The Last Step

#Chapter 29: The Fallen Angel - Read The Last Step Chapter 29: The Fallen Angel

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Kaiser's Perspective:

My battle with Levi had been nothing short of relentless. Countering a natural gift like God-Speed was borderline inhuman, but I had managed so far. Not because I had some grand strategy—no, I was just listening. The rapid sonic bursts of his footsteps, the subtle shifts in his momentum, the air breaking apart each time he moved. It was a crude method, but it worked. I only needed to know where he was going to be, and that was enough to keep up.

Decaying wasn't necessary. It was already over.

The chaos between Levi and me continued, but in the background, I could hear Ronan and Kiel mindlessly attacking Celia. The Silent Executioner had turned them into puppets, and despite their reckless aggression, Celia stood unfazed. Her barriers held firm, chains wrapped around her like an unbreakable cocoon. No matter how much fire and cursed energy swirled around her, it wasn't enough to break through.

Still, I could feel the sheer force of their attacks pressing down on her, flames flowing at the air and dark energy crackling violently. Yet, what unsettled me wasn't their power—it was hers.

Everyone else had an aura of strength, of mastery over their abilities. Celia, on the other hand, radiated something else entirely. Pure, unfiltered murderous intent.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. Even Levi, in the midst of our duel, had spared a fleeting glance in her direction, his usual cocky smirk faltering for just a second. I almost felt bad for Kiel and Ronan.

Almost.

But there was no time to worry about them. I had my own problem to deal with. Levi's strikes were relentless—eight slashes per second. Block, counter, evade. Block, counter, evade. My arms were screaming from the strain, my wrists growing numb from the sheer force behind each flick of his blade. And yet, I wasn't the only one feeling the exhaustion.

Levi's movements were still lightning-fast, but they weren't as sharp as before. His stamina was draining.

Not that it mattered much with that shadowy sword of his. Its power was as underhanded as Levi himself—designed to ease the wielder's stamina management while dealing additional damage to the target's soul. Because why stop at just cutting the body when you can carve into something deeper, right?

Humiliation.

But if he thought he could wear me down with that thing, he was sorely mistaken.

I adjusted my grip on my blade. The fight wasn't over yet—but the tides were about to turn.

We might've been fighting for just a minute, but the number of strikes we exchanged could rival an entire war that lasted months.

Then came the moment.

Levi, drained of energy, misstepped—a rare mistake. He was closer to me than he should've been. I capitalized on it instantly, leaning into his attack.

His eyes widened in shock.

His blade aimed for my right shoulder, but in the blink of an eye, I twisted, intercepted his arm, and grabbed his other before he could react.

With a quick shift of weight, I disrupted his balance and slammed him into the ground. Even I couldn't believe I had just done that.

His Shadowy sword, Mist-Walker, flew from his grasp, and I caught it in the nick of time. A Sword Saint like Levi, unarmed by basic martial arts.

Unbelievable.

But Levi wasn't finished. His eyes burned with anger, but it was already too late.

Mist-Walker allowed its wielder to vanish into the shadows for a few seconds. But now, it was in my hands.

I hadn't technically defeated Levi—just outmaneuvered him. But for now, that was all I needed.

Without hesitation, I blitzed forward, my form melting into the darkness. The Mist-Walker made me one with the shadows, a phantom gliding across the battlefield. For a few seconds, I ceased to exist.

My target was clear—the Silent Executioner. He stood alone, orchestrating the chaos from a distance, the numerous red eyes behind him fixated on me even in the void. Watching. Waiting. He knew.

It was now or never.

But as I closed in, something shifted. Levi. Kiel. Ronan.

Their heads snapped toward me in unison, their eyes burning with a murderous gleam. Like puppets on strings, they turned their attention to me, their bodies coiling for another assault.

This wasn't just a battle anymore. It was a hunt.

And guess what? I was the prey.

Another one versus three. Typical. I swear, people really don't have faith in fighting me one-on-one these days. Whatever happened to good old-fashioned duels? Honor? Pride?

Oh, right. They want to win.

What I call Teaming is what they call Strategy.

Celia's Perspective:

Wait...?

Why are Kiel and Ronan moving back?

I turn my head towards the way they're running, my heartbeat pounding against my chest. They're going after Kaiser. My body moves before my thoughts can settle, feet slamming against the ground as I chase after them. The cursed chains at my back rattle, dragging behind me like shadows that refuse to be left behind.

No... this can't be happening. No, please, no.

Kaiser, why? Why are you trying to fight alone? Please... don't hurt yourself for me again.

I push myself harder, my breath coming in sharp, ragged gasps. But they're too fast. I can't reach them. They're already so far ahead—farther than I can ever reach.

It's happening again.

Even though I have the power, why won't he rely on me? I can protect him—I know I can—but he still chooses to fight alone...

Does he... not need me anymore..?

The thought cuts deeper than any blade, a dull ache spreading through my heart like a slow poison. I bite my lip to keep the feeling from spilling over, but it lingers, tensing around my ribs.

Then I see him.

Kaiser moves like a ghost, rushing toward the Silent Executioner in a blur—appearing and vanishing like a mirage. The sword in his grip—it's Levi's. I don't know what kind of power it holds, but it must be the reason he can disappear.

Levi, catching up, doesn't waste a second. The moment Kaiser reappears, Levi swings with a speed that my eyes can barely follow, his blade cutting through the air with the intent to sever Kaiser's throat.

But Kaiser blocks it. Just in time.

The clash of steel rings out, and the force sends him stumbling back. His boots skid against the ground, but he doesn't stop moving. Then something shifts beneath him.

Cursed mana.

The ground warps, twisting into a monstrous face, its gaping mouth ready to swallow him whole. Kiel—he's the one behind it.

Kaiser's eyes flicker to the threat below. In an instant, he leaps, narrowly escaping the jagged teeth that snap shut where he stood only a moment ago. But now he's airborne—vulnerable.

Ronan is already waiting.

A wave of hellfire bursts from his hand, racing toward Kaiser in a scorching blaze, heat distorting the air around it. There's no escape—

Or so Ronan thought.

Kaiser smirks.

And vanishes into thin air.

Levi, Kiel, and Ronan, controlled by the Silent Executioner, stepped back toward it. They moved in unison, forming a wall between Kaiser and their master, their eyes void of anything but the cold, unyielding obedience of puppets.

They weren't themselves anymore. And yet, the way they stood, the unwavering determination in their postures—it was almost as if they still had a sense of purpose, even when stripped of their will.

The Silent Executioner did not move. It did not need to. It remained still, exuding confidence, as if it had already won.

