

The Last Step

Chapter 16 - Turning Point

Kaiser's Perspective:

I could feel it—the roaring energy twisting and turning toward me. For a fleeting moment, my body craved the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. The cursed creature, born of Kiel's will, tore through everything around it. Trees shattered, the ground cracked, and its monstrous form embodied destruction itself, like it was created for that sole purpose.

No... not yet. It's not time yet.

"Kaiser! Get away!" Celia's voice rang out, desperate and trembling.

"No..."

I turned toward her. She was terrified, gripping her hands together shaking under fear. Truthfully, I was too.

I wasn't a hero, nor was I ever chosen for anything. I'm just an ordinary man, a failure through and through, cursed from the very moment I was born.

The beast roared, its deep, guttural cry shaking the earth beneath us. It surged forward, cursed vines lashing out like whips, desperate to crush me. The sound of its rage echoed everywhere, deafening and overwhelming. Then it leaped, its enormous jaws opening wide, ready to devour me whole.

My sword, still ablaze from my earlier move, burned brighter as the creature closed the distance. This was the moment. Time to end it.

Gripping my sword tightly, I leapt forward, aiming directly at the cursed monster's gaping mouth. The cursed vines shot out from all directions, desperate to finish me off in one swift strike. But they were too late now.

My sword blazed with fire, a reflection of my determination. I called upon my own style—the Heaven Splitting Sword Style—a technique forged to challenge those gifted with magic, to stand against the ones blessed with powers beyond mortal reach.

With a surge of power, I struck the cursed beast head-on. For a brief moment, all was still, the world holding its breath. Then, the monster twisted, its body writhing into the sky, its agonizing roar splitting the air. It was all over.

But that roar, that final cry of defiance—it sealed its victory, not mine. The monster, in its twisted joy, believed it had won. It reveled in the belief that it had destroyed me. And for a fleeting moment, I let it—because in the end, it was the cursed monster who would pay the price for its caster's arrogance.

BOOOM! A shockwave exploded as my blade collided with the monster, sending fire and cursed energy roaring through the air.

I moved without hesitation. My sword blazed as I struck again and again, faster than the eye could follow. Twenty slashes in an instant, each one tearing deeper into the cursed beast. Flames spread across its body, engulfing it entirely. The monster's roars grew weaker with each blow, its grotesque limbs flailing helplessly.

Unlike before, when the cursed vines easily overpowered my normal sword, this was something else entirely. The ignited blade now burned with Ronan's Infernal Ascendance. The fire itself doubled the force of my strikes, turning each blow into something far more potent, even if it couldn't enhance my physical strength.

"SKREEEEAAAAGH!" The cursed monster's screech pierced the air as my blade tore through its cursed flesh. Each second I only got closer and closer to its end.

Its grotesque limbs flailed wildly, clawing at the air in a desperate attempt to stop me. Blood poured from its wounds, burning as it hit the ground. I pushed through the flames now consuming its body. . With each strike, the monster's roars grew weaker, its form collapsing under the relentless assault.

"Grrrrk..." Its final growl was cut short as I drove the blade into its core. The runes on my sword flared brighter, absorbing the last of its cursed energy.

The monster shuddered violently, its body convulsing before it stilled completely. In an instant, its entire form erupted in a blinding inferno, the heat radiating like the wrath of a dying star.

I leapt from the inferno, landing with a heavy thud a bit far from Kie. Without a word or expression, I moved forward, my steps slow and deliberate, the heat of the flames doing nothing to touch me. The fire raged behind me, but I walked through it like the force of nature, untouched and unbothered. The world seemed to pause, as if even the air feared to disturb my path, leaving only smoke and ash in my wake.

I didn't care about the explosions or the fire behind me. My gaze was colder than the flames as I locked eyes with Kiel, my sword resting on my shoulder, a silent promise of what was to come.

"Impossible... THAT CAN'T BE!" Kiel screamed, his voice trembling with disbelief as his eyes darted around, still unable to process what had just unfolded before him.

I paused, meeting his frantic gaze with a cold, unwavering stare. "You still don't get it, do you, Kiel?" I spoke slowly, the words deliberate, each one like a hammer driving the truth deeper into his chest. "You are weak."

Kiel's eyes blazed with frustration, the desperation in his voice rising. "No... I still have power! I can—"

I cut him off, my tone slicing through the air. "You're out of moves, Kiel. Admit it. You have lost."

His face twisted with fury and desperation as he began chanting again, his voice ragged as he tried to summon more cursed monsters, his last chance to turn the tide.

"Shadows deep, hear my plea, Unleash the cursed, bound to me. From the void, your chains I sever—Rise, and serve my will forever—"

But before he could finish the incantation, a violent cough gripped him. Blood spilled from his lips, his body convulsing with each painful breath. He stumbled, his strength failing him.

I stood there, unmoved, watching Kiel crumble. "How predictable," I said with a dark smirk, my voice low and cutting. "You were always too reckless. This was never about your power—it was about how easily I could make you waste it."

Kiel's knees gave out, and he collapsed to the ground, coughing violently. His bloodied hand clawed at the dirt, trembling as he tried to force out words. "I... I can still—"

"You can't," I interrupted sharply, my voice colder than steel. "It's over, Kiel." I stepped closer, each word measured and deliberate. "For all your gifts, for all your power... you're nothing. Weak, even with everything handed to you on a silver platter."

Kiel's head snapped up, his bloodshot eyes blazing with a mix of defiance and desperation.

"No! You're wrong!" His voice cracked, but he forced himself to speak. "I worked for this! Do you hear me? I worked for this power! I bled for it, suffered for it! You'll never understand my pain—someone like you couldn't!"

I tilted my head, letting his words hang in the air for a moment. Then a sharp, mocking chuckle escaped me.

"Oh, is that what you think?" I said, my tone dripping with condescension. "How cute." My chuckle grew louder, spiraling into a full-blown, manic laugh.

"Ahahahaha! AHAHAHA!" My left hand rose to half-cover my face as I let out a slow, deliberate exhale, calming just enough to speak again.

"Worked hard, you say? All that effort... just to lose to a powerless nobody like me?" I leaned forward slightly, locking eyes with him, my smirk growing darker. "It's honestly too much. You're making this far more entertaining than I expected."

Kiel's breathing grew erratic, his eyes moving around everywhere, trying to find something. He muttered under his breath, a hint of desperation slipping into his voice. It was obvious he was looking for his two vengeful spirits to save him.

"Why...? Why were you holding back?" Kiel's voice trembled, his words laced with desperation. "If you had power like this all along, why didn't you destroy us outright? Why hold back?!"

"Oh?" I said, stopping in my tracks. A faint, cruel smile tugged at my lips. "Trying to stall me for time, are you?"

"Too bad." My voice lowered, sharp and cutting, as I took another step forward.

"I don't owe you answers, Kiel." My tone was calm, yet it carried a weight that pressed down on him.

"This..." I leaned in slightly, letting the silence build before delivering my final words. "This is the last thing you'll ever ask anyone in life."

Suddenly, I heard dangerous fiery sounds behind me. As I glanced back, it was Ronan his body covered in fire trying to heal it using fiery healing spells. He was rushing directly, with desperate eyes trying to change the tides of the fight.

But he wasn't rushing towards me, he was rushing towards Celia. And around him, I also saw those two vengeful spirits rushing towards me. Ronan in a last ditch effort to win, placed his eyes on Celia to take her hostage. Going against what he had promised just before this, what a pathetic man.

Celia tried her best to run away, I know she was hurt, injured on the leg yet she didn't call for my name because she knew I was tired. Too tired to fight anymore, even in such moments she thought of me.

For a moment, Kiel's eyes were engraved with regret seeing Ronan rush Celia, he tried to reach out to me screaming at me,

"Kaiser! YOU HAVE TO GO SAVE HER!"

I brutally kicked him in the face, telling him to know his place and not order me around. It was obvious, I wasn't capable of outspeeding Ronan while fighting off two vengeful spirits. The only flaw to my plan, that I had considered.

"So are you just going to let her die?" Kiel asked bleeding down on the floor.

"Is that some kind of a problem for you?" I coldly told him, looking down on him.

Kiel's eyes filled with desperation, was he just trying to make me save her so he could save himself or.. Did he actually care for Celia?

"I.. Won't.. Let her die." Kiel whispered, getting me stunned.

He slowly, tried to pour his cursed energy again, trying to incantation another spell,

"From the depths of pain, I call thy chains; Mend the flesh, but bind the soul in eternal strain—"

Kiel blasted out, coughing blood again. This time even worse, in the background I saw Ronan get closer and closer towards her and those spirits getting too close towards me. It was time to make my final move, something nobody expected.

In this world, I've always lost people, lost them because I couldn't help, lost them because I was weak. But no.. winning is all that matters. And in the end if I win, that's all that matters.

I grabbed my sword with my left hand, Kiel's face still in despair knowing it was too late. I couldn't catch up to Celia to save her, she was as good as gone now.

Spirits now about to attack and kill me, I had to rush in order to save her even though I knew it was over. But instead of rushing, I sliced my right hand off my body. The same hand which was completely burned from the heat earlier.

"What are you doing?!" Kiel screamed, shocked over my actions.

Before I could reply, Kiel blocked his face, as he saw those two vengeful spirits right above me about to finish me off. But instead of dealing the blow, they turned their eyes and rushed over to Ronan.

"What..?" Kiel astonished from this,

"Call of the Forsaken Souls, that's the spell correct Kiel?" I told Kiel as blood was coming out of my now sliced off hand,

"This spell, Kiel, summons two vengeful spirits. Upon their summoning, they act like any cursed monster—ruthless, relentless, and bloodthirsty. But unlike others, these particular spirits are bound to the will of the caster."

I paused, my tone growing sharper as I watched Kiel's expression. "Now, you may or may not know this, but here's the catch—this breed of monster isn't fully under your control."

"What do you mean?" Kiel with shocked eyes couldn't say anymore.

"It's simple, really," I said, my tone casual, almost mocking. "These spirits live off the cursed mana or energy you supply them. As long as you can keep providing it, they'll obey. But the moment you're drained? That's when they turn. They'll go after the strongest target nearby, Kiel. And if they can't find one? They'll take you instead."

Kiel's face paled, his voice trembling as he asked, "That's not possible... How do you know all this?"

I chuckled darkly, taking a step closer. "Because, Kiel... they're out of your control. I've fought them before. They're not as tough as they look, but if you lose to them? They won't just kill you outright. Oh no. They'll drag your body to their realm, piece by piece, and devour it slowly. That kind of torment? It's one of the most horrifying experiences a human can endure. And you know what's worse?" I leaned in, my voice dropping lower.

"If there's no stronger target around, they'll feast on the caster instead."

Kiel's eyes widened in pure terror, his entire body trembling.

"They're loyal to no one, Kiel," I continued, my lips curling into a wicked grin. "Which makes them the perfect weapon to torture Ronan."

Kiel stumbled back, shaking his head. "No... that can't be. Is that why you sliced off your hand?"

"Exactly," I replied, my voice steady, unshaken. "By severing my now-useless burnt dominant hand, I weakened myself just enough for the spirits to sense greater danger from Ronan instead of me. So now? Their next feast isn't me—it's him."

"But... How? How did you calculate that they'd attack Ronan?!" Kiel's voice cracked, his desperation boiling over. "It's impossible to know something like that!"

"It's simple," I said, shrugging nonchalantly. "Once you summoned them, I changed my strategy. I stopped fighting to win outright and shifted to a war of attrition—taking your attacks, letting them slowly wear me down just enough while depleting your mana at the same time."

"I kept Ronan in as perfect condition as possible, even though I could've killed him several times over. Why? Because I wanted to see this, Kiel. Your pathetic face, as those spirits drag Ronan to hell."

I let out a low, twisted laugh, my voice dripping with malice.

As I finished speaking, a piercing scream echoed behind me.

"KIEL! What is this?! Control your spirits!" Ronan's panicked voice cut through the air.

Kiel spun around, his eyes wide with dread. "Ronan! I can't! They're out of my control!" he yelled, his voice breaking under the weight of his failure.

Behind me, I could hear Ronan's desperate cries as the vengeful spirits descended upon him, their hollow laughter filling the battlefield.

Celia glanced over her shoulder, her eyes locking onto Ronan as the vengeful spirits tore into him. I could see the confusion and fear in her gaze, but it lasted only a moment. Her eyes shifted to my severed hand, and in that instant, there was no hesitation.

She sprinted toward me, driven by something deeper than just instinct.

Celia's Perspective:

I rushed over to Kaiser, my mind racing with unanswered questions. I couldn't stop thinking about it—about everything.

Why are Kiel's spirits attacking Ronan? Why can't Kiel fight back anymore? And the most disturbing question of all: why did Kaiser slice off his own hand?

I know he's in pain. He has to be. No one could go through that without suffering. I need to help him—fast. But why... why is he smiling? It's as if cutting off his own hand means nothing to him. I just can't seem to understand him.

As I reached him, my attention shifted for a moment. Kaiser was staring at Ronan. I followed his gaze—and froze. Ronan was dead. His lifeless, scarred body was being pulled into the ground by the spirits, as if the earth itself wanted to swallow him whole. Wounds and deep cuts covered him, his soulless form disappearing before my eyes.

But none of it mattered to me anymore. It didn't matter that we used to be friends.

They betrayed me—Ronan, all of them. Just because my looks changed. They never even tried to see if I was still... me. No matter how I think about it, they were fake. Fake smiles, fake kindness. None of it was real.

In this world, there's no one you should blindly trust. I've learned that the hard way. And yet...

Kaiser.

He trusted me.

Even though I look like a monster—a cursed queen who brought nothing but death and despair—he looked past all of that. He saw me. Not the facade, not the resemblance to a murderer. He saw the person I truly am.

I screamed his name as I saw Kaiser raising his sword, ready to deal the finishing blow.

"Kaiser!"

"Oh, Celia! It's great that you're just in time to see his pathetic face," Kaiser mocked, his voice dripping with disdain as he looked at Kiel.

Kiel looked pale—lifeless, in fact. I didn't understand why, but he seemed... empty now. Even though he had attacked me, tried to kill me, I couldn't help but feel a shred of pity for him. Pity for someone as evil as him.

But as I got closer, I saw him through my earlier, disgusted view. He was nothing but a weakling who relied on Ronan to do everything for him. Not even worthy of being called human. And now, he is laying down on the ground begging for mercy.

"Celia, I promised. Do you remember?" Kaiser asked, his voice softening slightly as he looked at me.

"What?" I asked, still trying to wrap my mind around everything.

"I promised you I'd win. I would make sure of it," Kaiser said, his face filled with wounds and cuts, but his eyes never left mine.

