

The Last Step

Chapter 36 - Strings of Fate

Kaiser's Perspective:

I took Emma's hand in mine, pulling her down gently to sit beside me. She hesitated for a second, her fingers slightly trembling, but she didn't resist. Good. I needed her to stay open—vulnerable. If I wanted answers about the guilds, I had to make sure she trusted me enough to talk.

She glanced at our hands, a faint blush dusting her cheeks. "Kaiser, you're really close, you know..." she murmured, voice barely above a whisper. Then, after a pause, she added, "But I like it..."

I smirked, tilting my head slightly as I leaned in just enough to fluster her more. "Oh? You like it? Should I be flattered?" My voice was smooth, teasing, but just enough to make her shift in place.

Emma huffed, turning away, her ears tinted pink. "That's not what I meant," she pouted.

I chuckled. "So you don't like it?"

She stayed quiet, lips pressing together. Caught.

Exactly what I was aiming for.

I tightened my grip on her hand slightly, running my thumb over her knuckles in slow, deliberate motions. "Emma," I said, my tone shifting just a little, enough to make her focus. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

She blinked, her flustered expression melting into curiosity. "Me?" She pointed at herself, then stuttered, "W-What's so important, Kaiser?"

I let out a small, almost thoughtful sigh. "It's about Levi's guild. The Celestial Apex."

Her expression tensed at the mention.

I continued, voice laced with just the right amount of concern. "He spends too much time there, doesn't he? Instead of spending time with you."

Her fingers curled slightly in my grasp, and her expression turned a bit sad. "Yes... Kaiser, I know. Before the guild, we used to spend a lot more time together..."

Bingo.

"You must miss him a lot," I said, my voice low and understanding.

She nodded, looking down. "I do..."

Before she could say more, I moved—wrapping an arm around her back in one smooth motion. She stiffened instantly, caught off guard, her breath hitching. Her warmth pressed against me, and I could feel her heart racing.

"K-Kaiser..." she stammered, looking up at me with wide, unsure eyes. "W-What are you—"

"Shh." I gave her a comforting squeeze, my voice dipping into something softer. "It's okay. I just... needed to do this."

Her lips parted slightly, stunned, but she didn't pull away. Slowly, hesitantly, she leaned into it.

I let the silence hang between us before lowering my voice again. "Actually... I need your help with something, Emma."

She blinked up at me, her emotions still unsettled. "My help?"

I nodded. "But before I tell you..." I turned slightly, just enough to meet her gaze properly. "Promise me you'll help, no matter what. You trust me, don't you?" My voice carried a weight to it—a quiet, unwavering confidence.

Emma hesitated for just a moment before her lips pressed together in resolve. "...Of course. I trust you."

A slow, warm smile spread across my lips. "Good."

Then, as I glanced to the side, my smile turned just a little sharper.

It was over now.

I could finally start gathering what I needed.

The quiet evening was so peaceful, yet I knew what I needed to ask. She had already given me so much trust, so I knew this next step would be easy. At least, that's how I was going to make it feel.

"Emma," I said, my voice casual, light. "You know, I've been wondering. Your guild, Celestial Apex, it's... mysterious. You've told me so much about it, but there's still so much I don't understand. Like how they pick their members. It's all so selective, right?"

Her eyes shifted away from mine for just a moment, the faintest trace of hesitation on her face. "I... I don't know, Kaiser. I promised Levi—"

I gave her hand a gentle squeeze, just enough to remind her I was here, that I wasn't going anywhere. "Levi's a good guy, I know. But this... it's just between us, okay? You trust me, don't you? You can tell me. I won't tell anyone."

Her fingers twitched, and I could feel her reluctance in the slight tension that held her body. "But I can't—"

I smiled, my tone turning softer, more coaxing. "It's not about breaking a promise, Emma. It's about trusting someone who cares about you. You said you trust me, remember? Don't you want to share what you know? Just a little. I'll keep it safe. I'm not like the others."

She bit her lip, her gaze flickering between me and the floor, as if weighing the words in her mind. "I... I don't know, Kaiser. It's not that simple."

I leaned in closer, making sure my voice was just above a whisper. "Of course, it's simple. You've already given me a piece of your trust. Now, give me just a little more. It's not like I'm asking for everything. Just tell me about how they pick their members. That can't be too bad, right?"

Emma hesitated for a long time, but I kept holding her hand, gently brushing my thumb over her skin. The connection between us, so simple, yet so real, made her feel safe—like she could tell me everything.

Finally, she spoke, but her voice was quiet, like she wasn't sure whether she wanted to say the words aloud. "Celestial Apex... they only recruit people with extraordinary potential. If you don't make the cut, they... they cast you out. But it's worse than that. Sometimes... they silence you. Permanently."

I kept my face neutral, though I felt a small surge of satisfaction. "Silence? What do you mean by that?"

She looked away, clearly uncomfortable with the subject, but I wasn't going to let it go. "Emma," I said, my tone gentle but persistent, "you told me you trust me. And this is important. There's more to this, isn't there? Don't you want to tell me the whole story? You don't have to hold back."

Her fingers tightened around mine for a moment, but she still looked conflicted. "I don't know, Kaiser... Many of those who join never leave. They disappear. No one talks about them. Some of them... are just erased."

"Erased," I repeated, my voice low and thoughtful. "That sounds a little too extreme for a guild, don't you think? But you've seen it happen. You know the truth, Emma. You can't hide it forever. So, why keep it in? Why not share it with someone who cares?"

She bit her lip again, her eyes filled with uncertainty, but the slight nod she gave me confirmed what I already knew—she'd told me more than she meant to. She trusted me.

I gave her hand another squeeze. "Thank you for telling me. You've been more open with me than anyone else, and that means a lot."

"You're doing great, Emma," I said softly, trying to keep my voice steady. "I know it's hard, but you've already been so honest with me. I appreciate that. You know there's more to the story, right? There's always more hidden beneath the surface."

Her gaze dropped to our intertwined fingers, and I could feel her struggle. "I... I really shouldn't, Kaiser. This... This is different."

I raised an eyebrow, my tone light but with a hint of playful pressure. "Different how? You said you trust me. And I trust you, too. Don't you want to make sure I know everything? I won't judge you. You're just telling me what you know. It's not like you're responsible for what they do."

She bit her lip, glancing nervously around as if the walls might be listening, before slowly speaking again. "There's... there's a hidden arena. Deep inside the guild's stronghold. A place where... weaker members are forced to fight each other. Survival battles. The winners... they get higher rankings, privileges, things like that." Her voice wavered, and I could see her hesitation, the guilt creeping into her expression.

"That's... brutal," I said, my voice laced with disbelief, though inside, I felt a thrill at hearing this. The kind of power the guild wielded, the games they played with people's lives... it was starting to make sense now. "And the losers?"

She looked at me, her face clouded with sadness. "They're discarded. Or worse. Used for training exercises by the stronger members. They just... they vanish. Some of them never come back."

I could feel her reluctance, the guilt, and the sadness that rolled off her in waves. She hated this, but she had told me anyway. She trusted me... and that trust was a weapon I could use. Guilt, I knew, was a powerful motivator.

I leaned in just slightly, dropping my voice to a more intimate tone. "It must be hard, watching that happen. Knowing what they do to those people, and still staying there, right? You don't have to keep carrying that burden. You don't owe them anything. You've been nothing but honest with me. But you don't have to protect them anymore. Not from me. Not after all they've done."

Emma's eyes flickered with pain, but she didn't pull away. Her hand tightened in mine, and I could feel her hesitation crumbling beneath the weight of her own emotions.

"Why do you even care so much, Kaiser?" she asked softly, a note of confusion mixed with something else in her voice. "Why does it matter to you? You've already heard so much... I shouldn't have said anything."

I smiled, leaning in closer, my breath brushing against her ear. "Because you matter, Emma. And everything about you matters. If this is what you've been holding inside, then you don't need to carry it alone. Let me carry it for you."

Her eyes glistened, and I knew I had her, not just in words but in that unspoken, fragile connection we had. The guilt she felt, the sadness, it was all too much for her to keep locked away. And I was here, holding her hand, coaxing her into revealing more, bit by bit.

"I—" She paused, swallowing, before her gaze fell. "I never wanted it to be this way. But... the arena. It's real. It's where they send the weakest. It's where they break them." Her voice dropped, barely above a whisper now. "Some don't survive."

I nodded, keeping my expression soft, understanding. "You're not to blame for what they do, Emma. You're strong. You've been strong enough to tell me. And that... that takes real courage."

She looked at me, eyes full of conflicting emotions. "I don't want to be a part of it anymore, Kaiser. But I can't leave. I... I can't."

I squeezed her hand again, pulling her a little closer, making sure she felt safe in this moment, despite everything. "You don't have to stay in that place forever. You don't have to be part of their cruelty. Not when you have a choice now. And you've got me, Emma. I won't let anything happen to you. Not while you're with me."

I lied.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she didn't answer right away. But she didn't need to. The trust was there, blooming in the space between us. And I would use it.

Because I always did.

I watched Emma closely, her expression already tight with guilt, the emotions swirling inside her. The words she had shared so far—each one had been heavy, but this... this one would be the hardest for her to voice.

I could tell. She was scared. And maybe that was exactly why I couldn't stop now. If I let up, she'd close up again. But she had already come so far, and now, it was time for me to push her completely over the edge.

She looked at me, eyes filled with so much conflict. "Kaiser, I... I can't say this. I shouldn't have even told you what I did."

I tilted my head, trying to soften my voice. "You know, Emma, I thought we were past that. I thought you trusted me. It's hard, I get it. But this? Keeping secrets now after everything we've shared?" I let out a quiet sigh, as if disappointed. "I thought I was the one you could lean on. I guess I was wrong."

She jerked her hand away from mine, her lips trembling. "It's not like that," she whispered. "It's just... this is too much. I don't want you to think badly of me."

I leaned forward, my voice dropping low, soft enough to almost be a secret between us. "Think badly of you? Emma... you're the one holding back from me. I'm not the one hiding things. You want me to believe you, to trust you, but you're keeping this from me." I smiled just a little, making sure she could see the disappointment in my eyes. "It's not like I'm asking for everything. But you promised me trust, remember? If you can't be honest now... well, what does that say about us?"

Her face twisted with confusion, and she glanced away, clutching at her sleeve, clearly torn. "I—I'm scared, okay? I don't want to lose you, Kaiser."

I leaned in even closer, my voice softer but filled with a subtle, almost imperceptible threat. "And yet you won't trust me enough to tell me everything, Emma. What does that mean? What does it say about us?"

I let the question linger, my gaze never leaving hers as I let the weight of my words settle in. "What happens when you stop trusting me, huh? What happens when you shut me out like this? What happens when I can't trust you anymore?"

I let the silence stretch painfully long, watching her fidget under the pressure, the guilt building in her eyes like a storm waiting to break. "I'm here for you, Emma. Always have been. But if you can't trust me, then why should I stay?" I allowed my words to hit harder, my voice lowering, smooth as silk but razor-sharp beneath the surface.

"You've been telling me you're lonely, you want someone to trust... but if you keep holding back, how can I believe you really want me here? I've been nothing but honest with you, but you? You're pushing me away. I don't know how I could ever look at you the same way if you can't even be honest with me."

She flinched, her eyes flickering with panic. I could see her resisting, but I was determined to break her down.

I leaned even closer, my breath ghosting over her skin, my hand brushing against her cheek as I whispered, "I won't stay, Emma. Not if you can't trust me. I'm not some stranger you can keep secrets from. You've been opening up to me, and I've been

patient, but now... now you're making me wonder if you even want me here. If you can't trust me with this, maybe I should go."

I paused, letting the words hang heavy, my gaze intense. "You said you wanted me to stay. But if you keep hiding from me like this, I'll have no choice but to leave."

Her eyes welled up, guilt and regret washing over her, but still, she hesitated. "I don't want to lose you, Kaiser," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

I felt a flicker of victory but didn't let up. "Then why won't you trust me? You said I could have your trust, that I could be the one you lean on. But right now, I'm just a shadow, waiting to be pushed out. I can't keep standing by you if you keep things from me. If you won't let me in, if you can't be open with me, maybe we're not as close as you say."

She trembled under the weight of my words, the guilt surging through her, and her lips parted as if to say something, but nothing came out.

I pressed on, my voice barely a whisper, but it cut deep. "You're pushing me away, Emma. You wanted me to stay, to be here for you... but now I'm not sure you really mean that. If I can't trust you, if you can't be honest with me, I'll have no reason to stay."

Her chest tightened, the tears pooling in her eyes, her hand instinctively reaching for mine as if pleading for me to stop. "I... I didn't mean to... I just—"

I squeezed her hand gently, my voice now more coaxing, but the manipulation still evident in every word. "If you want me to stay, if you want me to trust you, you need to trust me too. Otherwise, I'm afraid I won't have a place here anymore. You've made me doubt everything, Emma."

Her shoulders sank, and the last of her resistance crumbled. The words came out in a strangled whisper, guilt and regret filling every syllable. "I trust you, Kaiser... I just didn't want to hurt you, but... I—I'll tell you everything."

I gave a small, almost imperceptible smile, the power shifting completely into my hands. "That's all I needed to hear."

It was all I needed to hear. She was mine.

"It's... it's about the guild," she whispered, barely audible now. "Those who betray Celestial Apex—they disappear. They're erased." She swallowed hard. "By Zain."

I could feel her sadness, the weight of her words pressing down on her, yet still, she went on. "Anyone who tries to leave the guild... they're hunted down. Killed. Or worse. Some are taken for experiments. Others are turned into... mindless soldiers. Used for the guild's army. But it's not just death. It's worse. It's... erasure."

Her voice cracked, and I could see the tears building up behind her eyes, but she blinked them away before they could fall.

I didn't speak right away. I let her words linger in the air. And then I leaned in, my breath warm against her skin, my words laced with a soft, dangerous comfort. "You've told me so much already, Emma... but there's still more, isn't there?" I murmured, tracing my thumb across her cheek. "More about this Zain... about the erasure. You're still hiding it from me. What does it really mean? What happens to those who cross him? What happens when someone becomes... nothing?"

Her whole body seemed to freeze. She was so close to breaking, her chest rising and falling with the pressure of it all. She was almost there—so close. But I wasn't done. I let the silence stretch, urging her, forcing her to face the truth that had been haunting her all along.

She closed her eyes for a long moment, then opened them again, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Zain... he's the one who does it. He... kills them. If you betray Celestial Apex, he kills you." She shuddered as if the words themselves could burn her. "It's like you're erased from everything, they make sure the bodies are not even found."

I smiled softly, the truth seeping into her like poison. She was mine now, all of her fears, all of her trust. I had unraveled her completely.

"You see, Emma," I whispered, my tone filled with something darker now, something almost predatory, "there's nothing to fear as long as you have me. But you need to trust me, completely. Not just with the small things... but with everything. You owe it to yourself. To us."

She looked up at me, her heart in her eyes. She was shattered, conflicted, but she had given in. She had revealed it all. And in that moment, I knew. I had her.

I've used her completely.

Celia's Perspective:

Aw man, I wonder what Kaiser and Emma are doing right now. It's almost sunset, and they're still not back. Levi's off doing whatever with his guild, leaving me here alone. Again. It's not like I mind being by myself... but I kinda do, you know? The house feels... empty. Like, yeah, I could be out there, too, fighting or whatever, but I'm not like them. I'd just end up looking like a fool.

I can't help but smile, though, thinking about Kaiser's promise to take me out tomorrow. He always knows how to make me feel... special, I guess. I'm looking forward to it. I think maybe that's why I'm so antsy today, waiting for something to happen. It's like... waiting for the best part of your day, and it's just not here yet.

I bet Kaiser's with Emma. Maybe they're talking, walking by the lake, maybe just chilling somewhere... I can almost picture them. Well, maybe Emma isn't super comfy around him yet, but Kaiser's got that charm, you know? He's... well, he's Kaiser. I wonder if one day she'll trust him the way I do. She doesn't know him like I do... I mean, how could she?

Ugh, I'm thinking too much again. It's just... I don't know. The thought of him with her—spending the day with her, like they're some team or something. I don't know why that bugs me, but it does. I should be the one with him. I've known him longer, right? It's not fair. I mean, I know he cares about me. He promised me. But still...

I shake my head, trying to get rid of the nagging thought. It's silly. But I keep walking around Levi's place, just aimlessly moving from room to room. I'm not sure what I'm even looking for, but I need something to distract me from my thoughts. Maybe a book. A good book always makes things better.

That's when I see it—the shelf of books. They look... old. The kind of books you'd find in a dusty library that smells like parchment and ink. I reach for a random one, but then a voice... a voice? It was more like whispers—like soft, dark murmurs tickling my ears.

"Read it. Become one with us, our queen."

My hand freezes in mid-air. I don't know why, but those words feel... wrong. I quickly pull my hand back, my heart hammering against my chest. What was that? I shake my head, trying to brush it off, but the voice... the voice is still there. It's like it's in my head, echoing.

What the heck? Am I losing my mind?

I glance at the book again. "Basics Over Curses." I swallow hard. Curses... I've always been a little scared of curses, especially my own. My cursed chains... I can't forget that moment, when they hurt Kaiser. The memory makes my chest tense, my heart aching. I can't... I can't touch it. Not again.

But it's just a book. A stupid book. Why should I be scared?

The voice in my head pushes again, its tone more insistent this time.

"You can learn more. Learn about curses, how they work. You can be strong. Don't you want to know more?"

I bite my lip, trying to fight the temptation. I shouldn't, I tell myself. I can't. If I read it, what if... what if something happens? What if I hurt someone again?

The voice doesn't stop. It's almost soothing now, like a sweet melody trying to pull me in.

"You won't hurt anyone. Not if you learn. You can protect him better. You can protect Kaiser."

Kaiser. That name echoes through me like a bell, shaking me to the core. Protect him. I know I want to. I don't want him to get hurt because of me. I never want him to go through what he did because of my curse. But...

The memory flashes again—when my chains lashed out at him, causing him pain. I can still see his face, his eyes... filled with concern and anger. It's like a punch to the gut.

I hurt him... I can't do that again. I just can't.

But then the voice—her voice—cuts through my thoughts. It's different now. It's familiar, like a distant memory I can't quite place.

"You're weak, Celia. You're too weak. Kaiser is out there, fighting, protecting you, and you... you're standing here, afraid of what you could be. Do you really want him to get hurt? Do you want him to leave you?"

The words are like a cold slap to my face.

Leave me?

I freeze. I can't... I can't lose him. Not after everything. Not after he's been there for me. Not after everything we've been through.

The voice goes on, twisting the words in my mind like a knife, digging deeper.

"If you don't get stronger, if you don't learn, he will. He'll get hurt protecting you. Or worse—he'll leave you. You'll be alone. Again."

The thought of him leaving me, walking away, just... disappearing... makes my chest burn. I can't... I can't let that happen.

The voice then, almost like it's reading my mind, adds, "You don't want to be weak anymore, do you? You want to be strong, to stand by his side, and to never feel like you're holding him back. If you don't read this, if you don't take control... you'll never be enough."

Never be enough. The words crash into me like a wave, knocking me off balance. They hit harder than anything ever has. And just like that, something inside me snaps.

I can't lose him. I won't.

I reach for the book. My fingers tremble as I pull it from the shelf, clutching it to my chest. I don't know what I'll find inside. I don't know if this is the right choice. But right

now, all I can think about is him—Kaiser. His smile. His eyes. And how much I need to protect him.

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding.

"I'll do it," I whisper to myself, more to convince myself than anything. "I'll do it... for him. To learn more about myself."

The weight of the book feels heavier than I imagined, but I know I can't turn back now. Not after everything that's been said. Not after everything I've felt.

I hesitated for a moment, staring at the old book in my hands. The cover was worn, the title barely visible beneath the layer of dust—Basics Over Curses. Something about it felt... wrong. Like I shouldn't be holding it. Like it wasn't meant for someone like me.

But I had already picked it up. And well... if a book practically calls out to you, what else are you supposed to do? Ignore it? Yeah, no. That's how people in scary stories get haunted. Not me. Nope.

I sat on the floor, legs tucked beneath me, and opened the book.

"The Nature of Cursed Magic"

Cursed magic is born from negative emotions—fear, hatred, sorrow, and despair. Unlike Celestial magic, it does not rely on external mana but rather corrupts the user's life force to fuel itself. The stronger the emotions, the more potent the curse.

I paused.

...Okay. That's. Um. Kind of terrifying?

So, basically, cursed magic is like a parasite. Instead of using mana like normal magic, it just eats away at you. And the stronger your bad feelings are, the stronger the curse gets?

I bit my lip, gripping the book tighter.

Then... does that mean when I—when my chains hurt Kaiser... it was because of my emotions?

A sharp, awful pain twisted in my chest.

I shook my head and quickly flipped the page.

"The Concept of a Cursebearer"

Those born with cursed magic are called Cursebearers—their magic manifests naturally without learning. A Cursebearer's body is partially resistant to their own curses but not immune. Some Cursebearers unknowingly pass their curse onto others, spreading suffering.

I stared at that last sentence for a long time.

Spreading suffering.

I suddenly felt sick.

So... people like me—Cursebears—are basically walking disasters, huh? Great. Fantastic. Just what I wanted to hear.

I groaned, burying my face in my hands.

"Kaiser's never gonna leave me, right?" I mumbled. "I mean... it's not like I'll curse him more just by being around him, right?"

Silence.

...I don't like that I have to ask that question.

I exhaled sharply and continued reading.

"The Difference Between Celestial Magic & Cursed Magic"

Celestial magic requires spellcasting and external mana control. Cursed magic activates instinctively, needing only intent and emotion. Normal magic weakens with exhaustion, while cursed magic gets stronger when the user is hurt or emotionally unstable.

I blinked.

"...Wait, what?"

That means—if I'm emotionally unstable, my curses get stronger?!

Oh no. No, no, no. That's not fair. I get emotionally unstable all the time!

So you're telling me every time I panic, get scared, or—worse—feel sad, my cursed chains just get stronger on their own?!

I flopped onto my back, staring blankly at the ceiling. "I'm doomed," I whispered.

Kaiser always tells me not to worry too much, but how can I not worry about this?! What if I'm next to him and I get upset and my cursed chains just—just go wild again?! What if—

I squeezed my eyes shut.

No. No, stop. Breathe.

I took a deep breath and turned the page.

"The Forbidden Rule of Curses"

A curse always takes something in return—whether it's a part of the caster's body, mind, or soul. The more powerful the curse, the greater the price. No curse can ever be undone completely—it can only be transferred or sealed.

...Oh.

Oh, I really don't like that.

So no matter what, once you're cursed, that's it? You're stuck with it? And if you use your curse too much, it takes something from you? Your body, your mind... your soul?!

I gulped.

Have I already lost something?

The thought made me shiver.

I flipped to the next page.

"The Queen of Curses & Her Legacy"

The Queen of Curses was the strongest Cursebearer in history, wielding curses without limits. Her mere presence twisted reality itself, and her magic could wipe entire towns off the map in seconds, reducing them to nothing but dust beneath her feet. No fortress, no army, no mage could withstand her power. Wherever she walked, only ruin remained.