Then, Kaiser reappeared on the ground, breathing heavily. A thin, crimson line trailed down his cheek, a fresh wound staining his skin and blood coming out.

I felt my stomach twist.

No. Not again. Why is this happening again?

Why is he always fighting alone?

Why won't he just—

Before I could finish the thought, his voice cut through the tension.

"Oh? So you really have to hide behind puppets?" Kaiser asked, his tone light, taunting.

A voice seeped through the silence, hollow and soulless. "Hide? No. I simply have no need to lower myself to your level. They fight, I command. Efficiency over arrogance."

Kaiser chuckled. It was a quiet sound, but it carried a weight of amusement. "Efficiency? Is that what you call it? Sounds more like cowardice wrapped in fancy words."

The Executioner remained still. "Amusing. You stand alone, clinging to the illusion of defiance. Surrender, and I might grant you a painless end. Resist, and you will serve— just like them."

Kaiser tilted his head slightly, a smirk playing at his lips. "Painless, huh? You sound desperate. Is that because, deep down, you know you wouldn't last a second without your little puppets?"

The air grew heavier, thick with something suffocating. But Kaiser wasn't fazed.

He took a slow step forward, his gaze locked onto the darkness where the Executioner lurked. His smirk widened, his voice dripping with amusement.

"You know, for someone who parades around as some ominous mastermind, you're just a glorified parasite." He gestured lazily toward Levi, Kiel, and Ronan. "Hiding behind others, barking orders like a coward who's too scared to get his hands dirty."

Silence.

Kaiser sighed, shaking his head. "I almost feel bad. Here I am, expecting a real fight, and instead, I get some spineless puppeteer too afraid to step onto his own stage." His chuckle was sharp, cutting through the suffocating stillness.

"Tell me, do you even remember what it's like to be anything more than a parasite leeching off others? Or have you convinced yourself that being pathetic is the same as being powerful?"

The air trembled. The pressure around us thickened, pressing against my chest like an unseen weight. But Kaiser just grinned.

"Yeah... That's what I thought. You're nothing more than a disappointment."

"I pity you, really. You parasite." Kaiser's voice cut through the tension, sharp and mocking, his smirk unwavering even as he wiped the blood from his cheek.

The Silent Executioner remained still, unreadable, but I could feel the shift in the air.

A flicker of something. Annoyance? Rage? Did it even feel anything at all?

Then, without a word, it raised its hand.

Levi. Kiel. Ronan.

They lunged forward like hounds unleashed, their movements mechanical, controlled.

My heart clenched, and my legs burned as I pushed forward. I had to reach him. I had to do something. But what? Even with this power, I was useless. I had all this strength, yet I couldn't keep up.

No. Maybe I never could. Maybe I was just fooling myself all along.

Why would he need someone like me anyway? He's always been ahead. Always fighting alone. Never relying on anyone.

...Never relying on me.

I could feel it—that awful, suffocating weight in my chest, pressing down like chains I couldn't break. I wasn't fast enough, I wasn't strong enough. He wouldn't need me. He never did—

"Celia! Please help me defend against Ronan!"

His voice. His voice calling my name.

I almost stopped running.

He... asked for my help?

Kaiser—who's been fighting alone, who never needed anyone—was calling out to me?

I looked up, my breath caught in my throat. He was already locked in a brutal clash with Levi, their swords moving too fast for my eyes to follow. Kiel's cursed magic twisted the ground beneath them, dark tendrils lashing out to consume him.

But it was Ronan who worried me. His hands were raised, and I could see the gathering fire mana, the swirling inferno that crackled in his palms. He was chanting, layering his spell, pouring everything into it.

This was going to be devastating.

Then Kaiser's voice came again, strained but still teasing. "C'mon, Celia! Be fast or else I'll actually die this time—"

He didn't finish.

Levi had activated God-Speed, appearing before him in an instant, blade slicing toward his throat. Kaiser barely managed to block, his feet skidding across the dirt as the force of the attack sent him staggering back.

But I didn't hear the rest. My mind had gone blank after one single word.

Die.

Die..? He will die if I don't do anything? He will leave me like all of them did...? Forever..?

No... no, no, no! Not again. I won't let it happen again. Not Kaiser. Not him. He can't leave me too. I don't care if I have to break myself apart, I don't care if I have to drown in this power—I refuse to watch him slip away like everyone else.

I clenched my fists, my breathing ragged. The memories surged in my mind like a flood, drowning out everything else. The warmth of my mother's embrace before it turned cold. The voices that once called my name before they faded into nothingness. The feeling of being alone—always alone, abandoned, discarded, left to mend the broken pieces by myself.

I don't want to be alone again. I can't bear it. I can't survive it.

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. My chains rattled as they surged forward, no longer just an extension of my power, but an extension of my will.

"Yes, he will. You're to blame." It was a voice in my head, whispering, curling around my thoughts like a serpent.

Me..? He will die because of me?

"You're no angel, you're no savior. You're a fallen angel that isn't fighting." The voice in my head said with a cold tone.

I could see the situation in front of me, my chains being nothing more than defensive tools for my protection, I was too scared to fight and this unknown voice was saying the truth...

What can I do..? I thought and asked that voice in my head.

"Kill Ronan. And Kaiser will live.." The voice said.

I looked over to Ronan who was about to release his most extreme fire spell onto Kaiser, and only I could do something..

I hesitated, my breath catching as a vision clawed its way into my mind—a memory I never wanted to relive.

Kaiser... on the ground, bleeding. His body motionless, his breath ragged, his usual sharp eyes dull with exhaustion. He protected me against Ronan's attack but got himself injured...

And me? I just stood there. I watched. Helpless. Weak.

I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything.

The warmth of his blood had painted the ground beneath him, a sight so wrong, so unbearable, that it had carved itself into my soul. My hands had trembled, my heart had screamed, but I hadn't saved him.

He had been the one to protect me, even when he could barely stand, even when he was the one who needed saving.

I clenched my fists. No.

Never again.

Each day of my life before meeting Kaiser, I had been sinking further into the abyss. Further from happiness, further from salvation. I had prayed, I had hoped, but with each passing moment, I realized—there was no hand reaching down to save me.

No angel would descend from the heavens to help me.

Because I wasn't one of them.

The whisper in my head, the cold voice that had stripped away my innocence—it was right. I was no angel. No saint. I was nothing but a fallen one, left to rot in the darkness.

And in this abyss, there was only one thing left for me to do—make my own happiness. And that meant protecting what was mine.

My gaze snapped to Ronan. His spell was nearly complete, flames twisting around him, ready to incinerate everything in its path. Ready to kill Kaiser.

The weight in my chest twisted into something dark.

He won't take him from me.

