

The Last Step

#Chapter 11: Crushed Dreams - Read The Last Step

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Kaiser's Perspective:

I will never forgive Kiel for hurting Celia. She trusted him—she thought of him as a friend. She opened herself up to him, and what did he do? He treated her like a monster. He tortured her. And worse—he planned to kill her.

Celia was harmless. She couldn't protect herself—they knew that. And yet, they tortured her. Tortured her, like she was nothing more than a thing to be broken. And that is something I can never, never let go.

Kiel will regret every single moment of it. Every damn second. He will beg for mercy, but I won't show him an ounce. Not a single bit. I will make him feel every shred of pain, every ounce of suffering he put her through.

I will make him scream. I will make him beg. And when he does, I'll watch him burn under the weight of what he's done. He won't escape it—not even in death. He will drown in it. Every wrong he's done will be felt, over and over, until he begs for his end.

This isn't just anger. This is a promise.

The rage burned through me. Hotter than any flame. Darker than any curse. It twisted my thoughts and dragged me deeper into it with every passing second. I couldn't stop it. I wouldn't stop it. Not when it came to her. Not when I could still feel the ghost of her pain.

I will break him. I will make Kiel's existence so painful, so unbearable, that he will wish he had never been born. Every breath he takes will remind him of the suffering he's caused.

The rage was overwhelming. The pressure built with each step. I clenched my fist so hard that my nails dug into my palm. My teeth ground together, and I bit my lip until I tasted blood. But I didn't care. I couldn't care.

I needed to distance myself from her. I couldn't let my emotions cloud this. I couldn't let my fury be her undoing. Slowly, I took a step back, keeping my eyes on Kiel and Ronan. Each footstep a deliberate separation from Celia, maintaining the space. This fight was mine, and I wasn't about to let anything distract me from making him pay.

Kiel and Ronan separated, running in opposite directions around me. They're splitting up... again?

I tracked their movements, eyes shifting between them. The rhythm of their steps was frantic, a sign of their desperation.

I knew what they were doing. Like before, they were trying to use Celia as a shield—again. A hostage to trap me. They thought it would work, just like last time.

I couldn't help it. As they made their move, I let out a laugh—cold, sharp, and filled with a twisted understanding. It sliced through the tension, sending a shiver down their spines, and for a brief moment, I saw the stunned look in their eyes.

"You think you can escape me?" I taunted, my voice low and full of malice. "Think again."

They didn't stop, though. Even with my laughter ringing in their ears, they kept running, determination written across their faces. But I could see it—the fear in their eyes, the uncertainty that lingered just beneath their resolve. They knew they couldn't outrun me forever.

Without hesitation, I bolted toward Ronan, my feet barely touching the ground. I was running as fast as the wind.

Kiel's attack on Celia no longer mattered. She would be fine. She would be safe. And Kiel? He would never lay another hand on her—not as long as I was still standing. I would make sure of it, personally.

In the blink of an eye, I was on Ronan. My speed was unmatched—he couldn't even track my movement. His eyes barely registered my approach before I closed the distance between us. His disbelief was clear, but it was too late. My sword flashed through the air like lightning, and I forced him into a defensive stance. His hands trembled as he struggled to raise his weapon to block.

Just as my blade was about to make contact, the ground beneath us shuddered violently, and a crack split the earth. A surge of heat exploded from the fissures, sending waves of scorching air over me. Ronan's voice cracked through the chaos, his desperation evident as he began chanting.

"Flare of the heavens, descend and annihilate! Leave nothing but embers—Solar Cataclysm!"

In an instant, the ground ignited. A massive phoenix erupted from the flames, its wings unfurling with a deafening roar. The beast was enormous, its form a wall of blazing fire, scorching everything in its path as it rose into the sky, roaring in fury.

I had no time to dodge. My sword clashed against the phoenix's fiery barrier with a violent clang, the impact forcing me back, a shockwave rattling my body. The heat seared through my clothes, biting into my skin, and I could feel my flesh burning beneath the flames. But I wasn't done yet. Not yet.

The phoenix roared, a deafening screech that vibrated through the air like a living weapon. Its molten eyes locked onto me with an intensity that could burn through stone. It was no mere creature—it was a force of nature, a raging inferno that had been summoned with the sole purpose of ending me. Its wings flapped, sending blasts of scorching wind and heat, and the ground trembled under its power.

Ronan's expression was pure pride, his chest swelling as the phoenix charged, its fiery form an impenetrable wall of death between us. He thought nothing could outspeed it. He thought his victory was inevitable.

I couldn't let him think that.

In the blink of an eye, the phoenix launched a flurry of attacks, each one coming at me like an unstoppable wave of destruction. Fireballs rained down, molten feathers shot like projectiles, and blasts of heat erupted from the ground itself. I dodged and weaved, my body a blur as I narrowly avoided each deadly strike.

The first wave of fire exploded just inches from my shoulder, the heat licking at my skin, but I was already in motion, rolling to the side, avoiding the second blast by mere inches. The air was thick with the scent of smoke and burning flesh as the third and fourth attacks came—raging streams of flame that I dodged by twisting through the air, my feet barely touching the ground as I used every ounce of agility I had to stay alive.

I could feel the pressure mounting—each moment that passed made it harder to avoid the phoenix's strikes. The fire was faster now, sharper. The air around me crackled with the intensity of its fury. It was relentless.

Five. Six. Seven attacks in just a matter of seconds, each one more deadly than the last. I was running out of space, out of time. My heart pounded in my chest, my movements faster, more desperate. But I wouldn't stop.

With one final, powerful push, I forced myself forward. The phoenix dove in, its wings spreading in an explosion of flame, but I was already moving—dashing straight at Ronan with everything I had. I was gambling it all on my speed, my reflexes, my will to survive.

Ronan's eyes widened in shock as I closed the distance, but the fire wasn't done yet. The phoenix unleashed one final surge of flame, a last-ditch attempt to stop me, but I was faster. I slid beneath it, my body barely grazing the searing heat as I rushed toward Ronan.

Fear replaced his pride in an instant. His face twisted in shock and disbelief as he realized I wasn't finished. That's when I knew—he was too slow, and his precious phoenix would be too late.

I leaned in, my sword hovering above his head, the tip of it brushing against his skin. His breath caught in his throat, panic flooding his eyes.

"That's right, Ronan," I whispered, my voice as cold as the blade in my hand. "I win."

And with that, I was going to end it.

But then, I felt it. A shift in the air—something cold, something darker. A presence I hadn't anticipated. It slithered into my senses, a whisper in the wind, a dark murmur that crawled up my spine like ice.

"From the pit of torment, tear them asunder—Vengeful Grasp!"

The words hit me like a bolt of lightning, tearing through the air with a force that sent a chill down my bones. I barely had time to react before the cursed vines erupted from the earth beneath me, their jagged thorns tearing through the ground with unnatural force.

The earth trembled as the curse spread, and I saw the vines surge toward me, faster than anything natural could move. They didn't just lash out—they hunted, like they were tracking my every move, anticipating my next step.

Instinctively, I raised my arm to shield myself, but it was too late. The vines struck with ruthless precision. The thorns dug deep into my flesh, their jagged edges cutting through my body and skin with terrifying ease. The pain exploded through my body, sharp and relentless—a curse that burned like fire and froze me to the bone all at once.

I was flung back, my body crashing into the trunk of a nearby tree. The bark splintered under the impact, and I felt the sting of every inch of it as I crumpled against it. A wheeze escaped my chest, but there was no time to breathe. The vines weren't done.

They twisted around me, coiling tighter with every movement I made. Each time I struggled, each time I tried to break free, they tightened their grip—squeezing the life out of me. The curse seeped into my veins, cold and suffocating, draining me, stealing my strength.

My sword—my only defense—slipped from my hand, falling uselessly to the ground. Panic surged through me, but I fought it down. I couldn't let them win. Not like this.

The weight of the curse pressed down on me, its pull growing stronger. I could feel my body growing weaker, my vision starting to blur, the pain settling into something more distant, more... final.

No. I wouldn't let it end like this. Not today.

I could feel the vines tightening around me, their cursed thorns digging into my flesh, their grip pulling me deeper into the earth. The pain shot through me in waves, unbearable, but I wasn't going to give in. Not like this. Not when I had a promise to keep.

The memory of Celia's words burned in my mind, fueling my fury. She stood tall when they tried to break her, protecting me when I couldn't even protect myself. She had believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself.

"I will fight by his side. He didn't need to risk his life for me, but I will."

Her words echoed through me, strengthening the resolve that was quickly growing in my chest. She would never give up on me. And I'd be damned if I gave up now.

I roared, slamming my fists into the cursed vines, each blow driving through them with all the fury I could summon. The pain flared with every strike, but I wouldn't stop. My hands bled, my body screamed, but I was relentless. These vines—these cursed things—had no idea who they were dealing with.

They responded with more violence, lashing out and slamming me back to the ground. The shock of the impact rattled through my bones, but I didn't stop. I couldn't stop. Not now.

I pushed myself up, my feet slipping in the mud as the vines latched onto my legs, dragging me back down. Again and again, they slammed me to the ground, their grip stronger each time, but I fought.

"Not today," I snarled through gritted teeth, digging my fingers into the earth.

My vision blurred with pain, but I couldn't afford to fall. I wouldn't. I pulled against the vines, my muscles burning with every inch of progress. My strength was slipping, but I could still feel Celia's resolve, her belief in me.

"I will fight by his side."

With a final, desperate heave, I tore through the vines, one by one. The cursed thorns bit into my hands, but I didn't care. I tore them apart until the grip on me loosened, until the vines lay broken at my feet.

I dropped to my knees, gasping for air, my hands shaking, blood dripping from my palms. The pain was unbearable. But I didn't care.

I wasn't going to die here. Not today.

I would make them pay for everything they'd done to her. I would keep my promise. And I would never let her down.

I didn't realize but blood was dripping down from my eyes. It burned, but I didn't care. The world around me was a blur, but my focus was sharp, and I could feel the presence of death in my eyes. I locked eyes with Ronan and Kiel, and they stopped dead in their tracks. Their faces twisted in fear.

