

# **The Last Step**

## **#Chapter 1: The Cursed Fate - Read The Last Step**

### **Chapter 1: The Cursed Fate**

#### **Chapter 1 - The Cursed Fate**

I have no name. No one to speak to. No place to call home. I exist, but it feels like I've never truly lived—a life that was never mine to begin with. I wonder sometimes if I was born for this emptiness, for this pain that never disappears.

The lasting empty memories of a family, even the love of my parents, were nothing but a lie. I never asked to be born this way. I didn't choose this life, this pain, this loneliness. But they don't care. All they see is a curse, something to destroy.

I can tell this is just another one of those endless nights. The wind feels like a stranger brushing past me, my existence nothing but a mere lie. Was it senseless of me to look for a place to call home? A place where I'm not an outcast? Where I can be seen, not just forgotten?

Some nights, I catch myself wishing. Wishing for someone to see me as more than a curse. I press my palms together, fingers trembling slightly, as if the act of holding myself together is the only thing stopping me from falling apart.

My breath hitches, but the silence that follows feels heavier than any words. Even my wishes, as desperate and raw as they are, seem to slip through my fingers like they were never meant to be real.

Living is supposed to be a gift. The world is filled with beautiful endless skies, colorful flowers, rivers sparkling in the light. I've never really noticed before, but now, it feels different. Somehow, a small smile tugs at my lips as I imagine it, though I don't know why. Sometimes, as I stare at the night sky, I wonder what life as a normal person would be like. Even in the darkest of nights, the stars still shine. Maybe there's a lesson in that, even if I can't feel it right now.

I sit alone in the dark, my fingers reaching up towards the stars as if I could touch them. Maybe this sorrow, this endless regret, isn't real. Maybe I've just been too trapped in my own pain to see the truth. Maybe there's a way out, a way to escape this life. But even as that thought takes shape in my mind, I can't shake the feeling that it's just a fragile illusion—something too far for me to ever reach.

I can't keep lying to myself. Deep down, I know that for me, life is nothing but an endless, cruel punishment. Sometimes, I wonder if they're right. If I really am a monster, like they say. I wonder if the stars would look down and see me, too. Or am I too small, too insignificant for even the heavens to notice?

Sitting on the cold grass, I bring my hand up and stare at my palms—worn, marked with scars. Why? I ask myself. The question echoes in the silence, as it always does. I've asked it so many times, yet there's never an answer. Why is this my life? Why was I born to endure this endless torment, alone and abandoned? My fingers tremble as I trace the faint remnants of a past that feels like it belongs to someone else.

I never did anything to them. I never wanted to hurt anyone. Never wished anyone harm. Still, they see me. They always see me. Every single one of them—every single one—hates me. And I don't even know why. What did I ever do to them?

The thought presses down on me like a weight I can't shake off. My fingers dig into the dirt beneath me, gripping it like it's the only thing keeping me grounded. The hatred—they feel it, don't they? It's always there, right behind me. If I stop, it'll catch me. It always does.

Their eyes—so dark, so sharp. I close mine for a moment, trying to block them out. But they're still there, still cutting through me. Every glance, like a blade, stripping away what little hope I can barely hold onto.

I curl tighter, arms wrapped around my knees, wishing I could disappear.

The cold wind brushes against my skin, whispering like the voices in my head, and the darkness around me feels alive, pressing closer. Just like the hatred that never leaves me.

Maybe I deserve it. Maybe this is all I'm meant for—just to carry the weight of their disgust, forever. It settles deep in my chest, cold and heavy, like a stone I can never throw away.

I want to scream at them. Shout until my throat burns and they have no choice but to listen for once. I've begged them, over and over, pleaded with them—told them countless times I didn't want to hurt anyone. I never did.

But it's like they're deaf. No matter how much I beg, no matter how raw my voice gets, they never hear me. It doesn't matter. I see it in their eyes. I've always seen it. The judgement. The certainty that I'm guilty. That I'm something to be wiped out, erased from existence.

I've wanted to fight back. I always have. Every part of me screamed to make them see, to make them understand. But how do you fight a world that's already made up its mind? How do you stand against something that's already decided you're their enemy?

I press my palms into my face, willing the tears back. No one's coming to save me. No one ever will.

Each day, it's a battle just to survive. A battle against their stares, their harsh words, the fear and disgust in their eyes. It's like I'm always on the edge of a cliff, waiting for them to shove me over. They call me names. Talk behind my back. Sometimes, if I'm unlucky enough to be close enough, they'll shout it straight at me.

"Monster." They say it like it's my name, like it's all I am. They tell me I'm a curse, that I bring nothing but misfortune, that I'm... the Queen of Curses.

And every time they say it, every time those words slice through the air, it feels like something inside me dies. Like a part of me is being erased. It used to just hurt, but now, it's more like the life is being drained out of me, slowly, piece by piece.

I glance down at myself, tugging at the short sleeves of my old white dress. The fabric's faded, its once-pure color long gone, and the edges are frayed from constant wear. The sleeves, once long enough, now barely reach my hands, a sign of how much I've grown over the years. The fabric is stretched thin, and in places, it's torn from the countless attacks, the rips and cuts a constant reminder of their hatred. They've tried to hunt me down, to finally remove my existence, and it shows in the state of my clothes—rough, worn, and jagged.

The hem of my skirt brushes the ground, its fabric just as aged, still clinging to its form despite the years of use. I can't remember where or how I got this dress, but I feel like someone precious to me once gave it to me, and I can still sense that faint warmth in the memory. Yet, no matter how much I try to remember it, the dress, like me, has only gotten more tattered with time.

I tug at the sleeves once more, but they barely cover my arms anymore. They're too short, the fabric pulling tight as if it's trying to hold onto me, but it never quite manages. The thinness of the cloth does nothing to protect me from the cold, especially now that winter's here. The wind bites at my exposed skin, making me shiver as I try to pull the fabric tighter, though it's no use. It's just another reminder of how little I have left.

And the worst part? The thing I hate the most about myself? I can't escape my reflection.

My red eyes. They're a curse in themselves, burning with a color that makes people look at me like I'm dangerous. Like I'm evil. It doesn't matter that I don't want this, that I didn't ask for it. They see the red, and that's all they need to decide who I am. The one thing that's always been mine, that I can't change, is the one thing that seals my fate.

I hate them. I hate those eyes. But I hate myself even more for not being able to escape them.

And then... silence. Silence and emptiness, where I thought there'd be anger. The anger I should feel for them, for what they've done to me, but it's not there. Only this heavy weight that drags me down. I don't even have the strength to hate them back. I don't

want to fight anymore. What's the point? There's no victory in it, not for me. All I want is to escape... to leave behind this life that was never mine to live. Just a cruel existence I was forced to endure.

I pull my legs closer to my chest, wrapping my arms around them as the cold air cuts through me. The emptiness in my heart spreads, and I can feel the weight of it pressing against my chest, suffocating me.

Sometimes, when the nights grow long and I'm alone, I wonder if it's even worth it. This life. This fight. I wonder if they're right—that maybe I am cursed. Maybe... I am a monster. Why else would they look at me like that? Why else would they scream at me, telling me to die, shouting for me to leave, to disappear? "You're nothing but a curse! A plague!" they yell. "Go die, monster! You don't belong here!" The words echo in my mind, a constant reminder of the hatred that's always there. Why does it feel like I've been living this same nightmare, over and over again, from the moment I can remember?

I try to push away the thought, but it comes back, like a shadow that follows me no matter where I run. Maybe if I'm meant to be hated, meant to be hunted like this, it would be better if I just... stopped. Stopped running. Stopped fighting. Maybe if I just gave up, they could finally rest. And so, could I. Because I'm tired. I'm so tired of fighting a world that doesn't want me in it. Tired of pretending that this pain inside me isn't real.

I could hear them. Footsteps drawing closer with every passing moment. They were coming back. The sound of boots crunching against the dry leaves, the rustle of underbrush as they moved through the night. They were hunters. Highly skilled magic and sword wielders, hired to kill me. I could almost feel their eyes burning into my skin. Their hatred. Their disgust. Their desire to kill me.

This isn't the first time they've hunted me down. No, I've faced them before. I remember the searing blasts of fire magic and the sharp whip of lightning, each one aimed to scorch or strike me down. And then there were the swords—blades flying through the air, hurled at me with deadly accuracy as I ran, barely able to dodge in time. Some wielded their swords with expert precision, others with wild abandon, but all of them moved with the same intent—to hurt me, to kill me.

But it's not just the chase. No, I've faced worse. Unlike normal people who are disgusted just to look at me, these hunters find joy in it. They laugh as they hunt me, as they torture me. Their cruel amusement is the worst part—the way they relish in my suffering, in knowing they can break me.

I've spent countless nights hiding in the dark, a cold, lonely companion. The wind whispers around me, carrying with it the same emptiness that clings to my heart. The trees above sway, but their rustling is no comfort—it only heightens the silence, makes it feel louder than any shout. It's a constant reminder that I have no place to belong. No place to be safe.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, pressing my palms against them, trying to block out the memories, the torments. But they keep coming back, uninvited and relentless, like shadows that refuse to fade. Faces, twisted with rage and fear. The crack of a whip. The heat of fire on my skin. I can't forget them, not when they're always there, lurking in the corners of my mind.

Before all of this, the hunters caught me several times. They would drag me back, breaking my body and spirit, beating me until I could barely breathe. Sometimes they'd leave me alone in a cell, just to hear my cries echoing in the darkness, before dragging me out again to be tortured, to make me beg for mercy I would never receive. It was always the same—my body bruised, my will broken, as they enjoyed every second of my suffering.

I could feel their joy in it, their laughter booming as they watched me bleed. They tortured me to the limits, making sure I was still alive, no matter how much it hurt me. They kept me in a constant state of fear and torment until they finally handed me over to the village to die. And that's when they tried to hang me.

I still remember the rope. It burned into my neck, its rough fibers choking me with every breath as they tightened it. The village had succeeded in hanging me. The faces in the crowd were twisted, their eyes filled with cruel pleasure as they watched me struggle. Their laughter echoed in my ears, cold and mocking, each chuckle a knife twisting deeper inside me. When they finally pulled the floor away, I cried out in my mind, begging them to stop, but I knew no one would. The pressure on my neck was unbearable. I could feel it cracking, but all I heard was their laughter.

I couldn't fight it anymore. My vision blurred, my strength leaving me, and I just... let go. I thought I was ready for it, ready to surrender to the darkness closing in. But instead of death, I woke up in the forest, my hands covered in deep, raw cuts—proof of the struggle. The rope was gone, but I could still feel the tightening pressure on my neck, as if it were a shadow clinging to me. I was alone. Broken. But somehow still alive. The question I never wanted to ask, *Why?*

Then there was the time they tried to burn me alive. The flames—God, the flames—burned my skin, scorching it, filling my lungs with smoke. I could feel the heat, the way it tore at me, burning like it was trying to rip me apart, piece by piece. They thought fire would cleanse me, purify me, rid me of whatever curse they thought I carried. I remember the pain—agonizing, suffocating. It was all I could feel. I gave in to it. I closed my eyes and accepted the fire, waiting for the end to come. But when I woke, I was near a river, my skin still marked by the burn's heat, but the flames were gone. The water washed over me, but no matter how much time passed, I could never wash away that fear. The fear that clung to me, that I would never be free of it. I'd survived—again—but why?

I draw my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms tightly around them, trying to hold onto whatever small shred of comfort I can find. The weight of it all sinks deep into my

bones, pulling me lower, making it harder to breathe. The night feels colder now, like the shadows are pressing in on me, suffocating me. I rest my forehead against my knees, the rough fabric of my clothes scratching against my skin, grounding me in this moment. But it doesn't help. Not really.

I wish I hadn't survived. I wish the darkness had swallowed me back then, or the fire, or the rope. Anything to end it. But no... I always survive. Always. No matter what, I'm still here. Still breathing. Still trapped in this never-ending pain.

I can't escape it. The thought gnaws at me constantly, deep inside, like an unending hunger I can't satisfy. Every night I survive, I ask myself, *why?* Why am I still here? What did I do to deserve this cursed life? Why am I the one who has to suffer, over and over again, in a world that never wanted me to begin with?

A quiet sigh slips from my lips, barely more than a whisper. I look up at the sky—filled with stars tonight, scattered across the dark canvas. For a moment, I try to see beauty in it, to feel something beyond the emptiness. But instead, it feels like a reflection of the void inside me, cold and distant.

I wanted to live. I wanted to know what it's like to smile without it being a lie. To feel a happiness that isn't just a fleeting dream, something that burns bright and cruel, only to disappear before I can even touch it. But when I look up, I realize... there is no happiness out there, no light that can fill the darkness inside me. The stars are just like me—distant, cold, untouchable. And I'm beginning to wonder if happiness ever really existed at all, or if it was just a cruel illusion, like everything else.

But that's not my reality. Not now. Not ever.

I couldn't hold it in anymore.

The tears came again, flooding my face as I buried my hands in my hair, clutching at the strands like they could pull me out of this pain. But they couldn't. Nothing could. For four years, I've been drowning in my own misery, each night desperately crying to myself in the darkness. A cry no one bothers to see or hear. My only wish to the world was for this nightmare to end.. I've pleaded for just one moment of peace, for the pain to stop, even for a second—to feel something other than this crushing weight inside me.

I wanted to feel... anything but this endless torment. But it never stops. It never goes away. And I don't know how much longer I can keep pretending that I'm strong enough to survive it.

Through the blur of my tears, everything felt distant—the sky, the trees, the rustling grass. It all felt so far away, as if I wasn't even part of this world. I knelt in the field, my hands trembling as they gripped the cold earth beneath me. The wind passed by, brushing against my skin, but it didn't soothe me. It never did.



I wanted to stand. I tried, pushing myself up with shaky hands, but the moment I placed weight on my right leg, pain shot through me. The rock they had thrown earlier—it had hit me square on my leg, the sharp impact leaving a bruise and a burn I couldn't ignore. My vision blurred with the pain, but I couldn't let myself fall. I couldn't give up. I'd never give up. Not yet.

They'd attacked me again—people from the village, throwing rocks and jeering at me, as if I were nothing more than a target. They had thrown everything they could at me, desperate to make me run, to make me leave. One of those rocks had found its mark, but I couldn't let it stop me. Even as the pain throbbed, I had no choice but to endure. I had to keep moving, because if I didn't, I'd be caught again. And I couldn't face that. Not again.

I leaned against a nearby tree, still trying to steady myself. The world around me felt so empty, so hollow. I just wanted someone—anyone—to hear me. To understand. To see past the pain and the brokenness. But I was alone. Always alone.

But as I stood there, broken and alone, I realized no one would come. I was trapped in this endless nightmare, with no one to pull me out.

I've come to accept the truth. For someone like me, that life doesn't exist. It never has. The only escape from this misery, this relentless nightmare... is death.

Maybe then, this nightmare will finally end.

I could feel the weight of the world pressing down on me, my breath ragged as I tried to steady myself. The pain in my right leg was sharp, relentless, from where they'd hit me with a rock. I stumbled, barely keeping my balance, but I couldn't stop. The fear—this constant, gnawing fear—coursed through my veins. It never stopped.

I wiped my tears, but they only came faster, heavier, as if my body couldn't help but break down. What did it matter anymore? What was the point of holding on when every step, every breath, only led to more pain? The memories of their cruelty haunted me, and now... now I could feel it. The fear crawling up my spine, colder than anything I'd ever known.

And then—footsteps. Heavy, uneven. Crunching against the dry leaves. The snap of twigs breaking underfoot.

My heart stopped. They were here. That sickening feeling tightened in my chest. They'd found me again.

They're coming for me again. This time, to finish the job. To kill me.

## **Chapter 2 - Into the Darkness**

The footsteps grew louder, and my breath paused as panic rushed through me.

I raised a hand to my face, wiping at the tears that fell down my cheeks, though it did little to steady the panic rising within me. My breaths came uneven as I forced myself to stand, my legs weak and hurt beneath me. My head moved in every direction, searching desperately for a way to escape.

They were coming from the village—I was sure of it. Running near the open field to my right would only make me an easy target, a sitting prey waiting to be caught. My eyes shifted behind me, where the dense forest stretched into the shadows of a mountain.

It was my only chance.