No one will.

I took a slow step forward, chains rattling at my side. My eyes burned—not with tears, but with something colder.

"Die."

My final whisper as my eyes filled with murderous intent.

Kaiser's Perspective:

Oh my~ I did expect an all-out attack after that taunt I threw at the Silent Executioner, but did it really have to pin me down with this much aggression? Feels a little excessive.

I stepped back, sword in hand, tilting it just in time to deflect Levi's strike. His speed was getting ridiculous, but I'd seen his rhythm enough to predict him. As soon as our blades clashed, I twisted my body, flipping backward to avoid the incoming sonic wave from Kiel's elemental magic. The air itself screamed as it slashed past me.

Yeah, getting hit by that would've sucked.

Hopefully, Celia had handled Ronan by now. If my estimations were right, her cursed chains should be decent enough to block his fire—at least for a short while. But Ronan's spell wasn't some simple fireball. He was chanting. That meant a large-scale attack.

From what I could tell, he was creating multiple portals of flames in the sky, all of them ready to rain hellfire down on us.

The only real counter? A pressurized barrier of water, something I didn't have the luxury of using. Since, y'know, I was born without magic. An unfortunate inconvenience, really.

That left me with one option—Celia.

But I didn't want to bother her. She still didn't understand the scope of her own powers. It was best to let her breathe, to fight this battle alone if possible.

Then the heat hit me.

I felt it before I saw it—the sudden shift in temperature, the way the air burned against my skin. I turned, expecting to see flames tearing through everything in their path. But what I saw instead—

Left me speechless.

Ronan was being hanged on the neck by her chains.

Celia's cursed chains weren't blocking the fire. No, they were absorbing it. Every bit of flame he had conjured was being devoured, twisting into the very metal that once only served as a shield. And now—those chains were burning.

In a matter of seconds, the battlefield was silent. Even the Silent Executioner, who was always composed, looked... stunned. I caught him standing still, his hands frozen, his puppets unmoving.

I followed his gaze.

There, in the sky, was a silhouette.

Celia.

She stood atop the layered chains, her form illuminated by the fire flowing across them. But that wasn't what sent a chill through me.

It was her expression.

For the first time, I saw nothing in her eyes. No fear. No hesitation. Just an emptiness— cold, dark, unshaken.

My chest tensed.

"Celia?!" I called out.

She didn't even look at me.

Her chains, once defensive, now burning in flames lashed forward, rushing toward Kiel and Levi with an intent far beyond simple combat.

Then I noticed the shift.

The Silent Executioner moved, not in action, but in thought. His body tensed as he glanced down at something in his hand—a note.

His gaze flickered, unreadable yet burdened by something heavy.

How is this possible? The Silent executioner thought.

The air around him pulsed with uncertainty. I could tell—this wasn't part of his plan. It wasn't part of anyone's plan.

The future keeps changing... only a god or an omnipotent being should be able to alter fate. Yet it shifts in the presence of mere mortals. The Silent executioner thought.

Then, slowly, his eyes settled on me.

And I saw it—the calculation, the realization twisting in his mind.

Except that one.

That thought was about me.

The Lord never mentioned his existence. His body does not react to my cursed presence. He has not used magic once... nor does he release any aura... which means he has no mana. The Silent executioner thought.

His fingers curled slightly over the note.

That should be impossible. Every living being is born with some level of mana. And yet, he has none. That is why the future cannot identify him as a living being... and simply skips him.

A breath. A pause. A dawning truth.

I was wrong. Celia, the Queen of Curses, was not changing fate. The Silent executioner thought.

His grip on the note tightened.

She was being changed by the path he walked. The Silent executioner thought.

His eyes flicked down to the words written on the paper, now more like a prophecy than an observation.

"The Silent Executioner will be executed by the Queen of Curses."

Chapter 30 - Decaying Fate

"The Silent Executioner will be executed by the Queen of Curses."

Those were the words on the page clutched in his trembling fingers. He gritted his teeth, sweat dripping down his forehead. His control was slipping.

He needed to kill her now.

With a flick of his hand, he forced Kiel and Levi forward, their bodies moving against their will.

"Strike her down."

Kiel's hands shot up, dark energy crackling in his palms, his voice low and strained.

"Venenum Tenebris: Maledicta Nexus."

Celia's magic trembled in the air as cursed veins crawled from Kiel's fingers, reaching for her like living shadows. The ground beneath them darkened, twisting with corruption as it sought to drain her energy, poisoning everything it touched.

In a blur of motion, Levi appeared in front of Celia, faster than anyone could see. His sword, glowing with elemental power, cut through the air with a deafening roar.

"Vortex Cleave!"

A wave of wind tore through the battlefield, sharp as razors, slicing through the cursed veins. But Levi didn't stop there. His other hand raised, and darkness spread over the scene like a blanket.

"Abyssal Veil."

The world around Celia went black as shadows swallowed the light. The cursed tendrils writhed in the darkness, but the disruption in her vision slowed her reactions. The ground beneath her cracked, and jagged rocks shot up like spears, closing in on her from all sides.

Silent Executioner watched, his mind racing. She's lost control. This is my chance. If they can just wound her...

But Celia didn't flinch.

Her fingers twitched, and the Cursed Chains shot out, slithering through the air like serpents. They coiled around the incoming spells with unnatural precision.

The first chain lashed against Kiel's dark tendrils, absorbing their corruption before pulsing back. A surge of searing flames ignited from the chains, racing up the tendrils and back toward Kiel's own body.

The second chain met Levi's Vortex Cleave mid-air. The instant they connected, a surge of lightning crackled through the chain, shattering the wind spell and redirecting its force straight into Levi's chest.

The third chain struck against the rising earth spikes, turning them to ice upon impact, shattering them into dust.

Levi stumbled, his body skidding backward, coughing as the wind backlash slammed into him. Kiel convulsed as the cursed flames wrapped around him, burning away at his forced resistance.

Celia took a step forward, her empty eyes fixed on them. Her chains lashed out again, the air splitting with each strike.

The battle was over before it could even begin.

Silent Executioner took a step back, his heart pounding.

Impossible...

"Oh my~ Trying to run now?" The voice was unmistakable. Kaiser's.

He turned on his heel.

He needed to run.

Kaiser's Perspective:

I took advantage of the chaos, my body moving before my mind could even register it. Celia had created the perfect distraction, and I wasn't about to waste it.

Silent Executioner's eyes darted toward me, wide with panic. His grip on the others faltered. A split-second mistake.

I lunged.

Levi, Kiel, and Ronan collapsed as the hold on them was released, but my focus was locked onto one target. He snarled, his hands shooting up, black energy swirling around his fingertips.