They can feel it, I thought. The rage. The desire for vengeance.

They both took a step back.

My eyes. I will not lose this fight. I will make them regret ever crossing me.

Celia screamed my name, her voice laced with worry. "Kaiser! Are you okay?"

I forced my lips into a smile, my voice shaky but cold. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me, Celia."

Lies. All lies. My bones felt like they were cracking under the pressure. My body was on the verge of collapsing. Every inch of me screamed in agony. But I would not stop. I would not show weakness.

I was the weakest adventurer in the world. I had no magic. No gifts. Nothing. I'm just weak...

But I would still fight. I will fight for her.

Celia's hands were gentle as she pulled me up, her strength and determination filling the air around us. Ronan and Kiel were talking in the background, too busy discussing their next move to notice Celia's careful touch.

Ronan's voice reached my ears, filled with curiosity. "Why didn't you kill Celia when you had the chance, Kiel?"

Kiel hesitated, his voice faltering. "I... I was about to... But then I saw Kaiser about to kill you. I had to use my cursed magic to save you."

Ronan's eyes narrowed, a deep, unsettling silence falling between them. "You had so many chances, Kiel... Why didn't you do it? Why hesitate?"

His voice was cold, but there was a flicker of something else—something darker—as he stared at Kiel. "You could've ended it already."

Kiel's jaw clenched, but his voice softened with a rare hint of guilt. "I'm sorry. I... I didn't want it to be like this." But that moment passed quickly. His eyes hardened as he

straightened up, his arrogance returning with a deadly edge. "I'm done holding back." His voice dropped to a dangerous growl. "Now, I'll use my full potential. You think you've seen power? You haven't even begun to understand true destruction."

Ronan met his gaze, a twisted smile spreading across his face. "You'd better, Kiel. Finish it. For both our sakes."

Kiel's eyes burned with fury as he nodded. "No more mercy. I'm done playing nice," he spat, his words dripping with malice. "Let's end this, Ronan. And when we're done, nothing will be left but their ashes."

They spoke for a few more seconds, but I couldn't hear them. The words were drowned out by the weight of my thoughts. Kiel... He could use wind, fire, ice, and now cursed magic. He was dangerous. More than dangerous. He was an A-rank adventurer. Far above my level. Far beyond anything I could ever hope to match.

Ronan wasn't much better. He had mastered higher-level elemental magic—B-ranked spells that could wipe me off the face of the earth in an instant.

I clenched my teeth, biting my lip until it bled again. My hand curled into a fist, nails digging into my palm until it almost hurt more than the pain in my chest.

I can't do this... I can't beat them... The thoughts clouded my mind. It's impossible.

Then, her touch. Celia's hand wrapped around mine, warm and firm. She looked at me with those eyes—eyes that saw more than just my weakness.

Kaiser, I believe in you.

Her voice was quiet, but I heard it clear as day. "I know you will win."

She forced a smile. It was weak. I could see it in her eyes. She was trying to hide her fear, trying to cheer me up, to make me believe in myself.

I couldn't let her down.

I've done nothing to stop them. Nothing to save us. Every time, I've only lost. And each defeat feels worse than the last. Yet, despite all that, she still believes in me. Instead of turning away, instead of giving up on me like everyone else, she's here. She's staying by my side.

How can I let her down now? How can I keep losing, when she's holding on to me with that fragile hope?

I won't—

I will win. I will.

I might be the weakest adventurer in the world, but I had one thing they didn't. I had her.

I squeezed her hand tighter. The fire in my chest ignited, burning away the doubts, burning away the pain.

I'll win for her.

And if I had to sacrifice everything, then I would. For her. For us.

This isn't over. Not yet. I will make them pay. And they will regret every moment they spent thinking they could break me.

My vision blurred, my body felt broken—but my resolve burned hotter than it ever had before. I would tear through every wall they put in my path. And when I stand victorious, Kiel and Ronan will be nothing but smoldering ruins, wiped from existence.

I will make them beg for death before it comes.

Chapter 12 - One Last Time

Celia's Perspective:

The air was heavy, thicker than I could ever remember. My hands trembled as I gripped the edge of my clothes, trying to steady myself, but it wasn't working.

In front of me stood Kiel and Ronan—two powerful opponents who seemed almost untouchable. The way they carried themselves, their calm confidence... it was terrifying.

I couldn't help but let my mind wander. How did we end up here?

Kiel's black eyes pierced through everything, cold and merciless, while Ronan's fiery aura radiated raw, unyielding power. They weren't just strong—they were relentless. Each move they made felt deliberate, like they were toying with Kaiser, testing his limits.

My gaze flickered to Kaiser. His bandages were already torn in a few places, his breaths shallow but measured. He looked exhausted, yet he refused to falter.

Why does he keep fighting? I wondered, my heart tightening.

We had only met recently, yet he had already risked so much for me. I could still see him in my mind, standing against those... those monsters—the Noctis Grasper. Two of them, both terrifying and relentless, and he faced them alone.

An E-rank adventurer like him did that. No one would have blamed him if he had run, but he didn't. He fought like his life depended on it—no, like *my* life depended on it.

Now, he was fighting for me once again. I knew he was lying to me—lying about how much pain he was in, about how tired he felt. He didn't want me to worry, so he carried all of it alone.

I bit my lip, my gaze fixed on him. Kaiser wasn't like Kiel or Ronan. He didn't have their overwhelming magic or their crushing strength. He didn't even have magic at all. But he had something else—a stubbornness, a resolve that refused to shatter no matter how much pain he endured.

Why hasn't he left me yet? Why is he still standing there, still fighting, when it's so clear he's hurting?

I remembered the words he told me earlier, his voice steady despite the blood staining his clothes. "I'm fine. It doesn't hurt at all."

But I knew he was lying.

He wasn't fine. He was suffering, more than anyone I'd ever known. Yet he still forced a smile, still stood tall, just to ease my worries.

And me? What was I doing? Nothing. I couldn't fight beside him, couldn't ease his pain or shield him from any of this. I was useless. I clenched my hands into fists, nails biting into my palms. He was risking everything for me, and all I could do was stand here, watching, powerless.

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I held them back. No, I couldn't cry. Not now. Not when he needed me to believe in him.

He deserved better than someone like me. But he still chose to fight for me, and that was enough to keep me hoping.

Kaiser... please, win. Please, come back to me.

Still, my chest tightened as I watched him struggle. There was something about him—a feeling I couldn't shake. It was like he was holding back, like there was a part of him that he was afraid to show.

"Kaiser..." I whispered, barely audible. My voice trembled, but I forced it out louder, steadying my breath. "Kaiser! I know you can do this. I believe in you! Just... please be careful!"

For a moment, it was as if time slowed. His movements didn't falter, but he turned his head ever so slightly. His sharp eyes met mine briefly, a faint warmth in their depths despite the storm raging around us.

"Don't worry," he said softly, his voice steady and calm. Then he turned back to face Kiel and Ronan, raising his sword as if nothing could shake him.

My heart clenched as I watched him walk towards them again, unwavering despite everything he'd endured. This wasn't his fight—it never should have been.

I didn't want him to suffer, to bear this pain because of me. Maybe I should stop him. Tell him to run away, to save himself and leave me. Maybe that was the right thing to do, I don't want him to suffer any more pain for me.

But as the words lingered on the edge of my tongue, I hesitated.

Kaiser...

Kaiser's Perspective:

The weight of my breath felt heavy as the sounds of battle raged around me. The air burned with tension, and I could feel the blood coursing through my body—pain that had almost become a constant companion. But my mind was still sharp. I had to think logically. That's how I got this far.

Maybe... I should escape with Celia? No... that was impossible. Kiel and Ronan would catch up in an instant. They were faster than me, even at my best. And with my wounds? I couldn't carry Celia for long, even if I wanted to. No, running wouldn't get us out of this.

So... should I take them both down? Was that even possible? The combined strength of Kiel and Ronan was something I could never overcome. If I was being honest with myself, I was weak. Just an intermediate swordsman, with barely enough experience to make it this far. And without magic? I had nothing. I was fighting with nothing but my will.

I paused. Could I take even one of them down? I analyzed their movements—Kiel's precision, elemental and cursed magic, Ronan's raw power and fire magic. In my current state, I couldn't do anything.

I thought of more ways I could change the tide, how I could actually win... But no matter how I looked at it, the answer didn't change. I couldn't beat them. Not like this. One would always interfere. They were a unit, and I was just a man standing between them.

That left only one option. I had no choice but to take it.

Escape. Alone.

I let the thought settle in my mind. Logically, leaving her behind was the best option. It was the safest, the most practical. I could walk away, avoid the danger, and keep moving forward. Why hadn't I done it sooner? The past me would've left without a second thought, without hesitation.

But this time... something was different. The idea of leaving her behind, of being alone again, made my chest tighten. Celia—this girl I barely knew—had already become someone I couldn't simply abandon.

No.

If I had been thinking logically from the start, I would've abandoned her. I would've let her fend for herself. But I didn't. I couldn't. Something in me—something I didn't know I still had—refused to let go.

I could see it in her eyes. The same fear, the same helplessness I had felt so many times. The same loneliness I had lived with. I knew what it was like to be abandoned, betrayed by the ones who should have cared.

I had someone once. Someone who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

And Celia... she had risked her life for me. When I was wounded, when I couldn't defend myself, she protected me from Kiel. She didn't have to. She could've run away, could've left while I kept them distracted, but she didn't. She came back. She stayed, just to make sure I was okay. She cares for me—even though we only met hours ago. Even though the fight seems hopeless, she still believes in me.

I couldn't just turn away from her now. Not after everything she had been through. Not after what she had endured. She deserved better. And I couldn't just leave her to face this alone.

It wasn't about logic anymore. It was about something deeper. Something I had forgotten how to feel.

And then the memory hit me.

"Kaiser, you've always given it everything you have. No matter how hard things get, you never back down. You work harder than anyone I've ever known, and even in your hardest moments, you've never lost the kindness in your heart. That's what makes you so special. That's why I'm proud to call you my best friend."