Clenching my fists, I slowly walked toward the forest, my steps each in desperation and fear. The rough ground beneath me seemed to threaten to trip me with every step. As I reached the start of the forest, I stopped, frozen by the sight of the dark trees ahead. My heart pounded in my chest, and for a moment, the fear of the forest—of what might be waiting inside—held me. I had no choice but to keep going, but I couldn't shake the terror and fear I was having.

I didn't want to go in—I was always terrified of the monsters lurking in the dark, the ones people whispered about. The villagers, those same faces that screamed at me and called me a monster, used to laugh and tell me I should just go into the forest and let the creatures there take me. But now, with the hunters closing in, those monsters didn't seem so bad.

I hesitated for a moment, looking into the dark trees where shadows twisted and moved. Then, I thought to myself, "Well, it's better than being caught and killed."

With that thought, I took a deep breath, clenched my fists, and ran into the forest, my heart pounding in my chest as the trees closed in around me. The darkness inside felt suffocating, swallowing every glimpse of light, as if the forest itself was alive, waiting for its prey. As I got deeper the forest grew darker and darker, almost growing pitch black.

The rough ground beneath me made every step painful. I could feel the jagged rocks digging into my bare feet, sending sharp stings of pain up my legs. My face twisted with each step, my jaw clenching as I tried to push through the pain.

But I couldn't stop. The thought of them catching me kept me moving forward.

I stumbled past a small, quiet lake, the water reflecting the dim light, before moving deeper into the thick woods. Hundreds of trees seemed to stretch on forever, their shadows twisting and merging into one endless sea of darkness. The forest felt like it had no end. It all looked the same. I couldn't shake the feeling, though—like the forest itself was watching me, waiting.



Then, suddenly, I froze.

I didn't want to, but I had to. My legs trembled as an eerie feeling washed over me. Slowly, I tilted my head to the right, my instincts screaming that something was there. It was pitch black, and I couldn't see a thing. For some reason, I always had a sense for danger—a sharp, unexplainable instinct that had kept me alive more times than I could count.

I glanced a bit further to the right and saw it: a faint glimmer of light breaking through the trees. An exit. A shortcut to escape this dark forest. Despite the exit, my instincts kept stopping me. My legs felt like they couldn't move anymore. It was impossible to see any further, as the moonlight was hidden behind dark clouds.

I hesitated, my breath shaky as I forced myself to take a step forward. The path was completely pitch black, save for that faint light at the end. Each step felt heavier than the last, tension building in my chest. The closer I got, the more my body screamed at me to stop, as if it were trying to warn me of something.

But then, I froze.

"No," I whispered, my voice steady despite the fear clawing at my chest.

I clenched my fists, forcing myself to focus. That faint light ahead felt like an escape, but my instincts screamed it was anything but.

"I have to trust my instincts," I muttered. "It's the only thing that has never betrayed me."

Without another thought, I spun on my heel and ran to the left. My heart pounded as my feet slammed against the ground, the forest around me growing darker with each step. The air felt heavier, the shadows deeper, but I didn't stop.

As I ran, the moonlight, previously hidden behind clouds, broke through and illuminated the forest. That's when I saw it behind me—something dark, shifting in the shadows. Its form was hazy, almost blending with the trees, but I could feel its eyes on me, cold and piercing.

I turned my head slightly, trying to catch a better look.

It was hard to see as the clouds slowly returned to hide the moonlight, but I caught glimpses. Horns twisted upward from its head, and its tall, shadowy frame loomed with unnatural stillness. Its wide hands dragged claws across the ground, sending shivers through my spine.

It saw me.

Yet, for some reason, it didn't move. It just stood there, silent and terrifying.

Then, it vanished, swallowed by the darkness.

My breath caught in my throat as I tried to make sense of what I saw, but there was no time to think. I had to keep running.

I pushed on, my legs burning, the weight of fear pressing against my chest. Then, I heard them—shouting, the hunters. "We found her tracks! She's not far!" Their voices echoed through the trees, and my heart pounding more than ever.

But then, a new sound pierced through the air—screams. The hunters' screams. They were begging, desperate cries for help, their voices trembling with terror. "Help! Something's—it's—! Aghhh!" I continued to run, my breath shallow as I heard them, straining to hear every word. Their cries were frantic, filled with pain, and then abruptly cut off. The forest seemed to absorb their voices, leaving only an eerie silence behind. I couldn't tell what was happening, but it didn't sound like they had a chance.

The screams echoing in the distance, sharp and full of terror, slowly faded away. Panic surged through me, pushing me to run faster, to get away from whatever was behind me.

My legs burned, my breath ragged, but all I could focus on was escaping. I didn't realize where I was going. The world around me blurred, everything spinning too fast. Before I could stop, I stumbled forward, and the ground beneath me wasn't stable anymore.

I tripped and fell straight into the muddy waters. Cold liquid splashed up, soaking my legs and edges of my tattered clothes. My knees buckled under the sharp pain, and for a moment, I could do nothing but sit there, trembling. The ground beneath me was slick and clinging, as though the mud itself wanted to pull me down and keep me there. My legs throbbed with a dull, relentless ache, each pulse of pain a cruel reminder of how far I had pushed myself.

As I tried to catch my breath, a rancid smell hit me, so thick and foul it made my stomach churn. I gagged, turning my head away as though I could escape it, but the stench clung to the air, refusing to let me go. "Ugh, what is that?" I muttered disgusted, coughing as the bad odor clawed at my throat. It smelled like rot—like something decaying in the wet, suffocating heat of the forest.

Grimacing, I planted my hands in the mud, forcing myself upright despite the pain screaming through my muscles. The smell was only getting stronger, almost unbearable now, and I realized the air itself felt heavier, thick with something sickly and wrong. But I didn't understand. Not yet. I only knew I had to keep moving, to get away from whatever was causing that horrid smell. I swayed on unsteady legs, blinking to clear the dizziness clouding my vision, and stumbled forward, still coughing.

Then, the moonlight started to peek through the dark clouds, pushing them aside and shedding pale light over the scene. Everything around me seemed to freeze for a moment, as if even the forest held its breath.

It wasn't muddy water. It was a river of blood, thick and murky, filled with the remnants of the dead.

Corpses. Bodies hung from the branches like grotesque ornaments, their pale, withered faces twisted in eternal agony. Empty eye sockets stared down at me, lifeless yet filled with a chilling sense of awareness, as if they could still see. The vines suspending them creaked softly in the wind, making them sway like broken puppets, their limbs contorted unnaturally.

The air turned ice-cold, and a suffocating dread wrapped around me. My chest tensed, and the breath I had fought to steady escaped in a shaky, ragged gasp.

What was this? Why were they here? My mind screamed at me to run, to get away, but my legs refused to move. I was rooted in place, overwhelmed by the sight of the bodies swaying with the faintest wind. The trees seemed to lean over me like they were part of the nightmare, their gnarled branches reaching down as if to grab me.

I could feel panic rising in my throat, my skin crawling, but I forced myself to breathe through the bad smell, to calm the storm inside. I couldn't afford to fall apart. I couldn't let fear drag me under.

I closed my eyes, squeezing them shut against the images of the hanging bodies. No. No, I couldn't stay here. Not with *them*—not with the forest watching me like this. I swallowed hard, my throat tight, and forced my legs into motion.

I had to move. I had to get out.

Pushing through the terror, I stumbled forward, my breath quick and erratic, the water sloshing beneath my feet. I barely noticed the pain in my legs, the rawness of my scraped palms, or the exhaustion gnawing at me. I just kept running, tearing through the dark, hazy woods, praying that I wouldn't hear the eerie creaking of the branches behind me.

But I couldn't outrun the feeling—the oppressive weight of the forest pressing in on me from all sides. It felt endless, suffocating. My body screamed for rest, for a break from the terror, but I couldn't stop yet. Not when every shadow felt like it was following me, not when the forest itself seemed to shift with malice.

Finally, I staggered into a small clearing, the trees thinner here, and collapsed against the rough bark of the nearest one, my chest heaving with exhaustion. I slid down to the ground, the coolness of the earth biting into my skin. My legs felt like they might give out at any second, but I stayed upright, clinging to the tree for support.

I closed my eyes for a second, trying to steady my breathing, trying to block out the terror. But even as I sat there, trembling, I couldn't shake the feeling that the forest was still watching. That the corpses were still hanging in the trees, waiting.

I wasn't alone here.

And I couldn't afford to stay for long.

My leg throbbed again, the wound from earlier reopening, blood slowly seeping through the torn fabric of my clothes. It hurt, but the pain felt distant compared to the terror coursing through me. My body shook uncontrollably, trembling with fear as I tried to steady myself. Every breath came in shallow gasps, and the world around me seemed to close in, the air thick with dread.

As I took a moment to recover, a drop of liquid splashed onto my arm from the tree, cold and sticky. I slowly glanced up, and my eyes widened with terror as I saw it—the monster. Its dark, hollow eyes locked onto mine, empty and soulless. It was hungry, watching me with an eerie stillness, as if I were its next prey. The air around me grew cold, suffocating, as the creature's presence seemed to stretch through the forest, filling the space with a feeling of unnatural dread. I didn't even feel the pain in my legs anymore, not with the monster standing above me.

The creature's form was twisted, barely human, its limbs too long, its claws glinting in the dim light. It shifted slightly, and I could hear the creak of its bones, like the cracking of old wood. It was watching, waiting—ready to catch me.

My heart raced, paining in my chest. My body screamed in exhaustion, but all I could feel was fear—the kind of fear that paralyzed, that made my blood freeze. Instinct kicked in. Without thinking, I forced myself to move, my legs feeling like lead. I ran as fast as I could, stumbling over the uneven ground, the fear pushing me forward like a tidal wave, crashing over every ounce of reason.

I didn't dare look back. The thought of it following me was enough to make my legs move faster, my breath ragged and desperate. It was coming. It had to be coming.

Branches scratched my skin, but I couldn't stop. I had to get out. My chest burned, my legs screamed, but I kept pushing through the trees, desperate for a way out. Then, ahead, I saw it—a small gap in the trees, a sliver of hope. But before I could reach it, a shadow stepped into my path. My heart sank. It was in front of me now.

The creature was massive—three times my size. Its horns twisted like jagged spikes, gleaming wickedly in the dim light. Its claws glinted, sharp and dripping with something dark, something foul. It let out a low growl that rattled through my bones, sending a wave of terror crashing through me.

Before I could turn, another growl came from behind me, closer this time, like a terrible omen. I spun, my stomach dropping as a second creature crept into view. It was smaller, but just as terrifying. Its eyes gleamed with malice, and it blocked my only escape.

I was trapped.

Panic surged through me, my breath coming in shallow gasps. I couldn't think straight. I couldn't fight. The creatures slowly closed in, their eyes locked on me with hunger, the scent of death thick in the air. I glanced around desperately, my gaze darting from one monster to the other, trying to find any way out.

What do I do now? The question echoed in my mind, my thoughts racing, but every option felt useless.

Coughing harshly, my breath ragged, the exhaustion making my chest tenser. My mind raced—Should I fight? Should I keep running? But I knew. I knew I couldn't outrun them forever.

As the creatures closed the distance, my panic began to subside, replaced by a bitter clarity. My breath grew shallow, and my limbs felt heavier. There was no escape anymore—no more running. The reality of it sank in. The faith was closing in, and I couldn't fight it anymore.

Maybe this was it. Maybe it was for the best. This nightmare had to end, one way or another.

But just as they leapt forward, their long, twisted arms reached out, claws scraping the air, inches from my skin. I could hear the sickening sound of them slicing through the air, the dark, jagged tips gleaming in the faint light. Fear flooded my veins, freezing me for a split second. The creatures were almost upon me, their jaws snapping open, their eyes glowing with hunger.

Something inside me snapped.

No. I wouldn't just give up. Not now.

I pushed myself harder, running to the side, hoping for a way out. The monsters paused for a moment, then leapt at me again, their movements terrifyingly fast.

I ran, gasping for air, my legs heavy and aching with every step. The burning in my lungs felt unbearable, and my mind screamed at me to stop. But I couldn't. If I stopped, they would catch me.

And then, something grabbed my leg from behind. Causing me to fall directly down to ground.

I screamed, feeling the claws sink deep into my ankle, pulling me back. My right leg throbbed painfully, blood spilling from the fresh wound as their grip tightened. I looked behind me, and there they were—drooling, their mouths wide, their eyes filled with hunger.

The pain in my leg was sharp, but the terror in my chest was sharper. I struggled, kicking and pulling, but their claws held firm, dragging me closer to them.

The creature was dark, its body a shifting blur, blending into the shadows like it belonged there. It was fast—impossibly fast—its eyes glowing faintly in the darkness. Jagged teeth glistened as it bared them, dripping with saliva. Its limbs were very long and twisted, reaching out from the darkness like unnatural shadows, claws sharp and ready to tear through flesh.

The other one reached out, its other hand trying to grab me, I kept on struggling to pull away. But the claws—they were holding me in place, and I felt my strength disappearing, like something was slowly draining from me. I was losing my will to fight, but I couldn't understand why.

Why did I feel so weak? Why was it getting harder to breathe, to move? Each second, I felt my body growing heavier, as though something inside me was being ripped away. My mind was clouded, and my thoughts were disappearing.

I tried to push back, to move, but I couldn't. The pull on my ankle was too strong, and my vision was starting to blur. My heart raced, but my limbs felt like stone.

And then, it hit me. It—the creature—was taking it all away. My energy. My will. Every ounce of strength I had left.

My body was weakening, my limbs heavy, but I wouldn't stop. I couldn't. Even as the darkness closed in, I refused to give up.

I kicked out with my other leg, desperate to shake off the creature's grip, but its claws only tightened, digging deeper into my skin. My fingers clawed at the rough bark of a nearby tree, but they slipped, useless against the smooth, unyielding surface. Nothing worked. Every attempt to fight felt like it was only dragging me closer to my doom.

Cold dread settled in, sinking deep into my bones. The realization hit me like a slap to the face: there was no escape. No way out. I was going to die here, alone and helpless, swallowed by the darkness of this nightmare.

Just as I felt my strength falter, the other monster's claws grabbed onto my other leg. My body went rigid, pain radiating from both wounds. My heart pained in my chest as I looked up, terror freezing me in place. The creatures towered over me, their faces grotesque, twisted in dark, macabre delight. Their eyes gleamed with hunger—but



worse than that, there was something in those eyes. They weren't just hungry... they were *pleased*. They reveled in my terror, in my struggle. They were enjoying it.

I couldn't fight it anymore. All my hope drained away, swallowed by the crushing weight of the nightmare closing in around me. It was too much. The fear, the pain, the hopelessness—everything came crashing down. In that moment, I understood the truth. This would be my end. They would feast on me, and there was nothing left to stop them.

I couldn't escape. I couldn't fight anymore. And as the darkness consumed me, I gave up all hope.

Before my vision blurred more, I saw both monsters look away from me for a second, their focus shifting to something on the left. One of them loosened its grip on my leg, slowly shifting its weight and walking to the left side with heavy, uneven steps. My body was numb, but I tried to force my eyes to stay open.

Through the haze, I saw him—a boy. He was slowly walking straight toward the monster, unaware of the danger closing in. My heart sank, a weight pressing down on me.

No, not him too. He didn't know. I wanted to scream, to warn him, but I hesitated.

*I can scream to warn him, but should I?* The thought twisted in my mind, heavy with indecision. *All my life, I've been hunted by people like him. And now... now I could watch him die. Watch him suffer, just like they've made me suffer, just like they've done to me.*

The sadness weighed down on me, bitter and sharp. Part of me wanted to scream, to warn him, but another part, the part that had been broken by years of hunting, couldn't bring itself to care. He was just another hunter, another person who would cause me more pain if given the chance.

*But why does it hurt so much to watch him suffer?* The question echoed in the depths of my mind, unanswered and cold. *They've hunted me, tormented me, made me afraid for so long. Is this how it should end?*

I felt the ache in my chest grow, a hollow emptiness that seemed to swallow me whole.

I had no doubt that he was one of the hunters. He wanted to kill me, I thought bitterly, feeling an ache of helplessness deep in my chest. But even so, I didn't want him to die like this. It didn't matter.

He was still a person. A life, like mine. I couldn't stand the thought of anyone else dying here, even if they were one of the hunters. They might've been chasing me, hunting me, but I didn't want them to die like this—not like the others.

