

# **The Last Step**

## **#Chapter 41: Bloom of Curses - Read The Last Step**

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

Still soaking wet, I stumbled back to Levi's place, my heart racing with the hope I hadn't felt in so long. If what Zain said was true, Kaiser was still alive, and he was out there somewhere, waiting for me to come and save him.

I could almost taste the determination on my lips. No more doubt. No more fear. I was going to get stronger, and I was going to bring him back. I will never... ever lose to those damn bugs again.

As I knocked on the door, the storm raged behind me, the wind howling like it was trying to rip the world apart. Lightning struck in the distance, and I could almost feel the buzz of electricity in the air. But oddly enough, I didn't feel scared. I didn't feel that familiar cold grip of fear that used to hold me tight.

Maybe it's the vow... I thought. The vow to get stronger. No, not just stronger. Unstoppable. And once I was, nothing could stop me from saving him.

The door creaked open, and there was Emma, her face clouded with worry. Maybe she was worried about me being out in the storm for so long. But before I could even say anything, she didn't waste a second.

She lunged forward and hugged me so tight that I felt the air rush out of my lungs. Of course, she was soaking wet now too, but I didn't care.

"I was so worried about you!" she cried, squeezing me even tighter. "Celia, don't leave like this again!"

Her words hit me harder than I expected. I hugged her back, squeezing her gently, trying to push away that gnawing ache in my chest.

Maybe I have been pushing them both away... But they do care for me. They're my friends. They're not Kaiser, but... they care.

"Hey hey, Emma, maybe we should go inside now?" I teased, lifting a hand to wipe the wet hair from my face. "Or are you planning to get more soaked holding me while I'm already dripping wet?"

She pulled back with a mock frown, but her lips twitched into a smile. "Oh, I'm getting pretty cozy here, so maybe we'll just stay like this a bit longer." She grinned and then tugged me inside.

Once inside, I changed into some dry clothes. The warmth hit me all at once, and I didn't even realize how cold I had been until I felt Emma's sweater wrap around me like a comforting hug. The blanket she handed me made me feel like I was being wrapped in a cloud.

I sat down on the couch, curling up under the blanket, shivering slightly. The warmth from the blanket and the soft hum of my own body trying to shake off the cold was soothing. But as soon as Emma plopped down beside me, she practically stole the blanket out of my hands.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Hey, that's my blanket!"

She just grinned and snuggled in tighter, pulling the blanket around herself and away from me. "You know, I'm cold too."

"No, no, no, you're not stealing my blanket!" I crossed my arms over my chest and made a face, trying to tug it back. "You can't just steal my warmth!"

She gave me an exaggerated look. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want to freeze?" she said, practically disappearing into the blanket. "I thought you needed warmth, but maybe I was wrong?"

"You're wrong. I'm the one who's freezing," I grumbled, pulling it back just a little bit. "I'll just take it back, then."

Emma raised an eyebrow, still snuggled in. "Are you sure? I mean, I can always help you warm up by sharing."

I stuck out my tongue. "I don't need your help, Emma. I can warm up just fine on my own!"

She chuckled and shifted, wriggling deeper into the blanket. "You're so cute when you try to act tough. I guess I'll just keep it all to myself then."

I sighed dramatically and leaned back, trying to settle for just my corner of the blanket. "Fine, but I'm still taking it back when you fall asleep."

"Sure, sure. Whatever you say, princess," she teased with a laugh. But the way she wrapped the blanket tighter around herself showed I wasn't getting it back anytime soon.

Suddenly, Emma pulled me down beside her, and before I could protest, we were both lying side by side under the blanket. The soft warmth wrapped around us, and for a moment, I forgot about everything. It was peaceful.

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help the little smile tugging at my lips. "Wow, so this is how it is now? Steal my blanket, steal my space?"

Emma grinned. "Yep. It's a two-for-one deal. You get warmth, and I get... well, everything."

I scoffed but couldn't argue. Her warmth felt nice, the tension slowly slipping away from my shoulders. "You're lucky you're not a jerk. I might've fought back if it was someone else."

Emma snorted, settling in more comfortably. "I'm way too cute for that."

"Oh, please," I chuckled, turning my head to look at her. "You're lucky you're cute, or I'd kick you off the couch for real."

She poked my side. "You're just jealous."

I raised an eyebrow. "Of what? That you think you can steal everything from me?"

Emma winked. "That, and I'm way better at this whole 'getting cozy' thing. Look at you, shivering."

I stuck my tongue out at her. "Well, I'm not the one who's hogging the blanket, am I?"

"Maybe, but we're still here together, aren't we?"

I sighed softly, the humor fading as the quiet settled over us. For once, I didn't feel that heaviness in my chest. I was finally just... here. I didn't need to cry anymore. No more waiting, no more praying for some miracle.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, pushing away the lingering sadness. I'll work hard. I'll make this happen. Kaiser will come back... but only if I do it myself.

The soft hum of the room and Emma's steady breathing lulled me into a strange comfort, something I hadn't felt in a long time. The weight of everything—the pain, the loss, the fear—seemed to drift away, piece by piece, as I lay there, warm and secure. It felt... nice. Too nice.

For the first time in ages, I wasn't thinking about Kaiser, about how much I missed him, or how helpless I felt. I wasn't planning or plotting, just... resting. I let my body relax, let my mind go quiet. One last time... One last time to rest.

As I drifted off, the world around me faded into the background, and I felt the soft weight of sleep pulling me under, almost like a gentle wave carrying me away. For a moment, I allowed myself to surrender to it—no more worries, no more guilt.

But deep down, I knew. When I woke up, there would be no more crying. No more waiting. I would be the one to make things happen.

I'd become stronger. Strong enough to make the world kneel to me, to bring him back. I wouldn't let anyone—anything—stand in my way.

With that thought, I finally fell into sleep, letting the warmth of the blanket and the soft rhythm of Emma's breathing be my last comfort before the fight began.

Tomorrow, I'd start. Tomorrow, the real work would begin.

And nothing would stop me.

Meanwhile, as Celia got her much-needed rest, her body and mind finally allowing her to relax, Zain's research and analysis on the grotesques were complete.

### **Zain's Perspective:**

I sat in the quiet of the guild office, my eyes drifting to the clock on the wall, watching each second tick by. Levi was out there, trying to convince the Sword Saints and the other guilds to help us.

Requiem—Alina, in particular—would be a hard sell. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd be successful.

I leaned back in my chair, tapping my fingers against the desk, my thoughts turning to Alina. She was a force to be reckoned with, but not in a way most people understood. Cold, calculated, emotionless... no one had seen her smile in years, not even a flicker of any emotion since she was taken into Sylvia's Noble family from Asura.

The rumors were endless—whispers of her unshakable, detached nature, how Requiem had only grown more threatening as the years had passed.

If anyone could make people feel small, it was her. I could picture her now, standing still, her expression always the same, devoid of any trace of warmth. In her eyes, people were nothing more than tools to be used. Helping us? Out of pity? Ridiculous. She'd never do it.

And I didn't even think Sylvia—her own master—could convince her with all the goodwill in the world. Alina wasn't that kind of person. Money? Maybe. But certainly not for any sense of camaraderie or shared fate.

No, it was the cold, hard truth: Alina wouldn't care. But I wasn't foolish enough to underestimate her. She was the Unrivaled Sword Saint of Technique, the Master of the Heavenly Stance, a title feared and revered across the lands.

No one had ever been able to replicate her swordplay, the Heavenly Stance being so precise, so deadly, that it left even the strongest in awe. Elemental magic in her hands? She was an S+ threat. People cowered when they heard her name.

I couldn't help but wonder, though—what if she fought Levi? My mind wandered for a second, playing with the thought.

Imagine it.

Alina, all stoic and poised, throwing out the most deadly, cold-hearted threats she could muster. Her voice, devoid of any emotion, just a chilling, calculated warning. She'd probably say something like, "I will destroy everything you cherish."

Then Levi, leaning back with that arrogant grin of his, just... casually shrugging it off. He'd probably say something like, "Oh please, I'm way too good for that."

Then he'd take a deep breath, crack his knuckles with that carefree smirk, and finally, with all the confidence in the world, add, "Nah, I'd win."

I couldn't help but laugh at the image. That damn confidence of his—it was like a shield he wore every day. No matter who it was, no matter how deadly, Levi had that unwavering, "I'm the best" attitude.

Shaking my head, I refocused. Alright, trust in him, Zain. If anyone can convince her, it's Levi.

I turned my thoughts to Xander next. The guy was a mystery—his mastery gift still didn't make any sense to me, but I knew one thing for sure: at least Xander and Levi shared a mutual past. They'd fought together, trained together—there was history there. So, I was betting on Xander agreeing to help us, even if he was a little unpredictable.

Just as I was running through all of this in my mind, a knock on the door broke my focus.

"Come in," I called out.

The door opened, and in stepped one of the guild members, a man with neatly combed dark hair and sharp eyes. His name was Kael. He had a quiet presence about him, but the kind that demanded attention when it was needed.

"Zain," he said with a small nod, taking a seat across from me. "The research papers on the grotesques are here. I've gone through them. It's... not good."

I leaned forward, my expression serious. "What's the verdict?"

Kael unrolled the papers and laid them out on the table. "They're evolving faster than we anticipated. We're not just dealing with the ones we've seen. There are signs of new mutations, more aggressive behavior. Their next wave is going to be a lot more dangerous than the last one. We need to act quickly."

I sighed, rubbing my temple. This was exactly the kind of news I didn't want to hear, but I knew we were running out of time.

"Alright, Kael. Let's go over the details. We need to figure out our next move. We don't have much room to make mistakes."

As Kael began to explain the findings, I felt the weight of the situation settle back onto my shoulders. Time was running out, and if Levi didn't get those other guilds on board soon... well, the next wave of grotesques might be the one that breaks us.

Then I looked and placed my focus on the research papers, they were our only source of information about those creatures. The first research document focuses on their existence and adaptation.

"Grotesques that shouldn't exist..." I muttered, staring at the report in front of me. The data wasn't just strange—it was downright unnerving. Kael, one of my most reliable guild members, was standing by, watching as I ran through the details.

Kael leaned forward, crossing his arms. "Yeah, it doesn't add up, does it? It's like they've learned how to adapt... how to counter us. Like they know what we're going to do before we even do it."

I nodded, my mind racing. "The fact that they're resisting fire now? It's beyond mere evolution. They've been mutated to handle it. And not just that. Some of them—" I paused, flipping through the pages, "—they're moving in ways that make no sense. Coordinated, almost like a well-oiled machine. Targeting spellcasters first, avoiding chokepoints like they've studied battle strategies."