"Malus Recalling: Fissura Mortis!"

A jagged rift of pure cursed magic tore through the air, its very presence making my skin crawl. But I was already in motion.

I twisted midair, my foot catching the edge of a broken stone, launching me sideways just as the void slashed past where my torso had been moments ago. My body spun, hands grazing the dirt, pushing off into another rapid movement before the second strike could land.

Another spell, tendrils of dark magic snaking towards me.

I slid under them, pivoting just in time to vault over a shattered pillar. My mind was calm, my muscles moving on instinct. Dodging wasn't a reaction—it was an art.

The ground beneath me cracked as more cursed spikes shot up, but I flipped backward, landing light as a feather. My shadowy blade hummed at my side, a whisper of power, but I didn't need it.

Not yet.

His panic was growing.

I could see it in the way his hands trembled, the way his breath hitched. Another barrage of attacks—wild, desperate.

I sidestepped one, spun past another, my momentum carrying me forward like the wind weaving through the chaos. A smirk tugged at my lips.

Too slow.

My foot planted, body twisting as I lashed out. My blade arced toward his throat—

"LEVIATHAN!"

The ground split apart.

A monstrous force crashed up, swallowing Silent Executioner in an instant. A gaping maw, lined with jagged, otherworldly fangs, devoured him whole.

And then, as quickly as it had come, the beast turned, the beast burrowing back into the ground.

I exhaled, my fingers still gripping the hilt of my sword.

"Tch... lucky bastard."

The moment I turned back, the air was thick with tension. Ronan hung limply by chains that Celia had wrapped around him, her grip unrelenting. The faint glint of blood trickled from his wounds, but I couldn't afford to focus on that.

Not yet. Not while she stood there, broken and distant.

Levi, groaning like a man who had spent too long in the depths of hell, was pulling himself up with shaky hands, struggling to steady his breath. I almost chuckled.

He'll be fine, I thought. He always pulls through, somehow. Afterall, he's the self-claimed strongest Sword Saint.

But then, I heard it. The angry, desperate shout that broke through the thick haze of chaos.

"Celia—what—what are you doing?" Kiel's voice softened a fraction, but it didn't reach her. His tone was more pleading than commanding.

She tilted her head, her eyes dark and unfocused. She wasn't just lost—she was gone. Her gaze fixed on Kiel like he was just another obstacle in her path, a risk, a threat to everything she was trying to protect.

"He's a risk to us, Kiel," she said, her voice a low murmur, too quiet to carry any sense of reason.

The chains around Ronan's neck rattled, their grip tightening with every syllable.

"You're all a risk," Celia's voice was flat, devoid of emotion, almost mechanical. "I have to keep him... he's mine to protect. And if I don't, I'll be alone again." Her hands trembled, but it wasn't fear—no, it was something darker, colder. The chains twisted in her grip, the dim light glinting off of them like deadly serpents.

Kiel's face contorted in disbelief, his jaw tight with frustration and concern. "Celia, snap out of it! This isn't you. You're not a killer. Let go of him—let go!" His voice was thick with worry, not just for Ronan, but for her. She wasn't the person he knew anymore.

The weight of her words sank into me, gnawing at something deep inside. Who is this "he" she needs to protect? Was there someone else, someone I didn't know about? What was driving her to this, to push everyone away in the name of keeping him?

Kiel's hands balled into fists at his sides. His voice, though laced with anger, still held a hint of desperation. "Celia, you need to stop this! You're not a monster. I won't let you turn into one."

She didn't react. Her eyes remained distant, her grip on the chains tightening further. The eerie rattle of the metal echoed in the silence, each shift in the chains a reminder of how far she had gone.

"You don't understand," she replied, her voice eerily calm, like a whisper from the abyss. "You're just a threat. All of you are." Her gaze flickered to Ronan, her eyes narrowing. "I can't let anyone get in my way. He... is all that matters now."

Kiel's voice cracked as he stepped forward, his frustration turning into urgency. "Stop this, Celia! Who is this 'he' you're talking about? You'll be alone if you kill us—if you kill me. Don't you see that? You'll have nothing left. Is that what you want? Is this 'he' Kaiser?"

Celia's gaze darkened, her lips curling into a vague yet unsettling smile. It wasn't the smile I remembered—it was cold and possessive. "I'll protect him," she whispered, voice laced with something unsettling. "I'll kill all of you if I have to. All threats to him... will disappear."

The words hit like a blow to the chest, chilling the air between them. Kiel froze, but something inside of him snapped.

"You think I'm scared of you?" he growled, his voice sharp, but his stance faltering. He was trying to stand tall, to show strength, but his body was drained, his cursed energy nearly spent. Every inch of him felt like it was made of stone, weighed down by exhaustion.

Celia didn't flinch, her eyes unwavering.

Kiel clenched his fists, a bitter chuckle escaping his lips despite the situation. "Damn it. If it means bringing you back, I'll fight you."

His words were defiant, but in the pit of his body, there was nothing but weariness. The flicker of cursed energy that had once surged through him now felt like a faint echo, barely enough to stand.

But he wouldn't back down. Not this time.

"Just know," he added, his voice barely above a whisper, "I don't want to hurt you."

But Celia was already moving, her chains snapping out like tendrils, closing in. And Kiel knew that if he didn't fight back, this would be the last time he'd ever see the girl he once called a friend.

I stood there, watching the whole scene unfold. Celia, lost in whatever delusion she'd spiraled into, and Kiel, acting like he stood a chance—great.

Honestly, at this point, I wasn't sure if it was his stubbornness or just pure stupidity that made him think he could win this. If I had to bet, I'd say his chances of surviving this encounter were about as good as my skills using magic. Seriously, the guy was practically on empty, barely holding himself up, and Celia was practically a walking death sentence right now.

Zero percent chance, I thought with a smirk.

But then, that "him" she kept talking about... Who the hell was this guy? She was fixated on him like he was some kind of holy grail. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something big here. She was risking everything, even Kiel's life, for someone I'd never heard of. My mind kept circling back to it. Who is this "him"?

Was she really talking about me?

I glanced over at Levi, trying to ignore the impending bloodshed in front of me. He was still on his feet, using what little magic he had left to patch himself up—again. He looked like he was about to collapse at any moment, but somehow, he managed to keep going. I guess that healing magic of his is good for something. If only it could heal his damn pride.

I shook my head.

The air was thick with tension as Kiel squared off against Celia, his body barely holding itself together. I could practically feel the weight of his exhaustion, his cursed energy nearly drained to nothing. He was hanging on by sheer will-power, but even I knew that wasn't going to be enough.