Her voice softened, trembling slightly, but the words carried so much warmth it felt like they could mend any wound.

"That's why I'll always care for you... always love you. Because you're not just my best friend—you're my heart. The one who's always stayed by my side, no matter what. And for that, Kaiser, I'll never stop believing in you."

Elfie...

Her words echoed in my mind, clear as day, as though she were standing right next to me, smiling, telling me that everything would be okay. But it wasn't. It wasn't okay, and it never would be.

I don't deserve her words.

The weight of the thought crushed me, a deep, suffocating feeling that I couldn't escape. I clenched my fists tighter, the raw pain of regret slamming into me all at once.

I couldn't save her. I wasn't there for her when she needed me most. I had failed her—failed to protect her, failed to live up to everything she believed in.

I shattered her trust, and no matter what I did now, I will never be able to see her.

She probably hated me. She should hate me.

I was weak. A coward who couldn't protect the one person who actually cared about me. I was nothing but a failure. I let Elfie down—she was the only person who had ever truly seen me for who I was. She was the only one who ever truly loved me, someone who trusted a weakling like me.

But I won't fail Celia. She trusted me, just like Elfie did, and I refuse to let her down the way I let Elfi down. I'll do anything to save her. I can't lose her, not the way I lost Elfie. Even if it costs me my life.

I shook my head, rejecting that thought of leaving her.

No. I couldn't think like that. I won't die here. I won't let it happen. I won't leave Celia behind on her own.

I'm not afraid to give it my all. I won't hesitate. No... I will decay and destroy them all if that's what it takes.

The words felt hollow in my mind, a reckless promise to myself. The burning sensation of my own will seemed to push against my limits, but I didn't move. Not yet. Not until I was ready.

The tension between us was suffocating. The air crackled with anticipation, and I could feel my body protesting, aching with every movement. But I couldn't stop now—not after everything I had promised.

Ronan's grin stretched wider, mocking me. "Why are you still fighting, Kaiser?" he sneered, his voice dripping with arrogance. "What's the point? You really think you can win this?"

I didn't hesitate. "I made a promise," I said, my voice steady and full of conviction, my gaze unflinching. "A promise to Celia. I promised her I'd make sure she never suffers again. Even if it costs me my life."

Ronan's laugh was sharp, cutting through the air. "A promise? To her?" He shook his head, eyes gleaming with contempt. "You're willing to throw away your life for that? If that's how it's going to be, then I won't show you mercy."

He raised his hands, fireballs flickering to life. "You couldn't even protect yourself, let alone her," he spat.

I tightened my grip on my sword, my heart pounding as I glared at him. "You'll see. I'm not backing down. I won't break. I'll make sure you regret underestimating me."

Kiel, standing to the side, gave me a cold, emotionless look. "You're a fool, Kaiser. You can't win this. There's no future for you here. This fight—this humiliation— isn't worth it." His voice was softer now, trying to reason with me, but his words were no less cruel. "Just leave. Run away and save yourself. Leave her behind. It's your last chance to live."

I shook my head, my voice firm. "No. I'm not leaving her. I won't run anymore."

Kiel, his face hardening, continued, "With wounds like those, Kaiser, you'll be dead any minute now. Just give up. You're only prolonging the inevitable."

Before I could respond, Ronan cut him off with a harsh laugh. "Stop being so kind, Kiel. Just let's finish him already."

Kiel hesitated, but he nodded. "Fine... Let's get it over with."

But as they prepared to move, I saw Celia—her figure in the distance, running toward me, her face full of panic. "Kaiser! No!" she screamed, her voice breaking. "Please... please just get away from here! I know you're in pain. Please don't suffer for me, I can't take this anymore."

I could hear the desperation in her voice, but I didn't falter. I couldn't. "Celia," I said, my voice shaking but steady, "I told you to stay back. I'll finish them, just wait for me. I don't even feel anything right now. I'll be fine."

But before I could finish, Kiel spoke again. "Celia, if you don't stop him, he'll die here. There's no escaping it."

Celia grabbed my hand, her grip tight. Her eyes were wide with fear, her lips trembling. "Kaiser... please. Don't throw your life away. You don't have to do this."

I looked at her, the pain in her eyes cutting through me. I smiled, trying to hide the despair gnawing at my insides. "Celia, crying doesn't suit you," I said, my voice full of confidence, though I knew it was fake. "I'm the master of fighting, remember? I'll take them down quickly, and I'll be back before you know it."

But Celia shook her head, her voice breaking with emotion. "Lies... Stop lying to me. I know you're suffering, Kaiser. Why are you doing this? I'm just a useless girl that needs others, I can't do anything for you... Don't sacrifice yourself for someone like me."

Suddenly, Ronan launched a fireball toward her. Without thinking, I lunged forward, moving her behind me, deflecting the fireball with my sword.

"Celia, don't worry about me," I said, my voice a little strained but firm. "I'll be fine."

"But Kaiser..." Before she could protest, I cut her off.

"I'm your friend, right? So, trust me. I'll win this fight."

Ronan let out a bitter laugh. "You're so delusional."

I turned to him, my eyes sharp. "Oh yea? How about this, Ronan? I'll fight you two again. One more time. If I die, or if I lose, you can take Celia."

"I have no magic, no talent, and I'm too wounded to even run or defend myself. Be a man and fight me fair and square without using her as a hostage. Or are you scared of me?"

The words hit Ronan's pride, and I could feel his anger boiling beneath the surface. But before he could say anything, Kiel intervened.

"Fine," Kiel said, his voice cold and decisive. "This time, it'll be just us two. Right, Ronan?"

Ronan's hesitation was brief. "Fine by me," he spat, his eyes flashing with fury.

I felt a rush of satisfaction. They were taking the bait. Celia was safe—for now.

I turned to her, gently placing my hand on her shoulder. "I will win. I'll come back to you in perfect condition. I promise."

Celia's voice trembled, but there was a warmth in it that made my chest tighten. "Kaiser... I... um..." She hesitated for a moment before continuing softly, "Thank you... for not leaving me. For staying by my side... even when you didn't have to."

I smiled softly. "It's going to be okay. Don't worry."

I could feel her about to tear up, she believes in me more than herself. I won't let her down.

"Aww, is the princess getting sad over her weak knight? You look cute when you're worried."

Celia rolled her eyes, but there was a small smile on her lips. "Oh, Kaiser, stop joking around and go beat them already."

I nodded, feeling the weight of the moment settle in. This would be the last stand. Nah, I'd win. "Just wait and watch. Move back a little. This is going to be the last fight. I promise I'll return safe."

Celia's expression softened, but I could see the worry in her eyes. She was holding on to something—perhaps it was fear, or maybe hope. But either way, I wouldn't let her down.

It was time.

"Time to decay them out of existence."

Chapter 13 - Strings of the Puppet Master

Kaiser's Perspective:

I grabbed my sword tightly with both hands, ignoring the burning pain from my wounds. Blood dripped down my arms, but I couldn't stop now. Rushing straight at them, I forced my legs to move faster. This time wasn't like before—I had a plan, and I wasn't going to lose.

Kiel broke off from Ronan, running toward me with deliberate strides. His movements were calm but purposeful, his eyes locked onto me like I was prey.

"Ronan," Kiel called out without looking back, his voice sharp and controlled, "stay back and come prepared. Keep your head cool."

Prepared? Prepare for what?

At first, I couldn't understand Kiel's confidence. Why did he think he could charge at me head-on? But then I noticed it.

While running full speed towards me, he was chanting.

"From the depths where light falters and shadows reign,

Weave the threads of despair and pain.

O cursed abyss, heed my command,

Shape my will into a weapon in hand.

Voidrend, awaken and sever all that stands."

The air around him grew heavy, like it was pressing down on my chest. An unnatural silence blanketed the area, broken only by the low hum of gathering magic.

Dark energy crackled in his palm, twisting and spiraling like it was alive. The swirling mass condensed into a sleek, jagged blade, its edges shimmering faintly with black and violet hues. The moment the weapon fully materialized, it radiated dread—a suffocating, overwhelming presence that sent chills down my spine.

Voidrend.

This wasn't just a sword. Voidrend's power extended beyond its physical form. Every slash carried an arc of cursed energy that could cut through anything in its path, regardless of distance. It was relentless, precise, and terrifyingly powerful.

Kiel tightened his grip on Voidrend, his expression unwavering as the shadows around him writhed to life, crawling up his body like hungry serpents. The darkness consumed him, shrouding his form in an eerie, shifting veil. His eyes began to glow a menacing crimson, radiating raw power and malice. The sword pulsed in his hand, its cursed energy flowing into him, filling him with an overwhelming surge of strength. As he raised Voidrend, the very air around him distorted, trembling under the weight of his unleashed might. Kiel was ready to strike—an embodiment of destruction incarnate.

But Voidrend came with a cost. I knew from years of study that prolonged use drained the wielder's stamina, and worse, it could corrupt their body if they pushed too far.

Even knowing that, seeing the blade in action was entirely different.

"Oh shit!" My heart pounded as I realized my mistake. I hadn't accounted for Kiel using cursed magic in close combat, let alone Voidrend. I'd never faced anything like this before.

Kiel wasted no time, slashing the air with the cursed blade. Each swing released arcs of dark energy that tore through the ground, splitting it like paper. I had no choice but to block and dodge, the force of each attack shaking me to my core.

I couldn't let this go on. I had to get closer.

Voidrend's power was strongest at range, but it had limits. Kiel couldn't keep this up forever—his stamina would drain quickly. I just had to outlast him.

The slashes came faster, more precise, leaving me no room for error. I moved in a curved path, forcing him to adjust his aim. Straight lines would've been suicide; the arcs traveled too fast for that.

Kiel was breathing hard now, each breath ragged and uneven. He was losing his edge, his attacks growing less controlled.

"I've spent most of my life trying to learn magic," I thought, the bitter truth rising to the surface. "Trying to master even one spell. I tried everything—studying, practicing, breaking my body and mind to get it right. But nothing worked."