I closed my eyes for a moment, imagining a life without the pain, without the constant weight of fear and regret. I thought about how long I'd been running, how long I'd been haunted by my past, always looking over my shoulder. I didn't want anyone else to suffer the way I had.

Not like I ever truly lived. A life where I never truly felt alive, just surviving in a world full of suffering and pain.

My life had always been a struggle, a never-ending fight to survive. I had learned early on that nothing ever comes easy, that even the smallest moments of peace are fleeting. And now, as my strength drained away, I realized that this boy—this hunter—deserved a chance at something better. Something I would never have.

I didn't want him to die here, in this forest, with nothing but the monsters as his witnesses. I wanted him to run, to live, to see the world beyond this nightmare.

Even if they had once been the ones hunting me, I couldn't wish that fate on anyone. Not after everything I had been through, everything I had lost. My heart ached, knowing that I could never escape this torment, but maybe—just maybe—he could.

I closed my eyes, the weight of my own helplessness crushing me. All my life had been a battle for survival, a never-ending chase, and now, it would end here, in this forsaken place. But if my sacrifice could give someone else a chance to live, a chance to escape what I could never have... then maybe it wasn't all for nothing.

With the last bit of strength I had, I forced out a weak scream, barely a whisper through my dry throat, but it was enough to say two words: "Run away!"

A part of me wished for something different—for a life I would never have, for a future I would never see. But if I could give him that chance, even for a moment... maybe I had done something right in all this darkness.

The monster didn't hesitate. It leaped toward him in a blur of motion, hearing my scream as if it had been waiting for me to make a sound.

I was dragged closer to the monster's open mouth, its sharp teeth ready to sink into me. The smell of rot filled the air as its mouth stretched wider, like a dark pit that would swallow me whole. I could feel the heat of its breath against my skin, making my heart race. I was almost there. It was the end.

The world started to fade, everything going dark, and I braced myself for what was coming. But just before I closed my eyes, I saw him again.

The boy.

He stood still, as the monster charged at him with terrifying speed. But he didn't move. He didn't run.

Instead, something felt... off. It was like his body was falling apart, breaking into pieces and decaying. He slowly reached behind him and pulled out his sword. It felt unnatural, like time was slowing down around him.

I could barely take it in. The monster's teeth were so close to me, but my eyes stayed on him. Something had changed. He wasn't the same anymore.

In that split second, the joy that had been in the monster's face vanished. It was replaced by sheer terror. I saw it in its eyes just before it was too late. My vision swam as tears blurred my sight, saying my goodbyes to the world.

The wind rustled the leaves, making them whisper in the dark. Birds scattered from the trees, their wings a blur as they fled into the sky, their cries echoing in the distance. The forest felt alive in a way that only made the moment feel more urgent, it was completely silent for a second.

Then, I heard it. The sound of slicing—so fast, I could barely note it at first. A blur of metal and sharp cracks filled the air, followed by the monster's screech. The earth trembled, and I could feel the vibrations in my bones, my heart racing with every passing second.

The monster was screaming in pain, its howls almost sounding like it was begging for help. I couldn't believe it—this terrifying creature, so full of malice, was now desperate.

I reopened my eyes; not sure how much time had passed. My energy slowly crept back, inch by inch, until I could see again.

The creature that had been holding me? Its head was gone, cleanly severed from its body. And then, my eyes moved to the left. The rest of the monster's body was torn apart—sliced over fifty times, each mark deep and precise.

The grip on my ankle loosened, and I collapsed, falling to the ground. Confusion clouded my mind. I couldn't quite understand what had just happened, the whirlwind of pain and shock making everything harder to understand.

But before I could fall unconscious, something strong caught me. My head rested against someone's chest, and I blinked up, still dizzy, still unsure.

With my vision blurred, I could barely make out the shape, but then, through the blur, clear beautiful blue eyes stared back at me.

He placed his warm hands behind my head, almost as if trying to comfort me. He smiled, a brief but reassuring look. "Looks like I was in time."

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I allowed myself to feel hope.

### **Chapter 3 - Cursed Past**

I don't understand this feeling. This strange, unfamiliar warmth deep inside me, like a ray of hope trying to bloom in the darkness.

I should have died back there—alone, forgotten, like I always thought I would. I had given up, accepted that my life would end the way it always seemed destined to. But then he appeared.

Why? Why save someone like me?

It doesn't make sense. I've spent my whole life learning one truth: people hate me. They always have. Yet, for some reason, he didn't. He looked at me like I mattered, even when I didn't believe I did.

I shifted in my sleep, the faint crackle of a distant campfire blending with my thoughts. But the warmth wasn't enough to keep the memories away. They came rushing back, unbidden, vivid as ever.

I don't remember much of my earliest days. But I remember having a loving family.

We were happy once. I had a caring mother, a hardworking father, and... someone else. Someone special. My sister, Lyla. Her name feels fragile in my mind now, like a whisper I'm afraid I'll forget. She was the one who took care of me, the one who made me laugh when no one else could. I can still remember her soft voice, calling me "Lia" when we played games in the garden, or how she would brush my hair before I went to sleep, as if weaving dreams into my hair along with the strands.

I remember her so vividly. Lyla had long, wavy brown hair that cascaded over her shoulders, often adorned with a ribbon—yellow-orange, like the autumn leaves she loved so much. Her golden-brown eyes always seemed to sparkle with warmth, a mixture of mischief and kindness that made you feel safe just looking into them. Her skin was soft and fair, with a blush on her cheeks that deepened when she laughed, which she did often. She wore a golden-yellow sweater with delicate patterns woven into the fabric, always favoring soft, warm colors that mirrored her personality. Her earrings were intricate and floral, as if they had been plucked from the garden she adored.

Even now, I can see her standing in that glowing autumn light, her hair catching the sun, holding a leaf in her delicate hands with that gentle smile that seemed to say everything was going to be okay.

My mother was the heart of our home. Her hands were gentle, always ready to soothe a scratch or bake her famous apple pie. I loved the smell of cinnamon filling the house; it

felt like a warm hug. She'd hum softly while she worked, and her voice could calm any storm in my heart.

I remember one night during a thunderstorm when I was scared—she stayed by my side, telling me stories until I fell asleep. She always called me "mommy's little girl," and every time she said it, I felt safe, like the world couldn't touch me.

Father wasn't as talkative, but his presence was strong. He'd wake up before the sun to go fishing, his hands rough from the ropes and nets. Even after long days, he'd sit with us at dinner, sharing stories about the sea—like the time he swore he saw a fish so big it could've sunk his boat.

One summer, he let me go with him. I didn't catch anything, but he laughed and said, "That just means you're saving them for next time." That day is still one of my happiest memories.

They made life simple and full of love, and those moments stay with me wherever I go.

Together, they built a home filled with love and laughter. It wasn't much, but it was everything to me. And Lyla, she was the anchor, the steady one who kept us together when the world outside seemed too big or too difficult.

We lived in a small village near the shore of Celestine Realm. A village that seemed caught between the gentle ebb of the sea and the great expanse of a land I never fully understood. The village was peaceful, with cobblestone streets that led to tiny cottages, their roofs some covered in moss, as though the earth itself was trying to hold us close. From our home, I could always hear the waves crashing softly against the rocks, a sound that felt like a lullaby, soothing in its rhythm. The beach stretched endlessly, golden sands meeting the rolling tides, and when the sun set, it painted the sky in shades of pink and orange that made everything feel like it was touched by magic.

I used to wonder why it was called the Celestine Realm. There was a beauty here that felt otherworldly, but I didn't know much about the continent. My village, Aloria, was small and quiet, nestled between rolling hills and the sea. I'd heard bits and pieces—stories passed between the elders or whispered around the campfires—but I'd never asked about the world beyond our shores.

Sometimes I'd catch myself staring at the horizon, wondering what lay beyond the blue, what secrets the land of Celestine might hold. But the question always felt too big, too far away from the peaceful life in Aloria.

The beauty of our village never ceased to amaze me. The way the waves glinted in the sunlight, or how the breeze carried the salty tang of the sea, mixing with the scent of wildflowers. It was a place where every sunset felt like a promise, and every morning seemed to bring new hopes. How could I not feel blessed living in such a place? How could I have known that everything I loved could change so quickly?

It was winter when we sat by the lively lake near the village, the kind of winter that turns everything soft and quiet. Snow blanketed the ground, muffling our footsteps and covering the world in white.

The lake, though surrounded by ice and frost, refused to freeze entirely, its waters shimmering under the pale light of the sun. I remember how we sat close, wrapped in warmth from layers of clothing and something less tangible—a shared silence admiring the view.

Our village was a lively place, full of faces I once adored. I had friends—a whole group of them. We were inseparable, dreaming of adventures we'd one day share.

Mira tried to skip a rock across the lake—or tried to. It plopped into the water with a sad little splash.

"One day, I'll leave this small village and travel beyond the mountains," she declared, as if the failed stone throw didn't just happen. "I'll find magical cities and forgotten treasures." She turned to us, hands on her hips. "And when I do, you'll all wish you came with me."

"Oh, sure," Toby said, crouching to pick up a rock. "You'll be off hunting treasure, and who'll be here building our fort? Me. Like always." He tossed his rock, and it bounced across the water with a perfect rhythm. "You know, the one you promised to help with last week."

"You call sticking a bunch of twigs, rocks, branches together a fort?" Elise cut in, her voice soft but sharp, like always. "Face it, Toby, the monkeys are using it as a storage shed." She smirked, threading a small flower into her braid. "Not exactly dragon-proof."

"Hey!" Toby crossed his arms, puffing up like a rooster. "Let's see you do better, Miss Flower Crowns!"

"Maybe I will," Elise replied calmly. "But at least I wouldn't need Ronan to rescue me from my own mess."

Ronan leaned down to the ground, smirking. "Let's face it, Toby. Without me, you'd all be lost. Who's the one saving everyone from trouble all the time?" He puffed his chest, trying to look important. "That's why I'm the leader of this group."

Mira raised an eyebrow. "Leader?" she repeated, barely hiding her laugh. "Did we vote on that, or did you just decide while you were lost alone in the woods last time?"

Ronan's grin faltered. "I wasn't lost. I was—uh—observing. Leaders do that for their members."



"Sure buddy," Fiona piped up, rolling her eyes. "You're the leader until someone mentions work, then you're suddenly 'too busy.'" She then suddenly bolted toward the river with a laugh, calling over her shoulder, "First one to the shore is the real leader! Last one has to do double the chores!"

"Hey!" I yelled, taking off after her. "That's not how this works!"

"Looks like I'm winning," Fiona called, her voice echoing as she dashed ahead.

By the time we all reached the river—Fiona, of course, already there—Toby was panting, Mira was glaring at her soaked boots, and Ronan had mistakenly slipped and fell face flat onto the water.

"You know," Toby said, sitting down in defeat, "when I build my kingdom, I'm not inviting any of you. You'll all be begging to come, but nope. Only the monkeys can join."

"You're building a kingdom?" Mira asked, trying not to laugh. "Out of what? Sticks and wishes?"

"It's called vision," Toby retorted, puffing up again. "A true leader like me has it."

"Then I guess you're not the leader either," Elise teased, her voice as steady as her hands weaving flowers.

Ronan finally reached us, fully soaked in water. He leaned down around a tree with a triumphant smirk. "Face it, I'm the only one qualified. I've got the skills, the smarts, and the guts."

"Guts?" Fiona laughed, splashing water toward him. "You're the same Ronan who ran screaming when Toby lit that tiny campfire too close to you!"

"It wasn't tiny!" Ronan shot back, gripping the branch tighter. "And the flames were right there! I am just a bit scared of fire!"

As their laughter filled the air, I couldn't help but think about how one day, maybe we really would make kingdoms, fight dragons, or even find magical cities. But for now, we were just us—perfectly imperfect, with a kingdom made of laughter and dreams.

Then there was Kiel, quiet but kind. He found me crying once, hiding under a tree, and simply sat with me, his book in hand. That was the kind of person he was—always there when you needed him, even if you didn't realize it.

While the rest of us were racing toward the river, laughing and shouting, Kiel barely even looked up from his book. He just strolled along, one hand tucked in his pocket, the other flipping a page.

"You all just wasted a bunch of energy," he said, his voice calm and unaffected.

I rolled my eyes. "Of course, you'd say that" I muttered, half-smiling. "You're not even trying. You wouldn't race us even if we placed you right in front of the finish line."

He gave me a look that could have been considered a smile, but it was more like the subtle upturn of a corner of his mouth. "I don't see the point in rushing. You'll all just end up out of breath, and for what?"

"You're such a weirdo sometimes," I said, shaking my head. But I couldn't deny the little flicker of warmth inside me. Kiel was always the one who didn't need to prove anything to anyone. The one who always took his time, no matter what. He wasn't like the rest of us, charging ahead, driven by the need to be first, or to be noticed.

He was the kind of person who simply *was*, and honestly, there was something admirable about that. Even if it drove me crazy sometimes.

After a while, as we all gathered by the river, catching our breath from the laughter and games, I heard a voice calling out from behind us.

"Lia!" It was Lyla. She came rushing toward us, wide-eyed and looking around in surprise when she saw all of us—especially Ronan, who was dripping wet, his hair sticking to his face. She burst out laughing. "What happened to you guys? Did someone try to drown you or is this your idea of fun?"

Ronan, still trying to recover his composure, shot her a glare. "It wasn't my fault! We were—uh, we were—having a very serious race, and the river just got a little too enthusiastic!"

Kiel, who had been leaning against a nearby tree, tucked his book under his arm and shrugged. "It's just us playing games together, nothing serious."

Lyla raised an eyebrow, but the smile on her face showed she wasn't fooled. "Well, that's good to hear. You all look like you could use a warm fire instead of more of whatever *this* is."

As she turned toward Fiona, her tone shifted, becoming lighter. "So, Fiona, still collecting flowers, huh?"

Fiona's eyes lit up, and the two of them quickly fell into an easy conversation about the different types of flowers growing nearby, with Lyla enthusiastically listening to Fiona's descriptions of each one. It was always like this between them—Fiona, always eager to talk about the wonders of nature, and Lyla, her interest genuine and bright.

I watched them for a moment, the warmth of the scene making my chest tighten slightly. The sound of their voices was comforting, like a song that had played for so long, you knew it by heart.

Finally, as the laughter and chatter died down a little, Lyla sighed softly, her gaze drifting toward the horizon. "I really miss those happy days of my life." Her voice was quiet, almost wistful, as though she was looking back on something precious—something she couldn't quite reach anymore.

I couldn't help but feel the same.

In our village, it was tradition for children to receive their names only after their 10th birthday. Before that, we were simply called by whatever name our parents felt suited us, but it wasn't permanent. The village believed that naming a child too soon could invite misfortune, that a curse might slip in before the name could shield them properly. So, before reaching the age of ten, you were a nameless soul, drifting between the world of childhood and something more.

To outsiders, it must have seemed odd—this hesitation to name a child, this superstition about curses—but for us, it was just how things were. Our village was overly cautious about curses, always wary of something dark slipping through the cracks. They believed that if a name wasn't fully earned, it might leave the child vulnerable to a curse's touch. Some of the elders would whisper that naming too early would make the child an easy target for any wandering dark spirit or curse seeking an opening.

I didn't know much about how curses worked, but Kiel had once explained a little to me when I asked. He was always the one who had a way with words, explaining things in a calm, logical way, even if it didn't always make sense to me. "Curses," he had said, "can cause sickness, pain... or worse. Sometimes, they can take over someone's body entirely, leaving them nothing but a shell watching." I remember his voice growing a little quieter when he said that last part, like even he didn't fully understand the danger they posed.

At the time, I hadn't quite grasped the full weight of his words, but I could tell by the way he said it that curses weren't something to be taken lightly. They were like shadows lurking just outside our peaceful village, waiting for the slightest crack to slip through. So, I suppose, in a way, the tradition of waiting to name us made sense. It wasn't just about avoiding misfortune—it was about keeping us safe from something far darker.

When the time came, the village would gather, and each child would be given a name—one that was meant to guard them against anything dark. But before that, I had no name of my own around that time.

And so, my friends, they called me Stella. It wasn't the name I was born with, but it felt right. It meant I was part of the stars, a piece of the night sky—something constant and

bright, even in the darkest moments. It felt like a promise, one they made me believe in, even when I didn't feel like I had a place among them.