I opened my mouth but couldn't find the right words. I did believe in Kaiser, but this... this wasn't the outcome I expected. He had completely turned the tide of the battle.

"You don't have to say anything," Kaiser continued with a smile, though his tone was cold. "It's going to end here."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

"Kiel's life has reached its end," Kaiser said, his expression hardening as he looked down at Kiel.

"It's time I end his pitiful existence from the world."

I was speechless. Unable to understand how far this had gone, how much pain Kaiser had to endure to win. But as I was oblivion of the present moment getting carried by my thoughts, I heard a faint whisper.

"Stella... please, hear me out. I was trying to help you..." Kiel's voice trembled, a faint, desperate reach towards me.

Help me? Really? Even at the end, he was still trying to lie?

I looked down at him, disgust twisting my gut. This... this piece of trash wanted to help me?

"Don't waste your breath," Kaiser said, stepping in front of me, his sword raised, ready to end Kiel's life.

"She's not going to be fooled by your lies anymore."

"Kiel... I..." My voice faltered, but I couldn't stop myself from speaking. Kiel's eyes lit up with a glimmer of hope, but I couldn't let it fool me.

"How long are you going to keep lying? You admitted yourself that you were here to kill me."

"Stella... I... I had my reasons for saying that," Kiel begged, his eyes wide, pleading with me.

"I wanted to save you. Please, Stella, tell Kaiser to stop... We can talk this out—"

Before he could finish, I cut him off, my voice ice-cold.

"No. I do not want to speak to someone like you ever again."

"Stella, please, just listen to me—"

"Don't call me that," I snapped, my voice shaking with frustration.

"My name is not Stella. I hate every moment you say it. You used to call me that because you cared about me. But now I know it was all a lie. Every single word."

"No... Stella... I still care for you," he whispered, as if hoping my heart would soften.

"Listen here, you human garbage," I growled, the words spilling out like venom.

"I told you once before, my name is not Stella. It's Celia. And it was given to me by my friend—a friend who isn't a degenerate liar like you."

Hearing myself speak like that felt... strange. But Kiel's face, once full of hope, shattered as he looked down. His resolve crumbled, and he gave up all pretense of survival.

I didn't understand why I said it like that. I had never spoken to anyone like this before. But somehow, in that moment, I had.

Kaiser's Perspective:

Wow... I never thought Celia was capable of saying something like that. Since we've met, she's been a bit shy, guarded, but still was always polite. But now, she was so... different. That didn't really matter though. I knew one thing for sure—she hated Kiel.

As for Kiel, he had completely given up. I could see it in his eyes. No... I could feel it. He had accepted his fate after hearing her say it.

"Kiel... Any last wishes?" I asked, a trace of humanity still lingering within me, pushing me to give him this final moment.

"Please... take care of Stella... No," his breath hitched, his eyes pleading. "Celia. Take care of her... for me."

The words struck me like a physical blow. The weight of them—the love, the trust—was almost too much to bear. For a moment, I was frozen, caught between the person I had been and the monster I was becoming. But I knew there was no going back. No redemption.

"You don't have to tell me twice," I whispered, my voice a low growl. The sword in my hand felt heavy, but it was my duty. I raised it, the tip aimed at Kiel's chest, prepared to strike.

It was over.

But then, a hand—small, fragile—gripped my own. I froze. Celia. Her desperate, wide eyes locked with mine, her fingers tightening around my wrist, pulling me back from the edge.

"Stop, Kaiser!" She cried, her voice trembling with urgency.

"What?!" I was taken aback. Why the hell was she stopping me now?

"Wait a second, will you?" she said, reaching for my hand desperately.

Even after that, Kiel didn't raise his head. He kept his gaze fixed on the ground, his body trembling. It looked like he was crying. Not that I cared. Who wouldn't cry after an old friend told them to die?

"Celia, don't tell me you still have feelings for Kiel, do you? Did you really fall for his words?" I asked, trying to protest. I couldn't understand why she was doing this.

"Oh my god, STOP getting the wrong idea!" she screamed, grabbing my right hand—the one I had sliced off earlier.

"Kaiser! Why did you slice off your own hand?!" She looked at me with wide eyes, demanding an answer.

I couldn't exactly tell her it was some grand plan to turn the tides; that would sound boring. I needed to come up with something. Ah, yes! I'd just tell her it was injured or something.

"Oh... Celia. I had to cut it off to get those spirits to attack Ronan. It was my last attempt to turn the tides. I had no other way to save you..." Somehow, my heart urged me to be completely honest in that moment, a magical pull to speak the truth.

Then, without warning, Celia slapped the back of my head. It wasn't hard, but it was enough to bring me back to the present.

"The hell did I do to deserve that?" I asked, rubbing my head in disbelief.

But when I turned to face her, the words caught in my throat. She was trembling, her hands clenched at my hand, her lips pressed tightly together as though she was holding back a wave of emotions. Tears brimmed in her eyes, threatening to spill over.

For a moment, I forgot the pain coursing through me. All I saw was her. Honestly, seeing her care about me like that made me happier than defeating Kiel or Ronan.

"You idiot," she whispered, her voice shaky but firm. "Do you think I could ever forgive myself if you did something like this again?"

Her gaze fell to my severed hand, the blood pooling around it on the ground. Her shoulders quivered, and for the first time, I saw something I hadn't expected from her: fear. Not for herself, but for me.

Before I could respond, she knelt down, grabbing at the hem of her dress. With a sharp tug, she began tearing the fabric, the sound ripping through the silence like a knife.

"What are you doing?!" I asked, panic and disbelief mingling in my voice.

"Just shut up and let me help you!" she snapped, her tone sharper than I'd ever heard. It was a command, one I couldn't defy even if I wanted to. The same words I had once said to her came back to haunt me now, and all I could do was watch as she ripped the cloth into strips with trembling hands.

Her movements were frantic but careful, her fingers deftly tying the fabric around my wound. She pulled it tight, her hands slick with blood, but she never wavered. The tears she had been holding back finally spilled over, streaking her cheeks as she worked in silence.

"Celia..." I managed to whisper, my voice weak.

"Don't," she interrupted, her voice breaking as she tied the makeshift bandage with a final tug. "Don't say anything. Just listen to me."

Her hands lingered on mine for a moment, as if she was afraid to let go. She looked up, her tear-streaked face filled with an anguish that pierced straight through me.

"Kaiser... please," she said, her voice trembling but resolute. "I'm not worth this. I'm not worth you losing yourself. Don't ever—ever—do something like this for me again. I can't bear it. Do you understand?"

The raw emotion in her words struck me harder than any wound I'd endured. She wasn't just scared. She was terrified—for me, for what I might become. And somehow, knowing that she cared this much... it hurt more than the pain in my body.

I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came. What could I even say? All I could do was nod, barely managing a whisper. "I'm sorry."

Her grip tightened on my hand, and though tears continued to stream down her face, she smiled—a fragile, bittersweet smile that made my chest ache.

"Just... promise me," she whispered. "Promise me you'll never put yourself through this for me again."

"I... I promise," I said, my voice barely audible.

But as her tears fell onto the cloth she'd tied around my wound, I knew deep down that it wasn't a promise I could keep.

Kiel's Perspective:

I... I failed once again.

If only I had told her the truth. If only I had been honest, just once. Maybe then, things could have been different. Maybe I could have been different. But I didn't. I kept that part of me buried deep, hidden behind lies and fear. Too terrified to face the truth. Too weak to change. And now... now it's too late.

My life flashes before my eyes, broken into fragments I can never piece together again, as I watch Kaiser raise his sword. The end is coming.

My life... it's been a long, cruel lie. Every decision, every step I took, led me here—lost and broken, suffering at every turn. I wanted to change. I tried. I really tried, with everything I had left. But no matter how hard I fought, nothing ever worked.

I thought I could be better. I thought I could escape the cycle, but in the end... I couldn't. And now, all I have left is regret, and it's far too late for redemption.

At least... at least my death will mean something.

Even if I couldn't fix things, even if I was too much of a coward to tell her the truth, at least I got to see her one last time. I saw her smiling again. I saw her happy with someone else. I'm glad my death means she was happy. That's enough.

That has to be enough.

"Sorry, Kiel... In This world the only punishment for sin is pain. But for you, there's no redemption. Only the end awaits you."

Kaiser's voice was cold, distant—like a judge passing his sentence. He stood over me, sword gleaming in his hand, his eyes devoid of mercy.

The wind howls around me as his blade comes down. I feel it, the air rushing past, the weight of death looming over me. It's all over.

I wanted to save her. I wanted to be there for her. But I was too late.

And then—just as the blade is about to strike—all my memories crash over me like a wave. The truth I buried. The truth I was too weak to face.

I remember now—why Celia was called a monster. Why her name was cursed, whispered in fear, and spoken with disgust. She was the reason our village was torn apart, the one who set the fire that devoured everything we had.

She was the cause of the bloodshed, the screams that echoed through the night, and the fire that turned everything to ashes. Hundreds of lives—families, friends, children—reduced to nothing, erased by the flames she unleashed.

The truth hit me like a blade to the chest, sharp and unforgiving. And standing at the heart of it all... was her.

And why, even knowing all of that, I swore to myself to save her.

That was my purpose. My reason to keep fighting.

But now, it doesn't matter anymore. Ronan's demon—his curse—was awakening. I could feel it's pressure killing me from the inside..

Velkaris.

The King of Flames.

He's coming. And when he does, nothing will be left standing. Not Kaiser. Not Celia. Not a single soul.

When Velkaris rises, it's the end of everything.

All because I was too late.

Chapter 17 - Two Sides

Kiel's Perspective:

Great... I never really thought my life would be flashing right before my eyes like this. They say it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience everyone has before dying—a vivid replay of the life they lived. But for better or worse, at least they get to relive their past experiences.

But for me? It's not the first time.

Looking back at my actions, I can admit it—I might've gone too far. But you have to understand, this village wasn't just a place to me. It was my family. My mother never got the chance to raise me; she died the day I was born. And my father... let's just say he vanished during the Cold War, leaving nothing behind except a few bitter memories and a cryptic parting order: "Go South-West of here. You'll be safe there in the village."

I didn't know what he meant at the time, but when I had nowhere else to turn, I clung to those words like a lifeline. The journey to the village was nothing short of grueling—a six-month ride on a rattling carriage, bouncing over uneven roads that seemed to stretch into eternity. There were days when I wondered if it even existed or if my father's words were just a cruel joke.

But when I arrived, it was like stepping into a dream. The village of Celestine sat nestled among rolling hills, cradled by dense forests that seemed alive with whispers of the wind. Rivers wove like silver ribbons through the landscape, their waters so clear you could see every pebble beneath the surface. And then there was the coast—the endless expanse of the Celestine Sea, its waves crashing against the shore in a symphony of strength and serenity. It was the kind of place you'd imagine only existed in fairy tales.

For someone like me, who had spent his whole life surrounded by strangers in Asura, arriving in Celestine was overwhelming. The village chief, a shrewd yet kind man, took me in. He didn't outright demand that I work, but his subtle hints weren't hard to catch. A raised eyebrow here, a lingering glance at the farm tools there—I got the message.

So, I worked. I plowed fields, mended fences, and did whatever odd jobs needed doing to earn my keep. At first, it felt like just another form of survival, another way to scrape by. But over time, something changed. The people in the village, with their easy smiles and quiet acceptance, started to feel less like strangers and more like... something I had been missing all along.

Still, life wasn't perfect. It was never going to be perfect for someone like me. But compared to the things I had endured to get here, the struggles of village life felt almost trivial. At least, that's what I told myself as an 11 year old.

It was a strange feeling, being surrounded by people but still so alone. I tried to talk to the other kids in the village, maybe make a friend or two, but they always turned away, uninterested. To be honest, I couldn't blame them. A random stranger showing up one day, with no history, no connection to anyone—it's hard to expect anyone to reach out.

Days went by, and my only good old friend was me and my book. A few months later, the harvest festival arrived. It was a time when all the crops of the year would be gathered, and the most notable of them was the Eteris plant. They said it could be eaten raw or cooked, but the real value of the Eteris was that it never rotted. No matter how much time passed, it remained fresh, making it a perfect agricultural product for trade and use.

I never really cared much for the festival or its crops. My mind was always elsewhere, buried deep in the pages of history books.

History... there was a certain magic in it that captivated me. It was more than just dates and facts. It was the stories—the lives of real people who dreamed, struggled, and overcame obstacles, much like we do today.

There was one story in particular that I always thought about. A story from five hundred years ago—one that shaped everything.

"The World's End... That's what we called it, because it nearly was. Five hundred years ago, the Queen of Curses and the Heavenly Sorcerer, the Chosen Mage of the Heavens, brought us to the brink of annihilation. Together, they ravaged the land, and in just a few short years, they destroyed over seventy percent of the world. Entire nations were wiped out, cities burned to the ground, and the very sky itself seemed to crack under the weight of their power. We were helpless in the face of their power."

"It felt like the end of everything—our people, our history, our future. Nothing could stand against them. But then... there came a legend. Marseille Astraesus. A solitary warrior, his sword glowing with a fierce blue light. He was the one who dared to defy the darkness, the only soul unyielding enough to stand against them."

"With a strength no one had ever seen, he fought both the Queen of Curses and the Heavenly Sorcerer alone, ending the war that would have consumed everything. He saved what was left of mankind. Without him, there would be nothing but ruin. The world we live in today exists because of his sacrifice."

As I sat in the quiet of the night, the distant chirping of crickets filled the air, and the moon cast a soft glow over the ranch. The world around me seemed so peaceful, so far removed from the chaos of history I had just relived in my mind. Alone, I could almost

feel the weight of my thoughts pressing in, wondering if I would ever have the chance to make a difference, like Marseille.

"Kiel!? What are you doing here alone at night?"

The voice startled me, and I turned to see the village chief approaching. His broad, friendly face was illuminated by the light of the lantern in his hand.

"Oh, sir! I was just... having fun, reading," I stammered, trying to brush off the seriousness of my thoughts.

"Well... it seemed like you were talking to someone," the chief said with a raised brow, his tone full of curiosity.

I quickly shook my head, trying to deflect. "Oh, it was nothing like that!"

He chuckled softly, though there was a hint of concern in his eyes. "Anyways, Kiel. Come with me to the Harvest Festival."

I hesitated, unsure of what to say. "I... um..."

"What? You don't want to come?" the chief asked, his voice more teasing now.

I shifted uncomfortably, glancing at the ground. "Mr. Chief, sir, I don't really have any reasons to get involved there."

He tilted his head, confused. "What do you mean by that?"

I sighed, feeling the words weigh on me. "I'm just an outcast here in your village, Mr. Chief. I soon realized that everyone here lives and cares for each other—almost like a family. I don't want to be the one to interfere in their bonding."

