bark was cracked and peeling, its branches brittle, stretching toward the sky like the fingers of a dying man. Something about it made me uneasy—it looked as though it had given up long ago.

She stopped beside it and placed a hand against its rough trunk. “Even what seems lifeless still listens,” she murmured. “Everything has a voice, if you are willing to hear it.”

I frowned. “But this tree is dead.”

She shook her head, her deep blue hair catching the sunlight. Then she closed her eyes, and the air around us stilled. It was as if the forest itself was holding its breath. A hush passed through the leaves—not a breeze, but something deeper, something I could feel in my bones.

Then, before my eyes, the tree began to change. The deep cracks in its bark smoothed over, as though time itself was reversing. Tiny buds appeared along its branches, unfurling into fresh green leaves. A single flower bloomed at the highest point, pale and delicate, swaying in the unseen current of Ciel’s will.

I took a step back, my breath caught in my throat. “How did you...?”

She turned to me, crimson eyes warm with something I couldn’t quite name. “It was always alive,” she said softly. “It was only waiting to be seen.”

I barely had time to process what I had witnessed before she moved again, leading me deeper into the woods. She stopped by a pool of water, its surface smooth as glass, reflecting the golden hues of the setting sun. Ciel knelt beside it and traced her fingers along the water. The reflection shimmered, rippling outward, and in an instant, I saw something impossible. The image of the sky changed, revealing stars twinkling against a night untouched by the sun. It was as if she had pulled the future into the present, showing me the heavens before their time had come.

I gasped. "Is this magic?"

She shook her head. "It is only the truth of what is yet to be. The world carries time in its own way."

I had no words, only wonder.

We continued on, the forest darkening around us, and soon, we reached a quiet clearing. Fireflies danced in the air, their lights blinking in slow rhythms, like the gentle heartbeat of the night itself. Ciel raised a hand, and the lights gathered around her, swirling like tiny stars pulled into an unseen current. They spiraled and moved in patterns too intricate for me to understand, and for a moment, the night itself seemed to hum with life.

I turned to Ciel, my voice barely above a whisper. "Who are you really?"

She only smiled.

By then, the sky had darkened completely, and I realized with a sinking feeling that I didn't know the way home. The trees looked unfamiliar, the path I had taken now hidden in the shadows. My chest tightened. I had wandered too far.

Ciel must have noticed my unease because she exhaled softly, a breath lighter than the wind itself. It drifted forward, weaving through the trees like an unseen guide. "Follow it," she said. "It will take you home."

I hesitated, glancing back at her. "Will I see you again?"

Her crimson eyes softened. "The wind always returns to those who listen."

I stepped forward, following the invisible current of air as it whispered through the trees. The moment I turned back, Ciel was gone, as if she had never been there at all.

But the fireflies still danced, and the tree she had touched still bloomed.

And I knew, somehow, that she was real.

For many days, it went on like this. Each morning, I would venture into the woods, and there she would be—Ciel, with her deep blue hair and crimson eyes, waiting with a gentle smile. Every day, she would show me something new. One day, she taught me how to listen to the whispers of the wind, and another, she revealed the way leaves danced in unseen patterns. She spoke of harmony, of patience, of the world's silent wisdom hidden in plain sight.

Without realizing it myself, I began to change. My once restless mind grew calm, my eager heart found stillness. I found myself walking slower, observing more, thinking less of desires and more of balance.

But all things must change. One day, my parents told me that we were leaving the village. My father had found better work elsewhere, and though I was still young, I understood that this was something beyond my control. The night before we left, I ran to the woods one last time, heart pounding with the weight of an unspoken farewell.

Ciel was there, as if she had always known. She did not ask why my steps were hurried or why my breath came short. She simply smiled, the same serene expression I had come to treasure. I told her everything—how we were leaving, how I did not know when I would return. My voice wavered as I promised her that I would come back one day.

She did not try to stop me. Instead, she placed a hand on my head, as she had done so many times before, and whispered, “Then I will wait.”

And so I left, glancing back at the forest as long as I could, hoping to catch one last glimpse of her between the trees. But when I blinked, she was gone, like a breath of wind dissolving into the night.

Years passed, and I grew into a young man. I lived simply, never desiring wealth or status. My parents passed away when I was still coming of age, leaving me to fend for myself. I took on whatever work I could find—chopping wood, mending roofs, carrying water—never asking for more than what was needed to survive. I wore the same tattered robes, ate whatever I could forage from the forest, and slept beneath the stars.

People began to notice me, though I never sought their attention. They came with their burdens—broken tools, broken hearts, broken hopes. I listened, offered what little help I could, and somehow, their problems faded away. Sometimes it was through words, sometimes through actions, and sometimes it was simply that, in speaking to me, they found the answers themselves.

They tried to reward me, but I had no need for gold or gifts. My joy was in the quiet, in the rhythm of life as it unfolded naturally. And so, they left their offerings anyway—a loaf of bread, a warm cloak, a place to rest when the nights grew cold. It was not much, but it was enough.

For some reason, many people came to be, seeking, in their words, ‘the simple man who solved their problems in incomprehensible ways’. And though I asked for nothing, they kept coming, as if drawn by something even I did not understand.

One day, as I wandered through a small town, the sharp sound of an argument caught my ear. I turned to see a young woman, her clothes worn and patched, standing before a merchant’s stall. Her voice was firm, but there was a roughness

to it, the kind that came from too many days of hunger and too many nights spent under the open sky.

“That’s twice the price it was yesterday,” she said, arms crossed. “You’re cheating me.”

The merchant scoffed. “Prices change. If you can’t pay, move along.”

I watched as her fingers curled into fists, her pride warring with her desperation. She didn’t want to beg, but she had little choice. Before she could speak again, I stepped forward and placed the last piece of bread I carried onto the stall.

“Take it,” I said simply.

She turned to me, eyes narrowing. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Because you’re hungry.”

She hesitated, then snatched the bread from the stall. She ate quickly, without another word, and when she finished, she glanced at me once more before disappearing into the crowd.

I thought that would be the last I saw of her.

But fate had other plans.

A few days later, as I worked to mend a broken cartwheel for an old farmer, I felt a gaze on me. I turned and found her sitting beneath a tree, arms folded, watching me in silence.

When I finished my work, she finally spoke. “You helped me once. Why?”

I wiped my hands on my robe. “Because you were hungry,” I repeated.

She scoffed. “People don’t help others for nothing.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “but I need nothing, so I ask for nothing.”

She frowned, as if searching for a catch, some hidden trick. When she found none, she let out a short breath and looked away. “Neia.”

I tilted my head.

“That’s my name,” she muttered.

I nodded. “Rimuru.”

And with that, a new path unfolded before me.

Neia didn’t leave after that. At first, she kept her distance, watching me from afar as I worked. Some days, she would appear as I swept the steps of a temple or helped a villager lift a heavy load. Other days, she trailed behind as I walked the roads, though she never spoke much.

She was cautious, like a stray animal testing whether a hand was meant to feed or to strike.

I let her be.

Then, one evening, as I sat beneath an old tree, sipping water from a wooden cup, she finally sat beside me.

“You really don’t ask for anything, do you?”

I glanced at her. The setting sun cast an orange glow on her face, highlighting the sharpness in her eyes—eyes that had seen too much of the world’s cruelty.

“I have what I need,” I said simply.

She pulled her knees to her chest. “That’s stupid.”

I smiled. “Perhaps.”

For a while, we sat in silence. The breeze carried the scent of warm earth, and the distant chatter of villagers filled the spaces between our words.

She lingered near the places I worked, always with a skeptical look on her face. She didn’t ask for help again, but she didn’t seem to trust me either. It was as if she were waiting for me to reveal some hidden motive, some price for my kindness that I had yet to name.

One evening, as I sat by the river washing my hands, she finally spoke again.

“You live like a beggar,” she said, sitting down a few feet away. “No home, no money, no future. What’s the point?”

I cupped a handful of water and let it slip through my fingers. “A river does not ask where it flows. It simply moves with the land.”

She clicked her tongue. “That doesn’t answer anything.”

I smiled. “Doesn’t it?”

She scoffed and leaned back on her elbows, looking up at the sky. “You know, I used to think people like you didn’t exist. The ones who help without expecting anything back. In my world, everyone takes and takes, and if you don’t take first, you’re left with nothing.”

I didn’t ask about her world. If she wanted me to know, she would tell me in her own time.

Instead, I simply said, “Do you still believe that?”

She didn’t answer. But she kept coming back.

One evening, as we sat beneath an old willow tree, Neia stared into the distance, her expression unreadable. The sky was burning with the colors of dusk, but her eyes were fixed on something far away—something I couldn’t see.

“I had a brother once,” she said suddenly, her voice quiet but steady. “His name was Ikor. He was always laughing, always dreaming. He wanted to be a knight,

you know? Said he'd wear shining armor and fight for justice. But we were peasants. Justice doesn't put food on the table."

She picked up a small stone and rolled it between her fingers. "The war came, and they needed bodies more than they needed knights. The lords went through the villages and took every able-bodied boy. We had no say in it. One morning, he was my brother, sparring with a wooden sword in the backyard. By nightfall, he was a soldier."

She tossed the stone into the grass. "We got one letter from him. One. He wrote that he was fine, that he missed home, that he would return soon. I didn't believe a word of it."

Her hands curled into fists. "The second letter wasn't from him. It was from his captain. They sent his things back—what little he had. A rusted dagger. A half-burned map. A lock of our mother's hair. I don't even know where he was buried."