The weight of that realization was something I'd carried for years. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't use magic. Maybe I was doing it wrong, or maybe... maybe it just wasn't meant for me.

But that didn't make my efforts worthless. No, every hour, every failure, every book I poured over gave me something else.

Knowledge.

I might not wield magic, but I understood it. Every incantation, every rune, every principle burned into my memory. And now, that knowledge would save me. It had to.

Kiel swung Voidrend, unleashing a wave of cursed energy that tore through the air, heading straight for me. I barely deflected it, the impact reverberating through my arms. Another swing followed, then another. Each arc of energy carried precision and force, ripping apart the ground and trees around us.

I couldn't fight him like this. Not at range. Voidrend's slashes were too powerful, too far-reaching. I had to get close.

But getting close meant surviving the onslaught.

I moved in a curved path, dodging and weaving to throw off his aim. Each deflection sent shocks through my body, my wounds bleeding freely now. Kiel stood his ground, his attacks relentless, precise.

Cursed magic wasn't just strong—it was devastating. A single mage wielding it was more dangerous than a hundred soldiers armed with swords.

Kiel knew that. And so, did I.

As I moved closer, I noticed the cracks in his facade. His breathing was harsh, each breath labored and shallow. Voidrend wasn't without cost. Every swing drained him, his stamina slipping away with each attack.

That was my opening.

The distance between us closed, and I forced him into melee. Our swords clashed, sparks flying with each strike. Voidrend's cursed energy tore into me, each blow leaving searing pain in its wake, but I didn't falter. I had trained for this.

I baited him with a feint, exposing my shoulder on purpose. He took the bait, his blade cutting deep—but it was exactly what I wanted. Using the momentum of his strike, I knocked Voidrend from his hands. The cursed blade dissipated into the air, leaving Kiel unarmed.

His eyes widened with fear. He knew he was finished.

I raised my sword, ready to end it.

Before my hit could land, it was blocked—by Ronan.

His body and hands were engulfed in flames, the heat radiating off him in waves. My blade, mere inches from severing Kiel's head, clanged against the fiery barrier Ronan had conjured. Sparks and embers danced in the air as I staggered back, my breath catching in frustration.

All this time, I thought I had the edge. I'd been so focused on outmaneuvering Kiel, so certain of my victory. But I'd been played.

Ronan had been preparing from the very beginning, letting Kiel take the lead to distract me while he quietly channeled his spell—a defensive magic specifically designed to counter my swordplay.

I gritted my teeth, gripping my blade tighter.

They had outplayed me.

And now, the fight wasn't over—it had only just begun.

I could feel the heat from Ronan's hands burning through my sword, the flames creeping up to my body, each touch searing my skin. The pain was unbearable, but I couldn't stop. With my free leg, I slammed a knee into Ronan's stomach, hoping to break his grip. It worked—he staggered back, but it wasn't enough. Before I could react, he lunged at me with a punch, his fiery fist aimed straight at my face.

I raised my sword just in time, the impact forcing me back, my body slammed into the ground. Gasping for air, I could only manage shallow breaths. This situation couldn't get worse, I thought, but as if the world had a cruel sense of humor, it did.

Ronan glanced over at Kiel, still recovering from the earlier clash. "Hey, Kiel. Are you finally done taking your long break?"

"Just give me some time, alright? It's not easy using cursed magic." Kiel's voice was strained, but there was no time to sympathize.

"Stop barking and make some moves. You're disappointing me," Ronan snapped, frustration clear in his voice.

Kiel gave both of us a cold, piercing look before muttering an incantation under his breath. "O spirits of vengeance, arise from the void! Bind—"

I couldn't let him finish. Panic surged in my body. I couldn't let that spell be completed. I rushed forward, desperate to stop it before it became reality—the worst thing that could happen in a cursed magic duel. Kiel hesitated, raising his hands to his face in a feeble attempt to protect himself.

"RONAN!" he screamed, a last-ditch attempt to get his partner's attention.

Ronan didn't hesitate for even a moment.

"Don't make me laugh," he spat. "Did you really think you could attack Kiel while I'm around?"

With a swift movement, Ronan's fiery hands blocked my sword strike to Kiel. I tried to fight back, but that infernal flame was too powerful, too hard to break through. It was impossible to defeat a tanked fire caster like Ronan in my current state.

"Continue your spell casting, Kiel!" Ronan yelled, locking his eyes on me as he blocked every attack I threw at him. His fiery hands clashed with my sword again, sparks flying. It was useless. I couldn't break through Ronan's defenses. The only option was to find a way to outsmart him. But I was too late..

I heard it.

"O spirits of vengeance, arise from the void! Bind yourselves to my will and strike with cursed steel. Let your wrath take form—Wraithbound Blades!"

Kiel finished the incantation. I could already feel the weight of the situation crushing me. It wasn't just another strong cursed spell—it was the worst one. Not because it was unbeatable, but because I was too weak to counter it. No Celestial magic. No high-ranked elemental magic. I was stuck in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

The spell tore through the heavens, and suddenly, the sky turned blood-red, as if drenched in the rage of countless souls. From the crimson void emerged two vengeful spirits—malicious, twisted creatures with translucent, wraith-like bodies. Their glowing eyes burned with a fury that seemed to pierce the very air. Each wielded cursed blades, their jagged edges dripping with malevolent energy, dark and menacing. But it was their smiles that froze the blood—the twisted, haunting grins of death itself, promising nothing but despair to those who dared face them.

The spirits moved with unnerving speed, their movements too quick for me to track. I tried to defend myself, but every strike I made was met with a counter. Their laughter, like the dying gasp of a child, echoed in my ears.

The sound was maddening, disorienting. It drowned out everything else. I could barely focus on the fight. One of my eyes was barely usable from earlier injuries, and it was only getting worse. They were too fast. I couldn't keep up.

Suddenly, the spirits stopped, hovering in mid-air. They were moving away, sensing something dangerous.

Then I heard Celia's voice—a scream full of terror. "KAISER MOVE AWAY!"

I barely registered her warning before I saw Ronan in the air. A surge of fire shot toward me, forming a deadly ring around me. I had only seconds to act. The flames began to descend, their intensity blinding. I could feel the heat, my skin already starting to burn, my body seizing up in panic.

Ronan using the spirits as a distraction, moved in for the kill. I couldn't even hear his incantation over the deafening laughter of the spirits. They were drowning everything out. The heat was unbearable. It's now or never, I thought. There was no other choice.

The flames above me were like a curtain of hell itself, raining down with the heat of a thousand suns. Ronan's maniacal laugh filled the air, a warning of the doom that awaited me. There was no time to think. No time to second-guess.

I could feel the fire closing in, the air growing thick with heat. It felt like I was being suffocated from all sides, the weight of the flames pressing in on me with brutal force. My skin was already starting to burn, searing under the intense heat, and the world seemed to distort in front of my eyes. I can't breathe, my mind screamed. I can't move fast enough.

Every inch of me was screaming to run, but the fire was everywhere, a living thing, surrounding me, closing in tighter and tighter with every second. I couldn't see a way out. I couldn't escape.

"Feel that? That's the heat of your defeat. There's no place left to hide." Ronan's voice cut through the air, confident and cold.

No, I thought. There has to be a way. I can't die like this. Not like this...

The flames began to fall faster, heavier, as if the air itself was being torn apart. I was running out of time.

I could feel the sweat on my brow, the burn in my chest as the fire closed in, but there was one chance—one desperate gamble.

I remembered the heat disparity. In the past I studied for fire magic for countless hours, understanding the logical elements behind it. Especially this spell, the fire casted got weaker and weaker the longer distance it traveled.

The fire was strongest overhead. If I could get beneath it—if I could break through the barrier of flames—there was a chance I could avoid the worst of the inferno. But it would hurt. No, it would be worse than pain. It would feel like I was burning alive, skin melting from the bone.

But if I didn't act, I would die. No question.

With every second, the flames descended closer. The air around me was thick with heat, oppressive. Move, move, MOVE! My instincts screamed as I threw myself into motion.

The ground beneath me was already beginning to heat up, but it was still bearable—just. I dropped low, throwing myself toward the center of the fire's perimeter, using every ounce of willpower I had to ignore the scream of agony in my chest as I crawled, moving faster than I ever thought I could.

The fire above me roared, a deafening crackle as it fell from the sky like a rain of molten steel. I could hear the roar of the flames coming down—closer, closer, and then—

I made it.

My body slammed into the dirt as the fire raged just inches above my back. The heat scorched the hairs on my neck, the edges of my clothing igniting. The burn was instant, brutal, unbearable.

But I was through. Barely.

I rolled forward, my arms shaking, my body convulsing from the agony of being so close to being consumed alive. Every fiber in me screamed for relief, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't afford to.

As I pushed myself up, my legs barely responding, the fire continued to fall around me, scorching the earth where I had just been. The heat was still unbearable, but I had a sliver of space now—a chance to recover, to get back on my feet.

"So, you managed to survive, huh? Looks like your luck hasn't run out just yet." Ronan's voice was dripping with mockery, his laughter echoing through the tense air.

"Luck doesn't last forever... and yours just ran out." Kiel's voice was cold, flat, as he summoned Voidrend again. The very air around him seemed to darken, crackling with cursed magic that sent shivers down my spine.

Then I saw them. The vengeful spirits, swirling around Kiel, their faces twisted in malicious glee. Their laughter rang out, disturbing and chilling, like a chorus of demons taunting me from the depths of hell. Their cries of joy in the unknown vengeance they would bring made my skin crawl. But I couldn't focus on them. I couldn't afford to.

This wasn't a 1v2 anymore. It was a 1v4.

Those spirits... they were the final nail in the coffin. Every escape route, every plan, every hope I had was gone. It felt like the world was closing in around me. All paths to victory, all hope of surviving... snuffed out. I was out of options.

Ronan's laughter filled the space around me, mocking, relentless. He reveled in my despair, and for a moment, I couldn't even think straight. His mocking tone was the only thing I could hear.

The spirits giggled, their laughter like dying children, faint and chilling.

"Hehehe... play with us..."

"Come closer..."

"Feel the cold..."

Their voices echoed, twisted and unnatural.