Before I could finish, the village chief's hand came down sharply on my head with a slap that made my ears ring. "You don't have to worry about any of that!" he said loudly, his voice filled with warmth and a touch of sternness.

I rubbed my head, still a bit stunned. "I..."

"I'll be going now. Come by in a few minutes, or I'll send some of the kids to drag you there," he said with a wink before turning and walking off.

As I watched him leave, a single thought echoed in my mind. "Huh, as if someone is capable of convincing me to do anything..."

A few minutes went by, and once again, I was completely alone. Seems like the Chief didn't really care to send anyone after all. Great, I had gotten my hopes up for nothing.

"Hey, that looks like an interesting book! What're you reading?"

The sudden voice startled me, and I quickly snapped my head around.

"It's about the historic war that happened 500 years ago—wait, who the hell are you?!"

"Aw, hey! That's not a nice way to talk to someone!" chirped a small girl standing behind me. She had brown hair and these odd brownish-grey eyes that almost seemed to sparkle. She was wearing a cute, simple dress, its light blue fabric swaying slightly in the night breeze. The dress had delicate white lace along the edges, giving it a playful yet elegant touch that suited her perfectly.

A small ribbon was tied neatly around her waist, adding a charming accent to her outfit. But her hands were on her hips like she was about to lecture me. Probably the person the Chief sent.

"That still doesn't answer my question."

She puffed out her chest, slamming a fist proudly against it. "Well, for now, I'm nameless! But you can call me Lia!"

"...Nameless?" I raised an eyebrow.

"It's a work in progress," she said seriously. "Anyway, what's your name?"

I hesitated but gave in. "I guess you can call me Kiel."

"Okay, Kiel! Let's go to the festival now!" She grabbed my shirt and tugged, trying to pull me along.

I stepped out of her grip easily. "Yeah, no. I don't want to go."

"What?! Why?! Are you sick or something?" She leaned in so close I thought she was about to check my pulse.

"No! It's not like that," I said, stepping back, trying to keep my dignity intact.

"Ohhh, I get it now," she said, nodding with the seriousness of someone solving a grand mystery.

"Thank you for finally getting it!" I said, relieved for about half a second.

"You're really, really shy!" she declared with a wide grin, looking way too proud of herself.

"It's NOTHING like that!" I yelled, my face probably redder than an overripe tomato.

"You know," she said, tapping her chin thoughtfully, "for someone who's 'not shy,' you sure sound like it!"

I groaned, which only made her giggle. "Okay, fine, I'm a little shy. Happy?"

"Very!" she said with a cheerful clap. "Admitting it is the first step!"

This girl was impossible. But somehow, I wasn't mad about it.

"Don't worry, Kiel. I'll help you!" She patted my shoulder like she was comforting me.

"Wait. How old are you again?" I asked, crossing my arms.

"Mommy told me not to tell strangers my age!" she declared.

"So now I'm a stranger? You're the one who started talking to me! And you're like, what—six years old?"

"I'M NOT SIX!" she yelled, stamping her foot. "I'm eight! Eight whole years!"

"Wow, impressive," I said dryly. "But I still don't care. Just leave me alone and tell the Chief you failed to get me."

She tilted her head, her brownish-gray eyes blinking innocently. "Why would I say that to the Chief?"

"Uh, because he sent you to get me?"

Her face lit up, and she giggled like I'd just told the funniest joke in the world. "Oh no! He was going to send Ronan and the others to get you. I just came here on my own!"

I blinked, my brain struggling to process her words. "Wait. So nobody actually told you to come check on me?"

"Nope!" she chirped. "I overheard the Chief saying you were alone near the ranch, and I thought, 'That's so sad!' So I came to see you!" She struck a "heroic" pose, hands on her hips, chest puffed out like she'd just saved the day.

I stared at her, baffled. "So... you're here for no reason."

"No, silly! I'm here to take you to the festival!" she declared, her grin so bright it could've lit up the night. "Being alone sucks, so I wanted to make sure you could enjoy the time with everyone in the village."

Her smile softened, and she clasped her hands behind her back, swaying a little as she spoke. "Also, nobody has to tell me to help. I just like making people happy. That's all!"

There was something about the way she said it—so simple, so genuine—that it made my chest ache a little. For a moment, I forgot how annoyed I was. How could someone so small, so young, be this kind? This thoughtful?

I looked away, trying to hide the lump forming in my throat. "You're a weird kid, you know that?"

She giggled again, clasping her hands behind her back. "Maybe! But at least I'm not alone!"

"Oh wow... Coming back to insult me now? But I'm sorry, I won't be able to go there."

"But why?!" she exclaimed, tilting her head like I'd just said something ridiculous. "It's the one time of year we're all supposed to have fun together!"

"Well..." I hesitated, lowering my gaze. "I really don't have anyone in this world anymore. So, I don't have anyone to enjoy it with." My voice softened as memories of my parents filled my mind, their absence weighing heavier than ever.

For a moment, she stared at me, her eyes wide, then suddenly brightened. "Oh, that's it? No biggie!" Before I could react, she grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet.

"Hey! What are you doing?!" I protested.

"Following my heart!" she declared with absolute confidence, dragging me along.

"We're walking now?! I told you, I don't want to go!"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time. But you've got me! You're not alone anymore," she said, glancing back at me with a smile so warm it made my chest ache. "I'm your friend now, aren't I?"

Her words froze me in place. Friend? Nobody had ever called me that before.

Before I could think of a response, she tugged harder. "C'mon, stop worrying and follow me already!"

And just like that, I found myself walking toward the festival, her small hand firmly holding mine.

By the time we reached the festival, the Chief greeted me warmly and introduced me to the entire village. Lia—well, to be more clear Celia—introduced me to her friends: Mira, Toby, Elise, Ronan, and Fiona. And just like that, out of nowhere, I had friends. For the first time, I felt like I belonged somewhere, all because of her.

Looking back now, as life flashes before my eyes, I realize how wrong I was. I thought being alone was the best way to protect others from me—that if I kept my distance, nobody would have to care, and I wouldn't hurt anyone. But Celia proved me wrong. She showed me that even the smallest acts of kindness, given freely and without expectation, can change everything.

Over the next year or two, we grew close. She wasn't just my friend—she was my best friend, the one person who could always make me smile. I cared about her deeply. Sure, I had other friends too. The ones she introduced me to at the festival became part of my life, but none of them reached out to me when I was at my lowest. None of them tried to break through the walls I had built. Only Celia did.

Celia was always like that—kind, selfless, and endlessly compassionate. She helped others simply because she could, with no thought of reward. It was just who she was.

She was like an angel walking among us. And yet, even angels have their trials.

I could never have imagined that just two years later, she would become the vessel for the Queen of Curses. That her resemblance to the ancient tyrant, even in the slightest, would lead people to betray her, to turn against her, to wish her harm.

They called her a monster, a reincarnation of evil, without ever looking beyond the surface. And on her birthday, the day meant to celebrate her life, they went further than I could have ever imagined.

That day... it was the turning point for everything. The day that changed both of our lives forever.

Chapter 18 - My Gift

From Kiel's Perspective:

6 Years prior to the present time.

It was the month of May, warm, dry, and of course, hotter than anything I had ever experienced. The sun shined relentlessly, the air thick and dry, making each breath feel like swallowing dust. The heat shimmered off the earth, somehow creating a mirage of wavering light along the fields.

Every now and then, wind would kick up, stirring the dry grasses and bringing the scent of earth and hay, but it didn't do much to cool me down. My shirt stuck to my back, soaked in sweat, and my boots crunched in the dry dirt as I moved about, working the land.

I still couldn't believe the chief wanted me to manage this whole ranch by myself. The animals, the farming, the building work—all of it. Alone. The place seemed endless,

sprawling with barnyards and open fields under the harsh sun. There was always something to do, but today, my mind wasn't on the cattle or the crops.

I had been saving up a lot lately. Every extra coin went into a little pouch hidden away in my room. A month from now was Celia's birthday, and I was determined to get her something special. She deserved it. I had been counting down the days, imagining what it would be like to give her a gift that would bring a real smile to her face.

Looking back, my past self must've been excited—was excited. She was my closest friend, after all. But now... now, she hated being called "Stella." It wasn't just a preference; it was more like a silent plea for distance. It had always felt strange calling her that, but it was who I knew her as. I guess, deep down, I should've known better, but I couldn't help it. Now, I felt it was better to leave that name behind in the past. Celia. That was who she was now. A small shift, but a necessary one. She didn't want to be remembered by that name anymore. And, deep inside, I didn't want to call her Stella anymore either. It felt wrong.

Around that time... Celia's curse was taking place. It was as if it had waited until she grew, but it wasn't like it had any real reason to. It just was. I remember those days so clearly, though I'm not sure how to explain them. It's like the memory's too big to fit into words, too complicated for my mind to understand. But I was there. I had seen her for the first time, in all that confusion and chaos, in the midst of something I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

I snapped out of my thoughts as I heard a familiar voice calling my name, cutting through the sounds of the wind and the creaking of the old barn doors. My heart skipped a beat as the voice grew louder, it was a familiar tone.

"Kiel! Come here!" a voice called out, cutting through the stillness of the ranch.

I straightened up, wiping sweat from my brow, and reached for the pitchfork leaning against the barn wall. If it was trouble, this would do as a makeshift weapon.

"Who is it?" I asked cautiously, gripping the handle tightly.

"My God, are you trying to kill me?" The familiar, exasperated tone stopped me mid-step.

"Oh, sir! I'm sorry, village chief. I didn't know it was you!" I lowered the pitchfork, relief washing over me.

The chief shook his head as he approached, a bemused smile on his face.

"Kiel... How many times do I have to tell you? Stop being so formal with me. You're already like a son to me, and we live under the same roof. You make me feel ancient with all your 'sir' this and 'sir' that."

"I'm sorry, sir—uh, I mean..." I winced, realizing my mistake too late.

Before I could say another word, the chief slapped me lightly on the back of the head.

"You'll never listen, will you?" he sighed, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

"I'm sorry..." I muttered, rubbing the back of my head. "I just don't know what to call you."

"Well then," he said, crossing his arms with a grin, "why don't you call me Chief Father? It's special—just for you."

"Chief Father?" I repeated, tilting my head. It sounded... strange, but also kind of fitting.

"Exactly. Now, doesn't that have a nice ring to it?" He chuckled, clearly proud of himself.

"Sure, Chief Father," I said with a small laugh. "So, what did you need?"

He handed me a crumpled piece of parchment covered in his messy handwriting.

"We're running low on rations at the house. I asked Mira and Toby to handle it, but those two were too busy playing whatever nonsense game they've made up this time. So, I'm counting on you to take care of it."

Of course, he couldn't find anyone else dumb enough to agree, so he turned to me instead.

"Yes, I'll go right away," I said with a sigh.

"Good lad," he said, patting my shoulder. "And Kiel, take care of yourself out there. Don't get into any trouble."

"Don't worry, Chief Father. I'll be back safe and sound."

As I walked away, list in hand, I couldn't help but mutter under my breath, What crimes did I commit in my past life to deserve this? It wasn't the worst thing in the world, but it certainly wasn't great either.

And Mira and Toby? Those two siblings were about as useful as my luck. I genuinely felt bad for the chief, having to take care of those lazy brats. How they got away with lounging around while I handled all the chores was beyond me. It just wasn't fair.

The sun blazed overhead as I left the ranch, the heat baking the ground and filling the air with the faint scent of dried grass and dust. Another day, another errand.

As I walked down the dusty village path, I caught sight of Ronan crouched awkwardly behind a wall like a thief plotting his next heist. His head popped up and down, peeking toward the square. Curiosity got the better of me, so I crept closer to see what—or who—he was so intensely watching.

It was Elise and Fiona, casually sipping on what looked like frosty fruit juices. Frosty. In this heat. Seriously? They got the village mage to chill their drinks? My mouth practically watered at the thought. How is that even fair?

I secret sat next to Ronan. He didn't even look at me, too busy with his spying mission.

"Hey, that's so unfair!" I whispered dramatically.

"I know, right?" he replied, not missing a beat as he continued peeking. Then it hit him. His head whipped around. "WAIT. AGHHHHH?!?"

"Why the hell are you screaming?" I said, taken aback by his overreaction.

His eyes widened in panic. "How long have you been standing there?!"

"Since the start," I said with a shrug. "Also, not to be that guy, but staring at our own friends like that? Kinda sketchy, don't you think?"

"I WASN'T STARING!" he hissed, his face turning a delightful shade of red.

"Sure, sure. You can't hide it forever, Ronan. Your reputation as the village stalker is safe with me."

He clenched his fists, clearly mortified. "Do you know who I am?! Get lost before I beat you to a pulp!"

"Oh no, my bad, original gangster! I'll be on my way. Please, continue your peeking—uh, I mean, 'innocent observing'—with extreme caution!" I saluted dramatically, turning on my heel to leave.

"I AM NOT PEEKING!" Ronan shouted after me, loud enough to startle the birds out of a nearby tree.

And that's when I saw her.

Fiona, standing behind us with Elise right next to her. Both of them were glaring at us, their chilled drinks still in hand.

"Is that so, Ronan?" Fiona raising an eyebrow.

Ronan froze mid-yell, his face draining of all color.

"I, uh, umm..." He stammered, trying to find some magical explanation. "Hi, Fiona! Elise! What, uh, brings you guys here?"

I didn't stick around for the rest. The moment I saw their death stares, I bolted away as fast as possible.

From a safe distance, I could still hear him fumbling. "You see, I was just... just testing the structural integrity of this wall! Yeah, that's it! Solid craftsmanship!"

Sorry, Ronan. You're on your own for this one, stifling a laughter while running. My ribs were going to hurt from this memory for weeks.

I finally arrived at my destination, the weight of the day's errands lifting from my shoulders. I couldn't wait to finish up and find Celia. Maybe we could play something together like we used to—laugh, enjoy each other's company. I smiled at the thought.

But as I glanced around the village square, I saw her—and my heart skipped a beat.

She was standing in the middle of a growing crowd, her delicate figure almost hidden among the bustling villagers. I spotted her hair, shimmering even in the dim light, and the soft curve of her face as she listened to someone. I needed to get closer to see what was happening.

I squeezed through the throngs of people, dodging a few curious eyes and murmurs as I pushed my way forward. The air was thick with chatter, but all I could focus on was her. I had to get to her.

"Move aside!" I called out, nudging past people. "Let me through!"

When I finally got a clear view, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Celia's hair and eyes were changing, their colors slowly fading as if being drained by some unseen force. Her usual vibrant presence now seemed fragile, almost otherworldly.

The villagers murmured anxiously among themselves.