She exhaled sharply, as if trying to push something out of her chest. "Then my sister. Elthea. She was the beautiful one. The smart one. The one who could've married someone rich, if we weren't drowning in debt. My parents—" She stopped, then started again. "My parents sold her to some merchant from the city. Said he'd take care of her, give her a better life. But we both knew the truth. He wasn't looking for a wife."

Neia hugged her knees, her voice growing rough. "I stayed as long as I could after that, but what was left for me? A brother in the dirt, a sister in chains, parents who had long since stopped looking me in the eye?" She let out a small, humorless laugh. "So I ran. I don't even know if they cared. Maybe they were relieved—one less mouth to feed."

Silence stretched between us, filled only by the whisper of the wind through the trees. I didn't say anything. There was nothing to say that could take that pain away.

After a long while, she turned to me, searching my face as if expecting something—pity, maybe. Judgment. But I only met her gaze and said, "You survived."

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Yeah. I did."

And for the first time, she looked at me not with skepticism, but with something closer to understanding. She laughed bitterly when she spoke of it. "It's funny," she said once. "I hated the life I left behind, but at least I understood it. But this..." She gestured vaguely at me, at the simple way I lived. "This makes no sense."

"Does it need to?" I asked.

She was quiet for a long time. Then, she sighed. "Maybe not."

And so, she stayed. Not because she had nowhere else to go—though that may have been part of it—but because she wanted to understand.

One afternoon, as the sun cast long golden rays through the forest, I was splitting logs behind the village. The rhythmic crack of wood breaking apart filled the air, mingling with the rustling of leaves in the soft breeze. I wiped the sweat from my brow and reached for another log when—

A flicker of blue.

Just beyond the trees, barely visible between the shifting branches.

I froze, axe still in hand. The color danced between the leaves, swaying like strands of silk caught in the wind. My heart skipped a beat. It was strange—no one in the village had hair that shade. And yet, something about it tugged at my memory, a feeling both distant and familiar.

Before I realized it, my feet were moving. I stepped past the treeline, following the flash of blue deeper into the woods. The ground was soft beneath my steps, the air thick with the scent of earth and moss. The figure was always just ahead, slipping past my vision the moment I thought I had caught up.

Then, nothing.

I found myself standing in a quiet clearing, surrounded by the soft hush of trees. The blue had vanished, leaving only the whispering wind behind. I turned in slow circles, searching, but there was nothing—no footprints, no broken twigs, nothing to prove that I had seen anything at all.

Had I imagined it?

The thought unsettled me. I stood there for a long while before finally turning back. But the feeling stayed with me, gnawing at the edges of my mind like an unfinished melody.

For days, it lingered. I would catch myself lost in thought, trying to chase a memory that remained just out of reach. Where had I seen that blue before? Why did it stir something deep within me, something I could not name?

I must have been distracted more than I realized because one evening, as I sat sharpening a dull knife, Neia plopped down beside me with a frown.

“You’ve been weird lately.” She propped her chin on her hand, eyes narrowing. “You keep staring off into space like you’re seeing ghosts or something.”

I blinked, pulled from my thoughts. “I’m fine.”

“Liar.” She flicked a small twig at me. “Something’s on your mind. What is it?”

I hesitated, turning the knife in my hands. Would she think I was losing my mind? That I was chasing shadows in the woods for no reason?

But Neia had always been stubborn. She wouldn’t let it go until I answered.

“...I saw something in the forest the other day,” I admitted finally. “Something that felt... familiar.”



Neia tilted her head. “What kind of something?”

I exhaled, searching for the right words. “A glimpse of blue. Like flowing hair.”

She raised a brow. “And you’re sure it wasn’t just a trick of the light?”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t sure at all.

She watched me for a moment before leaning back on her elbows. “Well, if you figure it out, let me know. You’re acting like a man who just saw a ghost.”

I forced a chuckle. “Maybe I did.”

But deep down, I knew—this was no mere trick of the light. Something, or someone, was waiting for me to remember.

For days, the image of flowing blue hair haunted my thoughts. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see it swaying between the trees, just beyond my reach. It felt like a whisper from my past, a memory buried so deep that I couldn’t quite grasp it.

One evening, as I sat by the river, watching the current carry away scattered leaves, a realization struck me.

My old village.

The thought sent a strange shiver through me. The village where I was born—the one I left as a child. Could the vision have something to do with that place? Had I once seen something, or someone, there who bore the same blue as the figure in the forest?

But there was a problem.

I had been too young when we moved. I barely remembered its name, let alone where it was. My parents had never spoken of it after we left, and I had never thought to ask. Now, as the past beckoned me, I realized I had no way of returning to a place I could not name.

Still, I couldn’t ignore this feeling.

I needed to find my village.

The town I lived in now—Alba’s Hollow—was not unkind to me. It had given me shelter, even if I had never truly belonged. But it was not my home.

The trouble was, I had no money for travel. I owned nothing of value except the small cabin I had built with my own hands, nestled at the edge of the forest. It wasn’t much—just a wooden structure with a single room and a hearth, the walls patched with whatever materials I could scavenge. But it had been enough for me.

And so, with a quiet heart, I sold it.

A poet passing through Alba's Hollow had long admired the tranquility of my home. He wished for a retreat, a place where he could write in solitude. When I told him he could have the cabin, he eagerly accepted, paying me a modest sum in exchange. It was more money than I had ever owned.

But it did not go unnoticed.

"You did WHAT?"

Neia's voice nearly echoed through the entire town square. A few heads turned, and I had to resist the urge to step back.

"I sold my cabin," I repeated, as if saying it again might make it sound less shocking to her.

She gaped at me, utterly bewildered. "Your only house? The one you lived in?"

"Yes."

She threw her hands up. "Why would you do that?! Where are you even going to stay?"

I shrugged. "Wherever I need to."

"That's not an answer!" She ran a hand through her hair, clearly trying to keep herself from knocking some sense into me. "You—You can't just throw your home away like that! Where are you even planning to go?"

"To find my old village."

Neia stopped mid-rant, blinking. "...What?"

I exhaled. "I think the thing I saw in the forest is connected to where I was born. I don't know its name or its location, but I need to find it."

Her expression shifted, the sharpness fading into something more uncertain. "But... why?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I can't ignore it."

She crossed her arms. "And what if you don't find it? What if you're chasing a memory that doesn't exist?"

"Then I'll build a new home somewhere else." I gestured toward the surrounding forest. "As long as the land is marked for expanding the town, anyone can claim it. I can always rebuild."

Neia stared at me as if I had lost my mind. And maybe, to her, I had.

Finally, she let out a long sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose. "You really are hopeless."

I smiled slightly. "That's what people keep telling me."

She groaned. "Fine. Whatever. Go off and chase ghosts. But you're not doing it alone."

I blinked. "What?"

She crossed her arms. "I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to. I want to." She jabbed a finger at my chest. "Someone has to make sure you don't get robbed, starve, or get eaten by a bear. And besides, I don't have anything to lose. I don't even own a house."

I hesitated. "... Are you sure?"

"Obviously." She sighed. "At least this way, I'll have a good story to tell if we end up lost forever in some forgotten corner of the kingdom."

I chuckled. "Then let's find out where the road takes us."

And so, with nothing but the clothes on our backs and a handful of coins in my pocket, Neia and I left Alba's Hollow behind. The road stretched before us, uncertain and endless. But for the first time in years, I felt as though I was walking toward something I had long forgotten.

Toward a past that was waiting for me to remember.

As Neia and I traveled, the road unfolded before us like a thread spun by fate, weaving us through forests, villages, and stretches of open land. Though my purpose was to find my old village, I could not abandon the way I had always lived.

Each town we passed had its own troubles, and I could not help but stop when I saw someone in need.

In a small village by the river, we stopped to rest at an inn. That evening, as we sat outside beneath the lantern glow, a man approached us hesitantly. He was tall, his arms thick with muscle from years at the forge, but his eyes were shadowed with worry.

"You're the wanderer who helps people, aren't you?" he asked.

Neia smirked and elbowed me lightly. "Told you your reputation was spreading."

I simply nodded.

The blacksmith sighed. "It's my son. Ever since his mother died, he refuses to touch a hammer. He was meant to inherit my trade, but now..." He shook his head. "I don't know what to do. I've tried everything, but he won't even step into the forge."

I thought for a moment. "Where is he now?"

The blacksmith pointed toward the river, where a young boy sat alone on the banks, tossing stones into the water.

I walked over and sat beside him without a word. For a long time, we simply watched the river together. He skipped a stone. I skipped one too.

“You’re not going to tell me to pick up a hammer, are you?” he finally asked.

“No,” I said.

He glanced at me. “Then why are you here?”

I thought about it. “Because sometimes, when the world grows too loud, it helps to have someone sit beside you in silence.”

The boy said nothing. But after a long pause, he whispered, “I see my mother’s face every time I enter the forge. It feels like I can’t breathe.”

I nodded, watching the ripples spread across the water. “Then don’t enter it. Not yet. Instead, try something new.”

“... Like what?”

I picked up a small piece of driftwood, smooth from years in the river, and handed it to him. “Start with this. If your hands won’t hold a hammer, let them carve.”

He hesitated, then took it.

A week later, as Neia and I prepared to leave, the blacksmith found me again. He didn’t say anything at first—just held up a small wooden carving of a bird.

“My son made this,” he said. “Said he wanted to give it to me.”

The weight in his voice was heavy with unshed tears.

As I took the wooden bird in my hands, I smiled.

Deep in the woods, as we walked the winding paths toward the next village, we were ambushed. Five men, ragged and thin, leapt from the trees, weapons drawn.

“Give us your money,” their leader growled.

Neia, hand on her dagger, tensed beside me. But I raised a hand to stop her and simply looked at them.