I had many fond memories with them. But there was one in particular I cherished the most.

It was the Firebloom festival Night, the time when our village lit bonfires to welcome spring and chase away misfortune. The stars always seemed brighter on that night, and my friends said it was because the sky was happy to see us.

That year, there was no joy in Firebloom Night for me. Lyla's condition had worsened beyond anything we could have imagined. Each day, her breath grew weaker, and her once vibrant body seemed to wither under an illness none of us understood. The sound of her laughter, which had always filled our home, was now a distant memory, fading with every passing hour.

I stayed by her side every moment I could, holding her hand as if my touch could somehow keep her tethered to this world. I whispered to her, telling stories she could no longer hear, her eyes barely open, her frail body too weak to respond. Smiling for her sake felt like breaking. Each smile I forced cracked something inside me.

The medicine she needed wasn't in the village. It was somewhere far off. Though it was on its way, I couldn't sit and wait. A week felt like an eternity—an eternity she might not have.

I couldn't stand still, not while she was slipping away. As I heard the distant laughter of others celebrating the festival, the ache in my chest deepened. I couldn't join them—not while Lyla needed me.

Then I saw my father. His face, set with determination, appeared in the doorway, lantern in hand, ready to leave.

"I'll go," he said, his voice thick with desperation. "I'll through the forest and find the medicine myself."

"No," the village chief's voice rang out, firm and unyielding. Before my father could take another step, the chief blocked his way. "It's too dangerous. Before the festival, the forest is filled with curses and monsters. You won't make it."

My father hesitated, his fists clenched at his sides. Anger and frustration battled inside him. "I can't just sit here while Lyla is suffering! She's my daughter!"

The chief shook his head. "And you'll be no good of a father to her being dead. Stay where you are."

A heavy silence hung in the air. I could see the war in my father's eyes, the urge to act warring against the knowledge that he couldn't go. Then, as if something inside him broke, Lyla's weak voice drifted from the house.

"Papa..."

My father froze, his face softening as he slowly turned toward the door. "Lyla..."

"Where are you going?" she whispered, her voice so frail it nearly shattered me. She tried her best to make a faint smile.

"Don't leave me please."

Her words—so soft, so broken—stopped him. He sighed deeply, the weight of his love for her pressing down on his shoulders. Finally, he nodded, defeated and tears coming out. "I... I'll be right here my daughter... But don't you go stop smiling on me."

He stepped back inside, his resolve shattered. But as I watched him, a quiet resolve started to build in me. If it had been me in Lyla's place, the one sick and dying there, she wouldn't have hesitated. She would've gone alone without a second thought to help me.

I couldn't wait any longer. I couldn't sit here and do nothing.

I found myself outside, trembling as I packed a satchel with what little I could gather—a canteen, bread, a scarf Lyla had woven for me. My hands shook with each motion, the urgency clouding my thoughts. Tears kept falling, no matter how hard I tried to stay composed.

I wiped my face with a deep breath, making my decision. I was scared—terrified—but I couldn't just watch her fade away.

I had been saving up silver coins for months, just a few at a time. I had enough—barely—but it was enough to buy the one thing that could save her: the healing potion.

One last look at the house, at the quiet stillness of the night, and I turned toward the woods. The lantern cast long shadows on the path ahead. The journey was uncertain, dangerous even, but I had no other choice. Fear gripped me, but I couldn't stop now—not when Lyla needed me.

I grabbed the lantern from the porch, its flickering light barely steady in my trembling hands. The darkness loomed ahead, the forest stretching before me. I felt small, insignificant, like the shadows might swallow me whole, but I didn't care. I couldn't sit here and do nothing.

"Please," I whispered, the words barely a breath. "Let this work. Let me do something." My voice cracked as I clenched my fists so tightly my nails dug into my palms.

But they found me.

"Stella! Where are you going alone?" Mira's voice shattered the stillness, cutting through the tension that had built in my chest. She was the first to catch up, her breath ragged, eyes wide with worry.

I froze, the strap of my satchel digging into my hand as I turned to face her. "I have to go buy the healing potion. Lyla doesn't have much time left, Mira." My voice cracked, holding the tears I'd been trying so hard to hold back. The pain in my chest felt unbearable, suffocating.

Mira stepped closer, her hands reaching out as if to comfort me, but her eyes... her eyes were full of concern. "Stella, you can't do this alone. You're not... you're not supposed to carry this alone."

Before I could respond, the others arrived, each of them carrying their own silent fear, their expressions hardening when they saw what I was trying to do.

Toby burst through the underbrush, his face flushed from running, his voice sharp. "You can't just leave on your own! What if you get hurt? You're our friend!"

I shook my head, a sharp, desperate breath catching in my throat. "I don't have a choice. Lyla's dying, Toby. She doesn't have time for me to wait around for help."

Ronan was the next to speak, his voice firm and unwavering, though the usual lightness was gone. "You're not going alone, Stella." His stance was almost protective as he crossed his arms, his usual courage replaced by something deeper. "You can't do this on your own. We won't let you."

There was a moment of silence, then a small grin tugged at the corner of his mouth, though his tone remained serious. "Besides, I 'borrowed' a few swords from the smithy earlier. Figured we'd need them."

"You what?" Fiona snapped, her hands turning into a fist due to pure shock.

"They were just lying there," he said with a shrug, patting the hilt of one. "Call it... preparation. Someone's got to think ahead."

"You mean someone's got to explain this to the swordsmith when he notices his swords are missing," I muttered, shaking my head.

"Laugh all you want," Ronan said with a wink, "but when the next monster shows up, you'll be glad I'm here."



Elise's voice was quiet, but there was an undeniable strength in her words. "We're your friends, Stella. Let us come with you. We'll help you go there." She reached for my hand, her touch gentle, grounding me.

I couldn't allow myself to bring anyone of them. The forest would be filled with monsters and curses at this time, it didn't matter if we had any weapons or not. I couldn't allow myself to get them in any danger. "I can't ask you guys to help me like this. Please return back to the village for my sake."

I tried to pull back, to keep my fear from infecting them, but Fiona was already beside Elise, cutting me off before I could say more. "You don't have to ask, Stella. We're coming. You think we'd let you do this by yourself? You've got more stubbornness than a whole herd of mules sometimes." Her grin was teasing, but the tremor in her voice killing the fear she was hiding.

Kiel, who had been silent until now, stepped forward, his eyes softer than usual, his voice low but steady. "Stella... You don't have to carry all of this alone. We're here for you." His simple words hit me harder than I could have imagined, his quiet presence a steady anchor in the storm inside me.

I wanted to argue, to tell them they didn't have to risk their lives for me. But when I looked into their eyes—Mira's wide, desperate gaze, Toby's fierce determination, Ronan's protective stance, Elise's gentle resolve, Fiona's brave smile, and Kiel's quiet strength—I knew. They weren't going to let me go through this alone, no matter what I said.

They believed in me, and now I had to believe in them, too.

We set out that night, the six of us walking through the forest like a barrier against the dark. Mira's voice kept the atmosphere light as she kept on telling stories about the stars, spinning tales of mythical creatures and distant lands, her words laced with a kind of comfort I hadn't realized I needed. Toby carried my lantern when my hands shook too much to hold it steady, his presence a constant reassurance that I wasn't alone.

Elise's voice, soft and melodic, floated through the silence of the night, her song calming my fears, even the ones I didn't know I had. Ronan led the way, his every step purposeful and calculated, yet there was a tightness to his movements. He was on edge, alert, and I couldn't blame him.

Fiona's usual energy kept the tension from suffocating us. She cracked jokes, making us laugh even when the dark felt too heavy, her loud, carefree spirit somehow pushing the shadows back.

Kiel walked beside me, his steady presence reminding me that no matter what happened, I wasn't alone in this fight.

Then, we encountered the first sign of something amiss.

It wasn't anything we could see, at least not at first. But I felt it—an unnerving, oppressive presence that seemed to hang in the air around us. My instincts were screaming at me, a very cold shiver ran down my spine. I glanced at the others, but they were too focused on the path, too caught up in their mission to notice the change in the air.

Something was watching us. I could feel its eyes—dark, unblinking, hungry.

I kept moving, my heart pounding in my chest. The silence around us felt unnatural. Even the usual sounds of the forest seemed muffled, swallowed by the unseen eyes on us.

I turned to Ronan, my voice barely a whisper. "Do you feel that? Something's out there... watching us."

He stopped, eyes narrowing. He didn't respond immediately, but his body tensed, and his hand hovered near his sword. "I don't like this," he muttered, but he didn't move. "Stay close."

We continued on, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was stalking us, waiting for the right moment to strike. The monsters in the forest had always been unpredictable, but these creatures—these curses—felt different. They didn't attack. Not yet.

And I still couldn't figure out why.

The further we went, the more the forest seemed to close in on us. The trees loomed taller, the darkness felt deeper, and every step forward made my heart beat faster. My friends were brave, but even they were beginning to sense it, the change in the air, the unnerving silence.

Then came the first attack.

It was sudden. A creature, its body twisted and grotesque, lunged from the shadows with a speed that made it hard to follow. Its jagged claws sliced through the air, aiming for Ronan, who barely managed to draw his sword in time. The clash was brief but brutal, Ronan's blade deflecting the strike by mere inches. He stumbled back, teeth gritted as the force sent vibrations up his arm.

"Toby, light!" Ronan shouted, his voice cutting through the chaos.

Toby fumbled with his lantern, the flame trembling like his hands. He swung it desperately, the flickering light momentarily pushing the creature back. But it wasn't

enough. With a snarl, the creature lashed out, its claws grazing Toby's arm and sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Get back!" Ronan bellowed, stepping in front of Toby as the creature closed in.

Fiona darted in from the side, her agility unmatched. She hurled a rock at the creature, striking its shoulder. "Over here, ugly!" she taunted, weaving around it with quick, nimble steps.

The distraction worked for a moment, giving Ronan the chance to land a slash across its side. But the wound seemed to do little more than anger the beast.

It moved faster than any of them could react, slamming into Ronan and knocking him to the ground. His sword skidded away, just out of reach. Fiona tried to intervene, but the creature was relentless, swiping at her with claws that barely missed her by a hair's breadth.

"Ronan!" Elise's voice trembled as she rushed to his side, dragging him back before the creature could land another hit.

Kiel, silent and composed, stepped forward, his movements fluid and calculated. His blade flashed in the dim light, striking true. The creature staggered, snarling in pain, but it wasn't finished. It turned its attention to me.

I froze as its eyes locked onto mine, filled with a predatory hunger. It lunged, faster than I could process, its claws aiming straight for me. My heart thundered as I stumbled back, too slow, too vulnerable.

But just as it reached me, it stopped. The creature's expression twisted—its ferocity replaced with sheer terror. Its body trembled, its claws hovering inches from my face. Its once-predatory eyes were now wide, filled with primal fear.

It couldn't move. It just stood there, shaking violently, as if something invisible held it in place. I was too stunned to react, my mind racing. Why? Why had it stopped?

The others weren't wasting the chance. Kiel darted in, his sword a blur as he delivered a final, precise strike. The creature crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

The forest fell silent once more, save for our heavy breathing. We were battered, bruised, and shaken, but alive. Yet the question lingered in the back of my mind—why had the creature stopped? And why did it fear me?

I looked around, my eyes scanning the trees, the shadows, the path ahead. Something was different about these monsters, something more uneven. They weren't attacking us because they were hungry or driven by instinct. They were scared.

But not of us.

My chest tightened as the thought struck me, cold and sharp. No, their fear wasn't aimed at our swords or our numbers. It was something else—something near me, or maybe... around me.

The realization was almost unsettling, but another part of me stirred, steady and certain. Whatever it was, it wasn't just scaring them. It was protecting me.

"Why haven't they attacked us all at once?" I murmured, almost to myself.

Kiel's gaze met mine, his expression unreadable. "I don't know. But we should keep moving. Whatever's out there, it's not done with us."

We didn't stop. We couldn't. Not now. Every step, every breath, felt like it was leading us closer to something that could save Lyla... or destroy us all.

When we reached the village and found the medicine, I thought my chest might burst from the weight lifting off it. The moment I clutched that vial, a wave of ecstasy washed over me—relief, hope, and joy all collided in a rush. It felt like a heavy storm finally passing, leaving behind only clear skies. The thought that I had the power to save Lyla, to finally bring her relief, filled me with a happiness I hadn't felt in ages. There was no stopping us now. We didn't even pause to rest, our steps quickening as if propelled by the weight of our mission. Every step closer to home only deepened the hope in my heart. I could save her. I could fix this.

We arrived back at the house, and the moment we walked through the door, my parents rushed toward me, their faces filled with concern and a storm of questions. "Where have you been?" my father asked, his voice tight with worry. "What happened? Are you alright?" my mother added, her hands reaching to touch me, as if to confirm I was truly safe.

But I barely heard their words. My focus was on one thing only: Lyla. I rushed past them, hardly noticing their shocked expressions, and headed straight for her room. I had to get to her.

Lyla lay there, pale and weak, her body trembling from the sickness that had gripped her. She looked up at me, her eyes filled with worry. "Lia," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "Don't come too close... the illness... you might catch it too."

But I shook my head, not even hesitating for a second. "I don't care about that," I told her softly, my voice full of conviction. "All that matters is your safety, Lyla. Nothing else matters."

Her eyes softened at my words, and I could see the hesitation in them. I opened the vial, took the medicine, and gently helped her swallow it. My hands shook as I held her,

but I didn't care. All that mattered was the act of healing her, saving her from this torment.

And then, as I pulled away slightly, I saw something in her eyes. A glow. It was the first time in days that her eyes were clear, full of warmth, and almost... relieved. It took everything in me not to break down right there. I watched as her eyes shimmered with the beginnings of tears. She tried to hide it, but I saw it—saw how she was fighting back the emotions that threatened to spill over. I had done it. I had saved her.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I saw a glimmer of hope return in her eyes. And in that moment, I knew that I would do anything—sacrifice anything—to keep that light in her eyes shining.

That night, I realized something I'd never forget—they weren't just my friends. They were my family, the stars in my sky. And as they liked to remind me, I was Stella, one of them.

I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to stand by me, to give me strength when I had none left to give. Their kindness, their unwavering support—it meant everything. I was no longer alone.

We were going to grow up and travel the world together. That was our promise. To leave the village, to adventure, to see everything life had to offer. I believed in that dream. In them.

But everything changed.

It was a month before my 10th birthday when it started. My hair began to fade, day by day, from brown to snow-white. At first, I thought it was a trick of the light. But then the pain came. My eyes burned constantly, so much that I couldn't even cry. The more I tried, the worse it got.

My parents were frantic, rushing me to the village doctor, trying remedy after remedy. Nothing worked. I remember my mother telling me to keep my eyes closed, whispering soothing words as if that would make it better. But nothing stopped the pain. Nothing eased the agony that gnawed at me every second.

As time passed, I noticed something else—my eyes, once a bright, vivid shade, slowly started to turn grey. At first, it was just a faint dimming, a shift so subtle that I thought I was imagining it. But as the days turned into weeks, the change became impossible to ignore. The light in them was fading, like a candle burned down to the wick. I tried to keep them shut as much as I could, to hide from the changes overtaking me, but it only felt worse. It was as if I was losing myself, piece by piece, with no way to stop it.

And the village noticed.

I heard them talking—whispers at first, soft and fleeting. But whispers have a way of growing, gaining shape and weight. One morning, while walking through the square, I caught fragments of their conversations.

"Have you seen her eyes?"

"Grey, like a colorless world. It's unnatural."

"Maybe she's cursed, that one. No wonder she's always alone."

The words stung, sharp as needles. I tried not to listen, to keep my head down, but their voices followed me.

"I heard she's not right in the head."

"Maybe it's not just her eyes. Maybe it's her soul."

"Mark my words, she's bringing trouble to this village."

Once, I turned a corner too quickly and stumbled upon a group of them. They didn't even try to hide their laughter.

"Look, there she is. The grey-eyed ghost."

"Careful, don't let her touch you. Who knows what kind of curse she carries?"

I fled before they could say more, my heart pounding so hard it felt like it might break through my chest. The laughter followed me, echoing in my mind long after it had faded into the distance.