"Miss Alina, do you know what's happening to your daughter?" one of them asked.

"I don't know!" Celia's mother's voice cracked, full of worry. She was on her knees, gently holding Celia's face. "She was fine earlier, and then she just stopped moving, and her eyes and hair... they just started changing."

Celia blinked slowly, her voice soft and uncertain. "Mommy... what's wrong with me?"

Her mother's face softened, even as her worry remained clear. She forced a smile, stroking Celia's cheek. "Nothing's wrong, sweetie. You're just tired. Let's go home now, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy!" Celia said, her voice carrying a fragile trust, like she believed her mother's words could fix everything.

I stood there, frozen, wanting to ask what was happening. But the words wouldn't come. My throat felt tight, and before I could gather the courage to speak, Alina was already leading Celia away.

The crowd parted to let them pass, whispers following in their wake. I watched as they disappeared down the path toward their home.

The sight of her fading hair and the fear in her eyes stayed with me. I clenched my fists. Why couldn't I say something? Why am I always too late?

From that day, Celia's condition only worsened. I tried to visit her, knocking on their door day after day, but she never answered. It wasn't just me—she stopped talking to anyone. Her home became quiet, and her absence weighed heavy on the village.

The smile she brought to everyone... it was slipping away. And I couldn't do a thing about it.

It was one of those days when the rain poured endlessly, the kind that soaks through every layer of clothing and chills you to the bone. Chief Father had fallen a bit ill, so I volunteered to fetch some medicine and potions from the healer. I didn't think much of the rain as I ran through the village grounds, my boots splashing in muddy puddles.

But then, as I passed the open field, I saw her.

Celia.

She stood there, alone, in the middle of the downpour, her face tilted toward the sky. The rain mixed with her tears as they rolled down her cheeks, and for a moment, my heart pained seeing her like that. What struck me most wasn't just her crying—it was her hair and eyes.

They had completely changed.

Her once golden hair was now silver, like fresh snowy white. Her vibrant eyes had dulled into a silver hue, reflecting a strange light even in the gray weather. It had been about twenty days since the changes started. Twenty long days where I visited her house daily, knocking on her door, hoping she'd let me in. But every time, there was no answer. I even tried calling out to her through the second-floor window, where I had often see her sitting alone on her bed, staring into nothing. She never responded.

I gave up trying after a while, thinking maybe I could cheer her up on her birthday instead. I told myself I would wait until then to make her smile again.

But seeing her now, standing in the rain with tears in her eyes, it felt wrong to leave her like that. I wanted to run to her, to say something—anything—but I couldn't.

"I'll come back," I thought. "I'll tell her when I return."

The healer was leaving the village that day, so I hurried to get what I needed and rushed back as quickly as I could. My mind raced the whole time, thinking of what I'd say to her, planning how I would make things right.

When I finally returned to the field, she was gone.

The rain still fell, but the emptiness of that spot where she stood hit me harder than the cold.

I haven't seen her since that day. People in the village spoke about her disappearance in hushed tones, their reactions mixed. Some were worried, others confused. But there was one thing that troubled me more than anything else—her hair.

In Asura, white hair carried a bad reputation. It marked someone as a slave from Elysium, a symbol of oppression and servitude. For Celia, someone so kind and full of life, to be burdened with such a thing... it didn't feel fair. I knew this cruel imbalance of Asura and Valerion's cultures would only make things harder for her.

But I hoped—no, I believed—that someday, this racial divide would be erased. Maybe not today, but in time, people would change. Someone had to make them change for the sake of a better future.

For now, I had to focus on her birthday.

I had finally finished her gift—a handcrafted pendant I had been working on for months. The emerald crystal at its center had cost me every last coin I had saved, but it was worth it. I could already imagine the look on her face when she sees it. Her smile would make it all worthwhile.

I ran my fingers over the smooth emerald, the intricate carvings on its silver frame catching the faint light of the lamp in my room. "I hope she likes it," I whispered to myself, setting it carefully into a small wooden box lined with fabric.

Tomorrow was her birthday.

And I couldn't wait to see her smile again.

A few months ago, in January, I had asked Celia a question that had been on my mind for a while. It was a cold day, the kind where the chill in the air makes everything feel still and peaceful. I found her sitting alone beneath the large oak tree in the village square, her back resting against the trunk. The sky was gray with clouds, but there was something calm about the moment.

I decided to join her, pulling out my book as I sat down beside her. We didn't speak for a while, letting the quietness settle between us. The only sound was the rustling of the leaves in the light wind, but before long, the silence was broken by my voice.

"Uhhh, hey, Celia," I said, almost nervously.

"Yeah?" she replied, turning to me with a gentle smile.

"This might come out of the blue, but would you mind answering a question of mine?" I asked, glancing up from my book.

"What is it?" she asked curiously, her eyes sparkling with interest.

I hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to phrase it.

"Imagine you had one wish. Anything you want. What would you wish for?"

"Anything I want?"

"Yes anything you want, what would it be?"

"Oh? That sounds fun! Let me think."

She took a deep breath and tilted her head up to the sky, her face lighting up as she thought. After a few moments, she spoke.

"If I had a wish like that... I'd wish for a world where no one feels alone. A world where everyone has someone to share their joys and carry their sorrows with them. That way, no matter how hard things get, we'd all have a little more light in our lives."

"Wow... that's a beautiful wish."

"Really? You think so?" She turned her head toward me, her bright eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"Yeah, it's... selfless. I don't know if many people would think like that."

"Well, I think that's what makes the world a better place, right? If everyone cared for each other a little more." Her hands gently folded in her lap as she sat up straighter, a soft breeze catching her hair and making it flutter around her face.

"I guess you're right... you're always so thoughtful."

"I try to be! I think it's important." She smiled brightly, her face illuminated by the sunlight, her hands now resting on the grass beside her as she glanced back at me, her expression warm and genuine.

I was taken back by her answer though. She always thought of others first, but to wish for something so selfless... it made my heart ache.

"I... um... why would you wish for such a thing though?" I asked quietly.

She smiled, her eyes softening as she looked at me.

"Because then everyone would be so happy," she said with a soft giggle, her eyes sparkling like stars. "If we all had someone to share our smiles with, the world would be filled with warmth and light." She smiled, her face glowing with pure kindness, as if her simple wish could make the world a little brighter.

"Seeing others happy makes me happy, too," she added, her voice full of sincerity, as if the joy of others was the greatest gift she could receive.

I couldn't help but smile at her, but at the same time, I felt a sharp pain of sadness. Celia was someone who gave so much, but never seemed to ask for anything in return. Her kindness was boundless, but what could I give her in return for all that she did for others?

"Hey, uh Celia? Maybe something for you instead of others?"

"Something for me?"

"Yeah, something you would want. It could be anything, feel free to tell me—I won't judge."

"Actually, thinking about it, I don't really want anything. I have everything in life that makes me happy and smile." She let out a soft laugh, the sound light and airy, as she looked down at the ground, absentmindedly picking at the leaves scattered around.

"You're always saying things like that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're always thinking about everyone else. Don't you ever think about something just for yourself?"

"Hmm... I guess I do, sometimes." She paused, gazing off into the distance as if searching for the answer. The breeze played with her hair again, sending a few strands drifting across her face.

"Well, I'm serious! You deserve something just for you."

"Haha, you're really serious." She smiled, shaking her head slightly, but there was a touch of playfulness in her eyes. She leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees, her gaze softening as she continued, "But... okay, there is something I'd like."

"Really? What is it?" I leaned forward eagerly, hanging on her every word.

"It's an emerald pendant."

"An emerald pendant?" I blinked, surprised.

"Yeah, it's simple, but... when I was younger, my father took me to a nearby town. He had work, but I really wanted to go with him. We stayed the night, and I saw a shop selling beautiful gemstones. One was green, like a little piece of the forest. I couldn't stop staring at it. The shopkeeper told me it was an emerald, and I loved it so much." She smiled at the memory, her eyes softening as she spoke, almost lost in the thought of that moment.

"That sounds... beautiful. So, what happened?"

"I asked my dad if we could get it, but he said it was too expensive. It was 400 gold."

"400?!" I said, wide-eyed, my hands instinctively clenching into fists as I tried to imagine the cost.

"I know. And now I realize just how much it really is. I probably won't even be able to see another emerald like it again." Her smile faded slightly, her gaze dropping as if the weight of the memory pulled her down for a moment. She tugged at the sleeve of her shirt nervously, her fingers brushing over the fabric.

Before she could continue, I blurted out, "You don't have to worry, Celia! I will get it for you!"

She froze for a second, looking at me with wide eyes. Her hand lifted to her mouth as if she couldn't believe what I had just said. "Oh? You really think so?"

"Yeah! I'll find a way. Just give me some time." I sat up straighter, my chest puffed out with determination. I met her gaze with fierce resolve, despite the uncertainty that lingered in the back of my mind.

"I don't want you to go through so much trouble..."

"But I want to!" I said, my voice unwavering. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, my hands clasped tightly together. "You've done so much for everyone else. It's my turn to do something for you."

"You really don't have to, Kiel..." She reached out, her hand gently resting on my shoulder. Her touch was soft and reassuring, but there was a hint of concern in her eyes.

"I'm serious, Celia. I'll make it happen."

She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes searching my face, and I could see the quiet understanding settling in. A soft smile crept across her face, her eyes shining with a warmth that made my heart skip a beat.

"Well, if you really do, that would make me very happy." She squeezed my shoulder gently before letting her hand fall back into her lap, her fingers lightly brushing the fabric of her dress.

That was the moment I knew I had to make it happen. For the past few months, I had been working harder than ever, doing extra tasks for the villagers in exchange for whatever small amount of gold they could offer. I couldn't afford to waste any of it, and I couldn't afford to be distracted. I worked long hours, gave up my time to play, and even skipped my usual leisure activities. But every time I thought of Celia's smile, it kept me going.

The emerald pendant was finally ready. I had spent all my savings, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that I had a chance to give her the one thing she had always wanted. Tomorrow, on her birthday, I would finally be able to give it to her.

I couldn't wait to see her face when she received it, to see the joy and surprise in her eyes. I could already imagine her reaction—her smile lighting up the world around her, her happiness so pure and sincere. It would be the perfect gift, the one thing I knew would make her happy.

But even as the night drew closer, something felt... off. A quiet unease settled in the pit of my heart, a feeling I couldn't shake. It was as if the universe was warning me that the happiness I had worked so hard to make happen might never come.

Little did I know, I was never going to be able to give it to her.

Chapter 19 - Twisted Queen

Kiel's Perspective:

The village square buzzed with life, bathed in the soft glow of lights. At its heart stood a towering oak, its ancient branches stretching wide as if embracing the scene below.

Beneath its shade, a long table dressed in colorful cloth and simple decorations awaited the celebration. Celia stood nearby, her snowy-white hair shimmering like starlight under the gentle light, a quiet smile adding warmth to the festive air.

It was her birthday. A day meant to celebrate her kindness, her selflessness—the very qualities that had earned her the love of the entire village. Almost everyone had come to wish her well, their smiles reflecting the joy she had brought into their lives.

I stood with Ronan, Elise, Toby, and Fiona, each of us clutching our carefully prepared gifts. We were excited for her to finally open her eyes. Celia had kept them shut all day, teasing her parents and everyone else that she wouldn't reveal them until the party. Her mother and father had asked her again and again, but she had only smiled and said, "Not until the party!"

I couldn't help but admire her. With her snowy hair, soft features, and radiant smile, Celia was a sight—an angel walking among mortals. Yet, in hindsight, calling her an angel might not have captured the full extent of her beauty and grace.

But something was different. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but she seemed quieter than usual. She stayed close to Lyla, her older sister, almost clinging to her. The two of them seemed closer than ever, which was heartwarming to see.

I still remember the day I found her, crying alone in the field. In that moment, I made a silent vow to do whatever it took to see her smile again. Maybe Lyla had helped her heal in ways I couldn't. Nonetheless, it made me happy to see her smile like this.

The moment we were waiting for finally came. The square grew quiet as Celia slowly opened her eyes.

My heart stopped.

With all eyes on her, Celia opened her lids, revealing... crimson red. Her eyes weren't the soft, familiar brown I had always known. They were red—bright, vivid crimson. My breath hitched as the realization struck me: her resemblance to the Queen of Curses was uncanny. Snowy hair, crimson eyes... it was as though the infamous queen herself stood before us.

The crowd's whispers started immediately, their words growing venomous and fearful. My heart sank as I saw Celia's expression—innocent, confused, completely unaware of the transformation she had undergone.

Celia blinked, confused by the gasps and murmurs spreading through the crowd. She had no idea what had changed. She didn't see what we all saw.

"She looks just like her..." someone whispered.

"Is she cursed?"

"Could she be dangerous?"

But before anyone could explain or comfort her, the air cracked with the sound of a slap.

Her mother's hand had struck her across the face. Celia stumbled to the ground, clutching her cheek as tears welled in her now-red eyes.

"LIES!" Alina's (Celia's mother) voice was sharp and unforgiving, dripping with venom as she stood over her daughter. "How could you be mine? How could I have given birth to someone who looks like Her?"

I stood frozen, unable to believe what I was seeing. This wasn't anger—it was pure hatred. How could a mother look at her child like that?

Celia's tears began to fall silently, streaking her pale cheeks as she knelt on the ground. Her hands trembled as she looked around, but no one came to her aid. The villagers, the same people who had praised her kindness and relied on her strength, now stood back, whispering amongst themselves.

"She's cursed..."

"She has the queen's blood..."

"Do we even let her stay here? What if she's dangerous?"

Their words caused pained to my heart. These were the same people she had helped, the ones she had cared for in their sad times. And now they wanted to turn their backs on her? My anger flared as I clenched my fists, every fiber of me screaming to do something.

Celia had always been there for me, even when I had wanted nothing to do with anyone. She was the one who reached out, the one who helped me feel less alone. Now, she was the one being cast aside, and I couldn't stand it.

I stepped forward, determined to protect her, to tell them all how wrong they were. But just as I moved closer, someone grabbed my arm tightly, stopping me in my tracks.

"Kiel, do not go near her. She could be dangerous."

The voice startled me, and I turned to see Ronan standing beside me. His expression was grim, his voice laced with apprehension.

"What do you want me to do? Just stand here and watch while my friend gets hurt?" I snapped, trying to break free from his grip.

"She's not our friend anymore, Kiel. Just look at her! She's identical to the cursed witch," Ronan spat, disgust evident in his tone and his narrowed eyes.

"You think I give a damn about that? I don't care how she looks. At the end of the day, she's still Celia—she's still my friend." My voice was ice-cold as I tore his hand from my arm, breaking free.