Ronan's laughter broke through, deep and cruel, full of dark satisfaction.

"Hahaha... Did you honestly think you could survive this?"

"You were doomed the moment you stepped into this fight."

"All your planning, all your struggles... worthless."

"Now, it's too late."

He stepped forward, eyes burning with a wicked smile.

"This is where your story ends."

Kiel stood silently, cold, his eyes locked onto me. He didn't laugh. He didn't need to. He knew exactly what this meant. I was finished.

And they knew it, too.

I had no way to win. Not anymore...

Thank you... Kiel and Ronan.

You've played your parts well, but you're nothing more than inexperienced fools. I may not have magic, sword skills, or even a stable body right now, but you haven't realized it yet... you've all been nothing more than puppets—dancing on strings I've been pulling this entire time. And now, you're about to see what happens when the strings snap.

Celia's Perspective:

I couldn't breathe. The air was thick, suffocating me as I watched Kaiser struggle. Every movement, every strike, they were all so deliberate, so calculated. But it didn't matter. They kept countering him, pushing him further and further back.

My hands clenched into fists, my nails digging into my palms as I trembled. He couldn't keep doing this. I couldn't watch him break like this. I wanted to scream, to do something—anything. But all I could do was stand there, helpless, caught in this nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

Is this really it?

I couldn't even finish the thought. No, no, no... I can't think like that. Kaiser had promised me. He promised me he would win... I bit my lip, forcing the words out of my head. He'd promised me he would come back to me... In perfect condition... I clung to that promise, like it was the only thread keeping me from falling apart.

But something didn't sit right. Something felt... wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I could feel it, like a knot in my chest, aching with every move he made. His attacks, his stance... there was something off.

It was like he wasn't really trying to win, like he was giving them chances, letting them set up their next move.

His movements—they weren't desperate. There was a calmness in them. Too calm, like he was leading them somewhere. I couldn't make sense of it, but deep down, I felt a glimmer of hope.

He had them right under hand hands.

I stared at him, my eyes burning, my throat tight.

Kaiser—he wasn't losing, was he? My thoughts scattered. He was far from desperate, and I... I felt so foolish for thinking he was. He had this under control, didn't he?

Suddenly, Kaiser glanced back at me, his face—twisted with a devilish grin I couldn't quite place.

And just like that, it clicked.

My heart ached, but this time it was different. The weight wasn't crushing—it was light, like the tension had suddenly snapped, and I could breathe again. He had them right where he wanted them. All this time, all his movements, his missteps, his calculated losses...

I blinked, stunned, and for a moment I could hardly believe it.

He had been leading them, guiding them into a trap. It makes so much sense now.

I felt my face flush with warmth. But there was no time to celebrate in it. Not yet. My heart pounded as I watched him, feeling my breath catch in my throat. He was ready. I could feel it.

"Kaiser!" I shouted, my voice trembling. "Do it! I believe in you!"

I didn't know if he could hear me over the chaos, but I had to say it. I had to believe it. I knew it, with every fiber of my being. He wasn't losing. He was just waiting. Waiting for the perfect moment.

Kaiser's Perspective:

"Watch closely—I won't let you down." I said, unable to stop my lips from curling into a twisted smile as I glanced back at her.

Every single thing I had done, every move I made, every attack they launched—Kiel's summons, Ronan's fiery defenses—everything was a carefully orchestrated step in my plan. The fight, their confidence, their arrogance... it was all part of the illusion, designed to lead them straight into my trap.

Slowly the sun was rising. The long night of bloodshed was about to end forever.

Ronan and Kiel...

They thought they were in control. They thought they had me cornered, but they were nothing more than pawns in a game they couldn't even comprehend. They couldn't see it... but I could. I had been playing a different game from the start—one where their every move, their every reaction, was exactly what I wanted.

And now, the game is over.

You've lost.

And you don't even know it yet.

Chapter 14 - Her Memory

6 Years Prior to the Current Situation, Kaiser's Perspective:

I could feel the weight of the books pressing against my arms like they were lead bricks. Twenty. How did I even manage to carry twenty books down from the second floor? My legs wobbled with every step, my arms felt like they would give out, but I refused to drop them. If I couldn't even carry a few books, how could I ever hope to pass the Yearly Assessment?

"One step at a time," I muttered to myself as I descended the last stair. The grand library of Valerion Magic Academy stretched before me. Rows of polished wooden shelves packed with tomes, scrolls, and ancient manuscripts. The scent of aged parchment mixed with a faint trace of lavender from the librarian's enchanted candles. It was peaceful—until I stumbled, nearly dropping the entire stack.

The thought of being here—at the highest-ranked Valerion Magic Academy—still felt surreal. Only the best of the best made it here, and even then, only a few were chosen. Most students were scouted for their talents, handpicked by the academy itself. For the rest of us? Well, we had to prove ourselves through rigorous written exams.

Luckily—or not, I somehow passed. Though sometimes, I wondered if I really belonged here. My peers were practically walking spell books, mastering magic with ease, while I spent every waking moment trying to grasp even the basics.

Still, here I was, arms shaking under the weight of too many books as I finally descended the spiral staircase to the library's ground floor. The librarian gave me a startled look the moment she saw me.

"Kaiser Everhart, what on earth—"

I glanced forward to see the librarian rushing over, her kind face lined with equal parts shock and concern.

"Who in their right mind carries this many books at once?" she exclaimed, reaching out to stabilize the pile before it toppled.

"Motivation, miss!" I replied with a nervous laugh. "I'm, uh, just really eager to study today."

"Eager to get yourself hurt, huh? You could've just asked me for help."

"I didn't want to bother you miss," I said, averting my eyes.

She shook her head with a sigh. "Next time, Kaiser, just ask. Now, let's get these to a table before you crush yourself."

With a sigh, she grabbed part of the stack and helped me carry the books to a nearby table. Together, we carried the books to a corner table by the window, the sunlight pouring in like liquid gold. As we set the stack down, she smiled at me, her tone softening.

"If you need anything, just let me know, alright?"

"Thank you, miss. I will," I replied, grateful.

As she walked back to her desk, I let out a long breath and sank into the chair. My arms throbbed, but at least I could finally get to work. The librarian was always kind to me. It was refreshing, given how most people here treated me like an outsider—like I didn't belong. Maybe they were right. The Valerion Magic Academy prided itself on producing the best mages in the world, and I couldn't even cast the simplest spell.

Still, that didn't mean I wasn't going to try. The New Year's Festival was tonight, and this time, I promised myself, I'd have at least one spell mastered before it—no matter how long it took.

The academy itself revolved around two main disciplines: sword skills and magic. But while sword skills were mandatory and straightforward, magic was the heart of the curriculum. Every spell ever recorded was categorized into three major branches: Elemental, Cursed, and Celestial Magic.

Elemental Magic was the most common. Fire, water, wind, earth—spells that manipulated nature itself and many more. It was the first type of magic I tried to learn. I still remembered reading about a basic nature spell in one of my books—a gentle incantation that could make flowers bloom even in the harshest environments.

It sounded simple enough. Too simple, in fact. Back then, I thought it would be the perfect way to make things right with Elfie after breaking our promise to visit last year's Elemental Showcase Festival. I thought growing a flower for her, something beautiful to show how sorry I was, would be the right way to apologize.

But what I didn't understand was that "simple" for others wasn't the same as "simple" for me.

The Elemental Showcase Festival was always a highlight at the academy. Mages would use their magic to create all four seasons, blending them seamlessly within the

academy grounds, locked in by barrier magic to preserve the effect for hours. Elfie had been especially excited about it. She'd told me how much she wanted to see a Stellar Bloom, a rare flower that only bloomed under moonlight, its petals shimmering like stars. It only grew during spring times around Asura Kingdom. I promised her I'd get it for her, but I failed.

Before going to the festival with Elfie, I had planned to spend my time studying and practicing Cursed Magic. I'd been at it for hours, and after over eight hours of intense study, I thought a quick nap would do me good. But I ended up oversleeping. By the time I woke up, the festival had already ended.

Elfie had been waiting for me the whole time, alone. She didn't go with anyone else; she just waited for me, all night. I regret it so much, leaving her there without a word. I should've been there with her, but instead, I was careless, and I made her wait for something that never came.

I thought I could make it up to her by casting a simple nature spell to grow the flower myself. It seemed like the perfect way to apologize, a way to show her how sorry I was for breaking my promise.

That day, I spent hours in the academy's courtyard, repeating the incantation over and over. My mana surged through me, but the spell wouldn't take shape. I was trying to grow a Stellar Bloom, a rare flower known for its radiant glow under the moonlight, something Elfie would love. Its petals shimmered like the stars themselves, and I thought it would be the perfect gesture. Yet no matter how many times I chanted, nothing happened.

Seconds turned into minutes, minutes into hours. The sun sank beyond the horizon, but the flower refused to bloom. My throat became sore, my arms heavy from the endless motions, until finally, I collapsed, staring at my hands in defeat.

By the end, I could do nothing but stare at my hands in defeat.

It wasn't just Elemental Magic. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't cast even the most basic Cursed or Celestial spells. And worse than all of it, I still couldn't gift that flower to Elfie. I had failed at the one thing I thought would make her happy, the one thing I thought would truly show her how sorry I was for letting her down.

The next day, I met Elfie. My heart sank as I approached her. I was pretty sure she was going to be very angry at me. With a deep breath, I looked her in the eyes and said, "Elfie, I'm sorry... I wanted to apologize to you for breaking my promise of going to the Elemental Showcase Festival with you. I know you really wanted a Stellar Bloom, and I worked all night yesterday trying to cast the spell to create it. But I couldn't even cast the simplest spell. I know you wanted to go and get the flower there, and I'm truly sorry."

The words felt heavy on my tongue. I never liked admitting failure, especially not to someone as kind and understanding as her. My head lowered in disappointment. I hadn't been able to keep my promise.

But Elfie, ever the calming presence, smiled at me softly. "Kaiser, you don't need to apologize," she said, her voice gentle but firm. "You tried. That's what matters. You really wanted to give me something special, and I can see that in your eyes. Don't worry about the flower, I'm happy that you tried for me."

