

# **The Last Step**

## **#Chapter 21: The Final Confrontation Begins - Read The Last Step Chapter 21: The Final Confrontation Begins**

### **Chapter 21 - The Final Confrontation Begins**

#### **Celia's Perspective:**

Why... why is this happening to me? My heart pounded in my chest as my thoughts spiraled. Kaiser—he fought so hard, defeated them both! But Ronan... Ronan is still here. How?!

Wait—Kaiser! I've got to help him!

My legs moved before I could think. I sprinted as fast as I could, the ground trembling beneath me from the aftermath of their fight. The smoke hung thick in the air, but I knew he was there. Ronan's attack sent him flying, but Kaiser's not dead. He can't be dead.

The closer I got, the more the smoke began to clear. My heart felt like it would stop when I saw him lying there, motionless on the ground. I was just about to reach him when flames erupted in front of me, blocking my path.

"You still don't get it, do you?"

Ronan's voice was cold, sharp as a blade. My heart sank as his towering figure appeared before me, his eyes brimming with cruel amusement.

"Your last hope—Kaiser—is already dead."

Before I could react, he surged forward, his foot slamming onto Kaiser's head with brutal force. "CRACK!" The sickening sound of bones shattering echoed around us, sending a chill through the air.

With a twisted smirk of pure malice, he stomped down again, harder this time. "CRUNCH!" Each strike wasn't just an attack—it was an act of merciless destruction, as if he was taking the very life out of him with every blow.

"No..." I whispered, tears stinging my eyes. My body trembled, and I couldn't breathe.

Ronan leaned closer, his voice dripping with malice. "See? No one's coming to save you. You're alone now."

"You... you MONSTER!" I screamed, my voice cracking with rage and despair.

I swung my fist at him, desperate to land a hit, but he was faster. His hand shot out, catching my wrist mid-air. His grip was like iron, twisting my arm painfully as he brought me closer.

"Ahhh..." he hissed, his lips curling into a disgustingly sinister grin. He leaned in, his breath brushing my ear as he whispered, "You're lost, aren't you? No one left to depend on. No one to protect you."

His words sent a wave of terror through me. I struggled against him, panic taking over, but it was useless. His grip tightened, unrelenting, like a predator savoring its prey. My strength was nothing compared to his.

And Kaiser... Kaiser wasn't moving. He wasn't breathing. My chest pained with the truth I didn't want to believe. He was... he was gone.

This monster had taken everything in a single, merciless strike.

"Get away from me!" I screamed, my voice trembling as I struggled desperately to free myself.

Ronan's laughter echoed around me, cruel and unrelenting. His grip tightened like a vice, sending sharp, unbearable pain through my arm.

"So soon, eh?" he sneered, his voice dripping with malice. "Know your place."

He twisted my arm further, and I felt a horrifying crack. "AHHHHH!" The scream tore from my throat as the pain consumed me, my vision blurring with tears.

Ronan tilted his head, his grin widening. "Ahahaha! How is it? This is what Toby and Mira felt. You're nothing more than an insignificant weakling."

My mind reeled at his words. Toby and Mira... the people I didn't do anything to... Their faces flashed before me, and guilt and rage fought for control in my heart. But no matter how much I wanted to fight back, my body felt useless. I could feel my bones giving way, the pressure unbearable.

"I... I can't..." The words barely escaped my lips. I couldn't beat him. His power was too overwhelming. The air around him shimmered with searing heat, and the ground beneath him scorched as if the flames were alive. The burning was spreading, consuming everything in its path.

Suddenly, a low, unfamiliar voice broke through the chaos. "Is that so?"

The words sent a chill down my spine. Before I could comprehend what was happening, cursed vines erupted from the ground, twisting and coiling like serpents. They surged toward Ronan, their speed unnatural and terrifying.

Ronan's eyes narrowed as he let go of my arm, shoving me aside. I hit the ground hard, the impact sending a sharp pain through my head. Everything spun for a moment, but through my blurred vision, I saw him—Kiel.

He stood there, his face bloodied but unyielding. His eyes burned with a determination I'd never seen before. The cursed vines seemed to ignore me entirely, focusing solely on Ronan as they lashed out with unrelenting force.

Ronan's grin didn't falter. Instead, it grew wider. He dodged the first strike with ease, doing a back flip gracefully, and with a swift motion, he kicked one of the vines that lunged at him.

The force of his kick was enough to send the vine recoiling, but two more shot toward him from either side. For a moment, I thought they had him, but his laughter rang out, cold and wild.

"Ahahaha! Is that all?!"

Raising both hands, he unleashed a devastating torrent of blazing hellfire to either side, incinerating the vines in an instant. The flames roared like a beast unleashed, consuming everything in their path, leaving only charred remains.

The heat was unbearable even from where I lay. My arm throbbed with pain, but my eyes were glued to the scene before me. Kiel's vines, Ronan's fire—it was chaos, destruction.

He casually, without breaking a sweat, deflected Kiel's attack. It was as if he barely even noticed it. But my thoughts weren't focused on that. Kiel... why? Why did you try to save me?

He wanted to kill me, didn't he? He hated me. He made it clear before. I couldn't understand. My mind raced as I tried to make sense of his actions, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Celia... stay behind me." Kiel's voice cut through my thoughts. He stood there, his breathing heavy, his body trembling slightly from the fight he just had with Kaiser.

"Kiel?!" I shouted, my voice shaky as I clutched my injured arm. The pain from Ronan's grip earlier still throbbed, sharp and unrelenting. "What are you doing?"

He glanced at me, his eyes steady despite the exhaustion weighing on him. "What does it look like? I'm helping you."

"But why?!" My voice cracked. "Didn't you want to kill m—"

Before I could finish, Ronan's mocking voice interrupted, laced with anger.

"So, this is the choice you've made, Kiel? Lying to my face to help a witch?"

Kiel didn't hesitate. He met Ronan's cold gaze with one of his own. "Yes, I did. I lied to you. I lied to her. Hell, I've been lying to myself this whole time."

I stared at him, confused and overwhelmed. "Kiel, what do you mean?" My voice wavered, but I had to know.

Kiel turned to me for a moment, his expression softening in a way I never expected. "I'm sorry, Celia... sorry for betraying you and hurting you. I know it might be too late for your forgiveness. But let me fight for you."

My heart pained at his words. "Kiel... I—"

But Ronan's harsh voice cut through the air, silencing me. "Really? You want to fight for the witch who took Mira and Toby's lives? Do you even know what you're saying?"

Kiel didn't flinch. His voice turned cold, detached. "Like I could give a shit. Mira and Toby are dead—six feet under, gone, never coming back. Why the hell should I care for those two?"

"You're the only one still hung up on them. I'm done with the past. I couldn't give a shit about their deaths."

His words stunned me. For a second, the air felt heavier, the silence louder.

Ronan's grin disappeared, his eyes narrowing as if Kiel's words struck a nerve. Without a word, he unleashed a barrage of fireballs. They burned brighter than before, the air around them rippling with their heat. Each one seemed alive, consuming everything in its path as they streaked toward us.

Kiel's eyes didn't waver. He raised a hand, chanting with determination.

"Glacial shield of eternal frost, Rise and protect, no matter the cost. By the breath of winter's call, Arise the unyielding, icy wall!"

In an instant, towering walls of ice erupted around us, enclosing us from all sides. The translucent ice shimmered, reflecting the fiery glow outside. The temperature dropped sharply, but the barrier held firm.

The fireballs slammed into the ice with deafening cracks, the sounds echoing like thunder. I flinched at each impact, my heart racing. But as I listened closer, I realized something remarkable—the ice wasn't breaking.

Instead, the heat seemed to melt the outer layer, which turned into water and froze again almost instantly. The wall thickened with each assault, creating an unyielding defense.

Kiel stood still, his focus unwavering as Ronan's relentless attacks continued. I glanced at him, my heart a mess of fear and confusion. Despite everything, I couldn't help but wonder: Why? Why would he fight for me now, after everything?

The crackling fire and shattering ice were deafening, but the question in my heart was louder.

Kiel glanced back at me, his voice steady but grim. "This defense should handle his attacks for about a minute. Get ready to run, Celia."

My heart clenched at his words. "Kiel, why are you doing this now? Didn't you... didn't you want to kill me? You hated me too, didn't you?" My voice shook, just as much from fear as from confusion.

He hesitated, his eyes filled with something I couldn't quite place—regret? Pain? "Celia... I... I'm sorry for lying. But it's too late for answers now. Please, run as far as you can. I'll fight the King of Flames."

"The... King of Flames?" I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper.

Kiel nodded, his jaw tightening. "That's Ronan. He's now one with the strongest fire demon. His power... it's stronger than any A-rank adventurer. You have to leave this place. Alone."

The words stung, sharp and cold. But I couldn't just accept them. "Kiel! I can't just leave Kaiser or you behind!" I screamed, the pain in my chest overwhelming the pain in my arm.

Kiel's voice turned sharp, colder than I'd ever heard it. "Accept it, Celia! Kaiser is dead. There's no way around it. He stood no chance against Ronan. And me... I'm going to die soon too. So leave us behind and run for your life!"

My breath caught. His words hit me like a dagger to the chest, but I saw the truth in his eyes. And yet... there was something else there. A glimmer of despair he couldn't hide.

"No! I refuse to leave both of you behind!" My voice cracked, but I didn't care. "I know for certain Kaiser isn't dead. He can't be!"

Kiel shook his head, his expression filled with both frustration and pity. "But it's the truth, Celia. Ronan's attack killed him. He stomped on his head, finishing him off."

"No..." My knees felt weak, the weight of his words crushing me. "It can't be."

Before I could process it, the ice walls around us ignited, the flames consuming them as the water from the melting ice hissed and evaporated.

Kiel raised a hand quickly, his voice calm but strained. A barrier of cursed energy formed around us, shimmering faintly, like a fragile shell trying to hold back the chaos.

None of it made sense. Nothing did. My world—everything I knew—had been turned upside down in mere moments.

"Accept it, Kiel," Ronan's voice echoed, dripping with malice and mockery. "You're going to die here."

Kiel stood tall, looking Ronan straight in the eyes. "It's funny, coming from you."

Ronan's grin widened, cruel and twisted. "What did you say to me? Don't forget the difference between us, you pathetic nobody."

Kiel's voice dropped, colder than ice. "I might be a nobody, yes. But I'm not the one depending on a demon for power."

Ronan laughed, the sound echoing like a death knell. "Kiel, you hold your head quite high for your level."

Then, his expression shifted, a sick amusement dancing in his eyes. Slowly, he raised his fingers to head level and flicked them toward Kiel.

My instincts screamed. My body strained as a wave of death washed over me. That simple flick wasn't normal—it was devastating. Without thinking, I threw myself at Kiel, tackling him to the ground just as the attack sliced through the air.

The space where Kiel had been standing was obliterated, a clean line cutting through the ground and the trees beyond. If I hadn't moved him... I shuddered at the thought.

Ronan's laughter rang out again, cruel and condescending. "Oh wow! The useless little girl can actually do something. How brave of you!"

Kiel's eyes widened in shock and anger. "Celia! What are you doing? I told you to run!"

"No!" I shouted back, my voice cracking. "I can't do that!"

Kiel's voice broke, trembling with desperation. "Why? You and I both know it's the only way! Stop being so stubborn! It's not the time to—" He hesitated, his frustration clear. "To feel regret about me! Just leave!"

Tears blurred my vision as I shook my head. "It's not about you... and it's not kindness either." My voice wavered, but there was something stronger beneath it.

Kiel's frustration faltered, his gaze softening for just a moment. "Then why? Why risk yourself like this?"

I clenched my fists, my chest tightening as I forced the words out. "Because I know. I know." My gaze locked onto Ronan, his twisted grin making my stomach churn, yet fueling a fire I didn't know I had. "You may call me unreasonable, but I know how this ends. Ronan will die here."

Ronan tilted his head mockingly, his grin widening, but I didn't waver.

For the first time, Ronan's grin faltered, ever so slightly. But his laughter soon resumed, louder and colder than ever. "How amusing. A little girl with a death wish."

My voice grew steadier, carrying a weight I couldn't explain. "You hear me? You're not walking away from this. You'll lose. You'll die here."