Their clothes were tattered. Their hands shook. And more than anything else, their eyes were hollow—not with cruelty, but with desperation.

I reached into my satchel, pulled out a bundle of dried bread and fruit, and tossed it to the leader. He caught it, startled.

“What—?”

“You’re not thieves,” I said. “You’re starving.”

The men hesitated. One of them, younger than the rest, bit his lip as his eyes darted toward the food.

Slowly, their leader lowered his sword. “... We were farmers once,” he muttered. “A nobleman took our land. We had nothing left.”

I nodded. “Then take this.” I handed him a small pouch of coins—the last of what remained from selling my cabin.

Neia gawked. “Are you serious?”

But the man took it, his hands trembling.

“There’s a village not far from here,” I told him. “They need workers. Go there, tell them you can mend fences, till fields, or do whatever needs doing.”

One of the bandits fell to his knees, his voice cracking. “You’re giving us a second chance?”

I smiled. “Everyone deserves one.”

By the time we reached the next village, there were no more bandits in those woods.

In a quiet town where the air smelled of wheat and earth, we met an old man lying beneath an oak tree. His breaths were shallow, his skin pale. A woman knelt beside him, holding his hand.

“He’s been asking for someone to take his final words to his son,” she told us. “But the journey is long, and no one has the time.”

I knelt beside the man. His eyes fluttered open.

“Stranger,” he rasped. “Will you carry my words?”

I took his frail hand. “Tell me.”

With the last of his strength, he spoke of regret. Of love unspoken. Of a son he had not seen in years, living in a distant town. I etched his words into memory.

That night, he passed away beneath the oak.

Two weeks later, Neia and I arrived at a bustling city far from where we had started. We found the man’s son in a small bakery, kneading dough.

When I told him of his father’s words, he stood in silence for a long time. Then, without a word, he removed his apron, closed his shop, and began preparing for a journey back home.

Neia watched him go, then turned to me. “You didn’t just deliver his words. You brought him home.”

I only nodded.

And so, our journey continued.

Wherever we went, there were people in need—some seeking answers, some seeking hope, and some simply seeking someone to listen.

I did what I had always done.

I walked. I listened. I helped.

And through it all, the thought of the blue-haired figure never left my mind.

We came across a small village nestled at the foot of a hill. It was the kind of place where time seemed to move slower, where children ran barefoot through the fields, and elders sat outside their homes, watching the world pass by.

Neia and I had stopped to rest near a well when I noticed an elderly woman struggling to carry a bundle of thatch up a ladder. Her house, old and weather-worn, had gaping holes in its roof, and the sky above carried the promise of rain.

Before I could think twice, I was already beside her, taking the bundle from her hands.

“You’ll hurt yourself,” I said gently.

She peered up at me with tired eyes. “The roof leaks when it rains.”

I nodded. “Then let’s fix it.”

Neia sighed behind me. “Of course.”

I climbed onto the roof and began patching the holes, weaving the thatch tightly so it would hold against the wind. It took the rest of the afternoon, and by the time I was done, the sky had darkened. The old woman, who had watched silently, pressed a small cloth bundle into my hands.

“Food for the road,” she said. “It’s all I can give.”

I did not refuse her kindness.

That night, as Neia and I rested under a tree at the village’s edge, she chuckled.

“You’re really incapable of walking past a problem, aren’t you?”

I smiled at the stars above. “Maybe.”

Further along the road, we entered a bustling market town. Stalls lined the streets, voices rose in lively arguments, and the air smelled of spiced bread and fresh fruits.

As we passed, I overheard a heated conversation—a merchant and a farmer locked in an argument. The farmer, red-faced with frustration, pointed at the merchant’s brass scales.

“These scales are false!” the farmer accused. “You’re cheating me!”

The merchant scoffed. “Lies! My scales are honest.”

I stepped forward. “May I test them?”

Both men turned to me. The merchant hesitated but waved a hand. “Go ahead.”

I took a small rock from the ground and placed it on the scale. Then, I removed it and placed an identical-looking stone from another part of the street. The scale tilted ever so slightly different.

Neia, catching on, grabbed a handful of weights from another stall and started testing them. It took only a few moments to confirm it—the merchant’s scales were subtly, but undeniably, rigged.

The crowd around us murmured. The merchant paled.

“I—” he began, but the whispers turned to shouts.

In the end, he was forced to return the extra coin he had unfairly taken.

As we left the market, Neia smirked. “You really do cause trouble everywhere you go.”

I chuckled. “The world sorts itself out. I just give it a little push.”

One evening, as we passed through another village, I noticed a young girl sitting outside a house, staring at a wooden cage. Inside it, a small bird flapped its wings restlessly.

She sighed. “I thought it would be happy with me,” she murmured.

I knelt beside her. “What’s wrong?”

She hesitated. “I found this bird with a broken wing. I took care of it, fed it, and nursed it back to health. But now, it doesn’t sing. It just sits there.”

I looked at the bird. Then at the sky.

“Maybe it sings where it belongs.”

The girl frowned. “But if I let it go, it might get hurt again.”

“Maybe.” I nodded. “But maybe it will fly.”

She stared at me for a long time. Then, with trembling hands, she opened the cage.

The bird hesitated.

Then, with a burst of energy, it shot into the sky, wings beating fast. It disappeared into the fading light.

The girl smiled.

Neia leaned against the fence, watching. “That bird reminds me of someone.”

I turned to her. “Who?”

She grinned. “You.”

The road had stretched long behind us, yet Neia had changed more than the path beneath our feet.

It was in the way she mirrored my habits without meaning to—how she no longer counted her coins before every meal, how she stopped eyeing merchants for the best deal and instead shared food with strangers without a second thought. It was in the way she teased me now, light and effortless, as if daring me to react.

“You never get tired, do you?” she sighed one evening as I helped an old farmer repair a broken fence. She leaned against the post, watching me with her arms crossed, pretending to be indifferent. “Are you sure you weren’t actually born with a halo?”

I smiled, tying the last knot. “If I was, I must have misplaced it.”

She snorted but said nothing else. Still, she lingered until the work was done, and when the farmer offered us food in thanks, she accepted without hesitation.

It was near sundown when we reached the heavily guarded town of Haldor’s Gate. The walls loomed high, and the men stationed at the entrance looked far from welcoming. Neither of us had permits, and neither of us wished to waste time being turned away.

“We can go around,” I said simply.

Neia nodded absentmindedly.

But then, her eyes caught something beyond the gate.

A guard—a man with one arm—stood at the edge of the barracks, his face set in a passive, dull expression. Around him, two younger guards laughed and jeered, shoving him lightly, testing his balance as if waiting for him to fall.

Neia’s fingers curled slightly.

Her gaze stayed on the man longer than it should have. She turned away, acting as though she had seen nothing, but I had already noticed the way her shoulders had stiffened, the way her breath had hitched for just a second.

I did not ask.

That night, when she finally slept, I left.

Sneaking past the guards was effortless. I found the one-armed man sitting in the shadows near the back of the barracks, his hand loosely gripping a bottle.

“You weren’t with them,” I said.

He blinked at me, then let out a hollow chuckle. “What’s it to you?”

I sat beside him.

For a while, neither of us spoke. The wind carried the sounds of distant music from the town square, muffled beneath the weight of the walls. Eventually, he sighed and set his drink down.

“My name’s Ikor,” he said. “Or at least, that’s what it was before I became a ghost.”

He told me his story.

A soldier. A survivor. A man who should have died on the battlefield but instead threw away his name to escape it all. He spoke of war and betrayal, of officials



who saw men as nothing more than numbers on a parchment. He spoke of two younger sisters—Elthea, who had been sold like cattle, and Neia, who had run.

“When I see them. . .” He swallowed. “When I see any woman in chains, any girl with dead eyes—I look, and I look, and I look. But I never find them.”

I sat still, the pieces falling into place.

There was only one way to be sure.

Neia woke to find us both sitting near her. The fire had long since burned to embers.

She did not ask how.

She did not ask why.

She simply closed her eyes for a long moment and exhaled.

“I didn’t want to face my past,” she admitted, voice barely above a whisper. “I thought I had left it behind.”

Ikor watched her carefully. “You really thought I wouldn’t recognize you?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t.”

Silence stretched between them.

Then, quietly, Ikor chuckled. “You still glare when you’re hiding something.”

She blinked, startled, before scoffing. “You’re still the same idiot who threw punches before thinking.”

The tension broke.

They spoke—of the years that had passed, of what had been lost and what had been found. But every time the conversation lulled, Neia turned it toward me.

“He never asks for anything,” she murmured. “Never takes anything. I’ve never seen anyone like him before.”

And then she sang.

I watch you sweep the stones each day,  
With mindful grace, the dust drifts far and free.  
At first, I thought, what foolish way—  
Is there no greater path to see?  
Yet now I hear the words unspoken,  
In every leaf the wind has turned,  
No lesson etched in ink or token—  
Yet in your hands, the truth is learned.

You do not chase, you do not cling,  
You walk as though the earth is kind.  
No chain to break, no crown to bring,

No fear of what is left behind.  
And when I asked, "What guides your days?"  
You only smiled, as soft as rain—  
"The stream that bends will find its way,  
The stone that stays will only wane."

No walls to guard, no path to bind,  
No need to grasp, no will to fight.  
The river flows, the stars will shine,  
And all will come in its own time.

I walked a world of fire and stone,  
Where hunger taught my hands to steal.  
Where loss became the seeds I'd sown,  
And love seemed far, too far to feel.  
But in your quiet, I found space,  
Between each breath, a softer tune.  
The sky was never empty air—  
It held the sun, it cradled the moon.