I couldn't believe how easily she understood me. Despite my failure, she didn't see it as something to be ashamed of. She saw the effort, the intent, and that was enough for her.

I felt a small smile tug at the corners of my lips. Maybe I hadn't been able to give her the perfect flower, but in that moment, I realized that Elfie's understanding and kindness were worth far more than any spell I could cast.

Back in the present, I closed my Elemental Magic book after finishing most of the sections. Satisfied, I turned my attention to Cursed Magic, which I knew the least about. By "least," I meant I'd only gone through the book six times. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Unlike Elemental Magic, Cursed Magic was powerful but dangerous. It demanded sacrifices from the caster—whether physical pain, injuries, or even worse. The only way to use it without those sacrifices was to possess cursed energy within you. Because of this, only a handful of students dared to study it, and even fewer managed to succeed.

On the other hand, Celestial Magic was the complete opposite. It relied on pure, divine energy, requiring clarity of purpose and a strong spiritual connection. Known for its healing and protective qualities, it was seen as the embodiment of balance.

Unlike others, though, I had neither cursed energy nor divine affinity. I couldn't channel the chaos of one or the harmony of the other.

And yet, here I was, flipping through pages I'd read a dozen times before, hoping for a breakthrough that never came.

The door to the library suddenly slammed open, and I barely had time to glance up before I heard a familiar voice calling out my name.

"Oh Kaiser! Looks like you're taking your sweet time studying again."

It was Elfie, my best friend. She barged in, her cheeks flushed with irritation as she walked into the library with an unmistakable loudness.

"Hey! Who's there?" the librarian called out from across the room.

"It's Elfienia, ma'am! Sorry for barging in like that," Elfie quickly apologized, flashing a sheepish grin.

The librarian raised an eyebrow. "Elfienia, it's rare to see you in the library! You're our highest-ranking student after all."

"I'm not here to study," Elfie said with a teasing smile, stepping closer to my desk. "I'm here to drag Kaiser to the New Year's festival."

Her eyes locked with mine, a playful glint sparkling in her blue eyes.

"Kaiser, remember? You promised you'd go with me!"

I sighed, glancing down at my textbooks. "Well, I did promise, but... I really need to study for finals."

"Oh, come on!" she interrupted, her voice light yet firm. "You've gone through those books a hundred times already. You're just wasting your time."

She wasn't wrong. I had memorized most of these books, practically word for word.

"Besides," she added, placing her hands on her hips with a confident stance, "what's even fun about reading books with thousands of pages? I would die just reading twenty."

I chuckled, despite myself. It was a bit awkward hearing that from the academy's top-ranked mage. She alone was capable of taking out armies and other high ranked mages yet she was so casual.

"Hey, could you two keep it down? This is a library, after all," the librarian added with a smile, clearly used to Elfie's antics.

"Sorry, ma'am, we'll be quiet," I quickly apologized. For some reason, Elfie looked at me in shock.

"Thank you, Kaiser," the librarian said with a kind smile, "Also, please tell Miss Elfiena to keep it down. She'll take your request to heart more than mine."

Elfie rolled her eyes and snorted. "Excuse me? Keep quiet for what? There's literally no one else here! It's just Kaiser, alone in the library, while everyone else is out at the festival."

"Well... you have a good point," the librarian replied, chuckling softly.

"Sorry about her rudeness, ma'am." I apologized for her, giving Elfie an apologetic glance.

"No, no, it's nothing," the librarian said, dismissing my concern with a wave. "Before you came, most students hardly ever set foot in the library. They relied solely on their practical skills to pass their exams, leaving me here to clean the dust off the books all year round."

"Yeah, written exams only count for 20% of the total grade," Elfie chimed in, looking at me with a smirk. "They're better off practicing magic than burying themselves in textbooks."

I could tell she was one of them—practical skills over theory.

"At least Kaiser comes here to study," the librarian continued, turning back to me with a soft smile. "I can see how hard he works every day."

"Kaiser's my partner," Elfie said, her voice bubbling with pride and confidence. "He's going to be a Mage Saint one day, and this is just the beginning!"

I shifted uncomfortably, embarrassed by her confidence. "Thanks, Elfie," I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck. "But yeah, I guess you could say that."

Suddenly, Elfie leaned in, her voice light but expectant.

"Oh, by the way, Kaiser! Do you notice anything different about me today?" Elfie asked, her voice light with a teasing tone.

I blinked, caught off guard. What was she getting at now?

I took a moment to really look at her. Elfie's pink hair was as beautiful as ever, a rare shade even at the academy, and her blue eyes—just like mine—were soft yet bright. She was already known for her beauty, and with good reason. But today... she looked absolutely stunning.

She wore a traditional kimono-style outfit in soft white, adorned with intricate blue floral patterns that gracefully complemented her pink hair. Her braids were delicately pinned back, accented by ornate floral accessories, including white and blue flowers intertwined with ribbons that trailed elegantly. Around her neck was a pendant shaped like a tiny star, its sparkle matched by the subtle glow of her earrings and bracelets.

I couldn't help but stare for a moment, completely mesmerized.

"Honestly, Elfie... you look amazing today," I said, a little breathless. "Are you heading to the festival with your friends?"

She flushed slightly but quickly smiled, though I caught the glimmer of worry in her eyes.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" she laughed lightly, though there was a teasing edge. "I have no interest in going with them. I'm here to take you with me."

I frowned, hesitant. "Why? They're nobility like you, and you're on a much higher status than I am. If I go with you, your reputation could take a hit. I don't want that for you."

"I don't care about them or my reputation," Elfie said, shaking her head firmly. "What I care about is experiencing the festival with you!"

"Elfie, I..."

"Come on, don't be like that," she said, pouting slightly. "You promised!"

"I really need to study, though. Finals are right after the festival," I said, feeling the weight of my responsibilities.

"You're stressing too much, Kaiser," Elfie shot back, a playful glint in her eyes. "Don't worry about the exams. You know we can handle it together. You'll get full marks on the written assignments, and I'll ace the practicals. As my partner, you'll get the full score!"

"It's not about that, Elfie," I said, looking down at my books. "I want to pass on my own skills this time, without relying on you."

She was quiet for a moment before responding softly, "Kaiser, don't you trust me?"

I glanced back at her, meeting her eyes. "It's not that," I muttered, frustration creeping into my voice. "I just... I don't want to keep dragging you into everything. I don't want to be the one who's always relying on you."

She stepped closer, her smile warm and understanding. "Kaiser... you never have to carry everything alone, you know that, right? I've got your back, always. You don't need to be perfect; you just need to try. I'm here, no matter what."

Her words hit harder than I expected. I realized how much she cared, and it made me feel guilty for trying to shoulder everything alone. Refusing her now would hurt her feelings, and I couldn't do that.

"I... I know, Elfie," I said softly, my voice quieter than I meant. "I guess I just don't want to disappoint you again."

She smiled, her eyes softening. "You won't, as long as you're being true to yourself."

I sighed, my resolve weakening. "Alright, alright... I guess I don't have much of a choice. But let me finish this section first."

Elfie grinned, a playful sparkle in her eyes. "Finally!" she said, nudging me lightly. "But don't take forever, okay?"

I quickly skimmed through the cursed energy manipulation section, which detailed the toll cursed energy took on the caster's body. It also warned of the dangers of summoned creatures, how they would turn hostile if the caster ran out of cursed energy.

Elfie watched me intently, clearly impressed by how fast I was reading.

"Wait, Kaiser," she said, her voice filled with wonder. "Why do you bother memorizing all this extra stuff? Just knowing the incantations and what they do should be enough. Why bother with energy costs or consequences? Seems like a waste of time."

"I just love magic," I said, putting the book down and meeting her gaze. "I want to understand everything about it—the spells, their properties, the consequences. I'm not just memorizing them. I want to master them."

Elfie's smile softened, her voice full of encouragement. "I know you'll become the strongest mage there is, Kaiser. You work harder than anyone I know, and soon you'll be a Saint of Celestial Arts—or even Cursed Arts!"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," I said, rubbing the back of my neck and trying to shake off the compliment. "I just need a bit more time to study before finals."

Elfie wasn't having any of it.

"Come on, Kaiser! Let's go to the festival already! I've been telling you about it all week! They even invited a Celestial Saint!"

"I can't yet, Elfie. I need to return these books back to their bookshelves before I can come. I spent 30 minutes just finding these books!" I glanced at the librarian, who quickly turned away, pretending she hadn't overheard our conversation.

Elfie crossed her arms and tilted her head, a playful smirk forming on her lips. "That's it?" she teased, raising an eyebrow. "Watch this!"

With a swift flick of her wrist, Elfie's mana pulsed through the air. The scattered books on the table lifted, weightless, and began to drift upward. Each one rotated slightly, moving with precision as they floated gracefully toward the shelves. In mere moments, they were all neatly arranged, slotting into place one after another. The room fell silent, the magic settling into the air.

She turned to me with a triumphant smile, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Now, all you have to do is come with me. No more excuses!"

The librarian and I were both stunned.

I grabbed her shoulder, shaking her lightly. "Do you have any idea how much effort I put into organizing those? It took me forever!"

She shrugged playfully. "Eh, you can thank me later. But hey, I've been working on that spell recently—mixing Celestial Float magic with Wind Magic. Helps control the wind to make things fly."

I blinked, still in disbelief.

"Now stop worrying so much and let's go to the festival!" she added, her mischievous grin spreading even wider.

Before I could respond, she grabbed my hand, gently but firmly, and began pulling me toward the exit. Her touch was warm, and I could feel her energy bubbling with excitement. The librarian's soft chuckle echoed behind us, but I barely noticed.

All I could focus on was the feeling of Elfie's hand in mine, leading me forward with such simple, genuine joy. It was moments like this that made everything else feel so insignificant.

It was hard to believe she was the strongest mage in the academy. I had known her since childhood, but sometimes, it still amazed me how someone like her could care so much for someone like me—someone with no real talent or noble status. Yet, there she was, always by my side.