Kiel looked at me, his shock replaced by a mix of awe and dread, but I didn't look away from Ronan. Something unyielding burned inside me, drowning out the fear. For the first time, I wasn't just fighting to survive. I was fighting to end this.

"Oh really? What makes you say that?" Ronan sneered, his voice dripping with malice. "Your E-ranked friend is dead, and your knight in shining armor is worthless."

My heart dropped at his words. The fear was overwhelming, suffocating. But even through my shaking, I tried to stay strong.

"Ronan... stop this." Kiel's voice was strained, but I could hear the exhaustion in it. Before he could say more, I cut him off, my voice trembling with every word.

"Ronan..." I swallowed hard, trying to steady my breath. My heart was racing, but there was a fire inside me now, something deep and rooted.

"You speak so much for someone who depends on a demon for power. And you have the guts to call me a monster, a cursed witch?" I could feel the weight of my words as they left my mouth, my voice more forceful than I intended.

"You've been nothing more than a coward all this time."

The world seemed to pause. The air grew thick with tension. Ronan didn't respond immediately, the silence stretching out like a heavy fog.

Then, suddenly, the stillness shattered. Ronan threw his head back and laughed—loud, cruel, manic.

"Hahhh... Ahhahaha... AHAHAHAHAHHHH!"

I flinched at the sound, my knees trembling, but I refused to look away.

"A demon, huh?" Ronan said, his voice cold, his gaze narrowing on me like a predator sizing up its prey. "Those are the last words you could say?" His eyes turned to ice, his expression twisted with sadistic look.

"You should've chosen your words more wisely, because they're going to be your last now."

I could feel the heat rising, the air thickening. I didn't know what was coming, but something in my instincts told me it was bad.

Ronan brought his hands together, fingers interlocking with a slow, deliberate motion. A fireball began to form between his palms, the heat radiating from it making the ground beneath us crackle and smoke.

His hands parted, stretching wider, and the fireball grew with it. The flames twisted and writhed as though alive, growing larger, fiercer. Slowly, he moved one hand near his head and the other forward, shaping the fire into a bow-like curve.

My heart skipped a beat. A fiery arrow was forming, glowing so brightly it hurt to look at. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it wasn't something I could survive.

I glanced at Kiel, my heart sinking. His face was pale, his eyes wide with fear, his body frozen in terror. He couldn't move. He couldn't even speak. He was too afraid to do anything.

Ronan's voice dropped, the malice thick and suffocating. "It was nice seeing you two. Seems like the fiery aura will make it easier to see how pathetic you two were."

I wanted to scream, wanted to run, but my feet felt like they were rooted to the ground.

"Bow beneath your lord, forge my fury! Arrow of oblivion, erase all in your path! Melt creation itself—burn the unworthy! 'Searing End,' unleash the flames of annihilation!"

Ronan's words were a death sentence. The air crackled with heat, the energy so intense that the very ground beneath our feet seemed to tremble. Then, with one swift motion, Ronan launched his attack.

The arrow flew faster than I could blink, its fiery trail leaving nothing in its wake. The earth cracked and crumbled, disintegrating at the arrow's touch. It melted everything around it, even the ground that it passed far away from.

I froze, my breath caught in my chest. It was all over.

We were going to die.



I couldn't look away. My legs shook, and my whole body trembled with fear. But even then, part of me couldn't fully believe it. Was this how it would end? For me, for Kiel, for everything?

The arrow was coming closer, the world growing hotter, and my vision narrowing with the dread of an inevitable end.

It's over...

## **Chapter 22 - The Sword Saint**

### **Celia's Perspective:**

There's no way to escape... Ronan, no. This demon can't be beaten.

I felt a cold weight settle over me, my heart racing as I watched the arrow streak toward us. It burned with a heat that could scorch the very air, turning the ground beneath it pitch black, as if it were poisoning everything in its path. The flames wrapped around the arrow, eating up the space between us with terrifying speed.

Ronan's voice cut through the chaos, his grin wide and cruel. "That's the end for you." His words were cold, confident—he was enjoying this. Enjoying our last moments.

I closed my eyes, bracing for the inevitable. The arrow was now only a breath away, about to turn me and Kiel to ash.

Oh no, no, no...

And then, a voice, distant but clear, echoed through the air.

"Oh really?"

It wasn't Ronan's voice. It came from nowhere. My head snapped around, eyes wide, but there was nothing. No one in sight. The arrow continued its deadly path, too fast to dodge, too powerful to escape.

I couldn't pull my gaze from it, not as it neared us, not as the heat began to singe the air around us.

This is it.

Then, without warning, someone grabbed my hand.

"—??!"

Kiel was dragged away from me, pulled by the hair as though something invisible had seized him. I barely had time to react.

In that instant, everything felt like it had stopped. The world slowed, almost painfully, as if time itself had hit pause. My senses sharpened, but nothing made sense. Then, with a blink, everything changed.

I wasn't standing where I had been. I was somewhere else. Far from the blast. I turned just in time to see the arrow slam into the edge of a distant hill, exploding on impact. The sound was deafening—an ear-splitting crack that shook the ground beneath us. The blast sent a storm of fire and debris into the air, ripping apart everything in its wake.

I staggered slightly, my head spinning as I looked up.

A hand—strong and steady—held mine, pulling me to safety. My eyes darted upward, and the person who had saved us stood before me. But... was he even human?

He stepped out of the shadows, his presence so overwhelming it was hard to focus on anything else. His black hair, wild but somehow perfect, shimmered faintly, catching the light in a way that felt unnatural. It gave off an almost otherworldly glow, as if it didn't belong in this world.

But it was his eyes—those piercing violet eyes—that made my breath catch. They weren't just looking at me. They were looking through me, seeing every part of me I never let anyone see. I wanted to look away, but something about him... I couldn't.

His cloak rippled around him, moving as though it were alive. It shifted unnaturally, despite the air being still. Beneath it, I could make out the outline of sleek armor, subtle but clearly designed for someone who moved with deadly precision. And the way he stood there, completely at ease, as though the ground didn't even matter—it was unnerving.

Who is he?

His voice broke through my daze, light and teasing, but it had an edge that sent a chill down my spine.

"What's that look for? Shocked by my good looks or my overwhelming power? Take your pick!" He chuckled, his tone playful, yet his presence was anything but casual. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him. His very presence... It was hypnotic.

"I... um... Who are you?" I finally managed to ask, my voice small and unsure.

He released Kiel from his grip, and Kiel dropped to the ground with a soft thud. Slowly, Kiel turned his head, his eyes wide with disbelief, his mouth hanging open in shock. His

expression was a mix of awe and confusion, like he had just seen something too extraordinary to comprehend.

Who was this person? Where had he come from? How could he do what he just did?

The questions hung in the air, unanswered, as the silence stretched between us, leaving me with a sense of wonder and fear all at once.

He didn't answer me immediately. My eyes drifted to his right, where a sword was strapped to his side.

I couldn't look away from it. The blade was black—darker than the night that surrounded us earlier. Its edge shimmered like shadow and steel fused together, almost as if the very darkness of the world had been carved into it. Shadows clung to the weapon, twisting and writhing like they were alive, feeding off his presence. It wasn't just a sword; it was a part of him—just as deadly and untouchable as he was.

"Wow, you really love staring at me, huh? Hate to break it to you, but I'm not interested."

His voice was mocking, but there was a cold edge to it that made my skin crawl.

"Hey, what?!" I blurted out, momentarily forgetting the situation with the King of Flames standing before us.

"Anyways, let's stay focused here—" His words were abruptly cut off.

"Oh, you're still alive?" Ronan's voice sliced through the air, sharp and menacing. "Impressive. I guess even trash has its moments of pride."

The King of Flames strode toward us, his demonic form crackling with power. The ground seemed to tremble beneath his every step, and his smile twisted into something far more dangerous than any fire.

"Excuse me? I was giving my heroic speech in front of th—" The man beside me began to speak again, but Ronan interrupted him with a flick of his fingers.

"Die."

The word was cold and final. In an instant, a deadly thread of fire-woven wind shot toward us with an explosive force. We barely dodged the last attack, but this one came faster, fiercer, impossible to react to in time.

Then, just as the attack closed in, the person beside me gripped my hand tighter and grabbed Kiel by the shoulder. Before I could even process what was happening, we were gone.

Time seemed to slow. In the blink of an eye, we had been ripped away from the path of destruction. The wind from Ronan's attack reached us only a second later, a gust strong enough to whip our hair around us.

"What?!" My heart raced, still trying to catch up with the speed at which we moved.

"Celia, do you know who he is?!" Kiel gasped, his voice full of astonishment.

I turned to look at him, stunned by the speed and power of the person who'd just saved us. I had no answers.

As I was about to respond, another attack from Ronan was already charging toward us—quicker than the last. But again, we dodged it without a scratch.

"Is this supposed to be an attack or a warm-up?" The person who saved us spoke, voice dripping with disdain. "Because I feel like I should've stretched more."

Ronan's smirk twisted, a wild glint in his eyes. "Hmm... Finally, something worth my time. But don't mistake this for a battle—you're just a slightly sturdier toy I'll break quickly."

The stranger's voice turned icy, devoid of any humor. "Huh, guess that makes me the weakling who's about to end your entire life."

Ronan's face hardened into something savage, a low growl vibrating in his throat. "You want to fight me? You've got guts, I'll give you that. Too bad I'll be carving them out in a moment."

The tension between them crackled, thick and oppressive. It was the kind of silence before the storm, the kind of battle that would tear the world apart.

This wasn't just a fight—it was the clash of two titans, each one determined to break the other. And I had no idea who would walk away alive.

Ronan didn't waste any time. He launched a barrage of fireballs, each one streaking through the air with deadly intent. They weren't just fired in a straight line—they curved, homing in on us from different angles, tracking our every movement. The flames blazed with an intensity that scorched the air around us. Kiel tried to dodge, weaving to avoid the incoming assault, but the man beside me had a grip on him, keeping him firmly in place.

"Nah... They're too slow," he said, his voice unshaken. "We can relax."

His words were casual, as though we weren't seconds away from being engulfed in fire. He held us still, forcing us to wait as the fireballs closed in, their heat already burning

the edges of my skin. I could feel the fiery aura growing hotter, suffocating the air with its intensity.

I blinked. In an instant, we were in a different spot entirely.

Ronan froze, his face twisting into a shocked expression, but it quickly morphed back into his usual twisted grin. He moved his hands, preparing for another attack.

"Oh, you're trying so hard to stay alive. It's adorable," he taunted. "But tell me, how does it feel knowing that all your effort is utterly meaningless?"

Without warning, the ground around us cracked open as walls of fire erupted from the earth, slowly closing in, encircling us in a blazing cage. The flames burned so bright that the world around us seemed to flicker with their light. My heart raced as I frantically searched for an escape, but Kiel... Kiel was unnervingly calm.

"Hey, why don't you just relax a bit? Let me handle this," he said, his voice smooth and confident, his violet eyes meeting mine, calming the storm of panic rising inside me.

I didn't understand how he could be so composed in the face of something this deadly. But then he spoke again, his voice low, carrying the weight of something ancient.

"O veils of darkness, arise and consume the arrogant flame. Swallow its light, and carve a path for your master to tread."

I didn't know the incantation, but the shadows around his sword began to stir on their own, moving like they had a life of their own. The flames around us crackled, their heat turning to something colder, darker. The fire began to melt into shadows, their light consumed by an unnatural darkness. The shift was sudden, almost surreal. The flames hissed and melted away, replaced by shadows that writhed and burned with an eerie glow.

Without a second thought, the man beside me walked right through the now-dark flames, his path untouched by the destruction around us. The air seemed to grow colder as the shadows swirled at his feet. He released his grip on Kiel and me, his eyes locked on Ronan with cold determination.

"You two should stay back," he said, voice steady. "I'll finish the demon."

Kiel and I just stared at him. He had dodged all of Ronan's ultimate attacks without breaking a sweat. He walked through Ronan's flames like they were nothing more than smoke. And still, I couldn't understand who he was or how much more power he was hiding, concealed behind a calm and teasing demeanor.

"Careful looking at me like that," he said, his tone suddenly light, playful. "People might think you're falling for me."

I was completely caught off guard by his words. "Could you be any more serious?!" I snapped, flustered. My heart still pounded from the chaos, yet here he was, turning the tension into something strange and awkward.