Kael scoffed, "I mean, who's teaching them? Because it sure isn't nature. And it's not like the grotesques ever showed any signs of being that clever before."

I rubbed my temples. "It's as if they're being engineered. Someone's behind this—someone who's been studying us... watching us. Maybe even learning from us."

Kael raised an eyebrow, clearly not liking the implications. "You're saying this isn't just some freak accident? That someone's pulling the strings behind all of this?"

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling. "I don't know yet. But I have a feeling that whoever is behind this, they're smarter than we've given them credit for. And that's

what scares me. These aren't just mindless beasts anymore. They've become a force to be reckoned with."

Kael nodded grimly. "So, what, we're dealing with some kind of grotesque mastermind? A force that's... planning?"

I gripped the edge of the desk. "Exactly. A force that learns. Adapts. And if we don't stop it, it'll outsmart us next time."

Then Kael picks up one of the papers and his focus shifts towards it.

"Patterned raids and tactical efficiency..." Kael murmured, flicking through the pages of the report in his hands. "If they were just driven by instinct, their raids would be a mess, right? Chaotic, disorganized. But these? They're... calculated. Precise. Like they're striking where we're weakest."

I drummed my fingers on the table, thinking. "Exactly. First, they abduct people to gather intelligence. They study us. They torture, experiment. It's sickening, but it's working. They're learning from each attack. They know our strategies, our weaknesses. Then, they strike, exploiting those vulnerabilities."

Kael let out a low whistle. "So, they're not just evolving in the traditional sense. They're actively studying us—preparing."

I glanced at Kael, eyes narrowing. "And the worst part? They're doing it systematically. It's like they've figured out the most efficient way to bring us down, piece by piece."

Kael shook his head. "This is bad. Really bad."

I let out a sigh, leaning forward again, my mind still piecing everything together. "They've learned how to move in the shadows, how to strike when we're most vulnerable. I don't think we've seen the worst of it yet."

I sat back in my chair, scanning the latest research paper that had just come in. The numbers, the theories—everything pointed to one unsettling conclusion: these grotesques were evolving, and whatever had set them on this path was deliberate.

Kael, leaning over the table beside me, rubbed his chin, eyes skimming over the pages. "C to B rank... that's what they're classifying them as, right? But this whole thing about the Swarm Tyrant, it's... different."

I grunted in agreement. "Different? It's a nightmare in the making. The Swarm Tyrant's on another level entirely. It's not just a grotesque anymore. It's a military mastermind with monstrous strength." I flicked my finger over the paper, pointing at the Swarm Tyrant's stats. "Look at this. 10,000+ HP, a thousand in strength, near indestructible



defenses, and its regeneration? Devouring bodies to heal instantly. This thing is a damn juggernaut. It's not like the other grotesques at all."

Kael shook his head, clearly disturbed by the implications. "No kidding. It's not just the stats either. The way it operates... it's like it knows what we're going to do before we even think of it. These coordinated raids? They're not random. They're planned. Calculated."

I leaned forward, meeting Kael's gaze, letting the weight of what we were discussing settle in. "Exactly. Grotesques usually act on instinct. They swarm, they destroy, they don't think. But the Tyrant? It's orchestrating everything. We've seen it—the way it targets spellcasters first, the way it uses its grotesque minions like chess pieces. This isn't some mindless beast."

Kael raised an eyebrow. "So, you think it's controlling them somehow? Psychically?"

I nodded slowly, thinking it over. "It has to be. It's the only explanation for the level of coordination we've seen. The way it can sense movement and boost the grotesques around it? That's not instinct. That's strategy."

Kael frowned. "So, it's not just an evolved creature. It's got intelligence. Tactical awareness. I mean... what if it's gathering information on us? Abducting civilians for intel?"

I clenched my jaw, my eyes narrowing at the thought. "That's exactly what I think it's doing. The report mentions it's been abducting humans for interrogation. Gathering data. Testing our defenses. It's figuring out how we fight. And then it strikes, exploiting whatever weaknesses it's found."

Kael shifted uncomfortably, clearly uneasy. "Hell, we're dealing with something smarter than we are, at this point. This is beyond a war. It's psychological warfare."

I folded my arms, taking a moment to process. "This thing doesn't just fight to destroy. It fights to understand. And once it's done learning, it'll come for us with everything it has. That's the scary part. We've been underestimating these creatures, thinking they were nothing but animals. But now we know the truth. There's a plan, a mind behind all of this."

Kael's expression darkened. "If it's learning, then we're running out of time to figure out how to stop it."

I sighed deeply, my fingers tapping the edge of the desk. "We have to find its weak points. Disrupt its command structure. If we don't, it's only going to get worse."

We both fell silent for a moment, the weight of what we were facing settling heavily on us.



And just as I was about to turn my attention back to the report, the door to the room creaked open. A familiar face stepped in—one of the witnesses we'd been interviewing for any information on the grotesques' behavior. The man was haggard, his eyes wide with fear.

He looked directly at us, barely catching his breath. "I... I saw it. The nest. The Tyrant... it's building something. Something huge. It's not just a lair—it's..."

His voice faltered, his words trailing off as his eyes darted nervously toward the door.

I stood up, heart pounding. "The nest? What do you mean, 'the nest'?"

He swallowed hard, his voice barely a whisper. "It's not just a nest. It's... a war machine. They're gathering. Preparing... I saw over 10,000 grotesque eggs there..."

I froze, my mind racing to process what the witness had just said. "Over 10,000 grotesque eggs?" The words hung in the air like a heavy, suffocating fog.

For a moment, I couldn't even breathe. 10,000. I had heard reports of grotesque swarms, but this? This was something else entirely.

I slowly turned to Kael, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me. "A war machine? A nest with 10,000 eggs..." My words trailed off as the weight of what this meant hit me.

Most guilds, our guild included, could barely muster anywhere from 600 to 1,200 members at full strength. A force of 10,000 grotesques? That wasn't just a raid. That was a massacre waiting to happen.

I ran my fingers through my hair, pacing as I tried to grasp the enormity of the situation. "We're talking about an overwhelming force here. Even if every guild in the region joined forces, we'd still be outnumbered. Ten thousand grotesques..." I shook my head, trying to steady my thoughts, but it was hard. The math didn't lie.

Kael's voice broke through my spiraling thoughts. "If we don't stop this, if we don't figure out how to break their command structure... they'll sweep us all away. No one stands a chance against something like this."

I gave him a sharp nod, but my mind was elsewhere, calculating. "We need every fighter, every strategist, and every weapon we can get. This isn't just about stopping the Tyrant anymore. We're facing an army. A damn army of grotesques, and it's growing."

I looked back at the witness, my gaze hardening. "Where exactly did you see this nest? Where is it?"

He flinched under my intensity, his voice shaking. "It's... deep in the mountains. Hidden... but it's there. I swear. I saw it."

The silence that followed felt oppressive, as if the entire room had drawn in a breath, holding it, waiting.

I slowly exhaled, my mind already running through strategies, possibilities. "We can't waste any more time." I turned back to Kael. "We need to mobilize. Now. Before it's too late."

Kael scratched the back of his head, his expression troubled. "Well... as much as I'd love to storm the place right now, my guild's tied up. We're focusing on reinforcing defenses and gathering intel, you know? It's not easy juggling everything. But... there's something else we can consider."

I raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Mercenaries," Kael said, almost reluctantly. "We've got contacts. We can bring in reinforcements—people who aren't part of any guild, but know how to fight. Might be a bit of a wild card situation, but it'll help build up our numbers."

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "Mercenaries won't do it. We need more than numbers. Who alone could infiltrate a nest with that many grotesques? Hell, we'd need hundreds of people just to be a distraction."

Kael's expression hardened, but there was something else behind his eyes—something that shifted his stance. "Actually... there is someone."

I tilted my head, curiosity piqued. "Go on."

Kael leaned forward, lowering his voice. "There's a rumor, Zain. A Heavenly Sorcerer. Power levels off the charts. And he's got a partner. A woman. Equally as strong, if not stronger. They both use celestial magic. I'm talking about someone who could take down entire armies on their own. If they're real... they might be the only ones who could handle this."

My heart skipped a beat. Heavenly Sorcerer? I thought, trying to process the information. A figure from the annals of history, legends told of someone capable of reshaping the very fabric of the world with their magic. If what Kael was saying was true... we might have just found a glimmer of hope.

I stared at Kael, a cold shiver running down my spine. "What's his name?"

Kael's lips curled into a grim smile, but it was devoid of warmth. His voice dropped to an even colder pitch. "Lucas Reinhardt. The Wielder of Celestial Magic. The rumored Heavenly Sorcerer."

Lucas Reinhardt.

I stood there, processing the name, the weight of it hanging in the air. This wasn't some mere legend anymore. This was real. The name felt dangerous, like a promise of destruction and salvation all at once.

A surge of thoughts flooded my mind—every battle, every strategy I had ever learned in the heat of war now seemed insignificant compared to what this man could do. If he truly was who Kael said he was, he had the power to shift the balance.

I was sure of it now. He's the one who can stop the nest.

But a lingering question gnawed at the back of my mind—if Lucas Reinhardt was indeed the Heavenly Sorcerer of legend, would he actually fight for us? Or would he turn the power of Celestial Magic toward his own goals?

I turned back to Kael, eyes narrowed. "Where is he?"

Kael didn't answer immediately, his gaze distant. "That, I can't say for sure. But if he's real, we'll find him."

I nodded, though I couldn't shake the feeling of unease settling into my gut. There was too much at stake, and if Lucas Reinhardt didn't come through—if he wasn't the answer we hoped for—Celestine might fall.

The thought of that terrified me more than the grotesques ever could. As now I can only wait and hope for Levi to convince the other guild's about this massive world threat.

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

I felt the familiar, unsettling chill as I woke up once again in the same place. A nightmare realm I could only visit when I slept—my nightmare realm.

It always felt like this: dark, but there was always a little spotlight of light around me. A faint glint that followed my every step. Sometimes, I hated it. Sometimes, I found comfort in it.

The sky was always the same: a beautiful, starry night... but there was something else in it. Something that shouldn't be there. A half-blood moon, shining with a deadly red hue, casting an eerie glow over everything. It was haunting. Yet, there was something about it that felt strangely... familiar.

I sat down on the grass, feeling its coldness seep through my clothes. My hands brushed against the blades, and the sensation struck me deep. I used to sit like this every night—alone. Crying. Crying because I was weak. Crying because I thought I'd

never be able to escape that life. The life where I was hunted and rejected, always running, always scared.

But now...

Now I'm not that girl anymore.

I'm not the one who ran away in fear. I'm not the one who hid behind others, hoping someone would save me. I'm stronger than that. I have to be.