And then there was that flying magic she had just used. To create a new spell—especially one that combined Celestial Float and Wind Magic—must take an incredible amount of talent and dedication. The fact that she could do it flawlessly, like it was second nature, only made me admire her more. It was something only a genius like her could pull off, and yet, she never once acted like it was a big deal.

I knew I wasn't like Elfie, and I probably never would be. She was special—destined to become the Empress of Celestial Magic, a title only granted to those who reached the pinnacle of magic. The strongest in Cursed or Celestial Magic were the ones bestowed with such prestigious titles, and Elfie was already on that path. Meanwhile, here I was, a weakling who hadn't even learned how to cast a basic Elemental Magic spell after a year at the academy.

But despite all that, I couldn't help but want to be worthy of standing by her side. To be worthy of being called her partner.

Some might say memorizing and studying magical spells in such depth was a waste of time. But that didn't matter. I might've been talentless, but over the years, I had developed a flawless memory. Sooner or later, I would memorize every single spell there was—how it worked, how it could be countered, the consequences of using it, and how to deal with the caster. I will use my knowledge in whatever way I had to, but I

wouldn't stay weak. Being born weak was something I couldn't control, but remaining weak was something I would never allow.

I didn't realize at the time just how useful this knowledge would be in the future.

Present Time, Kaiser's Perspective:

Kiel and Ronan, you think you're invincible, don't you? You've always underestimated me—just a talentless adventurer, incapable of even casting a simple spell. But now, look at you. Puppets, controlled by someone like me. You still haven't realized the gravity of the situation you're in, but don't worry. I'll make sure you feel every ounce of it. Every second. Every agonizing moment.

I'm not a hero. Nor will I try to be one. I'm nothing more than a coward. A coward who left Elfie when she needed me the most. I abandoned my one true friend, and that's a pain I'll carry with me forever.

But not anymore. Not this time.

Now, I'll show you both what it feels like to face the depths of hell. You'll understand, soon enough, how it feels to be crushed under the weight of your own sins. What you did to Celia won't go unpunished. No, it will be judged by me.

And when I'm done with you two... you will regret every single thing you've done. You'll pay for everything. It's time you face the price for every sin you've committed.

Chapter 15 - Breaking Talents

I lunged forward, sprinting with everything I had straight at them. Ronan, Kiel, and the two vengeful spirits didn't waste a second—they charged right at me.

Ronan was the fastest, closing the distance in an instant. He swung his right fist at me, wreathed in flames, aiming straight for my chest. I met his attack with my sword, the clash sending shockwaves that cracked the ground beneath us. Before I could react, his left hook came for my face. I barely managed to duck under it, feeling the heat of his fiery energy pass inches above me.

"You think you can stop me with only a sword?" Ronan sneered.

Behind me, one of the spirits had crept up, its blade already swinging for my back. I had no choice but to do a backflip, narrowly avoiding the strike. Mid-flip, the second spirit rushed in, its weapon almost about to slice me in half. My instincts kicked in, and I twisted my body, raising my sword to block the attack midair before landing safely on the ground.

"You honestly believe you can land a hit on me?" I growled, my smirk darkening as I locked eyes with him, every ounce of confidence radiating from my stance.

There was no time to catch my breath. Kiel's strikes came next—fast and relentless, like a storm of steel. Each swing of his blade, Voidrend, cut through the air with terrifying force, its cursed energy stretching far beyond his reach. I could feel the weight of his attacks, even as I deflected them from a distance.

"Come on, Kaiser," Kiel growled, his voice dripping with disdain. "Is this all the weakest adventurer can do? Just dodge?"

"Keep talking, Kiel. It's the only thing you're good at." I barely sidestepped his attack, my eyes narrowing in calculation. He wasn't even close.

I started running to my right, my body tilting low to the ground, gripping my sword tightly only on my left hand. My heart pounded faster than ever as Ronan and the spirits surged after me, closing in fast. From a distance, Kiel swung Voidrend again and again. Range didn't matter to him—his cursed blade could strike from up to seventy meters away, and I was well within its deadly reach.

"Running won't save you," Ronan snarled, his voice a deep, feral growl. "I will hunt you down, no matter how far you run."

Soon, they closed in on me. I was blocking Kiel's slashes, but the attacks came from every direction. I fought with everything I had—blocking, countering, and dodging as fast as I could.

The forest erupted with the sound of battle—slashing, explosions, and chaos in every corner. The spirits used their powers, creating medium-sized explosions as I deflected their attacks. We exchanged blow after blow, hundreds of strikes in mere seconds. The speed of their movements left trails of shadows hanging in the air behind them.

Ronan saw an opening. He closed the gap and launched a jab at my face, his fist leaving a trail of flames in the air, the fiery aura surrounding it like the wrath of a volcano. I blocked the strike with my sword, but before I could react, he seized the blade with a vice-like grip, his hands searing with the flames from his earlier spell. The heat was unbearable, burning through the air with every inch of his touch.

My body was wide open, a perfect target for a counterattack, just as I had anticipated from Ronan. His smirk twisted with fiery confidence, thinking he had me right where he wanted.

But he made one fatal mistake.

"You won't get away this time, Kaiser!" Ronan sneered, but I merely smiled, knowing his mistake.

Instead of dodging, I made my move. With a swift motion, I caught his fiery punch with my right hand, the heat of the flames searing through my skin and palms. The burn was excruciating, but I gritted my teeth, pushing through the pain. My hand shook from the force of the impact, but I tightened my grip, refusing to let go.

The flames wrapped around my arm like a wild serpent, but my resolve was hotter than the fire itself. I could feel the heat radiating from his body as if it could melt everything in its path. But it was his own arrogance that would be his downfall.

"We both know how this is going to end, Ronan," I hissed, my grip tightening.

We locked eyes as we faced off, neither of us giving an inch. Despite his physical enhancement spells, Ronan couldn't overpower me.

"You're nothing but a puppet, following the strings of your magic," I spat. "You're weak."

Then, from behind, one of the spirits attacked. I dropped to my knees, using my strength to jump and flip Ronan over, sending him crashing to the ground. Mid-air, Kiel's cursed Voidrend sword slashed toward me with blinding speed. I blocked every strike, my body twisting and turning to deflect them, all while fighting off another spirit's attacks.

"Impressive," Kiel sneered, his eyes glinting with malicious intent. "But this is where your luck runs out."

I landed with a thud, my legs trembling from the impact. As soon as my feet hit the ground, something felt wrong—too quiet. A wave of danger surged through me, instincts kicking in. Before I could process it, I heard the unmistakable sound of Ronan's movements, the heavy thud of his rapid approach echoing behind me.

I whipped around, just in time to catch a glimpse of him. His voice, low and filled with malice, cut through the tension as his fiery fist lunged toward my head. The air around him sizzled, the flames casting wild, flickering shadows in the dark.

"Think you've won?" His voice was a growl, barely audible over the crackling fire. "Think again."

I barely had time to react before he began chanting.

"Awaken the primal spirits, infuse my mortal shell. Fire of the phoenix, strength of the stone, swiftness of the wind, and resilience of the tide—lend me your power! Eidolon Surge!"

His body erupted with raw power, his aura igniting as flames cascaded off him like a living inferno. The air around us grew hot, searing.

I smirked, watching his body glow with the magic, the power radiating off him in waves.

Him completing the incantation was apart of my plan. It was the perfect opportunity to show him the difference between true strength and borrowed power.

"Big mistake, Ronan," I muttered, watching his body glow with power.

Eidolon Surge was an advanced elemental magic enhancement spell, designed to channel the raw essence of primal forces directly into the caster's fists. It was meant to grant inhuman strength, speed, and resilience—an overwhelming display of power that could crush anything in its path. But this wasn't enough to change the outcome.

"Thanks for the chance, Ronan. Now it's time you know how everything breaks."

Ronan's fully enhanced punch came at me with incredible force. Despite the burns on my right hand, I swung a counterpunch. The moment our fists collided, the ground trembled, and an explosion rang out, sending the spirits flying backward and clouding the area in thick smoke. Kiel's vision was blocked, his attacks halted.

"That was your best shot?" I laughed, stepping through the smoke. "Pathetic."

Ronan had enhanced his body to withstand the toughest blows, the Eidolon Surge granting him the ability to survive large explosions, deadly falls, and crushing impacts. But it was still primarily an attack spell, channeling most of his power into a single strike. But he hadn't accounted for my raw strength.

Then came the sound—the sickening crack of bones breaking.

"AHHHH!" Ronan screamed in agony.

As our fists collided, my punch landed square on his hand, slowly shattering his bones pieces. He froze in shock, unable to react. I seized the moment, jumping forward and delivering a powerful kick straight to his face.

"You should've stayed down," I said with a twisted smile, my voice colder than ever.

He was sent flying to the left, out of the smoke, but I was faster. I reached him before he could recover and grabbed him by his hair, locking him in place as he writhed from the pain of his broken bones. He was still too stunned to fight back.

"Did you really think that magic would save you, learn to fight on your strength. You will never be able to defeat me with borrowed power"

With one swift motion, I slammed him hard onto the ground, the force rattling the air. But I didn't have time to savor the moment. My instincts picked up on the cursed aura creeping up behind me. I spun just in time to block Kiel's attack.

"Don't even try it, Kaiser!" Kiel snarled, his eyes burning with fury. "You'll regret this—I'll make sure of it."

Kiel was no longer fighting from a distance. His vengeful spirits followed him closely, attacking in perfect sync. We traded blows, creating gusts of wind so intense it felt like a hurricane was forming around us.

"You're still not strong enough," I taunted, dodging Kiel's strikes with ease. "You're just like Ronan—needing dirty tricks to fight me."

The spirits were the easier part of the fight. I had already memorized their attack patterns and devised my own counter-strategy. The energy around me shifted, and I felt the strain on Kiel.

"If you keep pushing, Kiel, they'll get reckless. And then it's over," I warned, grinning as I avoided another strike.

Kiel was coughing, each breath shallow as he struggled to maintain control over Voidrend and keep his spirits active, all while trying to fight me. A few meters away, Ronan was desperately trying to heal his wounds with magic, his hands shaking from the strain.