Yet... I had heard she left behind no descendants. Her cursed magic was said to have consumed everything—even herself. And my family? My village? No one had cursed magic. Not a single person.

But then I remember... Kiel had used cursed magic during the battle a few days ago. He was a Cursebearer. Did that mean—?

I stopped breathing.

Wait.

Wait, wait, wait.

Queen of Curses?! Strongest Cursebearer?! Bloodline?!

Does that mean—there's a chance—could I be—

The air grew heavy. A chill crawled up my spine. The room felt colder.

And then, just barely, I heard it.

A voice. Soft. Amused. Familiar.

But I couldn't focus on it. Not yet. My heart was pounding too hard, my mind racing too fast.

No one in my family had cursed energy. Not my parents. Not my grandparents. Not a single person from my village had ever shown signs of it. We were just normal. Just normal except Kiel who moved into the village, not born there.

But then—when I transformed. When my hair turned white, my eyes burned red—everything changed. I could feel something. Something dark. It wrapped around me like unseen chains, tightening, pulling. My body was mine, but at the same time, it wasn't.

So what if... it had always been there?

What if it wasn't new but something buried—something waiting?

Cursed magic grows from emotions. That's what the book said. Fear. Hatred. Sorrow. Despair.

I had been scared. I had felt helpless.

And in that moment—when I changed—was it because... it was finally time? Because it had always been inside me, just waiting for the right moment to break free?

My hands curled into fists.

I swallowed hard.

And then, finally, I listened.

To the voice that should not have been there.

"You've barely scratched the surface... but at least you're starting to understand."

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest.

That voice—

It was mine.

But not me.

A deeper, older, colder version of me. A version of me that didn't belong to this moment.

A version of me that felt—wrong.

I swallowed hard, fingers gripping the book like a lifeline.

"W-Who...?" My voice was barely above a whisper.

The voice chuckled. "You'll know soon enough."

I shuddered.

This book. This stupid book.

I should close it. I should put it back. I shouldn't be reading this.

But my fingers refused to let go.

Because deep down, I already knew.

I couldn't stop.

Not until I found out the truth.

And for some reason... that terrified me.

Chapter 37 - Meaning Behind Curses

Celia's Perspective:

I settled into the chair by the window, curling my legs up as the sky outside burned orange with the sunset. The book in my lap was old, its pages worn and fragile, but I couldn't put it down.

I had started this out of curiosity—just another attempt to understand the strange whispers in my head. But the more I read, the more I realized that this wasn't just some story about an ancient, terrifying sorceress. Every page felt like it was describing me.

The Queen of Curses.

I swallowed hard, skimming through paragraphs of fearsome titles and grim descriptions. Then my eyes landed on the first horrifying ability.

The Queen of Curses had the power to turn the dead into her cursed soldiers.

Oh. Okay. That was... a lot.

It meant she could create an army whenever she wanted—no need for recruitment, food, or morale. Just bodies obeying her will, fighting endlessly. I frowned. That was more than terrifying. That was unfair. Like, imagine spending your whole life training to be an adventurer, only to die and still have to work? No thanks.

I kept reading.

Then came the worst part. Her passive abilities. Just existing near her was a curse.

Throne of Ruin

"A passive aura of decay and misfortune. Anyone in her presence slowly loses strength, their magic weakens, and their mind crumbles under unseen whispers."

I sat up straighter. That sounded familiar. Too familiar. My whole life, people avoided me, acted like I was bringing misfortune just by being there.

I flipped the page quickly, heart pounding.

Eternal Malediction

"A single curse that never fades, marking a target with irreversible suffering. No magic, no divine blessing can remove it."

I held my breath. A curse that can never be lifted. My fingers twitched against the book's worn spine. My own life had been filled with whispers of misfortune, of people muttering that I was cursed. Had I... done something without realizing it? No, that wasn't possible. Right?

The next part made my skin crawl.

Eyes of the Forsaken (Unbreakable Curse)

"A curse that forces a person to see every horrifying future they might experience, breaking their mind with infinite visions of their own suffering."

My hands clenched into fists. That was... horrible. Unfair. Imagine never being able to see hope—only an endless loop of the worst possibilities? No wonder everyone feared her.

But then came the final, most terrifying revelation.

The Queen's Ultimate Curse – "The Last Word"

"Her most feared ability, a curse that activates upon her death. If she is slain, her soul explodes into thousands of curse fragments, infecting the world and ensuring that her existence never truly ends. Her enemies are doomed to suffer her will for eternity."

A curse that even death couldn't erase.

My breath hitched. That was why she was hated. Why people feared even her memory. It wasn't just her power—it was the fact that she was inescapable.

Then, my gaze landed on a single, chilling sentence:

Her enemies will forever hate anything that relates to her.

I froze.

...Wait.

Was that why?

Was that why people looked at me with so much hatred, even before they knew me? It wasn't me they hated. It was my resemblance to her.

I swallowed, my fingers trembling as I turned the page. My eyes skimmed through descriptions of the Queen's appearance.

An intricate black dress, an aura of mystery and murderous intent, a hooded cloak.

Snowy-white hair. Piercing red eyes, gleaming with a murderous gaze.

I reached up, hesitantly touching a strand of my own white hair.

My hair. The one thing people always commented on, always whispered about.

They weren't wrong. I really did look like her.

I shifted uncomfortably, suddenly remembering the fear in people's eyes whenever I walked by. The way they instinctively recoiled. It wasn't just bad luck. It wasn't just superstition. It was history.

I turned to the window, watching the last light of the sun fade. My reflection stared back at me, and for the first time, I hesitated to meet my own gaze.

Then the whispers started again.

"You are her."

"You can do more than she could ever did."

"You don't even need to try. You're already stronger."

I clenched my jaw, gripping the book as I willed my mind to silence. No. No, that wasn't true. It wasn't.

But... what if it was?

I hesitated, then looked down at the book again. A new Chapter. The next section.

Basic Cursed Magic.

I exhaled slowly, steadying my nerves. If I really had some kind of connection to her... if the whispers were right...

Then I needed to know the truth.

Determined, I turned the page.

And I started reading.

The book rested on my lap, open to a page labeled "Withering Touch"—a simple curse, supposedly the easiest one to perform.

"A simple curse that saps strength from whatever it touches, feeding on negative emotions."

I read the description again, humming softly as I tapped my chin.

So basically... it's a depressing touch? A magic trick fueled by my personal misery?

I leaned forward, scanning through the details.

"Decay with me."

That was the incantation. It could be spoken or thought, meaning I didn't have to say it out loud if I didn't want to. It wasn't meant to kill or destroy, just... drain. The target wouldn't rot into dust or crumble apart, but it would feel the weight of my emotions—my sadness, my frustration, my loneliness—until it weakened under them.

It reminded me of how I felt sometimes when people glared at me for existing. Heavy, slow, like all the energy was being sapped out of my soul.

"Cursed magic connects to the soul's burden, using the wielder's emotions as a conduit."

I nodded to myself. So that's how it worked. Negative emotions became fuel. The stronger the feelings, the stronger the effect.

"Alright, got it!" I clapped my hands, feeling determined. "Time to try it!"

I placed the book carefully on the chair and looked around. I needed a test subject.

My eyes landed on a small flower sitting in a vase on the dining table. A delicate red rose-like bloom, petals full and soft, swaying slightly from the evening breeze drifting through the window.

I hesitated.

It was just a flower, but still... it felt wrong to experiment on something so pretty.

I puffed my cheeks and folded my arms. "Would they judge me for this?"

Immediately, my imagination answered.

Levi: "You're playing with flowers? You really are a kid." (Shrugs and walks off.)

Emma: (Gives me a thumbs-up.) "Good luck! Hope it dies painfully!"

Kaiser: (Smirks) "What are you doing?"

Me: "Nothing!"

Kaiser: "Oh, really? Because it looks like you're holding your hand over that flower like you're proposing to me."

Me: "What?! No! I'm not proposing to you!"

Kaiser: "Are you sure? I mean, it is a beautiful flower... but I didn't know you were so bold."

Me: "Kaiser!! It's just a curse, okay? Not a proposal!"

Kaiser: (Laughs) "Well, it's nice to know I'm not the only one you're interested in."

I shook my head, breaking free from my own nonsense.

"Okay, focus!" I held my hand over the flower and took a deep breath. "Here we go..."

"Decay with me."

I waited.

Nothing.

I frowned. Maybe I did it wrong?

I closed my eyes and tried again. "Decay with me."

The flower just sat there. Vibrant. Unaffected. Probably judging me.

I narrowed my eyes. One more time.

...No effect.

...Again.

Still nothing.

...Another.

Nope.

I kept going for minutes, hand stretched out dramatically, pouring all my "cursed magic" into the helpless flower like some kind of weird plant psychic.

After what felt like forever, I slumped onto the table, arms sprawled out in defeat.

"The whispers call me the Queen of Curses, but I can't even make a flower droop."

If they could see me now, they'd be so disappointed.

I exhaled sharply. "Alright, alright. I remember the book said I need to feel something."

I sat up, tapping my fingers against the table, thinking. Sadness? Loneliness? Frustration?

Hmm... what made me feel frustrated?

My mind immediately jumped to a recent memory.

Kaiser.

Leaving the house.

Without telling me.

I had searched everywhere, worried sick something happened to him—only to find him near the river, casually working out like it was nothing.

And when I scolded him for disappearing?

"Don't worry about it."

...Don't worry about it.

Like hell, Kaiser. I was ready to flip the entire town over looking for you!

That frustration boiled up inside me. I clenched my fist, focused back on the flower, and whispered:

"Decay with me."

This time—something happened.

The flower's petals dimmed, its red hue paling just a little. It was barely noticeable, but it was there. I did it.

I jumped up, eyes sparkling. "I DID IT! I REALLY DID IT!"

I spun in circles, fists in the air. "Hah! Take that, stupid whispers! I couldn't even curse a leaf! But now? HA!"

I struck a victory pose, one leg up on the chair, pointing dramatically at nothing in particular. "Cursed magic: mastered!"

I was grinning ear to ear. I could actually use cursed magic!

I turned back to the flower, ready to try again—but the moment I reached out, nothing happened.

I blinked.

Wait...

I tried again. Still nothing.

Slowly, realization dawned on me.

The curse was gone.

Because I was too happy.

My face twisted into a goofy, betrayed expression. "Wait—so I can't use cursed magic if I'm happy?! That's so stupid!"

I groaned loudly, rubbing my temples. "Ughh, fine! Sorrow! I need sorrow!"

I squeezed my eyes shut, digging through old memories.

...People hating me for something I couldn't control.

...Their whispers, their disgust whenever they saw me.

...The feeling of being pushed aside, alone for years.

I felt the weight settle over me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw it.

The flower dimmed further, the petals losing more of their rich color.

My fingers hovered over it, curiosity sparking in my mind.

"The book says sadness, frustration, and loneliness fuel this technique."

I tilted my head.

"But what about other emotions? Could I fuel cursed magic with... something else?"

Could rage create flames? Could envy create chains? Could fear create illusions?

My eyes lit up with excitement. I had just barely figured out cursed magic—

And already, I was coming up with theories.

I had already tried sorrow and frustration, and the results weren't too bad—the flower definitely looked weaker. But if I wanted to get better at this, I needed to experiment with

more emotions. The book said that negative emotions fuel cursed magic. That meant there were plenty more to test.

I took a deep breath and placed my fingers just above the petals. Time to see what else I can dig up.

Despair.

I thought about the days when I was completely alone. The years of being unwanted, of wandering without a place to belong. No family, no friends. No warmth. The feeling of being nothing more than a ghost in the world, unseen, unheard.

I clenched my fingers slightly, feeling my heart sink into that darkness.

"Decay with me."

The flower... barely reacted. A faint flicker of something, but not much more than before.

Huh. So despair isn't that strong? That was kind of surprising. Maybe I was already too used to it? Depressing thought, moving on.

Resentment.

I remembered every time people whispered about me, spat at my feet, cursed my existence for simply looking the way I do. The Queen of Curses. That's what they saw when they looked at me. Not Celia. Just a monster in the making.

I hated them for it. For never giving me a chance. For deciding who I was before I could even become anyone.

"Decay with me."

The flower twitched. Oh? A bit more reaction this time. I leaned in, watching as the edges of the petals curled just a little.

So... resentment works better than despair. Good to know.

Loneliness.

That was easy. Almost too easy.

I thought of all the nights I spent curled up in the dark, hugging my knees, wishing just one person would reach out their hand. Wishing I wasn't so alone. That someone... anyone would tell me I mattered.

Even after meeting Kaiser, that feeling never truly went away. There were times when he wasn't around, and the loneliness crawled back in, wrapping around my throat like an invisible chain.

"Decay with me."

The flower paled even more, its red petals losing some color.

I grinned. This was working.

Guilt.

I hesitated before using this one. But there was a memory that never left me.

The time I wanted to disappear. When I thought maybe... just maybe, if I was gone, people would stop suffering because of me. If I just erased myself, the hate, the fear, the anger directed at me... would finally stop.

I remembered standing at the edge of a cliff, looking down at the sharp rocks below, wondering if it would hurt—

I shut my eyes. No. I wasn't that person anymore.

But that guilt—that old guilt for even thinking that way—still sat in my chest.

"Decay with me."

The flower visibly wilted. Okaaaay, guilt is strong. Got it.

Regret.

I thought of the times I could've been braver. The times I could've spoken up. The moments I let slip away because I was too scared, too weak, too pathetic to fight for myself.

I thought of the people who reached out to me, and I turned away. I thought of Kaiser, how many times I wanted to tell him how much I...

I shook my head. No. That wasn't for now.

"Decay with me."

The flower shuddered. The decay spread slightly faster this time.

Hopelessness.

This was different from despair. Despair is feeling like everything is already lost. Hopelessness is believing nothing will ever get better. That no matter how much I fight, no matter how much I try—it will never change.

I didn't have to dig deep for this one.

"Decay with me."

The flower grew paler than ever. I could see the life draining from it.

I exhaled, pulling back.

The flower, which had once been a beautiful deep red, was now a dull, faded version of itself. It worked. It actually worked.

I opened the book again, flipping to the page on negative emotions.

There was a list.

Sorrow

Frustration

Despair

Resentment

Loneliness

Guilt

Regret

Hopelessness

Rage

Fear

Self-hatred

Grief

Anguish

Betrayal

Dread

Powerlessness

...Jealousy

I frowned. Jealousy?

Unlike the others, it was at the bottom of the list. In fact, the book even wrote a note about it.

"Jealousy is the weakest fuel for cursed magic. Its unstable nature makes it unreliable and fragile."

...Weakest, huh?

I smiled. Not because of jealousy, but because... I could actually do this. I could actually be useful to Kaiser. Maybe I wouldn't have to just sit back and let him fight for me. Maybe... I could stand beside him.

I wouldn't have to be protected anymore. I wouldn't have to watch him risk his life for me.

I wouldn't have to feel helpless.

But then I remembered.

Kaiser... wasn't here.

Oh. Right.

He was with Emma.

Wasn't it just because Levi asked him to? He didn't have a choice, did he?

Kaiser was always so kind, always helping everyone, always doing what he thought was right, but... was he really wanting to be with her? Or was he just doing it out of obligation?

It didn't make sense. He didn't need to be with her. He didn't need to spend time with her. He didn't need to hold her hand.

I mean, it's not like he had to, right? It was just because Levi asked, because he felt like he should—but was there more to it?

Why else would he be with her, of all people?

I bit my lip, feeling something ugly twisting inside me.

Did he want to be with her? Or was it something he had to do, just because he felt obligated?

But the more I thought about it, the worse it got. Why was he with her? Why was he holding her hand, laughing with her? I never asked him to do that with me. Maybe I should've. Maybe I should've forced him to stay with me, to be mine.

And that question... the jealousy in it—it hit harder than the rest. Because the truth hurt. It hurt in a way I didn't want to admit.

He didn't need me.

Maybe he didn't need anyone, except her.

Was he starting to forget about me?

Did he even remember that I was here, waiting for him? Or was it easier to pretend that I didn't exist while he held her hand?

I stared at the flower, feeling my heartbeat slow, my breath suddenly shaky.

Kaiser... was holding Emma's hand.

Holding. Her. Hand.

That thought alone should've been enough to make me feel sad, maybe a little lonely, but... it wasn't just sadness. It was worse than that.

A strange, twisting, suffocating feeling crawled up my chest, coiling around my heart like vines. My fingers curled slightly, gripping the soft petals of the flower in my hand. It was still warm—alive—but I barely noticed it. My thoughts were elsewhere, sinking deeper, spiraling.

Because Kaiser wasn't here.

He was with her.

With someone who wasn't me.

That thought alone made something inside me shatter.

I imagined it—the two of them together. Laughing. Talking. Maybe even smiling at each other.

Would he look at her the way he looked at me? Would he let her stand so close? Would he let her touch him—like holding his hand, or fixing his hair, or brushing the dust off his shoulders?

No. No, no, no—no.

He wouldn't. He shouldn't.

Because he was mine.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but the images didn't go away. They only became clearer, louder. I could see it—her leaning close, whispering something in his ear, and him turning to her with that soft, effortless smile he always had. The same smile he gave me.

And suddenly, it didn't feel like I could breathe.

My fingers trembled slightly, tightening around the flower in my hand. A sharp pain pricked my skin where the thorns pressed into my palm, but I barely noticed.

What if he was having fun?

What if, at this very moment, he was laughing at something she said?

What if he forgot about me?

My heart pounded, a sickening thud against my ribs.

No. That wasn't possible. Kaiser promised. He said I was his heart. He said he'd always be with me. He said I was important.

So why? Why was he with someone else?

A cold whisper slipped past my lips before I even realized I had spoken.

"He's mine."

My voice didn't sound like mine. It was softer, lower, but at the same time, sharp—like a quiet, deadly whisper from something buried deep inside me.

"Kaiser is mine."

"He doesn't need anyone else."

"He only needs me."

My hands trembled as I clenched around the flower, crushing its delicate petals between my fingers. The soft, comforting warmth it once had was gone, replaced by something brittle, something fragile.

A flicker of energy spread from my fingertips, a pulse of cursed power.

Then—it started.

The flower withered instantly.

The red petals turned black, curling inward, twisting as if they were being strangled by invisible hands. The once-strong stem weakened, cracking slightly under the pressure of my grip. But I didn't stop. I couldn't stop.

The more I thought about it—about him smiling at someone else, laughing with her, standing beside her, touching her in ways he had only touched me—the faster it died. My chest tightened, suffocating me. The jealousy burned in my veins, fueling the curse, and I let it. I let it pour out of me.

The flower couldn't take it.

The color drained from its body, leaving behind nothing but blackened, brittle remains. The stem shriveled, the petals crumbled into dust, vanishing like ash in the wind.

And in the end—

It was nothing. Gone. Completely lifeless.

But I wasn't done.

The weight in my chest didn't disappear. If anything, it grew heavier, colder. My heart thudded violently against my ribs, a frantic, erratic rhythm. The darkness inside me twisted, my jealousy like a blackened fire consuming every ounce of my being.

It wasn't enough.

The flower wasn't enough.

I needed more.

I needed something more.

The thought of him being with her, of him choosing her over me—it tore at me. How could he? Why wasn't I enough? Why didn't he see?

It wasn't fair. He was supposed to be mine. Only mine. And yet, here I was, standing in the aftermath of it all, helpless. I wasn't just angry, I wasn't just hurt—I was possessed.

No one else could have him.

I won't let them.

A low growl slipped from my lips as I squeezed the remnants of the flower tighter. And with it, the room grew darker, colder. My aura—the one I had once thought to be weak—was spreading like a suffocating fog, poisoning everything it touched. The air itself felt thick with my jealousy, curling around me like chains, pulling me deeper into the madness.

I needed him.

Only him in my life.

And I couldn't let him forget that.

As she was being consumed by jealousy, Kaiser, on the other hand, felt something completely different—something far removed from the turmoil she was drowning in.

Kaiser's Perspective:

The cool evening wind whipped through my hair as I stood alongside Emma, the weight of my thoughts almost as heavy as the day had been.

Damn Levi, I thought, gritting my teeth. Why'd he have to rope me into babysitting this girl? Sure, Emma wasn't the worst company, but I wasn't exactly jumping for joy to spend my day manipulating her about her brother's guild. Not exactly my idea of a "relaxing day."

But hey, I owed Levi one. After all, it was the least I could do for letting him crash at my place while he was injured. And it wasn't like I was heartless. Emma had helped me out a few times too—letting me and Celia stay at her place when we needed it, even when I probably wasn't the most ideal guest. Guess this was my way of repaying her. Some favor, huh?

Still, as annoying as Levi's request was, I couldn't deny the fact that Emma seemed to have enjoyed herself—at least to some extent. I'd played my part, used her to gather the information I needed, manipulated her into revealing things without her even realizing it.

I wasn't proud of it, but it was a necessary evil.

I looked over at her, her expression still a little uneasy. Yeah, she definitely hadn't enjoyed the way I'd guilt-tripped her into talking about Levi's guild, and for some reason, it made my stomach twist.

I hated that I had to play these games, even if it meant getting the information I wanted. Sometimes, I felt like I was a different person—one who didn't care much about anyone else, as long as I got what I needed. But was I really that guy?

A small smile tugged at my lips as I looked out over the mountains, the sun dipping low in the sky, casting an orange glow over the landscape. At least I'd gotten some fresh air today. It wasn't all bad.

I glanced at Emma again, her discomfort still lingering. Dammit, Kaiser. I could feel the guilt gnawing at me now more than ever. It was almost suffocating. I couldn't help but feel like a piece of me was slowly rotting away every time I manipulated someone for my gain.

But, I was determined to cheer her up. Enough of this shit.

"Hey, Emma," I said, my voice light and teasing, "you know, you look really cute when you're frowning like that. I think you should try it more often."

She shot me an incredulous look, but a small laugh bubbled up from her throat, despite herself.

"You're unbelievable, Kaiser," she said, shaking her head, but there was a small smile breaking through.

"Hey, I'm just trying to make you feel better," I replied, giving her a playful nudge. "I mean, sure, you could go back to being all serious and uncomfortable, but where's the fun in that?"

She rolled her eyes but didn't seem as tense anymore.

"I guess," she muttered, clearly not buying into the whole "charming" act, but I could see the smile tugging at her lips now.

"Alright, alright," I said, holding up my hands in mock surrender, "but seriously, it's getting late. We should head back before it gets too dark."

Emma's expression fell almost immediately. "But I was just starting to have fun..." Her voice trailed off, her eyes glancing around the surroundings like she was reluctant to let the moment end.

I smirked, shaking my head. "Nope. Time to go." I reached out, grabbing her hand before she could protest any further, and began to pull her along.

She immediately slowed her steps, trying to pull back. "Just a little longer, please? I swear, this is the most fun I've had in a long time!"

I raised an eyebrow, giving her a pointed look. "Emma," I said, my voice firm but still with that teasing edge, "we will be going. And you'll like it."

She pouted, her lower lip sticking out in a way that made her look entirely too adorable for her own good. "Please, Kaiser," she begged, her voice soft and sweet. "Just a little longer? I promise I'll go home soon after."

I shook my head, resisting the urge to laugh. "Nope. You're not getting away that easy."