"You really think you can take me on?" Celia's voice was cold, distant. The chains in her hands coiled and snapped, eager to strike.

Kiel gritted his teeth, fists clenched, but he was too slow. The chains shot out like whips, slicing through the air with a speed and precision that left no room for him to dodge. One of them wrapped around his torso, pulling him off the ground with a sickening crack. He let out a grunt, struggling to stay on his feet.

"You think you can stop me?" Celia murmured, her eyes glazed over. "You're all threats. All of you."

I knew she was far beyond reason now. She didn't care who she was hurting, not even him. She was on a different plane, consumed by something darker.

And here comes the show.

The next chain came for Kiel's legs, tripping him. He hit the ground hard, barely able to raise himself. His breaths came in ragged gasps as he fought to push the chains off, but they wouldn't relent. She was toying with him, pulling him apart piece by piece just like she did with Ronan.

I could see it. She was losing herself. This wasn't the Celia I knew. This was a shattered version, a ghost of the person she was.

I couldn't stand to watch it.

Before she could deliver the finishing blow, a blast of elemental energy ripped through the air, and the chains froze mid-swing. It was Levi. His grin was as cocky as ever, even as his aura crackled with raw power.

"You know, you should really stop getting in trouble." Levi said, his voice laced with that trademark arrogance. "She's cute, but let's be real, I'm the best here."

Kiel, barely able to move, groaned in relief as the chains finally loosened from his body. He dragged himself up, only to be met with Levi's steady gaze.

"Stop fighting, Kiel," Levi said, his voice dripping with that unmistakable confidence. "You're already outmatched. Step aside, before you make this even more embarrassing for yourself."

Kiel's eyes flared with defiance, but his body gave out beneath him. "I can't just leave her..."

Levi's grin stretched wider, almost mockingly. "Oh, but you can. Because if you stay, she'll just end up killing you. You're welcome, by the way. I'm the one saving your ass here."

I watched the exchange, feeling the growing pit in my stomach. I had to do something.

But what?

"Celia!" I shouted, my voice raw, slicing through the madness surrounding us. For a split second, her eyes flickered, her chains hanging still.

She looked at me, but it wasn't her—the light in her eyes was gone. It was like I was staring at a ghost.

"Stop this, Celia!" My words felt weak, desperate. I stepped closer, hoping that somehow, somewhere, the person I knew was still there, beneath the surface.

Her eyes went cold, vacant, like I wasn't even there. "It's not over, Kaiser, stay back." she murmured, and the chains around her tightened as if they were alive. "They're all threats to us, Kaiser. We have to take them out. All of them."

Her voice—her voice—sounded so distant, so detached. It wasn't the girl I'd called a friend. It was like she was trying to convince herself of something, grasping at a delusion for control. She wasn't doing this because she wanted to hurt us. She was doing it for me—for my safety. I knew it in my bones.

This was not making any sense.

"Celia," I whispered, stepping forward, my heart aching. "Please... it's over. Silent Executioner left. You don't have to do this." I reached out, hoping she would just—stop—but the chains whipped around, snapping violently in the air.

She didn't answer. Her face was expressionless now, like the woman I'd known was no longer in control.

"I have to keep you safe," she whispered, almost to herself. "If I don't, you'll be taken away. I can't lose you. I can't be alone again."

The weight of her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I had to stop this madness. I had to get through to her.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, my voice hoarse. "We're friends, Celia. You don't have to protect me like this. You don't have to push everyone away." My chest tensed, and I forced the words out, my own emotions rising up like a storm I couldn't control. "Please... stop this. Please, I'm begging you..."

But she didn't respond. The chains whipped out again, and I was forced to dodge, my body burning with exhaustion from the effort.

And it hit me—she wasn't herself anymore. The fear, the regret of losing me—it was all consuming her. I wasn't fighting her anymore. I was fighting her own fear, her need to hold onto something that wasn't even real anymore.

I could feel it. I could see it. She wasn't in control anymore.

And to save her, I'd have to bring her back.

But would she ever come back?

I watched in sickening silence as Ronan twisted, his body contorting in agony. His desperate pleas fell on deaf ears. Celia wasn't listening anymore—she was too far gone. The chains around Ronan's body snapped tighter, their grip unyielding. With one violent jerk, they tore through him.

His body shredded apart, bits of him turning into fragments, shattered souls absorbed by the chains, as though his very essence was being devoured.

I couldn't look away, even though I wanted to. It was getting out of hand. Things were escalating, and it was beyond my control now.

The silence that followed felt suffocating. The weight of the moment pressed down on me, but just as I thought it couldn't get worse, I heard Levi's voice cut through the tension.

"Kaiser, monkey, stop talking and start fighting." Levi's tone was casual, like he was talking about the weather. "You wanna save her, right?"

I turned to him, one eyebrow raised. "Yeah, I do. But would it kill you to offer a little help instead of just yelling at me?" I shot back, a little irritation creeping into my voice, though I was more amused than anything.

"You're the Sword Saint of God Speed, right? Maybe you should be the one saving her."

Levi grinned like he'd just heard the best joke in the world. "Oh, trust me, I would. But I'm too busy being the best to bother with something as trivial as saving people." He waved it off like it was no big deal.

"Besides, that's your job, Kaiser. You're the one with the emotional attachment to her, not me."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Emotional attachment? Is that what we're calling it now?" I shot him a sidelong glance.

"Look, I'm just trying to get through this without getting us both killed. But if you want to talk about emotional attachments, I think you might be a little too invested in making sure I don't screw this up."

Levi's laugh echoed through the tense air, like he was enjoying a joke only he was in on. "Oh, I don't screw up, Kaiser. You, on the other hand..." He looked me up and down, that smug grin creeping across his face.

"You're like a magic-less toddler. Honestly, if I didn't know better, I'd say you're the one with the most emotional attachment here."

I raised an eyebrow, smirking back. "Oh, please, Levi. You're the one failing to defeat Celia, and you're the self-claimed strongest sword saint? Talk about setting the bar low."

Levi didn't flinch. He didn't even break a sweat. Instead, he shrugged, his grin never wavering. "Ha! Silent Executioner had me under control earlier when I fought her. Don't

tell me you didn't notice. Now the real fight begins." He placed a hand on his sword, ready to strike.

"Time to show you what the real strongest sword saint can do."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, sure. Just don't start crying when you actually have to work for it, alright?"

Levi snorted, clearly unfazed by my jab. "Cry? I'll be too busy winning, Kaiser. You, on the other hand, might want to focus on not tripping over your own feet."

I glanced at Levi, raising an eyebrow as I caught him with that damn smirk on his face. "So, you were just watching the whole damn mess unfold? How the hell do you know what's going on?"