He chuckled, the sound low and teasing. "You're cute when you're flustered. But don't worry—I won't tell anyone. For now."

His smile widened as shadows swirled around him, almost as if they were being absorbed into his body, becoming part of him.

"What do you mean, 'for now'?" I demanded, suddenly irritated at his playful deflection.

He waved a hand dismissively. "Don't worry, I'll sign autographs after we're done here."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Kiel cut in, his voice tense. "Celia, he is The Sword—"

Before he could finish, Ronan's voice sliced through the air, dripping with venom. "You really think you stand a chance? How cute. Let me show you just how small and insignificant you are before I erase you—"

But Ronan never finished his sentence. His words were swallowed by the silence that followed, his threat hanging useless in the air.

A second ago, he had been standing behind us, but in the blink of an eye, he was already in front of Ronan. His sword was drawn, gleaming in the dying light, poised to strike. Ronan barely reacted in time, his arms igniting in a burst of fiery energy as he blocked his swing. The force of the clash sent shockwaves through the air, and though Ronan's defense was swift, his strike grazed his face, drawing a thin line of blood.

"Aghh!" Ronan hissed, stepping back, fury flashing in his eyes as he struggled to regain his footing.

But before anyone could blink, He was back in front of us, effortlessly closing the distance. It was like he was everywhere at once, his presence so overwhelming it left Ronan reeling.

"You're really confident, huh?" His voice was calm, almost mocking. He locked eyes with Ronan, both men sharing a death stare that could kill. "I'd say that's cute, but this is more like secondhand embarrassment for you."

Ronan's grin twisted into something darker. "Oh? You scratched me. Congratulations, worm. Your reward? A slower, more painful death awaits."

But he smirked, unbothered by the threat. "You speak a lot for the power you possess. Don't tell me you're trying to fake it?"

Ronan's laughter was cold, dripping with contempt as he took a step closer, his form radiating a menacing aura. "Hmph. At least you're not completely worthless. Keep this up, and I might even remember your name for your power."

Once again, his violet eyes gleamed with a sadistic delight. "Wow, thanks! I was going to say the same about you, but let's not lie to each other! We both know who truly is stronger."

Ronan's sneer deepened, his hands crackling with fiery power. "I can sense power in you, but before I destroy you, I want to hear your name. Who do you think you are?"

The pressure in the air built as the two locked eyes, their auras clashing like raging storms. The ground seemed to crack beneath them, the very air charged with raw, unrestrained energy.

He tilted his head slightly, his smirk never fading.

"Heh... Ahhahahaha... are these your last words? Fine, I'll humor you."

He drew himself up, his voice carrying with an unsettling confidence. "The name's Levi Ashton. You might've heard of me... one of the Five Sword Saints of the World. I'm also known as the Wielder of God-Speed."

The revelation hit like an explosion. I had heard of the Sword Saints—legendary warriors whose powers were beyond comprehension. They were not simply skilled swordsmen or mages, they were anomalies. Beings who wielded a unique bond with their swords and magic, capable of defeating S-Ranked mages and monsters with nothing but their blades.

And now, one of them was standing before me, facing down Ronan with a look that said he was untouchable.

"Levi... Wielder of God-Speed?" I whispered, my voice trembling.

The power emanating from him was unreal. His speed was something beyond normal perception. He didn't just move quickly; it was as if he could bend time itself, striking before anyone even realized he had moved. And the way he manipulated magic—it was like he could control nature itself, shadows and flames bending to his will.

Levi wasn't just strong. He was untouchable. No one—no S-Ranked mage, no elemental demon—could stand against him. His speed, his strength, his magic—they were all on another level.

Ronan, clearly unfazed, chuckled darkly. "Was that it? All that boasting, all that bravado... and you couldn't even make me blink. How utterly boring."



Levi's response was a low, menacing laugh that sent chills down my spine. "Ahahahahh... Really?"

He took a step forward, the shadows around him deepening. "Let me make this easy for you: run now, and I might forget this ever happened."

Ronan's eyes burned with rage. "You're beginning to irritate me. Consider all of the warnings off now, I will remove you from existence altogether."

Levi just shrugged, unfazed by Ronan's fury. "Hey, if you're trying to intimidate me, you might want to work on your delivery. I almost felt something—almost."

Ronan closed his eyes, and the temperature in the air spiked, the ground beneath us trembling with the force of his power. The flames around him roared to life, and the pressure between the two of them grew unbearable. My instincts screamed at me, but I couldn't take my eyes off them. Ronan's power was immense, but Levi... Levi wasn't fazed in the slightest.

I was safe around him, but my heart refused to let go. Kaiser was still there—lying on the ground, unconscious. That was all I could allow myself to believe, even if the truth whispered his death. He couldn't be gone. I wouldn't accept it. I would never accept it. Not while there was breath left in me.

In this moment, with everything on the line, my thoughts couldn't stray from him. Kaiser... my friend. My chest pained with the weight of it. If I could just ask Levi—if only he could help, if he could save him... Please, I can't lose him.

"Hey, Levi—" I started, but before I could finish, he interrupted.

"You're lucky you looked pretty. Otherwise, I might've let you squirm a little longer," he said casually, his eyes on me.

"...Excuse me?!" I reacted, flustered by his words. What was he saying?

Kiel, trying to stay strong, spoke up. "Hey, Levi. Let me help you fight Ronan, he is one of the elemental demons. You might not be able to take him on—"

"Oh, how cute. You really want to join the fun?" Levi's voice was light but laced with a deadly edge.

"Let me help you fight, I know we can both beat him." Kiel persisted, but as he spoke, he started coughing, still drained from his earlier battle with Kaiser.

Levi glanced over at him, his eyes cold. "Look, I'd love to let you tag along, but it seems like you're still recovering. You can't comprehend your condition yet. So do me a favor, stay back, and watch me win."



"But... Ronan is an elemental demon. Would you alone be able to defeat him alone?!" Kiel asked, concern etched on his face.

"Nah, I'd win." Levi said simply, the deadly aura around his sword growing thicker with each step as he walked toward Ronan. His confidence was unwavering.

This was it.

The King of Flames versus the Sword Saint of God-Speed. The battle that would decide everything.

## **Chapter 23 - King of Flames Vs Wielder of God-Speed**

### **Levi's Perspective:**

Immediately, I rushed forward, waves of flames flying across my face as I blitzed through them. Elementals always rely too much on their specialized powers, like Ronan is relying on fire. Fools try to match them in their own domain, but the smarter move is to fight them on your terms. For me, the battlefield bends to the greatest Sword Saint of all time, the wielder of God-Speed.

As I closed the distance between us, I caught a fleeting glimmer in Ronan's eyes—fear. It vanished as quickly as it came, replaced by an infuriating smirk of amusement. When I got close enough to strike, he conjured a fiery ring around himself, a defensive barrier designed to keep my blade at bay.

I leapt back, assessing his movements. His lips moved in rapid succession—he was already chanting another incantation. This one wasn't just for defense; it would incinerate anything within seconds. No doubt, Ronan's mastery over flames is unparalleled, but that's irrelevant. Against me, such things are mere obstacles.

"Wings of the heavens, grant me swiftness beyond the storm, speed to shatter time's grip!"

My incantation brought the very winds to life. They swirled and coiled under my command, forming a concentrated cyclone aimed at dismantling his fiery barrier. The torrent destabilized the fire's structure, its chaotic winds depriving the flames of their steady flow. The once-imposing ring began to falter.

Ronan's voice cut through the roar of the storm, laced with mockery. "Oh, you dare challenge the King of Flames head-on?"

I couldn't resist smirking. "Nah, I'll pass on that. I just need to remind you—there's no throne for you to sit on when I'm around."

His amusement deepened. "Is that all you've got, Sword Saint? Pathetic."

He wasted no time unleashing another spell.

"Ancient pyres, awaken and roar! Forge a fortress of searing wrath, devour the storm, and consume all who oppose!"

The ground beneath us cracked, molten veins glowing as flames erupted into a towering inferno. The fiery dome engulfed Ronan entirely, its heat oppressive even from my distance. My wind magic collided with the blazing barrier, but instead of dispersing it, the flames retaliated with ferocity, feeding off the oxygen and surging outward.

Ronan's taunt carried through the roaring fire. "Bold words from a dead man walking. Once I'm finished, they won't even remember your name."

I exhaled sharply, steadying my grip on my sword. Overconfidence. I've seen so many crumble beneath its weight. But I'm no stranger to it myself. The difference? I never lose.

"Shadows eternal, drown the sun. Smother the blaze and cloak the world in endless night!"

Darkness crept across the battlefield, devouring the light with an oppressive shroud. The dome of flames flickered, struggling against the sudden absence of illumination. Shadows moved and thickened, enveloping everything in their path.

In the cover of darkness, I became a phantom. A blur of motion, barely discernible, weaving through the fiery layers. A tendril of shadow slithered toward Ronan as I emerged behind him, my voice low and taunting.

"From darkness, bind! Let your shadow betray you and hold you still!"

Shadowy chains erupted from the ground, coiling around Ronan's limbs. His fiery dome wavered as his control faltered. Before he could react, I closed the gap, my blade poised to strike.

"Your fire burns bright, but even the brightest flame casts a shadow. And shadows... belong to me."

But Ronan was not so easily undone. His voice rang out, steady and defiant.

"Burn brighter, flames of creation! Light the heavens and banish the abyss!"

The battlefield exploded into radiance. The oppressive shadows hissed and shrank, consumed by a blinding inferno. The brilliance forced me to retreat, my eyes narrowing against the onslaught of light.

Still, I moved swiftly, God-Speed reducing me to a streak of motion. Flames erupted in chaotic bursts, but I darted through them, closing the gap once more. Ronan's smirk returned, sharper this time.

"Flames, heed my call! Ignite the ground and consume all who dare approach!"

The earth beneath us ignited, a tempest of fire that turned every step into a perilous gamble. My speed worked against me as I struggled to navigate the flaming terrain. Each misstep cost me precious momentum.

Ronan seized the moment, his voice rising in a triumphant roar.

"Rise from ash, eternal fire! Purge the darkness and bring forth renewal!"

The shadowy chains disintegrated in a blaze of golden fire. A colossal wave of flames erupted, engulfing the battlefield. I was forced to retreat further, the inferno consuming every shadow and leaving no refuge.

When the fiery dome finally shattered, only Ronan and I remained, standing amidst the scorched wasteland. Not a single blow had landed on either of us. Our battle was a relentless cycle of attack, defense, and adaptation.

I hated to admit it, but we were evenly matched.

Ronan's eyes locked onto mine, his voice dripping with mockery.

"What's the matter, Levi? Is that confidence slipping? I thought you were untouchable."

I met his gaze, my tone cold and unwavering.

"Enjoy your little moment. It'll make your defeat that much more humiliating." I said looking at him with a death stare.

"Enjoy it while you can, Levi. I'll strip you of your God-Speed, your gifts—until there's nothing left. And then, I'll kill what's left of you."

I smirked, my grip tightening on my sword. "I don't need my talents to kill someone like you, Ronan. You were always beneath me."

His chanting resumed, a new spell taking shape. I braced myself, knowing full well that he was about to exceed my expectations.

Ronan raised his hands high, and hundreds of searing, needle-like Flame Lances shot into the sky. They hovered for a brief moment, reflecting the blazing light across the battlefield, before descending like a fiery rainstorm—not directly at me, but in a wide,

suffocating area. His aim wasn't precision; it was containment. He was boxing me in, limiting my movements.

"Clever," I thought, dodging left and right, each motion powered by my Godspeed. The world blurred around me, the afterimages of my shadowed form zigzagging through the chaos. Yet as I moved, weaving closer with every step, I realized his strategy wasn't just to trap me but to keep me controlled in his firestorm.

He thinks he can wear me down. Laughable.

As I closed the distance, Ronan's grin widened. He slammed his hands into the ground, and from beneath my feet erupted Infernal Pyres—pillars of fire that turned the earth itself into his weapon. The dual assault of Flame Lances and Pyres created a gridlock of lethal flame. My feet barely found purchase between bursts of searing heat, but I adapted, my instincts sharpening with every evasive step. My movements became a blur, trails of shadow weaving through the fiery maze.

But his grin only deepened.