She groaned, letting out an exaggerated sigh. "Fine!."

I just smiled, tugging her along with me. Slowly, she finally gave in, following me as I led her through the forest. The trees stretched high into the sky, casting long shadows over the path.

The sunset cast a beautiful golden light, spilling over the leaves in a way that almost made everything seem magical. The air was cooler now, the chirping of crickets filling the silence around us as we walked.

The forest felt alive with the night creeping in, the colors of the sunset painting the sky in brilliant hues of pink and orange. It was breathtaking, and I could feel the tension in my chest loosen just a little. Maybe this wasn't such a bad thing after all.

I turned to Emma, who was quietly following beside me. "So," I said, breaking the silence, "you know anything about the other sword saints? What's their deal?"

Emma paused for a moment, clearly thinking. "Not much, really," she said, looking up at me. "But I know their names. And I can tell you about their guilds. I just don't know much beyond that."

I gave her a small smile, relieved that the conversation was finally shifting away from guilt and manipulation. "Sounds good," I said, nodding. "I'm listening."

As we walked, I let the silence settle in for a moment. Then I suddenly slapped my own cheek, my hand coming down sharply enough that it stung.

Get a grip, Kaiser, I told myself. You can't keep doing this. You can't keep playing with people's emotions just because you want something for yourself. You've changed. You have to keep reminding yourself of that.

I took a deep breath and turned back to Emma, my voice softening as I spoke again. "Listen, Emma, I just... I want you to feel comfortable with me. I want to be someone you can actually trust and speak to honestly."

She looked up at me, her expression shifting—first with surprise, then with something softer. And before I could even process it, her hand clutched mine tighter, her grip trembling.

"But I do trust you, Kaiser," she blurted out. Her voice was quiet, but there was desperation laced in it. "I should've told you everything from the start—I should've just been honest. But I hesitated."

Her gaze dropped, her fingers curling around my palm as if letting go meant I'd disappear. "I was scared," she admitted. "Scared that if I told you everything, you'd... you'd leave."

My stomach twisted.

The same fear I had planted inside her—the one I had used to manipulate her—was now the thing making her cling to me. And it made me feel sick.

"You made me feel like I wasn't alone yesterday," she said, her voice a little shaky but clear. She lifted her head, looking up at me with those eyes, eyes that had seen so much pain. They were glistening under the fading light, and I could see a depth there—something I didn't deserve to see. "You were the first person to comfort me and make me actually feel alive again, to forget the pain—even for just a moment."

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill. "I never told anyone this... but after my parents died, I... I've never really felt like I had anyone. Not really. Levi, he's my brother, but he's always been focused on his own things, his own life. I mean, I get it—he's busy, he has his own responsibilities. But... I was always there, waiting, invisible." Her words came out in a rush, each one heavier than the last. "I was used to that, I thought it was just the way it was. But... you—you—made me feel like I wasn't invisible. Like I wasn't just... alone in this world. And that's what it felt like. Alone. I never let myself admit it before, but I was alone."

She wiped at her eyes, her voice barely above a whisper now. "I tried to hide it with jokes, with teasing. I tried to act like everything was fine, that I was fine... But you—you made me feel like I didn't need to hide. Like I could just be... me. And no one's ever done that before. No one's ever seen me for who I am, not just a sister or a friend, but me. And it's... it's terrifying,"

she confessed, her voice cracking. "Because now... now I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here. What if you just... left? What if it was just like before, and I was all alone again?"

I stayed silent. I didn't know what to say.

"So please," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Please trust me. I'll tell you everything you want to know—I swear, just... don't leave me. Please."

Shit.

The guilt hit me like a blade to the chest. She was begging me to stay now.

I had used her. Used her pain, her loneliness, her desperation—all just to get what I wanted. And yet, here she was, trusting me completely, begging me to stay as if I was something worth holding onto.

I clenched my jaw, the weight in my chest growing unbearable.

I didn't deserve this kind of trust. Not from her.

"Please... don't say it," she whispered, trembling. "I-I can't lose you too. Please, don't leave me."

Her voice cracked, panic lacing every word as if my next sentence would be the final blow. She looked at me desperately, afraid of what was coming next.

"You're... you're going to leave, aren't you?" Her voice trembled, her words stumbling over each other. "B-Because I was hesitant... to tell you everything... y-you'll just walk away now, won't you?"

I opened my mouth, but she kept going, her words spilling out faster, more frantic.

"I—I should've told you everything from the start," she stammered, her voice trembling as she clutched my sleeve tighter. "I should've listened. I won't hesitate anymore, I swear. Just... please don't go."

Her other hand shot up, gripping onto me like I'd disappear if she let go. Her fingers curled into the fabric of my coat, desperate, shaking.

Her lips quivered as she blinked rapidly, as if trying to stop them from falling. "Ever since my parents passed away... even with Levi around... I still felt lonely." Her breath hitched, and she clenched my sleeve even harder. "It never went away, Kaiser. No matter how much I laughed, no matter how much I teased people—nothing changed. That loneliness was always there."

Her body trembled, her voice falling to a whisper. "But then you—" she sucked in a sharp breath, "the way you spoke to me, the way you comforted me, the way you made me laugh... I didn't feel lonely anymore."

Her grip tightened.

"I always tease people, you know? I do it because... it's easier to hide my own sadness that way. But with you—" she looked up at me, eyes glistening, "I don't feel sad. I don't have to pretend."

Her words hung in the air, raw, fragile. She wasn't just begging me to stay—she was terrified of losing the one thing that made her feel whole again.

Shit.

This wasn't fear of just losing anyone.

This was fear of losing me.

She wasn't begging me to stay because of some manipulative trick or calculated move. She was begging me because she genuinely wanted me around. And I had twisted that into something ugly.

I clenched my jaw, inhaling sharply before kneeling in front of her, bringing us to the same level.

"Emma," I said, steady but firm. "I messed up."

Her breath hitched, but she didn't look away.

I squeezed her hand. "I shouldn't have said those things. I shouldn't have made you feel like you had to earn my trust or my time. That was wrong of me."

Her lips parted slightly, eyes still searching mine.

"You don't have to prove anything to me," I continued. "And I'm not here because you're useful, or because you tell me what I want to hear." I shook my head. "I'm here because I want to be."

"But—"

"No 'but,' Emma," I cut in. "I won't ever say such things ever again. Remember always that I was here because I wanted to be with you, to make you feel happier as your friend."

She blinked rapidly, like she didn't fully believe it. Like she was still waiting for me to take it all back.

So I smiled—genuine this time.

"Guess you'll just have to deal with me," I teased.

A weak, choked laugh escaped her lips. Barely there, but enough.

I smirked. "See? Progress."

Her grip loosened just a little.

She sniffled, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. "You really are annoying."

"But an annoying guy you trust, right?" I quipped.

She huffed, crossing her arms. "More like an annoying guy I tolerate."

I smirked. "Close enough."

She paused, staring at me for a long moment. Then, finally, she nodded.

"...Yeah," she whispered.

I exhaled, feeling something in my chest lighten.

Not because I deserved it. But because, this time, I meant every word.

As we started walking again, the last remnants of the sunset bathed the forest in a golden glow, painting the trees in warm shades of amber and crimson. The world felt quieter now, softer.

And in that silence, I made a promise to myself.

This time, I didn't have to manipulate her.

And I won't do it again.

Not when she trusted me this much—even after everything. The guilt still gnawed at me, but for once, I pushed it aside. Because I wanted to be someone she could trust.

Not a fake version of me.

Now it was time to learn about the other Sword Saints.

Meanwhile, while Kaiser was gnawing at his own guild. Celia's jealousy continued to grow more and more each second.

Celia's Perspective:

A wave of energy surged within me, and before I even realized it, my hand shot out, palm flat against the ground. The action was instinctive—my body responding before my mind could catch up. A pulse of power erupted from my core, spilling out like an uncontrollable tide.

It wasn't a spell. It wasn't incantations or rituals. It was pure instinct. My aura, the cursed aura of a queen who had been ignored, shattered, and now—fueled by jealousy—it broke free.

It was the weakest form of my power, still raw, untamed. But even as the smallest trace of it escaped, it was deadly.

The room seemed to shift. The air thickened, growing oppressive as though the very atmosphere itself was growing heavy with the weight of my emotions. I felt it—an icy, suffocating aura radiating from me, curling out like smoke, spreading its decay. The ground beneath my feet trembled slightly, and I could almost hear the groan of life withering in my presence.

Everything—everything—around me felt it. The walls, the air, the objects in the room—they all trembled under the shadow of my envy. The plants outside, already withering from my proximity, began to curl and rot faster.

The grass in Levi's yard withered. The vibrant green faded into a sickly, rotten black, curling inward like burned paper. The trees trembled. The flowers—all of them—began to darken, their petals shriveling, falling apart one by one.

Even the air felt heavier. Like it was suffocating.

I stood there, frozen, my chest tight as I watched the world around me start to fall apart. But it wasn't the decay of the room or the plants withering away that caught my attention. No, it was him.

Why wasn't he with me?

Why did he leave me behind?

Why was I always second choice to her?

Why did he smile at her like that? Why didn't he smile like that for me?

Was I not enough? Was I never enough for him?

Why did she get all of his attention, all of his time? Why was she standing there, laughing with him, while I was left alone?

Did he forget the promises he made? Did he forget me?

How could he look at her the way he did? How could he touch her the way he touches me? Was I not special enough?

Am I not enough for him?

My thoughts spun in a frenzy, each question cutting deeper, sharper than the last. Why didn't he need me anymore? Why did I always have to fight for a place in his heart? Why was I constantly watching from the sidelines while others got everything I wanted?

What did she have that I didn't?

Was I not good enough? Was I not the one he was supposed to choose? Why wasn't it me?

Why did he make promises to me, telling me I was his heart, and then just... leave?

I clenched my fists, my body trembling, but it wasn't from fear. It was from rage. Rage at her, at him, at myself for not being enough. I couldn't stop thinking about the way he had looked at her, the way he'd held her hand—something I'd never felt from him. Was that what I was missing? Was that what made her better than me?

Why couldn't he see that I was the one who belonged with him?

Why did he need to be with someone else? Someone who wasn't me?

I could feel it, that horrible, choking, suffocating presence swirling around me. My aura. My jealousy was fueling it, growing stronger, wilder, more uncontrollable with each passing second. I could feel it reaching out, extending to everything around me, the plants, the air, everything was starting to decay under its weight.

It was all because of her.

It was all because she was there, taking what was mine. My place. My Kaiser.

Why can't I have him?

Why does she get to stand by his side?

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the vision of them together, the thought of her laughing with him. No. I wouldn't let it happen. He's mine. He's always been mine.

And I would make sure it stayed that way.

Was I doing this?

I didn't even need an incantation. I didn't need a spell. My jealousy alone was enough to kill.

The cursed magic that was supposed to be the weakest... was now the strongest in me.

It was a power I couldn't control, a dangerous, volatile force that surged within my veins, twisting, coiling, suffocating. And it was all because of him.

And then—

Knock. Knock.

The sound pierced through everything.

My entire body froze.

For a long moment, the room was silent.

The jealousy lingering in my veins flickered. The heavy weight in my chest shifted.

A warmth—small, soft, but powerful—spread from my heart.

A smile curled onto my lips before I could stop it.

He's back. Kaiser's back.

Everything inside me lightened.

All of those dark, ugly, suffocating feelings suddenly felt so... small. I took a breath and turned to the flower. Or—what was left of it. Carefully, I placed it back into the vase.

It was dead. Completely lifeless. Its petals blackened, its stem brittle. It would never bloom again.

But that was fine.

It was just a flower.

...Right?

I turned to leave.

But then—

Drip.

A single drop of red slid down from the blackened petals.

Blood.

It bled. The flower was bleeding blood.

As if it had suffered. As if it had felt every ounce of pain, every twisted, suffocating emotion that had poured out of me.

I tilted my head slightly.

A soft hum slipped from my lips.

How strange...

Chapter 38 - The Swarm Tyrant

Celia's Perspective:

The second I heard the knock, my heart nearly jumped out of my chest. My fingers clenched slightly before I shook the hesitation away and rushed to the door.

I already knew who it was.

Kaiser.

I could almost picture him standing there, his usual blank expression, his blue eyes meeting mine. Maybe he'd finally realized his mistake and come back to me first. Maybe he felt bad for leaving me behind. Maybe... maybe he missed me, too.

A warm, giddy feeling bubbled up inside me as I reached for the door. I pulled it open in one swift motion, my lips already forming his name—

"Kai—"

The word died in my throat.

It wasn't Kaiser.

It was Levi.

I blinked, my heart sinking, and I felt the excitement drain from my face.

Levi's eyes immediately caught the shift, and a slow, amused smirk spread across his lips. He leaned lazily against the doorframe, tilting his head.

"Oh?" He tilted his head, pretending to be hurt. "That's the fastest I've ever seen someone's smile disappear. What, not happy to see me?"

I blinked, quickly straightening myself. "I—No, I just—" I cleared my throat. "I thought it was Kaiser."

Levi snorted, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation. "Yeah, I got that. What gave it away? The part where you yelled his name?"

I puffed out my cheeks, walking past him towards the dinner table. "Hmph."

The second Levi took a seat at the dinner table, I knew I was doomed.

He leaned back, resting his arm over the chair like he owned the place, and lazily tilted his head toward the vase in front of him. His blue eyes gleamed with curiosity, but there was something else there, too—amusement.

"So," he drawled, tapping his fingers on the table. "Not to alarm you or anything, but why is your flower bleeding?"

I stiffened. My eyes darted toward the vase, where a single withered flower stood—except it wasn't just withered. The petals had turned black, curled inward like they were screaming in agony, and thick, crimson liquid dripped down the stem, staining the water inside a deep red.

Okay. That... was not normal.

I swallowed hard and quickly averted my eyes. "I... I don't know anything about that."

Yeah. Smooth. Totally convincing.

Levi didn't even blink. His smirk widened like he could see right through me. Then, without saying another word, he slowly turned his head, scanning the entire room.

Panic bloomed in my chest.

Crap, crap, crap. Don't look around. Don't—!

His eyes flicked over the shelves, the furniture, the open window—then, finally, they landed on something near the right side of the other room.

The book.

I felt my stomach drop.

Levi stood up and casually strolled over, plucking the old, slightly worn-out book from the table near the window. He turned it over in his hands, flipping through a few pages. His smirk hadn't vanished, but his brows did lift slightly.

"This looks familiar," he mused. "Oh, right. It's mine."

I winced. Oof.

I tried to play it off with a nervous chuckle. "Ahaha... um, funny story about that—"

Levi snapped the book shut and looked at me. "Celia."

I flinched at the way he dragged out my name like a disappointed parent.

I sighed, slumping my shoulders. "Fine. I was trying to learn basic cursed magic."

Levi leaned against the table, resting his chin on one hand. "Basic, huh? Which one?"

I hesitated before muttering, "Withering Touch."

Levi raised a brow and glanced at the flower still bleeding on the table. He reached out, plucking it from the vase and holding it between his fingers. The dark red liquid stained his fingertips as he turned it slowly, studying its decayed form.

Then, he exhaled a quiet chuckle. "Yeah, see, that's the problem." He twirled the dead flower before tossing it back onto the table. "Withering Touch doesn't do this. It's supposed to just cause minor decaying, not—" He gestured vaguely at the bleeding mess. "—turn a flower into a bleeding crying mess."

I bit my lip, gripping the hem of my dress tightly. I already knew that.

My gaze flickered to the shriveled petals, dark veins of decay crawling through them like something alive. The deep crimson droplets at the edges of the withered bloom made my throat tighten. Blood. The flower was bleeding. And I—I did that.

I swallowed, shifting in my seat. "I-I don't know what you're talking about." My voice came out soft, maybe a little too soft to be believable. I turned my eyes away, pretending to be absolutely fascinated by the grain of the wooden table.

Levi didn't respond immediately, which was somehow worse. I could feel his stare like a weight pressing against me.

He exhaled, and in a much lighter tone, he asked, "Okay, so, let's pretend that wasn't a totally obvious lie. What do you think happened here? A ghost? The air? Maybe the flower just... got tired of life?"

I bit the inside of my cheek. I really didn't want to answer. But Levi had this annoying way of waiting—just sitting there, grinning like he had all the time in the world.

Eventually, I sighed and folded my arms. "I was... experimenting."

"With?"

I hesitated, but it wasn't like I could hide it now. "The flower."

Levi arched a brow, looking mildly impressed. "The flower, huh? That's pretty edgy of you." He tilted his head. "Which spell?"

"Withering Touch," I admitted, tracing a small circle against the table. "It's supposed to be weak."

Levi hummed. He lifted the flower, turning it between his fingers. "Yeah, well, this isn't weak. This is straight-up plant homicide."

I clenched my hands into fists, the realization creeping into my mind like a whisper I didn't want to hear.

Withering Touch was weak. It barely did anything. A small shriveling effect, nothing more. But my magic—my jealousy—it hadn't just drained the life from the flower. It had twisted it, crushed it, left it bleeding.

I chewed on my bottom lip, my heart pounding a little too fast. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The book had said jealousy was the weakest of emotions when it came to cursed magic. But my jealousy—my envy—had made something as small as a flower die in agony.

That wasn't normal.

Levi's voice cut through my thoughts again. "By the way, I noticed something weird when I got back." He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "The grass outside? The flowers near the yard? All withering. You sure you didn't go on a little death-touch rampage out there?"

I blinked. My chest tightened. "I... I didn't touch anything else."

Levi tilted his head, watching me. "Then why's everything dying?"

That question hung in the air between us, heavy, pressing, suffocating.

I hadn't touched anything. Not outside. Not the grass. Not the flowers.

Then why?

Levi tapped a finger against the table before speaking again, his tone still light but a little more thoughtful. "Maybe it's not just your touch. Maybe..." He trailed off before smirking. "Oooor, plot twist—you're secretly an ancient evil goddess of death. Pretty cool, right?"

I shot him a glare. "Levi."

"Alright, alright," he chuckled, then leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand. "But really, if you didn't touch anything, and Withering Touch is a physical spell, then..." He paused. "What if it's your aura?"

I swallowed.

"My aura?"

"Yeah," Levi shrugged. "You were probably negative and emotional, right? Maybe your aura's reacting to that. Maybe your emotions don't just affect you—they affect the world around you."

That thought made something cold crawl down my spine.

Because if that was true, then what would happen if my emotions got worse?

If jealousy alone could do this...

Then what would happen if I ever truly lost control?

I can feel my face flush as I glare at Levi. I was just... waiting for Kaiser. Maybe I was hoping for some peace, something calming... but no, I get Levi teasing me like I'm some kind of joke.

Levi laughs that laugh of his, the one that's way too cocky for anyone's good. "You know," he says with a smug grin, "for someone who's supposed to be all serious about this cursed magic stuff, you're causing some serious trouble, Celia."

I squint at him, narrowing my eyes. "I didn't ask for a lecture, Levi."

"Sure you didn't," he teases, strolling around the room like it's his personal stage. "Though, I gotta say, you've got more chaos than an S-ranked mage on a bad day. Look at that flower... really withering."

I cross my arms, trying to keep the irritation off my face. "Well, I didn't know it was going to react that badly. It's not like I'm a self-claimed strongest like you." I roll my eyes dramatically, making sure he knows how much I'm over his teasing.

Levi gives me a raised brow, grinning even wider. "Of course, you're with Kaiser so much that you've started talking like him, huh?" He leans in, eyes gleaming. "Guess that makes you a Kaiser simp, huh?"

I freeze, eyes widening. "I'm NOT!" I snap, my cheeks burning. "I just heard him say that! It's not like I was—"

Levi interrupts me with a laugh, hands raised in mock defense. "Yeah, sure, sure. You're just a clingy Kaiser girl then, huh?"

I try not to fume. "Stop saying that! I'm not clingy!" My voice wavers a little, despite me trying to stay serious. I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks again, but it's not just embarrassment. There's a twinge of something else, a deeper feeling I don't quite know how to explain.

Levi laughs again, that loud, carefree sound filling the room. "You're cute when you're flustered, Celia." He leans back, still chuckling like he's won some grand victory.

I puff out my cheeks and pout, feeling like an irritated child, but I can't help the small part of me that wants to smile at his ridiculousness. He's a pain, but there's something... oddly comforting about him, even if he's always teasing me.

Finally, his laughter fades, and I notice he's scanning the room, eyes flicking toward the window. It's dark now, the shadows in the corners of the room stretching across the floor.

"Where's Kaiser and Emma?" he asks, his tone oddly serious now.

I bite my lip. Where are they? A cold knot twists in my stomach. I glance at the door as if expecting them to walk in any second, but no, there's nothing. "They're... not here yet," I say, my voice quieter than usual. "They... haven't come back."

Something shifts in Levi's expression. The easy confidence is gone, replaced by something darker. His eyes narrow, his lips pulling into a tight line. "Wait, what? They're still not home? It's dark outside now." His voice takes on a serious edge, and a heavy feeling settles over me.

I feel my own stomach churn at the sound of his voice, the way his words almost seem to press down on my chest. "What's wrong, Levi?" I ask, my voice shaking a little.

Levi doesn't look at me immediately. His eyes stay fixed somewhere far away, as if thinking deeply, processing something I don't understand. Then, his gaze flicks back to me, cold and sharp.

"This... is bad, Celia. Really bad. The things happening nearby... they're not just rumors anymore." He pauses, eyes hardening. "Villages are getting wiped out. Entire villages, just... gone."

I feel my blood run cold. "Wiped out? What do you mean?"

Levi exhales slowly, and I can see a flicker of fear in his usually confident eyes. "A few towns over... there was a mass execution a few days ago. The whole village was

destroyed in hours. Not just killed, but... completely devoured. No one's left standing. Not a trace."

A chill runs through me, my heart thudding painfully in my chest. I can barely breathe as I process his words. "But... why?" I whisper, barely able to form the question.

Levi looks at me, his expression becoming even more serious, his voice lowering to something that feels like a warning. "The Swarm Tyrant." He says it like it's a name meant to make my skin crawl, and it works. I feel the fear creeping in, tightening around my throat.

"A grotesque, towering insectoid overlord. It stands at the peak of an evolutionary nightmare. It leads an army of creatures that adapt endlessly, constantly changing, growing. They're... never satisfied. They consume everything, Celia. Everything. Including their own kind. They even use the bones and exoskeletons of the fallen to forge weapons and armor."

I gasp, my hands trembling. "That... that sounds like a nightmare..."

Levi nods grimly. "It is. And they're spreading. The Swarm Tyrant's army is unstoppable, devouring everything in its path. It just destroyed a village... in a day. Every single person was eaten. Alive."

I feel my stomach turn, my heart racing faster. My legs feel weak, and I stagger a little, gripping the nearest table for support. "Kaiser and Emma... they're outside the town... and they... they don't know about this?!" I gasp, my voice breaking.

Levi's jaw tightens. "Exactly. That's why I was planning to tell Kaiser to get out of Levinton with you. But now, with them out there..." He trails off, eyes darkening.

I shiver at the thought of it. "Why isn't it safe anymore, Levi? What's happening?"