Levi shrugged like it was the simplest thing in the world. "Oh, easy. Even under Silent Executioner's control, I still had perfect vision of everything. It's like being a spectator in your own body, just with extra perks. I was *all* caught up."

I couldn't help the dry chuckle that escaped. "So, you just had a front-row seat while the rest of us were getting torn apart? Great to know you were so comfy."

Levi's grin only stretched wider, that trademark cocky confidence still radiating off him. "Exactly. But hey, I wasn't just watching. I was making sure everything stayed under control. And I trust you, Kaiser. I trust you to handle the real fight—after all, I've seen you in action. You've got this."

I let out a slow breath, feeling the weight of his words. "I'm not that same person you remember from two years, Levi. That guy is long gone."

Levi's gaze softened just a fraction, but that familiar cocky grin never left. "I get it, Kaiser. You're not that guy anymore. But you still have that fire, the one I saw in that 1v1 when I was under Silent Executioner's control. You weren't holding back, and neither was I."

I paused for a moment, my gaze steady. He had a point. That fight had been something else. But this time, it felt different—more personal. "You say that, but deep down I know you weren't at your full potential."

Levi's grin only grew wider, like he was almost enjoying this. "You think that was my full potential?" He chuckled, shaking his head. "Nah, the Silent Executioner's control barely tapped into about 25% of what I can really do. I was still holding back."

I raised an eyebrow, a bit surprised but not entirely. I had suspected as much, but hearing it from Levi himself just confirmed it. "Figured as much," I said with a dry smile.

"Even back in our last fight two years ago, you were holding back. You've always been stronger, haven't you?"

Levi's eyes gleamed, his arrogance practically radiating off him. "Well, I wouldn't say 'always.' But yeah, you're catching on." He paused for a moment, letting the words settle. "Now, let's see what happens when we really go all out."

Levi chuckled, his voice light, but there was something more in it, something deeper. "You've grown yourself, Kaiser. That's why I'm trusting you to handle this together. Don't let me down, Kaiser."

I nodded, a small smirk tugging at the corner of my lips. "Yeah, well, no pressure, right?"

We exchanged a couple more shots before we both saw it—a flicker of movement in Celia's direction. Her chains started to coil, their deadly tips aimed right at us.

I grinned. "Guess the warm-up's over."

Levi's smirk only deepened. "Finally. Let's see if you can keep up, Kaiser."

And just like that, Celia's chains shot out at us with a force that could rip through anything in its path.

The chains shot out like snakes from the darkness, aiming straight for us. But Levi wasn't fazed. He shifted his weight, his sword flashing through the air with effortless precision. Every swing met its mark, cutting through the chains before they could reach him.

He exhaled sharply, his voice steady as he chanted, "Break and scatter—Tempest Severance!"

A surge of wind wrapped around his blade, sharpening its edge to the extreme. The moment his sword met the next wave of chains, they were torn apart like fragile threads, the wind slicing through them before they could reform.

Then, Levi's form blurred—God-Speed. He moved like a ghost, faster than my eyes could track. Every step was a perfect dodge, every strike a counter. The air itself struggled to keep up with him, his presence flickering like lightning across the battlefield. His sword left glowing arcs in its wake, cutting through Celia's relentless assault as if it was all just a warm-up.

I had no magic to help me, but that didn't mean I was useless. I gripped my own sword tight, the familiar weight of it grounding me. When a chain came at me, I didn't have the luxury of just slicing it down like Levi by buffing my sword with magic.

Instead, I sidestepped, using my legs and body to move fluidly, dodging the deadly chains with acrobatic precision.

A chain came at me fast—no time to dodge. I shifted my stance, raising my sword just in time to deflect it. The impact sent a shockwave up my arm, but I barely flinched. I swung my sword in a wide arc, deflecting another chain that tried to strike me from the side.

I didn't have Levi's speed or magic, but I had something just as dangerous—my own instincts and skill. I danced around the chains like they were nothing, moving with ease, dodging and deflecting like I was born for this. Every time a chain got too close, I moved, and every time it came too fast, my sword was there to stop it.

I spun, avoiding another chain that came too close for comfort, and in that same motion, I closed the distance between me and Celia. The air felt charged, like the fight was building toward something more. I wasn't going to get close enough to strike her—not yet—but I had to keep pushing, keep forcing her to react.

Levi was still slicing through the chains like it was a game, every movement flawless, every counter perfect. He shot me a glance, a grin on his face as he effortlessly blocked another chain with a flick of his sword.

"C'mon, Kaiser, you can do better than that." He smirked. "Try not to fall behind."

I couldn't help but chuckle, even as I dodged a chain that came at me from above.

"I'm not the one getting flashy, Levi. You're just showing off."

Levi didn't answer, but I could see the satisfaction in his eyes as he cut through the next wave of chains. I was still dodging, still closing the gap, and every time I avoided another chain, it felt like I was one step closer to bringing her back.

Celia's grip tightened on the chains, and I could see the frustration in her eyes as she tried to anticipate my every move. She wasn't the only one who could play this game.

Another chain shot toward me—fast and vicious. But I was ready. I twisted, dodging it just in time. I didn't stop there. In one fluid motion, I flipped backward, landing softly on my feet with barely a sound. I could see the shock in her eyes as she tried to react to my speed.

I wasn't here to fight her. I was here to make her remember. To bring her back to herself. But first, I had to survive. And if that meant dodging and deflecting her chains all day—then so be it.

Celia's eyes shifted, and for a moment, I saw something flicker there—a cold, empty glint of something darker, deeper. Her grip on the chains tightened, but then, without warning, her expression shifted into something colder, more focused.

It wasn't just anger anymore; it was murderous intent. And I could feel it—like the air around us had frozen over.

Levi didn't seem to notice the shift at first. He was too busy slicing through the chains with his usual confidence, a smug grin still on his face. But the moment her gaze locked onto him, that grin faltered.

Then, she spoke—not in a loud voice, but a quiet, almost whispering incantation. And in that moment, I felt it.

The oppressive weight of cursed magic swirling in the air.

"Hitei no kage, kage no tamashī—"

I didn't know the incantation, but the power behind it was unmistakable. I could see the very atmosphere around Levi changing. His movements slowed as if the air itself was thickening, pulling at him, holding him in place.

"Kuroi sekiyoku—"

A dark aura surged around Celia, the air shimmering like a heatwave as the cursed magic enveloped her hands. The chains were no longer in play.

No, now she had something far deadlier—a shadowy, black mist coiling around her like a serpent, and in her hands, a vortex of dark, pulsating energy began to form. It wasn't just magic—it was something that canceled Levi's God-Speed, the very essence of his power.