Ronan's palms met the ground again, summoning Ember Chains. They burrowed deep beneath the battlefield before erupting in glowing, red-hot lines that traced toward me. I landed for just a fraction of a second, and the chains shot up, locking onto my shadow—not my body. Heat radiated from them, weakening my connection to the shadows and dulling my mobility.

I clenched my jaw, frustration bubbling. He's controlling the flow of the battle. I'm adapting, but he's already thinking five steps ahead. Does he think strategy alone can defeat me? The Sword Saint of Godspeed?

I countered, unleashing a barrage of Shadow Spears and conjuring whirlwinds of darkness. The spears struck fast, aiming to pierce through his relentless defenses, while the whirlwinds twisted toward him, threatening to engulf him. But Ronan was prepared. He summoned Flame Aegis, a rotating shield of fire that absorbed and redirected my attacks.

As I moved in for close combat, intent on turning the tide, Ronan revealed another trick up his sleeve. He detonated the Ember Chains, releasing a blinding ember fog—a superheated, luminous mist that burned my skin and robbed me of sight. Even my Godspeed faltered, my steps momentarily unsure as the glowing inferno swallowed my vision.

"Dirty tricks," I muttered under my breath, quickly casting healing magic to stave off the burns and refocus my mind.

"The King of Flames resorts to traps and gambits. How... predictable."

Amid the chaos, his voice echoed, clear and mocking.

"Ashes to fire, wings take flight, Burn the veil, reveal the light. Rise anew, Phoenix Mirage!"

Dozens of fiery phoenixes erupted into existence. Each bird moved independently, their wings leaving explosive trails of fire. I dodged and weaved, using shadow portals to evade their relentless pursuit, but they adapted, colliding with the portals and detonating, collapsing my escape routes. They forced me into the open.

I was beginning to feel it now—fatigue seeping into my muscles, sweat stinging the burns on my skin. His plan was clear: to weaken me, pin me down, and leave me vulnerable.

Then I heard his voice again, mockery dripping from every word.

"Witness the end, as suns collide, Your world burns, and none can hide. By flame's decree, all shall perish—Sunfire Annihilation!"

The air itself seemed to tremble as he condensed every ounce of fire magic into a miniature sun above the battlefield. The heat was unbearable, melting the obsidian spires around us and evaporating the shadows I commanded. My connection to them wavered under the sheer intensity of his magic.

I gritted my teeth. "Is this all he has? Overwhelming force? It doesn't matter. I'll cut through it."

I activated Godspeed, charging straight for him, my blade gleaming with shadow energy. If I could reach him before the sun detonated, I could end this. But he wasn't finished. Ronan summoned Pyric Clones, fiery decoys that exploded upon contact. They slowed my advance, each blast throwing me off balance. Still, I pressed on, each step fueled by defiance.

Just as I closed the distance, the miniature sun exploded in a controlled, focused beam of solar fire. The blast engulfed me, a torrent of light and heat that scorched the battlefield. The ground beneath me turned to molten slag, the air seared my lungs, and even my shadows quivered, barely clinging to existence.

I emerged from the inferno, battered but standing. My body flickered, unstable within the fragments of shadow that clung to me like a tattered cloak. Godspeed had carried me clear of the worst of it, but not before the flames had left their mark. My skin burned, my muscles ached, and my magic felt dulled, battered by the relentless assault.

As the light faded, I surveyed the battlefield. What had once been jagged terrain was now a molten wasteland, steam rising from the cracks. At the center stood Ronan, his

clothes in tatters, smoke curling from his body, but his aura burned as fiercely as ever. He locked eyes with me, his smirk sharp and unrelenting.

"Still alive, huh?" His voice cut through the haze, calm but laced with challenge. "Then let's turn up the heat."

I staggered back a step, my lips curling into a smirk of my own. "You've got me good," I admitted, my voice low but steady.

"You're fading, Levi," he taunted, flames dancing in his hands. "You've got nowhere left to run."

I chuckled, wiping a trail of blood from the corner of my mouth. "Is that what you think? Disappointing, Ronan. You've yet to understand. I don't run. I adapt. And now, it's your turn to burn."

I let the shadows weaken even more, faltering in places, making my movements seem sluggish. My heart beat faster, but it wasn't from fear—it was from control. Every beat was deliberate, every motion calculated. Ronan's eyes narrowed, and I caught the flicker of flames in them.

He was reading me, trying to predict my next move. I almost admired his focus, his precision, but that fleeting thought was drowned in the tide of my strategy. He was waiting for the perfect moment to strike—the moment I was most vulnerable.

And that was exactly what I wanted.

He lunged forward, flames surging in a wave so intense I could feel its heat before it even reached me. My skin prickled, not from fear, but from anticipation. Ronan's fire spread wide, closing me in, trying to push me into a corner. Clever, but predictable. He thought he could overwhelm me, force me to submit under the sheer force of his magic.

But I had already seen this coming.

I let him close the distance, allowing his flames to feel the edge of my shadow. My shadow thinned, almost evaporating under the pressure, but it was a feint. I had planted the seed of deception long before he'd even started his attack—a false image of myself, seamlessly woven into the battlefield's darkness. It stood there, solid and convincing, waiting to take the hit.

Ronan's flames struck, obliterating the illusion in an inferno of destruction. For a split second, his eyes lit up with triumph. He thought he had me.

And that's when I dropped the act.

With a flick of my hand, the shadows surged. They rose like serpents, silent and precise, forming chains that wrapped around his legs and locked him in place. His instincts screamed at him to move, to pull away, but the real trick was already in motion.

His arrogance had blinded him, made him predictable. I didn't need speed, mana or any one of my gifts. All I needed was for him to believe he was winning—until the moment he realized he wasn't.

He thinks he's the king. But in truth, he's just another piece on my board.

The chains didn't hold him for long. That wasn't their purpose. They were a distraction, a means to make him focus on the wrong threat. As his flames clashed with the shadows, I stepped into the abyss, vanishing into the folds of my magic. The battlefield twisted around me, the darkness bending to my will. He couldn't track me, not in time.

When I reappeared, I was right behind him, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his magic. The shadows wrapped around me like a second skin, feeding into my power. This was the endgame.

"You know, Ronan," I said, my voice laced with mockery, "you're almost too predictable. So much power, and yet, your greatest weakness is your pride."

He whipped around, his flames roaring to life, but it was too late. His movements were sluggish, his focus fractured. The moment of realization flickered across his face, a crack in his confidence.

Good. Let that doubt fester. Let it grow.

I twisted my hand, and the shadows beneath him surged upward. They latched onto the flames he'd so recklessly unleashed, twisting and redirecting their energy. The inferno became a weapon against its master, folding in on itself in a violent feedback loop. His magic spiraled out of control, the flames turning wild and uncontained.

"Burnout, Ronan," I whispered, watching as his face twisted with desperation. His own power was consuming him, choking him. Every attempt to fight back only made it worse, accelerating the backlash.

I stepped back, letting the scene unfold. It wasn't speed or brute force that had won me this battle. It was his own ego. He had underestimated me, believed in his superiority until the very end.

"You really thought I was weak?" I laughed, the sound echoing in the burned remnants of the battlefield. "Pathetic."

Ronan growled, his grin faltering. He clenched his fists, flames still flickering weakly around his fingertips. "You'll regret this, Levi. I'll burn you down to nothing."



I raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "You really think you can kill me?" My voice was calm, almost cold. "You've been trying for how long now? Minutes? Hours?"

He grit his teeth, his anger boiling over. "You don't get it, do you?" He stepped forward, the ground cracking under the weight of his remaining power. "I'm the king in this fight. I've been holding back, toying with you. I'll crush you like the insect you are."

I stared at him, unblinking. His words were hollow, his posture desperate. "The king?" I echoed with a soft chuckle, shadows flickering around me in amusement. "You're not even close. I'm not some stray that can be burned away by your flames."

His flames roared to life once more, the intensity of his magic forcing the air to vibrate. "You're a coward, hiding behind shadows! You don't even know what it means to fight for real!"

I smirked, stepping closer, my movements deliberate. "Fighting for real?" I asked, my tone dripping with disdain. "Is that what you call this? Throwing everything you have without a single thought?" I stopped just out of his reach, tilting my head slightly.

"No, Ronan. That's not strength—that's desperation. You're not trying to win; you're just trying not to die. And that's pathetic."

His eyes narrowed, flames crackling around him like a storm. He raised his hand, shouting, "Inferno Calamitas!"

The world seemed to warp. The air grew unbearably hot, the ground splitting under the force of his magic. Flames erupted, towering columns of fire twisting skyward. The battlefield was consumed in an inferno, everything within its reach disintegrating into ash.

But I didn't move. I didn't even blink.

Raising my hand, I let the shadows rise. They spread like ink, devouring the light and smothering the flames. The air chilled, the oppressive heat vanishing as my magic consumed his.

"Umbra Dominatus," I whispered. The words carried weight, a command that the shadows obeyed without hesitation.

The battlefield was plunged into darkness. And in that moment, Ronan's flames were extinguished—not by brute force, but by the overwhelming precision of my strategy.

"Checkmate," I muttered, my voice barely audible over the silence that followed. The king had fallen, and the battle was mine.



The ground trembled beneath us—subtle at first, like a distant whisper. But then the tremors became violent, shaking the earth as if the world itself were being torn apart. My focus wavered for the briefest moment. The shadow tendrils I had unleashed paused mid-strike, and Ronan's inferno hesitated as if caught in an unseen current.

A deafening crack echoed through the battlefield, the sound of the earth splitting open beneath our feet. Massive fissures snaked across the charred ground, radiating outward as something colossal surged upward from the depths. The temperature around us shifted violently, swinging between suffocating heat and bone-chilling cold.

I staggered back, planting my feet firmly as the chaos unfolded. My mind raced, trying to comprehend what was happening. Before I could react, a primal roar erupted, shattering the air and sending shockwaves rippling through the battlefield. It was a sound so raw, so ancient, that it seemed to claw at the very fabric of existence.

Then, I saw it.

An enormous beast burst forth from the ground, a hulking mass of dark, chitinous armor and shifting tendrils. Its serpentine body stretched impossibly far, vanishing into the newly formed chasms it had created. Jagged spikes lined its frame, each one glinting like a blade ready to carve through anything in its path. Its glowing eyes—pools of eerie, unnatural light—locked onto us with an intelligence that sent a chill down my spine.

This was no ordinary beast. This was Leviathan, a creature of legend that had roamed the depths for over 200 years.

It moved with a dreadful grace, its massive form coiling and twisting as though it were one with the earth itself. The air grew heavy with its presence, an oppressive weight that made it hard to breathe. As its colossal body loomed over us, it let out another roar, the sound so deafening that it drowned out the world.

The combined force of our attacks—my shadows and Ronan's flames—was nothing to it. The Leviathan absorbed the impact with ease, its armor deflecting the destruction like raindrops on stone. The ground around us buckled and fractured further, yet the beast stood unyielding, a living embodiment of annihilation.

For a moment, I could only stare. The sheer scale of it, the sheer impossibility of it, left me stunned. And then, as if to mock us, the Leviathan began to sink back into the earth. Its monstrous form vanished into the shadows, leaving behind only destruction and an ominous silence.

But the air didn't clear. The tension didn't fade. Something lingered—a presence even more unsettling than the Leviathan itself.

Then, I saw it.

A figure emerged from the haze, stepping forward with an unnerving calm. The shadows clung to them like a second skin, a cloak of darkness that seemed to shift and writhe with a life of its own. The air grew colder, the oppressive silence broken only by the faint whisper of wind.

"Greetings, mortals."

The voice was cold and detached, carrying an air of authority that demanded attention. I didn't flinch. I'd been through too much to be rattled by a voice. But there was something about it, something that gnawed at the edges of my mind, making me uneasy.

Ronan, ever the hothead, didn't hesitate to respond. "You've got to be kidding me." His flames flared to life, crackling around him like a living thing.

"And here I thought this fight was going to be interesting. Now we've got this overgrown lizard playing savior."

I allowed myself a smirk, masking my irritation. "Oh, I thought you were the hero here, Ronan. A little too much fire for your own good, aren't you?" I tilted my head, my shadows curling lazily around me.

"But yeah, I agree. This thing has ruined our fun."