One day, while the rain fell steadily outside, I found myself standing alone in the yard. I hadn't meant to go out. I hadn't meant to let anyone see me like this. But the rain—cold, relentless—matched how I felt inside. I stood there, unmoving, as the water soaked through my clothes, the chill seeping into my bones.

I cried quietly, the tears blending with the rain, my grief soaking into the earth. My shoulders trembled, my chest heaving with silent sobs. For a moment, it felt like the storm was mourning with me, its relentless downpour masking the sound of my pain.

But even then, I couldn't escape their voices. From the safety of their doorways and windows, the villagers watched, their words cutting through the rain like knives.

"Look at her. What's she doing out there?"

"Crazy girl. Maybe she is calling curses?"



"She probably thinks the rain will wash away her sins."

I clenched my fists, the water streaming down my face indistinguishable from my tears. The urge to scream, to shout, to tell them they didn't know anything about me surged in my chest, but I swallowed it down. They wouldn't understand. They didn't want to.

So I let the silence take me in. I stood there, crying, my grief drowning beneath the relentless rain. Alone, fading, with no one to pull me back.

I accepted my mother's idea and kept my eyes closed, hoping it might bring some relief. But as I did, the world vanished in an instant. The warmth of the fire, the faces of those I loved—it was all gone, swallowed by the darkness behind my eyelids.

I couldn't see anyone, couldn't feel anything but the ache that consumed me. It was as if the world had turned its back on me, leaving me alone in the shadow of my pain.

I stopped talking to people, locking myself away in my room. I didn't want anyone to see me like that. I didn't want them to see what I was becoming.

At first, my friends would visit daily, their voices calling to me from outside my door, trying to coax me out with laughter and stories. My parents came too, their concern heavy in every word they spoke, while Lyla just wanted to sit beside me, quietly holding my hand.

But I told them all to leave me alone, insisting that I was fine, that I didn't need anyone. Slowly, one by one, they stopped coming. They left, just as I wanted. I thought it was better that way—better that no one had to see me like this.

But Lyla wouldn't leave me alone.

She used to call me "Lia" out of love, saying it described how precious I was to her and that she would sacrifice anything to protect me.

Every night, she sat outside my door, her voice soft and unwavering as she tried to comfort me. "It'll get better," she would say. "I'll be right here. Always." Her words carried a hope I couldn't feel, like she was clinging to something for both of us.

But sometimes, her voice wavered, and I could hear the desperation beneath her calm exterior. "Lia," she whispered, her words like a plea. "I know you're hurt. I can hear it in the silence... please, let me in. You don't have to carry this alone. You don't have to hide away."

I felt the weight of her love through the door, pressing down on me like the world was collapsing. "You don't understand," I whispered back, my voice barely audible. "I can't keep going like this. It feels like I'm drowning, and no matter how hard I try, I just want to disappear sometimes."

For a long moment, there was nothing but silence. Then she spoke again, her voice trembling. "Lia, no... you're not broken. You're hurting, and I see that. But you are not alone in this. I see your pain, I feel it, and I'll stay here—every step of the way. I'll hold you when you fall apart, and I'll remind you of the strength you can't see right now. You're more than this moment, Lia. You're more than the fear and the doubt you feel. Please, don't shut me out. I need you just as much as you need me."

Her words felt like a lifeline, pulling me from the darkness, but I was too afraid to reach for it. Still, I could hear her—her heart in every word, her determination to keep me from slipping further away.

"Lia, you're my heart," she continued, her voice breaking. "You're the reason I am alive. You're the reason I keep going, even when everything feels impossible. Don't you dare believe you're alone in this. I swear, I will never leave you. I will fight for you, with everything I have."

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to let her in, to feel her warmth, but I didn't know how. The pain inside felt too heavy, too deep to share.

I told her to go away. My voice was sharp, my words harsher than I intended, but I couldn't stop myself. Again and again, I screamed at her to leave, my heart twisting each time I heard the hurt in her silence. But she stayed.

No matter how much I pushed her away, she stayed. Through the nights when I sobbed quietly into my pillow, convinced no one could hear. Through the days when the world outside my door felt like a foreign place I didn't belong to anymore. She stayed.

Some nights, I would cry alone, the tears falling silently as I curled into myself, hoping the darkness would hide me from the world. The pain, the loneliness, the strange changes—I didn't want anyone to see. I didn't want anyone to laugh at how I looked now, with my hair so pale, my eyes dull and grey, like I wasn't even the same person. I needed to keep my suffering hidden, tucked away in the silence of my room, where no one could judge me. She never needed to see me like that, yet somehow, she always knew. Even when I tried to lock myself away, she stayed. And I don't think I ever truly understood how much that meant until much later.

Her voice was my lifeline, even when I pretended not to hear her. She told me stories, spinning tales of adventure and heroes who overcame impossible odds. She made up jokes—most of them terrible—just to coax a smile from me. I never gave her the satisfaction of a laugh, but her persistence was the closest thing to warmth I could feel.

I never opened the door. Not until the night before my birthday. I don't know what made me do it. Maybe it was the way her voice cracked as she whispered, "I just want you to know you're not alone. Not now, not ever." Maybe it was the quiet snuffle I heard afterward, the sound of tears she thought I couldn't hear.

When I finally turned the handle and saw her sitting there, arms wrapped around her knees, her eyes red and swollen from crying, I realized something I hadn't let myself believe. She wasn't just waiting for me to get better. She was breaking too, and she was still there, holding on for both of us.

I let her in, and the moment I saw her face, I broke. The pain, the fear, the loneliness—it all came spilling out in sobs I couldn't control. Lyla didn't say a word at first. She just wrapped her arms around me, pulling me close, stroking my hair like she always did when we were little.

Lyla kept her tears from coming, not wanting me to cry with her. I could feel how much sadness she felt for me, the weight of it pressing against me as she held me. She didn't have to say anything; I knew she understood my pain, the quiet sorrow that had been building inside me for so long.

Her grip was firm, steady—an anchor in the storm that raged within me. She didn't judge me for how I looked, for the way my hair had faded and my eyes had dulled. She only cared for me, her younger sister, as if nothing had changed. It was enough. In that moment, it was all I needed.

"It's okay, Lia," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Let it out. I'm here. I've got you."

"I-I can't," I choked out between sobs. "I can't do this anymore, Lyla. I'm not strong. I'm weak—a crybaby who can't handle anything!" My words felt heavy, as if saying them out loud only made them more true.

"Don't say that, Lia," Lyla said softly, pulling back just enough to look me in the eyes. Her gaze was steady, her voice firm but gentle. "You're wrong. You're so much stronger than you think."

"How?" I asked, my voice breaking. "I push everyone away. I hide. I can't even—" My words dissolved into more tears.

She cupped my face, brushing away my tears with her thumbs, her touch gentle but firm. "Do you remember when I was sick?" she whispered, her voice trembling as she spoke. "How you stayed by my side, day and night? You never gave up on me, even when I was too weak to lift my head. You held my hand, told me stories, and made me laugh when I thought I'd forgotten how. You kept me alive. You're the reason I'm here."

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak, my chest tight with the weight of everything I couldn't put into words. But she wasn't finished.

"And now it's my turn, Lia," she said, her voice soft but unshakable, her gaze never leaving mine. "You helped me when I couldn't help myself. You gave me strength when I had none. It's my duty—no, it's my privilege—to do the same for you. You don't have to go through this alone. I won't let you."

Her words wrapped around my heart like a lifeline, but the fear and shame held me back. I wanted to believe her, but the darkness in my mind felt too heavy to escape. She could see it though—the weight I was carrying, the despair I couldn't shake.

Lyla leaned in closer, her forehead resting against mine, her breath warm and steady. "You are not alone, Lia. I'm right here. Every step of the way. I'll be the strength you need when you don't have any left. I'll carry you when you can't stand. Don't you dare think you're a burden to me. You're my sister. You are everything to me."

The tears came again, but this time, they didn't feel as heavy. They were just... a release. A breaking open of all the pain I had kept hidden for so long. I leaned into her, letting her warmth and love fill the cracks in my heart.

"I'm scared," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "What if I'm too much for you?"

Lyla pulled me into her arms, holding me tight as if she could shield me from the world. "You'll never be too much for me, Lia. Never. I'll always be here. You don't have to be perfect, you just have to be you. And that's more than enough for me."

Her words sank deep into me, breaking through the walls I'd built around myself. "But I'm scared," I whispered. "What if I'm never okay again?"

She hugged me tighter, resting her chin on my shoulder. "Then I'll keep being here, every step of the way. We'll face it together, one day at a time. You don't have to be okay right now, Lia. Just know that you're loved, and I'm not going anywhere."

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I allowed myself to believe her.

The morning of my birthday was the happiest I'd felt in weeks. My parents threw a party, inviting half the village. They told me they were going to give me my name, something they'd dreamed of for years. I wanted to keep my grey eyes hidden as long as possible, so I kept my eyes closed the whole way long.

Mother wanted to call me Celestara, after the goddess who blessed Celestine. She believed that my snowy white hair, so much like the pure light of the moon, would be a perfect match for the name. My mother was deeply religious, and curses were her greatest fear. She made sure I never came in contact with anything she considered dark or ill-fated. To her, Celestara was a name of purity, of divine blessing, one that would protect me from any misfortune that might try to cling to me.

Father, on the other hand, had his own idea. He wanted to name me Anastasia, meaning "resurrection" or "rebirth." He said it symbolized hope—perhaps the hope that even the darkest days could bring new beginnings. My father had a strange fondness for names that carried weight, names that meant something greater than themselves. I always found it funny how he could get so passionate about something so simple as a

name, but to him, it was more than just a label. It was a symbol, a reminder that life always moved forward, even through the toughest times.

Then there was Lyla. My dear sister. She wanted to name me Selene, after the moon. She said it represented the deep bond we shared, how she had always been there for me, just like the moon had always been there for the stars.

Selene was calm, protective, and constant—just like her. She said the moon was always watching over the night, soothing the world with its light. And she wanted me to carry that same protection, that same serene presence in my life.

It was a name that felt almost too grand, too perfect for me. I had always been Lia to her, a name that was simpler, more familiar. But Selene—Selene felt like something more. Something powerful. The way she spoke of it, with such certainty and tenderness, made it hard not to believe in its meaning. It was astonishing, really, how a name could carry so much weight, so much love.

And of course, my friends—Mira, Toby, Elise, Ronan, Fiona, and Kiel—wanted me to be called Stella. They were all well over the age of ten, but they treated me as their equal, never once making me feel less than them, despite my age. They all said that I was a part of the stars, that I had a light inside me even when I didn't believe it. They made me feel like I truly belonged, like I was meant to shine alongside them, no matter how small or fragile I felt. I was happy being able to call them my friends.

Even though they were older, they treated me with such care and respect that I never once felt out of place. And in that moment, on my birthday, with the sun shining brightly and my heart full, I felt like their Stella—a name that made me feel as though I belonged.

For the first time in a month, the pain started to completely fade away. I could open my eyes again, the bright sunlight almost too much to bear. My hair, they told me, had turned completely white. They said it suited me, that I looked like an angel.

But when I finally looked up at my mother, everything changed.

Her face, once full of love, now looked cold and hard. Her eyes were distant, like she was looking right through me.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice sharp and cold, cutting through the silence.

I didn't realize at that time, but my eyes had turned glowing red, a color I had never seen in myself before. They resembled the Queen of Curses, a woman of legend feared by all. I had heard stories about her—how she was the only one with eyes like mine. It was as if the curse itself had somehow seeped into me, though I never asked for it.

She dropped to her knees, leaning in close, her eyes searching my face as if trying to find something—anything—that made sense. Her gaze was unsettling, like she was looking for a stranger instead of the child she once held in her arms.

I blinked, confusion filling my mind. I reached out to her, feeling a strange sense of fear in my chest. "I'm Mommy's little girl," I said, forcing a smile, my voice shaky. I stepped forward, arms open, hoping for the hug I used to feel safe in.

But instead of holding me, her hand struck me across the face. The slap was hard, sending me to the ground. I could feel the sting on my cheek as I stared up at her, confused and hurt, the ground cold beneath me.

She stood over me, her eyes wild with disbelief. Her voice cracked as she screamed, "LIES!" Her words were venomous, full of disgust. "How could you be mine? How could I have given birth to someone who looks like Her?"

Her gaze flickered to my eyes, glowing with a cursed red, and the horror in her expression deepened. "You're not my daughter... you're a monster."

The weight of her words crushed me. My mother, the one person I had longed to believe in me, was looking at me like I was something less than human.

I looked up, tears stinging my eyes, and saw nothing but hatred in her eyes.

The villagers were no better. Their cheers quickly turned to gasps, then whispers, then shouts that filled the air with fear.

I could feel their eyes on me, cold and full of judgment. My friends, who had been close, began to move away, their faces stricken with disbelief. The moment they saw my eyes—those cursed, otherworldly eyes—their expressions faltered. One by one, they backed up, as if afraid they might be pulled into whatever darkness had taken hold of me.

"A curse!" one man yelled, his voice trembling with panic as he pointed at me.

"She's the Queen of Curses reborn!" another voice cried out, followed by murmurs of dread from the crowd.

"Stay away from her!" another shouted, fear seeping into his voice.

I didn't understand. I had done nothing wrong.

I could hear the rustling of clothes as people stepped back, eyes wide with fear. A child clutched their mother's leg, looking at me like I was something dangerous, something to be avoided. The elderly woman at the market crossed herself and hurried away,

muttering under her breath. A man in the back spat on the ground, his face twisted in disgust.

They kept their distance, staring at me as if I had just grown horns or become something unrecognizable. I stood there, trembling, not understanding what was happening.

I had done nothing wrong. I hadn't asked for this, hadn't asked for any of it.

But still, their eyes bore into me, full of fear, like I was a threat. A curse.

Lyla was the only one who defended me, standing firm between me and the crowd. Her voice was loud and desperate, cutting through the rising chaos as she screamed at them to see reason.

"Please!" she begged, her eyes wild with panic. "She's just a child! She's not a curse!"

But the villagers didn't listen. They only shouted louder, their fear growing. Even my father, who had once held me close, now turned away. He looked at me with disgust, his face twisted in anger.

"She's a monster!" he yelled, his voice sharp with hate. "A curse! We can't let her stay here with us!"

Lyla's face twisted in agony as she reached out, grabbing my father's arm to stop him from coming closer. "Please, don't!" she cried, her voice cracking. "She's just sick. She's not dangerous!"

The village chief's voice rang out, cold and indifferent. "Let's say we believe you for now," he began, his tone dismissive, as if her pleas were little more than an annoyance. "But if she doesn't change back by tomorrow," he declared, his words like a death sentence, "she'll have to be sacrificed. We can't take the risk. She's too dangerous."

Lyla turned to him, her eyes filled with tears, but she didn't back down. Her voice broke as she pleaded with him, desperately trying to make him understand. "You don't understand! She's just a sick kid! She doesn't deserve this! She needs help, not... not to be treated like this!"

She paused, trying to hold herself together, looking at him with all the hope she had left. "Please, Chief, you're wise. You can see this isn't what it looks like. We can find another way."

But the chief's face remained hard as stone, unmoved by Lyla's desperate pleas. He shook his head, his decision final, a weight settling on the village's future. "This is the only way," he said coldly, his words like a death sentence. "We can't risk her bringing more danger to us all."



Lyla's cries echoed in the air, but they were drowned out by the growing roar of the crowd, their fear turning to anger. She called out to him again, her voice cracking, but it was no use. The chief had made up his mind.

She thought he would be wise enough to stop this madness, to see reason, but instead, he sneered at her, his eyes cold. "You don't get it, do you, Lyla?" he growled. "She's a curse, a threat, and there's no way around it. You'd better stop protecting her, or I'll do what needs to be done. The village comes first. I don't have patience for this. Why should I let everyone suffer when I can just kill her right now?"

Lyla froze, her heart hammering, but there was no fear in her eyes. Slowly, she wiped away her tears, her face turning a serious expression of cold resolve. Then, with a deadly calmness, she spoke.

"Why don't you try it?" she said, her voice as cold as ice.

The villagers gasped, stunned by the change in her tone. Lyla's once gentle aura, full of desperate pleading, was now replaced with an aura of pure disgust and evil. The air around her grew colder, heavier, and a dangerous energy radiated from her like an approaching storm.

Lyla took a step forward, eyes locked on the villagers.