I couldn't help but smile faintly, remembering that night—that night. The one that had changed everything for me. I had felt like I was going to die, trapped in the grasp of those Noctis Graspers. My heart had been full of dread and regret, but then—then Kaiser had come.

Kaiser.

I remember how he fought for me. He didn't even hesitate, even when he was powerless against the odds. No magic, no extraordinary strength—just his heart, his conviction. He saved me. He protected me. And after that... he was kind to me. More kind than I ever thought I deserved.

The thought of him made me feel warm. I laughed softly to myself. He was my knight, back then. The knight who had no magic, no power—but he had a heart I couldn't help but fall for. A heart that was pure.

And now? Now I know that no matter what happens—no matter what anyone tells me—Kaiser would never betray me. Not even the gods could make me believe that.

I smiled, more to myself than anyone else. "My knight... without magic, yet still strong."

But then, as I sat there, something stirred in the air. The hairs on my neck stood up. It was the same feeling I had the first time I met... her. The voice in my mind, my future self, that had warned me. But now? Now I wasn't the same timid girl I used to be.

I've changed.

I stood up slowly, turning around. I wasn't going to hesitate this time. I wasn't going to shy away in fear. Not anymore. Not after everything I've been through. I tilted my head slightly, surprise filling me.

There, standing before me, was a woman. Not my future self, not anyone I recognized. No, this was different.

She fit the description of the Queen of Curses from 500 years ago perfectly.

An intricate black dress clung to her form, a hooded cloak draping over her shoulders. Her snowy-white hair cascaded like silk, contrasting sharply with the dark realm around us. Unlike what the book described, it failed to mention the half-elf-like ears she possessed—half as long as those of elves—while she bore such a crown.

Her piercing red eyes locked with mine, gleaming with a deadly confidence. She wasn't just standing there—she commanded the space around her, as though the very air bent to her will.

I couldn't help but feel a wave of hesitation creep into me, but I pushed it down. I wasn't the same girl. I wasn't going to let fear take over.

She spoke, and her voice was like silk, smooth and deadly, carrying an air of both mystery and amusement.

"You're the one who's been wandering around in my realm, aren't you? How interesting."

I swallowed, trying to steady myself. Stay calm, Celia. You're stronger now. Show it. I straightened my back, meeting her gaze head-on, despite the shiver running down my spine.

"Answer me," her voice came, smooth and threatening, with that seductive edge that made you want to obey.

I stood up straight, trying to steady my nerves. I wasn't going to cower in front of her. Not now. Not after everything.

"I—I was just thinking," I started, but my voice faltered under her gaze. There was no denying the weight of her stare. My heart raced, but I refused to look away.

She took a step closer, her presence commanding every inch of the space around us.

"You think, girl?" she asked, her lips curling into an amused smile. "What does a child like you know of thinking? You're in my domain, my realm. This is my world."

I swallowed hard, her voice like silk and venom at the same time. There was an undeniable pressure pushing down on me, but I couldn't let her crush me.

I took a deep breath and lowered my head slightly, not out of fear but out of respect for the weight she carried. "Yes... it's your world," I whispered, my voice quiet but yielding. The cold bite of submission stung, but I didn't fight it. Not yet.

She laughed softly, the sound like ice breaking. "Good. You understand your place. A pity. I would have thought you'd be more of a challenge."

The air around her shifted, the very space vibrating with her control. I couldn't help but flinch, stepping back as the energy from her grew thicker, more oppressive.

But this time, I caught myself.

I wasn't the same timid girl anymore. I had made a vow—to get stronger. To protect the one person I cared about, and to never show weakness. I had promised myself that I would never submit again. Not to anyone.

Not even her.

"Remember your place, little girl," she said, her voice dripping with sweet venom. "You may have your power, but you are in my domain now. You'll bow to me, whether you want to or not."

The weight of her words hit me like a wave, pushing me down, making me feel small once more. But no. Not this time.

I clenched my fists, the bitter taste of submission rising in my throat. But I would never go back. I had sworn it to myself on that stormy day, tears and wind howling around me as I promised that I would never be weak again, never submit to anyone.

I had a purpose now, a goal. I was stronger than I had ever been, and I would never fall prey to this domineering force standing before me.

I raised my chin, refusing to bow. Not to her. Not to anyone. I might be in her domain, but that didn't mean I had to bend to her will. I wouldn't.

"Who says it's your domain?" I said, my voice more confident, more grounded. I could feel the defiance in my chest, a fire lighting inside me. It wasn't fear that surged through me now.

No, it was pride—my pride.

Her eyes flashed, narrowing at my words. She tilted her head, the faintest smile playing at the corners of her lips. "What do you mean, little girl? I am the one in control here. This is my realm. My domain. You stand here because I allow it."

Her words were heavy, oppressive. I could feel the aura around her thickening, the space vibrating with power, monsters and curses swirling at her feet. She was making herself known, showing me the full extent of her control.

But as the darkness pressed in, I remembered something—something important.

The curses I wielded weren't just born of hatred, or fear, or pain. They were born of emotion. My emotions. Pride, anger, defiance... They were my strength, my power.

I closed my eyes, focusing inward. The whispers of the curses in my mind reminded me of their words, those whispers that echoed in my mind when I was weak, when I was unsure.

You're the strongest, they said. You are stronger than any curse wielder, stronger than any power in this world.

And now I believed them. I would be proud of that strength.

I focused on the fury that rose within me, the fire in my veins, the burning determination. My aura shifted, the air crackling as a dark, murderous energy began to leak from my body.

My eyes glowed a bright, dangerous red, the curses around me answering the call of my emotions. It felt like power, raw and untamed, but it was mine.

"The world begins from where I stand," I said coldly, my voice sharp as a blade. "And if I say this isn't your domain, then it's not."

I took a slow step forward, my feet firm against the cold ground, as if grounding myself in my words. "I've lived through hell. I've fought to stand where I am, and no one, not even you, will tell me where my boundaries lie."

The air grew colder as I stepped forward more, the cursed energy swirling like a storm around me, murderous intent sharpening the edges of every breath I took.

"Don't mistake my confidence for submission," I said, my tone colder still. "I won't be bound by anyone's will but my own."

Around me, chains slowly began to materialize, twisting and warping into sharp thorns. They coiled around my form, an ominous bloom taking shape—I myself becoming a deadly flower of curses, unfolding petal by petal.

Then, those very chains shed their form entirely, no longer mere bindings but pure thorns—razor-sharp and unyielding, brimming with the promise of pain.

She stood still, her face unreadable for a moment. Then, she laughed—a low, dangerous chuckle that echoed in the darkness around us.

"Well, well," she said, her voice a soft, seductive purr, "you're someone worthy, aren't you?"

I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of pride at the way her words landed. It wasn't admiration—no, it was acknowledgment. She was recognizing something in me.



"I like you," she continued, her smile widening, dangerous and genuine all at once. "You have... potential."

With a small, almost playful tilt of her head, Her eyes narrowed as she spoke again, her voice smooth like silk. "Tell me, what's your name?"

"I'm Celia," I said firmly, a trace of pride sneaking into my voice. "Celia. I'm striving to get stronger, to become the new Queen of Curses. And... I'll leave my own legacy. But my main goal..." I paused, my chest tightening slightly. "My main goal is to save someone I care for."

Her smile softened, but the intensity in her eyes didn't fade. "I see... So you have a purpose after all." She gave a slight nod, as if acknowledging something deep within me. "I like that. I think you'll go far, Celia."

With a graceful movement, she extended her hand toward me. "I'm Evelina Blackrose. But you can call me Evelina."

For the first time in what felt like forever, I smiled, a small but confident smile. There were questions in my mind—so many questions. And now, with Evelina, there was no going back.

It was time to get the answers I needed.

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

Ahhh, finally! Made it to Sylvaris—the town where Alina and Requiem call home. Let's see if it lives up to the hype.

The moment I stepped into Sylvaris, I couldn't help but let out a low whistle. The place was a damn marvel. I'd seen a lot in my time—towns that fell into ruin, villages that looked like they hadn't seen a good idea in decades—but this? This was something else.

The streets were lined with towering buildings, half made of stone, half made of some kind of enchanted material that sparkled when the light hit it just right. The air itself hummed with magic, like you could reach out and pluck it from the sky.

I looked up at a floating platform that was drifting lazily overhead, the edges glowing with intricate arcane symbols, like the whole town was built to defy gravity. And I thought I was the only one who could pull off the impossible.

A couple of kids dashed under the platform, barely missing its edge as they ran in some game that looked like a cross between tag and flying, but no one seemed worried about it. The buildings here—hell, even the streets—seemed alive. They bent and shifted to the needs of the people, as if Sylvaris itself had a heartbeat.

I was supposed to be headed to the guild, but, well, let's just say I've never been great at following directions. The place was a maze of enchanted alleyways, floating bridges, and structures that seemed like they'd belong in a dream rather than reality.

Right now, I felt like the only person who didn't belong here.

I pushed through the crowd, trying to find my bearings, but people moved around me like they were used to their own world of magic and machines. I caught snippets of conversation as I passed—some talking about the latest tech upgrades, others arguing about the best enchantment for defense—but mostly people seemed to be going about their business.

Not the kind of hustle and bustle you'd find in a desperate town, but the calm, confident rhythm of a place that knew exactly where it was going.

Then I saw them.

A group of kids, no older than eight or nine, were playing near a set of floating platforms. They were laughing and chasing each other, using a mix of magic and agility to leap between the platforms like it was nothing.

It was simple, innocent, and just... kinda heartwarming, y'know? I couldn't help but watch for a moment. In a world that seemed to be at war every other week, it was refreshing to see some kids enjoying their life without a care in the world.

One of them caught my eye—a little girl with messy brown hair and an oversized cloak that looked way too big for her. She wasn't jumping around like the others, though. Instead, she was sitting on the ground, her head tilted back as she stared at the sky. The others were too busy playing to notice, but for some reason, it made me smile.

I couldn't resist.

I walked over to her, crouching down so we were eye-level. "What's up? Don't wanna play?"

She blinked, then looked up at me with wide, curious eyes. "Nah. I'm watching the clouds. They change shapes, y'know?" She smiled a little, her eyes glinting with something I couldn't quite place. "And sometimes, I think they're telling me something."

I chuckled, ruffling her hair. "Maybe they are. Or maybe they're just playing their own game."

She giggled and nodded, her attention going back to the sky. I stayed there for a moment longer, watching her as the world continued moving around us. The way she just existed in the moment without a care, it felt... like something I didn't have the luxury of doing anymore.

Yeah. Not the time to get sentimental, Levi. Focus.

I pushed myself up and gave the girl a final wave before turning back toward my original destination. The guild. I had business to attend to, and if I let myself get distracted for too long, I'd end up lost in this place forever.