He meets my gaze, and for the first time, I see the fear in his eyes. A fear that matches my own. "It's coming. The Swarm Tyrant isn't stopping. Levinton's not safe anymore... I don't know what's going to happen."

I swallow hard, the terror in my chest bubbling up as I feel the weight of his words. The world feels like it's closing in, and for the first time in a long time, I don't know if I'm ready for what's coming next.

Kaiser's Perspective:

The night stretched over the forest like a thick, endless veil. It was quiet, but not the kind of quiet that made you feel safe. It was the kind that whispered, that crawled under your skin, that made the trees feel like they were watching.

The moon barely cut through the branches, leaving us in a dim, shifting twilight. The air was colder than it should've been. Crisp, sharp—like the kind before a storm, but there was no wind. Only the sound of our footsteps pressing against the damp earth.

Beside me, Emma walked with an easy, unbothered stride, her hands tucked behind her head as if we weren't surrounded by endless shadows. "You look way too serious right now," she said, glancing at me.

I barely shifted my expression. "That so?"

"Yep," she nodded. "Like, super serious. Scary serious."

I smirked slightly, keeping my gaze forward. "Maybe I'm just thinking about dinner."

Emma gasped dramatically. "You do look like the type to kill a man over food."

"Wrong," I corrected. "I'd kill a king over food. Gotta aim high."

She snorted. "Okay, yeah, that's fair."

A joke. A casual back-and-forth. It made it seem like nothing was wrong. Like the unnatural stillness around us wasn't setting off every instinct in my body.

Because it was.

Something was off.

I didn't react, didn't let it show, but I could feel it. The forest wasn't just quiet—it was listening. And something inside it was moving.

Not animals. Not the natural rustle of leaves or the scurrying of small creatures in the underbrush. No, this was different. The way the darkness shifted—slow, deliberate—it was as if something was watching.

Tracking us.

I adjusted my pace subtly, positioning myself slightly ahead of Emma, between her and the treeline. Just enough to make sure if something came out of those shadows, I'd be the one to deal with it first.

"Okay, seriously," Emma said, eyeing me. "What's up? I can practically hear your brain working."

I sighed, tilting my head slightly. "Would you believe me if I said I was thinking about how slow you are?"

Her eyes narrowed instantly. "Oh, screw you, Kaiser."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Relax, we're almost at town."

Not a lie. But not the truth either.

Because the closer we got, the worse the feeling became. The edges of Levi's town were barely visible through the thinning trees, but something about it felt wrong.

I glanced toward the path ahead, then back to the forest.

There were too many shadows. And not enough noise.

The town's entrance came into view, dimly illuminated by scattered lanterns. The warm glow should have felt welcoming, but something was off. The air carried a strange weight, like a warning lingering just beyond the senses.

I stopped walking. Emma nearly bumped into me before she realized.

"Huh?" She blinked up at me. "What's wrong?"

I glanced toward the streets ahead, then down at her. "You should head home first."

Emma frowned. "What? No. Let's just go together."

Her grip on my sleeve tightened—a small, almost unnoticeable action, but I felt it.

I shook my head. "I need to check something."

"That can wait, right?" Her voice was light, casual—but there was hesitation underneath. "I mean, come on, it's late. Whatever it is, it can wait till morning."

I stayed silent.

Her fingers twitched, then suddenly, she grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly. "You promised," she whispered. "You said you wouldn't leave me."

I stilled.

Promises.

I had made plenty before, and I had broken just as many.

I had been the kind of person who would have manipulated her. Twisted words, played on emotions, made her believe she wanted to leave on her own. I could do it now—easily.

But not anymore.

I wasn't going to do that to her anymore again.

She was looking at me now, her grip firm, her eyes uncertain. She wanted to trust me, but the fear of being abandoned was clawing at her.

I exhaled slowly, then let my expression shift into something playful. "Fine, fine," I muttered. "If you're that worried, how about this?"

Emma raised an eyebrow. "What?"

I smirked. "We race."

She blinked. "Huh?"

"I'll take the long way around," I said smoothly, pointing to the side. "You take the straight path. Let's see who gets home first."

Emma's brows furrowed. "That's dumb. Why don't we just walk together like normal people?"

I clicked my tongue. "Where's the fun in that?"

She deadpanned. "Oh, I don't know—maybe in not making me run at night?"

"Scared you'll lose?"

Emma narrowed her eyes.

I shrugged. "I'm giving you a head start, y'know. And if you win, I'll take you out tomorrow as well."

Her expression flickered. "For real?"

I nodded.

Emma's eyes lit up. "Promise?"

I held out my pinky. "Promise."

She studied me for a second, then grinned widely and hooked her pinky with mine.

"You're so losing," she declared.

I chuckled, stepping back. "We'll see."

Her fingers slowly uncurled from my sleeve.

Then—

"Go!"

Emma bolted forward, her laughter trailing behind her as she dashed toward home.

I waited until her figure disappeared into the streets.

Then, without a word, I turned and headed in the opposite direction.

Because I wasn't going home.

I had somewhere else to be.

Celia's Perspective:

I looked at Levi, my voice shaking as I tried to keep it steady. "Levi," I said, urgency creeping into my words, "you have to take Emma and leave this town. It's too dangerous. You can't stay here. It's the only way she'll be safe."

Levi didn't even flinch. He just stared at me, his expression unwavering. "No," he said, the word sharp and final, like a door slamming shut. "I can't."

I blinked, confused. I hadn't expected that answer, not from him. He was always so confident, so quick to jump into action when things got tough. Why wouldn't he leave? Why wouldn't he protect Emma and get out of here?

What's going on with him?

"But... Levi," I stammered, my confusion mixing with frustration, "why? You're putting your life and Emma's at risk if you stay. You could leave. You could protect her by leaving. Why won't you?"

He leaned back in his chair, his hands running through his hair like he was frustrated with something I couldn't see. "I'm not running," he said quietly, his tone much darker now, colder. "Not again."

I felt a chill run down my spine. Not again? What did that even mean? What was he talking about? His words didn't make sense. I walked closer to the table, my feet carrying me without thinking. I needed to understand.

I needed him to explain. His hands were on his face now, hiding something. Was he hiding his pain? Or was it something else?

"Levi," I asked, my voice softer now, almost a whisper, "what do you mean by 'running away'?" I took another step, closer to him, my heart pounding louder with every movement.

Levi didn't answer right away. He just stared at the table, his jaw tight. I waited, my pulse thumping in my ears. Something felt so wrong about this. Something wasn't right.

Finally, he spoke, his voice rough, like it pained him to say it. "Take a seat, Celia."

I hesitated for a moment, but I obeyed. Reluctantly, I sat down across from him. My mind was still racing with unanswered questions. Why wouldn't he leave? Why wouldn't he protect Emma like I wanted him to?

As I sat there, my thoughts drifted back to Kaiser. Where is he? Why isn't he back yet? My heart squeezed in my chest, the worry crawling up my throat. What if something happened to him? What if I never saw him again? The thought was unbearable.

I couldn't stop thinking about him. Please, Kaiser... be okay. Please be safe. I'm not strong like you, I can't protect you... But you promised me... you promised me you'd come back. My breath hitched as the fear crept in, cold and suffocating. Please, Kaiser...

My whole world, for that moment, was filled with thoughts of Kaiser. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. My heart was a mess, twisted in knots, and all I could do was pray. Please, be safe...

Levi's voice cut through my thoughts like a blade. "You and Kaiser should leave," he said, his words sharp. "I'll get Zain to protect Emma and take her out of town. As for me, I'll stay with the guild. We'll deal with the grotesques ourselves. We'll take down the Swarm Tyrant."

I felt a rush of anger—no. I couldn't accept this. I couldn't let him face that alone.

I stood up from the chair, my hands shaking with frustration. "Why must you do it?" I asked, my voice rising in disbelief. "You can't keep putting yourself in danger. Why do you have to stay? Why can't you just leave with us?" I turned to him, my chest tensing as I continued.

"Emma only has you, Levi. You're the one person she relies on. You should be the one protecting her, not running off to fight this... this monster alone!"

I didn't realize how loud I'd shouted until my voice echoed in the room. I was shaking, my emotions tearing through me, but I couldn't stop. Why? Why wouldn't he leave?

Levi's eyes flickered with something I hadn't seen before—pain. It was quick, just a flash, but it was enough to make me pause. He stood up from the table abruptly, his

voice louder now, filled with frustration. "I KNOW!" he screamed, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"I know it more than anyone! I know that Emma needs me! But I can't... I won't run again. I'm not going to do it. Not anymore. I can't let the past dictate what I do now." His voice wavered, almost breaking, and for a moment, I saw a crack in his armor.

I stood frozen, my heart pounding. There it was again—the past. What happened to him? I knew it had to be something terrible. But I could feel it, deep in my gut—this wasn't about me. It wasn't about Emma, either. It was about something inside of Levi, something he wasn't ready to confront.

I took a slow step closer to him, my voice softer now, my tone almost pleading. "Levi, please. You can't keep this to yourself. I know something happened. I can feel it. But you don't have to hide it within yourself." I paused, looking into his eyes. This isn't about being strong. This is about letting go of the weight.

He didn't look at me. He couldn't. His gaze drifted, his jaw tight, as if he were battling something deep inside. But I wasn't going to back down now.

"Levi," I continued, my voice steady but full of empathy, "I'm not trying to push you. But I need to understand. I'm not asking because I want to know for my sake—I'm asking because I care about you. I care about Emma. But most of all, I care about the fact that you're carrying this pain, and it's not going to let you go unless you face it."

I watched as his fists unclenched, his shoulders sagging, just for a moment. "I'm not asking you to forget. But I am asking you to trust me. Let me in. Let me help you like you helped me."

There was a silence that settled over us, thick and heavy. I could almost hear the weight of his hesitation, the inner battle he was fighting.

He finally spoke, his voice quieter now, like the words were coming from a place deep inside him. "You don't know what it's like..." He trailed off, his voice raw. "You don't know what I've seen. What I've done."

I took another step closer, now standing just inches away from him. "I don't need to know everything," I said softly. "But I need to know why you're doing this alone. You don't have to do this alone, Levi. Please."

His eyes flickered back to me, this time full of something—vulnerability. It was brief, fleeting, but it was enough.

"I..." He let out a shaky breath, his voice barely above a whisper. "I failed once. I ran. And people paid for it. They died because I wasn't strong enough to protect them."

his voice cracked, the weight of the admission hanging in the air. "I can't run again. I won't. Not with Emma. Not with anyone else."

I saw it then. The crack in his resolve. The fear, the guilt, the shame. I stepped forward, placing a hand gently on his arm.

He stared at me for a long time, his expression unreadable. But after what felt like an eternity, he finally nodded, his voice barely audible. "Fine," he whispered. "I'll tell you." He paused, looking away. "But only because of Emma. I need you to understand."

I didn't say anything. I didn't need to. The moment he agreed, I knew it was the first step toward healing. Towards something better.

Levi let out a long breath and finally, his walls came down, piece by piece.

Levi took a deep breath, his voice wavering as he spoke. "A few years ago, Emma and I lost our parents." He paused for a moment, his fingers trembling ever so slightly. "They passed away... or at least that's what she told you, right?"

I nodded, my heart sinking at the mention of their parents. "Yeah," I said, my voice small. "Emma told me about it."

Levi shook his head, his eyes darkening, a shadow of regret clouding his expression. "She lied to you. Just like I did." His words were cold, but they carried a weight, as though the truth had been a heavy burden he could no longer bear.

I blinked, feeling the air in the room shift. "What do you mean? What are you saying?"

His gaze flicked down to the ground, his hands gripping the edge of the table, his knuckles white. The energy in the room seemed to thicken with each passing second. "Our parents didn't pass away like that. They were murdered... because of me." The words were barely a whisper, but they hit me like a sledgehammer.

I froze. My mind struggled to process the magnitude of what he'd just said. "Murdered? But... why? How?" I stuttered, my voice catching in my throat, unable to comprehend what he was saying.

Levi couldn't meet my gaze. His face was downturned, his eyes filled with something I couldn't name—regret? Guilt? Maybe both, or something deeper, like a wound that never healed.

"Because I ran, Celia," he murmured, his voice barely audible. "I ran when I should've stayed. I couldn't protect them. I couldn't even protect Emma. I was too scared, too weak... and it cost them their lives."

"I never got to use a sword earlier in my life," he started, his fingers curling into tight fists on the table, almost as if he was holding onto the words for dear life.

"I didn't know what it meant to hold one, to fight. My God-Speed awakened before I ever truly had the chance to understand it... to understand myself." His eyes flicked to the floor, avoiding my gaze. "I hated it, Celia. I hated holding that sword and fighting. I wasn't ready for it. I wasn't ready for any of it."

The words struck me like a cold gust of wind, chilling me to the core. This was Levi—the strongest Sword Saint I knew, the one who'd always been so confident, so unshakable. But now, in this moment, I could see the cracks in the armor he'd spent so long building around himself. The fear, the doubt—everything he'd hidden away was coming to the surface.

He leaned back in his chair, his gaze distant, almost lost in his thoughts. I could feel the weight of what he was about to say.

"As a young Sword Saint... I was so new to life," Levi continued, his voice dropping lower, filled with regret. "I wasn't used to having all this power. It was... overwhelming. And then that day came. The day I failed."

I sat down across from him, my eyes never leaving his face. I could sense the trembling in his hands as they rested on the table, the subtle twitch of his fingers as if they were remembering the weight of a sword he wished he'd never had to hold.

His shoulders sagged as he spoke, as though the burden of his past was too much to carry, even now.

"A horde of grotesques... They came out of nowhere. Monsters, creatures born of twisted flesh and bone, moving so fast, so... horrific. My village, the place I called home, was peaceful. We had everything we needed. But then they came. And I... I froze."

I couldn't help but feel my chest tense, my heart racing with the horror of the image he painted. A young Levi, full of doubt, faced with something so much darker than he could have imagined. And he had been paralyzed by fear.

"The fear... it was too much. I couldn't move, Celia. Despite being a Sword Saint, despite all the power I had... I was terrified. Terrified of dying. Terrified of losing. And in that moment, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't protect anyone." Levi's voice cracked as he spoke, and he looked down, as if ashamed to face the weight of his own words. "I ran, Celia. I ran away."

I sat there, speechless, my heart aching for him. I had always seen Levi as this cocky, invincible force. But now, I was seeing the broken man beneath all that bravado.

"The grotesques tore through my village," he continued, each word heavy with pain. "I saw Emma. She was just a child. She watched in horror as they killed our parents. She thought they were demons. But they weren't demons, Celia. They were the consequences of my fear. My failure."

I wanted to say something, anything, but my voice caught in my throat. How could I comfort him when he was the one bearing the scars of such a traumatic event?

"Emma never told you the truth. She never told anyone," Levi said, his voice distant, eyes clouded with sorrow. "She never wanted anyone to know... the truth about why everyone died that day."

I shook my head, my breath shallow as the weight of his confession sank in. "But... why? Why didn't she tell me?"

Levi's eyes met mine then, and I could see the deep pain in them. "Because, Celia, I couldn't protect them. And she didn't want anyone to hate me for it. But the truth is... I left them to die. I wasn't strong enough. I wasn't brave enough."

I couldn't keep silent any longer. I reached out, placing a hand gently on his, trying to offer him comfort, though I knew it would never be enough. "Levi... I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

He sighed, his head lowering as if he couldn't bear to look at me anymore. "I'll never forgive myself for what happened that day. I couldn't protect them. And I'll never be able to undo it. That's why I promised myself I would never show fear again. Not to anyone. Not ever."

I could feel my own heart break for him, for the man who'd buried his fear so deep, locked it away in a cage he'd built around himself. But I couldn't just leave it at that. He had to understand that he wasn't alone in this. Not anymore.

"You don't have to carry it all alone, Levi," I whispered. "You don't have to be the invincible Sword Saint every second of every day. It's okay to be human. It's okay to feel... to be scared."

Levi looked at me, his eyes full of hesitation, but something flickered behind them—a vulnerability he'd been keeping hidden. "I just... I don't know how," he admitted quietly, his voice almost breaking.

I gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "We'll figure it out together."

And for the first time, Levi didn't pull away. He didn't brush me off. Instead, he sat there, the walls around him slightly cracked, as if—just for a moment—he was allowing himself to be human again.

Then suddenly...

Another knock on the door. My heart skips. It has to be them, right? Kaiser and Emma—back together, safe. I can finally breathe again. I rushed to the door, my feet barely touching the ground as I almost tripped over myself in my excitement.

Levi stood up from the chair, his usual cocky confidence back in place, as though nothing had changed. As if nothing had ever been wrong. But I didn't notice him much. I was focused on the door, on what was behind it.

I flung it open, grinning wide, and then—

My heart stopped. My smile faltered.

There, standing in front of me, was Emma. Just Emma. No Kaiser. I felt a sudden emptiness that I couldn't shake.

"Did Kaiser return first?" Emma asked, her voice as bright as ever. It made my chest tighten even more.

I shook my head, barely able to manage a smile in return. "No..."

But something was wrong. I could feel it. Why wasn't he here? My stomach twisted. My thoughts were suddenly loud and chaotic, like a storm inside me. Something didn't feel right. I couldn't just stand here. I needed answers. I needed to know where he was, why he wasn't here.

Levi stepped forward, his tone sharp, a little too quick. "Where is Kaiser?"

Emma blinked, her smile still there, but she seemed a little confused now. "We agreed to race. He gave me a head start and went around the town edges, near the dark forest."

The world froze.

Levi's face twisted in a way I'd never seen before—his usually confident, cocky demeanor crumbling. His eyes, full of something darker, told me all I needed to know.

He knew exactly what the consequences were. The grotesques. They could be anywhere, watching, waiting for the perfect moment. And Kaiser... he was out there. Alone.

Why wasn't he here with me? Why was I alone, standing in this suffocating silence, while others got to be with him? I could feel the heat of rage creeping up my spine, curling its fingers around my throat.

I shouldn't be left behind. Not again.

No one, no one, should have the right to stand beside him, to touch him. That right belonged to me, and only me.

The fear, the ache in my chest, wasn't just because I missed him. It was because I could feel it—**that terrible, maddening sense of losing him.** Like I was slipping through his fingers, like he was being torn away from me by forces I couldn't even name.

And I would not—I **refuse**—to let that happen.

I'll tear apart anyone who stands in my way.

Kaiser was supposed to be safe. He was supposed to be with me, not out there in the forest, with danger lurking in every shadow. We were supposed to be together.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to pull him close and hold him forever, keep him safe from everything that could hurt him. But instead, I stood there, frozen, while the seconds ticked by, slipping away like sand through my fingers.

What if it's too late?

What if he was already too far gone? What if the grotesques found him first?

I could feel my heart breaking, my thoughts scattered. Why is he out there? Why isn't he here? It didn't make sense. He knew better. And yet...

Why wasn't he with me?

I couldn't think. I couldn't stop. The fear was suffocating, tearing at my chest. The thought of him—**out there alone**—shook me to my core. **What if something happens to him? What if someone else is with him, keeping him safe while I'm stuck here?** The jealousy burned inside me, and it was overwhelming. **No one else should be with him. No one but me.**

I couldn't just stand here, useless. **I couldn't wait for someone else to find him. I couldn't.** The fear was sharp, but so was the burning need to get to him. **I wouldn't let anyone else take my place.**

Without thinking, my body moved, pushing me out the door. I rushed into the unknown, heart pounding, knowing the dangers that waited for me. But none of it mattered.

I have to find him.

No matter what it takes. No matter how dangerous it is. I'm not scared. **I'll bring him back. He won't be alone.**

I repeated it, over and over, as my legs carried me toward the one place that terrified me the most: the edge of the forest. But fear didn't stop me. Not when it came to him. **He's mine to protect. And I will get him back, no matter the cost.**

Kaiser's Perspective:

I finally reached the dark forests, the shadows creeping closer, not just figments of my imagination but real, tangible things lurking in the depths.

I could feel them, watching, waiting. They were always there, gathering information on the townspeople, keeping tabs on every movement, every breath.

I had lied to Emma about the race. It wasn't about the challenge or the fun—those weren't my real intentions. The truth was far more urgent. While she thought we were just playing around, I was tracking something else.

Them. The shadows that had been watching us earlier, as Emma and I were returning to the town. They had been following us, inching closer, and now I was going to make sure I wasn't just another prey in their game. I had to find them before they found me.

They weren't just watching, though. They were waiting for something. What that something was, I had no idea. But I wasn't about to stand around and wait to find out the hard way.

As I walked closer to the edge, I glanced back at Levinton. It was still lively, filled with the night's hum of life, people going about their business, completely unaware of the dangers hiding just beyond the tree line.

Standing on a hill, I couldn't help but admire the night sky above it all, the stars twinkling as if mocking me. Beautiful. Peaceful. And yet, everything beneath it was a farce.

Even though it was Levi's town—the one that claimed to be the strongest, the cocky bastard—there was something so undeniably... fragile about it all. Lmao.

But none of that mattered now. Turning my back to it all, I walked toward the dark forest.

And that's when the whispers came.

They slithered into my ears, as cold as ice, as dark as the void. A low, guttural voice calling me, pulling me in.

"Kaiser..."

I stopped in my tracks.

"Accept it. You were never meant to be here. Join us. End it all. Embrace the nothingness. Embrace the void."

The words crawled under my skin, a sickening poison in my veins. I could feel it trying to pull me into the dark, into its endless, empty grasp.

It promised peace, no more struggle, no more pain. A quiet, silent nothingness.

But I couldn't—wouldn't—fall for it.

I stood firm, shaking my head. "Not this time," I muttered under my breath, my voice strong, defiant. "I'm not giving in to you."

"You never belong here. You don't belong in this world."

I know. I've always known. I wasn't meant to be here, in this world, with these people. I wasn't even supposed to be born.

Six times. Six failed attempts before I finally came into existence, each one tearing me apart, leaving me closer to the edge of nothingness. The world didn't want me. Fate didn't want me. Yet, I was still here, still breathing, still fighting.

But that's the way it's always been for me, hasn't it? To exist when I wasn't meant to. To stand in places I don't belong. But it doesn't matter anymore. Whether I belong or not, I'm here now. And that's enough.

I entered the forest path with a steady step, determined not to listen to those twisted voices that always returned when I was alone, trying to convince me that I belonged with them, in the dark.

But not this time. I wouldn't let them win. I'd made that choice long ago. I chose my life. I would fight for it, even if it meant facing the darkness head-on.

The path before me twisted and turned, the trees so thick that it felt like they were swallowing the light. The air was thick with an eerie stillness, the only sound being my footsteps on the damp ground.

The forest was alive with shadows, the kind of living darkness that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It was suffocating, like the forest was closing in, watching my every move.

But I didn't let it stop me. I couldn't afford to.

Then, just ahead, I saw something that made me halt in my tracks.

A wagon.

An abandoned wagon, sitting alone in the dark forest. At first glance, it seemed harmless. But as I walked closer, the stench hit me. The sight was worse.

The wagon was filled with bodies—merchants, travelers. Their corpses were twisted unnaturally, limbs bent in ways that shouldn't be possible. Their faces frozen in terror, eyes wide open, but no longer seeing.

My stomach twisted in disgust. Whoever did this... they were coming closer.