"I have more power than any of you realize. I've mastered ice, water, and fire magic—three elements you can't even begin to challenge. No one in this village could even come close to stopping me, physically or magically."

Her words were met with stunned silence. The crowd could feel the shift in the air—the power that had been hidden beneath her pain now laid bare. Lyla wasn't just angry anymore; she was a force of nature, and every person there could feel it.

As she spoke, her eyes began to shift, a grid-like pattern slowly forming in the depths of her brown irises, like a crosshair locking onto her targets. The intensity of her eyes grew colder, darker, as if she was about to unleash a force no one could comprehend.

A wave of heat radiated from her, the air around her thickening with the crackle of fire magic beginning to surge within her. The villagers could feel the heat growing, and the unmistakable warning that if anyone dared to attack her again, she would burn the entire village to the ground. The air was charged with the promise of destruction.

She turned her eyes back to the chief, her eyes burning with fury. "Try to hurt Lia," she said again, her voice a low growl. "And I'll make sure it's the last thing you ever do."

The villagers watched in shock as the once hopeful, pleading Lyla transformed into someone they didn't recognize. The air was thick with tension, and the line between

protector and destroyer blurred in the intensity of Lyla's presence. She was no longer begging them to stop. She was warning them. Threatening them.

Lyla's aura shifted from the pure, emotional energy of someone desperate to protect her sister, to something darker—more lethal. The villagers could feel it. They saw her for what she truly was—a force not to be underestimated.

The chief, his face pale with fear, stepped forward, his voice trembling as he tried to regain control. "Enough," he commanded, his tone sharp but faltering. "You will not destroy this village over one mistake." His eyes darted nervously to the others, who backed away, some even retreating into the shadows.

Lyla's gaze remained unwavering, the fire in her eyes only intensifying as the chief spoke. She didn't flinch, didn't show any sign of hesitation. Her voice, when it came, was as cold as ice, cutting through the tension in the air.

"Defend yourselves?" she said, her lips barely moving, but the words hung in the air with lethal intent. "You think you have the power to stop me? You couldn't even touch me if you tried."

Her eyes shifted, the grid-like pattern deepening, as if honing in on the chief with a dangerous precision. The temperature in the air dropped further, a chill creeping along the villagers' spines as they realized the full extent of her power. She took a slow step forward, her presence overwhelming.

"Stay far away from me, and my sister, if you value your lives. I'm not interested in your threats," Lyla continued, her voice devoid of any emotion. "You've seen what I can do. Remember it."

From that moment on, there was no turning back.

Since that day, my life was over.

That night, when my father came for me, his hand raised to strike, Lyla was there. She fought him, blocking his every move, her arms shaking with the effort. "Stop! Please, stop!" she shouted, her voice desperate. She grabbed his wrist, trying to force him to see reason, but his eyes were filled with hatred.

"Lyla, please!" I cried, my heart breaking. "Don't! You'll get hurt."

But she wouldn't let go, standing between me and my father like a shield. "You're wrong!" she screamed at him, her voice raw with desperation. "She's not the monster you think she is! She's my sister! She's just sick! Don't do this!"

My father's face twisted in anger, and he took a step forward, his voice low but filled with fury. "Lyla, stop! You're blinded by your emotions. Can't you see? This—this thing is not

your sister anymore." He pointed at me, his finger trembling with disgust. "She's possessed. She's a vessel for the Queen of Curses. The curse is inside her, waiting to destroy everything."

Lyla shook her head violently, tears streaming down her face. "No! No, that's not true! She's not a curse! She's just—she's just sick, Dad!"

But my mother, who had been silent until now, stepped forward, her face a mask of disgust, her eyes hard with something darker than anger. "You don't understand, Lyla," she said, her voice sharp and venomous. "Your sister is gone. She's not the little girl I gave birth to. She's a curse—a monster—and we have to get rid of her. I wish I could erase her from existence right now."

Lyla took a step back, her eyes widening in disbelief. "No, Mom, please, that's not her! It's the disease, it's not her fault—"

"Stop protecting her!" My mother's voice cracked, filled with fury and revulsion.

"She's dangerous, Lyla! You think I don't see it? She isn't herself anymore, I know she has been taken over by now. We can't afford to keep her alive—she's poison to all of us. If you truly loved this village, you would let her go. She needs to die. For all of us. For the future of this place."

Her words sliced through me like a blade, and the tears that had been on the edge of my eyes froze. My mother's voice had never held such venom before—it felt like she was speaking not just to Lyla, but to me as well, tearing apart any remnants of love or care she had once held.

Lyla's body trembled with anger; her face twisted in disgust as she turned to face them both.

"You're all disgusting," she spat, her voice colder than ice. "You all loved her once, when she looked normal, didn't you? You all fawned over her. But now that she's different, now that she's not what you want her to be, you turn your backs on her. You're nothing but degenerates—trash people. I can't believe I ever called this place home."

Her voice wavered then, the walls of her anger cracking as the pain and heartbreak spilled out. "How can you say that about your own daughter?" she choked out, her voice breaking. "How can you just throw her away like this? She's still my sister. She's still the same person, and I'm not going to let you do this to her. I won't."

My mother's expression softened for just a moment, but she said nothing. Her eyes moved to my father, who gave a curt nod, his face unreadable.

Lyla's hands shook, fists clenched, but she didn't back down. She turned to me, her voice softening. "Please, don't listen to them. You're not what they say." She moved to stand in front of me again, her arms wide, blocking any further attacks from my father.

She gently placed her hands around my shoulders, pulling me close as she leaned down, her forehead resting against mine. "You're not a curse, Lia," she whispered, her breath warm against my skin. "You're my sister. And nothing will change that. You're you, no matter what they say."

My father didn't try to reach for me again. Instead, he let out a bitter laugh. "Then you'll be just as lost as she is, Lyla."

That night, Lyla kept me close, her arms wrapped tightly around me as she whispered comforting words in my ear. "We'll get through this, I promise. I'll always be by your side. No matter what they say."

Tears filled my eyes, but I didn't want to cry. I wanted to be strong for her, even though everything felt like it was falling apart. She gently wiped away my tears, a small, sad smile tugging at her lips. "Don't worry, okay? We'll leave this place. We'll go somewhere where they can't hurt you."

Lyla took my hand and led me out into the dark night. The village was silent behind us, the distant sound of the villagers' voices fading away as we left. She didn't say much more, but the weight of her promise filled the air around us.

"Everything will be okay," she said softly, her voice full of conviction, even though I could see the fear in her eyes. "I'll keep you safe, Lia. Always."

We walked into the night, the world ahead of us uncertain and dark, but Lyla's hand in mine made everything feel a little less cold.

## **Chapter 4 - Lost Hope**

I can't remember after it. No matter how much I try, no matter how desperately I claw at the edges of my mind, it's just... gone. A blurry past. The faces, the places—they slip through my fingers like grains of sand. Even her face... Lyla.

She was everything to me—the light in my darkest moments, the one person I could never let go of.

The tears came before I could stop them, cold and endless. In my dream, they fell silently, dampening my cheeks. I wiped them away with trembling hands, but they kept coming, as though my heart couldn't stop bleeding through my eyes.

And then, amidst my anguish, I felt it—a warm touch on my head. Soft, gentle, like a mother's hand but with an unmistakable strength behind it. The warmth spread, not just over my skin but into the cold, hollow pit in my heart.

"Lyla?" My voice cracked as I looked up, and there she was. Behind me, her figure so familiar it hurt. She smiled—oh, that smile. It was the one she used to give me when everything felt like it was going to fall apart. Her hand patted my head, just like she always did when she tried to comfort me.

"Don't worry," she said, her voice as soothing as a summer breeze. But there was something else in her tone, something almost... distant.

I tried to reach for her, to tell her not to leave, but then she spoke again, her words shrouded in a strange mystery.

"There is someone in this world who will do anything for you," she had said, her voice laced with both sadness and hope.

"Find him. He'll care for you more than his own life."

Before I could understand, she began to fade, her form melting into the shadows of the dream.

"Wait!" I screamed, but it was useless. She was gone.

I jolted trying to end the dream, my eyes burning with unshed tears. Slowly, I opened them, the blurry haze of sleep giving way to a breathtaking sight. Above me, the night sky stretched infinitely, dotted with countless stars glowing softly like embers in the dark. It was so vast, so beautiful, it almost made me forget the pain in my chest.

The soft crackle of a campfire reached my ears, accompanied by the familiar, earthy smell of fish roasting over a flame. My stomach growled faintly at the scent—it was the same smell that used to waft through the air when my family went camping. My father, he was a great fisherman, always catching the best fish.

I tried to sit up, but a sharp pain in my leg stopped me. Glancing down, I noticed bandage wrapped tightly around it. Someone had dressed the wound. A wave of uncertain shock surged through me.

The memory flashed in my mind—the dark, vanishing monster with its long, clawed limbs. I could still feel the cold grip around my leg, the way its claws dug in, sharp and unrelenting, until the warmth of my blood soaked the ground beneath me. The fear was suffocating, its hollow, glowing eyes burned into my mind.

I swallowed hard, gripping the sheet beneath me.

It's over. It's gone. I'm still here. But my leg pained as if the creature's grip lingered, a grim reminder of how close I had been to its grasp.

But... Someone saved me.

I took a moment to assess my surroundings. Beneath me was a small, comfortable bed with a warm sheet draped over me. The fabric wasn't luxurious, but its warmth was more than welcome. To my side, I spotted a sword lying within arm's reach.

I glanced down at myself and noticed I was wearing a white sweater, oversized and soft, though it wasn't tied properly. The loose sleeves slipped slightly off my shoulder, and the knot at the hem was clumsily done. It wasn't hard to guess someone had dressed me in it, perhaps in an attempt to keep me warm?

The thought of that pressed down on my heart—someone had tried to help me, but their effort felt awkward, almost hesitant, as if they weren't sure what they were doing. Still, the gesture was... kind.

I couldn't help but think, if something goes wrong, at least I'll have a weapon. But as my fingers brushed its hilt, I realized it was absurdly heavy. I tried to lift it, but my arms protested with every inch.

"How could anyone even fight with something like this?" I muttered under my breath, frustration bubbling up.

Sighing, I glanced toward the campfire. The flames flickered gently, their light illuminating the area around us. Fish were skewered on sticks, sizzling softly over the fire. My stomach churned at the sight, not just with hunger but with memories. I could almost hear my father laughing as he showed Lyla and me how to roast the perfect fish.

And then my eyes shifted further, catching sight of someone sitting near the fire.

He was leaning against a tree, his eyes closed, one hand resting on his head while his legs were crossed in a relaxed posture. A bandage wrapped around his right arm, faintly stained with blood. On his left side lay a book, the faint markings of magic runes visible even from where I sat.

His appearance was striking—his black hair messy and tousled, adding to the air of effortless intensity he carried. His coat, a long, dark overcoat, flowed elegantly past his waist, the intricate embroidery along the hem and cuffs catching the faint light. The heavy fabric, a blend of velvet and wool, draped around him with authority, its high collar turned up slightly to frame his face in a mysterious way.

Beneath the coat, the soft gray tunic he wore contrasted against the sharpness of his coat, simple yet refined. His dark trousers were tailored to fit perfectly, with the faintest gleam of a fine wool blend. Tall, polished boots reached just below his knees, each step

echoing power, while the leather belt with a decorative clasp hinted at his noble heritage. The faint glow of magical energy flickered around the edges of his coat, a quiet reminder of the power that lay beneath the surface.

A hunter? I guessed. The thought didn't bring much comfort. Hunters weren't known for their charity. I could still remember the cruel eyes of the ones who had once come to my village, their cold faces devoid of mercy as they took what they wanted, leaving only fear in their wake.

I looked back at the makeshift bed beneath me, then at the food cooking over the fire. My chest tensed with confusion and suspicion.

Why would anyone help me? Why save someone like me?

The question circled endlessly in my mind. I wasn't anyone important. Just a girl lost in the woods, barely able to defend herself. People usually ignored me—or worse. What would make this boy, this stranger, care enough to patch me up and give me warmth?

A grim possibility crossed my mind. Maybe he expects something in return.

I tightened my grip on the sword's hilt and tried to stand. My legs wobbled under my weight, the pain in my bandaged leg flaring up. I bit my lip, forcing myself to stay upright. If he turned out to be a threat, I'd have to run. Not that I'd get far with this leg, I thought bitterly.

As I shifted, the sudden noise startled a flock of birds from the trees nearby. Their wings beat against the night air, their cries echoing into the distance before fading into silence.

The night was cold, a biting breeze sweeping through the open field around me. I hadn't noticed it before, but the forest, with its oppressive darkness and lurking horrors, was far behind us now.

Here, the air felt lighter, though the wind carried a subtle chill that seeped through the sheet covering me. The sky above stretched endlessly, scattered with stars that shimmered like tiny fragments of hope.

The sound of the birds must have woken him because when I looked back, I saw his eyes slowly flutter open—crystal blue and piercing, like the clearest summer sky. They caught the faint glow of the stars, making them seem almost otherworldly. For a moment, I couldn't look away, as if those eyes alone could promise safety.

I froze. Those were the same eyes I had seen before, staring at me amidst the chaos—the eyes of the boy who had saved me from being devoured by the monsters.



I remembered collapsing from exhaustion, my body giving out, only to feel his arms catch me. His hands had gently rested behind my head, offering a strange comfort amidst the pain and fear.

The memory struck me like a lightning bolt, sharp and unrelenting, pulling me back into the haze of that moment. The terror of the monsters, their grotesque forms reaching for me, and the pain in my leg as claws sank into my flesh—it all came flooding back.

But more vivid than anything else was the warmth of his hands, steady and gentle as they cradled my head, pulling me from the brink of despair.

And then, my sister's voice from the dream echoed in my mind, soft yet firm, like a guiding light in the dark.

"There is someone in this world who will do anything for you," she had said. "Find him. He'll care for you more than his own life."

The weight of her words settled over me, filling the emptiness in my chest with a strange, fragile feeling I couldn't name.

Could it be him? This boy with eyes like the summer sky and hands that had shielded me from pain. The thought was absurd, almost laughable—how could someone like him, a stranger, care for me in a way even I struggled to? And yet, the memory of his actions, his quiet strength, made it impossible to dismiss the thought entirely.

Could he be the one for me? I thought to myself.

The sound of the birds scattering had faded, but the tension between us was sharp enough to cut through the cold night air. He rubbed his eyes, shaking off the last remnants of sleep, and looked at me. His expression softened, his shoulders relaxing as if he were relieved.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, his voice carrying a warmth I wasn't prepared for.

I didn't answer. My grip tightened on the sword, both hands straining under its weight. The blade's tip dragged against the ground; I could barely lift it. Still, I wasn't going to let my guard down.

He raised his hands, palms forward, a gesture of peace.

"Hey, relax. I'm not here to hurt you," he said, his tone almost playful.

"Stay back!" I screamed, my voice trembling despite the defiance in my words.

His eyes widened in surprise, but he took a cautious step back. "Okay, okay!" he said, his hands still raised. Then, clasping them together in an exaggerated gesture, he grinned.

"It's not really nice to interrogate someone you've just met, you know."

"Don't play games with me. I know what you are—a hunter." I scowled.

He tilted his head, looking almost amused. With a dramatic sigh, he laced his hands behind his head and leaned back casually.

"Man, you're cautious, huh? Alright, since you're so curious, the name's Kaiser Everhart." His grin widened. "Now, drop the sword and chill, would you?"

I took a step back, my mind racing. The name didn't ring any bells—nothing about "Kaiser Everhart" seemed familiar. I racked my brain, thinking of every encounter, every whisper about someone who might know me or hunt me. But no, I couldn't place it. I hadn't heard that name from any of the villages, nor from anyone in the distant cities. It was just... a name.

He was just a random hunter. That was all. Another one hunting me, probably for the reward that was surely on my head by now. My hand tightened around the hilt of my sword again, my thoughts clouded with the bitterness of past betrayals. There was nothing to trust in this world, not even the people who wore names like his.

His charisma threw me off. He didn't act like someone trying to hunt me down. Still, I wasn't about to let my guard down.

"Stay where you are," I warned again, my voice firm but laced with unease. His movements were slow, deliberate, as he crouched slightly, his fingers inching toward the ground.

The dim light caught the tension in his frame, every muscle coiled like a predator preparing to strike. My heart raced as I tightened my grip, unsure of what he might do next, but ready to act if necessary.