Still, as I walked past the bustling squares and through the towering structures of Sylvaris, I couldn't shake the thought. This town... it wasn't just some dot on the map. This place was a testament to growth, to what people could accomplish when they believed in something.

It wasn't just the magic that made this place special. It was the leadership behind it—Sylvia. That woman sure knew how to get things done.

I made my way through another street, passing more people who were moving with purpose, talking about the latest tech innovations and magical enhancements.

A fountain ahead caught my eye, the water shooting up in a series of perfectly choreographed arcs that seemed to pulse with life. It wasn't anything overly extravagant, but it had a kind of elegance to it—like it belonged in a museum.

I leaned against one of the nearby stone pillars, watching the water glisten in the sunlight. The sound was oddly soothing, but even as I relaxed for a moment, something gnawed at the back of my mind. I couldn't afford to get too comfortable.

I'm not some naive kid anymore. I've seen enough of the world to know that nothing ever stays this perfect. Sooner or later, it all crumbles. But that's exactly why I was here, right?

To see how long this damn tower could stand before it came crashing down.

I stood up straight, shook the thoughts off, and continued forward, a playful smirk creeping onto my face as I finally spotted the guild building in the distance. Alright, let's see what these folks are made of.

"Man, the atmosphere here is actually pretty nice. The weather's welcoming, the people look disciplined—definitely a place that runs on efficiency. Gotta say, I kinda like it."

My eyes drift to a potion seller on the street, neatly arranging his bottles, the shimmering liquids inside reflecting the midday sun. Potions, huh? Mostly useful for E to D ranks—a quick boost to magic or health.

Anyone stronger wouldn't need them, but it's still nice to see them here. Levinton doesn't even have a single potion stand.

Maybe I should tell Zain to grab a few.

I shake my head. Focus, Levi. The guild building—Alina, Requiem—I need to talk to them about the swarm.

Magic and tech mix seamlessly here. The streets are lined with vendors selling enchanted artifacts, and scholars roam in groups, deep in discussion. It's no wonder Sylvaris is a hub for mages and engineers.

Then, finally, I see it.

The guild building.

It towers over the rest of the town, a fortress of elegance and strength. The best-looking one here, no doubt. Guess it's time to get to work.

Both Celia and Levi had their purpose. Their goals may have been different, but they were bound by a single thread—defeating the swarm.

For Celia, it was about reclaiming the one she cherished most, refusing to be weak, refusing to submit ever again.

For Levi, it was redemption. A chance to correct the mistake that had haunted him—the moment he ran, the moment he gave up. This time, he would stand.

Their paths were set.

And as the next moments unfolded, the world would bear witness to the choices they made.

## **Chapter 42 - The Swarm's Beginning**

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

Evelina Blackrose, huh? The Queen of Curses herself. I never thought I'd be standing face to face with her, let alone hearing her tell me she respects my willpower.

...Respect, huh?

That doesn't mean I should trust her. Let's not forget—this is the same woman who slaughtered millions of people five hundred years ago. The very embodiment of devastation. If I let my guard down just because she smiles at me, I might as well throw myself into the mouth of a dragon and call it a day.

Evelina arched an eyebrow, her crimson eyes glinting with amusement. "Oh my, you're giving me quite the look, little one. I wonder... are you thinking something rather unpleasant about me?"

I flinched. Just a little. "It's nothing."

She chuckled, her voice dripping with something playful, teasing, almost like a melody. "Ara~ Come now, don't be shy. If you're curious, why not just ask? I promise, I won't bite." She tilted her head, smiling in a way that felt both lovely and terrifying at the same time. "Well, unless you'd like me to."

...Yeah, not terrifying at all. Nope. Not even a little bit.

I swallowed hard, gripping the edges of my sleeves. My mind wandered back—back to when I first met Kiel. I remember the way his fingers flipped through those dusty old history books, the look in his eyes as he read about the bloodshed of five centuries past.

The Queen of Curses... she didn't do it alone. The Heavenly Sorcerer, chosen by the Gods themselves, stood beside her, their hands drenched in just as much blood.

Seventy percent of the world... gone. Annihilated. Until they were stopped—until Marseille Astraesus, the Forbidden Wielder, ended it.

I clenched my fists.

I had to ask.

"Why did you do it?"

Evelina blinked. Then... she laughed. Lightly at first, like she was genuinely surprised. But then, she let out a full, rich laugh, touching a hand to her lips.

"You're direct, aren't you?" She leaned closer, her tone dropping into something softer. "But are you sure you want to hear the answer, little one?"

My throat tightened. "I have to. Your past... it's shaped my entire life in ways I never wanted. Pain, hatred, loss—it all stems from what you did. I deserve an explanation."

Her smile lingered, but this time, there was something else in her eyes. A faint sadness, hidden beneath all the amusement. She sighed, tilting her head. "Ara, ara~ So stubborn... Fine. I'll tell you—just a little."

I braced myself as she straightened, her presence shifting from playful to something more... wistful.

"The world blamed us for saving it."

I felt my breath hitch. "What...?"

Evelina's expression didn't change, but her voice carried a strange weight, like she was reliving something far too painful to be spoken aloud.

"The rulers declared that our power was too dangerous. That victory came at too great a cost. The people—those ungrateful little things—turned against us. They feared us. Hated us. And when their rulers spun their lies, they swallowed them whole."

I swallowed. "But why—?"

"They demanded our death," Evelina continued, her eyes drifting to some unseen past. "We saved the world, yet it was us they chose to hate. They feared us, despised us, and in the end... they decided the world would be better off without us."

She exhaled slowly, a distant, unreadable smile crossing her lips. "But there was a hero," she murmured, her voice laced with something fragile—something almost mournful. "Someone who sacrificed everything. He gave up all of his power, drained himself to his very core, left himself weak—helpless—just to protect this world."

Her fingers curled slightly, as if grasping something long lost. "And yet, it was him they wanted gone the most."

She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again, softer now, yet filled with something deeper. "He was our most cherished person. Mine... and the Heavenly Sorcerer's. More than anyone, we wanted to protect him. But the world—" She let out a quiet laugh, bitter yet laced with sorrow. "The world wanted him dead."

My stomach twisted into knots. "You tried to protect him, didn't you?"

A small, humorless chuckle. "Of course we did. The Heavenly Sorcerer and I—we tried to hide him, keep him safe. But the world is cruel to those it fears. They dragged him through the streets, humiliated him, hurt him. And in the end..." Her voice softened, barely above a whisper.

"They made his execution a celebration."

I clenched my teeth, my chest tightening. "That's—"

"Unforgivable?" Evelina mused, a bitter smile touching her lips. "Yes... We thought so, too."

I couldn't speak. The words wouldn't come.

She let out a soft hum before tilting her head back slightly. "That was the day we realized... this world didn't deserve to be saved."

Silence. Heavy. Suffocating. I could feel my hands trembling.

But then, she exhaled, shifting her gaze back to me, her smile returning—gentler, almost affectionate. "You wish to know more, don't you, Celia?"

I nodded, barely able to find my voice. "Please."

Evelina chuckled. "Then listen well."

"We were forced to do it—to save one person."

My heart pounded.

"There was a curse," she continued, her voice quieter now, almost distant. "A divine punishment. A condition placed upon someone we loved."

Her eyes softened, the way a person's might when recalling the one thing they cherished most. "Someone worth everything."

She exhaled, her gaze darkening. "His execution wasn't just a death—it was a seal. A judgment passed by the world, but more than that... by the Gods themselves. They didn't just take his life. They bound him, marked him with something absolute."

A bitter smile touched her lips. "No revival magic could ever bring him back. The Gods made sure of that."

I held my breath.

"The only way to break it... was to take the lives of millions and defy the Gods."

A shiver ran down my spine. "That's..."

She smiled again, but it didn't reach her eyes. "We searched for another way. We fought against it. But time was cruel, and so was fate. The choice came down to two things."

She raised a single finger.

"Let our most precious person suffer and die."

Another finger.

"Or become the monsters the world already believed we were."

I didn't realize I was shaking until I forced myself to speak. "And you... you chose to destroy the world?"

A small, almost sad chuckle. "We chose to save him."



The weight of her words sank into me. Heavy. Almost unbearable.

The world never understood them. And yet, in that moment, for the first time, I felt like... I did.

I felt the words from Evelina sink deeper into me, their weight pressing down on my chest. Her sadness, her regret—it was all too familiar. It mirrored something inside me.

As I stood there, my mind was overwhelmed by the thoughts of Kaiser. How much I cherished him, how much I wanted to protect him, to be by his side. My heart twisted in a way that made my breath catch. I didn't know how much more of this pain I could take.

I wanted to protect him, just like Evelina had wanted to protect her own.

In a strange way, it was like our worlds had collided, despite being so different. I didn't understand everything they'd gone through, but the desire to shield the one I loved, to keep him safe from everything, that... that was something I could relate to.

Our motivations weren't so different after all, even if our times were.

I couldn't hold back my question. My voice shook just a little, "Evelina... how did you feel about him? The person you and the Heavenly Sorcerer did everything to save?"

She didn't look at me at first, her gaze far away, as though the answer was just out of reach, buried beneath years of pain. Her voice was soft when it came, heavy with defeat. "We failed. Fate... and even the gods themselves were against us." She sighed, as if the weight of that failure was still with her.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of pity, sadness creeping into me at the thought of such loss. I had seen what it had done to her, to the point where even she seemed broken by it. I swallowed the lump in my throat before asking softly, "Did you love him?"

Her eyes met mine then, and she smiled—tender, almost wistful. "To call it love would be to disrespect the bond I shared with him. He was my everything, Celia. My reason to breathe, to live in this world. A world without him... it wasn't a world I could bear to live in. I loved him that much, more than my life."

I couldn't stop my thoughts from swirling around in my head. Evelina, the Queen of Curses, had loved him more than her own life, more than the world itself.

She had fought for him with everything she had, and even the gods had turned against her. Yet... yet... something didn't sit right with me.

If she really loved him that much, if he was her everything, why didn't she try harder? Why didn't she push even further, break every barrier, cross every line?

If I loved someone like that, I'd never stop fighting. I'd break the world in half if that's what it took.

I couldn't even imagine losing Kaiser like that. Just the thought of it... made my chest pain. I felt my grip on my fists tighten as my mind raced with thoughts of what I would do if someone dared to take him away from me.

My blood boiled. I could feel it—the curse—it grew stronger with every heartbeat, darker, colder. My aura—my murderous aura—spread out, filling the air around me, thickening with rage.

If Kaiser were in that situation, if someone tried to take him...

My body trembled with the sheer anger at the idea of losing him. My teeth ground together, and all I could think of was ripping apart anything or anyone who dared to harm him.