The figure stepped closer, their movements deliberate and precise. As they approached, the shadows peeled away just enough to reveal a face—cold, angular, and devoid of emotion. Their eyes burned with an unsettling light, not unlike the Leviathan's. This wasn't a monster or human. It was something else entirely.

"I am the Silent Executioner," it said, its voice sharp as a blade. "A follower of the Cult of Nemesis. My purpose is simple: to take control of your bodies, your minds, and use you to fulfill the will of the Cult."

Control? The word sent a jolt through me. I'd fought many enemies, faced countless threats, but this... this was different. This wasn't just a fight for survival. This was a battle for our very existence.

Ronan's flames burned hotter, his frustration spilling over. "You think you can control us?" he snarled, stepping forward. "You've got another thing coming. We don't bow to anyone, and certainly not to some shadow-worshipping freak like you."

I remained still, my mind racing. The Silent Executioner's presence was unnerving, but it wasn't unbeatable. I could feel the shadows around me, their cold embrace a reminder of my strength. This thing thought it could bend us to its will, but it didn't know who it was dealing with.

"Well, well, well," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "A little late for the show, don't you think? We were just getting to the good part. Or maybe you like interrupting people when they're having fun."

The Silent Executioner didn't respond immediately. Instead, it stared at us, its eyes piercing through the air like daggers. When it finally spoke, its words were a quiet promise of pain.

"You will bow," it said, its tone devoid of doubt. "It is not a matter of if, but when. The Cult of Nemesis does not kill. We reshape. We remake. And you... will serve us."

I took a step forward, letting my shadows coil tighter around me. "You think you can reshape me?" I said, my voice calm but edged with defiance. "I don't bend for anyone, least of all some pretentious cultist."

Ronan chuckled darkly beside me, his flames surging with renewed intensity. "Yeah, you're about to regret stepping between us, insect. You've just signed your own death sentence."

The Silent Executioner's gaze didn't waver. It only smiled, a twisted grin that sent a shiver down my spine.

"You will regret resisting," it said, its voice as cold as the void. "But that is how it always is with those who defy us. You will learn. In time."

I met its gaze, my smirk returning. This thing thought it could intimidate us, thought it could control us. But it didn't understand. I'd faced death before. I'd stared into the abyss and come out stronger.

"Try it," I said, my shadows flaring around me. "See how far you get. I'll enjoy tearing you apart."

### **Celia's Perspective:**

Wait... what's going on now?!

I thought it was just Levi and Ronan fighting, but now... what is that creature? It called itself the Silent Executioner...?

Its voice... cold and empty, as if it spoke from a void, not a being. The weight of its presence alone made my knees tremble. And that centipede—where did it come from?! It's massive, unnatural, grotesque, its countless legs clicking against the ground like a storm of knives. It blocked all of their attacks effortlessly, almost mocking their struggle.

Why? Why was this happening all of a sudden? Everything feels like it's unraveling.

Kiel and I had made it far enough to avoid the chaos of their fight. I even managed to drag Kaiser with me. He was still unconscious, thank the heavens. I don't know what he would do if he saw this. No, I don't want to imagine it. Not now.

Still... my heart aches seeing him like this. Seeing my friend—someone I've known for so short yet caring, someone who always seemed untouchable—in such pain and such a horrible condition. His body... It's like he's teetering on the edge of something I can't comprehend. Kiel tried to heal him, to do something, anything, but even he was drained. His magic wouldn't respond, and he needed time to regain his cursed energy.

Time... The one thing we don't have.

My thoughts are a storm of panic. What if Kaiser doesn't wake up? What if Levi can't defeat Ronan? And that creature? The Silent Executioner... what even is it? Its very name chills me to the bone, and I can't shake the feeling that it's something beyond any of us.

I'm scared. For Levi. For Kiel. For Kaiser. For myself. I wish I was stronger. I wish I could help him. Help all of them. But right now, all I can do is stand here and hope, pray, that Levi will come out of this unharmed. That's all I can do. Isn't it?

When I glance back at the battlefield, I see them. Ronan and Levi—enemies just moments ago—are now standing side by side, their weapons and magic raised. The Silent Executioner looms before them, a harbinger of doom.

It's like something out of a nightmare, its form shrouded in shadowy mist, its eyes glowing like embers in the dark. They're readying for another fight, their last stand against this thing. I want to call out to Levi, tell him to be careful, but my voice catches in my throat. What would I even say? He already knows.

It's now or never. One last time to change the fate of everyone here. I can only watch.

Kaiser... He's still lying there, motionless. Or... was he? I blink, and for a moment, I think I see his fingers twitch. Just a little. Was I imagining it? No, it was real. My heart races. Is he waking up?

But then... something feels wrong. There's a tension in the air around him, like the calm before a storm. I crouch beside him, hesitating to touch him, afraid of what might happen. His face is pale, his breaths shallow, but there's something else. A fire burning inside him. I can't explain it. It's not desperation. It's not regret. It's something darker. Something I don't understand.

Disgust.

## **Chapter 24 - The Silent Executioner**

## **Levi's Perspective:**

I dashed forward, the ground cracking beneath my feet as God-Speed surged through me. Everything around slowed down to a crawl—the wind, the faint rustle of leaves, the shifting of the Executioner's cloak. My blade gleamed, aimed to cut him down in a single, precise strike.

This ends now.

But then, eyes around him opened.

Red, glowing like embers in the dark, they pierced through me. It wasn't just a look. It was something deeper. My chest tensed; my muscles froze for half a second. The confidence I carried? Shaken.

Is he reading me?

I faltered, only slightly, but it was enough to make me hesitate. I scanned him, waiting for a reaction, any hint of a counterattack. Nothing. Just the cold, unflinching stare of a predator, as if it knew its prey's every move.

"Levi! MOVE!" Ronan's voice thundered from behind me.

A massive wave of fire roared past, crashing into the Executioner like a tidal wave of molten fury. The flames twisted and surged, engulfing him in an inferno so bright it illuminated the forest around us. The air shimmered with heat, and the trees groaned under the strain of it.

When the fire cleared, he was still there.

The Silent Executioner didn't even flinch.

"Seriously, Ronan?" I smirked, taking a half-step back to regroup. "Maybe next time try aiming for his heart."

Ronan chuckled darkly, the glow of his flames lighting up his twisted grin. "And maybe you should quit shaking in your boots, Levi. Don't tell me those big eyes scared you."

Before I could snap back, the forest around us came alive.

The fire cleared, and he stood there, untouched. His armor glinted faintly as if mocking Ronan's attempt. The air grew colder.

I narrowed my eyes, my grip tightening on my sword. "He's not just standing there for fun."

"Yeah, no kidding," Ronan growled, his flames still flowing at the air around him.

Then we heard it. A sound that froze the blood in my veins—a low, rumbling growl that echoed through the trees.

The forest around us erupted with movement. Branches snapped, the ground trembled, and the skittering sound of claws on stone filled the night.

From the shadows, they emerged—Noctis Graspers. At first, a handful. Then a dozen. Then more.

"Alright," I said, gripping my sword tighter. "This just got interesting."

"Interesting?" Ronan barked a laugh, flames igniting in his hands. "Try surviving."

Massive, four-legged beasts covered in thick black armor that gleamed like obsidian under the dim light. Their claws were as long as swords, their glowing red eyes locked onto us with hunger. These were the Noctis Graspers.

One of these things is bad enough to take down a team of adventurers.

There were at least forty.

"Levi," Ronan said, his voice lower now, more serious. "This is bad."

I smirked, raising my blade. "I've handled worse."

"Really?" he asked, his flames flaring brighter.

"No," I admitted. "But let's see who takes down more of them."

"You're on." Ronan said.

The first Grasper lunged at me, its claws tearing through the air with a screech. I sidestepped, my body moving faster than the creature could track. God-Speed carried me behind it, my blade slicing through the joint in its hind leg. Sparks flew as it collapsed, screeching in pain.

I didn't stop. With a sharp pivot, I drove my blade into its exposed underbelly, ending it in one clean strike.

One down.

But the second was already on me. Its claw came down hard, and I barely managed to roll out of the way, the force of its strike cracking the ground where I'd just been.

Two at once? That's going to be a problem.

Across the battlefield, Ronan roared as he unleashed a wave of flames. The heat was intense, the ground beneath him glowing red-hot as the flames surged forward, engulfing a group of Graspers.

The creatures screeched, their armor glowing white-hot, but they kept coming. One leapt at Ronan, its claws slicing through the fire as if it were nothing.

Ronan ducked under the attack, his fists igniting as he punched the creature square in the jaw, the impact sending it flying into a burning tree.

"That's one!" he shouted, his voice filled with defiance.

Meanwhile, two Graspers had me pinned. One slashed at me from the left, the other from the right. I darted between them, my speed leaving faint afterimages as I moved.

I can't keep this up forever.

I spotted a boulder nearby and made a break for it, luring the creatures toward me. At the last second, I ran up the side of the rock, flipping over their heads. They crashed into each other, momentarily stunned.

That was all I needed. I drove my blade into the neck of the first, then spun around and severed the leg of the second.

"Three down," I muttered, breathing hard.

But I couldn't celebrate. The Executioner's gaze fell on me again, and suddenly, the Graspers began moving differently—faster, more coordinated. They weren't attacking blindly anymore. They were hunting.

On the other side of the battlefield, Ronan was struggling too. His flames engulfed another Grasper, but its armor refused to yield.

"Why won't you burn?!" he growled, his frustration boiling over.

He shifted tactics, focusing his fire on the joints and weak points. A beam of concentrated fire shot from his hands, melting through the armor of one Grasper and bringing it down.

But then, like with me, the Executioner's presence turned the tide. The remaining Graspers began anticipating Ronan's attacks, dodging his flames and closing the distance.

"Damn it!" Ronan cursed, forced to retreat as the creatures pressed him harder.



I tried to move, to find an opening, but every time I did, the Executioner's red eyes were there, dissecting my every thought before I could act. The Graspers surrounded me, their claws slicing through the air as I dodged and weaved.

"Out of ideas already?" I said, my tone laced with mockery despite the situation. I sidestepped a claw that came dangerously close to my side, the wind from its strike cutting through my overcoat.

"Watch your mouth, God-Speed," Ronan snapped, his voice sharp, menacing. "You're not exactly winning this fight either, are you?"

Another Grasper leapt at me; its claws aimed for my chest. I darted to the side, barely escaping its reach, and countered with a slash to its exposed underbelly. Sparks flew as my blade barely pierced the creature's armor, leaving only a shallow wound.

"They're adapting," I muttered, glancing at the Executioner, who remained motionless. The red eyes locked onto me, unblinking, cold, and calculating.

"No kidding," Ronan growled, igniting a burst of flames to drive back a pair of Graspers lunging at him.

"He's toying with us. Waiting for us to bleed out, isn't he?"

I didn't respond. My grip on the hilt of my sword tightened as I tried to shake off the crushing weight of the Executioner's presence. Every move I made, every thought I tried to form, felt like it was being dissected, predicted, and countered before I could act.

"Come on, Levi," Ronan's voice dripped with venom, his flames flaring brighter for a moment as he slammed a burning fist into a Grasper's head, sending it sprawling back. "You're supposed to be the big-shot tactician, right? Figure something out."

"Maybe I would, if your oversized bonfire wasn't such a waste of energy," I shot back, driving my blade into the leg of a Grasper that got too close. It shrieked but didn't fall, its claws swiping wildly at me.

"Oh, you think you're funny, huh?" Ronan snarled, dodging another attack and countering with a wave of fire that incinerated a patch of trees but barely singed the beasts. "This isn't a damn joke, Levi!"

I darted past another Grasper, using God-Speed to flank it, but its movements were sharper now. It twisted mid-lunge, forcing me to block its claw with the flat of my blade. The impact sent a jarring pain up my arm.

"Enough!" Ronan roared, his flames surging with renewed intensity. He hurled a massive fireball at the Executioner, who still hadn't moved. The fire roared through the battlefield, engulfing several Graspers in its path.



But when the flames cleared, the Executioner stood there, untouched. His armor glinted mockingly in the dim light, his red eyes locking onto Ronan.

"You done yet?" I sneered, though my voice lacked the usual bite. "Throwing tantrums isn't going to win this."