I turned my head to look around, every instinct screaming that I wasn't alone. And then I saw it. A grotesque bug-like creature, standing tall behind me. Its body was dripping with blood, a grotesque grin on its face, as it prepared to feast on whatever prey it had found.

And that prey... was me.

Chapter 39 - He... he's gone

Celia's Perspective:

I was always scared of people. Their judgment, their whispers, their disgusted looks. I hated the way they stared at my eyes—my cursed red eyes, the ones that made them see me as a monster. I always kept my head down, always avoided attention, always hid behind my hood like a coward.

But right now, none of that mattered.

Not their stares.

Not their hate.

Not their opinions.

I had only one thought in my mind: I need to see Kaiser was safe.

The cold night air rushed against my face as I ran through the streets of Levi's Town, my heartbeat pounding louder than my footsteps. The town had a different life at night. Dimly lit lanterns flickered against the stone buildings, casting long, eerie shadows.

The streets weren't empty—some people were out drinking, chatting, and laughing, while others walked home from late-night work. A group of merchants was unloading crates from a carriage, their tired faces barely acknowledging me as I passed.

I didn't care about any of it.

I ran past an open tavern, the scent of ale and roasted meat drifting into the street. Somewhere in the distance, a bard's lute played a soft tune. None of it registered. The world blurred as I sprinted through the cobbled roads, weaving through alleyways, ignoring the looks of confusion and concern from the people I passed.

Then I saw it.

The guild's side of the town.

And the road was blocked.

You've got to be kidding me.

A row of wooden barricades and heavy barrels blocked the path leading toward the outskirts. A few torches lined the area, their flames barely fighting against the darkness of the night. And standing in front of the barricades were two guild members, both armed and looking as if they had no intention of letting anyone through.

I skidded to a stop, my breath sharp.

"What the hell is this?!" I mentally screamed, frustration boiling inside me.

I tried stepping forward, but before I could even take another step, one of the guild members—a man with a shield and sword strapped to his back—held out a hand.

"Stop. No one's allowed past this point at night."

I clenched my fists. "Move."

The second guild member, a woman dressed in mage robes, crossed her arms. "You're not listening. It's dangerous outside the town at night. The outskirts are off-limits."

I didn't have time for this.

I stepped forward, only for the man to grab my wrist.

Wrong move.

"Let me go."

"We can't."

I pulled against his grip, my breathing unsteady. They were in my way. Wasting my time. Kaiser's out there, and they were stopping me for no reason.

I felt something snap inside me. A suffocating coldness crept into my veins, a sensation I had always buried deep down. I raised my head, slowly, and locked eyes with them.

And I smiled.

Not a kind smile.

A cold, twisted, murderous smile.

"Let. Me. Go."

The temperature around us seemed to drop. The two guild members tensed, their grips tightening.

The man narrowed his eyes. "You're not getting through."

I tilted my head. "Is that so?"

He didn't react. Good. That meant he didn't notice the faint purple hue swirling around my fingers.

"You know..." I said softly. "I don't like repeating myself. And I don't like people who don't listen."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Are you threatening us?"

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. "I'm warning you."

A shiver ran through the air. The magic around me grew heavier, more sinister. My fingers tingled with an eerie, dark energy—a magic unlike anything these fools had ever faced.

"I am Celia," I whispered, voice dripping with venom. "The Queen of Curses."

The man instinctively raised his shield, the mage stepped back slightly. They weren't taking me seriously.

So, I showed them.

The air around us turned rotten, the very essence of life beginning to wither. My fingers twitched, releasing a wave of cursed energy. The effect was instant—one of the torches nearby flickered and died, the grass beneath us darkened and curled, shriveling into dust.

Then, a bird overhead—an innocent, unfortunate bird—let out a sharp cry before plummeting lifelessly to the ground.

The two guild members froze. Their faces paled.

I took another step forward, raising my hand toward them. "Move, or I'll drain every last ounce of life from your body."

The man gritted his teeth, but his stance wavered. The mage, however, raised her hand, gathering magic. "You don't want to do this."

I tilted my head again, my red eyes glowing. "You think you can stop me?"

Their hesitation told me everything. They were scared. They were beginning to understand.

And then—

A sudden gust of wind slammed into me.

I barely had time to react before I was forced to step back, my focus breaking. The withering aura vanished, the grass stopped decaying, and the oppressive air lightened.

I whipped my head around.

Standing a few feet away, his arms crossed and his expression cold, was Zain.

"Enough," he said, his voice sharp as a blade.

I glared at him, still burning with rage. "Stay out of this."

He didn't even flinch. "This is our town, Celia. Not yours to do whatever you want."

My fists tightened. The anger, the frustration, the sheer desperation in my chest hadn't faded.

But Zain... Zain wasn't afraid.

And that pissed me off even more.

Zain would slowly walk towards his two guild members, telling them to go back inside and get the others ready if needed. His voice was calm, but there was an underlying authority, something sharp and unwavering.

As his eyes shifted to me, they were cold. Almost calculating, like I wasn't anything more than another problem to deal with.

"Go back inside, both of you," Zain said, his tone clipped. "We may need to prepare for more, and I expect you to follow orders."

His gaze lingered on me, the faintest shadow of judgment in his eyes. It was clear that he didn't think I should be outside, at least not in the state I was in.

I could feel the tension building in my chest. My mind was racing—Kaiser. He was out there. Alone.

"No," I said, my voice shaking with frustration. "I need to go. I have to find Kaiser. I can't stay here, not when he could be in danger."

Zain's face remained unreadable as he met my gaze. "That's not possible, Celia. You're not leaving. You're not going near the outskirts, not with your cursed magic."

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into the palms of my hands as I tried to keep my voice steady. "I don't care about your rules. Kaiser needs me—he could be hurt, or worse, and you're standing here telling me I can't help him? I can't just sit here!"

Zain's expression didn't change. "The guild's policy is clear. No one leaves the town without proper clearance. It's dangerous out there—do you really think you're in any state to be wandering the outskirts right now? With your cursed magic?"

My heart raced. I was terrified, desperate. I couldn't lose him. I couldn't lose Kaiser. Not again. Not after everything that's happened. "I don't care about your damn policies! I don't care about anything else!"

I felt my frustration bubbling up, but I couldn't stop it. "Kaiser could be out there getting hurt, or worse, and you're standing in my way because of some stupid rules?"

Zain's eyes narrowed, a coldness creeping into his voice. "You think this is about rules? It's about safety. You're dangerous, Celia. You don't control your magic. If you lose control—"

"I'm not a child!" I snapped, stepping forward, trying to make him understand. But the anger inside me kept pushing me further, and I couldn't stop myself.

"I'm not going to sit around and wait while the one person who's ever treated me like I matter could be out there in pain, or worse! I'll do whatever it takes, Zain, even if it means breaking every rule you have. I'm going, and you can't stop me."

Zain didn't flinch, didn't back down. "I'm not letting you go. You're not stepping one foot outside this town without a direct order, Celia."

It felt like I was suffocating under the weight of his rules, his judgments. His lack of understanding. Kaiser was out there. Alone. I couldn't lose him again. I wouldn't.

I could feel my anger burning inside me, like fire in my chest. I wanted to scream. To throw something. I could almost feel the magic swirling around me, thick and heavy, as

though it was waiting for me to lose control. But I couldn't. I wouldn't let Zain see how weak I felt. How terrified I was.

I ran my hands through my hair, pulling at it in frustration, trying to breathe. The fear, the jealousy, the anger—it was all mixing together in a whirlwind of emotions, spiraling out of control.

I couldn't stand it. Kaiser could be out there—hurting. Bleeding. What if he was in pain? What if something happened to him while I stood here, useless and helpless?

What if I didn't get to him in time?

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. No. I wasn't going to cry. Not now. Not when Kaiser needed me. He had always been there for me. He was the only one who ever made me feel like I wasn't just... broken.

I could feel the cursed power inside me stirring, preparing to collapse at any second. It was angry, just like I was. Furious, jealous, and so filled with fear that it made my chest ache.

If I wasted any more time, I'd lose him.

I couldn't lose him. Not again.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms, and turned toward the wooden barricades that blocked the way out of town. Zain was still standing in my path, his arms crossed, his expression unreadable. But I didn't care. I had to get to him.

Without thinking, I moved forward, my feet carrying me toward the wooden barriers. I wasn't going to let anything stop me. Not Zain. Not the rules. Not anything.

But then—

"Stop."

The single word was low, cold, and commanding.

Before I could even react, a blast of icy air shot toward me, and with a crackling sound, the path ahead of me was sealed. A wall of ice appeared out of nowhere, thick and unforgiving.

Zain's voice was steady, but there was a hard edge to it now. "I'm not letting you go, Celia. Not this time. If you try to break through, I'll stop you. By force if necessary."

I stopped dead in my tracks, staring at the ice wall, my heart pounding in my chest.

How dare he?

I was not going to let him stop me.

I turned slowly, my anger building, the cursed power inside me thrumming with tension. Zain was still standing there, his gaze unwavering. But I could feel it. I could feel the weight of his condescension, his judgment, pressing down on me.

I wasn't going to let him treat me like this. Not now.

I turned my head slowly, my eyes narrowing. My red irises burned with fury, glowing faintly as I released a dangerous aura. The air around me seemed to crackle with malevolence.

"**Move**," I said, my voice icy, barely more than a whisper. But there was nothing soft in it. Nothing pleading. It was cold. It was final. And it was filled with malice.

Zain didn't budge.

But neither did I.

We were at an impasse. And I was ready to make him regret underestimating me.

Kaiser needed me. Every second I wasted felt like a blade to my chest. I could feel the power building inside me, the cursed chains stirring restlessly beneath my skin, pulsing with my emotions. It wasn't something I had to consciously control anymore; it just happened.

Before I could even move, the chains erupted from my body like tendrils of darkness, slithering into the air. The cursed power that flowed through them was so thick, it almost felt suffocating.

Zain didn't hesitate. With a swift motion, he lifted his hands, and the air around him began to shimmer. His voice rang out with command, loud and clear. "Guild, assemble! Get in position! Move, now!"

Guild members spilled out from the buildings behind him—some were physical sword wielders, others were mages of various ranks. The low-ranked ones, D to B, hesitated for only a moment before they took their places. Zain commanded them like a strategist, each movement calculated, each word a direct order.

"Circulate around her. Don't let her escape. Support each other," he barked, already stepping forward, his own magic ready to burst forth.

His next words came like a sharp whisper. "Ice Water Pillar."

Before I could even react, the ground beneath me began to freeze. A wave of ice shot up, cold and biting. I jumped back, narrowly avoiding being trapped by the sudden surge of frozen spikes. His elemental magic was swift, and I felt the sting of cold rush through the air as the ice twisted toward me.

I lashed out with my chains. They cracked through the frozen air with eerie precision, aiming for Zain, but he was already moving. His next spell came quicker—"Water Bind!"

Water erupted from the ground, forming thick tendrils that tried to wrap around my legs. I could feel the pressure of the water, threatening to restrict my movement. My chains, however, reacted instantly, stretching to their limits as they intercepted the water. The water splashed harmlessly against them, but the force of Zain's attack still tugged at my balance.

"Focus on her—don't let her breathe," Zain commanded to his guild, and at his signal, the others attacked. A sword-wielding member lunged at me, while a mage cast a fireball in my direction.

I barely had time to react as the fireball whizzed past me, but I wasn't fast enough to avoid the sword. It sliced through the air toward me, but my chains extended just in time, slamming into the sword with a metallic clang. The force pushed me back a step, but I held firm, my chains vibrating with their strength.

They were attacking in waves, testing me. My frustration grew. I could feel the anger bubbling up, that familiar dark feeling threatening to swallow me whole. I hated feeling like this. Like I was losing control. My chains grew heavier, their movements sharper, more precise as my emotions twisted.

Zain's eyes flickered with something cold and calculating as he watched my chains, his stance unwavering. "Don't let her power overwhelm you. Block, counter, now!" He commanded his guild, and the mages began to cast again—more elements, more chaos. The physical fighters circled around me, weapons raised.

But I couldn't think. I couldn't think when it felt like I was going to lose Kaiser. My chains grew darker, their shadows bleeding across the ground. Each swing, each lash, each strike was not just to defend, but to attack.

The cursed magic inside me flared, the chains sizzling with energy as I used my Withering Touch on them. The touch wasn't just physical—it drained, it weakened. It sapped the strength of anyone it touched, slowly but surely.

The first sword-wielding fighter to get too close collapsed to the ground with a scream, his body drained of strength, his arm limp at his side. He couldn't hold his sword anymore. The chains wrapped tighter around him, pulling him toward me, dragging him away from the fight.

I could feel the power surging now. I wasn't the one fighting. I wasn't in control. The cursed magic, my anger, my fear, it was all feeding into it, and my chains were the manifestation of that rage.

"Focus!" Zain barked, stepping back slightly, his hands held wide. "Ice Mirror."

A reflection of myself, formed from ice, emerged from the ground in front of me. It was a perfect replica, mimicking my every movement. I could feel the cold seep through me as the reflection began attacking with water and ice, mirroring my chains' movements.

For a moment, I hesitated.

I couldn't afford to hesitate.

The reflection came at me, and my chains wrapped around its form, squeezing, crushing, withering. The ice shattered as my chains continued to spiral through the air, breaking through the mirror like a force of nature.

"She's gaining cursed energy—don't let up!" Zain shouted, his voice rising, his control faltering as he saw the tide shift.

But I didn't care anymore. I couldn't. My body, my cursed magic, it was moving on its own now. The chains slashed through the air with calculating precision, overwhelming Zain's guild members.

One by one, they fell—sword-wielders collapsing as their strength was drained, mages unable to summon the next spell with enough power to stand against me.

My breath came in ragged gasps, my heart pounding in my chest, but the rush of power—the rush of finally fighting—felt like a storm that couldn't be contained.

No. I won't lose him. I won't lose him.

I could feel Zain's eyes on me, and his fear—it wasn't something I could see, but something I could sense. His strategy was falling apart. The more I fought, the more I overwhelmed him. He shouted commands, but his guild was beginning to crumble under the pressure.

And then, just as I thought I had the upper hand, a sharp voice broke through the chaos. "That's enough, Zain."

Levi came forward in just a second, his stance firm, his eyes burning with the usual arrogance. But there was a seriousness to his tone that froze me in place. "I said, enough."

Zain faltered, his eyes narrowing as he turned toward Levi. "She's a danger—"

"She's fine, Zain," Levi cut him off, his voice carrying across the battlefield. "You've had your fun, now step aside."

Zain hesitated, but at Levi's words, he lowered his hands, his ice magic dissipating. The guild members, battered and drained, began to retreat, stepping back as the fight came to an unexpected halt.

I stood there, my chains still raised, but my breath coming out in uneven gasps. My anger was still swirling inside me, the power still there, but now it felt... hollow.

I couldn't stop thinking about Kaiser. Was he okay?

"Don't push her like that again," Levi said, his voice softer now as he looked at me. "You're not alone in this, Celia."

But all I could think about was Kaiser. "I need to go. Please..."

Levi sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, his eyes softening as they met mine. "Go," he said, his voice firm yet caring. "Just... don't attack anyone on the way or get hurt."

I nodded quickly, feeling the weight of his words in my chest. But I couldn't stop thinking about Kaiser. He needed me. I had to find him, no matter what.

"Thank you, Levi," I whispered, trying to force a smile, but the fear still gnawed at my insides. "I'll be careful."

Zain, who had been standing nearby, watching us with a cold gaze, raised an eyebrow. "Why are you letting her go like this? We agreed on closing the outskirts, Levi!"

Zain's eyes narrowed at Levi's words, but before he could respond, Levi added with a smirk, his confidence practically oozing from every word, "Look, Zain, I get it. You're trying to play the responsible one, but let's be real for a second. If anything goes wrong, I'll be there to destroy it completely at ease. It's not even a challenge. So, let her go. You've got to trust me on this one."

Zain scowled but said nothing, and Levi turned back to him. "Prepare the guild members. We need to be ready for whatever comes next. The swarm could arrive any time now."

Zain opened his mouth to protest again, but Levi cut him off. "No arguments. Do what I say."

I didn't have time to hear more of their conversation. I was already on my feet, adrenaline pushing me forward despite my exhaustion. With a final glance at Levi, I gave him a small, thankful nod before turning and rushing into the darkness.

"Kaiser..." I whispered to myself, my heart thundering in my chest. I had to find him.

I could barely catch my breath as I stumbled through the dark outskirts, my heart racing in my chest, my mind a whirlwind of fear. Kaiser... where are you? I kept calling his name, my voice cracking with the weight of desperation, "Kaiser! Where are you? Please, answer me!"

My feet moved faster, almost too fast, and I tripped over uneven ground more than once. Every shadow seemed like a threat. Every rustle in the distance made my skin crawl. What if something happened to him? What if I couldn't reach him in time?

I shouted again, "Kaiser!" The sound echoed through the night, but there was no answer. The silence around me felt suffocating. I should've been with him sooner, but my thoughts kept running in circles, full of doubt. Maybe I wasn't strong enough to help him. Maybe... Maybe I've already failed him.

And then I saw it.

A grotesque creature. Its monstrous form was hunched over something, ripping at the flesh like it hadn't eaten in days. The half-eaten body of someone—who, I couldn't tell—was lying in a pool of blood, the grotesque's jagged claws sinking deep into the severed arm. My stomach churned, bile rising in my throat.

I took a step back, instinctively reaching for my chains. They surged to life, responding to my panic, wrapping around my body like an extension of myself. But they felt... different.

My cursed magic was still too wild, too erratic after the fight with Zain. It was harder to control, like it had a mind of its own, and now, I could feel it feeding on my fear.

The grotesque's head snapped up, its grotesque eyes locking onto me with an eerie intensity. It didn't hesitate. It snarled and charged at me.

I tried to react quickly, but the creature was faster than I expected. Its movements were erratic, jerking in an unpredictable way as it lunged forward, jagged claws swiping at the air. I barely managed to dodge, but not without feeling the wind of its claws tear through my hair.

My chains shot forward, aiming for its exposed chest, but the grotesque's thick, armor-like skin absorbed the blow. I could feel the impact reverberate through my arms, but it didn't even flinch. It only seemed to grow angrier.

"Come on, come on..." I muttered to myself, struggling to focus. But the chains were wild, unfocused, reacting more to my panic than my control. The grotesque didn't give me a chance to catch my breath. It surged forward again, swiping with its claws. One hit. Two hits. I couldn't keep up.

I threw up my chains, trying to shield myself, but the grotesque's sheer strength overwhelmed them. It backed me up, cornering me against a rock, and with a swift motion, it brought one of its sharp spikes toward me, aiming for my side.

I gasped in horror, but before the spike could pierce me, I felt a sudden jolt—something pulling me away from its strike. It was my chains, barely managing to wrap around the grotesque's limb in time to stop it.

But I couldn't hold it. The thing was too strong. My chains writhed, desperate to hold on, but the grotesque just twisted its body and broke through them with a sickening crack. My head spun from the strain of the battle, the fear creeping in, eating away at my resolve.

No... no, not like this.

I needed to do something. But my magic was erratic, unpredictable. Every move I made felt like I was just stumbling through the dark, trying to find a way to win.

"Please... please!" I whispered through gritted teeth, but the grotesque wasn't listening. It was relentless, its hunger growing stronger as it pressed me further into the corner.

Just as I thought it was over, a voice cut through the chaos. "Celia, move!"

The next thing I knew, a blur of movement passed by me, and the grotesque let out a screech of pain as a blade sliced through its side.

Levi.

He appeared like out of thin air, his blade flashing in the moonlight, his movements swift and decisive. "Zain! Now!"

I barely registered his voice before Zain appeared beside him, his water magic surging around him like a tidal wave, crashing into the grotesque. The creature howled in pain, its movements slowing just for a moment as Zain's magic bound it in place.

I couldn't believe it. I had been so caught up in the fight that I hadn't noticed them coming. The guild members began to assemble around us, positioning themselves at a distance, ready to strike at the moment's notice.

But even with Levi and Zain here, the grotesque was far from defeated. It thrashed violently, its rage only growing, ignoring the pain in favor of its need to feed and destroy. I could hear it snarling, its claws scraping against the ground as it tried to reach me.

"Focus!" Levi's voice was low, sharp, as he moved around the creature, slashing with his sword. "Zain, take its legs!"

The moment Zain's water magic lashed out again, binding the grotesque's limbs, it roared in fury. But its strength was starting to wane. Levi's strikes, Zain's magic—it was starting to add up.

But I couldn't move. My body was still trembling from the fight, my energy drained. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving only exhaustion in its wake. My chains hung limp by my side, no longer alive with cursed power, and I couldn't bring myself to do more.

Then, with one final, overwhelming strike, Levi's sword plunged into the grotesque's head. The creature let out a final scream of rage before collapsing, its body going still.

I couldn't even breathe. I felt like my lungs had given up on me. My legs gave out, and I collapsed to my knees. I was shaking, my body covered in bruises and blood. The exhaustion hit me all at once, and I could barely keep my eyes open.

"Celia?" Levi's voice was softer now, more concerned. He knelt beside me, his usual cocky grin replaced by a rare, serious expression. "You okay?"

I couldn't speak. I was too tired, too shaken. But I nodded weakly, though my body refused to cooperate.

Zain stood a little distance away, his face unreadable. "That was too close," he muttered, but his tone lacked any real comfort. "You should have waited for us."

I opened my mouth to say something, but my vision was starting to blur. Before I knew it, everything went dark.

I blinked, my eyes slowly adjusting to the heavy darkness around me. It felt... strange, suffocating almost. I tried to move, but everything felt off, like my limbs were heavy, unwilling to obey.

I pushed myself up, feeling the coolness of the ground beneath my palms, but I couldn't see a thing. Just endless, thick blackness that seemed to swallow every inch of the space around me. My heart raced, my breath quickening as panic started to take hold.

Where am I?

I looked around, turning my head slowly, hoping for something to ground me. Anything. But there was nothing. Just darkness. It felt so... empty.

I tried to remember what happened before I passed out. My mind felt foggy, as if it were fighting to stay focused, but bits and pieces of the past few hours started to filter through.

I was looking for Kaiser. I remember that much. My mind had been fixated on him—his safety, his whereabouts. I couldn't stop thinking about him. I was desperate to find him, to make sure he was okay.

That grotesque, though... that disgusting, horrible thing. I came across it, and I... I tried to fight, but I was so tired. I wasn't prepared for something like that. I couldn't do anything to stop it.

My chains kept swinging, but it wasn't enough. My energy was gone, and the creature's brutality was too much.

Then... Zain. And Levi. They were there, saving me. But I... I still passed out. My vision went black, and everything stopped.

I held my head, trying to force myself to think. Where is Kaiser now? Where did he go? I can't let something happen to him too.

The thought made my heart race again, my breathing uneven as I stood there, unable to do anything, unable to reach him. **The grotesque. Kaiser. Was there a connection? Was he... Was he in danger too?**

I clenched my fists, feeling the sharp sting of worry and fear. I can't... I can't lose him too. No. I refuse to lose him.

"Celia."

The voice was quiet, distant, yet it cut through the silence like a knife. I froze. My whole body went rigid as the hairs on my neck stood on end. That voice. I knew it. I... I knew it.