No walls to guard, no path to bind,  
No need to grasp, no will to fight.  
The river flows, the stars will shine,  
And all will come in its own time.

So now I sweep the stones each day,  
The dust will rise, the dust will fade.  
The world moves on, and so will I—  
Not lost, not bound, just free to fly.

Her voice was low at first, almost uncertain, but then it grew—soft yet unshaken,  
carrying the words she had woven from her own heart.

Ikor listened with a smirk.

"You're in love with him," he said when she finished.

Neia sputtered. "I—"

He laughed. "You talk about him more than yourself. And you never sing for anyone."

Her face burned, but she crossed her arms stubbornly. "I'm not—"

He raised an eyebrow.

"...Shut up."

Ikor only grinned.

When the night began to fade, Neia stood.

“I’ll visit,” she promised. “But I’m not staying.”

Ikor eyed her before glancing at me. Then he smirked. “I didn’t think you would.”

She caught up to me just as I was preparing to leave.

“You’re still here?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

And so, we walked on.

The moment I stepped into the village, something in me stirred. It wasn’t a memory, not yet—just a feeling, a quiet whisper that I had stood here before, that the wind had carried my breath in this very place. The scent of the air, the way the earth felt beneath my feet, the rhythm of life here—it was familiar.

I asked around, searching for someone, anyone, who might remember me. But each time, I was met with blank stares. Some of the older folk recalled my parents, but only faintly, as passing figures from long ago.

And when I asked about a blue-haired girl, the answer was always the same.

“No one like that ever lived here.”

Even so, I knew. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew.

Neia must have noticed the way my shoulders sagged, the way my eyes kept searching for something I couldn’t name. She placed a hand on my arm.

“Why don’t you rest? I’ll ask around more.”

I hesitated, then shook my head. “I think I’ll take a walk in the forest.”

She gave me a long look, then sighed. “Alright. Just don’t get lost.”

The trees stretched high above, their branches whispering in the wind. I walked without direction, guided only by an invisible thread of familiarity. The deeper I went, the stronger it became, until finally, I stepped into a clearing.

And there it was.

An ancient tree stood at its edge, roots sprawling like veins across the earth, its trunk thick and scarred by time. I didn’t know why, but the moment I saw it, my heart clenched.

I took a step forward.

Then another.

And suddenly, I wasn’t standing there as I was now.

I was smaller, my hands still soft with childhood. I was running across this clearing, laughing, breathless. And beside me—

A presence.

I couldn't see her face, but I could feel her there, watching over me with quiet patience. A friend. Someone I had once known.

Someone I had forgotten.

A warmth spread through my chest, achingly familiar. More memories slipped through the cracks, slow at first, then all at once—the touch of a gentle hand on my forehead, the soft hum of words I could barely understand, the flickering mirages of light and air that had once felt like magic.

And then—

A song.

A melody rose unbidden in my mind, ghostly and familiar, as if it had been waiting all these years. A voice—soft yet vast, unshaken, like the sky itself.

And with it, a name.

A name I had buried in the depths of my forgotten past.

“...Ciel.”

The word escaped my lips before I could think, and the moment it did, everything fell into place.

Softly falls the evening's glow, the day becomes a sigh,  
With footsteps worn on paths I know, beneath a patient sky.  
The wind brings echoes, faint and warm, from places far and near,  
A fleeting shape, a distant name-so close, and yet unclear.

The hearthlight flickers-stories weave, of longing and release,  
Of loves that slipped like morning dew, yet left the heart at peace.  
A single petal, drifting down, unfolds a hidden thread-  
A voice I knew, a vow unsaid, from dreams I thought had fled.

Ciel-the dawn, the gentle rain, the breath between the trees-  
She taught me how the world could sing through whispers on the breeze.  
In childhood's spring, she touched my soul, then faded with the tide-  
But every path I've walked since then has kept her by my side.

No need to chase, no need to bind-what's lost returns in time.  
The river knows, the mountains keep, what fate makes hers and mine.  
I've sought no crown, nor fought the sky-just followed nature's flow-  
And through the stillness of my heart, I found what I let go.

The wind may scatter leaves afar-  
Yet every leaf becomes a star-  
No distance, time, or world above  
Can break the bond of silent love.

So let her be where she must go-  
The stream will meet the sea-  
And if the sky returns her name,  
She'll find her way to me.

No grasping hands, no cries, no fight-  
Just faith that darkness leads to light-  
For what is meant will always stay-  
A blossom borne upon the way.

Ciel. The angel of wisdom.

She had been here. She had always been here.

And I—

I had forgotten her.

I searched the forest for hours, following the faintest hints of memory. Every rustling leaf, every shifting shadow felt like it might reveal her, but no matter how far I walked, I never found what I was looking for.

The wind stirred around me, gentle yet insistent, like a whisper from the past. A thought came to me, unbidden.

### **Follow the wind.**

It had led me home once before. Would it do so again?

Closing my eyes, I let the breeze guide me, my feet moving without thought. It twisted through the trees, curling around trunks and slipping between branches, and I followed like I had so many years ago, my heart pounding with quiet hope.

But when I opened my eyes, I stood before something I did not expect.

My old home.

Or at least, what was left of it.

The house was in tatters, the roof partially collapsed, vines creeping over the wooden walls. The windows were broken, the door barely holding onto its hinges. It had the look of something long abandoned, yet not completely forgotten.

I asked around, hoping for some connection to the past, some trace of familiarity. Most people shrugged, indifferent, but eventually, I found someone who knew.

"It's going to be an inn soon," they told me. "The new owner plans to fix it up."

I stood there for a while, looking at the broken remains of what had once been my world. The place where I had lived, where my parents had laughed, where I had first run into the woods and met—

I turned away.

Neia was waiting for me when I returned, arms crossed, eyes scanning my face. “Did you find anything?”

I nodded, sitting down on a nearby stone. “I remember now. Her name was Ciel.”

Something flickered in Neia’s expression—something small, something painful.

“Ciel,” she repeated softly.

“The angel of wisdom,” I murmured.

She looked away. “And now?”

I exhaled, the answer coming as naturally as breathing. “Now, I find her.”

For a moment, she was silent. Then she let out a sharp, bitter laugh. “Just like that?”

I tilted my head, unsure of what she meant.

She shook her head, her voice suddenly raw. “You’re just going to leave? Just like that?”

“You don’t have to come,” I said gently. “You can go back now.”

Neia’s hands clenched into fists at her sides. “Go back? Rimuru, you brought me this far! The least you could do is—”

She stopped herself, biting her lip. Then, after a long, shaky breath, she looked up at me with eyes burning with unshed tears. “No. No, you know what? I don’t want to go back. I want to keep going.”

I hesitated. “Are you sure?”

She let out a short, shaky laugh, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. “You always ask me that, but you already know the answer.”

I gave a small nod. “Then we’ll have to work along the way. I don’t have money.”

Neia let out a breath, steadier now. “Fine by me.”

That night, as the fire crackled between us, Neia sat alone, gazing into the flames. I could hear her humming—soft and low, almost like a whisper to herself.

A song.

A melody I hadn’t heard before, yet something about it felt... familiar.

I see the way you look at her,  
The softness in your eyes.  
A love so deep, so far beyond  
The reach of space and time.

And though I stand here by your side,  
I know your heart’s not mine.

Yet still, I stay, though words unspoken  
Hang between the lines.

I will wait, through sun and rain,  
Through fleeting days and years of change.  
I won't ask, I won't chase,  
I'll stand right here if you turn my way.

I've walked alone through fire and stone,  
Through loss too great to tell.  
But even pain was easier  
Than loving you this well.

For love that's free will find its way,  
And love that's true won't fade.  
So even if you never choose me,  
Still, my heart will stay.

I will wait, through sun and rain,  
Through fleeting days and years of change.  
I won't ask, I won't chase,  
I'll stand right here if you turn my way.

And if the road should bring you back,  
If someday you should see-  
That love was waiting all along,  
Then come and stay with me.

But if your heart stays far away,  
Then I will let you go.  
For love should never beg to stay,  
It only hopes you know.

I will wait, I will stay,  
Even if you never turn my way.

She didn't look at me as she sang, her voice just above the crackling embers,  
carrying words I could barely catch. But there was something in her tone,  
something in the way her fingers curled slightly against her knees, in the way  
her eyes shimmered in the firelight.

I didn't ask.

Instead, I closed my eyes and listened.

As we traveled, Neia began to change. Or perhaps, she had always been this  
way, and I had only now begun to see it.

At first, she only watched as I helped people—lifting a broken cart from the mud, mending a torn roof, listening as an old woman wept over the past. But slowly, she began stepping forward on her own.

One day, we passed through a village stricken by drought. The people were weary, their fields cracked, their wells nearly dry. I sat beneath a tree, listening as they spoke of their troubles, but I had no answer for them.

Neia, however, did not wait for an answer.

She disappeared for a while, and when she returned, it was with a group of children, leading them toward the river at the village's edge. She knelt beside them, cupping her hands into the flowing water.

"Do you know how to dig a canal?" she asked.

The children shook their heads.

She smiled. "Then let's learn."

She rolled up her sleeves and began digging, shaping a path for the water. The children followed her lead, their small hands scooping dirt, their voices lifting with laughter. Soon, the village men and women joined in, drawn by the sight of their children working together.

By the time the sun dipped below the horizon, a narrow channel had been carved, guiding the river's flow toward their fields.

One of the elders looked at me and said, "You have our deepest thanks."

I tilted my head. "But I did nothing."

He only smiled. "Yet, somehow, you always bring what is needed."