"You think you can scare me with threats, Kaiser? You're not the only one who knows how to push past their limits."

Suddenly, Kiel dropped Voidrend, catching me off guard. The spirits, sensing his shift, turned their attention to me, attacking relentlessly to keep me distracted. In that brief moment, Kiel rushed over to Ronan, using advanced cursed magic to heal him completely.

"O spirits of torment, hear my plea! Feed on my pain, mend this broken vessel. Bind flesh with shadows and seal wounds with suffering—Veil of Agony!"

It was a high-level healing spell—one that drained an immense amount of cursed energy. Unlike elemental magic, this spell enveloped Ronan in a dark veil, his cursed energy swirling around him, mending his wounds and broken bones. Kiel collapsed to the ground, coughing up blood from the effort.

"So much for pushing past your limits?" I sneered. "No amount of magic will save you, Kiel."

Ronan looked at him, concern in his voice, "Kiel! Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine... don't worry about me. Just go kill him now," Kiel rasped, still healing Ronan.

Enraged, Ronan surged forward, his speed now unmatched, his body completely healed thanks to Kiel's spell. The spirits, sensing his aura, pulled back, clearing the path for him. I stood still, waiting, ready for the perfect counter.

"Is that all you've got, Ronan?" I taunted, my grin widening as I prepared to strike. "Let's see how long you last this time."

Ronan poured all his mana into his elemental magic.

"Flames of the eternal inferno, rise and empower me. Cloak my body in fire, strengthen my limbs, and fuel my will. Infernal Ascendance, ignite my soul!"

His hand ignited in blazing fire, scorching the ground around him. He was certain I would try to block, giving him the opening to strike while he was fully charged. Fighting him head-on would mean certain death. It was a death sentence to face someone using Infernal Ascendance in close combat with nothing but a sword.

Exactly what I wanted.

I threw my sword into the air, catching Ronan completely off guard. Before he could react, I side-stepped, effortlessly dodging his first jab. I grabbed his outstretched arm, countering with my own punches, crossing them against his strikes.

"You thought simply covering yourself with fire was enough to stop me?" I sneered. "You're nothing but a delusional sore loser."

The impact was deafening. The air exploded with force, sending a shockwave through the area and filling the space with smoke. Kiel, still recovering, stood speechless as he watched me stop Ronan's blazing attacks with nothing but my bare hands.

The heat from Ronan's flames was unbearable, my hands slowly burning, but that wasn't what Ronan had expected.

"HOW?!" Ronan screamed in disbelief. "How are you able to stop my Infernal Ascendance?!"

"Real power lies in technique," I replied coldly. "Those who rely on magic will never understand this. That's why you've already lost the game."

"That's pure bullshit," Ronan spat, rage in his voice. "Anyone that even comes near the fire should melt instantly. Yet you're still here standing. How is that possible?"

I smirked, taking a step forward. "Ronan, you're nothing more than a caged rat. Thinking you've gotten stronger from the incantations you've memorized, believing that was enough to beat me." I chuckled darkly.

"It's just hilarious, really."

As I spoke, my grip tightened. Ronan's fists, once raised in defiance, now trembled in my hands as I crushed them with raw strength. Years of training, countless hours spent honing my body, had all led to this moment. The muscle memory kicked in, and I stepped closer to him.

With one swift movement, I released my left hand and seized his right wrist with both hands. He didn't even have time to react. Before he could comprehend what was happening, I drove my knee into his, breaking his balance. His body lurched, and as he struggled to stay upright, I reached out and locked onto his wrist with my left hand and his shoulder with my right.

In one smooth motion, I used my back as a pivot point, twisting my body with precision and power. I tore through his gravity, completely flipping him upside down. Ronan's body hit the ground with a massive crash, sending a shockwave through the earth and breaking the momentum of his Infernal Ascendance magic.

It wasn't just strength that made this work—it was technique. A technique I had perfected over time, honed through countless battles against monsters and demons where a sword wasn't always an option.

The core of this martial art, was a theory I had read about in ancient books, wasn't difficult to implement once I understood the mechanics. In order to survive in a world without knowing any magic, I had to adapt.

My body was burning. The intense heat from my struggle, the flames still scorching at my skin, made it feel like I was caught in the center of a raging fire.

Kiel, witnessing the unthinkable, was speechless. He called out Ronan's name, unable to comprehend how I was still standing.

"Ronan... how? How is he still standing?!"

The fire around me began to die down, its energy slowly dissipating as it was absorbed into my hands.

At that moment, the sword I had thrown into the air finally descended, its weight cutting through the smoke-filled air. I reached up with my right hand, feeling the heat still radiating from my skin as I caught the blade, the flames still burning my hands.

The heat was unbearable, my flesh starting to blister, but I gritted my teeth and pressed forward. With my left hand, I tilted the sword toward my face, guiding it carefully as I dragged my hand along the blade's edge. The fire on my skin transferred to the blade, touching along its surface like an obedient flame.

As the flames left my hands, they burned into the sword, permanently igniting it with an ethereal fire that would endure. The flames on my hands vanished, absorbed completely by the weapon, leaving the sword blazing with a dark, almost unnatural glow. It was no longer just a weapon—it was a part of me, the flames now bound to it, ready to strike with a power I had never wielded before.

Ronan's eyes were filled with desperation as he muttered, "Mana Shifting... How?"

I knew exactly what he meant. Mana Shifting wasn't just a basic magic technique—it was a way to transfer magical energy from one source to another. Typically, this is only possible using celestial magic, which directly manipulates elemental forces.

But, since I didn't possess any celestial magic, I had to use my own body to perform this feat. I focused every ounce of my physical energy, shifting my mana into the sword's blade.

A normal person would have been consumed by the flames, their skin searing and their bones scorched beyond recognition. But over the years, I've developed a keen understanding of how manipulation and control of magic worked, especially fire. By channeling my own energy and reinforcing my skin with a protective layer of minor mana channels, I was able to create a barrier that prevented the fire from burning through my skin.

It wasn't perfect, but it was enough. The flames raged around me, yet I remained unharmed, using their energy against Ronan. It's this unique resistance allowed me to absorb Ronan's Infernal Ascendance flames and turn them into my own.

Infernal Ascendance is a fire magic designed to enhance both offense and defense. It cloaks the caster in a fiery armor, amplifying their strength and agility. On the surface, it makes them appear invincible, like a god wrapped in flames. But I understood its true nature—its vulnerabilities.

Though Infernal Ascendance created a powerful defense around Ronan's body, it only protected the outer layers—the skin, muscles, and surface of the caster. It was like encasing a fragile vase in steel; it might look unbreakable, but if you struck it just right, the cracks would appear from within.

That's where my knowledge came in.

I had studied the nature of fire magic briefly, also covering how Infernal Ascendance worked, understanding that its protection was not absolute. The fire could reinforce the outer body, but it couldn't protect the inner workings—his bones, joints, and organs. The trick was to bypass the outer shield and strike at the core, where the magic couldn't reach. And from there, the spell's defense would crumble.

At first, my strikes were pointless. The fire absorbed every punch, every hit, like I was hammering against an unyielding wall. I couldn't even leave a mark. But then, I noticed his movements—slower, more labored—especially when he twisted to dodge. That's when I understood. The fire could shield the outside, but not the internal shockwaves.

I stopped wasting my energy on surface hits and focused on precision. I aimed for his ribs, collarbones, and joints—places where the force would ripple through his body. I knew that shockwaves could manipulate the structure of the magic and break its hold.

When I slammed Ronan onto the ground, I used all my strength to amplify the impact. The force created shockwaves that reverberated through his body, rattling his bones and organs. I could feel the magic waver, its grip weakening as the shock traveled inward. The first crack I heard came from his ribs, and I knew I had found my mark.

Ronan collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath. The flames that had once surrounded him now flickered weakly, their intensity waning as I relentlessly targeted the core of his body. Each strike I landed seemed to drain the last remnants of his fiery defense, leaving him vulnerable.

The once-invincible blaze that had protected him was now little more than a fading memory, and I could see the realization in his eyes—he was finished.

This knowledge didn't come to me by accident. I had memorized hundreds of magical texts—books that explored the intricacies of elemental magic and its weaknesses. One of them, *Elemental Convergence: An Ancient History of Elements*, had specifically pointed out the flaw in *Infernal Ascendancy's* design. While most people focused only on the incantations, Ronan was missing the key understanding behind them. And because of that, he was destined to fail.

That was the difference between talent and knowledge.

Kiel's voice shattered the tension in the air, his desperate cry for Ronan to watch out. The two vengeful spirits reacted instantly, snatching Ronan from the battlefield and pulling him away, away from the fury of the clash.

But Kiel remained. Silent. Emotionless.

His once frantic breaths had steadied into a cold, unfeeling calm. He stood there, his body drained, but his eyes, devoid of hope or mercy, locked onto me as he began the incantation. The words spilled from his lips with a chilling finality.

"From the pit of endless suffering, tear their souls asunder—Vengeful Grasp!"

The air trembled as Kiel's cursed magic surged. Unlike before, where the spirits had simply followed his command, this time, the energy exploded, twisting violently.

The cursed vines, once slithering like serpents, now twisted together into something far more menacing. They coiled and interlocked, forming a gargantuan dragon, its massive body writhing with dark energy. The vines were alive with malice, their very essence forged from the deepest, most twisted forces Kiel could command. The beast's eyes blazed with pure wrath, burning with a hatred that matched the fury of its creation. With a primal roar, it surged toward me, a towering creature of pure malevolence, its every movement a harbinger of destruction.

I could feel Kiel pouring every last drop of his cursed energy into this one final assault. He had gambled everything on this strike, betting his life that it would be enough to break me. The battle had reached its end. This was the endgame.

Kiel's voice was a whisper of finality, cold as the grave. "I'm going to destroy you."

But I wasn't shaken. Instead, I met his gaze with an unwavering calm, my lips curling into a thin smile.

"You haven't even realized it, Kiel," I said, my voice low and filled with certainty. "You're already dead."