I turned around slowly, dread pooling in my stomach. What I saw made my heart drop into my stomach.

It was him. Ronan. But... it wasn't the Ronan I used to know. This was a broken, dying version of him. His face was pale, his eyes clouded with pain, and his body was barely holding together. He looked... wrong. So wrong. His once-proud posture was now crumpled and weak.

"Ronan..." My voice trembled, barely more than a whisper, as my feet felt frozen to the ground. I didn't want to move closer, didn't want to face what he was now. The pain in my chest was unbearable, a mix of fear, guilt, and confusion that I couldn't shake.

"You killed me," he said, his voice flat, hollow, as if there was no life left in it.

I stumbled backward, my hand instinctively going to my chest, as if it could stop the aching that had started to spread throughout my body. It wasn't physical, though. It was all inside. The guilt. The shame.

I killed him... didn't I?

It was a question that had haunted me ever since that night—after that night Kaiser had been unconscious, the night I had been left alone. I asked Levi about what had happened to Ronan, to Kiel.

Levi told me that he found Kiel, but Ronan... Ronan was already dead. Strangled by his own flames, bound by chains—my chains. I never wanted this. I never wanted any of this. But now, looking at him... I couldn't help but feel like the weight of that guilt was crushing me.

I looked at Ronan, my chest tensing. His eyes were empty, cold. He was dying, but it didn't feel like he was gone. The voice that came from him felt like a ghost, a shadow of who he had been before.

I killed him. I did. And now he was here... telling me it was my fault.

"I didn't leave you, Ronan," I whispered, my voice shaking. "I didn't... I didn't want this. I didn't want you to..."

But he didn't let me finish.

"You abandoned me, Celia. You were the one that killed me." His voice grew more haunting, more accusing. "You transformed into that thing, the Queen of Curses, and I tried to stop you. You pushed me to the edge, but it was you who took everything from me. You trapped my soul forever, cursed me to never rest."

I flinched, his words like daggers. Trapped his soul? I had trapped his soul? My heart clenched, and all the air left my lungs as I struggled to hold onto myself. The guilt... the suffocating guilt.

"No... no, I didn't mean to, Ronan!" I cried out, my chest paining. "I didn't... I never wanted to hurt you. I didn't want to be the Queen of Curses. I didn't want to change! You left me... you left me to die!" My voice cracked with the weight of my own anger and confusion.

"You were the first one to turn away! You betrayed me first, Ronan!"

But he didn't listen. He just stood there, that dead, empty gaze never leaving me.

"You were the one who betrayed me, You chose to become a curse. You let me die, and now... now you have to live with it. You took my life. You took everything."

"You didn't just kill me, Celia. You took my soul, bound it, and made me your slave. Now, I'm nothing more than a curse you control, trapped in this endless torment because of your choices."

I staggered backward, my knees buckling as his words crushed me further. No, no, no. I didn't do this. I wasn't the one who killed him. He was the one who turned his back on me first.

He had been the one to abandon me when I needed him the most. And yet, his words... they made it feel like I was the villain. I was the one who failed him. I was the one who killed him.

I could feel the tears building, but I tried to hold them back. I couldn't cry. Not now. Not with him standing here accusing me, making me feel like a murderer.

"I didn't want this... I swear," I whispered, my voice trembling. "I never wanted to hurt you, Ronan. I never wanted any of this. I just wanted to protect Kaiser... I just wanted to protect him."

But he didn't soften. He just looked at me like I was the one who had done everything wrong. And with each passing second, the weight of my guilt grew heavier.

"I didn't ask for this, Ronan," I said, my words barely audible as my body shook with the guilt. "I never wanted to be what I am. But... but you... you left me. You tried to kill me... and you didn't even think about what happened to me. You just... you just left me."

My breath hitched as my tears finally began to fall. I couldn't stop them. They blurred my vision, the guilt squeezing at my chest until I thought I might suffocate from it.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry... I never meant to hurt you."

The words tumbled out of my mouth in a stream, my voice choked with emotion. "I'm sorry, Ronan. I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I'm sorry I couldn't stop this. I'm sorry for everything."

I collapsed to my knees, unable to stand under the crushing weight of the guilt anymore. My hands gripped my chest as if I could somehow hold my broken heart together.

I couldn't stop apologizing. The words kept slipping from my lips, like a broken record, but they felt so empty. Each "I'm sorry" was just a drop in an ocean of guilt, a pit of regret that seemed to swallow me whole. My tears came faster now, uncontrollable, my voice barely more than a whisper.

"I'm sorry, Ronan. I'm so sorry..."

But as I stood there, crying, repeating those words over and over, I felt myself slipping again. I was becoming that pathetic, sobbing weak girl—the one who only knew how to apologize, how to beg for mercy, and that terrified me.

If I stayed like this, if I kept crawling back to my old self, I'd never be strong enough to protect anyone. Not even Kaiser.

It was in that moment, when I felt the weight of my failure crushing me, that Ronan's laugh broke through the silence.

"Ahahahaha!"

It echoed, loud and jarring, twisting and distorted, making my skin crawl. It was a laugh that felt so unnatural, so... demonic.

"You think you can save him, Celia?" he sneered, each word dripping with mocking venom. "You've always been so naïve."

My heart skipped a beat, and a cold chill crept down my spine. His words hit harder than any physical blow. I felt it... that knot in my chest tightening. I couldn't breathe.

"W-Why are you laughing?" I whispered, my voice trembling. Fear clawed at me, mixing with confusion, as if his laugh itself was a poison spreading through me.

The darkness around me felt colder, heavier now, like Ronan's presence was suffocating me from all sides.

Ronan's smile grew wider, his eyes dark, full of a sinister gleam. **"Kaiser is dead,"** he spat, cold and sharp. "It's your fault. You were too weak. You couldn't even fight properly to save him this time. You've lost the fight, Celia. And now, because of you, the one person you care about is going to die."

I felt my blood boil. The anger that had been simmering inside me, threatening to burst, finally erupted. All my doubts, all my fears... everything faded away. His words, meant to hurt me, were nothing more than fuel for the fire.

"You'll get what you deserve, Celia," Ronan continued, his voice dripping with venom. "Karma's coming for you. You'll lose the only person who ever trusted you. The only person you've ever had by your side. He'll die, and it'll be because of you."

I could feel my pulse thundering in my ears. My hands clenched into fists, and I took a step forward, the urge to rip him apart overwhelming. He was just a curse. A dead soul trapped in this nightmare. He had no power over me anymore. And yet... I still hated hearing those words.

I could feel his words gnawing at me, each one sinking deeper, piercing into the place I least wanted to acknowledge: my own weakness. My hands tightened into fists, nails biting into my palms.

I could almost hear the sound of my heart pounding, a deafening rhythm that matched the fury in my chest. But despite the anger bubbling up, I couldn't escape the truth.

He was right.

I had failed. The grotesque, that vile creature that tore through me with such ease—I had failed. If I had just been stronger, faster, more prepared, I wouldn't have been trapped like that. I wouldn't have been caught off guard. **And Kaiser... Kaiser wouldn't have been left alone.**

The thought twisted in my chest, like a knot tightening every time I breathed. If only I had been stronger. The blame weighed heavy, suffocating me.

It wasn't just the grotesque that I couldn't defeat. It was my own lack of experience, my inability to stand my ground. I didn't know how to fight the way I needed to. I didn't know how to win. If I had been trained, had the right tools, maybe I could have protected Kaiser. Maybe I wouldn't have lost him in the first place.

I swallowed hard, forcing the lump in my throat down. The guilt, the self-loathing, threatened to drown me, but I wouldn't let it. Not now. Not after everything.

Because one thing I knew for sure was that I couldn't afford to let this be the end. I couldn't let weakness dictate my fate.

I won't lose again.

I straightened, my hands relaxing, but the fire inside me was growing. This feeling, this horrible helplessness—it wasn't going to define me. It was time for me to grow. To train. To understand my powers. To know how to use them, so that no one, not even a grotesque or a curse, could ever overpower me again. I refused to be a victim of my own inability.

I would never let someone make me feel powerless again.

I would make sure that, the next time, it would be my power that overwhelmed them.

I took another step forward, my body shaking with the rush of newfound determination.

"I'll never lose again," I whispered to myself, the words falling from my lips like a vow.

Because I was done being weak. I was done being the one who lost.

I was the Queen of Curses.

And from now on, I alone would have the authority to make them kneel.

But then, just as I was about to say something—anything—a sudden rush of cold energy blasted through the ground. I didn't have time to react before cursed chains shot out from behind Ronan, impaling him with cruel precision.

His eyes widened in agony, and he screamed—his voice raw, twisted by the pain.

"AHHHHH!" Roman screamed.

"Shut up," I whispered, my voice colder than ice.

Ronan's scream echoed around us, but it only fueled the fire inside me. I took slow, deliberate steps toward him, my gaze dark and unforgiving.

"Watch your mouth, Ronan," I said, each word carrying the weight of an unspoken threat. "You're nothing but a dead curse. A curse I killed. If you even dare to bring up Kaiser again, I won't hesitate to kill you again. Understand?"

My eyes glowed a fiery red, the familiar aura of power surrounding me once more. It was as though the dream had ignited something deep within me.

Something dark. Something dangerous. I could feel the pulse of that power in my veins, growing stronger with every word I spoke.

"I'll get stronger," I vowed, my voice low and deadly. "I'll use this power, no matter how long it takes, no matter how much pain I have to endure. I'll learn to control it, and I'll save Kaiser."

I stepped right in front of him, towering over his kneeling form. I looked down at him with disdain. The anger and pain I'd felt for so long had found its release.

"Just like he saved me," I whispered, my words dripping with venom. "I will save him."

The dream began to crumble, the world around us starting to fracture. The cursed chains that had bound Ronan's body began to retract, pulling away from him. **He fell to his knees with a sickening thud.**

"Praise your queen, Ronan," I said coldly, my voice full of power. "Praise your queen... or suffer."

The last remnants of his dignity crumbled as he was forced onto his knees, his head bowed in submission. I smiled, a dark, twisted smile. It wasn't a smile of happiness—it was a smile of power.

I stepped forward, placing my foot firmly on his head, pressing down with all the force I could muster.

"Know your place," I said, the words coming out like a command. "You are nothing but a cursed slave I own. Because I alone am the Queen of Curses. **You're nothing but a bug beneath me.**"

I could feel my negative emotions flooding through me, feeding into my power. Every ounce of pain, every ounce of anger, every ounce of fear I'd ever felt—it all came together in that moment, in that dream, in that darkness.

I was the one in control. I was the one who was cursed, but I was also the one who would reign.

Ronan's voice quivered as he tried to resist, but his words cracked under the weight of my power. "I... I acknowledge you, Queen," he rasped, the words scraping out with the last of his pride. "You are my master. I... I am yours."

I leaned down, my eyes glowing red with malice, and I crushed his head further under my foot. "Say it properly, Ronan," I whispered coldly. "Admit it. You're nothing without me."

His body trembled as he gasped for air. His pride shattered, and he finally broke. "I... I am nothing," he choked. "I'm yours, Queen Celia. I live for you. I die for you. I swear my life to you."

I pressed harder, watching him writhe beneath me. "Good," I purred, a twisted smile on my lips. "You understand your place now. A slave. Nothing more. You're mine to control and discard when you've ran out of uses."

His voice barely came through, weak and desperate. "I... I am your slave. I exist to serve you... to be crushed by you... forever."

I chuckled darkly, my boot still pressing against his skull. "And you will, Ronan. You'll exist only to serve me, to bow to me. You'll beg for mercy that will never come."

His eyes glazed over with defeat. "I am yours. I'm nothing without you, Queen Celia. Please... let me serve you."

I stood over him, watching him tremble in submission, his dignity lost. "Remember this moment," I spat, "The moment you gave your life to me. Because that's all you are now. A broken thing. **My broken toy.**"

He nodded, his voice nothing more than a whisper. "I'm yours... Queen Celia... forever."

I smiled, stepping back, knowing he was nothing but a broken curse in my control.

As the dream crumbled further, I stood there, looking down at the broken form of my old friend. The chains vanished, and the nightmare began to fade.

But as I woke, the darkness didn't leave me. The weight of it, the coldness of my own heart, stayed with me.

After a while the nightmare ended.

I slowly blinked my eyes open, the dim light from the window blurring in my vision. My head felt heavy, like I'd just woken from the deepest sleep. It took me a moment to focus, but when I did, I saw her.

Emma was sitting by the bed, her head resting on the edge of the stool, her soft breathing filling the quiet room. I rubbed my eyes, still feeling groggy, and I tried to sit up.

"Emma," I whispered, my voice croaky from the sleep. I reached out a hand, gently tapping her shoulder.

She startled, her eyes shooting open. "Celia! You're awake!" Her voice sounded like the sweetest melody to my ears, a relief that I didn't even realize I needed. Without a second thought, she jumped up from the stool and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug.

"I—I didn't know if you'd wake up," Emma whispered, her voice shaky with emotion. "I was so scared."

"Thank you, Emma," I murmured, my voice muffled against her shoulder, but even through my gratitude, something gnawed at me, a sense of something wrong, something missing. I couldn't place it yet, but the pit in my stomach deepened.

The words hit me harder than I expected. Days? I furrowed my brow, trying to process it. Days? I had been out for that long? I felt a sharp pain in my chest at the thought. It didn't feel right. Something was off.

I tilted my head, my eyes scanning the room, desperately searching for the one person who should've been here. Kaiser? Where was he?

My heart began to pound louder, my breath catching in my throat. He wasn't here. He should've been here. I couldn't ignore the dread that grew inside me, twisting tighter and tighter.

"Where's Kaiser?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, but it was laced with fear I couldn't hide. "Why isn't he here with me?"

I tried to sit up again, but my body protested immediately. A sharp pain shot up my side, making me wince. My hands were shaky, struggling to move, but I wanted to stand. I needed to see him, make sure he was okay. He has to be okay.

Emma immediately stood and rushed over to me, her face full of concern. "Celia, you need to rest. Your injuries—"

"No," I said, my voice cracking slightly. "Where is he, Emma?" My heart pounded in my chest. There was something in her eyes that told me the truth before she even spoke. I could feel it. I didn't want to hear it, but I could feel it. Something terrible had happened.

Her gaze faltered, and she stuttered, her hands trembling as she wrung them together. **"K-Kaiser... I... I...," Emma's voice broke, and she choked on her own words as tears welled up in her eyes.**

I leaned closer, my heart pounding harder. No. No, this can't be happening. My voice shook as I grabbed her arms, desperate. "Where is he, Emma? Please, tell me. Where is he?"

Emma looked away, her face crumpling with grief. Her voice shook as she spoke, barely audible through her sobs. "Celia... we... we couldn't find him. We searched everywhere, but... but there were so many... so many bodies." She paused, swallowing hard, her hands trembling as she clutched the edge of the bed. "The area... it was full of corpses. But there was no sign of him. Not a trace."

She looked back at me then, her eyes filled with raw pain. "I—I thought he'd be fine, that he'd come back, but... now, I don't know..." Her voice broke, and fresh tears poured down her face as she leaned into me, unable to hold it back any longer.

The pain in her eyes hit me harder than anything. No... not Kaiser. Not him.

I shook her lightly, my voice growing frantic. "Emma, tell me!" I almost begged. "What happened to him? Where is he?"

Emma collapsed against me then, sobbing uncontrollably, her entire body shaking with grief. "Celia, I—I couldn't do anything. I tried... I tried to stop them, but..." She gasped for breath, her sobs thick with pain. **"He... he's gone. He was... he was killed. They took him from us, Celia. They took him from you. I couldn't save him..."**

Emma's breath hitched as she tried to speak through her tears. "Levi... Levi told me... he told me Kaiser couldn't fight a Grotesque. He said... he said there was no way... no way he could survive... He... he's gone, Celia. I'm so sorry..." She choked on her words, the pain in her voice deepening with each sob. **"They... they killed him, Celia. I... I couldn't do anything."**

Her words shattered me. My vision blurred as the world around me seemed to crumble. I felt my heart crack, each piece falling into an abyss deeper than anything I'd known. No, no, no, NO!

The words hit me like a hammer to my chest. My entire body went cold. I couldn't breathe. My vision blurred as everything around me seemed to spin, to fall away. No. This can't be true. Kaiser can't be dead. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I couldn't process it. I couldn't... accept it.

Tears welled up in my own eyes, but they didn't fall yet. I was frozen, stuck in the moment, my mind refusing to catch up with the reality Emma had just shattered for me. I was barely aware of Emma's trembling hand on my arm as she whispered again, her voice breaking.

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

My heart shattered. Pieces of it splintered and scattered everywhere, leaving only this empty, hollow feeling inside me. I had failed. I couldn't protect him. I couldn't protect the one person who mattered more than anything else to me.

He's gone. The words kept repeating in my mind, but I couldn't make sense of them.

I slowly sank back into the bed, the weight of the world crashing down on me. "Kaiser...", I whispered, as the tears finally spilled down my cheeks, hot and heavy, burning my skin as they fell.

I... I didn't tell you, Kaiser. I—I—didn't... I didn't say it.

Why didn't I say it? Why didn't I...? I kept pushing it away, telling myself there'd be more time. But... now you're gone. And there's no more time. There's no more... you.

You always made me feel safe. You made me feel... whole. When you smiled, it was like everything could be okay. And now... now I'll never see that smile again. I'll never hear your voice again. I'll never feel your hand holding mine, or that warmth that always kept me from falling apart.

Why did you have to leave me? Why now? Why couldn't we... why couldn't we have had more time?

I wasn't ready. I'm not ready... I'm not ready to be without you.

I... I... I didn't even tell you... how much I cared for you...

The door creaked open, and Levi stepped into the room. His usual cold, unreadable expression was replaced with something... softer, more solemn. My heart skipped a beat, and for the briefest moment, I thought—maybe—there was still a chance.

There has to be a way. Kaiser can't be gone. He can't be.

Emma had told me he was dead, but she hadn't seen it herself. She was just as lost in grief as I was. I couldn't—I wouldn't—accept it. Not without seeing it with my own eyes.

I lifted my head, my voice trembling as I whispered, "Levi... You must know something. Please tell me. There has to be a way to bring him back. You've seen things. You must—"

Levi's gaze softened for a fraction of a second, and then he stepped closer, his eyes dark with an unreadable sadness. He opened his mouth, about to speak, but just before the words left his lips, I felt my chest tighten. I knew this wasn't going to be good, but I couldn't stop myself from hoping.

"Celia... It's about Kaiser." Levi began, his voice low, hesitant.

My heart stopped, the words hanging in the air like a death sentence, waiting to fall.

And then—everything paused.

This chapter is updated by [freew\(e\)bnovel.\(c\)om](http://freew(e)bnovel.(c)om)

Chapter 40 - Broken Hopes...

Celia's Perspective:

Levi slowly walked toward the bed, his steps sluggish, his face carved with something I couldn't bring myself to care about. My world was shaking, crumbling into pieces, and the only thing that mattered—Kaiser—was gone.

"Celia, please calm down." Levi's voice reached me, but it barely registered.

Tears poured from my eyes, my chest heaving as every second passed in agonizing silence. My fingers curled into the blanket, gripping it like it could hold me together.

"Just listen to me," Levi said.

I tried. I really did. But everything was blurry. My vision. My thoughts. My entire world.

Levi hesitated before speaking again. "We're... almost certain Kaiser was killed by a Grotesque. Those creatures are B-ranked based on their physical strength alone... Kaiser—" He stopped for a moment, as if weighing his words. "He might be Kaiser, but—"

A sharp sob tore from my throat. The air felt too heavy to breathe.

Levi exhaled. "Kaiser was an E-rank, Celia. The chance of him surviving a Grotesque attack is near zero."

I snapped.

"That's what you came here to tell me?!" My voice broke into a scream. "Just shut up and leave me alone!" My hands swung wildly, shoving them away, my nails digging into my palms.

Emma and Levi both stilled. Their expressions flickered between surprise and something softer—pity, understanding. But they didn't understand. They couldn't understand.

Emma knelt beside me, her voice quieter than usual, no teasing in her tone. "Celia, listen—"

"NO!" My scream came out hoarse, my throat raw. "Don't tell me to listen! Don't tell me you understand! You—!" My breath hitched, my chest rising and falling unevenly. "You don't get it! None of you do!"

Emma sat beside me, her usual carefree energy nowhere to be found. She didn't joke, didn't tease—she just looked at me with this unfamiliar expression, like she didn't know what to do.

"Celia..." She hesitated, her voice softer than I'd ever heard it. "I know this hurts, I do, but—"

"No, you don't!" I snapped, my voice breaking mid-scream. "You don't know! You don't understand! So stop—stop saying you do!"

Emma flinched. A flicker of pain crossed her face, but I didn't care. The ache in my chest was too much, too overwhelming. I gasped between sobs, gripping my arms like they were the only things holding me together.

Levi leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, his expression unreadable. But his usual cocky smirk was gone. Instead, he looked... tired.

"Celia," he exhaled, his voice steadier than Emma's. "No one's telling you to stop grieving, but you're breaking yourself apart."

"Th-that's not your problem!" My words stumbled over themselves, my breath hitching painfully. "Y-you... you're acting like this is s-something I can just—just fix!"

Levi's eyes darkened. "I never said that."

Emma's hands clenched into fists on her lap, her voice wavering. "Kaiser wouldn't want this, Celia."

I froze.

Then, slowly, I turned toward her.

The look I gave her must've been terrifying, because she swallowed hard. My voice shook, but it was sharp, filled with something raw, something broken.

"D-Don't... Don't you dare say his name like that." My nails dug into my palms, my body trembling. "Like he's... g-gone."

Levi rubbed a hand down his face, exhaling slowly. "Celia—"

I cut him off with a choked, desperate cry. "He promised me, Levi! He p-promised we'd always be together! That w-we'd travel together, fight together, live together!"

My voice cracked, turning into a sob so deep, so painful, I felt like I might fall apart completely.

Emma's eyes glistened, but she held them back. "I... I miss him too, Celia."

A hollow, bitter laugh tumbled out of me. "No, you don't!" My voice rose again, cracking under the weight of my grief. "Not like I do! Not the way I do!"

Emma sucked in a breath, and Levi finally pushed off the wall, his voice lower, calmer. "Celia, you're not alone in this."

"Y-yes, I am!" My hands curled into my chest, my body shaking. "He's gone! And—and I'm still here! And I don't know how to—how to even—"

My words collapsed into sobs, my entire body trembling so badly it hurt. Emma reached for my hand, her fingers brushing against mine—

And I ripped my hand away.

"Don't t-touch me," I whispered, breathless and afraid.

Emma's face fell. "Celia..."

But I just shook my head violently, burying my face in my hands, my voice small, fragile. "J-just leave me alone..."

It wasn't just a pull away—it was pure instinct, my body recoiling in fear, in denial. My hand shot back so fast it was like her touch would burn me.

A long silence stretched between us. My shoulders trembled. I couldn't stop crying, couldn't stop the way my body shook, the way my heart clenched with unbearable pain.

Levi exhaled through his nose, his expression unreadable as he glanced at Emma. He didn't say anything—just gave her a look. A silent message.