"Kiel, wait!" Mira's voice joined in, her tone pleading. "Ronan's right. We can't be sure we can trust her."

"Yes, Kiel. Be patient and watch for now," Toby added, his voice quieter but no less hesitant.

I looked between them, disbelief filling me. "What the hell is wrong with you all? Just a few minutes ago, we were all friends. What's so different about her now? What changed?" I shouted, my voice raw with frustration.

No one answered. Instead, their silence felt like knives. The betrayal hit harder than I expected, and my heart clenched as I heard her voice—Lyla's voice.

She wasn't her usual self. Lyla stood in front of the village chief, her small frame radiating power and anger. Her hands glowed faintly with fire magic, her eyes sharp and unyielding. She looked ready to tear down anyone who got in her way.

"You don't get it, do you, Lyla?" the chief growled, his voice heavy with authority. "She's a curse, a threat, and there's no way around it. You'd better stop protecting her, or I'll do what needs to be done. The village comes first. I won't let everyone suffer just because you're too blind to see the truth. If no one else can act, I'll kill her myself."

Lyla's reply sent shivers down my spine. "Why don't you try it?" she said, her voice icy and sharp. Her fiery mana surged, her eyes now shimmering with a faint crosshair-like glow. The sight was mesmerizing and terrifying all at once.

I froze. For the first time in my life, I felt true fear—not for myself, but for everyone. Moving even an inch might make Lyla turn her fury on me. The atmosphere was heavy, charged with tension. My chest ached, and my mind raced with conflicting emotions.

Ronan leaned in, his voice a venomous whisper. "You see? Celia's using her cursed magic for manipulating Lyla to fight for her. The curse has taken over. It's obvious."

"That's pure bullshit, Ronan!" I yelled, my voice trembling with anger as my fists clenched. "What makes you say something like that? How can you just throw her away like this?"

He didn't reply. Instead, his smirk and silence infuriated me even more.

Before I could do anything, Lyla turned and guided Celia away from the square, shielding her from the accusing stares and whispers. I watched helplessly as they disappeared into the distance, their silhouettes fading beneath the glow of the sunlight.

I never got to give Celia my gift. I never got to see her smile the way I had imagined. Instead, the day had turned into a nightmare—one I couldn't wake from. Everything was ruined. Everything I had hoped for was gone.

Later that night, I couldn't shake the bitterness in my chest. I found myself standing in front of the chief, desperate for answers. "Why?" I asked, my voice quieter than I intended but filled with resolve. "Why is everyone so scared? Why do they want to hurt Celia?"

The chief turned to me, his expression unreadable. For a moment, he looked almost... speechless, as if my question had caught him off guard. His silence stretched on, and I realized he wasn't going to answer. Maybe he didn't know how. Maybe he didn't want to.

But his lack of words said more than enough. The world we lived in—the people I thought I knew—had changed in an instant. And I wasn't sure I'd ever see it the same way again.

"Kiel, don't you already know?" The chief's voice was colder than I had ever heard it before.

I shook my head in disbelief. "No... I don't understand this at all. Celia is the kindest person in the village. Why is everyone suddenly against her, Chief Father? Why?"

His face twisted in frustration, his patience wearing thin. "Shut up... It's obvious, isn't it? She's cursed now. Our only goal should be to take her down."

"Why?" I asked, my voice rising, desperation starting to crack through. "How are you so sure she's cursed? Why does everyone suddenly hate her?!"

For the first time, I screamed at him. My anger, confusion, and fear all flooded out in one chaotic rush. I needed answers—someone needed to explain this madness.

He didn't respond right away, his eyes locking with mine. I could see the conflict, the pain, and the uncertainty that had long been buried in him. But as he spoke, his words wavered, his voice crumbling. "I don't know... Celia was truly someone with a good heart, but... I can't seem to shake this feeling of hatred for her."

I stumbled back, as if he had physically struck me. "What the hell do you mean by you don't know? hatred?" I asked, my voice sharp with disbelief.

"Kiel," he said, his tone heavy, almost like a confession. "You love history, don't you? Why don't you tell me what the Queen of Curses did 500 years ago to Celestine?"

"What does that have to do with anything?!" I demanded to know.

"Just do it. You'll understand," he insisted, his voice trembling with something I couldn't place.

I didn't know why, but I complied. "500 years ago, there was a great war. The Queen of Curses and the Heavenly Sorcerer together wiped out 70% of the world's population. As for the Queen of Curses... she almost destroyed Celestine, killing 90% of its population with her cursed powers. Only because of Marseille Astraemus was Celestine spared, and we're even alive." I paused, the weight of those words sinking in. "No... it can't be."

"Yes, Kiel," the chief said, his voice low and filled with sorrow. "Everyone in Celestine hates that witch. She killed our race and people for personal pleasure—nothing else. Now, because of her past actions, we're biologically drawn to hate anything or anyone that even remotely resembles her."

His words settled over me like a cold, heavy blanket. I had always known that the past shaped people, but I never realized how deep those scars ran.

"That's... why everyone suddenly changed to hate her," I muttered to myself, my voice faltering.

Speaking to the village chief opened my eyes in a way I hadn't expected. The villagers didn't see Celia anymore. They saw a ghost—a twisted reflection of the Queen of Curses. To them, she was no longer Celia, the kind-hearted girl who had always helped them; she was the very thing they feared the most. Without any real proof, they had jumped to conclusions, convinced that the curse had come back to haunt them.

But why... Why didn't I feel the same? Why was I immune to the hatred they all seemed to carry? I looked at her and still saw the same gentle, caring person she had always been.

I didn't have all the answers, but I knew one thing for sure: I wasn't going to abandon her.

Tomorrow, I'd talk to Celia. We'd find a way to make them see. Maybe, just maybe, we could convince the villagers that she wasn't a curse. But when morning came, I wasted no time. I rushed to her home, hoping to find her and Lyla.

But it was too late. They were gone.

The village was in turmoil, rumors flying that they had let a curse roam free—that the Queen of Curses had returned to power. The chief and Celia's parents were deep in conversation, their words lost in the distance, too quiet for me to hear. But the tension in the air was thick—unspoken fears gripping everyone, myself included.

I stood there, frozen in place, unsure of what to do next. The people I had once trusted now seemed like strangers, consumed by an irrational fear that I couldn't quite understand. My heart pained with a longing to protect Celia—to shield her from this madness. But for now, all I could do was stand in the shadow of their fears, helpless.

The village had gone mad. They had placed bounties on Celia's name—500 gold to anyone who could bring her back, dead or alive. Dead or alive. Those words echoed in my head, each repetition a sharp pain in my chest. I couldn't say anything anymore. Everyone had betrayed her—everyone.

I had to talk to someone, anyone who might still hold onto a shred of reason. Desperation led me to Ronan and Toby, hoping they would offer a different perspective. But as soon as I approached, it was clear they both shared the same cold, unforgiving view.

"You know what has to be done," Ronan said flatly, his eyes not meeting mine. "Celia's a threat. We can't afford to keep her alive."

Toby nodded in agreement, his tone equally devoid of empathy. "She's a threat to us all. It's better this way. You saw what happened to her. She has to die."

They were ready to leave her behind, cast her aside without even considering her side. No care, no compassion—just a willingness to abandon her as if she were nothing. My chest pained with frustration.

"How can you say that?" I demanded. "You didn't even listen to her. You don't understand what she's been through!"

But my words fell on deaf ears. They didn't care to understand her, to see her as more than just a problem to be erased.

Later, in a last-ditch effort, I turned to Elise and Fiona, hoping they might offer a different view. But when I spoke to them, their response was eerily similar.

"Sometimes, there's just no other choice," Elise said softly, her face a mask of resignation. "Celia has changed, we can't be her friends anymore."

Fiona, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, nodded in agreement. "She's completely taken by the curse by now. We've seen the signs. It's not just about her anymore—it's about the safety of everyone else."

The weight of their words settled like a stone in my stomach. No matter who I turned to, the answer was the same. It was as if they had all closed their hearts to her, unwilling to even consider that she might still be worthy of saving.

They all shared the same cold, unforgiving opinion: Celia had to die. They were ready to leave her behind, abandon her just like that, without even hearing her side. They didn't care to understand her.

I was the only one left who still believed in her. I couldn't let this happen. I couldn't let her be lost to the world, condemned without a chance. I was determined—I would help her. I had to. But the village chief didn't care about my resolve. He wouldn't let me leave the village. I was stuck there, my hands tied, forced to stay in a place that felt more like a prison with each passing day.

I had no choice but to give up my work at the ranch and begin training. I needed strength. I needed to be stronger if I were going to protect her—if I were going to be the one to save her.

Every day I worked. I worked until my muscles burned, until my body screamed in protest. I pushed through it, not stopping, not even for a moment. I knew that every drop of sweat, every bruise, was one step closer to being able to stand by her side again.

I also started learning magic. The village mage had left behind old books—books filled with knowledge that seemed almost foreign to me. I didn't know much about magic, but I couldn't ignore the pull. There was something in me, something that made learning it feel almost natural.

At first, it was difficult. The books were complicated, dense with theory and incantations. For just one spell it had 300 pages of details, as if I was going to waste my time reading theory. I mostly skipped the useless theory parts and focused on incantations and what it did.

But then, as I kept reading, something strange happened. I wasn't just picking up elemental magic like everyone else. I could feel it—the curse magic, flowing through me like a second heartbeat. It was terrifying at first, but somehow, it felt right.

I tried to hide it, of course. My mother was from Elysium, where many cursed people lived. It made sense. I must have inherited this cursed magic from her. It explained why I was immune to the hatred that seemed to wash over everyone else when they saw Celia. I didn't see her as a monster. I saw her as the person I had always known.

So, I practiced. No matter the weather—whether it was raining, storming, or burning under the heat of the sun—I practiced. I trained, honing my skills, pushing myself to be better, stronger. Some days, I wondered if it would all be worth it. Some days, I felt like dying would be easier than continuing on. But then, the memory of that day when I was too powerless to help Celia would hit me, and I couldn't stop. I had to become strong.

The village mage had given Ronan, Toby, and the others their training, but I was self-trained. I didn't care about their lessons. I had my own path, my own way forward. I didn't need their approval or their help.

A year had passed since that terrible day—the day I had lost my friends and my village. Everyone was changing, but I was stuck in the same place, unable to move forward. The village chief's health had worsened, and now, with me no longer helping with the errands and chores, he had to rely on others. Not that I cared about him. Not after what he had said about Celia and how he ordered those bounty posters. I had no respect for someone who would sacrifice her for the village's fear.

Then, one day, I heard the news.

Celia was returning.

Apparently, Ronan and the others had been searching for her, and I couldn't believe my ears. I had always thought they hated her, but here they were, working hard to bring her back. It was a cruel twist, hearing that they were still fighting for her, even though they had turned their backs on her so easily.

After that incident, I could no longer see them the same way. I stopped speaking to all of them completely when I learned that they shared the same view as the villagers—that she was a monster, that she deserved to die. Their words cut deeper than I ever expected. I was left alone, torn between the people I once considered friends and the girl I knew was still worth fighting for.

But hearing she was returning, that she was coming back to us, brought a sense of relief I didn't even know I needed. Despite everything, I was glad. I was more than glad. I was ready to stand by her, no matter what they thought.

I hadn't spoken to any of them since that day. I had cut them off completely. They weren't my friends anymore. They didn't deserve that title. But hearing that Celia was returning—hearing that she might come back to the village after everything—was a spark of hope.

The village was preparing for a festival that night. Decorations filled the square near the oak tree, lanterns and lights flickering as the villagers celebrated. But all I could think about was Celia—what she would do when she returned, how things would go.

As nightfall approached, I made my way to the village square, unsure of what I might find. And there, standing near the decorations, was Ronan. He was waiting.

I could feel my heart racing, a storm of emotions flooding through me. I didn't know what to say to him. I didn't know if I even wanted to. But I had to face him. I had to see if he truly believed what he had said, if he still saw Celia as a threat—or if he could somehow, just maybe, see her as I did.

"Hey Ronan, long time no see. How have you been?" I asked, my voice steady but filled with unspoken frustration.

"Oh, Kiel... Yeah, it's been a year since we spoke, hasn't it?" Ronan's tone was indifferent, as if he hadn't even cared about the time lost.

"Yeah, Ronan... Look, I just want to speak to you about Celia. How did you find her? How did you convince her to come back?"

Ronan's smirk slowly faded, his eyes narrowing as he began to explain, his voice colder than I had ever heard it. "Well, that's a long story. But to put it simply, we convinced her to come back with us. Told her that everyone—her parents, the villagers—wanted her home."

"Wait... What?" I could barely process what he was saying.

"Yeah. Celia was actually the one who defended our case, while Lyla..." He scoffed, his tone dripping with disdain. "Lyla was the only one who hesitated, but she's a fool, really. Believed every word we told her." He chuckled darkly.

My heart clenched, a weight pressing on my chest as the truth sunk in. "Ronan... What did you do to her?"

Ronan's expression darkened as he shrugged casually, as though he didn't care. "Nothing, really. She's going to be executed here in front of everyone anyway. I just lied, told her we all wanted her back. Doing everyone a favor, free of charge."

His words were like daggers, twisting deeper with every syllable. "YOU MONSTER!" I screamed, my voice breaking. I couldn't hold back the fury anymore. My cursed magic flared to life, surging violently as I launched an attack, the air around me crackling with raw power.

But Ronan was faster, too fast. With a mocking laugh, he dodged my strike effortlessly, grabbing my wrist and slamming me to the ground. The force of it left me gasping for air, my head spinning. His grip tightened, his strength far surpassing mine.

"You're pathetic, Kiel," Ronan spat, his voice dripping with venom. "It's all over. You're too late. You think you can stop this? You're nothing." He clenched his fist, and suddenly, the searing heat of his fire magic coursed through me, draining my strength. Every ounce of energy seemed to slip away, leaving me helpless, unable to move or even think clearly.

And then I saw her.

Celia. Her fragile form was dragged by the village guards, her face streaked with tears, eyes wide with fear and confusion. Her body trembled with every step, each movement a painful struggle. When she stumbled, they kicked her, forcing her to keep moving as if she were nothing more than an animal to be punished.

It shattered me. The sight of her, broken and desperate, tore through me like a blade. I tried to push myself up, but my body refused to obey. I was too weak... too powerless to protect her.

"Celia..." I whispered, the word barely escaping my lips. Her eyes met mine for a brief moment, and for a fleeting second, I saw the girl I used to know—the one full of light and hope. But then, the guards pulled her away again, and that spark in her eyes seemed to fade, leaving nothing but despair.

My heart broke into pieces as I collapsed, my body betraying me in the face of everything I should have been able to fight for.