Kaiser paused and pointed at the fire, his voice light and teasing.

"Relax, I'm just checking on the fish. Don't want them to burn. You don't want to eat burnt fish, do you?"

His words were disarming, but I wasn't convinced.

"Stop fooling around!" I snapped. "Answer my questions!"

Before I could finish, my stomach growled loudly. The smell of roasting fish was intoxicating. My face flushed with embarrassment.

He laughed, a hearty sound that carried genuine humor rather than mockery. As the laughter spilled out, he casually placed a hand behind his back, the gesture hidden slightly behind the flowing fabric of his dark overcoat while he was trying to take it off.

"So, you're hungry, huh? Come on, you've gotta admit—this smells amazing. High-quality fish, cooked to perfection. You're in for a treat."

I glared at him, trying to keep my composure despite the numerous thoughts in my head. I couldn't let him see how shaken I was, but everything inside me screamed for answers.

"What happened with the monster?" I demanded, my voice sharp. The image of that terrifying thing, its speed and its face wouldn't leave my mind. I needed to know what happened—and why it was still on my mind.

Kaiser's smile faded, replaced with something more serious. "That's... a cold memory," he said softly.

"You shouldn't bother trying to recall it the dead. Some things are better left in the past."

I hesitated, the weight of his tone settling over me like ice. "How did you take it out?" I pressed again, my voice firmer than I felt. The image of the monster's terrifying face flashed in my mind, its speed still lingering in my thoughts. "It was dangerous... and so fast. I don't understand how you even survived it."

He raised his hands again, this time in mock surrender. Slowly, he moved closer. "They're called Noctis Grasper," he explained, his voice taking on a darker edge.

"Monsters of the night. They thrive in darkness, moving faster than the eye can follow. Their faces are twisted, almost human, but with mouths that stretch too wide and eyes that glow like embers. They have long, skeletal limbs that can snatch you from the shadows, draining your strength—your will to live—until there's nothing left."

His description sent shivers down my spine. I clenched my fists, my heart racing. I know he's speaking the truth... The memory of those long, clawed hands wrapping around me flashed in my mind.

That's exactly what happened to me. The cold, draining sensation still lingered, like a shadow over me, and I couldn't shake the fear that it might come back.

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Once they've caught you, there's no escape. They feed on your fear before they devour you whole."

I swallowed hard, my heart racing.

Then, as if flipping a switch, he straightened up, that playful grin returning to his face. "So, why were you brave enough to fight two of them at the same time? Got some hidden power or something?"

I couldn't help but frown. "I wasn't," I admitted quietly. "They caught me."

He let out a dramatic sigh, throwing his hand to his chest like he'd been struck by an arrow. "Ah, tragic. The mighty warrior falls before the great Noctis Graspers." He paused, glancing at me with mock sympathy. "But hey, at least you didn't go down without a fight, right?"

I stared at him, unamused. "You make it sound like it was easy."

"Well, you know," he shrugged, brushing it off like it was nothing. "I took them out, though. Barely broke a sweat."

"How?" I asked, my suspicion growing. "You made them sound unkillable."

He raised an eyebrow, his grin widening. "Oh, the Noctis Graspers? Pfft. Easy. I just walked up, gave 'em a little wink, and they were like, 'Oh no, we're out of here.' Totally scared of me."

I blinked at him. "Really?"

He burst out laughing, shaking his head. "Nah, not exactly. It was more of a 'stab, dodge, stab again, hope they don't grab you' situation." He waved his hands in exaggerated motions. "You know, the usual. Real finesse."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You make it sound like it's nothing."

He puffed out his chest and put on a dramatic pose. "Well, it's a little more complex than that, but I like to keep it humble. I'm basically the world's greatest monster slayer, after all."

I stared at him for a moment before I let out a reluctant laugh. "Yeah, right."

He winked. "Believe me, it's all in the technique and strategy. You ever seen someone defeat a monster with sheer charisma?" He flashed a grin, and for a moment, the air around us felt lighter.

I rolled my eyes, but a small smile tugged at the corner of my mouth despite myself. There was something strangely comforting about his carefree attitude. It was as if, for a moment, the danger and darkness that had surrounded me had faded.

He waved a hand dismissively, pulling me back to reality. "Those were higher C-class monsters. Nothing a B or A-rank adventurer couldn't handle." He leaned back, his tone light but full of confidence. "In fact, you could probably take one down with the right strategy and a little bit of luck."

He flashed a grin, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement.

"Though, I wouldn't recommend trying it unless you're planning to make a name for yourself. Trust me, fighting those things head-on isn't as glamorous as it sounds. It's mostly just a lot of running, dodging, and hoping you're not the one getting eaten."

He chuckled, tapping the side of his head as if sharing a secret. "And, you know, being a bit smarter than your average monster doesn't hurt either."

I furrowed my brows, trying to process everything he had just said. "What's an adventurer rank?" I asked, my voice tinged with confusion. His revelation was overwhelming—monsters, ranks, dangerous creatures lurking in the shadows.

My mind was racing, but I couldn't wrap my head around it. "And what does that have to do with me?" I added, still unsure of his intentions.

"You keep talking about things I don't understand. What do you mean by this 'adventurer' stuff?" I shook my head, frustration creeping in. "I don't get you."

He leaned back on the tree, looking more relaxed, as if the weight of the conversation had lightened a little. "Adventurers," he started, his gaze drifting off as if he were recalling his own experiences, "are the ones who go out into the world, taking on quests, hunting monsters, helping those in need... you know, all that 'heroic' stuff. They're the backbone of most kingdoms—though it's not all glory, mind you." He smirked slightly.

"There are six ranks. E is the lowest—rookies, fresh blood, those who have barely made it past their first trial. But honestly, no one weak enough to be an E-rank would be stupid enough to sign up here."

He paused to make sure I was following, then continued.

"Then there's D, where most start. It's the entry-level rank, for those with a bit of skill but not much else. After that, you climb through C, B, and A—the real heavy hitters. Those with natural talent or blessings. Not everyone has that, but the ones who do make it to A are seriously skilled." He leaned forward a little, eyes sharpening.

"And then there's S. The elite of the elite. Only the very best get there, and even then, it's rare. The kind of people who could wipe out a monster horde without breaking a sweat. You'd find more S-rankers in places like Asura or Valerion—kingdoms with resources and the talent to train them. Here in Celestine, it's practically unheard of."

He leaned back again, his tone more casual, but there was a flicker of something in his eyes—respect, maybe, for those at the top of this dangerous ladder. "It's a hard life, but if you're good enough, you make your name."

I blinked, trying to process it all. "What's your rank?"

He hesitated, his eyes flickering with something unreadable before he let out a short, dry laugh. "Does it really matter?" He waved a hand dismissively, then pointed at the fire. "Your fish is about to burn, by the way. Better eat it before deciding whether to attack me or run."

I turned my attention to the small campfire crackling in front of us. The flames flickered, casting a warm orange glow over the makeshift campsite, the smoke curling up into the darkening sky. The night was settling in, the dense forest surrounding us growing quieter, save for the occasional rustle of leaves.

The scent of charred fish mixed with the earthy smell of pine trees and damp underbrush, a reminder of how far we were from any villages or people.

My stomach growled again, louder this time, making me pause. I sighed, my shoulders slumping. The hunger gnawed at me, a reminder of how little I had eaten in the past few days. Despite the tension that had hung between us earlier, the fire's warmth and the food in front of me offered a rare moment of peace.

With a reluctant groan, I dropped the sword to the side, its hilt still catching the flicker of the firelight. I finally let my guard down, letting myself relax for a moment. The night air was crisp, carrying the distant call of nocturnal creatures, but the fire kept most of the darkness at bay.

The fish sizzled softly as he handed it to me, the heat from the flames mixing with the chill of the night. It wasn't much, but it was enough for now. My eyes drifted back to him, but for a moment, I was too tired to question his intentions. He didn't seem like he'd attack right now—not with the night so still and the fire between us. Still, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that things were far from resolved.

He smiled warmly. "Glad you're finally starting to trust me."

The smell was overwhelming, rich and savory, with a hint of char. My first bite was heaven. It was tender, smoky, and better than anything I'd eaten in years.

Across from me, he dramatically took a bite of the burnt fish, his face contorting in exaggerated despair. "Ugh, so tasteless," he groaned, pressing his hand to his forehead like he'd been struck down by the cruelest fate. His eyes moved to me, as if waiting for my reaction.

The absurdity of it caught me off guard. I couldn't help but laugh. It was small, but it bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me, something I hadn't felt in so long—something like... relief. It was the first time in years I'd laughed like that, genuinely, without fear or sorrow weighing me down. It felt almost... freeing.

As I took another bite, savoring the warmth of the fish, he suddenly broke the silence. "Thanks," he said quietly, his voice steady but filled with an odd weight.

I looked up, confused, still chewing the bite in my mouth. "For what?"

He met my eyes then, his eyes unusually serious, and for the first time, his usual playful demeanor dropped. His face softened, but there was something in his eyes—something vulnerable. "For saving me. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

The words hit me like a cold gust of wind, sharp and unexpected. I blinked, the warmth from the fish suddenly feeling distant. "What... what do you mean?"

He looked at me for a long moment, almost as if weighing whether to say more. "It's... a long story," he murmured. "But the short version is... you're the reason I am alive. Without you, I wouldn't have made it."

I stared at him, my heart felt uneasy. His words left me stunned, but they only raised more questions than answers. Who was he, really? Why would he say something like that?

And more importantly, what kind of person was I that he felt he owed me something so... profound?

I tried to push the thoughts away, but they lingered, like an itch I couldn't scratch. His gratitude felt genuine, but there was an eerie sense of mystery behind it, like he was hiding something important. Something that I didn't quite understand.

I opened my mouth to ask more, but the weight of his words hung in the air between us, thicker than the night itself.

## **Chapter 5 - A Promise to Keep**

I sat by the fire, its warmth barely touching the cold ache in my chest. The flames flickered softly in the quiet night, but my mind felt heavier than the silence around us. I didn't get it. Why did Kaiser even want to help me? Why bother talking to someone like me?

I glanced at him quickly, then lowered my eyes back to my lap. My hands were clenched tight, my fingers digging into the fabric of my clothes. He could probably see how useless I was—how much of a burden I'd been.



He saved me when I fell, made sure I had food to eat, and kept me safe. I couldn't stop the thoughts from circling in my head, each one sharper than the last. Why is he thanking me? It doesn't make sense. It should be the other way around. Without him, I wouldn't even be alive.

"Kaiser..." I finally said, barely audible. My voice wavered as I stared at the ground, my fingers twisting together.

"I've done nothing to help you. I've only burdened you... burdened you with my injury. I don't understand why you're thanking me." My eyes dropped lower, my insecurities pulling me deeper into a familiar pit.

"Without you, I wouldn't even be here."

My voice broke, and I quickly covered my eyes with one hand, hiding the tears that were about to fall. My other hand clutched at my lap. Why am I even saying this? He doesn't need to hear it. No one does.

From the other side of the fire, Kaiser's soft smile broke the tension. "You know," he said, his voice light but steady, "I can see you're broken." His words caught me off guard, and I stiffened.

"You've been suffering for so long that you've lost all confidence and hope inside you."

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes meeting mine. Then, as if sensing the weight of the moment, his tone shifted into something lighter.

"But hey, don't get too gloomy on me now. I'm here if you ever need someone to talk to or just... someone to listen." His grin stretched across his face, playful but sincere.

I shook my head, my voice trembling as I spoke again. "Why... why would you help someone like me? Someone who's cursed... a witch. That's what they all call me. A monster." My voice faltered, and I clenched my jaw to hold back a sob. I refused to let him see my tears, raising my hand slightly to block my face.

"Everyone wants me gone. They hate me. They think I should just disappear." My fingers dug into my lap, the sharp pain grounding me. "I just... I want to give up already. I don't want to endure anymore. Time isn't healing anything. It's only made the pain worse."

The night air felt colder now, the wind brushing past my hair as the moonlight illuminated the field. The silence hung heavy, and I wondered if I had said too much. But then Kaiser stood up, his movement catching my attention.

He stepped closer to the fire, his figure framed by the soft glow. His expression was calm but determined, and his crystal-blue eyes seemed to pierce through the barriers I had built. Reaching out his hand slightly, he spoke, his voice filled with quiet strength.

"Time doesn't take the pain away," he said softly. "It only teaches us how to live with it. How to move on and... be happy again."

His words struck something deep within me, breaking through the numbness. How can someone like him... someone who doesn't even know me, say that?

As he spoke, tiny flickers of light appeared around us. Fireflies. One landed gently on his outstretched hand, as if trusting him completely. He smiled down at it, his expression softening.

I couldn't help but wonder to myself, I've never seen fireflies before... and I've never seen one trust a human so easily.

"Isn't it beautiful to live?" he asked quietly, his voice soft but filled with awe. "To feel the wind on your face, the warmth of the sun, the colors in the sky? Even when things are dark, the world still has so much beauty. Don't give up on it. Because if you do... you'll never see what tomorrow might bring."

He stepped back slightly, his arms spreading wide as if to gesture at the world around us. The openness in his body language made me feel something I hadn't in years—a faint glimmer of trust. His words carried a warmth that reached through the cold void inside me.

But I couldn't respond. My thoughts swirled, tangled between my fears and the strange sense of hope he had stirred. Why does he care so much? I clenched my hands together tightly, staring at them as I struggled to find the courage to speak.

I have no name, no purpose. No home or family. What's the point? What's the point of continuing to live?

Before I could say anything, Kaiser's tone shifted again, playful and teasing. "You know," he said with a smirk, "you interrogated me so much when we first met. I thought I was the one who'd need to answer all the questions tonight." He chuckled lightly.

"But it just hit me—I forgot to ask for your name."

His question startled me. I looked up, my breath hitching. His eyes were filled with genuine curiosity, not judgment. For a moment, I couldn't bring myself to answer, my voice caught in my throat. Then, quietly, I thought of her—Lyla. My sister's voice echoed in my mind, the way she used to call me "Lia." But the thought brought back the pain of everything I had lost, and I couldn't bring myself to say it aloud.

"I..." My voice trailed off. I looked away, unable to meet his eyes. "I don't have a name."

Kaiser's expression softened, but he didn't press me. Instead, he sat back down by the fire, his smile never fading. "Well," he said lightly, "that's something we can work on."

I blinked, confused, but he didn't explain further. Instead, he looked up at the sky, his eyes reflecting the moonlight. For the first time in what felt like forever, I allowed myself to feel... curious. About him. About his words. About the faint hope flickering in the corner of my heart.

The fire crackled softly as the forest whispered around us, the night alive with distant chirps and the rustle of leaves in the gentle wind. I sat there, staring at the flames, but their warmth did little to comfort me. My thoughts churned like a storm I couldn't escape, and the weight of my own inadequacy pressed down harder with each passing second.

Kaiser sat across from me after, poking at the fire with a stick, his expression unusually calm. The flickering light highlighted the sharp angles of his face, but there was something softer in his eyes—a glimmer of understanding I didn't fully trust.

"You know," he said softly, breaking the silence, "I'm almost just like you."

He looked down as he said it, his blue eyes filled with sadness. For a moment, it felt like he understood everything—my pain, my struggle. His voice was quiet, almost heavy. "I can feel it," he added, barely above a whisper. "How much it hurts."

I blinked, unsure of what he meant. His voice carried a strange mixture of seriousness and vulnerability, something I hadn't expected.

He leaned back, tossing the stick aside as if discarding the weight of his thoughts.

"A few years ago, my mother sent me here, to Celestine. I don't know why. Maybe she hated me. Maybe she thought I was too much of a burden." His voice wavered, bitterness laced with something deeper—hurt, confusion. His eyes drifted toward the horizon, unfocused, as if searching for answers he might never find. "But even then... I loved her. I would have done anything for her."

He paused, the silence heavy between us, his expression caught between longing and anger.

"Her last message to me—just a single letter—said to take care of myself, that one day, it would all make sense." He laughed, but it was hollow, the sound of someone trying to mask the pain.

"I've always wondered why things turned out the way they did," he said, his voice soft but carrying a quiet ache. "Why I ended up here, why everything happened the way it did."