Emma hesitated before standing up.

I didn't look at them. I couldn't.

They left.

The moment the door clicked shut, everything inside me collapsed.

A choked scream ripped from my throat as I buried my face into the blankets, my fingers clutching at the fabric desperately.

"Kaiser... You promised..."

My voice broke. My sobs came faster, my breaths hitching so violently it hurt.

"You promised you'd stay... you promised you'd be by my side... You lied!"

Tears blurred everything. My body curled inward, shaking, breaking.

"Kaiser..." I whispered his name like a prayer, my voice so fragile, so helpless.

"Why... Why did you leave me, Kaiser?! Why?!" My fingers trembled as I grasped at the empty space beside me. "You said... you said I wasn't alone... but now you're—you're just—"

My throat closed up. My words died in a choked, pitiful cry.

I pressed my forehead against the mattress, my tears soaking into the fabric. My entire body trembled, as if trying to reject the reality sinking into me.

I wanted to scream again, to yell at him, to tell him to come back—

But no matter how loud I cried, no matter how desperately I begged—

Kaiser wasn't here.

Day 1 – The World Without Him

Everything felt wrong.

The room was the same, the air was the same, the people were the same—but he wasn't here.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my arms wrapped tightly around my knees, staring blankly at the wall. The candlelight flickered, casting shadows across the wooden floor. I could hear Emma shuffling around in the background, probably trying to make herself look busy.

I didn't move.

I didn't eat.

I didn't sleep.

I just sat there, waiting—for what, I didn't know. Maybe for this to be a nightmare I'd finally wake up from. Maybe for Kaiser to walk through that door and call me an idiot for looking so miserable.

But the door never opened.

The chair beside the bed remained empty.

And the silence in my heart grew heavier.

Emma tried, she really did. She talked to me, sat next to me, even made some dumb joke about how she'd start looking better than me if I kept sulking like this. Normally, I'd throw a pillow at her or at least roll my eyes, but now... I just couldn't.

I didn't have the strength to laugh.

Or to care.

When night came, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, feeling the weight of my own body pressing into the mattress. The blankets were warm, but I was cold. I pulled them up, curled into a ball, squeezed my eyes shut.

I still remember Kaiser would come check if I was sad, or even unable to sleep in night. And then tease me until I would smile and promise him I would fall asleep.

I used to find comfort in that.

Now?

Now, the silence of the night only reminded me that his breathing wasn't there.

And it never would be again.

Day 2 – The World Keeps Moving, But I Don't

I woke up to Emma shaking me.

"Celia, you have to eat."

I didn't respond.

"Come on, just a little? If you starve to death, Kaiser's gonna be really pissed at you when you meet him in the afterlife."

I flinched.

Emma's smile disappeared instantly. "I—I didn't mean it like that. I was just—"

But I was already sitting up, forcing myself to take a bite of whatever food she had placed in front of me. It tasted like nothing. Just something to chew and swallow.

Emma looked relieved, but she didn't say anything. I think she knew words wouldn't do much.

The rest of the day passed in a haze.

I walked around the guild, hoping—hoping—that someone would tell me this was a mistake. That they had seen Kaiser, that he was alive, that he was out there waiting for me.

But all I got were pitying looks.

The kind that made my stomach twist, the kind that screamed "Poor girl, she still believes he's coming back."

By evening, I was sitting on the roof of the inn, staring at the sunset. Kaiser and I used to sit like this sometimes, just watching the sky burn with colors before night fell.

"Celia?"

Emma climbed up next to me, kicking her legs off the edge. "...You've been quiet."

I didn't answer.

She sighed, leaning back on her hands. "You know, Kaiser wouldn't want you to—"

"Don't." My voice cracked, sharp and brittle.

Emma shut her mouth.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms. "Don't say what he would want. He's not here, Emma. He's not going to tell me anything ever again."

Emma looked down, her playful mask slipping for a moment.

Then she nodded. "Okay. I won't say it."

Silence stretched between us.

I squeezed my eyes shut, breathing shakily.

I missed him.

I missed him so much it hurt.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to cry.

I wanted to grab him and never let go.

But the world wasn't listening to what I wanted.

After a while, Emma left. But I stayed on the roof...

The night sky stretched endlessly above me, stars flickering like distant, unreachable dreams. I hugged my knees, my body curled into itself as if that would make the ache in my chest go away.

But no matter how tightly I held myself, the pain wouldn't fade.

I closed my eyes. And as the world around me blurred, the past came rushing in.

The memory of the past that made me feel... like I was living that time. It was a two weeks back when Kaiser just had woke up and I was with him.

I sat beside his bed, my hands resting on my lap, watching him. His face was peaceful—relaxed in a way I had rarely seen. The bandages around his arm and chest were a reminder of what he had been through, but even in his wounded state, he looked strong.

I didn't know why I was smiling. Maybe it was because, for the first time in so long, I wasn't alone.

The warmth of the morning light slipped through the cracks of the curtains, casting a soft glow over him. His black hair caught the light, strands falling over his closed eyes. I resisted the urge to brush them aside.

I should let him rest...

But still, I stayed. Watching. Waiting. As if afraid that if I looked away, he would disappear.

And then—

The memories came back.

I didn't want them to, but they did.

People never wanted me.

I learned that early.

I was eleven when I first truly understood what hate felt like.

It wasn't just the whispers anymore. It wasn't just the way people looked at me like I was something dirty, something that shouldn't exist.

It was the moment when the first stone was thrown.

It had hit my shoulder—small, sharp, but enough to make me flinch. I turned, wide-eyed, only to see a group of boys standing there. Grinning.

"Oops," one of them had said, laughing. "Guess the cursed kid isn't just bad luck, she's bad at dodging too."

I didn't understand.

I had done nothing.

Nothing to them. Nothing to anyone.

So why—?

Another rock. This one hit my leg. Then another. And another.

I ran. I ran until my legs ached, until my lungs burned, until I could barely breathe.

But even when I escaped, the bruises remained.

And so did their words.

"She shouldn't be here."

"Her existence is a mistake."

"Don't touch her, don't go near her, or you'll be cursed too."

It didn't stop.

No matter where I went, no matter what I did, it never stopped.

When I was twelve, I heard a man tell his daughter, "You're lucky you weren't born like her."

When I was thirteen, I walked into town, hoping—begging—that today, they would look at me like I was just another person.

But they never did.

"Don't let her near the well. She'll curse the water."

"She's disgusting. Just looking at her makes my stomach turn."

"People like her should just disappear."

Disappear.

Like I wasn't supposed to exist in the first place.

Like I was just wrong for being alive.

When I was fourteen, I tripped and scraped my knee on the cobblestone road. I remember looking up, hoping—pleading—for a hand, for someone to help me up.

No one did.

They walked past me like I wasn't even there.

No—worse than that.

They stepped over me like I was dirt beneath their shoes.

"Filthy."

"Pathetic."

"She should've never been born."

When I was fifteen, the whispers turned into shouts.

"Why is she still here?"

"Her kind always bring ruin! She'll bring misfortune to us all!"

"Someone should've drowned her as a baby!"

When I was sixteen, someone actually tried.

When I was sixteen, they tried to kill me.

It was raining that night, a cold, sharp drizzle that cut through the fabric of my clothes and bit into my skin. I had been walking back from the forest, the weight of the day pressing down on me.

My body was soaked, chilled to the bone, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I didn't belong anywhere. I pulled the collar of my cloak tighter, but the cold didn't care. The mud beneath my feet squelched with every step as I trudged through the darkness.

Then—hands.

Rough, strong hands seized me from behind, dragging me backward, pulling me into the mud with a sickening force. I gasped, the air knocked out of my lungs, and I tried to push myself up, but the weight of their grip was too much. My knees buckled, and I crashed back down.

"Get off me!" I screamed, but it barely came out as more than a strangled cry.

The mud was thick, heavy, like the world itself was pressing down on me, suffocating me. Before I could react, another kick sent me flying back into the dirt. My face slammed into the wet ground, the sharp sting of pain hitting me like a jolt of electricity. I tasted the grit of the earth as it scraped against my cheek.

I tried to claw at the ground, my hands desperately reaching for something—anything—to pull myself up, but they were too strong. Too many. Too relentless. Their laughter echoed through the night, cold and cruel, cutting through me more than the rain ever could.

"What's wrong, freak? Can't fight back?" one of them jeered.

My wrists were pinned, and their weight pressed down on me, forcing me deeper into the muck. I kicked, thrashing helplessly, but every move was met with more laughter,

more taunts, and more pain. My heart pounded in my chest, a drumbeat of terror and hopelessness.

Then, they shoved my face into a puddle.

The filthy water flooded my mouth, choking me. My nose burned as rainwater rushed into my lungs, filling them with a cold that felt like death itself. I gasped, but it only made it worse. It burned. It stung. It tasted of earth and rot. The water slipped down my throat, strangling the life from me, drowning me in a world that had never wanted me to begin with.

I struggled, my hands flailing, but it was useless. My body felt heavy, like the world itself was sitting on my chest, suffocating me. My mind screamed for air, for anything to break free, but all I heard was the sound of their laughter.

"Just die already," one of them spat.

It was the easiest thing in the world for them to say. Like it was just a simple request. Like my entire life—everything I was—was nothing more than an inconvenience. A mistake. An accident that could be erased with the flick of a wrist.

I fought to breathe, to hold on, but the darkness was creeping in. My lungs burned, my chest ached, and every movement felt like I was dragging myself deeper into the abyss. My fingers clawed at the mud, searching for something, anything, to hold onto. But there was nothing. Only darkness. Only cold.

And the laughter. The laughter that would haunt me forever.

I was slipping. Slipping further away, and it was becoming so easy to let go. To just let the darkness take me.

I couldn't remember how I got away. I didn't remember if they'd gotten bored or if they just assumed I was dead.

Maybe they thought I had died there, in that puddle of mud and rain. Maybe that's why they left.

Maybe I should've been dead.

Because even after surviving that night—nothing changed.

The stares didn't change. The whispers didn't change.

The hatred didn't change.

And eventually...

I started to believe them.

Started to believe that maybe, just maybe, I really shouldn't have been born.

And when I was sixteen... I stopped trying to change their minds.

I stopped fighting.

Because what was the point?

No matter how much I wished for it to be different, the world had already decided—

I was nothing.

A tear slipped down my cheek.

Even now, even after all this time, the memories still hurt. They still made my chest feel hollow, made my hands tremble, made me want to disappear.

But then—

Something warm brushed against my skin.

My breath caught.

My eyes fluttered open, and I gasped softly.

Kaiser.

His arm, wrapped in bandages, was stretched toward me. His fingers, rough but gentle, traced my cheek, wiping away the tear before it could fall any further.

His eyes were barely open, still heavy with exhaustion, but he was awake.

Looking at me.

Not with disgust. Not with pity.

Just... looking.

Like I was someone worth seeing.

"Ka... Kaiser?" I called, my voice barely above a whisper, the words escaping my lips like a fragile breath. It felt so hard to speak, so heavy with all the weight I carried inside me.

His gaze softened as he looked at me, his eyes warm. "Crying doesn't suit you, Celia. It really doesn't."

I could barely hold it together. The tears kept falling, but they weren't just from the pain of what had happened, the loss of everything I had held dear. They were tears from the very core of me, from all those years of feeling unwanted, unloved, hated.

I wiped at my face, but it didn't stop. "This is who I am, Kaiser," I choked out, my voice shaking. "I'm just... disgusting. People hate me. I'm just this thing that should have never existed."

The words slipped out, painful and true, and I couldn't stop them. Every time I tried, I felt like I was suffocating on my own thoughts. They were always there, taunting me, reminding me of all the times I had been called a freak, an outcast, a thing to be ridiculed. I could still hear their voices, the whispers in the back of my mind.

Kaiser's hand reached out, gently cupping my cheek, lifting my face toward him. His smile was soft, tender. "You're not disgusting, Celia. You're beautiful."

The words felt like a dream. A part of me couldn't believe them, couldn't understand them. I stared at him, almost not knowing how to respond. "R... really? Kaiser?" I asked, my voice trembling, unsure, as if hearing the words out loud might break the spell.

He shifted his gaze away for a moment, looking around the room like he was thinking of something. He reached for the vase by his bedside, picking up a single flower with a delicate touch. His eyes returned to me, a quiet smile spreading across his face as he extended the flower toward me.

"Come closer," he said, his voice warm, inviting.

I leaned down, my breath caught in my throat. He carefully tucked the flower into my hair, his fingers brushing against my skin, sending a gentle warmth through my body. I could hardly breathe, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Celia," he whispered my name, his voice so gentle, so caring.

I blushed, my face flushing bright red. "K... Kaiser..." I stammered, the words barely leaving me as I struggled to understand the overwhelming tenderness in his touch.

He smiled at me again, his eyes filled with something I couldn't quite describe—something that made me feel like I was worth something, something that made me feel seen, loved. "You're beautiful, Celia," he said softly. "Please always smile like that. Do it for me okay?"

And in that moment, something inside me cracked open, something I didn't even realize was broken. A soft sob escaped my throat, but this time, it wasn't out of sadness. It was

out of happiness, of feeling cared for, of realizing that maybe, just maybe, I wasn't all those horrible things I had been told. I wasn't disgusting.

I wasn't something that should be killed.

I repeated the word to myself over and over, like a mantra, trying to let it sink into my soul. Beautiful. Not disgusting. Not something that should be erased from the world.

I wanted to believe it. I wanted to let it sink in. But the doubt... it lingered, clinging to me like a shadow. Could it really be true? Could I really be more than just the broken girl everyone hated?

But Kaiser... Kaiser made me want to believe in myself. He made me feel like I could stand taller, like maybe the world didn't have to see me as ugly. Maybe, just maybe, I could be something more.

Beautiful. I whispered it again, to make it real. To make it mine.

Not disgusting. Not something to be killed. Not someone to be ignored or thrown away.

I was beautiful. And maybe—just maybe—I could start believing that.

Soon, my focus shifts back to the present. Alone on the roof, my knees hugged to my chest, I felt a deep, aching sadness wash over me. It was like the weight of everything crashing down again, all the pain and loss piling up. My heart felt empty, and I couldn't escape it.

Those moments, I thought, my chest tensing, they made me so happy... The way Kaiser would say my name so softly, like it was something precious, the way he spoke to me, making me smile, even when I didn't think I had anything to smile about.

He was the only one who could do that. The only one who made me... smile.

But now... now that he's gone, I don't know if I could ever smile again. It felt like something was missing, like a part of me had just disappeared. The joy he brought me, the warmth in his words—it was gone. And in its place, there was only this emptiness, this cold silence.

A quiet sob escaped my lips before I could stop it. I buried my face into my knees, letting the tears fall freely once again. I miss him so much...

But then, through my blurred vision, I saw it.

A shooting star.

It streaked across the night sky, bright and fleeting, leaving a trail of light that almost seemed like it was meant just for me. For a moment, the world felt still, and I could almost believe in magic, in something greater than all the pain I was feeling.

I reached out, my fingers trembling, as if I could somehow touch the star, or at least hold onto the hope that it carried with it.

"Please...", my voice cracked, barely a whisper through the sobs. "Please bring my Kaiser back to me..."

I couldn't stop the tears. They kept coming, but through the pain, I made my wish. A wish that maybe, just maybe, the world would listen.

Levi's Perspective:

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the map of Levinton laid out in front of me, the town I swore to protect. Swarm. That damn swarm. Every thought kept circling back to it, like a storm cloud on the horizon. The endless horde of grotesques, tearing apart everything in their path. If they came here, Levinton wouldn't stand a chance. We're strong, sure, but are we strong enough?

My guild's numbers weren't bad, but they weren't great either. D ranks all over the place, a handful of B ranks, and maybe... just maybe a few A ranks to back us up. Nothing that would make a serious dent in a swarm. I'm not that cocky. I know how overwhelming those grotesques can be. We've faced them before, but they're a different kind of beast when they travel in packs.

I was thinking about calling in reinforcements. Some other Sword Saints maybe. I could call in Xander—nah, I'd rather not. The guy's a lazy genius who wouldn't even show up unless the threat was on his doorstep. Then there's Scar. No. I can't. Not after what happened. That guy's not an option. Not now, not ever.

But I need help. I need something. My guild's fine for the large stuff, but they're not equipped for this. Hell, we're all still recovering from that last damn raid, where I barely held the line against those grotesques. Calling in Scar would be tempting—he's strong, no doubt. But it'd make things worse. I need to handle this on my terms, without dragging that mess into it.

I don't want to drag anyone into this mess.

My mind drifts to Emma. I feel a twinge of guilt. She's tough, no doubt. But even she has her limits. If the swarm comes for us, it'll hit her hard. I have to keep her safe. I can't afford to lose another person who matters.

Not after everything that's happened. Zain will keep her safe, at least. I trust him. We're friends, partners, hell, even brothers in arms. He's a damn good leader, and if anyone can keep Emma out of harm's way, it's him.

Then my thoughts shift. A deeper, darker feeling creeping up.

Celia.

Ever since Kaiser disappeared, she's been... broken. She hasn't eaten, hasn't spoken much. She's distant, lost in her grief. I can't stand it. It's like there's nothing left in her. She looks at me sometimes like I'm supposed to have all the answers, but I don't. I can't fix this. No one can. She lost the one person who gave her something to believe in. Kaiser. And now... now she doesn't even know how to pick herself up again.

I can't help her. Not like this. Not when the world around me is falling apart, and there's no way to keep her from getting hurt. If I'm being honest with myself, there's a part of me that wants to just run. Get away from it all. But then I remember—there's no escaping.

Not now.

The swarm's coming, and I'll be damned if I let it destroy everything I've worked for. Everything we've built. They've taken too much already—my parents, my village. I can still hear their screams, feel the guilt eating at me every day for running away. I wasn't strong enough back then, not when it mattered. I should have fought. I should have stayed. But I ran. I left them behind, and I've carried that weight with me ever since.

But now? No more running. I'm facing this head-on, no matter what. I won't let the swarm take anything else from me. Not this time.

And sure, I might not have the numbers to back me up, but let's be real—I've got this. No one's taking Levinton without going through me first. Nah, I'd win.

But right now, all I can do is wait. Wait for Zain to show up and for the next move to unfold.

The door creaked open, pulling me from my thoughts. Zain stepped in, his usual calm presence filling the room. He gave me a nod, taking a seat across from me, his eyes narrowing slightly as he assessed my mood.

"You look like you've been running circles inside your head," Zain said, his voice steady and calming, like it always was when I needed to hear it.

I didn't respond at first. I just kept staring at the map, tracing the lines of Levinton with my finger. The town... my town... soon to be overrun by the swarm, and I could already

feel the weight of the responsibility. My hands clenched into fists, and for a moment, the guilt washed over me like a flood.

"You know, it's not like you to brood like this," Zain continued, his tone softening. "What's eating at you?"

I finally glanced up at him, a smirk forming despite myself. I leaned back in my chair, shrugging nonchalantly. "I'm just thinking, you know? I'm the best there is at what I do. I've got this. No biggie."

Zain raised an eyebrow, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Yeah, sure. 'The best.' Is that why you're sitting here, acting like a brooding mess?"

I snorted, the tension in my chest easing slightly at his words. "You just wait. I'm gonna handle this. But first, tell me what you know about the swarm, Zain. Don't leave me hanging."

Zain leaned forward, folding his arms. He glanced at me for a moment, as if measuring whether or not I was really ready to hear the full scope of the nightmare we were facing. "Alright, but you better sit tight. This is a lot."

He took a breath before continuing, his voice steady but laced with concern. "We've been researching the bodies of the fallen—those that got captured and killed in previous skirmishes with the swarm. From what we gathered, these things... they're not just mindless insects. There's a hierarchy, and the higher you go, the scarier it gets."

I could feel my curiosity piquing, the smug cockiness slipping away just a little. "Hierarchy? Like what?"

Zain's gaze darkened, and he leaned back in his chair, eyes scanning the room as if weighing the gravity of his next words. "The Swarm Tyrant. Their leader. The one controlling everything. From what we've pieced together, it's a grotesque, towering insectoid overlord. A king among monsters."

My lips parted slightly. I leaned forward, genuinely interested now. "A king? Tell me more."

Zain took a deep breath, and his tone became more serious. "The Swarm Tyrant's presence enhances the intelligence, strength, and coordination of every insect in its army. It's not just a swarm anymore, Levi. It's an army—one mind, one purpose, working as a single, calculated force. Their every move is planned, executed flawlessly."

I leaned back in my chair, absorbing the information. It was worse than I'd imagined. A single mind controlling all of them... that meant the swarm could adapt, respond, and plan.

Zain continued, his words heavier now. "The Tyrant has the ability to evolve its swarm. Every time one of them dies, the survivors devour it, taking its abilities and adapting their biology. They evolve, getting stronger with each kill, learning how to counter enemies."

I frowned, my fingers tapping the table. "So they're not just a mindless horde. They're getting stronger the more we fight them?"

"Exactly," Zain replied, his voice firm. "And it doesn't end there. The Tyrant uses bones—bones from fallen humans, beasts, and even their own kind. They shape them into weapons, shields, and even war machines. The swarm doesn't waste anything. The bones are repurposed into deadly, chitinous gear. They're building an army of boneforged monsters."

I let out a low whistle. "They really don't mess around, do they?"

Zain shook his head, his face grave. "No. And if that wasn't bad enough, their claws and mandibles secrete a corrosive acid. It melts through flesh, metal, armor... everything. They don't just kill. They dissolve. Over time, no matter how strong you are, your armor will be useless."

I stared at him, feeling a knot in my stomach. This wasn't just about fighting an enemy; this was a battle against an ever-evolving, adaptive, and nearly unstoppable force.

I gritted my teeth, my eyes narrowing. "So, how do we stop them? If they can just keep getting stronger... how do we fight that?"

Zain looked at me, his expression as serious as I'd ever seen it. "We research. We look for weaknesses, any flaws we can exploit. And we fight smarter, not harder."

I cracked a grin, my usual cockiness returning despite the grim situation. "Smart, huh? Sounds like something I can do. And hey, if things go south, I'll just beat them into submission. No big deal."

Zain let out a chuckle, the brief levity helping to ease the tension in the air. "You always have that kind of confidence. But don't get too cocky. This won't be easy."

I waved him off, still grinning. "Easy? Who said anything about easy? It's going to be fun."

Zain gave me a knowing look, but there was a glint of respect in his eyes. "Don't let that cockiness get you killed, Levi."

I stood up, stretching, my smile never faltering. "Don't worry, Zain. I'm the best there is. And I'm not going anywhere."

I then weighted my options, for a while I was quiet knowing my situation well.

"You're deep in thought," Zain said, his tone casual, but there was an edge to it. "You're not usually this quiet."

I raised an eyebrow, glancing at him. "Oh, I'm just enjoying the silence. The calm before the storm, you know?" I leaned forward, dropping the sarcasm. "What's on your mind, Zain?"

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I need to talk about something serious. The missing persons cases."

I froze, instantly alert. "Missing persons?" I asked, my tone shifting. Why was he bringing that up now? We'd been too busy with the swarm to focus on anyone else.

Zain met my gaze, his eyes steady. "I don't think they're just missing, Levi. I think it's the swarm. The Swarm Tyrant's forces, most likely."