And then, I saw Lyla, carried by Toby, her body a bloody mess, tortured beyond recognition. They were both going to hang. My friends—the very people I had once trusted—had betrayed her. They had betrayed me.

"CELIA! PLEASE, SPEAK TO ME!" I screamed, my voice cracking under the weight of everything.

"Hey, hey," Ronan mocked, tightening his grip as he smirked down at me. "She can't hear you right now. She's about to be hanged by the oak tree."

"GET OFF ME! YOU'RE A COWARD!" I screamed, my voice breaking through my desperation.

Ronan's cold smile widened. "Swearing now, Kiel? Seems like your mask is falling off faster than I thought. I always knew you weren't as innocent as you pretended to be."

"Shut up. Move away before I kill you..."

Ronan laughed, the sound echoing in the night. "Really? Too bad, Kiel. The game's over. She's going to die now."

I heard Celia's voice, soft and broken, drifting through the air like a fragile whisper. "Please... Stop. I'm not a monster. Let me and my sister go. We promise never to return..."

Her words were a plea, but they trembled with so much pain that they barely seemed to reach the cold night. The air around us grew heavier, thick with the weight of her desperation.

The village chief's voice, however, was cold, devoid of any warmth or mercy. "It's your time to die, cursed witch." His tone carried no hesitation, no doubt, just the certainty of someone who had long ago decided that her life had no value.

Celia's voice cracked as she fought to hold back her tears, her hands shaking in the ropes that bound her. "Please... Chief... I'm not a monster. Please believe me..." She was begging now, her words strained, raw with the weight of everything she'd endured. But it didn't matter. Her pleas, her heartache, fell into the silence like whispers against a storm—completely ignored, brushed aside with cruel indifference.

The chief didn't spare her another word. He moved toward her, his hands cold as he looped the ropes around their necks with a practiced ease. The ropes were tight, the nooses unforgiving as he prepared to end their lives beneath the very oak tree where they had once played, once laughed together as children.

I could see her, struggling against the bonds, her face a picture of sheer heartbreak. The girl who had once been the light of the village was now nothing more than a crying soul, standing in front of the very tree that had witnessed her joy, now destined to bear witness to her end.

"RONAN, YOU FUCKING CUNT, GET OFF ME!" I screamed, summoning every ounce of cursed magic I had left to overpower him.

"You speak a lot for someone who's never been able to do anything," Ronan replied coldly, as he slammed my face into the ground, over and over. My vision blurred as blood poured from my face. The pain was unbearable, but I forced my eyes open. I had to help her. It was now or never, but I was too weak, too pathetic.

Then, for a brief moment, Celia's eyes met mine. I saw the fear in her eyes before they released the ropes.

Lyla and Celia were hanged.

"Please... help me, Kie—" Her voice cracked, but she couldn't finish.

Her legs kicked weakly, swinging back and forth as her body strained against the suffocating pressure. The rope tightened around her throat, and I watched in horror as her neck slowly began to snap, her desperate breaths growing quieter with each passing second. Tears streamed down her face, her eyes wide with pain and fear, searching for something—anything—that might save her.

I was too late. Once again, I was too late.

The weight of failure crushed me, heavier than any physical blow. I had promised to protect her, to be there when she needed me most, and yet I couldn't do a damn thing. The image of her struggling, her life slipping away in front of me, tore into my heart like a blade. I couldn't save her, couldn't stop the inevitable.

I felt my own consciousness flickering, like a dying candle in the wind. I tried to move, to scream, to do something—anything—but my body refused to obey. Then, through the

suffocating fog of despair, I smelled something burning. The air around me was thick with the acrid scent of smoke, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

The villagers cheered, their cruel laughter rising in the air like a twisted symphony. They gathered around, faces twisted in satisfaction, as if her suffering was some sort of spectacle meant to amuse them. Each jeer felt like a weight pressing down on me, drowning me in guilt and helplessness. The very people who had once called her one of their own, now reveled in her torment, as if she were nothing more than a monster to be destroyed.

The sound of their voices, their mockery, made everything worse. It twisted the knife deeper into my heart, reminding me how completely I had failed her. She was alone in this moment, surrounded by the very people who should have protected her, yet they were the ones celebrating her end.

And I couldn't do a damn thing about it.

Chains rattled against Celia's body, a cruel reminder of how powerless I was. Ronan's elemental absorption spell was draining everything from me, leaving me weak and broken. I could feel my strength slipping away, every ounce of energy vanishing like sand through my fingers.

The world around me was fading, but the image of her, broken and abandoned, stayed with me. A permanent scar on my soul.

As everything faded into darkness, the last thing I could hear was the faint sound of her cries, echoing in my mind as a haunting reminder of my regret. I had let her down, and that thought would stay with me forever.

When I woke up, I expected to see Celia's lifeless body in front of me. But what I saw instead was far worse—corpses. Corpses of the villagers, scattered and broken across the burning village. The entire place was engulfed in flames, everything reduced to ash. People's bodies were burned to a crisp, twisted in unnatural ways.

I slowly stood up, my legs unsteady, and began walking through the ruins. The fire consumed everything, devouring houses, trees, and bodies alike.

What... what happened here?

I didn't know. The only thing I could remember was hearing the sound of chains.

As I stumbled forward, I saw the bodies of Toby and Mira. Toby's body was half burned on one side, the other torn apart—ripped, shredded, almost unrecognizable. Mira's body, however, was worse. It had been torn to pieces, the flesh ripped open as if something—some power—had dragged her apart.

I... How? How did this happen?

Then, I saw Ronan. He walked toward me slowly, his hand clutching his chest as though trying to control something dangerous swirling within him. His steps were deliberate, but there was an unmistakable tension in his posture, as though every part of him was struggling to keep some overwhelming power at bay.

"Kiel..." His voice was low, heavy with finality, sending a chill through my spine. "I told you. She was the monster. The queen of curses."

I didn't know how to respond. I couldn't even form words. My mind was a blur, spinning in a storm of confusion and disbelief. "I... I can't believe it."

Ronan's eyes darkened, his expression growing colder with each passing second. "She killed everyone, Kiel. Everyone. Including her own mother."

"No... That can't be... You're lying to me!" My voice cracked, desperate for some shred of truth that wasn't wrapped in pain.

"I'm not lying," Ronan snapped, his voice tight with conviction, the words biting with a force I couldn't ignore. "When you passed out, chains appeared around her—chains that started killing everyone. They choked people, hung them... We all heard her neck snap, but she healed herself within seconds. She even healed Lyla before leaving without a word. But not before summoning a nightmare-level fire elemental demon... That demon wiped out the entire village, Kiel. I'm sure she ordered it."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, each sentence driving a wedge deeper into my chest. I couldn't process it. I refused to. "No... Ronan, that's... That's unbelievable. I can't believe anything like that."

"The demon's inside me now, it choose me as it's body." Ronan continued, his tone unwavering, like he had already come to terms with it. "I'm not lying, Kiel."

Before I could gather my thoughts, Fiona and Elise rushed toward me, their faces pale with fear, their eyes wide with the same conviction. They spoke with the same urgency, their words tumbling out in a rush, confirming everything Ronan had just said.

"The chains... The destruction... It's true, Kiel," Fiona said, her voice shaking. "She killed them all."

Elise nodded, her face a mask of horror. "We tried to stop her, but she... She was already too powerful. And that demon... It was like nothing we've ever seen. It devoured everything."

The weight of their words crushed me, leaving me breathless. My vision blurred as I struggled to understand what had just happened, what had become of the girl I had

loved. But nothing made sense. How could this be true? How could Celia—Celia, the one who had always been kind and gentle—be the one to bring such devastation?

I stood there, frozen, drowning in disbelief, as the realization slowly sank in. The person I had tried so hard to protect—the person I thought I knew—was capable of something monstrous.

It felt like a cruel joke. Did they really think I could believe them? After everything they did? After what I had seen?

"Do you want me to feel sympathy for you, too?" I spat, my voice filled with disgust, every word laced with bitterness. "You're all monsters. You deserve this. And yet you act like you didn't have a hand in it."

Ronan's expression remained cold, almost void of emotion, as he met my gaze. His lips curled into a smirk, but it didn't reach his eyes. Fiona and Elise, standing beside him, avoided my stare, their eyes fixed on the ground as if they couldn't bear to look me in the face.

"Sympathy?" Ronan repeated, his voice low and almost mocking. "Don't expect any from me, Kiel. I'm not the one who failed to see the truth."

The words stung, but I couldn't back down. I clenched my fists, my anger boiling over. "You think I'm the one who failed? You all turned your backs on her, on everything we had. You—"

Ronan cut me off, his voice dark with menace. "Celia's already killed enough people, Kiel. You really think I'm going to let her live after everything she's done?" His eyes hardened, the cold fury behind them unmistakable. "She killed Toby and Mira. Killed them mercilessly, without hesitation. I watched them die. And I will make her pay for it."

My blood ran cold. Toby. Mira. Two of the people I had once called friends. Gone, just like that. My breath caught in my throat as I tried to comprehend what Ronan was saying. "You... You can't be serious. You're going to kill her?"

Ronan nodded, his gaze unwavering, eyes cold as steel. "Yes. I'm going to take my revenge on her, Kiel. I'll make sure she never hurts anyone again. This ends now."

He took a slow step forward, the air thick with menace. His voice dropped to a chilling whisper, his words sharp like a knife. "And if you try to stop me... I'll make sure I kill you first."

The promise in his voice was lethal, void of hesitation or remorse. His every word was a threat, a cold, bold declaration that he would not hesitate to erase me if it meant getting to Celia.

The weight of his words crashed into me, and for a moment, I couldn't move, couldn't speak. The man I had once trusted—my friend—was now nothing more than a vengeful monster, intent on ending Celia's life. And the worst part? I believed every word he said.

But no matter how much my heart screamed in denial, a part of me still couldn't believe them. They were liars, bigger liars than I had ever been.

I had to find her. I had to see her—talk to her. The truth could only come from her. That was the only way to know what really happened.

And even now, after everything, I still wanted to give her my gift.

Chapter 20 - The Truth

Kiel's Perspective:

Chief Father. The village that was once my home. My friends. Celia.

In a matter of moments, I lost it all. The air hung heavy with smoke, choking and bitter, yet I forced myself to walk forward. Behind me, Ronan, Elise and Fiona remained, their presence nothing but a shadow in my mind.

I didn't want anything to do with them anymore. Not Ronan, not his friends. Nothing. I knew their intentions were clear—they would hunt and kill Celia. That much was certain. I had to find her before they could. It was the only thing I could do. The only thing left that mattered.

I left with almost nothing but myself and the memories of what once was. The village chief had treated me like his own son. Though, to be fair, there were times he worked me like a slave. But I didn't mind it then. I had a home, a place to belong. Now, looking back, it hurt to realize I couldn't even give his ash-covered corpse a proper burial.

I pushed those thoughts aside as I made my way to the nearest town. There, I planned to register as an adventurer. My abilities earned me the rank of A-Class, thanks to my aptitude for both cursed magic and elemental spells. Still, they told me I lacked experience—and they weren't wrong. Knowledge was one thing, but without experience to back it up, it was little more than theory.

From there, I set off on my journey. I ventured solo, chasing shadows, hoping to find Lyla and Celia. But no matter how far I traveled or how thoroughly I searched, I found nothing. No trace of them. Lyla was clever, always careful, and now, it seemed, she had taken extra precautions to cover their tracks.

And so, time passed. My travels carried me across Celestine, each step weighted with a mix of determination and frustration. A year flew by in what felt like an instant. I was

twelve now, fending for myself in the wilds, struggling to keep from being devoured—literally and figuratively.

Still, my search yielded nothing. No leads. No clues. Nothing.

Until recently.

Rumors began to spread about a party that had been completely wiped out during an S-Class dungeon raid. It was the kind of news that sent shockwaves through the adventurer circles. A few days later, the whispers grew stranger. People claimed to have seen a chained curse locked in battle with a masked figure, whose body seemed to be deteriorating into fragments of itself.

It sounded unbelievable. Ridiculous, even. But there was one word that stuck out to me—chain.

That single word was enough. I had to investigate.

Once I arrived at the village where the rumored battle had taken place, I immediately noticed some familiar faces—Ronan and Elise. My heart raced, but I kept my composure, trying to avoid them and move away quietly. It seemed they felt the same; neither of them gave me so much as a glance.

Just as I thought I could slip away unnoticed, the village mayor's voice rang out, calling all the adventurers to gather. He had an offer—one that even I couldn't ignore. He pleaded for assistance with a growing threat and promised a reward of 1,000 silver coins upon completion. That was roughly 100 gold. For someone like me, barely scraping by and starving half the time, it was too good to pass up.

The mayor explained the issue. At night, monsters and demons would spill out of a nearby dungeon, wreaking havoc on the village. Our task was simple in theory: block the dungeon entrance to stop the creatures from emerging. Straightforward enough, or so it seemed.

I decided to take the job. Unfortunately for me, so did Ronan and Elise.

When night fell, the plan was for the adventurers to sneak past the monsters and block the entrance quietly. It sounded efficient on paper, but the reality was more complicated. Trust was a scarce commodity among adventurers; everyone suspected betrayal for a bigger share of the reward. Instead of working together, most groups and individuals kept to themselves, unwilling to risk cooperation.

The result was a scattered and disorganized effort. Each party moved independently toward the dungeon entrance, relying on their own strategies.

For me, I had an advantage. I had learned a cursed spell that granted invisibility and masked my mana aura completely. While the others crept cautiously, I strolled casually, hidden from sight as I made my way toward the dungeon entrance.

The monsters lurked around the area, their grotesque forms illuminated faintly by the moonlight. I moved silently, undisturbed by the chaos that surrounded me. My only focus was reaching the entrance and completing the task—no distractions, no unnecessary risks.

"SOMEONE HELP ME!" A scream pierced the air near the dungeon entrance, desperate and raw.

"Please! No... no, no! I don't want to die!"

The terror in their voice sent a chill down my spine. Without hesitation, I sprinted toward the source of the cries. As I closed the distance, the sight before me rooted me in place for a moment—a nightmare incarnate.

The dungeon boss had emerged.

A group of four adventurers, likely C-Class by their lack of coordination, stood trembling before it. Their plan to block the dungeon entrance had backfired, and the creature loomed over them, a monstrous entity I'd only ever heard about in legends.

Malgareth.

The stories hadn't done it justice.

The Abyssal Sovereign stood nearly fifteen feet tall, a grotesque figure that merged monstrous power with an unsettling, dark elegance. Its skeletal frame was encased in chitinous black armor, shimmering with an unnatural, otherworldly glow. Crimson veins pulsed beneath its surface, illuminating the shadows with a malevolent light.