Levi's eyes widened for the first time. He tried to move, to dodge, but his body felt heavy, like every muscle was fighting against an unseen force. He grunted, attempting to fight through it, but the cursed magic was everywhere now, surrounding him. The very air felt like it was turning to stone, like gravity itself had doubled.

"Kuro no noroi..." she whispered coldly, her voice breaking the silence like ice cracking in winter.

The vortex of cursed magic pulsed and shot forward. Levi was still trapped, and I could see the realization hit him—he couldn't move, couldn't use his speed to avoid it.

The magic shot out with blinding speed, a massive sphere of shadow that seemed to consume everything it touched. Levi's confident smirk was gone now, replaced with a grimace as he struggled against the curse that bound him.

He tried to bring his sword up, but the weight of her attack crushed him down, forcing him to one knee. I could feel the energy in the air, the destructive force behind her attack—it was no longer just chains.

This was something far worse. A magic that could strip away his advantage in the blink of an eye.

Celia's eyes didn't soften. They were cold—empty of anything except a desire to stop him. Her grip on the cursed magic didn't waver.

And for a split second, I saw a crack in her resolve. Her heart breaking further, her mind slipping deeper into the abyss.

But I couldn't let that stop me.

Celia's eyes snapped to me, and I saw something flicker in them—something more fragile than I had ever seen before. Her face went pale, the color draining from it as if she had seen a ghost.

For a moment, the murder in her gaze faltered, replaced by something else. Her hands trembled, her grip tightening on the chains that had once been so deadly.

The chains shot out again, but this time, they weren't aimed at Levi—they were coming for me.

Her chains reached for me with vicious intent, like they had a mind of their own. I could feel the weight of her gaze on me as I kept running toward her, ignoring the danger, ignoring the pain that would inevitably come. My heart raced, but I didn't stop. I wouldn't stop.

"Kaiser, stop!" Celia's voice cracked, and it broke something inside me. Her words were desperate, almost pleading, but her chains were still coming for me—sharpened, deadly, and fast. "Please! MOVE AWAY!"

She screamed it again, her voice raw, desperate, as if she couldn't bear to see me hurt.

But I didn't stop.

Her chains lashed out, a brutal, terrifying force that sliced the air in half, but I dodged, moving with the grace using acrobatics. My sword remained at my side, but I wasn't using it anymore. I dropped it, the familiar weight gone, and focused purely on my body, on the acrobatics that would get me close to her.

I twisted and flipped, ducking under a chain that would have split me in half if I hadn't moved just in time. Every step I took, every movement I made, brought me closer to her, even as the chains continued to strike at me.

"Kaiser!" she screamed again, her voice laced with agony. Her heart was breaking, I could feel it. She didn't want this. She didn't want to hurt me, and yet, here I was, running straight at her.

But I couldn't stop. I couldn't. Not when she was like this.

I was getting closer, closer with every leap, every flip, but the chains didn't stop coming. Celia's eyes were wide, terror filling them as she watched me draw nearer. The chains sliced through the air with precision, but now there was something else—wind magic. A gust of sharp, cutting wind followed the chains, leaving cuts across my arms, my chest, my legs, no matter how I dodged.

The blood was starting to stain my clothes, but I didn't care. I kept moving, each step bringing me closer to her.

"Kaiser, stop! Please, get away!" she screamed again, her voice breaking, desperate.

Her chains were faster now, sharper, and I couldn't avoid them all. One chain whipped around me, cutting through my side. I gritted my teeth, refusing to fall, refusing to slow down.

Celia's face crumpled, her whole body shaking as she saw the blood. My blood. Her own creation—her own power—was hurting me, and I could see it in her eyes, the horror, the agony, the helplessness.

But still, I ran.

One more step.

One more leap.

And I was almost there, right in front of her.

"Celia," I breathed, my voice barely a whisper as I reached out, my blood staining the floor beneath me. My body was beaten, battered, and broken, but my will didn't falter.

Celia's Perspective:

I can't breathe.

The sight of Kaiser—Kaiser, covered in blood, his body a testament to my own violence—brings everything crashing down on me. The chains I've been wielding, the power I've let consume me, it's all my fault.

He's coming closer, and each step he takes feels like it's pushing the knife deeper into my chest.

I... I've hurt him. The one person who's been kind to me, the one person who made me believe—no, feel—that I wasn't just a monster. I'm trembling so violently I can barely stand, my hands shaking at my sides.

I want to move, to run, to hide from the devastation I've caused, but my feet are rooted to the ground. I can't even look away from him, not even when I know it's my power that did this to him.

Tears fall from my eyes without my permission. I'm not even sure if they're from pain, guilt, or fear. Maybe it's all of them. But as Kaiser slowly walks toward me, I feel like I'm suffocating.

I hurt him... My chest pains, the weight of the thought suffocating me. I never wanted to hurt anyone, especially not him. He was the first person who ever looked at me without fear, without judgment. He saw me as someone worth caring for, worth protecting. But now, he's bleeding because of me.

Because of my cursed chains...

And now, I can't help but think—he's going to leave. He's going to turn away from me and never come back. Because I'm a threat to him now. Because I've become the very thing he's afraid of.

I... I'll be alone again.

I've always been alone. Even in the years I spent crying alone in night, I was used to it. It was my reality, something I accepted without question. But when Kaiser appeared, when he smiled at me and spoke to me like I was worth something, I started to believe—just for a moment—that maybe I didn't have to be alone anymore. Maybe I could smile again. Maybe I could laugh again.

I'm going to lose him.

The thought grips my heart, making it impossible to breathe. In the span of a few hours, he's made me feel more alive than I ever have in four years. Four years.

That's how long I've spent drowning in loneliness, and now I've found someone who makes me want to smile, want to live... and it's my own fault that I'm about to lose him. Because of my own weakness, my own fear.

I'll never laugh again. I'll never be able to smile again. He won't be there.

Not for me.

And yet, as I'm drowning in these thoughts, he's still coming toward me. His steps slow, but they don't falter. His face is determined, but there's something else there.

Something soft. I'm terrified—terrified of what's happening, terrified of what I've done, but the closer he gets, the more I feel like I'm sinking. My chest feels heavy, my vision blurry from the tears, and I can't seem to breathe.

But then, just as I think I can't take it anymore, just as I'm about to fall apart completely, I feel it. His arms around me.

I don't even realize what's happening until I'm engulfed in warmth—his warmth. It's so foreign, so gentle, that I don't know how to react. He pulled me close to a hug.

Then I hear his voice. Soft, steady.

"It's okay, Celia. I'm here now. I won't leave you."