"There have been nights I've stared at her words, hoping they'd tell me why she sent me here, why she left me alone in a place that never felt like mine." He paused, his gaze distant. "I guess, in a way, I'm holding on to it... because part of me wants to believe there's some reason behind it all. That maybe she had a purpose, even if I can't see it."

I looked up at him, unsure of what to say. The way he spoke made it clear—he didn't believe it had made sense yet. I could see it in his eyes, the weight of unanswered questions still haunting him, just like they haunted me.

Maybe that's why his words struck me so deeply—because I understood that pain all too well. The feeling of searching for meaning in a world that seemed to offer none, trying to piece together a story that felt broken. It was like we were both stuck, caught between our pasts and the uncertainty of what was to come.

"I know I can't compare to you," he continued, his voice quieter now. "You've been through years of pain, alone, hunted, and hated. I've only had to deal with a fraction of that."

His words hit me strangely. There was something in the way he said them—like he was used to expecting the worst from life. It wasn't just what he said but how he said it that made me realize how deep his pessimism ran. I hesitated, unsure if I should speak.

"How long have you been here?" I finally asked, my voice soft. I had so many questions I wanted to ask him, but the words caught in my throat. It was hard to imagine anyone else being abandoned like me.

He smiled faintly, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Five years. Five years alone in Celestine. And in that time, I've seen it all—death, bloodshed, false hope, and utter despair. I wanted to find my purpose... but all I found was something darker, something that made me question everything. Humanity's so-called nobility—it's a lie. The truth? It's terrifying."

He paused, his eyes far off, like he was seeing something from the past. "I wanted to know... if there was really any value to this thing we call living. If any of it mattered. Or if we're all just waiting for the end."

I looked down at my lap, my fingers twisting the fabric of my skirt, a nervous habit I couldn't shake. Five years... He had survived so long, each day a battle fought alone, and yet he stood there, carrying it all with such cold strength.

I couldn't help but think to myself—I was just like him. But unlike him, I couldn't help anyone, not even myself. I ran from my problems, hid from them, hoping they'd go away. But he... he faced his, even when it seemed impossible. And now, despite everything, he's trying to help me. Why?

I had barely managed four years on my own, and even then, it felt like I was unraveling at the edges—each year leaving scars deeper than the last. His endurance, his ability to push forward despite everything, felt like something I could never reach. I wasn't strong enough. I wasn't built to withstand the weight of it all.

"I wish I was like you," I whispered, not realizing I had spoken aloud, the words slipping from my mouth before I could stop them. My heart thudded painfully in my chest, and for a moment, I felt exposed—like I was comparing my shattered self to someone who had managed to hold himself together, no matter how broken he might've been inside.

Kaiser's laughter broke the silence. He grinned at me, his usual humor returning, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"What, you seriously want to be like me?" He leaned in slightly, his grin widening. "Careful now, that's a big step. You sure you can handle all this charming?" He gestured to himself with a mock-serious look.

I felt my face heat up, and I shot to my feet, glaring at him. "No!" I shouted, my voice higher than I intended, crossing my arms defensively. "That's not what I meant! It just slipped out, okay?"

As his gaze lingered, a wave of embarrassment washed over me, and I quickly raised my hands to cover my blushing face. "I-I'm serious!" I stammered from behind my hands, peeking through my fingers for a second before turning my head away. "Don't get the wrong idea!" My voice trembled slightly, betraying how flustered I truly was.

He kept laughing, his grin widening. "You're adorable when you get flustered," he teased, leaning back like he'd won some unspoken game.

I sat back down, scowling, but his laughter had softened something inside me. Despite his teasing, I felt a little lighter, like the weight pressing down on my chest had eased—just a little.

The wind carried the scent of pine and earth as I dared to ask another question. "Why were you in the forest, anyway? If you weren't trying to hunt me, what were you doing here?"

He hesitated, scratching the back of his neck, his eyes flickering away for a moment. "Uh... I was looking for a campsite," he said casually, though the pause in his voice gave him away. "Yeah, that's it." He cleared his throat, trying to sound nonchalant, but the tension in his words betrayed him, as if he was still searching for a way to cover the truth.

I raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "Really?"

He sighed, giving in. "Fine. I was heading to a nearby village to restock, and that's when I saw some high-class adventurers. The villagers had hired them to hunt you." His expression darkened slightly. "They offered 500 gold coins for your dead body."

The words stung, even though I wasn't surprised. "So, you were going to hunt me too?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. My hands tightened into fists, doubt clawing at me again.

Kaiser smirked, his humor returning. "What if I was? Would you have fought me off with your scary 'witch powers'?"

I glared at him, but his grin only widened. "You're insufferable," I muttered, though his sarcasm tugged at the corner of my lips despite myself.

He raised his hands defensively, still grinning. "Alright, alright. The truth is, I was curious. I heard all these stories about this 'Queen of Curses,' being reborned. This monster everyone was so terrified of. I wanted to see for myself if they were true."

I frowned, his words sinking in. He didn't trust what others told him—he needed to see things with his own eyes. That kind of paranoia... It explained a lot about him.

"And?" I asked, my voice quieter now, the weight of the moment pressing down on me.

He met my eyes, his smile softening as he took a deep breath. "And then I met you." His words seemed almost reluctant, as if saying them made him vulnerable. "You saved my life back there, warning me about those Noctis. You knew I was just another hunter, but you still helped me."

He paused for a moment, his gaze drifting as if lost in thought. Then he added quietly, "Honestly, when I first heard the screams from the other hunters, I thought they were just messing around. I didn't realize how dangerous it was." He shook his head with a bitter chuckle. "I thought I could handle anything, but those things... they came out of nowhere."

His eyes narrowed, and for a brief moment, I saw something in them—fear. "I've faced a lot in this life," he said quietly, "but when those screams started, I wasn't sure I'd make it out. All I could think was, I hope I'm not the next one to scream for help." His voice faltered slightly, the weight of his words sinking in.

So far, I thought he was fearless but hearing him talk about the Noctis—how they shook him—was a side of him I hadn't seen before.

"I didn't even know what was lurking," he said, his voice lower now. "I've fought a lot, but those Noctis... they were something else. I wasn't sure I was prepared for that." He let out a nervous laugh, but it was hollow. "I guess I wasn't."

There was an eerie vulnerability in his words, a stark contrast to his usual cocky demeanor. It reminded me that, despite his tough exterior, Kaiser had his own fears, his own doubts. Just like me.

"I wasn't expecting to get saved, especially not by someone I thought was out to kill me," he added, a wry smile returning to his lips, but there was still a hint of unease behind it.

"But you..." He paused, his gaze locking with mine. "If you'd stayed quiet, those Noctis would've caught me. You knew that. You could've let me die, just another hunter gone. You could've stayed back, listened to the screams of the others, let it feed your anger, your need for revenge. It probably would've felt good."

He leaned in slightly, his voice soft but firm. "But you didn't. You stepped in. You wanted me to live, even though I was just another hunter, one of the ones who could've easily been your enemy."

His admission, that brief crack in his confident mask, made something stir in me. When I first met him, he had that cocky attitude—always confident, always joking, never showing any hint of doubt. But hearing him speak like this, so raw and uncertain, made me realize how much I had misunderstood. It was hard to imagine someone like him, who always seemed unshakable, could feel fear like the rest of us.

I looked away, unsure of how to respond, my mind struggling to make sense of his words. They didn't make sense to me.

"I didn't do anything special," I mumbled, my insecurities bubbling to the surface, a familiar self-doubt creeping in.

"That's where you're wrong," he said firmly, his voice carrying an intensity that caught me off guard. "You felt sympathy for me, even though I didn't deserve it. Even after everything, you didn't want me to die. That's why I trust you." He looked at me, his eyes soft but steady.

"No 'Queen of Curses' would ever act the way you did."

His voice softened even more as he looked at me, a flicker of something vulnerable in his eyes.

"I don't know how to say it, but... because of you, I think I can finally see the beauty in this world again. You've given me something I thought I'd lost forever."

He paused, his eyes holding mine, before adding quietly, "Thank you, Lia."

His words hit me harder than I expected, and I found myself speechless, lost in the raw honesty of his eyes.



Tears welled up in my eyes, unbidden and relentless, as I thought about the name—Lia. It was the name my sister always called me, the one that had slipped from my lips in my dreams.

Was he... the person she had been talking about? The one I was meant to find? The thought made my heart race, a mix of hope and fear, as if the pieces of something bigger were starting to fall into place. Hearing his words, I didn't even know how I felt—there was too much to process. It was overwhelming.

I hadn't realized it at first, but tears were streaming down my cheeks. Nobody had ever understood me this well—not even my sister. But he did. Somehow, he saw the parts of me I kept hidden from the world, and his words had reached a place no one else had ever touched.

These tears... they weren't because I was sad. No, they came from somewhere else, a warmth I couldn't put into words. For the first time in what felt like forever, I was crying because I was happy. Tears of happiness.

Kaiser furrowed his brow, a deep concern settling on his face. "Did I say something wrong?" he asked, his voice soft and hesitant, as if searching for reassurance.

"I heard you say that name while you were asleep, and I just... I thought it was yours. I didn't mean to assume, and I'm sorry if I overstepped."

His eyes softened further, regret glimmering in his eyes as he waited for me to say something, clearly worried that he had made a mistake.

I shook my head left and right, signaling to him that I was okay, though the slight smile on my lips might not have fully convinced him. I didn't want him to worry, not when his own burden seemed so heavy.

He raised his hands, showing his palms in a calm, open gesture, as if trying to assure me he meant no harm. The uncertainty in his eyes mirrored his words, his body language softer now, trying to read me, to understand what I was feeling.

I felt a lump in my throat, but I didn't want to speak. My thoughts raced. No one had ever seen me like this. No one except my sister. Everyone else only saw the witch, the monster. But he... Kaiser, he looked past all of that. He wasn't afraid to trust me, to see the person beneath the scars and the rumors. He was seeing me for who I really was, and that made me feel something I hadn't felt in years—hope.

Kaiser hesitated, his usual confidence faltering for a moment. He moved closer, gently placing a hand on my shoulder, his touch tentative but warm. "Hey, it's okay," he said quietly, his voice soft with something I couldn't quite place—genuine care.

"You don't have to keep it in. I'm here now, and I swear I'll do everything I can to make sure you never have to feel this alone again." His words were slow, heavy with sincerity, as if trying to pull me from the storm inside myself.

His hand moved hesitantly, brushing away some of the tears from my cheek with a tenderness I hadn't expected. For a moment, I just let him. His kindness felt strange, yet genuine, and for once, I didn't feel judged, didn't feel like I was broken beyond repair.

To lighten the mood, Kaiser flashed me a mischievous grin and raised his arms dramatically, striking a mock-heroic pose. "And then, just as I was cornered by a wild monster the size of a small mountain," he began, his voice dropping to an exaggerated whisper, "I did the only thing any sane person would do."

He paused for effect, leaning in closer with a conspiratorial wink, and then, without warning, flung himself backward, pretending to dodge an imaginary beast. "I ran like the wind! And by 'ran,' I mean I tripped over a rock and rolled down a hill for ten minutes!" He collapsed back onto the ground with a dramatic sigh, making a show of catching his breath.

I couldn't help but laugh at his antics, the tension in my chest easing just a little. He smiled at me, eyes sparkling with mischief, and launched into another ridiculous tale, full of wild exaggerations and his signature humor. "And then there was the time I fought off an entire pack of grey wolves—while blindfolded!" He winked. "Okay, maybe it wasn't a pack, and maybe I wasn't blindfolded, but still, heroic, right?"

As Kaiser leaned back, fully in storyteller mode, he continued, his voice dropping to a mock-serious tone.

"So," he began, leaning back slightly as if preparing for a grand performance, "there was this one time, after a long quest clearing monsters near the desert. I'm starving, right? I'm thirsty too—parched, dry throat, the whole deal. I walk into this bar, and there's these two guys munching away like they're trying to devour the entire place."

"They're sitting there at the bar, stuffing their faces with food like there's no tomorrow. I'm talking tons of food, just piled high, and they're talking between mouthfuls, sounding like a bunch of lunatics. It was like watching a feeding frenzy, but here's the kicker—what they were saying? It wasn't even real words! It was this weird gibberish, just slurring through their mouths with food flying everywhere, and I swear, I didn't understand a single thing."

Kaiser tilted his head, pretending to eavesdrop on an imaginary conversation between the two.

"One of them says something like, 'Grrrmph gubba, shoolah rahrah!' and the other one responds with 'Gggglllk ghhaahh!' It was honestly so strange, I thought I was losing my mind."

He grinned as he went on. "I'm just standing there, hungry as hell, staring at these two idiots going back and forth in what sounded like a mix of a wolf's growl and a camel that's been run over. Like, how the hell were they communicating with each other?"

I laughed, imagining the scene.

Kaiser threw his hands up in mock confusion, exaggerating his bewilderment. "And they're talking like it's the most normal thing in the world! Meanwhile, I'm sitting there trying to figure out whether they're planning an ambush or summoning a demon. I'm just... how are they even understanding each other?"

He shook his head dramatically, his voice rising in frustration. "It was like some secret language only the truly starving could speak."

He looked over at me with a smirk. "And let me tell you, by the end of that conversation, I was ready to start speaking gibberish myself, just to see if they'd invite me to their little food party."

"And I'm sitting there, absolutely starving, ready to throw myself at them for just a crumb of whatever they're eating. So, I finally gather the courage, wave the bartender down, and ask for something—anything—to eat or drink. You know what they told me?" He leaned in closer, eyes wide for dramatic effect.

I raised an eyebrow, bracing myself for whatever absurd punchline was coming.

"They said, 'Sorry, we're out.'"

I blinked. "Out of food? In a bar?"

Kaiser nodded dramatically. "Out of food, out of drink, out of everything. It was like the universe conspired to torture me. So, there I was, starving and thirsty, sitting between these two gibbering idiots who didn't seem to care at all. They just kept munching away like it was the greatest feast ever."

Kaiser leaned in, eyes wide with mock seriousness. "So, what did I do? Naturally, I got desperate. I stood up, walked right up to them, and—" He paused dramatically, giving a mischievous grin. "I started speaking gibberish myself. Just throwing out the wildest sounds I could think of: 'Blorrrr tish togrin zoppo!' You know, that kind of stuff. Thought I'd fit right in."

I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it.

Kaiser snickered, continuing, "And of course, they thought I was mocking them. Big mistake. They whistled, and suddenly, out of nowhere, seven of their buddies appeared. They looked like they just crawled out of a desert storm, but there they were—ready to defend their honor or whatever it was. I'm thinking, 'Great, now I'm the one in trouble.'"

He paused for a moment, shaking his head. "So, I did what any sane person would do—I ran." He raised his hands in mock surrender, "I was in the desert, no water, no shade, and still, they just wouldn't stop chasing me. I swear, they were like a pack of angry birds or something. By the time I lost them, I could barely stand, but hey, at least I wasn't food for the vultures, right?"

Kaiser grinned widely at the memory, clearly entertained by the chaos of it all.

He paused, looking down at his lap with a sigh before continuing. "I felt like dying, honestly. If I could have, I would have probably drank poison and called it a night. But guess what? I was too poor to even afford the poison. All I had was a couple of copper coins and a grumbling stomach."

I burst out laughing, despite the weight of everything that had just been said. It was hard not to find the humor in his misery, especially with the way he told it, his voice full of sarcasm and self-deprecation.

Kaiser leaned back, looking pleased with himself as he saw my reaction. "Yeah, it's always the best stories, right? When you're about to starve to death, and there's not even a chance to escape your misery. That's the true adventure."

I couldn't help but smile at the absurdity of it all.

He just wanted to make me smile, to stop me from crying anymore. I had only suffered pain and hatred all my life, but he wanted to change that. He promised that he would make sure I wouldn't cry again. I had to live up to that. I couldn't let him down, not when someone was finally trying to make things better.

He looked at me, his usual grin softening just a little. "You know," he said, his tone a bit lighter now, "I like it when you smile. It suits you." He paused for a moment, his eyes studying me as if weighing his words. "We'll figure out a proper name for you soon. I can't keep calling you the 'Queen of Curses,' can I?"

There was a teasing warmth to his voice that made me feel just a little less alone.

I laughed, quieter this time, but it felt real—like a part of me was waking up after so long in the dark. For the first time in years, I felt like I wasn't entirely alone, and the thought, for once, didn't scare me.