Its gaunt face was concealed behind an ornate mask of jagged metal, adorned with glowing runes that pulsed rhythmically like a heartbeat. Towering above its head, two obsidian horns crackled with crimson arcs of energy, bathing the area in an eerie, flickering glow.

Malgareth's six spindly arms each ended in claws that glinted like razors, their edges capable of slicing through steel with contemptuous ease. Its lower half was a nightmarish amalgam of arachnid features, eight segmented legs moving with a speed and grace that seemed impossible for something so large. The underside of its spider-like form glowed with molten energy, casting sickly orange light across the ground as it moved.

The oppressive aura it exuded was suffocating. Dread filled the air like poison, thick and choking, forcing weaker adventurers to their knees before they could even think to run. Malgareth's glowing crimson eyes locked onto his prey, unblinking and devoid of mercy.

When it spoke, its voice was a thunderous amalgamation of grinding stone and a venomous hiss, each word a promise of death.

"You dare invade my domain?"

The adventurers, frozen with fear, scrambled to retaliate.

"Flames of the Inferno, consume my enemies!" one screamed, their hands trembling as a torrent of fire roared toward the towering beast.

"Raging Tempest, carve the winds!" cried another, summoning blades of air that hurtled toward Malgareth with desperate speed.

"Earth's Wrath, break upon my foe!" bellowed a third, slamming their fist into the ground, summoning jagged spikes of stone to pierce the monster's legs.

"Frozen Chains of the Tundra, bind this evil!" the last one pleaded, unleashing a chilling sphere of ice aimed to trap the beast in place.

Their combined power was overwhelming, filling the night with a cacophony of roaring flames, howling winds, shattering stone, and cracking ice. The dungeon trembled under the sheer force of their magic as it converged on Malgareth.

But it was their greatest mistake.

The runes on Malgareth's armor ignited, flaring with blinding crimson light. The Shadowforge Carapace absorbed the attacks effortlessly, devouring the magic like a ravenous void. The veins on its body pulsed violently, glowing brighter with every spell it consumed.

Then, it laughed.

A deep, guttural sound reverberated through the air, filled with malice and scorn. The adventurers' faces paled as the realization struck—this wasn't a fight. This was an execution.

"Ahahhaahh..."

"You dare challenge me with such pitiful power?" Malgareth's voice thundered, each word dripping with contempt. "Now, behold the price of your arrogance."

With a single, deliberate motion, Margareth raised one clawed hand. From the molten veins coursing through its body, an orb of corrupted energy began to form, pulsating with volatile power. It grew larger and brighter until, with a flick of his wrist, it shattered into four thread of pure shadow.

Each thread honed in on its target, merciless and precise.

"Run!" one of the adventurers screamed, but escape was futile.

The first thread impaled the fire mage mid-stride, twisting through his chest. The flames he had summoned turned against him, igniting his body from within. His screams were brief, ending in a shower of ash scattered across the bloodstained ground.

The second thread lashed out at the wind mage, coiling around them like a serpent. The air blades they had conjured became weapons of betrayal, slicing through their own flesh until nothing remained but a mangled, lifeless form.

The third thread smashed through the earth mage's hastily constructed shield, shattering it into jagged fragments. Those fragments embedded themselves into his chest as the tendril lifted him high into the air before slamming him into the ground with a sickening crunch. His broken body lay motionless, blood pooling beneath him.

The final adventurer, the ice mage, backed away in horror as the last tendril slithered toward her, its movements deliberate and taunting.

"No... please... I don't want to die..." she whimpered, tears streaming down her face.

Margareth offered no mercy. The thread struck, wrapping her in a cocoon of frost corrupted by shadow.

"AHHHHHHH"

Her screams echoed as the ice tightened, constricting her until the cocoon shattered into shards, leaving nothing behind but an empty silence.

The dungeon fell still. Margareth lowered his arm, the crimson glow of his armor dimming as the energy subsided.

A deep chuckle rumbled from his chest, low and malevolent, as his crimson eyes surveyed the remaining adventurers hiding in the shadows. His gaze lingered, promising that their time would come.

Margareth had proven his dominion. This was his world, and all who entered it were nothing more than prey.

The Sovereign of the Abyss Malgareth turned his gaze toward the rest of the group, his dark eyes glinting with malice. His aura was suffocating, each breath heavy with despair.

"Who's next?" His voice slithered like a blade across bare skin, sharp and unyielding.

I was frozen in place, paralyzed by the scene of carnage before me. Blood stained the dungeon floor, bodies lying lifeless, and the stench of despair hung heavy. None of us stood a chance against the Malgareth. We were meant to block the dungeon, not face one of the most feared bosses in this region.

I gritted my teeth, debating whether to flee. The promise of a reward paled against the certainty of death. Just as I prepared to cut my losses and escape, Malgareth's abyssal gaze landed on me.

"Hiding, are we?" His voice carried a cruel amusement, dripping with venomous malice. I felt every fiber of my being revolt against his words, my body locked in place. His eyes gleamed with the thrill of the hunt as his aura spread further, clawing at my very soul.

He wasn't seeing me—he was sensing me. The faintest motion, the subtlest breath, would give me away. I stopped moving entirely, holding my breath as though my life depended on it.

But Malgareth took a step forward. Then another. His clawed hand twitched, brimming with dark energy. He was closing in, and I was utterly powerless.

A faint crackling sound broke the tension—a slow, deliberate crunch of footsteps against the dungeon floor. Malgareth's eyes shifted slightly.

From the shadows emerged Ronan, his hands casually tucked into his pockets, a calm and unbothered demeanor contrasting the oppressive atmosphere. His lack of a visible weapon made him seem absurdly overconfident, almost suicidal.

Malgareth let out a low growl, a sound that resonated like the grinding of bones. "Another human walking to the slaughter?"

Ronan stopped, meeting Malgareth's cold, unfeeling gaze. He smirked, the faint flicker of heat radiating from his body. "We'll see about that."

As Malgareth narrowed his eyes, Ronan spread his arms wide, his voice rising in a chant that reverberated with an otherworldly cadence.

"Velkaris, King of Flames, Sovereign of the Infernal Pyre," he began, his words reverberating through the chamber. "I summon you. Take this vessel. Burn away my weakness. Reduce this abyssal filth to ash."

The air grew heavy with heat as flames erupted around Ronan, spiraling upward like a living entity. His voice rose, a cry of pain and fury as fire consumed him. But beneath the agony, another voice began to rise—a deep, guttural growl that shook the dungeon.

When the flames subsided, Ronan was gone. In his place stood Velkaris.

His eyes blazed like molten gold, his very presence searing the air around him. The faint crackle of embers followed every step as he approached Margareth.

"So this is the Sovereign of the Abyss?" Velkaris's voice was cold and mocking. "A rabid beast pretending to be a king?"

Margareth's grin faded, replaced by a snarl. "And you are a king who hides behind mortal flesh. What does that make you, summoned-pawn?"

Velkaris tilted his head, a cruel smile curling across his lips. "It makes me your executioner."

Margareth roared, the sound shaking the walls, and unleashed a wave of dark energy that surged forward like an avalanche. The attack tore through the dungeon, threatening to obliterate everything in its path.

Velkaris didn't flinch. With a flick of his wrist, a blazing wall of fire erupted, swallowing the attack effortlessly. The flames roared, pushing back the darkness until it was nothing but ash.

"You call that power?" Velkaris sneered, stepping through the smoke. "You're not even worth the flames I waste on you."

Furious, Margareth lunged, his massive claws slashing at Velkaris's chest. But the King of Flames caught them mid-swing, his molten hands gripping them tightly. The sound of searing flesh filled the air as Velkaris leaned in, his fiery eyes boring into Margareth's.

"Stronger monsters than you have crawled at my feet, begging for mercy," Velkaris said, his voice chillingly soft, yet dripping with malice. "I showed them none."

With a violent shove, he sent Margareth hurtling backward. The Abyssal Sovereign snarled, summoning every ounce of mana within him. The dungeon trembled as he prepared his ultimate attack, a sphere of all-consuming darkness that grew larger with each passing second.

Velkaris smirked, unbothered. He raised his hand, conjuring a sphere of fire so dense it burned white-hot. The air shimmered with unbearable heat as he stepped back, a fiery bow forming in his grip.

"Let's end this," he said, his tone dripping with finality.

Malgareth unleashed his attack, the void screaming toward Velkaris with destructive force.

Velkaris extended his hand with an unsettling calm, his movements measured and deliberate. Flames began to coil around his palm, swirling faster and tighter until they formed a searing sphere of molten energy. With a calculated step back, he pulled the fiery mass as if drawing a bowstring, the air around him distorting from the heat. His left hand rose, fingers outstretched, and a blazing bow materialized in his grip, its edges crackling with raw power. The arrow—radiant, blistering, and deadly—came into existence, its heat rivaling the inferno itself, gleaming with an unmistakable promise of destruction.

The fiery arrow ripped through the void, splitting the abyssal wave in two before slamming into Malgareth's chest. Flames erupted, consuming him entirely. His roars of fury and pain echoed through the dungeon as his massive form crumbled to ash.

As the flames died down, Velkaris stood over the ashes, his expression cold and unfeeling. He turned his fiery gaze to the ashes, his lip curling in disgust.

"You're weak," he said, his voice like a blade of flame. "A waste of my time."

The fire around him flickered and vanished, leaving Ronan's unconscious form in its place. But the fear Velkaris left behind lingered, burning in my mind.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't move. The display of power had burned itself into my mind. Velkaris was more than terrifying—he was an unstoppable force. And Ronan? He was no longer just a man. He was something far more dangerous.

In that moment, one thing became clear: crossing him meant to face Velkaris—and that was a death I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

I didn't bother going back for a reward. I hadn't done anything to help. If anything, I felt a sense of dread. The thought of seeing Ronan again made my chest pain. His power wasn't human—no, it was otherworldly. And now? I feared him.

Leaving that dungeon wasn't just about survival—it was about moving forward, about finding Celia before Ronan did. His strength was overwhelming, and she wouldn't stand a chance against him. My only choice was to find her, take her far away, and keep her safe from whatever this nightmare was becoming.

But fate, it seemed, had a twisted sense of humor.

Not long after, rumors began to spread—whispers of villages burned to the ground, chains rattling in the night, and demons swarming the land. Each tale painted a vivid picture of chaos, and at the center of it all was a name: the Queen of Curses.

They said she was captured once, only to have the town that held her wiped from existence mere days later. The very idea was terrifying. Celia had powers, that much I knew. But the nature of those powers? A mystery I couldn't unravel.

I chased those rumors relentlessly, hoping for a glimpse of her—some sign that she was still alive. Yet every time, I was too late. The ashes of a ruined village, the cries of survivors who spoke of chains and fire, and the creeping dread that she was slipping further out of reach.

Four years passed like that. Four years of chasing shadows, hoping against hope that I'd find her before it was too late.

Then, recently, I heard something. Down by the Southern Coasts, near a small village clinging to the cliffs, there were reports of a girl who matched Celia's description. White hair, red eyes—there was no mistaking it. It had to be her.

But the villagers didn't mention anyone else.

Lyla wasn't with her.

I couldn't stop the knot that formed in my chest. What happened in these past years? What happened to her?

The village was buzzing with activity when I arrived. Adventurers, ranging from C-rank to B-rank, swarmed the area, drawn by the growing bounty on the Queen of Curses. It wasn't surprising. A target like Celia would lure every ambitious fool with a sword.

And among them, standing awkwardly near the notice board, was someone who didn't belong.

An E-ranked adventurer—the lowest of the low.

He had dark hair and piercing blue eyes, his muscular frame at odds with his ranking. A large sword hung at his side, the blade gleaming unnaturally even in the dull coastal light. I think someone mentioned his name—Kaiser, or something like that.

I didn't care much really.

What could someone like him do in a situation like this?

I was ready to find Celia, to save her from this cruel and dangerous world. But fate had other plans.

Ronan.

I hadn't seen him in years, and yet, there he was, standing in my path as if he had been waiting for me all along. His expression was unreadable, but the moment he spoke, my chest pained with dread.

"Kiel," he greeted, his voice eerily calm. "You're here to avenge Toby and Mira as well, aren't you?"

My heart skipped a beat. "I... What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb," Ronan snapped, his eyes narrowing. "Celia killed Toby and Mira. There's no denying it."

"Ronan, you're blowing this out of propor—"

He cut me off, his tone sharp and unforgiving. "Are you here to avenge our friends or not? Yes or no."

His gaze burned into me, his words heavy with expectation.

"Why the hell are you asking me this question?!" I shot back, my voice trembling with a mix of anger and fear.

"You see..." He stepped closer, his presence suffocating. "Your life currently depends on your answer."

I froze.

"I told you once, and I'll repeat it, Kiel. I'm going to take my revenge on her. I'll make sure she never kills anyone again. Like she did with Mira and Toby. She deserves to die for it."

"Ronan, try to calm down—"

But he interrupted again, his voice rising with fiery determination. "And if you try to stop me... I'll kill you first."

A chill ran down my spine. His hand lifted, flames flickering to life as he prepared a fireball. The air around us grew hotter, oppressive, and I knew he was serious. My decision here would determine whether I lived or died.

"So, Kiel," he said, his voice like a blade against my neck. "What's it going to be? Avenging our friends or helping that witch?"

My mind raced. I needed to stall him. To find Celia and protect her. But I couldn't fight Ronan—not here, not now.

"I..." I hesitated, my voice barely steady. Then I forced the lie. "I'm here to hunt her myself. I hated her since the day she destroyed our village. I've been training to kill her all this time."

Ronan's eyes lit up with approval, and his lips twisted into a sinister grin. "Glad to hear that. Now come with me. We'll finish her off together." His laughter sent shivers down my spine.

"Alright, Ronan. Let's do this," I replied, feigning resolve.

But inside, I was panicking. I had no intention of hurting Celia. At that moment, Ronan had me on death's door. I couldn't risk telling the truth. The only option was to play along—to find Celia first, get her as far from him as possible, and use my invisibility spell to help her escape.

If Ronan realized I was lying, he wouldn't hesitate to kill both of us.

And so I followed him, the weight of my deception growing heavier with each step.

When we finally found her, my heart clenched.

Celia was sitting in the distance, laughing with someone in a campsite. It was that same E-ranked adventurer I had seen earlier in the village—the one with dark hair and piercing blue eyes. They seemed... happy, like there wasn't a care in the world.

For just a moment, seeing her smile made me forget everything. It was all I wanted—to see her happy, safe, and free.

"Stop zoning out, Kiel," Ronan's cold voice snapped me back to reality. "Are you going to take the shot, or do you want me to end this in one blow?"

I turned to him. His hands burned with a fiery aura, and his eyes held nothing but murderous intent.