"Celia, you too have someone you cherish, don't you?" Evelina's voice brought me out of my thoughts, her words cutting through my rage like a sharp blade. She spoke as though she could sense my turmoil, and she was right, I did have someone.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak just yet. My mind was only on one person—Kaiser. My first true friend. The one person who didn't look at me like I was some curse that should be killed.

He gave me a reason to smile, to laugh, to feel... alive. And the thought of losing him... I just couldn't even begin to imagine it.

A cruel smirk spread across Evelina's face, and she leaned in slightly, her eyes gleaming. "What if that person was in a similar situation? What would you do?"

Her question caught me off guard. I didn't know what to say. The words died in my throat. What would I do?

My heart clenched so tightly I thought it might stop. A sickening twist of fear, sorrow, and rage swirled in my chest. My hands clenched into fists so tight my nails dug into my palms.

The cursed energy inside me flared—uncontrollable. My aura grew colder, more dangerous, more murderous. I could feel it—the world—it would not take him from me.

"Take him away from me?" I whispered, my voice colder than ice.

Evelina's eyes sparkled with amusement as she replied, "Yes. The world taking him away from you. What would you do then, Celia?"

I stood there in silence for a moment, the weight of her question settling on my chest. The thought of the world, of anyone, trying to take him... it made my blood burn with a fire I didn't know I could feel.

And then, without thinking, the words spilled out of me, darker than anything I'd ever said before.

"If the world was trying to take him away from me..." I took a deep breath, my voice steady now, my eyes cold and unyielding. "Let it try. I'll burn every inch of this world to the ground before I let that happen. I'll put an end to their lives and make their suffering worse than all the stages of Hell."

I could feel my aura spreading, filling the air like a storm ready to tear everything apart. I could see the slight surprise in Evelina's eyes. I could feel her watching me, trying to read me.

But I didn't care.

Her lips curved into a smile—amusement and something else. A sort of... respect? I didn't know.

Then, I stepped closer to her, narrowing the distance between us. The coldness in my chest didn't leave, but now, it had become a burning certainty. "You said a world without the person you cherish is not worth living in, right?"

Evelina nodded, remembering the words she had spoken earlier.

I smiled, but it wasn't a smile of kindness—it was dark, full of resolve. "For me, a world without him doesn't deserve to exist. And if the world thinks it can tear us apart, I'll destroy it and remake it with my own hands. With blood. I'll carve a place where he'll always be with me. Where nothing will ever take him from my side again."

My words echoed in the air, thick with the promise of destruction. I could feel the power in them, the weight of my vow. I wasn't going to back down. Not for anything. Not for anyone.

Evelina's smile remained, but now, there was a flicker of something else in her gaze. Something... approving. "I see," she said, her voice a mix of admiration and something more sinister.

I wasn't sure if she was impressed, but I didn't care. I had spoken the truth—the truth of my heart. And I would let nothing, and no one take Kaiser away from me. Not now, not ever.

I clenched my fists, feeling the warmth of my cursed energy crawling beneath my skin. The air around me felt heavier, thicker—like the weight of my own resolve was pressing down on me. But I welcomed it. I needed it.

Those monsters, those disgusting bugs that stole him away from me—I'll burn them all alive. I don't care what it takes, I'll tear them apart one by one until there's nothing left but ash. They won't take him from me. They won't.

He was the one who saved me when I had nothing, when the world only looked at me with fear and disgust. He protected me. He gave me warmth when all I had was cold. He made me feel human.

Now it was my turn. I'll save him, I'll protect him—no matter what.

It wasn't just a promise. It was a vow. A truth so deeply carved into my soul that nothing, not even death, could erase it.

My gaze lifted toward Evelina. The Queen of Curses. A woman feared by the world. A woman who once failed to save the one she loved.

I wasn't going to make the same mistake.

I stepped forward, the crimson glow of the blood moon casting a spotlight over the two of us. The cold night air whispered against my skin, but the fire in my heart burned hotter.

I took a deep breath, then exhaled, letting every ounce of hesitation leave my body. My next words would change everything.

"Please fight me, Evelina." My voice was steady, unwavering. "You might've lost the person you loved in the past due to your weakness—" I saw her eyes darken at that, but I didn't stop. "—but I won't be the same as you. I will get stronger. So strong that even the world itself will have no choice but to follow my rules."

Silence.

For a second, Evelina just stared at me. Then, slowly, a devilish smile stretched across her lips.

"...You're playing a dangerous game, little girl," she purred, her voice dripping with amusement, but her eyes—her eyes—were sharp, deadly.

"I don't think you understand just how much stronger I am than you. If we fight, I will break you. I will shatter every bone in your body, drown you in your own curses, and leave you gasping for breath, wondering if you made a mistake challenging me."

Her presence alone sent a chill down my spine, but I didn't flinch.

Instead, I smiled.

A dark, wicked smile.

"Then I'll surpass you." My voice was cold, absolute. "Even if I have to crawl through Hell itself, I'll surpass you and make you kneel before my power."

Our eyes locked, the murderous intent between us thick enough to choke the air.

And just like that—our fight had begun.

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

The moment I stepped into the guild hall, I was met with the usual sight—adventurers drinking, chatting, and throwing around war stories like they were the biggest badasses in the world.

It had that same loud, chaotic energy that most guilds had, but there was something a bit different here. More refined. More structured.

Didn't matter to me, though. I wasn't here to admire the furniture.

Before I could take another step, a guild member noticed me and walked over. The guy was young—mid-twenties, maybe—with a decent build. The way he held himself, the slight tension in his posture, the hesitation in his steps—yep. C-Rank.

Not that it mattered. But, hey, old habits die hard.

"Can I help you?" he asked, polite but wary.

I gave him my best cocky grin, the one that usually threw people off. "Yeah, I need to see Alina and Sylvia. Name's Levi. Celestial Apex Guild's Leader."

His eyebrows lifted slightly, but he kept his composure. "Miss Alina is currently in the middle of a guild conquest meeting, but I can take you to see Miss Sylvia."

Figures. Alina always had her hands full.

"Alright," I nodded. "Tell Alina to come find me after. Got something important to discuss."

The guild member nodded in return, then gestured for me to follow. As we moved through the hall, I could already feel the stares—some curious, some wary. Guess word about me hadn't fully spread yet.

Good. That made things more fun.

The office I was led into was... well, exactly what I expected from someone like Sylvia.

Large, but not excessive. A mix of elegance and practicality. A grand oak desk sat near the center, polished to perfection, stacks of neatly organized documents resting on its surface. The walls were lined with bookshelves, filled with records, history, and battle strategies—things only someone truly invested in leadership would keep. The windows were tall, allowing just enough natural light to pour in, giving the room a golden glow under the midday sun.

And at the center of it all, sitting behind that pristine desk, was her.

Sylvia.

She was beautiful, no doubt about it. Silver-white hair that cascaded down her shoulders, eyes the same metallic sheen, sharp and calculating like she could see right through you. She was dressed in a fitted, deep blue noble's coat with silver embroidery, the high collar giving her an air of authority. Beneath it, a sleek, professional-looking white blouse, paired with tailored dark trousers.

Everything about her screamed elegance—from the way she sat, legs crossed, fingers gently laced together, to the way her gaze met mine, unwavering and confident.

Yeah, I was definitely out of place here.

I glanced down at my casual clothes—just a simple black sleeveless top, some worn-out pants, and boots that had seen way too much action. I probably looked like some random street fighter that wandered into a royal estate.

Sylvia's lips curled into a small, knowing smile. "You don't have to look so out of place, Levi. I don't judge a man by his clothing—only by his actions."

I chuckled. "Well, that's good to hear. Would've been real awkward if you threw me out just 'cause I wasn't dressed like a prince."

The guild member who escorted me gave a respectful nod before leaving, closing the door behind him.

"Please, take a seat," Sylvia gestured to the chair across from her.

I did as she said, leaning back comfortably, though my mind was already working through what I was about to say.

This was it.

I wasn't here to flirt. I wasn't here to play around.

We needed their guild's help. If we were going to deal with that grotesque swarm, we needed manpower, strategy, coordination.

And right now, it all depended on me.

I leaned back in my chair, arms crossed, eyes locked on Sylvia. There was something about the way she carried herself—poised, confident, the kind of person who knew exactly what she wanted and how to get it.

And right now, I needed her to want this.

I exhaled, then leaned forward, resting my elbows on the desk between us. "Alright, let's cut straight to it. You know about grotesques, right?"

Sylvia gave a small nod, silver eyes sharp with curiosity. "C to B Rank threats, yes. Dangerous, but manageable in small numbers. What about them?"

"Yeah, well, the usual grotesques? They're nothing special. Tough, ugly, travel in hordes, but overall? No real brains behind 'em." I tapped a finger against the desk. "But here's the problem—there is one that has brains. An S Rank freak of nature calling itself the Swarm Tyrant."

Sylvia arched a brow, hands clasped together on the desk. "Swarm Tyrant?"

I nodded. "King of the Devouring Nest. Unlike the rest, this thing's got tactics. Strength? Off the charts. Intelligence? Enough to command entire armies of grotesques and actually strategize rather than just charge in blindly. If left alone, it won't just attack towns—it'll consume everything. People, land, resources. No survivors. No remains."

Sylvia didn't react immediately, but I could tell she was processing it. She leaned back slightly, crossing her legs, her expression unreadable. "And you're saying this thing is mobilizing?"

"Not just mobilizing—it's expanding. This isn't some random outbreak. It's a war." I glanced at the window behind her, watching the golden rays of the sun filter through. "One city at a time, the swarm will spread. Celestine won't be able to hold it back forever, and once it's done there..." I turned back to her, my tone dropping. "Sylvaris is next."

I could see the shift in her expression—subtle, but there. She wasn't just listening now. She understood.

Sylvia let out a slow breath, tapping a single finger against her desk. "A threat of this scale... if what you're saying is true, then ignoring it isn't an option."



"Glad we're on the same page."

She tilted her head slightly. "Then what do you propose?"

I smirked. "Simple. Celestial Apex and Requiem work together. We combine our forces, our strategies, and we take the swarm down before it grows beyond control. A full-scale coordinated assault to wipe out the grotesques and crush the Tyrant."

Sylvia's eyes flickered with thought. She was considering it—not just the idea itself, but the realistic possibilities.

She tapped her fingers once, then twice, before speaking. "A cooperation between our guilds could prove effective. The manpower of both Celestial Apex and Requiem would allow us to strike with overwhelming force. And considering the level of intelligence you've described in this Tyrant... attacking before it strengthens further is the logical move."