My brow furrowed. "You've gotta be kidding me." My voice dropped, seriousness settling in. "How do you know that?"

He leaned back in his chair, a strange glint in his eyes. "We have a witness. A survivor. Someone who managed to get out of one of the towns before the swarm took it over. They saw the entire thing unfold—how they're abducting people. How they're being... collected."

I crossed my arms, thinking it over. "Collected? Like cattle?" I asked, my mind already racing with possibilities.

Zain nodded. "Exactly. They're being gathered somewhere. But we don't know where yet. The witness couldn't give us much more, but... there's a chance we still have survivors out there."

I didn't speak for a second, just letting the weight of his words hang in the air. A chance? Survivors? It felt like a sliver of hope in the midst of a nightmare.

"Survivors?" I finally spoke, my voice flat. "You think there are people still out there, hidden away from the swarm?"

Zain's gaze softened, just a little. "Yeah, I do. And we need to figure out how to get to them before the swarm does. If they're still alive, they could help us."

I let out a breath, pushing my chair back as I stood up. My hands went to my hips, and I looked out the window, the weight of the responsibility crashing down on me. "Alright. I see. I'll need the reports later, though. For now, let's focus on something else."

Zain didn't skip a beat. "You're right. We need to form alliances. With the other guilds, we need all the help we can get. You can't win this war alone, Levi."

I groaned, running a hand through my hair. "I know. I hate admitting it, but we'll need them. The guilds are going to have to step up, whether they like it or not."

Zain shot me a sideways glance. "And that includes Valhalla, right?"

I shook my head, cutting him off. "Nah. Forget Valhalla. They'll just drag their feet like they always do. Let's focus on the others. They'll be more reliable, and we won't have to waste time babysitting."

Zain raised an eyebrow, the corners of his lips twitching upward. "You've got a point. Valhalla's never been quick to move. Their pride is as big as their ego."

I laughed. "Exactly. So, who's on our side, then? Who do we start with?"

I leaned back in my chair, running a hand through my hair as the weight of the situation started to settle in. Zain had a point—this wasn't going to be a one-man job. It wasn't just about fighting anymore. It was about survival. Damn it. The swarm wasn't just a threat to us, it was a threat to everything. If we didn't act soon, nothing would be left.

As I sat there, my mind started to churn, working out the details of what we needed to do. The guilds...

I mentally ranked them, thinking through the possibilities. From strongest to weakest.

First, Valhalla. Scar, the Sword Saint of Power. The guy was strong, no doubt about it. But I knew Scar. He wasn't the kind of guy to help without a cost. He'd ask for money, power, benefits, you name it. The guy had pride, and I wasn't about to spend my time trying to convince him to join the fight, especially when his guild was already packed with S-ranked mages and A-ranks. Yeah, no thanks. Not worth the effort.

Then there was Crimson Eclipse, led by Navina, the Sword Saint of Reflex. Her guild had the wealth, the numbers, the resources—but I wasn't fool enough to think she'd help us without something in return. Navina didn't do charity. She'd want a price, and I wasn't about to get caught up in her games just to get some help. No way.

Celestial Apex—my guild, my people. It had its perks, but even I wasn't naive enough to think we could handle this alone. My position as the Sword Saint of Godspeed wasn't going to magically make the swarm go away. I'd have to rally support from the other guilds. And that wasn't going to be easy.

Next, Requiem. Alina, the Sword Saint of Technique. Stoic. Emotionless. A killer, through and through. She was cold, calculating. She might help, but she wouldn't do it for free. No doubt about that. And then there was Sylvia. Alina's other leader. I didn't

know much about her, but I wasn't sure she'd be willing to lend a hand either. Still, asking them? Better than dealing with Scar and Navina.

Finally, Eternal Overseer. Xander, the Sword Saint of Mastery. I hated dealing with him. The guy was lazy, annoying, but he had his uses. Unlike the others, Xander had some ties to my guild. He wasn't the most reliable guy, but when it mattered, he'd at least try. And honestly, at this point, I needed someone who would at least try. No guarantees, but it's better than the rest.

So I started weighing my options. Requiem and Eternal Overseer. They're my best bet. If I can get Alina and Xander on our side, we might just have a shot.

I let out a sigh, rubbing the back of my neck as the plan started to take shape. I couldn't waste time wondering if they'd actually help. I had to ask.

I stood up from my chair and turned to Zain. "Alright, I'm heading out. I'll go see if Requiem and Eternal Overseer will actually help us fight the swarm."

Zain raised an eyebrow, the seriousness of the situation starting to settle into his features. "You sure about this? They're not exactly known for playing nice with others."

I gave him a smirk, cracking my knuckles. "Nice? Nah. We don't need nice. We need fighters. I'll get them to fight, not hold my hand."

Zain chuckled under his breath, but his eyes stayed serious. "Don't underestimate them, Levi. They're not easy to deal with."

"I never do," I said, my voice low as I turned toward the door. "But I've got no time to waste. The swarm's not waiting."

I walked out, a sense of urgency pulsing through me. If I was going to survive this, if we were going to survive this, I needed the strongest allies I could get. Even if they weren't the easiest to work with. No one else was going to step up. So it was up to me to make sure they did. And if they didn't, well... I'd make them.

The swarm was coming, and I wasn't about to sit back and let it tear everything apart. Time to go hunting for some help.

Celia's Perspective:

A day had passed since I made my wish. Nothing had changed. I hated myself still for losing Kaiser. He was my everything now, the only one who made me feel... real, like I mattered. And losing him? It broke me.

Even after being alone for four years, hated by everyone and crying myself to sleep every single night, it felt worse now. The ache in my chest was deeper, like there was this endless hole I couldn't fill, no matter how much I tried.

Every morning I woke up to a wet pillow, soaked in my own tears. I didn't even know I was crying most nights until I woke up and found my cheeks stained with salt. I missed him. God, how I missed him. The way he would comfort me when everything else felt wrong. The only person who—maybe—loved me for who I truly was.

I didn't even know how to handle this anymore. It wasn't even about being alone. It was that I lost him. The one person who could make the world feel okay. Without him, everything just... felt wrong.

The house felt suffocating, its walls closing in on me with every passing second. I needed to get away, to breathe. So, I left. No destination, just walking to clear my head. The weather was bad. I could feel it before I even stepped outside—the air was thick, heavy with the promise of rain.

It wasn't even that cold, but it didn't matter. The storm was coming, and I didn't care. I didn't care about anything anymore. I just kept walking. I had to walk. I needed something, anything to distract me. Anything to stop me from thinking. From feeling.

As I walked along the path, the rain began slowly at first. Then it came down harder, the droplets hitting my skin like tiny stabs of cold. But I didn't run for shelter. I didn't even try to find a place to hide from the storm. I felt too broken to even do that.

The truth was, it was easier to stand there in the rain, letting it soak me to the bone, than to face the reality that Kaiser was gone. That I couldn't fix this. That I couldn't fix myself without him.

Because I lost the one thing that kept me going. The only person who made me feel like there was a reason to get up in the morning.

I was nothing without him.

My feet dragged as I walked deeper into the forest, the rain pounding harder with each step, the wind howling through the trees like it knew the emptiness I felt. I hugged myself tighter, as if I could hold my broken heart in place, but it only made the ache worse.

The storm had been raging for a while now, but I barely noticed it anymore. My clothes were soaked, my hair clung to my face, and my fingers were cold, but none of it mattered. The ache in my chest drowned out everything else.

Then, I heard footsteps behind me.

Maybe it's monsters. Maybe it's hunters.

I didn't care.

I didn't even turn around.

If this was how it ended for me, then fine. Maybe it was better this way. Maybe it was better than having to keep walking forward in a world that didn't have him in it.

Kaiser.

The name alone made my breath hitch. My eyes burned, but I had no more tears left to cry.

The footsteps grew closer. I squeezed my eyes shut. Just let it be quick...

But instead of an attack, something shifted above me. A shadow. The rain stopped falling on my head.

Confused, I blinked and looked up.

An umbrella.

I turned my head, and there he was—Zain.

His face was unreadable, his black eyes calm even in the middle of this storm. He didn't say anything at first, just stood there, holding the umbrella over me like I wasn't a complete mess.

Then, in a quiet voice, he spoke.

"Emma asked me to find you. It was her request."

Emma... Of course, it was Emma.

I didn't answer. I didn't care. I just moved away from the umbrella, refusing to take whatever kindness he was offering. I didn't need any of it. I didn't want it.

But Zain moved with me. He kept the umbrella over my head.

I clenched my fists. My nails dug into my palms. "Leave me alone!"

He didn't flinch.

"Don't you hate me?! Don't you also want to get rid of me?!"

The frustration, the anger, the helplessness—I threw it all at him. I screamed at him like I could push him away with words.

But he just stood there, silent.

He didn't fight back. He didn't argue. He just... looked at me.

And that made it worse. That made everything worse.

My voice wavered. "If you just hadn't stopped me that day... maybe I could have saved Kaiser..."

The words came out broken. A sob cut through my chest, and I had to bite my lip to keep myself from falling apart even more.

Zain stayed quiet, then...

He dropped the umbrella.

The storm swallowed him, drenching him completely. The cold rain poured down his face, his black hair darkening under the water, but he didn't move to pick it back up.

"I know," he finally said, voice softer than before. "Maybe it's my fault. And you can blame me forever, Celia."

I stayed quiet. What was the point? Kaiser was still gone. My Kaiser was still gone.

Zain let out a slow breath. "But hurting yourself over that now won't do anything, Celia."

I snapped my head up.

"What do you know?!" I screamed. "What do you know about me or him that you can say that?!"

He didn't back down. His expression didn't change.

"I may not have known you or Kaiser," he said, his voice steady, "but it's obvious. You're drowning in grief instead of pushing forward. Instead of trying to bring him back."

My breath caught.

I looked at him, eyes burning with fresh tears. My voice broke into a whisper.

"It's always easier to say that... to give false hope..."

Tears slipped down my face, mixing with the rain, but I didn't wipe them away. What was the point?

Then Zain's voice cut through the downpour.

"You just have to move on and remember him in your memories, Celia. Kaiser is no more—"

I snapped.

"I CAN'T!"

The words ripped out of me before I could stop them.

"I've died every single day since he's been gone! Every moment, every second, I think—maybe today. Maybe today, he'll come back. Maybe today, I'll wake up and it'll all be a nightmare.

"I would do anything—anything at any cost to have him again!

"I would rip apart this world if it meant I could hold his hand one more time! If I could just see him—if I could just tell him I—"

My voice broke. I covered my mouth. I didn't want to cry anymore. I was so, so tired of crying.

Zain remained quiet for a few moments.

Then...

He smiled.

I froze. My body tensed. My hands curled into fists again.

A small, bitter laugh slipped from my throat. "Go ahead." My voice was hollow. "Laugh. Do it. I don't care anymore." I wiped at my face, even though it didn't matter, not with the rain.

But Zain didn't laugh.

Instead, he took a step closer. His gaze softened, and for the first time, his cold resolve cracked.

"No," he said. "I'm smiling because I can give you hope."

I stared at him.

"...Hope?" My voice was barely above a whisper.

He nodded.

"To bring him back."

My heart stopped.

I looked up at him, desperate, pleading.

"Please..." My voice shook, my body trembled. "Don't give me false hope..."

Zain took another step forward.

The storm still raged on, but suddenly, it felt like the only thing that mattered was the next words that would come out of his mouth.

"That's right, Celia," Zain said, his voice steady even as the rain poured between us. "There's a chance. Kaiser could still be alive... captured by the grotesques."

I felt my breath hitch.

For a moment, just a moment, my world cracked open—just enough for something to slip through.

Hope.

But could I even believe it? Could I trust it? Or was it just another cruel joke fate was playing on me?

Zain continued, his tone unwavering. "It's just a theory for now... but we have witnesses. A survivor. Someone who's lived through it."

I stared at him. My fingers trembled at my sides.

Please. Please don't lie to me.

I wanted to say it, but my lips wouldn't move. My throat felt tight, strangled by the weight of my emotions.

Zain didn't wait for my reply. He stepped forward slightly, his expression still unreadable.

"The grotesques' recent attacks... they're not mindless rampages. They're coordinated hunts. Evidence suggests that the Swarm Tyrant—the monstrous king of the devouring nest—has been taking humans before major raids. Not for food..." He paused, his silver hair dripping with rain. "But for interrogation. Experimentation."

I inhaled sharply.

The grotesques—those mindless, flesh-eating monsters—interrogating people? Experimenting on them?

My hands curled into fists. I was shaking, but not from the cold anymore.

Zain pressed on. "This means grotesques aren't just evolving randomly. They're learning. They're systematically gathering intelligence on human settlements before attacking."

A chill ran down my spine.

"...W-What...?" My voice came out weak, uncertain.

If what he was saying was true, then grotesques weren't just monsters. They were calculating. They were thinking.

They were planning.

I swallowed hard. A lump had formed in my throat.

The rain kept pouring, soaking me completely, but I took a hesitant step forward. I didn't care how pathetic I looked, how desperate I sounded.

"Please... tell me you're not lying, Zain," I whispered, my voice barely holding together.

Zain shook his head. No hesitation.

"Before every major grotesque attack, people disappear," he said. "Townfolk vanish—no signs of a struggle. Their remains are never found among the dead." He met my eyes, serious and firm. "In Levi's Town alone, a dozen hunters and travelers vanished two weeks before the first grotesque raid."

I felt my heart pound against my chest.

Kai...

I took another step toward him, desperation bleeding into my voice.

"Please... please don't give me false hope."

I couldn't take it. Not again. If I believed him and it turned out to be a lie...

I wasn't sure I could survive that.

Zain stepped closer too. He shook his head again, his soaked clothes clinging to him from the rain. "I'm not."

The storm around us was relentless. Thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance. The cold bit into my skin, but...

Somehow, I felt warm.

Just maybe... just maybe... my Kai was still alive...

Zain's voice softened, but there was something steady—hopeful—in it.

"We haven't found his body."

My breath hitched.

Zain continued, "Even if he was attacked first, there were no remains. No limbs. No blood. Nothing that confirmed he was dead."

I felt something deep inside me—something that had been shattered for so long—start to mend.

My heart was pounding, fast and loud in my ears. The weight on my chest, the unbearable grief I had been drowning in, shifted—just slightly.

Zain's next words nearly made my legs give out.

"Maybe he was taken. Maybe the grotesques captured him... for experimentation. For research."

I sucked in a breath, my hands clasping over my chest.

"There's a chance," Zain said, looking straight into my eyes. "Kaiser might still be alive."

And just like that—

The storm around me went silent.

The world, my grief, my pain—everything faded into nothingness.

All that remained was those words.

Kai...

Zain extended his hand toward me. His expression was calm—too calm for the weight his words carried.

"So, Celia... there's still a chance." His voice was steady, firm, unwavering. "You can bring him back. Only you."

I stared at his hand, fingers slightly curled, waiting for mine.

Hope.

It dangled in front of me like a fragile thread. I wanted to grasp it, to hold it tightly and never let go. But what if I reached out... and it snapped? What if this was just another cruel illusion, another dream that would shatter the moment I woke up?

Still... my fingers twitched.

Zain's voice pulled me back. "Help us, Celia. Help us defeat the Swarm." He exhaled, shaking his head slightly. "I've seen your capabilities firsthand. When you fought me and the guild members, you proved it—you're strong. You can help us win."

I hesitated. My hand barely lifted from my side, trembling.

"Do it for Kaiser," Zain said, his voice softer now, almost pleading. "Get stronger for him. Fight for him. Let the world know that he has you, and that you'll be there for him."

Something inside me snapped.

Not in a way that broke me. Not in a way that shattered my heart into more pieces than it already was.

No. This time... it was different.

Like fire catching onto dry wood, spreading, burning, consuming everything in its path.

Kai...

I could almost hear his voice. His soft, gentle tone from all those times he looked at me—looked only at me.

"You're beautiful, Celia. You should smile more. At least for me."

I squeezed my eyes shut. My breath came in sharp, shaky.

For him.

For the one who called me beautiful.

For the one who told me to smile.

For the one I refused to lose.

My eyes fluttered open, and without another second of hesitation, I grabbed Zain's hand in a firm shake.

"Okay," I whispered. Then, louder, stronger, "I will help. I will defeat the Swarm and—"

I paused, my mind spiraling back to the last time I saw Kaiser. His face, his warmth, the way his voice carried through the wind when he spoke my name.

The world blurred for a moment. Then, my lips curled.

It wasn't a soft smile.

It wasn't a happy one either.

It was a promise.

A cursed, murderous promise.

A dark aura crackled around me like a storm ready to burst. I let it rise, let it fill the air, let it speak the words I didn't need to say.

And then, I did say them.

"I'll let the world burn... for ever touching him."

Zain's lips twitched up in a small, approving smile.

"Welcome to the team." His tone was lighter, but his eyes knew better than to treat this as anything other than what it was. War. "A month from now, the Swarm is expected to attack the town. Can we count on you?"

I tilted my head slightly, my voice turning cold as ice.

"You don't need to ask me twice." My grip on his hand tightened briefly before I pulled away. "I will burn each of those bugs alive. Those pests won't have a nest to crawl back to once I'm done."

My eyes darkened, a violent glint reflecting in them as the rain around us seemed to slow, as if the very air had sensed the shift in me.

Let them come.

Let them try to take what was mine.

Because the next time they did—

I would make sure they suffered for it.

I will get stronger.

I don't care what it takes.

If I have to embrace this cursed blood running through my veins, I will. If I have to become the monster they whisper about, the one they fear, then so be it.

The Queen of Curses.

They compare me to her. They say I resemble her. Then I'll make sure to live up to the name.

If it means having Kaiser in my arms again—if it means feeling his warmth, hearing his voice, knowing he's still here—I will do it. Over and over again.

I will learn to fight. To kill. To destroy.

And I will not hesitate.

Not until I have him back.

Not until these grotesque are nothing but ash beneath my feet.

Watch me.

Watch as I ascend to my throne—

And make you kneel.

Mysterious Perspective:

The storm raged outside, drowning the forest in a suffocating darkness. Rain pounded against the trees, the distant rumble of thunder rolling through the sky like a beast awakening from its slumber.

Yet, within the depths of this blackened night, there was a flicker of warmth. A small cave, barely noticeable amidst the overgrown wilderness, where the light of a campfire danced against the jagged stone walls. The flames crackled softly, their orange glow illuminating a lone figure sitting near them.

A man.

His body was wrapped in bandages, covering deep wounds that had yet to heal. A fresh strip of cloth was being tied around his right eye, stained faintly with blood. His hands, rough and scarred, moved with an eerie calmness as he bit the end of the bandage, tearing it off with his teeth.

A smirk played on his lips.

His voice was deep, laced with amusement.

"They say a man can never truly value his life until he experiences death up close—" he mused, pulling the bandage tighter. "Until he stands on the edge of the abyss and sees what waits on the other side. Then, suddenly, life becomes so precious. They beg. They weep. They regret drowning in eternity."

The fire crackled louder. His smile widened.

"Not me, though. I've died far too many times to have regrets now."

His fingers traced the handle of a knife beside him—its edge sharp, reflecting the flickering firelight. Slowly, he lifted it, turning it towards his mouth, as if lost in thought.

Then, without shifting his gaze, he spoke again.

"Don't you agree?"

The cave fell into a heavy silence.

A soft, wet noise echoed in response. A sound of desperation.

From the other side of the cave, nestled in the darkness, something twitched. Or at least, it tried to.

A grotesque.

Or rather, what used to be one.

Its wings had been torn off. Its limbs had been severed, leaving nothing but a pitiful, squirming husk. Jagged cuts marred its exoskeleton, evidence of torment beyond imagination. It wasn't dead.

No, that would have been mercy.

This thing—this once-mindless beast—knew fear now.

It understood the meaning of pain.

And as the bandaged man's eyes met its hollow, trembling form, it let out a chittering, pathetic sound. A plea. A desperate, mindless begging for life.

But the man only watched.

His smirk stretched into something more twisted. His fingers tightened around the knife.

And then—

"Heh..."

A low chuckle.

"Hahaha..."

The fire flickered violently as his laughter deepened, growing, twisting into something unhinged.

"Ahahah... AHAHAHAHAH... AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAA!!"

His voice filled the cave, drowning out even the storm outside.

The grotesque trembled, unable to escape, unable to fight back.

It was helpless.

And its captor?

He was enjoying it.

The sound of rain pounding outside barely reached the depths of the cave, drowned out by something far more sinister.

The slow, rhythmic tap of a blade against calloused fingers.

"Now..." The bandaged man's voice was smooth, almost amused. "Let's see how we're going to have our fun today."

His single dark eye gleamed in the firelight as he tilted his head toward the grotesque.

It flinched.

Tried to move.

Tried to run.

But the ropes held firm, binding what little remained of its broken body. Its wings were gone. Its limbs were severed. It had no means to escape.

Still, it struggled. Still, it begged.

A wet, sickly noise came from its twisted throat—a pathetic sound, a plea for mercy.

The bandaged man chuckled.

"Oh? Not in the mood to choose, huh?" He smirked, spinning the knife in his hand.
"How rude."

With slow, deliberate motion, he brought the blade to his lips. His tongue slithered out, running along the edge of the metal in a slow, deliberate lick.

The sharp sting of pain followed.

A thin line of his own blood trailed down the knife's edge.

He inhaled sharply, letting the sensation sink in before he pulled the knife away, licking his lips as if savoring the taste.

The grotesque twitched violently. The sound it made now was different—choked, rattling, its body trying to recoil as much as it could despite being bound.

The bandaged man barely spared it a glance as he set his knife down. Instead, he reached for a small wooden box nearby. With a quiet click, the lid opened, revealing an array of carefully arranged tools inside.

Five instruments of agony.

Iron Spikes – Long, rusted, perfect for driving through exoskeleton and flesh alike.

Bone Saw – Serrated, jagged, ideal for slow, agonizing cuts.

Tear Hooks – Designed to latch onto flesh and rip it apart with a single pull.

Fire Tongues – Heated over the flames until they glowed red, searing through nerves upon contact.

The Widow's Needle – A thin, barbed instrument that slides beneath the skin, tearing from within.

He picked each one up, turning them over in his hands, admiring their craftsmanship.

Then, he laid them all out neatly beside him.

"If you're not going to decide..." He sighed, running a finger along the sharp edge of the tear hooks. "I'll do it for you. As always."

His dark eyes locked onto the grotesque, his smirk widening into something monstrous.

A smile so wicked it could make even the devil himself avert his gaze.

The air felt heavier. The fire seemed dimmer.

His fingers danced between the weapons, hovering over each one as he whispered to himself, a playful tune leaving his lips.

"Eeny..." His hand swayed to the left.

"Meeny..." Then to the right.

"Miny..." His fingers tapped against the widow's needle.

"Mo—"

Then, he froze.

And without warning—

Laughter.

Twisted, maniacal, echoing off the cave walls.

"AHAHAHAHAH!! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

The grotesque convulsed in sheer terror, the sound shaking through its hollow body.

The cave drowned in screams, its agony swallowed by the howling storm outside.

Who was this man?

And what horrors would he unleash next?