Another time, in a bustling town, we came across a woman weeping in the marketplace. She clutched a tattered shawl to her chest, murmuring prayers under her breath.

Neia knelt beside her. "What's wrong?"

The woman looked up with tear-streaked cheeks. "My husband. . . He was taken away for debts. They'll send him to the mines. I have nothing left."

Neia turned to me. "Can't you help?"

I shook my head. "I have no money."

Neia's gaze sharpened, thoughtful. "Then we don't need money."

She stood and scanned the marketplace, her eyes landing on a group of street performers—dancers, musicians, acrobats. A smile spread across her lips.

She grabbed my wrist. "Come on."



Before I could protest, she pulled me into the open square, where the performers were gathering a crowd. She approached a fiddler, speaking to him in quick, excited whispers. Then, with a sudden twirl, she leapt onto an overturned crate.

And she began to sing.

Her voice carried through the air, weaving through the marketplace like a golden thread. The crowd hushed, drawn to her melody. It was a song of longing, of love lost and found, of the struggles of the heart.

In this vast universe  
Among the many stars  
In a single vast blue planet  
My small feelings of love would reach  
to that tiny island where you are

Time had passed since I met you  
And the letters adorning our feelings are also increasing  
Someday, they will echo unnoticed in our hearts  
At times violently, at times sorrowfully

They will echo faraway, into the far-off distance  
This tender song will change the world

Look now  
The person who you cherish  
Is right beside you  
I wish  
for this to reach just you  
Resonate, my song of love  
Look now...  
Resound, my song of love

You come to realise,  
that even when the two of us should walk a dark road  
The moon would illuminate our days  
Never letting go of your hand I've clasped  
Our feelings are strong  
and we vow it's for all eternity  
In the depths of eternity  
I will surely say the exact same words  
with my feelings still the same  
But those words will never cease  
they will turn into tears  
Then to joy  
Unable to speak  
I'll just embrace you

Look now  
The person who you cherish  
Is right beside you  
I wish  
for this to reach just you  
Resonate, my song of love  
Look now...  
Resound, my song of love

If it's a dream don't wake me up  
If it's a dream don't wake me up  
The time I've spent with you  
Shall become a star  
shining eternally

Look now  
The person who you cherish  
is right besides you  
I wish  
for this to reach just you  
Oh resound, my song of love  
Look now  
the person who you cherish  
Is right beside you  
I wish  
for this to reach just you  
Resonate, my song of love  
Look now...  
Look now!  
Resound, my song of love

I watched as coins began to fill a small basket at her feet. The fiddler played alongside her, the acrobats turned their tricks to the rhythm of her voice, and soon, the entire square pulsed with life.

By the time she finished, the woman who had wept was no longer crying. In her hands was enough coin to buy her husband's freedom.

Once again, the people thanked me.

And once again, I wondered why.

There were many moments like these. Neia, without realizing it, had begun to take part in the way of things. She never thought about it the way I did—never questioned whether what she did was fate or mere coincidence.

She simply saw what was needed, and she acted.

And so, the road stretched on, beneath a sky that carried us forward, and ended up getting lost in a forest track.

The forest was silent save for the soft rustling of leaves, the gentle murmur of the wind weaving through the branches. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and wildflowers, and somewhere in the distance, a brook babbled over smooth stones.

And then, I saw her.

Ciel knelt in a clearing, her deep blue hair flowing like liquid night, her crimson eyes calm as she ran a delicate hand over the injured calf at her side. The animal trembled, its leg twisted unnaturally, but under her touch, it stilled, its breathing slowing, as if it knew—just as I knew—who she was.

My heart caught in my throat.

For a long time, I had chased a memory, a fleeting glimpse of color through the trees, the ghost of a name on my lips. And now, standing here, I was once again a child running barefoot through the woods, laughing in the wind, reaching for a hand that was never meant to stay.

She looked up at me, and her lips curled into a familiar, gentle smile.

“It’s been a long time, Rimuru.”

Hearing my name in her voice after all these years—spoken with such warmth, such certainty—sent a shiver through me. I swallowed, trying to find words, but none came.

Instead, I dropped to my knees beside her, reaching out hesitantly. My fingers hovered over her sleeve, afraid that if I touched her, she might vanish like mist in the morning sun.

“You’re real,” I breathed.

She laughed softly, a sound like the whisper of the wind through the trees. “I have always been real.”

Neia stood a little behind me, quiet, watching. I could feel her presence, her gaze heavy, but she said nothing.

Ciel turned back to the calf, her hands glowing faintly as she traced over its wounded limb. “You’ve grown,” she said, as if we were simply catching up, as if years hadn’t passed like autumn leaves swept downstream.

I let out a breathless laugh. “And you haven’t changed at all.”

Her smile deepened, but there was something in her eyes—something softer, something sadder.

We talked. About the past, about the days we spent together in the woods. I told her of the village, of my journey, of how I had spent so long trying to

remember her. She listened with the same patience she had always had, nodding, her fingers running absentmindedly through the calf's fur.

And then, as the wind shifted, she spoke words I was not ready to hear.

"I already know, Rimuru." Her voice was quiet, but unwavering. "I know that you love me."

The world seemed to still around me.

I opened my mouth, but no words came. Because she was right.

It was not a love of possession, nor a love that begged for reciprocation. It was something deeper, something woven into the very fabric of my soul. A love that simply was.

She lowered her gaze. "But I am not meant for this world. I cannot stay with you."

The air grew heavier, pressing against my chest. I clenched my hands into fists, fingers digging into the earth.

"Why?" The word barely left my lips, a whisper lost to the wind.

She lifted her hand, brushing her fingers against my cheek. "Because I am an angel, and you are mortal. Our paths were never meant to walk side by side."

I bowed my head, eyes burning. My breath came unsteady, my body trembling under the weight of something I had never allowed myself to acknowledge.

For the first time since I was a child, I cried.

Ciel watched me, and though she had always been the picture of serenity, her own eyes glistened. This was not the farewell of a cold, untouchable being. This was something real. Something painful.

Then she turned to Neia.

"Neia," she said, and I felt Neia stiffen behind me.

"Please," Ciel continued, "be with him."

Neia inhaled sharply.

Ciel smiled, her usual composure cracking just slightly, revealing the sorrow beneath. "I can't stay, but you can. And I will visit. I promise."

Neia bit her lip, her hands curling into fists. She didn't answer.

Ciel looked back at me, one final time.

"This is goodbye," she said, her voice breaking at the edges.

She took a step back, then another. And then, like the wind itself, she was gone.

I sat there, my hands still curled into the earth, staring at the space where she had stood. The air still smelled of her—like rain and wildflowers.

Neia kneeled beside me, silent for a long while. Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, she began to sing.

Her song carried through the clearing, soft and trembling, wrapping around me like a gentle embrace. The words drifted over me like falling petals, and though my heart ached, I let them in.

The wind still carries echoes soft,  
Of voices lost to time.  
The stars still shine, though clouds may drift,  
Their light will always find.

She was never meant to stay,  
Like rivers never rest.  
But love that's true won't fade away,  
It lingers in your chest.

She walks with the wind, she sings with the trees,  
She's part of the world, as far as it seems.  
Though hands cannot hold her, nor time make her stay,  
She'll always be near, in her own quiet way.

Tears may fall like autumn leaves,  
Let them go, don't hold them tight.  
For love is not in chains we weave,  
But in the warmth that fills the night.

If you close your eyes, she'll be right here,  
In whispered winds and silver streams.  
No distance breaks the love you share,  
She lives within your dreams.

And as you grieve, as you let go,  
Know I will never ask too much.  
You need not love me as you love her,  
Just leave a space for me, just enough.

She walks with the wind, she sings with the trees,  
She's part of the world, as far as it seems.  
Though hands cannot hold her, nor time make her stay,  
She'll always be near, in her own quiet way.

So take your time, don't turn away,  
I ask for nothing more.  
Just let me stay beside your heart,  
A place that's mine-no less, no more.

She was never meant to stay,  
Like rivers never rest.  
But love that's true won't fade away,  
It lingers in your chest.

I closed my eyes.

The wind still carried echoes of a voice I would never forget. And yet, through the grief, through the aching emptiness left behind, I could still feel her.

Always near.

In her own quiet way.

The days passed, and the road stretched endlessly ahead. Though my feet moved forward, my heart remained tethered to the place we had left behind. The forest still whispered in my mind—Ciel's presence lingering like an imprint on my soul.

Neia walked beside me, her usual energy subdued, though she never said anything outright. She didn't need to. The silence between us was a knowing one, filled with things neither of us dared to say aloud.

That afternoon, we came across a broken cart abandoned by the roadside. The wheels lay askew, one of them snapped clean through. Scattered grain littered the ground, a few birds pecking at the stray kernels.

Neia sighed, setting down her pack. "Looks like someone's bad day."

I crouched beside the wheel, running my fingers along the splintered wood. "Maybe it doesn't have to be."

She raised an eyebrow. "You plan on fixing it?"

I nodded. "It would be a shame to leave it like this."

So we worked. I gathered fallen branches from the nearby trees, whittling and shaping them until they fit snugly into place. Neia secured the bindings, her hands skilled and sure. The sun dipped lower as we labored, sweat beading on our brows, but by dusk, the cart stood whole again.

We found its owner in the next village—a weary farmer whose gratitude was worth more than coin. He offered us sacks of wheat as thanks, and with little else to do, we struck a deal.

And so, for the next few months, we became merchants of sorts.

It was simple work, ferrying wheat and flour between the village and the town's mill. The roads grew familiar, the weight of the sacks became second nature. The town—Merrivale—was lively, its people accustomed to traders and travelers alike.