She paused, then continued, this time more measured. "However, there are risks. A campaign of this size will drain resources, both in supplies and personnel. Some of our guild members are currently engaged in other missions—we'd need to recall them, which will affect other contracts and alliances. Additionally, moving this many people would alert the grotesques early. If the Tyrant is as intelligent as you claim, it might anticipate an attack and adapt."

I nodded, resting my chin in my palm. "You're not wrong. But sitting around and waiting for it to come knocking isn't an option either. We act now, or we deal with a nightmare later."

Sylvia studied me for a moment before giving a small smile. "It's a compelling argument. But you'll need to convince Alina as well. Without her agreement, Requiem won't move."

I raised a brow. Of course.

Convincing Sylvia? Reasonable. Straightforward. She looked at the bigger picture.

Alina?

I let out an internal sigh, already picturing the hell this was gonna be. Convincing Alina will be harder than wiping out the grotesques by myself.

Hell, if I had to choose between reasoning with her and fighting the Swarm Tyrant one-on-one, I'd take the Tyrant every time. At least with that thing, I'd get a fair fight.

But I wasn't about to back down.

I flashed Sylvia a cocky grin, resting one foot on the desk just to test how much I could push before she'd call me out. "Alright, no problem. I'll talk to her. Convince her. Charm her, if I have to."

Sylvia gave me a knowing smile. "I wish you luck, then."

Before I could respond, the sound of the office door swinging open caught my attention.

And there she was.

Alina.

I leaned back slightly, giving an exaggerated sigh. Well, that was faster than expected.

"So, you're Levi? The Sword Saint of God Speed, huh?"

Alina's voice was as cold as ice. No emotion, no warmth—just words spoken with the sharp precision of a blade. Her violet eyes barely acknowledged me as she stepped forward, her movements controlled, efficient, calculated.

She carried herself like a queen who had no time for anything beneath her.

I grinned, standing up from my seat, hands slipping into my pockets. "That'd be me. And you'd be Alina—the Sword Saint of Technique."

She didn't react, didn't even acknowledge the title. Just stopped in front of me, tilting her head slightly.

Alright. It's now or never. My hardest conversation of life—convincing a woman just to say yes.

I exhaled and got straight to the point. "The grotesques. You probably know them—C to B Rank threats, messy but dangerous. Alone, they're nothing special, but together, they wipe out entire towns. Usually, they lack any real leadership, but this time..."

I met her gaze. "There's an S Rank leading them. The Swarm Tyrant—King of the Devouring Nest. Smarter, stronger, strategic. This isn't just another outbreak. It's an invasion, and it's spreading fast. Celestine is under siege, and if we don't do something, it's only a matter of time before it moves beyond that."

I watched her. She was listening. No interruptions, no unnecessary comments—just absorbing every word like she was breaking it down piece by piece in her head.

Then she nodded, as if confirming something to herself.

And then—

"No."

No hesitation. No explanation. Just a flat refusal.

I blinked. "...No?"

Alina met my gaze, her voice as lifeless as before. "Requiem won't be involved in this. Your guild, your town—it's not my concern."

I let out a slow breath, rubbing the back of my neck. Yeah. Should've seen that one coming.

I leaned forward slightly, arms resting on the desk. "You realize these things won't stop at Celestine, right? They'll keep moving. Town after town, city after city. If we don't take them out now, Sylvaris could be next."

Alina remained indifferent. "If that time comes, I'll handle it."

I narrowed my eyes. "With what? Hope?"

She finally moved—just slightly, tilting her head. "Valhalla and Crimson Eclipse. If the grotesques become a threat to Sylvaris, they'll stand with me. They owe me."

I scoffed. "So you're saying if it comes knocking at your door, you'll have backup. But until then? You don't care?"

"Correct."

Cold. Unapologetic. Not even a hint of concern.

I exhaled through my nose, tilting my head back. "You do realize people are dying, right? Whole families wiped out. Innocent lives torn apart. You're really just gonna sit back and watch?"

Alina didn't even blink. "If they are weak enough to be wiped out, then they were never meant to survive."

I clenched my fists, the muscles in my jaw tightening.

She continued, unbothered. "You expect me to waste my guild's resources, my people, my efforts—for what? So I can feel some sort of moral satisfaction? This world is not built on kindness, Levi. It's built on power, control, and survival. If something does not benefit me, I have no reason to be involved."

I stayed silent for a moment, just staring at her.

Damn. She really doesn't care.

I let out a small breath, forcing myself to stay calm. Getting emotional wouldn't change anything.

Alright, Levi. Think.

Alina wasn't the type to be swayed by ideals. She didn't care about heroism or saving the weak. No, she was calculating, self-serving—an opportunist.

If I wanted her help, I needed to give her a reason. Something that benefited her.

And right now? I didn't have it.

Time to change that.

"Alright, let's talk business, then. Celestial Apex isn't just some small-time guild, you know. We've got elite swordsmen, top-tier mages, sorcerers, and even a few specialists you won't find anywhere else. If we work together, Requiem could—"

"No."

I blinked. "Damn. Didn't even let me finish."

Alina remained as still as stone, her violet eyes as cold as the dead of winter. "I don't need swordsmen. My people don't rely on brute strength. Precision, tactics, and mastery—those are what wins conquests. Not swinging a blade faster than the next fool."

I scratched my cheek. "Ouch. That hurt a little. But fine, what about our mages? We've got sorcerers capable of large-scale defensive barriers, energy amplification, even time acceleration spells—things your guild doesn't specialize in. That could—"

"Still no."

I sighed. "Alright, and let me guess, you've got a cold, heartless reason why?"

Alina barely blinked. "Magic alone does not win battles. It is a tool. If my guild requires more magic, we will take in specialists who align with our goals. I have no reason to tie myself to yours."

I leaned forward. "Okay, okay. What about resources? Celestial Apex is well-funded. We have supply chains, trade connections, and access to exclusive black-market relics. I bet Requiem could—"

"I don't need your resources."

I stared at her. "You're kidding. Everyone needs resources."

Alina shook her head, her voice completely void of interest. "Requiem already has its own private channels. We don't rely on trade. We take what we need or form contracts with those worth the effort."

I let out a deep breath, rubbing my temple. Man, she's really not budging.

I lifted a finger. "Alright. Last one. Manpower. We have trained warriors, combat units, and experienced strategists who could—"

"No."

I dropped my hand on the table, making a light thud. "Alright, I get it. You don't need anything. But hear me out—what if you just wanted some insurance? You're smart. You know long-term gains matter more than short-term refusals. Aligning with us means—"

Alina's gaze never wavered. "Loyalty is just an illusion created by the weak. People follow only as long as it benefits them—so I make sure I'm always the greater option."

Sylvia, who had been silent up until now, stepped forward. "Alina, listen. There's no harm in forming an alliance. Even if you don't need them now, you could in the future. This could be beneficial if—"

Alina turned her head slightly, cutting Sylvia off with a glance. "If there are no guarantees of advantage, it's a waste of my time. I don't act out of kindness. I act because it serves me. If helping you aligns with my goals, consider yourself lucky. If not, you were never worth my time to begin with."

Sylvia clenched her fists. "Are you really that heartless?"

Alina's expression didn't change. "Emotions are liabilities. Sympathy is a weakness. I deal in results, not attachments."

I let out a sharp breath, shaking my head. "And what if standing against you is the only choice left?"

Her voice was as cold as ever. "If you stand in my way, you're an obstacle. If you serve my interests, you're a tool. Either way, you are replaceable."

Sylvia looked almost disgusted. "How can you think like that?"

Alina didn't hesitate. "Survival isn't about morals or emotions. It's about power. And power belongs to those willing to abandon everything to claim it."

I clenched my jaw, running a hand through my hair. "So what, you'd let the world burn if it got you what you wanted?"

"If destruction brings me closer to what I want, then let the world burn. It was never my concern to begin with."

I stared at her, genuinely trying to figure her out.

She didn't flinch. Didn't hesitate. Didn't care.

And that... that was the problem.

I let out a short laugh—dry, frustrated. "Damn. You really don't care about anyone, do you?"

For the first time, Alina paused. Just for a second. Then—

"Does it matter?"

My grin faded.

"...Maybe it does."

Sylvia stood up from her seat, brushing off the imaginary dust from her coat. With a calm, knowing smile, she raised a hand.

"Alright, alright, let's all take a breath and relax, shall we?"

Her voice was smooth, diplomatic, confident. The kind of voice that could make enemies pause before drawing their blades.

Alina, however, wasn't the type to be swayed easily. She turned her head, shooting Sylvia a sharp glare. But then... something shifted.

The glare faded. Just slightly. Replaced by something more neutral. A rare moment of genuine attention.

Interesting.

I leaned back, crossing my arms. If there was anyone Alina might actually listen to, it was Sylvia.

Sylvia didn't waste the opportunity. She clasped her hands behind her back, her noble posture impeccable. "Alina, let's be realistic. You're a strategist, and I respect that. But sometimes, strategy involves making temporary compromises for greater rewards."

Alina remained silent, her gaze unmoving.

Sylvia continued, "Requiem aligning with Celestial Apex benefits you more than you realize. You gain additional manpower without taking risks, access to their intelligence networks, and a firsthand opportunity to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. Information is power, after all."

Alina blinked once. Then—

"No."

Sylvia's lips curled slightly. "I expected that. But think about it—having Levi's guild as an ally means increased influence. You wouldn't just be maintaining your position; you'd be expanding it. Having Celestial Apex under obligation to you—"

"No."

Damn. She didn't even hesitate.

Sylvia pressed on, not missing a beat. "Financial backing. Celestial Apex has deep pockets, and we both know money fuels power. Imagine the things you could achieve with—"

"No."

I exhaled, shaking my head. Cold as ever.

Sylvia, however, didn't seem fazed. Instead, she hummed, tapping her chin with a thoughtful expression. Then, her eyes lit up as if she had just uncovered a hidden card in her hand.

"Alright then. I have an idea."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Sylvia turned to Alina, her smile widening. "How about a bet?"

Alina's eyes narrowed slightly. "A bet?"

"A one-on-one match," Sylvia said smoothly. "You vs Levi in a one on one fight. If he wins, Requiem assists Celestial Apex in fighting the swarm."

Alina didn't even blink. "No."

I grinned. "Oh? What's wrong? Scared you'll lose?"



Her eyes snapped to me, cold and unbothered. "I don't waste time on trash."

Oof. That one had some bite.

I smirked, tilting my head. "Funny. Because by the end of the fight, your little fantasy of being untouchable will be shattered into pieces."

The air between us thickened, my aura stirring like dark flames, hers like cold violet embers.

Before things could spiral, Sylvia swiftly stepped in between us, pressing a hand against my chest with an exasperated sigh. "Alright, that's enough posturing. Alina, I'm curious—why won't you accept?"