Ronan's glare could have burned a hole through me. "Says the guy who hasn't done anything useful except dodge and look pretty."

Before I could retort, the Executioner raised a hand. A simple, deliberate motion, but it sent a chill through the air. The Graspers stopped their relentless assault for a moment, their glowing eyes snapping toward him like obedient hounds awaiting a command.

Then they moved.

Faster, more coordinated. They weren't attacking blindly anymore—they were hunting. The pack closed in on us, their claws slashing with precision, their movements synchronized.

"Levi!" Ronan's voice broke through the chaos, strained and desperate. "We're done if you don't do something!"

"Shut up and fight!" I barked back, barely managing to deflect another attack. My breaths came ragged, my vision blurred from the strain of dodging and countering.

This isn't a fight anymore.

It was a massacre in slow motion.

The Executioner still hadn't moved. He didn't need to. His eyes followed every one of my desperate attempts to find an opening, his presence like a shadow looming over my every thought.

The Graspers pressed harder, their claws raking the ground around us, their growls filling the air with a primal dread. My body screamed for rest, but I couldn't stop. Not now.

"I'll burn them all to ash!" Ronan roared, his flames surging one last time as he unleashed a wave of fire that lit up the battlefield. The heat was intense, almost suffocating, but the Graspers kept coming, their armored hides glowing faintly under the onslaught.

"Ronan, it's not enough!" I shouted, slashing desperately at another Grasper that lunged at me.

"Then we die fighting!" he snarled, his voice filled with defiance even as the beasts closed in.

I wanted to laugh, to mock his bravery, but the Executioner's eyes crushed the thought before it could form. This wasn't just a battle anymore. It was a death sentence, signed and sealed by the silent figure who watched us with unflinching cruelty.

### **Celia's Perspective:**

I don't understand... How are those monsters working together so perfectly? How are they managing to guess where Ronan and Levi may attack from so quickly..... It doesn't make sense that should be impossible.

But my eyes never left them—Levi and Ronan.

They were enemies, their hatred for each other sharper than any blade, yet here they were, standing against the Executioner as if the world depended on it. Maybe it did.

Levi, with his almost inhuman speed, darted around the Graspers like a shadow. His sword struck fast, carving precise arcs, yet no matter how skilled his attacks were, it wasn't enough. Not against those...things.

Ronan, a living inferno, stood his ground with raw power. Flames surged around him, his fists blazing as he unleashed blast after blast. But even his fury couldn't penetrate the Executioner's calm.

And then, for the first time, the Executioner moved.

A subtle shift—a tilt of his head, a flick of his wrist. It shouldn't have been terrifying, but it was.

"He's about to do something," I whispered, gripping the edge of the jagged rock I was hiding behind. My heart raced, a drumbeat against my ribs. I wanted to help. I should help. But what could I do?

"Focus, Ronan!" Levi's voice cut through the chaos, sharp and commanding.

"You don't need to tell me twice!" Ronan barked back, his flames roaring brighter.

I didn't think it was possible, but they were actually working together. Barely.

Levi closed the distance in a flash, his sword slicing through the air with deadly precision. At the same time, Ronan launched a massive hell fire, its heat searing even from where I stood.

The Executioner didn't flinch.

Their attacks were in perfect sync, a combination of speed and power that seemed unstoppable.

Levi darted forward, his speed breaking the sound barrier, leaving minor trails of flame in his wake. Each step was a blur, each movement timed to perfection, as he slashed and weaved around the Executioner with blinding agility.

Meanwhile, Ronan unleashed devastating firestorms, his magic roaring to life with every chant, turning the ground beneath them into molten slag. Together, they were a cyclone of fire and fury, their combined strength erasing the distinction between magic and physical combat.

For a moment, the Executioner faltered, the relentless assault forcing him to his knees. His red eyes flared, brighter than ever, as if daring them to continue. Levi and Ronan didn't hesitate.

With synchronized chants, they unleashed their ultimate attack: A spiraling inferno of unimaginable heat and destructive force, aimed directly at the Executioner.

And then the ground trembled.

A deep, guttural roar erupted beneath us, shaking the battlefield. My breath hitched as the earth cracked, splitting open with violent force.

"What the—?!" Ronan stumbled, barely catching his balance as the ground erupted.

A shadow loomed over us, impossibly large and monstrous. Scales, dark as midnight and shimmering faintly with an unnatural glow, emerged from the gaping fissure.

The Leviathan.

Its massive body coiled, armored plates glinting under the fading light. Its eyes, glowing like molten gold, locked onto Levi and Ronan with a terrifying intelligence.

"No...this can't be happening," I whispered, my hands trembling.

"Stay on your feet!" Levi shouted, his voice sharp with urgency.

"I don't need your advice!" Ronan snapped, flames surging around him again.

But even he hesitated as the Leviathan's massive maw opened, revealing rows of jagged teeth. Its roar shattered the air, a sound so deafening it made my knees break.

And then it struck.

Levi and Ronan moved in sync; their attacks perfectly timed despite their animosity. Levi dashed forward, his sword aimed for the Leviathan's exposed scales, while Ronan unleashed a torrent of fire straight at its head.

For a moment, it looked like they had a chance.

But the Leviathan's scales shimmered, glowing faintly as it twisted its body. The sword strike, so fast it seemed invisible, glanced off its armor, leaving not even a scratch. Ronan's flames washed over it harmlessly, dissipating into the air like smoke.

"What the hell?!" Ronan's voice was raw with disbelief.

Levi didn't waste time. He darted to the side, his movements precise, his blade aiming for a weak point near the Leviathan's neck. But it was no use. The creature was too fast, its body whipping around to intercept him.

The impact sent Levi flying, his body slamming into the ground with a sickening thud.

"Levi!" I screamed before I could stop myself.

Ronan charged, his flames flaring brighter than ever. "You overgrown entipede! Burn!"

The Leviathan didn't even flinch. Its massive claw swiped through the flames, scattering them like embers, before slamming into Ronan. He tried to block it with a wall of fire, but the force was too much. He was thrown back, his body hitting the ground hard.

"No...no, no, no," I whispered, my chest paining.

Both of them, lying motionless. The Leviathan towered over them, its eyes glowing brighter, its maw opening again as if preparing to finish them off.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms. My body screamed to move, to do something. But what could I do?

The Executioner stood motionless in the distance, watching the scene unfold with cold detachment. The Leviathan's roar echoed again, shaking the ground as its massive body coiled tighter.

Was this it? Was this how it ended?

The Executioner stepped forward, leaving behind a trail of ash. His eyes locked onto Levi and Ronan, and even though I wasn't his target, a chill ran down my spine as if Death itself had glanced in my direction.

"Pathetic," he said, his voice colder than the void. "You are insects—crawling in the shadow of greatness. Did you think you could challenge us? Compared to our Lord, you're less than nothing."

Levi, coughing, forced himself to lift his head. "W-Who... who is your Lord?" he managed, his voice trembling with pain.

The Executioner tilted his head, his glowing eyes narrowing as though the question amused him.

"You do not deserve to speak his name. But know this: when Nemesis rises, the world will kneel. It will belong to us, in the palm of our Lord's hand."

Ronan shuddered, the color draining from his face. "You're insane... Nemesis is a myth! You're playing with things you can't control!" he snapped, but his voice cracked, betraying his fear.

"How are you even controlling monsters like that?!"

The Executioner chuckled, a low, grating sound that made my skin crawl. "Control? You think I need tricks for such things? You are a fool." He loomed over them, his crimson eyes casting a sinister glow on their battered forms. Levi and Ronan were utterly powerless, reduced to mere corpses from what they were moments ago.

Then the Executioner crouched slightly, his dark aura expanding like a shroud. "You've lost," he whispered, his voice so low it felt like a death sentence. "Your bodies, your will, your pathetic existence—all of it belongs to me now."

His blade pulsed with dark energy, and suddenly Levi and Ronan convulsed. Their eyes widened in terror as they struggled to resist whatever dark force he had unleashed.

The red glow intensified behind him, a crowd of shadowy, monstrous eyes watching in silence, their intent as clear as the Executioner's words.

"You are nothing but tools for our Lord's ascension. Accept your fate... and despair."

As he spoke, Levi and Ronan's struggles ceased. Their bodies went limp, their eyes dimmed, and they were no longer themselves. The Executioner straightened, turning his attention briefly to me and Kiel. I froze, unable to breathe, as his eyes pierced through me.

Kaiser was motionless, his body crumpled behind me in the shadow. Ronan and Levi's eyes were lifeless, their bodies nothing more than a puppet under the Executioner's control. And now, standing before us, the Silent Executioner loomed—a figure of pure malice, his crimson eyes glowing like dying embers in a void. Behind him, the writhing

mass of Noctis Graspers—a grotesque army of shadowy beasts—awaited their master's command.

"You..." My voice trembled with anger, despair, and something deeper—a helpless fury that burned my chest. "You did this! What kind of monster does this to people? What kind of—what are you even after?!"

The Executioner's cold gaze locked onto me. His voice was devoid of life, each word cutting like ice. "You must be the vessel of the Cursed Queen my lord has spoken of. The one I was sent to kill."

His words froze my blood. Vessel? Cursed Queen? What was he talking about?! I stumbled back, the weight of his accusation sinking in. My anger flared, breaking through my fear.

"If you think you can spout nonsense and terrify me, you're wrong! Who are you? What do you want? Answer me!"

He took a slow step forward, his massive blade dragging across the ground, leaving scorched marks in its wake. "Answers?" He tilted his head slightly, his crimson eyes narrowing. "You scream for knowledge you cannot comprehend. Why should the prey understand the slaughter?"

"Levi, Ronan..." My voice cracked, and I clenched my fists. "You destroyed them for what? Some ridiculous cult?! You think I'll let you—"

Kiel's voice cut through my rage like a blade. "Stop wasting your breath, Celia." His tone was sharp, filled with venom and frustration.

"This bastard doesn't deserve your pity or your questions." He stepped forward, calling upon the voidrend sword using magic, fury etched into every feature.

"Listen to me, Executioner, or whatever the hell you are. In a world like this, a cult like Nemesis will never exist! You're nothing but a stray dog, and I'll put you down like one."

The Executioner stopped, his gaze shifting to Kiel. For a moment, there was silence, then—he chuckled. It was a low, guttural sound that grew into a chilling laugh, echoing across the battlefield.

"Ahahah...AHAHHAAHAA!"

"You threaten me? A fool grasping at broken swords, standing amidst the corpses of his allies? How amusing."

"You won't think it's funny when I—" Kiel began, but the Executioner raised a hand, silencing him with an unspoken authority.

"You want to know how I control the beasts? How I predict your every move?" His voice was soft yet piercing, every word laced with menace.

"You wouldn't understand. But I will tell you this—our Lord sees all. The past, the present, the future. Your fate, your failures, even your pathetic little threats. Tonight, I know exactly how this ends."

"That's impossible," I whispered, shaking my head. "You're insane."

Kiel growled, gripping his sword tighter. "You're lying. No one can see the future—"

The Executioner interrupted, his tone cutting through Kiel's defiance like a knife. "It is not for you to decide what is possible. My Lord's will is absolute, and fate is but a thread in his hands. I know the outcome of tonight, and let me assure you—there is no future where you win. Fate cannot be rewritten."

I staggered back, my breath caught in my throat. Was he serious? Could this cult—could he—really know the future? The very idea was maddening, impossible, yet the certainty in his voice clawed at my mind like a shadow creeping into the light.

"You're insane," I spat, my voice trembling. "You don't know anything. Whatever lies you're feeding yourself, they're—"

He turned his eyes to me, and the air seemed to freeze. His crimson eyes bore into mine, and for a moment, I felt as though the weight of an entire world pressed down on my shoulders.

"You disappoint me," he said, his voice colder than the void. "To think the Queen of Curses would fail so miserably. Weak. Unworthy. A shadow of what she was meant to be."

My chest pained, the words cutting deeper than any blade. I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came out. Behind him, the Noctis Graspers stirred, their glowing red eyes locked on me, waiting for his command.

"You were meant to bring ruin, yet here you are, trembling in the face of inevitability," he continued, his voice sharp and unrelenting.

"This is your legacy. Failure."

Kiel stepped between us, his sword trembling in his grip. "Stay away from her!" he roared, his voice desperate but defiant.