Neia took well to the work. She haggled with an ease I lacked, her sharp tongue and quick wit often earning us a better deal than I ever could. I merely watched,

amused, as she playfully sparred with merchants, always walking away with a victorious smirk.

Between our round trips, our conversations grew longer.

One evening, as we sat by the river washing the dust from our hands, she asked, “Why do you live the way you do?”

I glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

She gestured vaguely. “You don’t chase after money, power, or even stability. You just... let things happen.”

I considered her words, watching as the water curled around my fingers. “I suppose I don’t see the point in chasing things that fade. Wealth comes and goes. Power is fleeting. Even stability is an illusion—one bad storm, one twist of fate, and it all crumbles. But harmony... harmony lasts.”

She frowned. “And how do you define harmony?”

“A balance between what is and what should be.”

She scoffed. “That sounds vague.”

I smiled. “It is.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t press further.

Yet as the days turned to weeks, she kept returning to the topic. During our journeys, while unloading sacks at the mill, while waiting for customers, while sharing meals beneath the open sky—she questioned me, challenged me, probed deeper into my thoughts.

“Do you ever get angry?”

“Not often.”

“But doesn’t that mean you’re just suppressing it?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I have learned that most things are not worth anger.”

“What about love, then? Do you just... let that go too?”

I hesitated. Her gaze was piercing, waiting, searching.

“I love in my own way,” I finally said.

She looked away, dissatisfied with the answer but unwilling to push.

And so it continued. A dance of words, of curiosity, of two minds trying to understand each other across a chasm neither of us could yet define.

And in those moments, I realized—Neia was changing. She no longer questioned me as an outsider peering into something foreign. She questioned me as someone standing at the edge, uncertain if she should step forward or turn away.

I saw a boy at the mill, weaving through the bustling crowd with a confidence that didn't quite match his years. He was small—no older than thirteen or fourteen—but his voice carried sharp and clear over the din.

"Step right up, fine folk! A rare elixir from the eastern lands! Grants strength, vitality, and—" he paused for dramatic effect, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "—it even keeps nightmares at bay."

Neia, arms crossed, leaned toward me. "You believe that?"

I shook my head. "Not even slightly."

Still, I watched. The boy's hands moved swiftly, gesturing animatedly, his words flowing like honey. He had the skill of a seasoned trickster, but his audience was not easily fooled. A burly farmer snorted and waved him away. A mill worker laughed outright. Someone else muttered, "Damn brat's at it again."

I took a step forward. "That's quite the claim."

The boy turned to me, sizing me up in an instant. "Ah, a man of wisdom, I see! You must know that the best things in life are often overlooked by common folk."

"That's true." I nodded. "And yet, the best things in life rarely come in glass bottles."

The boy's confidence wavered for the briefest second before his grin returned, sharper this time. "You wound me, sir! But you see, this is no ordinary bottle—"

"Come." I gestured for him to step aside. "Let's talk."

His face hardened. Then, without a word, he bolted.

Neia groaned. "Well, that went well."

I watched his retreating form disappear into the crowd. "I'll find him later."

Weeks passed before I finally tracked him down. Not because he was particularly good at hiding, but because too many people were eager to complain about him. Farmers, merchants, innkeepers—all had a story about how "that wretched boy" had tricked them out of coin, stolen scraps, or disappeared before paying his dues.

I found him in a half-collapsed barn at the village's edge, curled up with a threadbare cloak over his shoulders. When he saw me, his eyes darted around for an escape route, but I raised a hand.

"I didn't come to turn you in," I said.

He scowled, arms tightening around himself.

"The villagers want to beat you," I continued. "I stopped them."

His expression barely changed. "And why would you do that?"



“Because you’re still a child.”

He snorted. “You’re a fool.”

“Maybe.” I extended a hand. “Come with me instead.”

He stared at it as if it were a trap. Then, reluctantly, he stood.

For a month, he stayed with us.

He did not make it easy.

He ate what we gave him but never thanked us. He slept under our roof but never spoke. Whenever I tried to speak with him, he turned away, refusing to acknowledge me. He didn’t ask for my name, nor did he care to share his own.

Neia, however, had a way of getting through to him.

She didn’t press him for answers. She didn’t demand his gratitude. She simply treated him as if he were always meant to be there—mocking his grumpiness, dragging him into conversations, making him laugh when he least expected it.

Slowly, his walls cracked.

And one evening, beside the fire, he spoke.

“I was born into a noble house,” he admitted, eyes fixed on the flames. “Servants, tutors, expectations—I had all of it. My father wanted me to be a scholar. My mother wanted me to marry well. Every step of my life was planned before I even took my first breath.”

Neia said nothing, just listening.

“I hated it,” he continued. “I felt like I wasn’t living, just... fulfilling someone else’s design. So I ran away, looking for something real.”

His fingers clenched into fists. “I got lost in the deep woods. A group of bandits found me, and I thought that was the end of it. But then... she came.”

His voice softened. “A girl with blue hair. She saved me.”

Neia and I exchanged a glance, but neither of us interrupted.

“I never forgot her,” he murmured. “She felt like something I was meant to find. So I ran away from home for good. I wanted to see her again. But the world isn’t kind to a noble boy with no name and no survival skills.”

He laughed bitterly. “I fell in with the wrong people. Learned all the wrong things. Lived on lies. And I started to hate her for it.”

His gaze flickered to me. “You remind me of her. That’s why I hate you too.”

Silence settled between us.

Neia’s voice was gentle when she finally spoke. “So what now?”

He hesitated. For the first time, his expression wasn't scornful or guarded. It was uncertain.

He had spent so long running. Perhaps, for the first time, he didn't know where to go. He had spent so long running.

As I watched him, something stirred in my chest—an unease, a quiet understanding.

His story should have been foreign to me, yet I felt as though I had heard it before.

Or rather, I had lived it.

He was searching for something. Chasing after a fleeting image, a moment in time that had slipped through his fingers. Was I not the same?

For years, I had wandered, helping people, moving with the wind, never staying, never settling. I told myself I had no destination, that I was merely following the course that life set before me. But was that true?

Or had I been searching too?

Ciel. . .

I had spent so long trying to find her, retracing steps I could barely remember, following whispers in the wind. But what was I hoping for?

The boy before me, with his restless eyes and clenched fists, was like a reflection in still water. Both of us chasing something we could never quite grasp, like a river trying to reach the sky.

Was there an end to such a journey?

Would we ever arrive?

Or would we simply flow on, endlessly?

And so, we set out once again.

This time, our journey had a destination.

The boy—who still refused to tell me his name—traveled with us, though his steps were slow, as if he were being led to a place he no longer belonged. He never spoke of his family, never admitted he wanted to go back. But he did not resist, either.

Neia, as always, walked beside me, stealing glances at the boy when she thought I wouldn't notice. She had grown fond of him, though she never said it outright. Instead, she teased him, argued with him, made sure he ate enough when he sulked too long. The boy, despite himself, grew closer to her.

Our path was long, stretching over months. We stopped to help those we met along the way, sometimes fixing broken carts, sometimes settling disputes,

sometimes simply listening to stories that no one else would hear. The boy watched it all in silence, though his sharp eyes missed nothing.

The boy had always been confident in his wit. He believed that clever words and quick thinking could outmatch anyone. And so, when he saw a merchant setting up his wares in the town square, he could not resist the challenge.

The marketplace was bustling, with traders calling out their wares and customers haggling for better prices. The boy's sharp eyes locked onto a merchant arranging bolts of silk on a wooden stall. With a smirk, he strolled up, feigning disinterest as he ran his fingers over the fabric.

"This silk?" he scoffed, holding up a roll. "I've seen better in the hands of beggars. You wouldn't happen to be selling counterfeits, would you?"

The merchant, an older man with a measured gaze, raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"I'll be generous," the boy continued, playing the part of an experienced buyer. "I'll take it off your hands for half the price."

The merchant chuckled, eyes twinkling with amusement. "And I suppose you'll sell it elsewhere for double?"

The boy hesitated for only a second—just long enough for the merchant to see through him. Before the boy could respond, the merchant leaned forward. "You remind me of a younger me. Overconfident. Thinking wit alone can turn the world in your favor."

The boy bristled. "I—"

The merchant cut him off. "Listen carefully, boy. A real trader doesn't just talk—he listens. The moment you opened your mouth, you lost."

The boy's face darkened as he shoved the silk back onto the table and stormed away. When he was alone, he spoke. "You're angry because he was right."

He glared at me. "I don't need advice from a fool who never haggles."

I smiled. "And yet, I get what I need without trying."

He had no response to that.

We found the man on the outskirts of a village, lying beneath a tree. His breathing was shallow, his wounds long past the point of healing. He had fought wars he no longer cared to name.

The sun was beginning to set, casting a golden glow over the dry, cracked ground. Flies buzzed around the man's wounds, and the faint scent of blood clung to the air. I sat beside him, the coolness of the evening settling in.

The boy stood at a distance, shifting uncomfortably. "He's just... waiting to die?"

“They left me here,” the soldier murmured, voice cracked with bitterness. “All the years I spent serving them, and this is how it ends.”

“You regret it?” I asked.

The soldier coughed out something between a laugh and a curse. “I regret believing it meant something.”

The boy hesitated before stepping closer. “Shouldn’t we get a healer?”

“There is no healer for what ails him,” I said.

The soldier exhaled slowly. “You’re not going to tell me I fought for a noble cause?”

“No.”

He closed his eyes. “Good.”

The boy’s fists clenched. “You’re just letting him die?”

I did not respond. We sat with him until his breathing stopped. The boy did not speak for a long time. When he finally did, his voice was strained. “You didn’t even try to comfort him.”