Alina glanced at Sylvia with the same detached expression. "I gain nothing from it."

Sylvia's lips curled into a knowing smile. Then, with the grace of a seasoned negotiator, she took a step closer to Alina, lowering her voice slightly. "Oh, Alina. What if I told you that, if you win, I'll personally gather half of Requiem's members to search for him."

Sylvia, ever the tactician, didn't elaborate. She simply tilted her head, letting the weight of her words settle. "You know who I mean," she murmured, her voice like a whisper against the tension in the air. "Half of Requiem, scouring every corner, every lead. A search unlike any before."

Alina's breath hitched, her composure wavering for just a fraction of a second. Her lips parted, but no words came out at first. Then, with quiet intensity, she asked, "Really?"

Sylvia met her gaze without hesitation. "Really."

Alina's entire body stilled.

For the first time since this conversation began, her violet eyes flickered—not with calculation, but with something close to shock.

Well, well. That's new.

I tilted my head, studying her. "Huh. You actually look surprised."

Sylvia glanced at me with a smirk before returning her gaze to Alina. "She won't refuse this, trust me."

Alina remained still for a moment, her eyes locked onto Sylvia's. Then, without another word, she turned and walked toward the exit.

Just as she reached the doorway, she paused. Slowly, she turned her head back, her violet aura flickering to life like spectral flames.

"You and I will fight later this evening," she said, her voice colder than ice. "Sylvaris Arena."

The sheer pressure of her presence filled the room, the weight of her magic pressing against the air.

I felt a familiar thrill pulse through my veins. My own dark flames ignited, shadowy and hungry, rising to meet her intensity.

A grin tugged at my lips. "Oh, this is gonna be fun." I leaned forward, my tone dripping with confidence. "I'll win, you know. After all—" I flashed her a cocky smirk. "I'm the strongest."

Alina's violet flames flared once, casting a ghostly glow over her face. Then, with an icy smirk of her own, she turned fully toward me.

"Just don't get sliced in half, Mr. Self-Proclaimed Strongest."

And with that, she walked out of the room.

I exhaled, my grin widening. Damn. I think I'm actually excited.

I leaned against the stone wall, stretching my arms out with a satisfied sigh. "Hey, Sylvia, gotta admit, I'm pretty grateful you went out of your way to convince Alina. That was... impressive."

She raised an eyebrow, her smile never wavering. "Nothing to thank me for, Levi. It benefits us both."

I cocked my head, intrigued. "How exactly does it benefit you?"

Sylvia stepped closer, her presence as smooth and composed as ever. She leaned in just a bit, her voice dropping to a more secretive tone. "Well," she began, "people would pay a lot to see two Sword Saints fight. It's not something that happens every day, is it?"

I raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of my lips. Her words hit me differently as I watched her eyes—those calculating, cool eyes that had the power to make even the coldest of men crack.

Oh, I get it now.

Sylvia wasn't just setting up a fight for some heroic cause or for the glory of her guild. No, this was business. Big business. I could practically hear the gold coins jingling in the air.

In my mind, I couldn't help but chuckle. So this is how it is, huh? She's using me—and Alina, for that matter—to turn a nice profit.

The thought alone made me laugh out loud. She's going to make a fortune off us. One fight, and she could be swimming in gold and silver—probably at least 600 gold. Hell, they might even have to build a bigger vault for it after this.

And here I was, thinking I'd get a little assistance with the swarm. But nope, Sylvia was playing the long game, stacking coins instead of favors. Typical.

I shook my head and laughed, letting the sound fill the room. "You're an opportunist, Sylvia."

She smiled back, that same charming, confident smile. "You could say that. But I'd call it... strategic."

I chuckled again, appreciating the way she worked. "Strategic? Yeah, sure, if you want to call it that. But you're not fooling me. You're gonna make a small fortune off of this fight."

Sylvia shrugged lightly, still smiling. "What can I say? Opportunities like this don't come around every day."

I smirked, crossing my arms. "You're a sly one."

She glanced away briefly before her gaze returned to me, a flicker of amusement in her eyes. "And you're not so bad yourself."

I leaned back against the wall, my tone turning a little more serious. "What about Alina? She's... not exactly the kind of person who'd jump at a chance like this."

Sylvia's smile softened, and she took a step back, folding her arms. "No, she's not. She's very detached, almost... inhuman in a way."

I raised an eyebrow. "You really think that? I mean, the woman is like a walking ice block."

Sylvia chuckled, shaking her head. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just... she's always so calculating, you know? She doesn't do anything unless there's something to gain. She's always focused on the end result."

I nodded, letting the truth of her words sink in. "Yeah, I've noticed. She's got that whole 'don't care about the world, just get what I want' vibe."

Sylvia sighed, her expression becoming a little more contemplative. "She's been like that for as long as I've known her. It's not out of malice—more like... survival, I guess."

"Survival, huh?" I mused. "I suppose that makes sense. She's got nothing but power in her sights."

"Exactly." Sylvia's voice softened, almost as though she was speaking about an old friend, despite Alina's coldness. "She's not heartless, Levi. But she's had to fight for everything she's gotten. The way she is—it's just her way of making sure nothing gets in the way of her goals."

I looked at her, seeing the slight hint of empathy in her eyes as she spoke. It was rare for Sylvia to get this... sentimental, but it made sense. She'd seen Alina grow, maybe even understood her more than anyone else.

I smiled lightly, pushing off the wall. "I get it now. You've got her figured out."

Sylvia gave a small nod, a flicker of respect in her eyes. "I wouldn't say figured out. But I know her. Just don't expect her to change. Not unless something big happens."

I laughed lightly, cracking my knuckles. "Well, if she wants to take me on, she's gonna need more than a little change."

Sylvia's smile returned, but it was tinged with something else—something like acknowledgment, or perhaps amusement. "I'll make sure she's ready for you. Just remember, don't underestimate her. She's a lot more than she seems."

I grinned. "Underestimate her? Please. I'm the strongest, remember?"

Sylvia raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in her eyes. "Just don't get sliced in half, Mr. Self-Proclaimed Strongest."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "You know, Sylvia, I think this fight's going to be more fun than I expected."

She shrugged with a smirk. "As long as you don't break anything, it should be a good show for everyone else."

I laughed again, the sound of it echoing off the stone walls. Yeah, this is gonna be fun.

But curiosity nagged at me, and I couldn't help myself. "So, Sylvia," I said, turning my gaze back to her with a playful smirk. "Who's this 'him' that made Alina agree to this fight? You know, the one who convinced her?"

Sylvia's smile widened, a glint of mystery flashing in her eyes. She leaned in slightly, her voice lowering just a touch, adding a bit of intrigue to her response. "Ah, him. He's the only person Alina ever really cares about."

I raised an eyebrow, genuinely shocked. Alina, care about someone? Now that was a surprise. "You mean, she actually cares about someone? Really?"

"Yes," Sylvia replied, her tone a little more serious, though she still carried that same confident air. "She does. But as for who he is..." She trailed off, as if weighing her words carefully before continuing. "I couldn't tell you much. She hasn't revealed much to me, but I have a vague understanding."

I leaned forward, intrigued. "What do you mean by 'vague understanding'?"

Sylvia's expression softened, though her eyes still carried that sharp focus. "He was the one who helped her... when she was at her lowest. He's the reason she believes she can change, that she can write her own future."

I raised my eyebrows even higher. A guy who gave her hope? Now that's a story worth hearing. "And what's his name? Where is he? What's he look like?"

She shook her head, a hint of something unreadable crossing her face. "I don't know. We don't even know what he looks like. Alina's kept everything about him close to her chest."

I frowned, but Sylvia didn't seem the type to lie. "So, you don't know anything about him, huh?"

Sylvia nodded slowly. "All I know is... Alina had a very rough past. A childhood that almost broke her. She lived through horrors that would make even the hardest of men flinch. She... well, she almost lived a life of slavery, torture... all of it."

I froze, my mind struggling to process that. Alina? A life like that? It explained so much. The coldness, the detachment—it was all beginning to make sense. She wasn't just an emotionless machine; she was a survivor, shaped by something dark and terrible.

Sylvia sighed, almost as if the weight of her own words had settled on her shoulders. "That's why she's so... distant. So cold. She doesn't let people in. She's learned to shut everything out. It's the only way she survived."

I bit back a sigh, feeling something unexpected rise up in me—empathy. It was hard not to feel for someone who had endured that kind of life, even if they came off as harsh or unapproachable. Alina wasn't heartless; she was just... guarded.

Sylvia continued, her gaze dropping slightly. "But that person she's looking for... he saved her life. Gave her the strength to keep going when she was at her weakest. And that's why she fights so hard to find him again. To show him that she's changed."

I nodded slowly, piecing things together. "How did he save her? When did that happen?"

Sylvia shook her head again. "I don't know. Alina's kept all of that to herself. Whatever happened, it's something she hasn't shared yet."

I exhaled sharply, feeling a twinge of frustration mixed with understanding. Some things are meant to stay private. But damn, I couldn't help but wonder who this mysterious person was.

Before I could say anything else, Sylvia glanced at the clock, then at me. "Your fight's in two hours. You should rest. Prepare yourself."

I nodded, appreciating her thoughtfulness. "Thanks again, Sylvia, for convincing Alina. I'll take it from here."

She gave me a small smile. "Good luck, Levi. And remember—don't underestimate her."

With a final nod, I turned and left the guild, stepping out into the cool air.

The sky above was beautiful, the sun slowly dipping behind the horizon, casting golden hues across the town. I looked up at it, breathing in the crisp air as I took a moment to collect my thoughts.

This is it.

It was going to be the hardest fight of my life. I was up against the Sword Saint of Technique, Alina—the woman known for her Heavenly Stance, a stance that no one had ever been able to overcome. Her techniques were precise, lethal, and calculated. I'd need everything I had to match her in the arena.

But then again...

Who am I kidding?

I grinned to myself, my ego already kicking into high gear. I'm Levi, the Sword Saint of God-Speed. I've been in worse fights, faced worse odds, and come out on top every single time.

Hell, I even took down a dragon once. A real dragon. And what did it get me? Glory. Fame. A ridiculous amount of admiration. Not that I'm complaining, of course. I earned it all. Every single bit.

Now I'm about to take on Alina. The one who's never been defeated, never shown weakness in a fight. But you know what? I'm the strongest.

I'm not worried. She can have all her fancy stances, her perfect technique, and her cold, calculating mind. Because when it comes down to it, there's one thing that separates me from her...

I'm stronger.

I'm not afraid of anyone or anything. I'll smash through whatever walls she throws at me. And when it's all over, it'll be my name they remember.