I had to make sure Ronan didn't get anywhere near Celia. My plan was to make him believe I actually hated her. I would have to hurt her, to lie to her, to make her think I was the enemy. The thought of it made my heart pain, a sickening weight settling in my chest. But it was the only way to protect her from Ronan.

I wanted to die in that moment—just end it all. How could I betray her like this? But it wasn't about me. It was about keeping her safe. Ronan had to believe the lie, and I had to play my part.

"I'll do it, Ronan," I said, my voice trembling with the lie. "Try not to kill her quickly. She deserves to suffer first, and honestly, I've been wanting to spend the night torturing her. So don't mind me."

His laugh was cold, almost satisfied. "Ahh... Sounds like you really care. Well, I don't care as long as she dies by morning."

I forced myself to nod, feeling my heart break with each word. I turned toward Celia and used my elemental magic to create a fireball and launched that E-ranked adventurer away, creating a path between me and her. I rooted Celia in place, making sure she couldn't move. My plan was simple: get Ronan far enough away from us, then cast a sleeping spell to buy us time, then use my cursed invisibility magic to shield her and escape.

I had to make her truly hate me. It was the only way. If Ronan believed I had betrayed her, he would leave us alone. It was the only chance I had to save her. But to do that, I had to become the villain.

Every part of me screamed in protest. Every fiber of my being screamed that this wasn't who I was—that this wasn't me. But I had no choice. If I didn't do this, she would die. And so, I did the unthinkable.

I punched her.

Her head snapped back, and I saw the shock in her eyes, the disbelief. My heart shattered with every second that passed, but I couldn't stop. I had to make her believe that I was her enemy.

She fought back, of course. Celia, always strong, always so full of life, struggled against me. Her hands, trembling but determined, reached for that E-ranked adventurer, the only one who could've helped. I saw the hope in her eyes that someone might come to her aid, someone who could stop me. But it wasn't enough. Her resistance only made this harder. Her pain, her confusion—it tore me apart.

I'm sorry, Celia. I'm so sorry...

"Why?" Her voice was weak, broken. The words barely made it past her lips, but they felt like a blade slicing through my chest. "Why are you doing this? What happened to you?"

I'm sorry. I'm sorry...

I couldn't answer her. I couldn't explain. I couldn't tell her the truth because if I did, if I showed even a shred of kindness, Ronan would kill us both.

"You... you were my friend, Kiel. What happened?" Her eyes—those beautiful, trusting eyes—were filled with disbelief and pain. The pain in her eyes mirrored my own. I wanted to scream, to tell her that this wasn't me, but I couldn't. I had to keep going.

I can't. I have to make her hate me. Please... forgive me.

"I'm not your friend, Celia," I spat, trying to make my voice cold, to make it sound like I meant it. "You killed Toby and Mira. You killed them, and you're going to pay for it."

Her eyes widened, and I saw the hurt flash across her face. "No... Kiel... No! You know I didn't—"

"Don't lie to me!" I interrupted, my voice trembling despite my attempts to sound angry. "You think I don't know the truth? I saw what you did. You killed them, you—"

I broke off, my throat choking with the words I was forcing out. Every part of me wanted to stop. To pull her into my arms and tell her everything was going to be okay. But I couldn't. I couldn't afford to do that.

I could hear her crying now, her voice barely a whisper, but it was loud enough for me to feel it. "Kiel... please... I didn't— I swear I didn't—"

Stop. Stop it, Kiel! Why are you doing this? My heart cried out in pain, but my actions never wavered. I punched her again, this time harder, and her body slumped against the ground.

Her gaze locked onto mine, but there was no recognition in her eyes anymore. Only confusion, only a deep, crushing hurt.

"Why, Kiel? Why are you doing this?" she whispered, and I almost couldn't bear it.

Why? I thought, my heart breaking. Because I love you, Celia. I love you so much... but I have to protect you.

"I don't know you anymore," she choked out, a single tear slipping down her cheek. "You're not the Kiel I knew. You're not him."

I could feel her breaking, feel the hope she once had for me fading. And in that moment, I realized that I was losing her. Not just physically, but emotionally. Her heart was slipping away from me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I was the villain now. And as much as I wanted to scream, to tell her everything and beg for her forgiveness, I couldn't.

Because if I didn't do this, if I didn't make her believe I hated her, Ronan would kill us both.

I'm sorry, Celia. I'm sorry...

And so, I did the only thing I could.

I hurt her. I made her hate me.

But deep down, I knew that she would never look at me the same way again.

And I would never forgive myself for it.

The forest was ahead, filled with Noctis Graspers—terrifying creatures that Ronan had warned about. They were too strong for lower-ranked adventurers, and while I was A-ranked and Ronan was B-ranked, neither of us wanted to take our chances. It was wiser to avoid the forest altogether. But now, I was more focused on the task at hand than the dangers surrounding us.

I was so close. So close to saving her. The spell was almost done, the plan nearly complete. All I needed was a little more time. A little more distance. Once Ronan was out of sight, once he truly believed I was going to kill her, I could cast the sleeping spell and take Celia away from all of this pain, this madness. I could undo the damage I'd done, heal her, protect her from everything.

But now, everything was slipping through my fingers.

Kaiser.

That damned E-ranked adventurer—Kaiser—had appeared out of nowhere, interrupting my spell, stepping into my path like a silent storm. His presence was overwhelming, and for a moment, I could only stand there in disbelief. How was he so strong? How had he defeated both Ronan and me? He didn't even have magic, and yet he fought like he was a force of nature itself. It was impossible.

It was supposed to be me and Celia. I had to make her hate me, I had to break her trust so Ronan would believe I had betrayed her. She was supposed to be safe. But now... now, I had hurt her, punched her, pushed her to the brink of despair. I made her believe that I was her enemy, all to protect her. I thought that once it was over, once Ronan was gone, I could take it all back. I could heal her.

But instead, I had broken her.

I saw the look in her eyes, the disgust, the fear. It tore me apart. Every punch, every lie, every second of it—it killed me inside. I could feel the weight of my actions crashing down on me with each passing moment. I had done this to her. To the person who saved me, who trusted me. I had broken her heart, and for what? For what?

Now, standing here, watching Kaiser stand between us, I realized how much I had lost. My plan had worked—Ronan had left. But at what cost? The woman I had once cared for, the woman who had been my light, now hated me. The trust she had in me was gone, and I had no way to get it back. I had pushed her away in the name of protecting her, but instead, I had driven her into an even darker place.

Kaiser... How was he so strong? How had he ruined everything I worked for? He wasn't supposed to be here. I didn't care about Ronan anymore. It was Kaiser, that damned adventurer, that ruined everything.

I was the one who was supposed to save her. But I had failed.

I had hurt her, I had made her believe I hated her, just so Ronan wouldn't kill us both. And now, Kaiser had come and destroyed all of it. All my plans, all my struggles, my regrets—everything was for nothing.

I could feel my heart breaking. I had been so close to saving her, so close to undoing the damage I had caused. But now, I had lost her for good.

And it was all my fault.

But now, it was too late. Back in the present, I found myself defeated—by Kaiser, no less. He had shattered everything, leaving me broken.

Celia, the one person I had desperately wanted to protect, now looked at me as though I was nothing but a monster. That look in her eyes—once so full of warmth, of trust, of everything I had ever yearned for—had turned into a cold, jagged blade that cut deeper than any wound.

Her gaze was a silent accusation, a silent condemnation that crushed what little was left of me. The Kiel who had loved her, the one who had been saved from the suffocating loneliness that had plagued me for years, was no longer here. The person I used to be had died the moment I made the decision to betray her. I had ruined everything.

Her eyes, once filled with softness, now radiated nothing but disgust. Every inch of her body recoiled from me as though I was poison, and it was all my fault. I had poisoned the very bond we shared, turned it into something unrecognizable, and for what? To protect her? To save her from Ronan's wrath?

I couldn't even tell myself it was for her anymore. It wasn't. I had destroyed the one person who had ever truly cared for me. I had destroyed her trust, her love, her belief in me. The Kiel who had been saved by her kindness, the Kiel who had laughed with her, held her hand, shared moments of joy and warmth—he was gone. And in his place stood someone unrecognizable, a monster who would never deserve her.

I stood before her, desperately hoping she could hear me, praying she would understand. But all I saw in her eyes was a coldness that made my chest pain. Her voice, once so full of warmth, now cut through me with icy venom.

"Kiel..." she began, her voice faltering, but I couldn't stop myself from holding onto that fragile thread of hope. I saw a glimmer in her eyes, something that made me believe, just for a moment, that maybe—just maybe—I could fix everything. But I was wrong.

Her next words were like a slap to my soul.

"How long are you going to keep lying? You admitted yourself that you were here to kill me."

Her words hit me harder than anything Ronan could have ever done. I tried to explain, to beg her to understand, but the words caught in my throat.

"I... I had my reasons for saying that," I whispered, my voice trembling. "I wanted to save you. Please, Celia, just tell Kaiser to stop... We can talk this out—"

But before I could finish, she cut me off. Her voice was like ice, colder than anything I'd ever heard from her.

"No. I do not want to speak to someone like you ever again."

I froze, the finality of her words sinking in like a blade through my heart.

"Stella... please, just listen to me—"

"Don't call me that," she snapped. The fury in her voice hit me harder than I could ever have imagined.

"My name is not Stella. I hate every moment you say it. You used to call me that because you cared about me. But now I know it was all a lie. Every single word."

The words burned through me like fire. I wanted to apologize, to explain, to tell her everything. But nothing would make this right anymore.

"No... Stella... I still care for you," I whispered, my voice barely a sound.

Her eyes, filled with disgust, met mine. And what I saw there broke me more than anything else. She was so far away from me now, a person I could never reach.

"Listen here, you human garbage," she growled, her words coming out like poison. "I told you once before, my name is not Stella. It's Celia. And it was given to me by my friend—a friend who isn't a degenerate liar like you."

Her words crushed me. Everything I had done, everything I had tried to do... it had all been for nothing. She hated me now. The Kiel who had loved her—who had been saved from loneliness by her kindness—was gone. I had ruined everything.

And in that moment, I realized the bitter truth: I would never be the person she once cared for. The Kiel who loved her was dead, and nothing I did could ever bring him back.

The pain in her eyes was unbearable. It suffocated me. It wasn't just the physical torment of knowing she hated me—it was the emotional wreckage. I had been the one to destroy everything beautiful between us, and I could never undo it. No matter what I did now, no matter how much I cried or begged for forgiveness, she would never look at me the same way again.

And that... that thought broke me more than anything else. I had loved her, and now I had killed that love with my own hands.

Kaiser's sword was aimed at my neck, positioned to end my life. But then, as if fate had one final chance for me, a fire arrow shot through the air, striking Kaiser and knocking him away. The explosion that followed was deafening. My vision blurred as I fought to regain consciousness. When I opened my eyes, I saw him—Kaiser, sprawled on the ground not far from me. And Celia...

Her eyes were wide with terror, her expression one of devastation. She was no longer the calm, kind-hearted girl I had once known. She was scared, frightened. For herself. This time, it was no longer about me or Ronan. It was about him.

"Did you think a measly one or two spirits could defeat me?" A cold voice echoed through the air, cutting through the tension like a blade. It wasn't Velkaris anymore—it was Ronan. The power of the fire demon was now his. Ronan had merged with Velkaris's essence, a terrifying fusion of strength and destruction.

"Ronan... What did you do?" Celia's voice trembled, laced with fear as she watched him approach.

Ronan's laugh was dark, malicious. "How dare you try and touch my soul, you pathetic weakling..." His gaze fixed on Kaiser, and his tone was full of disdain.

"Be sure to savor this, Kaiser," he said, his words dripping with venom. "It's unfortunate you won't be able to watch your friend burn in the depths of hell."

With that, Ronan's power surged, flames swirling around him, engulfing everything. He was no longer just a man—a vengeful spirit fused with the might of a demon. And Celia, powerless as ever, couldn't do a thing. She was helpless.

And me? I... I lost.

I had lost everything. Every plan I had made, every step I had taken, it was all meaningless now. I couldn't even look at her anymore without feeling like I was suffocating. The person I had been, the person who loved her so deeply, was gone. All that remained was the hollow echo of my mistakes.

For the longest time, I had hesitated, I had been scared. Scared of losing her, scared of the truth, scared of what I might become if I tried to protect her. But it didn't matter

anymore. All that fear, all that hesitation, had led me here, to this moment where I could no longer undo the damage I had done.

I had lost her. I had lost her trust, her love. And now I stood here, watching everything fall apart around me, like a piece of glass shattering into a million pieces. My heart felt as though it had been torn from my chest and thrown into the fire.

But then, as the fire of my resolve began to kindle, something else came to mind—something that had been buried deep inside me, hidden beneath all the pain and regret.

The gift.

The one I had promised her. The one I had planned for so long, the one that should have been hers long before this moment. It was meant to be something I gave to her when the time was right—when I wasn't afraid to show her who I truly was. But I had been too scared, too unsure of myself. Too afraid of losing her to even give it to her.

But now, in the silence of the storm, amidst the fury of everything I had destroyed, I realized it wasn't just a gift—it was my apology.

It was the one thing I could give her that might show her, even if only for a fleeting moment, that I had cared. That I had always cared. That I would have done anything for her, and maybe, just maybe, I still would.

But it was too late, wasn't it?

She hated me. She would never want the gift now, not after everything I had done, after every lie I had told.

Yet, even if I had nothing left, even if it was too late for redemption, I couldn't let that gift go. It was the last part of me I had left—my true, unspoken feelings for her.

I hadn't fought for her in the past. I had been a coward. But now, as I faced the very embodiment of fire and death, as I stood here with nothing but the shreds of who I had been, I would fight.

It wasn't much—just a faint, flickering spark—but it was enough. I had been too late to protect her. I had been too weak, too afraid to act when it mattered. Too afraid to fight.

But not anymore.

No. Not now.

I looked at her, even though it felt like I was burning from the inside out. She was so far from me now, so angry, so hurt, and I knew I had no right to ask for her forgiveness. But

I couldn't run anymore. I couldn't be that scared, weak person who had been too late to protect her.

I had to fight for her.

Even if I was facing the king of flames. Even if every part of me felt like it was crumbling, breaking down with every passing second. Even if I had no magic left to fight with, no power to call upon.

I wasn't going to run. I wasn't going to hesitate.

I would stand, even if it meant my destruction. I would fight. For Celia.

It didn't matter if she hated me. It didn't matter if I had no hope of ever earning her forgiveness. She had given me everything, and I had thrown it all away. But I would fight for her. Not for myself, not for redemption, but for her. Because she deserved a chance to live, to be free, and I was the only one left who could do something about it.

I would fight.

Even if I had nothing left.