The Executioner tilted his head, a faint, cruel smile tugging at his lips. "You think you can protect her? From me? From her fate? How amusing."

Then, with a gesture, the Noctis Graspers began to advance, their twisted forms moving as one. The Executioner's final words echoed in the air, a sentence drenched in cold, inevitable doom.

"Your fight is over. You belong to us now."

How did it come to this?

I stood there, frozen, as his words echoed in my mind—a relentless tide of accusation, contempt, and truth I couldn't ignore.

Weak. Unworthy. A shadow of what she was meant to be. The Silent Executioner's words pierced not just my heart but my very soul. And the worst part?

He wasn't wrong.

My hands trembled at my sides. Kaiser lay broken, Levi was lost to whatever curse the Executioner had placed on him, and now Kiel...

Kiel's energy was rising again, preparing to fight. I could feel it burning through the air like a wildfire, desperate and unrelenting. He was going to fight. For me.

Why?

Why did it always come to this? I was supposed to be strong—someone who could protect those around me, not drag them into my failures. Yet here I was, standing in the shadow of monsters, relying on everyone else to save me. My chest pained as shame clawed at my heart.

Kiel, stop. I wanted to scream, to beg him to stand down, but the words wouldn't come. Because deep down, I knew I had no right to ask.

What could I even say? That I'd try harder next time? That I'd make it right? How could I, when every time I stood up, I just fell harder? When all I did was make things worse?

The Executioner's voice whispered in my mind again. Failure. This is your legacy.

I bit my lip, hard enough to draw blood. He was right. I was weak. I was a burden. And the weight of it crushed me. Kaiser had to carry me. Levi had to fight for me. Now Kiel—despite everything he's endured—was preparing to put himself on the line.

Why was he helping me? From the moment we met, he made it clear he wanted nothing to do with me. He wanted me gone, cast aside, like I was some kind of threat or nuisance. Yet now, here he was, standing between me and certain death, willing to fight a battle that wasn't even his to begin with.



Why does he care now?

And for what? A girl who couldn't even protect herself? A vessel for some cursed legacy she didn't even understand?

My breath hitched, anger bubbling beneath the surface. Not at the Executioner. Not even at Kiel. At myself. I hated this.

Hated me.

But then... something shifted.

At first, it was just a whisper—an unfamiliar sensation curling around my senses. I could feel the cursed energy radiating from Kiel, raw and unrestrained. It was fierce, burning with desperation and determination. But there was something else. Something darker.

I turned my gaze toward the Executioner, my chest tensing as I felt the oppressive weight of his aura. His cursed energy was a storm—a suffocating void that threatened to devour everything in its path. And yet, amidst that chaos, I felt... something else.

A presence.

It wasn't like the cursed energy or the hatred swirling around us. It wasn't even human. It was... disgusting. Wrong. A vile, dying sensation that clung to the air, as if the world itself recoiled from its existence.

My stomach churned, and I instinctively stepped back. The disgust pressed against me, almost unbearable, but then—

I felt something else.

I turned sharply, my eyes landing on Kaiser's crumpled form. He hadn't moved. Not yet. But in that moment, I could have sworn... his eyes fluttered. Just for an instant.

"Kaiser?" I whispered, my voice barely audible.

Something stirred deep within me, a spark of hope buried beneath layers of fear and self-loathing. It was faint, fragile, but it was there. And as I stood there, caught between despair and determination, I realized one thing.

Even if I was weak. Even if I was a failure. Even if the Executioner's words were true.

I couldn't give up. Not now. Not ever.

Because if I stopped fighting, if I let them all suffer for me without trying, then he really would be right. And I refused to let that happen.

Not again.

I clenched my fists, my gaze hardening as I took a step forward. The disgust, the fear, the shame—it didn't matter anymore. The Executioner might have known the future, but he didn't know me. Not truly.

And as long as I had breath left in my body, I wouldn't let him win.

Not tonight.

## **Chapter 25 - Empress of The Abyss**

Celia's perspective:

My heart raced, each beat thundering in my ears as I turned my head toward the Silent Executioner. A shiver crawled down my spine, cold and unrelenting, as I took in the creature's form.

His silhouette was monstrous, but it was the eyes—countless, unblinking, and gleaming with an unnatural light—that truly unsettled me. They hovered behind him, like specters of his will, each one piercing into me as if they knew my every thought.

But I couldn't focus on him. Not now.

Ronan and Levi moved like puppets under his control, their bodies moving unnaturally, yet with precision that was terrifying to watch. My throat tensed as I glanced to my right. Kiel stood firm, his stance unyielding, his Void-Rend sword steady in his hands. He was prepared to face them alone.

Why...?

Why is it always someone else standing in front of me, shielding me from danger? Kaiser... Levi... and now Kiel. My chest ached with frustration and guilt, but I pushed it down. This wasn't the time. I had to help him. Somehow.

I stole a glance behind me. Kaiser lay motionless on the ground, his dark coat splayed around him, his face pale and still. The sight of him like that struck something deep inside me, a fear I couldn't name. I clenched my fists. He was the first person who'd truly seen me as more than just... the cursed child. I had to protect him.

Footsteps.

Ronan and Levi began to move, their lifeless eyes fixed on us. My lips parted to warn Kiel, but my voice caught in my throat.

"Kiel—"

Before I could finish, Levi blurred forward, a streak of motion too fast to follow. His sword gleamed, aimed straight for my neck. My breath hitched, the icy grip of fear paralyzing me. There was no way to dodge—it was impossible.

But Kiel had seen it coming.

Steel clashed against steel, a sharp, deafening sound that sent vibrations rippling through the air. Sparks flew as Kiel deflected the strike, his movements precise and deliberate. The force of the collision pushed Levi back, but only for a moment.

I stumbled, falling to my knees. The hard ground bit into my skin, but I barely noticed. My hands trembled as I tried to steady myself, the adrenaline coursing through me making my fingers feel numb. Kiel didn't falter. He stood between me and Levi, his back straight, his sword raised.

Levi vanished.

My eyes darted around, searching, but then a roar of fire erupted from the distance. Ronan was making his move to finish us in one swift blow.

The flames surged toward us like a tidal wave, consuming everything in their path. The heat hit me first, a suffocating wall that made it hard to breathe. The air shimmered, and the acrid smell of burning earth filled my nose.

Kiel reacted instantly.

"Clung!"

The ground beneath us groaned and cracked as he slammed his sword into it, summoning a wall of stone to shield us using earth magic. The flames crashed against it with a deafening roar, the impact sending tremors through the ground. I pressed my hands against my ears, trying to block out the sound, but it was everywhere, relentless.

The wall began to glow, its edges softening as the heat bore into it. The air was so hot it felt like it was searing my skin, even from behind the barrier. Sweat dripped down my forehead, stinging my eyes. The faint scent of ash clung to the air, sharp and suffocating.

Kiel turned his head slightly, his voice calm but firm. "Stay behind me, Celia."

I nodded, swallowing hard. My throat was dry, and I could barely force the words out.

"I-I'll try to help..."

Before I could do anything, Levi appeared again, his movements a blur of speed and precision. His strikes were relentless, forcing Kiel to match him blow for blow. Each clash of their swords sent shockwaves through the air, the sound echoing in my ears.

Behind them, Ronan raised his hand, a dark orb forming in his palm. My stomach dropped as the orb expanded, crackling with malevolent energy. I scrambled to my feet, my legs unsteady.

"Depths of shadow, heed my call, Consume the light, devour it all. From the void, your wrath unchain, And let my will become your bane."

Kiel couldn't fight them both. Not like this.

I had to do something.

Anything.

Ignoring the fear twisting in my chest, I focused on the ground beneath Ronan. My hands trembled as I raised them, willing the earth to respond. Kiel had seen me tried and manipulated the ground to react to me. A small tremor rippled outward, weak and unsteady, but it was enough to throw him off balance.

For a moment, Ronan hesitated, and his concentration broke. The dark orb dissipated into nothingness.

Kiel didn't waste the opportunity. With a sharp step forward, he swung his blade through the air, unleashing a rippling void-rend. The invisible strike tore through the space between them, its trajectory fixed on Levi's chest.

The Silent Executioner's eyes flared with recognition, a sickly light illuminating the battlefield. At the last moment, Levi twisted sharply, the void-rend slicing past him with terrifying precision, rending the air where he had just stood.

The fight wasn't over. It had only just begun.

But for the first time, I didn't feel completely helpless.

"Kiel, stay sharp—!" I tried to call out, but my voice was drowned by the roar of Ronan's flames.

"Ignite and consume—Infernal Pyre!" Ronan's voice boomed, commanding the fire to erupt around him. A wave of heat slammed into us as the ground cracked and molten streams began to seep through the fissures.

Kiel gritted his teeth, slamming his hand to the ground. "Rise and shield—Earthen Bastion!"

The ground obeyed, forming a sturdy wall between us and the inferno. The fire crashed against it with a deafening roar, the wall glowing red as it absorbed the relentless heat. My ears rang from the explosion, and the air burned my lungs with each breath.

Before I could recover, Levi shot forward, his sword a blur of motion. "Too slow," he hissed, his speed inhuman.

"Shadows, bind and strike—Umbra Chains!"

Dark tendrils erupted from the ground, aiming for Kiel, but he reacted swiftly. "Winds, tear and scatter—Tempest Break!"

A violent gust of wind exploded outward, shredding the shadowy chains and forcing Levi back. The pressure from the wind whipped through my hair and stung my skin like tiny needles. But before Kiel could catch his breath, Ronan attacked again.

"Engulf and devour—Infernal Spires!"

Columns of fire shot up from the ground, forcing Kiel to dodge. The earth quaked underfoot, sending me stumbling to the ground. Each step Kiel took was precise, calculated, as he avoided both the flames and Levi's relentless strikes.

I watched in helpless awe as Kiel fought to protect me. Every move he made was a desperate attempt to hold them off, but it was clear he was struggling. The combined onslaught of fire and shadow was too much, even for someone as skilled as him.

"Kiel..." I whispered, my voice trembling.

His breathing was labored, sweat dripping from his brow as he blocked another of Levi's attacks. The sound of steel clashing against steel rang in my ears, each blow sending vibrations through the ground.

Despite his efforts, it was one-sided.

Kiel's Perspective:

I gritted my teeth as Levi's blade came at me again. The bastard was too fast, his strikes calculated to exploit every gap in my defenses. Ronan wasn't any better—his fire magic was relentless, giving me no time to counter.

"Damn it," I muttered under my breath.

I swung my void-rend sword to deflect Levi's attack, then immediately raised a wall of stone to block Ronan's flames. But it wasn't enough. Every time I managed to defend, they came at me again, faster, stronger.

"Shatter the light—Eclipsing Blade!" Levi's voice echoed as his sword was engulfed in shadow, slashing through my stone wall like it was paper.

"Shit!" I cursed, jumping back as the wall crumbled.

I couldn't keep this up. Their attacks were relentless, and I didn't have the precision or time to mount a proper counter. My body screamed in protest with every movement, but I couldn't stop. Not now.

"Enough playing around," Ronan growled, flames swirling around him. "Let's end this."

Fine. If they wanted to end it, I'd make them regret it.

I slammed my sword into the ground. "Bind and suffocate—Cursed Thorns!"

Dark vines erupted from the ground, covered in jagged thorns that gleamed with a sickly, unnatural light. They lashed out at Levi and Ronan, wrapping around their limbs and pulling them down. For a moment, I thought I had won.

But then Levi smirked.

"Pathetic," he sneered. "Shadow Rend!"

The shadows around him exploded, tearing through the vines like they were nothing. Ronan roared, his body igniting in flames so intense the air shimmered. The vines holding him burned to ash in seconds.

"Nice try," Ronan said, his voice dripping with mockery.

I barely had time to react before Levi was on me again. His blade slashed across my side, and pain shot through me. Warm blood seeped through my armor, staining the ground beneath me.

"Damn it all," I growled, staggering back.

My vision blurred, and for a moment, I thought about giving up. But then I saw her. Celia, crouched behind me, her eyes wide with fear.

I clenched my fists. No. I couldn't give up. Not again.

Years ago, I had failed her. I'd been too weak, too helpless to shield her from the pain. Her cries still haunted me, echoes of a time when all I could do was watch as the world tore her apart. That memory burned in my soul, a wound that never healed.