“Would it have helped?”

He had no answer. And so we walked on.

In the next village, a crowd had gathered. A farmer knelt in the dirt, his hands bound, as an angry mob hurled accusations.

The village center was alive with shouts, the smell of sweat and dust heavy in the air. The accused farmer, a gaunt man with hollow cheeks, stared at the ground in silent defeat. The crowd around him was restless, their voices sharp with anger.

“He stole from the grain stores!” one man shouted.

The boy folded his arms. “He probably did.”

I looked at him. “You’re certain?”

He hesitated, then muttered, “People are selfish. That’s just how the world is.”

I walked past him, toward the bound man. “Did you steal?” I asked.

The farmer’s eyes were weary, resigned. “No.”

The village leader scoffed. “And I suppose we should just take your word for it?”

“No,” I said simply. “But truth reveals itself, given time.”

That evening, as the village settled, I walked through the granary. The entrance was well-guarded, but the back had loose planks, likely pried open with tools. The markings on the ground showed heavy sacks dragged toward the tax collector’s house.

When I confronted him the next morning, he laughed. “And what proof do you have?”

I smiled, producing a torn piece of cloth caught on the granary’s broken wood—a cloth that matched his robes exactly.

The crowd gasped as realization dawned on them. The tax collector’s smugness faded, replaced by cold sweat. The farmer’s name was cleared, and the boy stared in silence.

“People aren’t always selfish,” I told him.

I’m pretty sure he could have argued his way through- but because I was who I am - because people knew me, they chose to believe me.

The boy scowled, but his expression was troubled. A small crack in his certainty.

One evening, we stopped at a poor household. They had barely enough food for themselves, yet they shared their bread with us without hesitation.

The inside of the house was small, dimly lit by a flickering oil lamp. The wooden table was old and scratched, the chairs mismatched. Yet, the family’s laughter was light and easy, filling the room with warmth.

As we sat outside, I noticed a small child laughing, running barefoot in the dirt, as if the world held no troubles.

The boy watched, frowning. “He has nothing. What’s there to be happy about?”

I took a slow breath. “He isn’t missing anything.”

The boy scoffed. “Everyone wants more.”

I gestured toward the child. “Then why doesn’t he?”

The boy had no answer.

One night, I woke to the sound of footsteps. The boy was walking away, his pack slung over his shoulder.

I followed him silently until he stopped at the crossroads outside the village. He stood there, staring at the paths before him, his hands tightening around the straps of his bag.

“You’re free to go,” I said.

He flinched but didn’t turn around. “I know.”

“Then why did you stop?”

The wind rustled the leaves. He let out a harsh breath. “Because I don’t know where to go.”

I sat on a nearby rock. “Then perhaps leaving isn’t your answer.”

He turned to face me, frustration burning in his eyes. “You just drift through life, but I can’t live like that! I need—”

He stopped, as if he didn’t know the words.

I waited.

After a long silence, his shoulders sagged. Slowly, he turned back toward me and walked past me, back toward the fire.

I said nothing as I followed.

We kept searching..

And then, at last, we found them.

The noble house stood tall against the sky, its gates heavy with iron, its crest displayed proudly upon banners that did not waver in the wind. The servants who greeted us stared in disbelief as they recognized the young master they had thought lost.

The boy’s father was a stern man, with lines of worry carved deep into his face. His mother, who had likely spent many nights awake in fear, did not even try to speak. She only ran to him, clutched him tight, and wept.

He did not push her away.

But he did not embrace her, either.

I watched him stand there, stiff and unmoving, as though he had forgotten what warmth felt like.

Neia placed a hand on my arm, her grip firm. She knew what I was thinking.

I had brought him home.

But was this where he truly belonged?

The nobleman was a towering figure, dressed in fine robes embroidered with gold, his face lined with age and worry. His wife clutched their son’s hand, tears streaming down her cheeks as she held him close, as if afraid he would disappear again. The boy stood stiffly between them, his expression caught between resentment and relief.

“I don’t expect you to understand why I left,” the boy muttered, avoiding his father’s gaze.

“You’re our son,” his mother whispered, voice thick with emotion. “We don’t need to understand—we just need you home.”

The noble father studied him for a long moment before giving a weary sigh. “We will speak later.” His voice softened as he added, “For now, rest.”

The boy gave a reluctant nod, his fingers tightening into fists.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll visit when I can,” I said.

His scowl twitched slightly. "Don't bother."

Neia smiled and, to his horror, pulled him into a hug. His face turned red instantly, and he struggled to pull away. "You're such a brat," she teased, though her voice was gentle.

His father cleared his throat, and Neia finally let go, but not before ruffling the boy's hair. He shot her a glare, but there was no real malice in it.

The boy stood at the gate, staring at the noble house as if it were something distant, something foreign. His hands curled into fists, then relaxed, then curled again.

I should have left already. But my feet did not move.

"You don't have to stay," Neia said softly. "You can still come with us."

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he let out a slow breath, shoulders slumping. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

I looked at him carefully, and for the first time since we met, I saw it—the same look I once had. A boy standing at the edge of a world he didn't belong to. A boy searching for something he could not name.

And suddenly, I was unsure of myself.

"...Then what were you searching for?" I asked.

The boy's fingers tightened at his sides. "Something that was mine. Not my father's. Not my mother's. Just mine." His voice was quieter now. "But everything I found, I hated. Everything I tried, I failed at. And now I'm here. Back where I started."

I exhaled. "Nothing is ever the same once you leave it. Even if you return, it will not be the place you once knew."

The boy frowned, as if that thought unsettled him. "...Then what's the point?"

"The point," I said, after a long pause, "is that you are not the same either."

Silence stretched between us.

I did not know if he understood. Perhaps I did not fully understand myself. But I felt something shift in him—just as something was shifting in me.

He let out a small breath. "So what am I supposed to do now?"

I looked at him, at the house, at the road that led away from it all. I wanted to tell him that I did not know. That I never knew. That every step I had taken had been without expectation, without seeking, without believing there was ever an answer to begin with.

But I didn't say any of that.

Instead, I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Find something worth keeping."

The boy stared at me, searching my face for something—an answer, a reassurance, a truth.

I had nothing more to give.

His lips pressed into a thin line. Then, after what felt like forever, he gave a slow nod.

I turned around.

“Do you think he’ll be alright?” Neia asked.

I looked up at the sky, at the clouds shifting without direction, at the world that moved as it always had.

“He will find his way,” I said. “Or he won’t.”

I sighed. “Just like the rest of us.”

And though I did not say it aloud, a thought remained, lingering in the quiet space between us:

And so will I.

A strange unease settled in me. I had left the boy behind, given him my parting words, and yet, something gnawed at me. Neia walked beside me in silence, but I could feel her eyes flickering toward me now and then. She knew.

I had told the boy to find something worth keeping, but as the words left my mouth, a question weighed on my mind—was I a fraud?

I had spent my life offering guidance, showing others the path they could take, yet I had never truly known where I was going myself. If my younger self stood before me now, what would I tell him? Would he believe me?

I was not always like this. I was once a child with grand dreams, dreaming of luxury, of success, of recognition. And now, I wandered with nothing but the clothes on my back and the uncertainty of where my next meal would come from. My younger self would look at me with scorn, with disappointment. Was I truly at peace, or had I simply convinced myself that this was the only path left?

The doubt gnawed at me, but as I searched within myself, I found my answer. No matter what path I could have taken—whether I had chased wealth, status, or comfort—I would have come to despise it. It would have felt empty, suffocating, and eventually, I would have abandoned it all to walk the very path I was on now. Not because it was easy, not because it was abundant, but because it was the only path that felt like my own.

And so, to the younger self I saw in the boy, I turned back and answered:

“Your dreams were not your own. They were planted in you by a society that does not know itself, by people who do not know what they themselves want. This is a plague that spreads from one person to another, filling their heads



with desires that do not belong to them. You believe you want wealth, power, success—but whose voice told you that? Not your own.”

“And what about you? Have you found what you were looking for?” He asked me.

I let out a slow breath.

Neia finally spoke, her voice careful. “You’re thinking too much again.”

I gave her a small smile. “Maybe.”

She studied me for a moment before looking ahead. “You still believe what you told him, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

And yet, the feeling did not fade entirely. As we walked onward, into lands unknown, I carried it with me—not as doubt, but as a quiet reminder that even I was still searching.

Perhaps, like the boy, I always would be.

With that, we turned and left.

The air outside was heavy with the scent of rain on stone. The sky, though bright, was overcast, casting the world in a muted light. I walked ahead without speaking, feeling the weight of the past months settle into my steps.

Neia followed in silence.

After some time, I spoke. “You should stay.”

“No.”

I glanced back at her. “You’ve gained quite a reputation. People know your name now. You could settle down somewhere, find a place to belong.”

She scoffed. “Settle down and do what? Get married?”

I shrugged. “It would be the normal thing to do.”

She laughed—a sharp, bitter sound. “You really don’t understand anything, do you?”

I stopped walking. The sea stretched out before us, vast and untamed, the waves rolling endlessly toward the shore.

Neia stepped beside me, her arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

I exhaled. “I’m going to keep walking. Keep wandering. Until I find peace or something close to it. It’s not a life worth following.”

She didn’t respond at first. The wind pulled at her dark hair, carrying the scent of salt and something unspoken between us.

Then, quietly, she said, “If you’re a madman, then I must be mad too.”

I turned my head slightly, watching her from the corner of my eye.

She looked at me then—really looked at me. Her lips parted, as if she wanted to say something more, but in the end, she just sighed and shook her head.