I freeze. I feel everything within me collapse in a heap of relief, of overwhelming emotion. My legs give out beneath me, but he holds me, supports me, never letting me fall. The tears come faster now, like a dam breaking, but they aren't just from the pain of what I've done—they're from something else. Something softer.

He's here. He's still here.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Kaiser..." I can barely get the words out between the sobs. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Please don't leave me."

His grip tightens around me, but I can feel the strength in it, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I let myself lean into it. I can't fix what's happened, but for just this moment, I let him hold me.

I want to believe him. I want to believe that he really won't leave me, that he'll stay, even after all I've done. But I don't know how to trust myself anymore.

I don't deserve this.

The moment his arms tightened around me, I felt like I was going to collapse completely. I wanted to scream, to push him away because I didn't deserve this kind of kindness—not after what I'd done.

Not after I had hurt him so badly.

"I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry, Kaiser." My voice cracks, broken and shaky as I bury my face into his chest, the tears coming harder now. "I didn't mean to hurt you... I didn't... I just wanted to protect you... I thought... I thought if I could keep you safe, then maybe... maybe you wouldn't leave me. But I... I hurt you..." My breath shudders as the weight of my guilt presses down on me, each sob making it harder to breathe.

He's hurt. So much. His blood stains my skin, and I know it's because of me. Because of my stupid chains and cursed magic.

But his voice, soft and steady, cuts through the storm in my chest.

"It's okay, Celia. I'm here now. I'm not going anywhere. Please don't blame yourself okay?" Kaiser says it like it's the simplest thing in the world, like he's not bleeding, like he hasn't just been through hell because of me.

It doesn't make sense. How can he still care for me after what I've done? How can he still want to be here with me?

"No," I whisper, shaking my head. "I hurt you. I hurt you... I thought I was protecting you. But look at you... you're covered in blood because of me..."

He lets out a soft sigh, but there's no anger, no frustration. Just... something warm. Maybe even a little sad, but it's directed at me with so much care.

He brushes my hair back gently, his fingers trailing along my cheek, wiping away the tears I can't seem to stop.

"You wanted to keep me safe. That's all." His words are slow, like he's trying to make me understand, make me see it. But I can't. Not when I've hurt him like this.

"I wanted to protect you... but I ruined everything," I cry harder now, my body trembling in his arms. "I just wanted to make you happy, but now you'll hate me."

I feel his hands, warm and strong, pulling me closer. "Celia," he murmurs, his voice so soft, it cracks through the layers of guilt that are suffocating me. "I don't hate you. I could never hate you. You didn't ruin anything. You just got lost, okay? You got scared... but that doesn't make you a monster."

"But I hurt you," I sob, pulling away just enough to look up at him. I can barely see through the tears blurring my vision, but I can still make out the pain in his eyes. "I hurt you, Kaiser. I... I..."

His expression softens, his eyes closing for a brief moment before he sighs again, this time more deeply. "I know, Celia. I know. But I'm not mad at you. You didn't mean to. And I'm not going anywhere."

I can't stop crying. I can't stop thinking about how I've broken him. My chest feels like it's caving in, like I'll never be able to fix this. He doesn't deserve any of this.

"I'm so sorry... I don't know how to fix this..." I hiccup, tears streaming down my face as I grip onto him harder, as if somehow, I can stop the pain by holding on tighter. But nothing can stop this.

Kaiser's hand moves to the back of my head, gently pressing me against his chest again. I feel the heat of his body, the steadiness of his heartbeat, and it's like it anchors me—pulls me away from the storm of guilt and self-hatred that threatens to drown me.

"It's okay," he repeats, his voice stronger now, more certain. "We'll figure it out together. But right now, just breathe, alright? It's not your fault. And I don't blame you for any of this."

I can't even respond. I'm too broken, too lost in this sea of guilt to say anything. But he doesn't ask for anything more. He just holds me. Just... holds me, and it's enough.

I want to believe him. I want to believe that somehow, he'll stay, that this won't be the end of everything. But it's so hard, because I know—I know—that I'll never forgive myself for what I've done.

"I'm sorry, Kaiser," I whisper again, more quietly this time, my voice trembling. "I never meant for any of this to happen. I just... I wanted to keep you safe with me."

He's silent for a moment, just holding me as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders too. Then, with a sigh, he pulls back just enough to look me in the eyes.

"I know, Celia," he says softly. "I know."

And for just a moment, I don't feel like I'm falling apart. For just a moment, I don't feel like I've lost everything.

Because he's still here. Even after everything. Even when I feel like I don't deserve him. He's still here.

"I won't leave you, Celia," he says, like it's a promise.

And maybe, just maybe, I can start to believe it.

And I didn't even see it coming.

One moment, Kaiser was holding me, his arms wrapped around me like he'd never let go. And then the next... I felt his body grow heavy in my arms. His breathing, once steady and reassuring, became ragged.

He didn't say anything—didn't warn me. He just... collapsed.

His blood, still fresh from the battle, seeped between us, staining my clothes, my hands. I gasped, my heart pounding as I frantically tried to hold him up.

"Kaiser!" I screamed, my voice raw with panic, the sound of it slicing through the air like a desperate plea. I shook him, my hands trembling, my tears falling freely, but he didn't respond. His body, warm only a moment ago, now felt cold, limp in my arms.

"Please! Don't leave me... Please!" My voice cracks, breaking apart as the guilt slams into me again. This was my fault. I did this. I hurt him.

I tried to use my cursed powers—tried to summon the healing magic that I had used earlier to heal him—but it failed me. It couldn't heal the damage I had done. It couldn't fix the blood I had spilled. The magic wrapped around him, glowing faintly, but it was useless.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't undo what I had done. I couldn't fix the broken pieces I had created.

"Don't leave me... please..." I whispered, my voice barely audible as the tears poured from my eyes, soaking into his chest.

I clutched him tighter, desperate, as if somehow the force of my grip would keep him from slipping away.

But he wasn't waking up. He wasn't responding.

My heart shattered.

I had failed him.

I had lost him.

"Please... don't leave me... Kaiser..." I sobbed, my voice breaking, the weight of the world crashing down on me. My body trembled, the air around us thick with pain, with regret.

This... this was it. He wasn't going to wake up. Not this time.

And just as I felt like I was going to drown in the suffocating grief, I heard footsteps—slow, heavy.

They stopped beside me, but I couldn't look up. I couldn't face anyone. Not now. Not when everything was falling apart.

I felt the presence beside me. The shift in the air.

"Celia..." the voice said softly, but I didn't dare look up. Not yet.

Not until I knew if Kaiser would ever open his eyes again.