But not this time.

This time, I wouldn't falter. I wouldn't stand by and let her suffer again. I had promised her—no, I had promised myself—that I would fight, that I would endure anything to protect her. Even if it cost me everything.

"Not this time," I whispered.

I turned to Celia. "Run!" I shouted, my voice breaking. "Get out of here, now!"

She hesitated, her eyes searching mine.

"GO!" I screamed, raising my hand. "Rise and tear—Cursed Thorns of Despair!"

Vines erupted from the ground, thicker and more menacing than before, their jagged thorns glistening with black ichor. The liquid hissed and bubbled as it struck the ground, its malevolence spreading like poison. The vines lashed out violently, striking with unrelenting force, forcing Levi and Ronan to block and evade.

But it wasn't enough.

Levi moved like a shadow, weaving through the onslaught with an agility that defied reason, his blade flashing in the dim light. Behind him, Ronan's flames roared, devouring the vines in a fiery inferno. The two advanced like an unstoppable force, their combined power bearing down on me.

Pain exploded across my body as Levi's sword bit deep into my side, Levi's blade cutting with merciless precision. Fire seared my skin, consuming the air around me, its heat suffocating. My legs gave out, and I crumpled to the ground, blood pouring from the wound as Levi's blade pinned me in place. The metallic scent of blood filled my senses, thick and suffocating.

Their shadows loomed over me, victory glinting in their eyes, as the world blurred and darkened.

The Silent Executioner stepped forward, his presence oppressive.

"You're weak," he said, his voice cold and devoid of emotion. "Did you really think you could stand against a Sword Saint and a Fire Demon?"

I coughed, blood staining my lips. "I bought her time," I muttered. "Celia... she's safe."

The Executioner tilted his head, a faint smile on his lips. "Safe? You're a fool."

He pointed behind me.



My heart sank as I turned my head. Through the haze of heat and smoke, I saw her. Celia was dragging Kaiser, his body limp, her every step a struggle. Her arms trembled under his weight, her steps faltering as she tried to carry him away.

She could've fled. She could've escaped. But she chose to carry him.

"No..." The word escaped my lips in a broken whisper.

If she had just left him, she would've had a chance. But like always, she was too kind. Too selfless. And now, because of me, because of my failures, she wouldn't make it.

I clenched my fists, the sharp pain from my wounds screaming in protest. My thoughts spiraled, regret clawing at my mind like a beast.

What was the point? What had I done? I fought to protect her, to make up for all the times I failed. But in the end, I had only wasted my life... and hers.

"Get up," I growled to myself, my voice trembling. "Move, damn it!"

But my body wouldn't listen.

The Executioner loomed over me, his shadow swallowing what little light remained. His boots crunched against the ash-covered ground as he stepped closer. I felt his presence pressing down on me, an inescapable weight.

"You can't even stand," he mocked, his voice low and venomous. "You thought you were her savior, but all you've done is condemn her to die alongside you."

He crouched beside me, his face emotionless as he whispered, "You'll watch her fall. And when she does, you'll understand how truly powerless you are."

"No..." I forced the word through gritted teeth. My arms trembled as I tried to push myself up. Every muscle in my body screamed in pain, but I didn't care.

I couldn't let it end like this.

"Still resisting?" The Executioner's voice was tinged with amusement. He stood, towering over me like a god passing judgment.

"Let me show you what real power looks like."

Shadows coiled around him, writhing like living creatures. They reached for me, cold and unrelenting, wrapping around my arms and legs. The icy touch burned against my skin, and I could feel them burrowing into me, invading every part of my being.

"No! Stop!" I shouted, struggling against the shadows.

But it was useless.

The Executioner raised his hand, and the shadows tightened their grip. My body convulsed as an overwhelming cold spread through me, freezing me from the inside out. My mind screamed, but the shadows silenced everything.

"You fought valiantly," he said mockingly. "But now, you're mine."

I felt my will slipping away, my thoughts fading into the void. The shadows consumed me, drowning me in darkness. My body no longer felt like my own—it was a puppet, strings pulled by the Executioner's will.

In the distance, I could still see her. Celia, struggling to carry Kaiser, her determination unyielding. I wanted to scream, to tell her to run, to leave him behind. But no sound came.

I had failed her.

As the last remnants of my consciousness faded, one thought burned brighter than the rest.

I promised to protect her. But I was too weak.

The shadows took me, and I became the Executioner's puppet.

Celia's Perspective:

C'mon, Celia. You can do this. Just keep moving.

I clenched my teeth as sharp pain shot through my wounded leg with every step. My arms ached from carrying Kaiser, his weight pressing down like a constant reminder of my weakness. The metallic scent of blood mixed with the acrid stench of smoke in the air, stinging my nose and making my stomach churn.

The forest around me was eerily quiet, save for the faint crackling of distant flames and the occasional rustle of leaves. Shadows flowed on the ground as the dim moonlight filtered through the charred trees. My breath came out ragged, each exhale a desperate plea for strength.

"Kaiser," I whispered, glancing at his pale face. His chest rose and fell weakly, a fragile rhythm that filled me with both hope and dread.

"I'll get you out of here. I promise."

I tightened my grip around his arm, pulling him forward as I stumbled through the uneven terrain.

Kiel gave me this chance. He fought so I could escape. But why does it have to be this way? Why does everyone have to suffer for me?

I blinked back tears, my vision blurring as my thoughts spiraled. Memories of Kaiser risking his life for me flooded my mind—fighting the Noctis Graspers in the forest, standing against Kiel and Ronan, even when the odds were against him. He had always been there, shielding me from harm, even at the cost of his own safety.

I owe him everything. Without him, I wouldn't have made it this far.

But no matter how much I try, I always end up relying on others. Why can't I do something for once? Why can't I fight for him?

The world around me seemed to close in, the oppressive silence broken only by the pounding of my heart. The weight of my failures crushed me, each step feeling heavier than the last.

And then, the air shifted.

A cold, shadowy aura spiraled around me, wrapping around my body like icy chains. I froze, my heart leaping into my throat. The suffocating presence made my skin crawl, and I felt a shiver run down my spine.

A figure emerged from the darkness ahead. My breath caught.

"K-Kiel?"

He stepped forward, his movements unnaturally smooth, his eyes devoid of emotion. But he was alive. Relief washed over me, and for a moment, I felt a flicker of hope that Kiel had beat them all.

"Kiel! You did—"

"Die."

His voice was cold, empty, and the word cut through my hopes.

Before I could react, shadows closed in around me, and two more figures appeared—Levi and Ronan. Their presence was overwhelming, their expressions filled with deadly intent.

"No, no, no..." My voice trembled as panic set in.

They began chanting, their voices low and rhythmic, the air around them thickening with magic. The ground beneath me trembled, cracks spreading like spiderwebs. My legs felt rooted to the spot, fear paralyzing me.

I clutched Kaiser tighter, his unconscious form a reminder of why I couldn't give up. But what could I do? I was surrounded. I had no weapons, no magic, no way to fight back.

The Silent Executioner emerged from the shadows, the piercing red eyes behind him locking onto me. They glowed like embers, filled with malice and unyielding purpose. Each step he took was deliberate, the sound of his boots crunching against the dirt echoing in my ears like a death knell.

This is it.

I glanced up at Kaiser, my vision blurring as tears welled up. I wanted to scream, to cry, to beg for someone—anyone—to help. But deep down, I knew no one was coming.

"I... I can't let this happen," I whispered, my voice shaking. My fingers curled into fists, my nails digging into my palms as desperation surged through me.

But no matter how hard I tried to think of a way out, I came up empty. I was trapped, surrounded by enemies too powerful to overcome.

"I-I'm sorry," I choked out, my voice breaking. "Kaiser... I'm so sorry."

The Silent Executioner raised a hand, and the shadows around me began to twist and writhe, closing in like a noose. My heart pounded in my chest, the sound deafening in my ears.

"You're a failed queen—a shattered remnant of the cursed legacy you once bore. The Queen of Curses, reduced to nothing but regret."

He raised his hands, the air around him heavy with finality as cursed magic surrounded me.

"Die and return to the void where you truly belong."

This was the end.

Suddenly, everything shifted. The dark forest around me vanished like smoke dissolving into the air. No towering trees, no whisper of leaves swaying in the wind, no familiar faces. Levi, Ronan, Kiel—gone. Even the Silent Executioner had disappeared, his looming presence erased in an instant.

And Kaiser? The reassuring weight of him on my back was no longer there.

Where was he? Where was everyone?

Panic seized me. My chest tensed as I turned in frantic circles, searching for any trace of them. But all I found was darkness. I stood alone in an endless void, an expanse so vast it felt as if it could swallow me whole.

The air was heavy, thick, and cold, carrying a faint metallic tang that made me shudder. Above me, the sky stretched wide, painted in the deepest crimson, with a blood moon glaring down like an unblinking eye. Its oppressive glow only deepened the shadows that surrounded me.

I clenched my fists, my nails biting into my palms. A chill crawled down my spine as I realized something terrifying—I wasn't just in this place. I was part of it, living and breathing inside my own mind.

"What's happening?" I whispered, my voice trembling.

I spun again, my movements jerky and desperate, trying to orient myself. But every direction looked the same—vast, dark nothingness. The silence was suffocating, pressing down on me like a physical weight. My breath quickened, the sound unnaturally loud in this oppressive realm.

How did I get here? The last thing I remembered was standing with the others, bracing myself as their attacks came hurtling toward me. The memory was sharp and vivid—the flash of light, the deadly precision in their strikes, the inevitability of my end. And then...this.

The Silent Executioner called me a shattered remnant. The words echoed in my mind, bitter and raw. He's not wrong, is he? I thought bitterly. I am shattered, failed and cursed. But why? What had I done to deserve this? What sin could justify such torment?

My thoughts spiraled until they were cut short by a sound—a voice. It was low and cold, almost emotionless, yet eerily familiar. It felt as though it came from within me, a chilling echo of my own words.

I froze. My heart pounded in my chest as a figure emerged from the shadows, her silhouette sharp and unmistakable. She moved with a confidence I could never muster, each step deliberate and unyielding, as if she owned the darkness itself.

And then I saw her eyes. They burned with an icy, unforgiving light, her gaze piercing through me like a blade.

"Failed? Shattered? Do not insult yourself with such weakness," she said, her voice slicing through the silence like a whip. "You are no broken fragment—you are the heir to death itself. Rise, or I will carve the throne from your flesh and take it myself. Prove you are worthy of the curse you bear."

Her words struck me like a physical blow. I staggered, my breath catching in my throat. The heir to death? What was she talking about? My mind raced, grasping for meaning, for any understanding of what was happening.

"Who are you?!" I demanded, my voice cracking. But she didn't answer. She kept walking, her pace unhurried, as if the weight of the world bent to her will.

"Tell me!" I shouted, my desperation spilling out. "Why was I picked? I'm not strong—I can't even kill anyone!" My voice faltered as tears welled in my eyes, hot and unrelenting.

"You've ruined my life with this curse! You've taken everything from me!" The words tore from me, raw and jagged. I could barely see through the haze of tears now streaking down my face.

And then she stepped into the light. My breath caught, the air in my lungs freezing.

She looked just like me.

Long, flowing white hair framed her face, her piercing red eyes glinting with an otherworldly intensity. She wore a dark, elegant dress that clung to her like shadows, the fabric shifting faintly as though alive. Her expression was cold, devoid of emotion, but her presence was suffocating, pressing against my very soul.

She wasn't just older. She was me. An older, more commanding version of me, standing tall and unyielding, exuding power and authority. If I was sixteen, she looked to be twenty-two. I took a shaky step back, my legs trembling.

"Who are you? And why do you look like me?!" My voice cracked, rising in pitch as fear and confusion tangled together in my chest. This couldn't be real. It was impossible.

She finally stopped, her gaze boring into me. When she spoke, her words were calm, but they carried a weight that made my knees weak.

"I'm you," she said coldly. "I'm the Queen of Curses within you. I am your future."

Her words hit me like a storm. My mind reeled, questions and doubts swirling in a chaotic torrent. The Queen of Curses? My future? How could that be? How could I ever become...Her?

I stared at her, my heart pounding so loudly it drowned out everything else.

If she was me...then that meant...

I am The Queen of Curses.