We stood there for a long while, watching the waves crash against the shore.

So be it.

As we stood there, my eyes were drawn to a child sitting alone by the riverbank. He was no older than ten, carefully piling stones on top of each other, only to watch them tumble back down.

I stopped without realizing it.

“Do you see something?” Neia asked, noticing my pause.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I walked toward the boy and sat beside him. He glanced at me, wary at first, but when I said nothing, he returned to his task.

“You’re trying to build something?” I asked after a moment.

“A tower,” he said simply. “But it always falls.”

I watched the stones crumble again. “Then why do you keep building it?”

The boy frowned, as if the answer should have been obvious. “Because I want to see if I can make it stand.”

I smiled at that. “And when it does?”

He hesitated, thinking for a long moment. “I don’t know. . . Maybe I’ll make another one.”

A strange feeling stirred in my chest. I had no name for it, but it lingered, heavy yet familiar.

I thought back to my younger self, the one who had wandered these lands searching for something he could never quite grasp. I had met an angel once, long ago, and without realizing it, I had spent my life trying to reach her again. Even now, I found myself looking to the sky, as if hoping to see her wings in the clouds.

The boy kept stacking his stones, but they fell again. He sighed, frustrated.

“Would you like to know a trick?” I asked.

He nodded eagerly.

“If you press your hand against the earth before you start stacking, you can feel where the ground is most stable. Place your first stone there, and your tower will stand longer.”

He did as I said, pressing his small hands into the dirt, searching for the right spot. Carefully, he stacked the stones again—this time with patience, not frustration. When the tower stood taller than before, his eyes lit up with quiet triumph.

“It worked!” he grinned.

Neia chuckled behind me, but I wasn’t looking at the boy’s tower.

I was looking at my own hands.

For years, I had followed the simplest path, the one that nature laid before me, never questioning, never resisting. I had let the river carry me without wondering where it led. But now, for the first time, I wondered—had I been flowing toward something all along? Or had I just been drifting?

That evening, as we sat by the fire, Neia hummed a familiar tune. I had heard it before—the song she had sung to me on the night Ciel left. A song that had asked for only a small place in my heart.

For a long time, I had given her nothing.

I watched the fire flicker, the light reflecting in Neia’s eyes as she gazed into the flames. Her face was calm, accepting. She was not waiting for me. Not anymore.

And yet, I reached out.

My fingers brushed against hers.

She tensed, surprised. Then she turned to me, searching my face for answers I did not yet have.

I did not speak. I did not tighten my grip. I simply let my hand rest there, against hers. A quiet acknowledgment. A simple truth.

It wasn’t something grand like *I love you* .

It was more like *I see you* .

Indeed, I don’t think I am capable of loving anyone. I just do what occurs to me at the moment. I am not as kind as people tell me I am.

I think ill of people all the time, but I realize that expressing such things would do me no good. I do not want to help anyone, but if I don’t , I cannot earn my next meal. Therefore I keep my ill will to myself and it appears like I am helping people, even though I am nowhere as benevolent as people think I am.

I do not love anyone.

Neia did not move, did not ask for more.

For now, this was enough.

Years passed, and I continued my journey, wandering through villages, forests, and distant lands. I did not seek anything, nor did I desire to change anything. I simply followed the natural course, flowing like a river that never stopped to question its direction. Have I changed ? Perhaps. Eventually everything in nature changes. If that was not the case, then nature could not have endured this long. If even nature cannot resist change forever, then how much less can man ?

The flow of time is bound to change me. I'm sure that something, somewhere would eventually , gradually, change me.

Neia remained by my side. She had long abandoned the hope that I would return her feelings, yet she stayed—not because she waited for me to change, but because she had come to love the life I led. I never asked her to stay, just as I never asked her to leave. And so, we walked together.

One evening, as the sky melted into hues of gold and crimson, I found myself sitting beneath a tree by the stream, a familiar melody slipping from my lips. I hadn't meant to sing—I simply did. A song devoted to the life I had lived, the love I had known, and the peace I had finally begun to understand.

I sang of Ciel, of the love I had held for her, of my realization that she was never meant to stay. I sang of Neia, of the one who had always walked beside me, of the love I had never truly grasped until now. I did not claim to love her in the way she once wished, nor did I forget Ciel. Instead, I do not claim to have answers to any such things either.

Perhaps it is wise to not have such wisdom.

Once, I chased the echoes of a voice,  
A whisper lost to time and sky,  
She was light upon the morning mist,  
A dream too far, yet held so high.

She taught me how the wind could speak,  
That truth was not in walls of stone,  
She smiled, and in that fleeting glance,  
She left me searching all alone.

But rivers do not chase the clouds,  
They only flow where they must go,  
And love is not the grasping hand—  
It's the gentle tide, the drifting flow.

Years had passed like autumn leaves,  
And yet, a voice remained so near,  
Not calling me to chase the past,  
But standing quiet, always here.

She never asked for more than this,  
No wings, no stars, no endless height,  
Just a place to rest beside the stream,  
And walk with me beneath the light.

For rivers do not chase the clouds,  
Yet still, the sky is always there,

It stays there like a fleeting wish-  
One that stays so far yet so near.

To the sky I raise my hand,  
Not to grasp, but to let go,  
To the earth, I place my feet,  
And walk the path that I now know.

The river flows, the sky remains,  
One above and one below,  
And wise is not the reaching hand-  
It's knowing when to let it go.

As my song faded into the evening breeze, I lifted my gaze—and there she was.

Ciel- she stood across the stream, beneath the shade of an old willow. The last light of the sun caught in her golden hair, making her seem almost unreal. She had not changed—still light as air, still belonging to a world beyond my reach.

For a moment, I wondered if I was dreaming. But then she stepped forward, crossing the shallow water with bare feet, and I knew she was real.

“Rimuru,” she said, her voice calm as ever, though I sensed a warmth that had not been there before.

I smiled. “It’s been a while.”

We sat together on the soft grass, speaking as we once had—of the wind, the rivers, the passing of time. There was no sorrow between us, no regret. Just the quiet understanding of two souls who had once loved each other in their own way.

The night deepened, and I felt the weight of the years settle upon me—not as a burden, but as something gentle. My eyes grew heavy, and before I realized it, my head had come to rest in her lap, just as it had when I was a child. She did not move, only watching over me as my breath slowed, as I drifted into sleep.

I woke to the sound of footsteps. Neia had returned from fetching water. She paused at the sight before her—me, resting, and Ciel, watching over me. For a moment, she was silent. Then she chuckled softly.

“He looks like an innocent child when he’s sleeping,” she mused.

Ciel smiled. “He always did

She let out a quiet sigh. “I should go.”

Neia nodded. “Will you return?”

Ciel slowly shifted my head onto the grass as she stood. “Someday.”

Then, with a mischievous glint in her eye, she leaned down and tapped my forehead. “Wake up, dreamer.”

I stirred, blinking up at her face, still caught between sleep and wakefulness. I sighed. “You always wake me up at the best parts.”

She chuckled. “Then dream faster next time.”

I knew that even if I did that, the angel of knowledge would know exactly what I was dreaming and do the same thing again.

Not that I expected it to happen again. But it’s up to her, so there is no point in thinking about it.

She stepped back, and the moonlight caught her form. Slowly, little by little, she became one with the wind, her presence fading like a whisper.

Before she disappeared entirely, she looked back at me one last time.

“Live well,” she said. “And when we meet again, I hope you’ll have more stories to tell.”

And then she was gone.

I stared at the spot where she had stood, then closed my eyes and let out a deep breath.

I honestly wondered how an immortal, omniscient being lived her life, never aging a day despite passing by millennia.

“She really never changes,” I murmured.

Neia sat down beside me, watching the same empty space. “Neither do you.”

I chuckled. “Maybe.”

We sat together beneath the stars, listening to the murmuring stream. There was no need for words. Somewhere, far beyond the reach of mortals, I knew Ciel was watching. And when the time came, I would see her again.

## Epilogue

I have walked many roads, but none of them have ever belonged to me.

The people I have met, the lives I have touched—they were the heroes of their own stories. I was only ever a passing spectator, the one who passed through, watching as their journeys unfolded. They suffered, they struggled, they found meaning, and in the end, they continued forward, as they were always meant to.

And I? I simply walked alongside them.

People often ask me why I never seem to struggle. Why the world’s hardships never seem to weigh on me. They don’t understand that it’s not because life spares me, nor because I am beyond pain, but because I have never thought of myself as someone meant to suffer.

Hardships belong to heroes, to those who fight and weep and rise again. I am none of those things. I am only here to witness, to help where I can, and to move forward.

I suppose that is why I have always been untouched by the burdens others carry. I have never tried to claim them. I have never tried to be kind to them. I place all of them before me, and so the world passes through me like the wind through the trees. It does not linger, nor do I try to hold onto it.

Ciel once told me that I loved her. I do not know if I ever truly understood what that meant, but I know this: I never needed her to stay. She was the wind, and the wind cannot be held. So I let her pass, just as I have let all things pass.

Neia has walked by my side for years, though she no longer waits for something that will never come. She sings songs of longing, but there is peace in her voice now. Perhaps she has come to understand, just as I have, that love does not have to be held to be real. That we do not have to own something to treasure it.

So I walk, as I always have. I do not seek an ending, nor do I seek a destination. A river does not ask where it flows, only that it continues.

Perhaps that is what I have always been—a river that tried to carry the weight of the sky only to realize later that the sky is carried without needing to be carried. The river thus continues to be, reflecting all that passes above it, including the sky, but never stopping, never holding, never claiming.

And so, that river will keep flowing.

Because that is all I have ever known how to do.