I cracked my neck and stretched, rolling my shoulders. Let's go, Alina. You're about to learn what happens when you try to take down Levi.

While Levi was busy preparing for the fight, far from the bustling guild and the impending battle, Alina stood alone on a distant bridge, gazing up at the sky.

The expanse of blue stretched endlessly above her, the clouds drifting lazily, as if they, too, were lost in their own thoughts. Her expression was blank, empty even, yet there was a subtle softness in her gaze as she looked at the sky.

For the first time in a long while, Alina allowed a genuine smile to form on her lips. It wasn't much, just a brief tug of her mouth, but it carried a warmth that had long been absent from her usual stoic face.

And then, in a voice barely above a whisper, she spoke to herself, the words laced with a quiet, newfound hope. "At last... it's time to finally meet you."

As the words left her lips, memories of him flooded her mind. She could still hear his voice, clear and steady, as though it had never left her. "You are not worthless. You are not a slave to anyone or anything. The future isn't something that is handed to you, Alina. It's something you take, something you write for yourself."

A gentle smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, her heart tightening in a mixture of warmth and longing. His words—always so sure, so unyielding—had been her anchor through the pain of her past. In her darkest moments, they were what had kept her from breaking.

His voice echoed in her mind again, like a heartbeat that never wavered. "Alina, I trust you. I believe in you. One day, you'll become someone I'll look up to. Your strength, your resolve—they'll take you places you never imagined."

Her smile deepened as she remembered him. His unwavering belief in her, when even she couldn't believe in herself. He had never faltered in his faith, and for the first time, Alina allowed herself to truly believe those words.

"You think so?" she murmured to herself, her lips curling into a soft, nostalgic smile. A quiet laugh escaped her, one that felt almost foreign, yet comforting. "You can never look up to me. I'll always be the one looking up to you."

She lingered on the memory of his kindness, but it was quickly replaced by the weight of what was ahead. The fight.

The upcoming battle against Levi. The Sword Saint of God-Speed. A battle that would test everything she had learned, everything she had fought for.

Her heart quickened at the thought. This wasn't just another duel—it was the culmination of everything she had been working toward. It was a chance to prove to herself, to him, that she was ready. Ready to stand tall, to fight for the future she had promised herself.

Her gaze hardened, the softness in her eyes fading as her focus sharpened. In two hours, I face Levi. I won't let anything stand in my way.

A breeze tugged at her hair as she stood, still, her body rigid with resolve. She could almost feel him beside her, his unwavering confidence, as though his presence was still a part of her.

"I'll show him. I'll show them all," she whispered to herself, the words carrying a strength she hadn't felt before.

Alina's hand tightened into a fist at her side, her chest swelling with the surge of determination. I'll find you, my savior... I'll show you how much I've changed just so... just as you saw the potential in me.

Her smile, though faint, remained. And with it, a quiet but unshakeable certainty. She would prove herself, not just for her past, but for the man who had believed in her when no one else did.

### **Zain's Perspective:**

I walked past the guild office of Levinton, my mind weighed down with a constant stream of thoughts. I had just finished meeting with some of the town's leaders, and now I couldn't shake the worry gnawing at me. Was Levi successful in convincing Requiem to help us? Would he manage to bring allies we so desperately need?

As I made my way through the streets of the town, I watched the town's folks bustle about their daily tasks, their laughter, their routine. Some children were playing near the



market, their innocent joy a stark contrast to the growing tension I felt in the pit of my stomach.

But I couldn't afford to get lost in the simple sights and sounds. The swarm... It was coming. The grotesques, those monstrous, vile creatures, were not going to wait. If we didn't prepare now, the town, the people I had sworn to protect, might not survive.

I paused for a moment as the familiar smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the air. The bakery was bustling with its usual customers, exchanging coins for loaves of bread and cakes. I could hear the chatter of merchants nearby, the familiar hum of Levinton's heart beating in the distance.

But I couldn't focus on that. My thoughts kept returning to the swarm and whether we had enough time. Would Levi's plan with Requiem succeed, or were we running out of options?

That's when I saw him.

Walking down the street, just past the market square, a man moved through the crowd like he owned the place. He wasn't from around here—there was something... foreign about him.

Red hair, almost unnatural in its brightness, and piercing yellow eyes that seemed to scan everything. He had an aura about him, an unmistakable presence that immediately caught my attention. He wasn't someone to be ignored. No, this man was someone worth paying attention to.

And then I noticed it—two long legendary swords hanging from his back. The unmistakable sign of a Sword Saint.

It was him. Xander.

The Sword Saint of Mastery. A man whose reputation was as large as the power he wielded. He had always been a bit of a mystery to me—his lazy genius attitude often made him seem aloof, but no one could deny his skill.

If the stories were true, Xander could take on almost anyone in a fight with barely any effort.

He strolled past me like he was walking in the park, his gaze casual as he examined the town. His expression was half-lidded, a lazy smile playing on his lips as he approached me.

"Yooo," he said, his voice low and casual, "this is Levi's town, right?"

I blinked, a bit taken aback by his complete nonchalance. "Yeah, it is," I replied, a bit wary. I knew Xander had a reputation, but it was hard to get a read on the guy. "What brings you here?"

He yawned, stretching his arms as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Heard there's a swarm of grotesques coming through. Figured I'd show up and help out."

I stared at him, momentarily stunned. "You... came here for the swarm?"

He nodded lazily. "Yeah, got a letter from Levi." He shrugged as if the whole situation didn't deserve more than a passing thought. "Said you guys could use a hand, so here I am."

I couldn't hide my shock. "You came all the way here just for that?"

Xander gave me a nonchalant grin, the lazy brilliance of it almost irritating. "What can I say? I don't have anything better to do. Besides, I've been looking for a good fight." He seemed to lose interest in me for a second, eyes trailing off to the horizon as if the conversation had already been decided.

I was trying to process his words, still grappling with the fact that Xander, of all people, was standing right in front of me. A man who could walk into any battle, no questions asked, and emerge victorious without even breaking a sweat.

"So you're really just... here to fight?" I asked, trying to make sense of it.

Xander gave me a bored look, then raised a hand, gesturing carelessly. "Yeah, yeah. No big deal. I mean, I don't know if it's gonna be worth my time, but I'll give it a shot. Looks like things are about to get interesting." He grinned at me like he was looking forward to something—something far beyond the swarm or the town.

I felt my nerves stir, an uneasy tension creeping up my spine. This was no simple adventurer. Xander was a force in his own right, and now he was here, joining forces with Levi in this last-ditch effort to defend Levinton.

I shook my head, still trying to wrap my mind around the situation. But just as I was about to respond, Xander's eyes flicked toward the horizon, and his casual demeanor shifted ever so slightly.

"Anyway," he said, straightening up, "you might wanna hurry up. The swarm's getting closer, and I'm not here to babysit. If you're gonna stand around, I'll go ahead and find them myself."

I hesitated, looking at the man before me—this lazy genius who had come to our aid, seemingly without a care in the world. But his words were clear, and that ominous feeling only intensified.

And then, as if the universe itself decided to give me one last push, I heard it—a rumbling, distant sound. A low, throbbing tremor that set the ground beneath my feet vibrating.

The swarm was closing in faster than I had hoped.

"Looks like it's time," Xander said, cracking his neck with a nonchalant smile. "Let's go, Zain. I've been waiting for this."

I didn't need any more encouragement. As we turned to head toward the town's defenses, the feeling of dread hung heavy in the air, but so did something else—something more dangerous.

A presence. The swarm wasn't the only thing we had to fear.

As we walked, my mind raced. Something was off, and I couldn't shake the feeling that this fight would be far more complicated than we thought.

But before I could process the thought any further, a figure appeared in front of us, a silhouette in the distance—a shape I knew all too well.

## **Chapter 43 - Torn Apart**

### **Celia's perspective:**

I'll do this. No matter how much it pains me to take just one step forward, I'll keep going.

Right now, I was standing against the strongest cursed wielder recorded in history—the Queen of Curses from 500 years ago. And from what I had said just minutes ago, Evelina had no intention of going easy on me.

I forced myself to stay calm. If I panicked, I'd be crushed in an instant. I had to analyze my strengths.

Right now, I had my Cursed Chains for defense and Withering Touch for offense. But as for her? That was still unknown to my senses. All I knew was that her curses were far superior—far beyond anything I had encountered. The cursed magic basics book I had read back at Levi's home made that very clear.

A shiver ran down my spine as I looked at her.

Her cursed aura spiraled around her like a living entity, an oppressive force under the blood moon's glow. It was almost as if the moon itself had chosen to spotlight her, recognizing her as something beyond human.

I clenched my hand against my chest, taking a deep breath. This is it. A chance to prove myself.

Evelina's voice rang sharp through the air.

"Oh my, so eager to be humiliated? Shall we start now?"

I took note of her tone—mocking, confident, as if this wasn't even worth her attention.

I steadied myself and met her gaze. "We shall, then."

And just like that—the battle began.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

She stood still, waiting, anticipating my first action. Her eyes gleamed with amusement, as if she were simply curious to see what I'd try.

Fine. I'd make the first move.

My plan was simple: use my Cursed Chains to block her attacks, then close the distance and drain her cursed energy with Withering Touch. If I could weaken her enough, I could bring her to her knees.

I leaped forward, summoning my chains from my back. They coiled like serpents, latching onto the ground as I used them to propel myself forward, accelerating my speed. The force sent a powerful shock through the air, the ground cracking beneath the pressure.

And yet—

Evelina didn't move.

She stood there, watching me with a smirk. As if I were nothing. As if I were no threat to her at all.

I lunged forward, my cursed chains tightening around my arms as I swung them toward Evelina. The plan was to use their weight to feint an overhead strike while coiling another set around her legs—force her to react, then punish her when she made a move.

But the moment my chains lashed toward her, Evelina simply raised a single finger.

"Condemn," she whispered.

A pulse of black energy burst from her feet. My chains stopped mid-air, shuddering violently before crumbling to dust. The backlash hit me instantly—I felt my own curse energy recoil like a whip snapping against my soul. I gritted my teeth and fell back, skidding against the ground.

I had to keep moving. If she could disrupt my curses with a word, I needed to engage her physically.

I sprinted in, pushing past the numbness spreading through my arms. Withering Touch ignited in my hands, a dark mist curling around my fingers. The moment I got close, I twisted my body low and struck forward, aiming for her exposed side.

Evelina sighed, her crimson eyes gleaming. "Scorched Affliction."

Heat. Blistering, suffocating heat engulfed the air between us. A spiral of flames roared into existence, swirling like a living beast before slamming straight into my gut. Pain exploded through my nerves. The force alone sent me hurtling backward, my body twisting in midair before I crashed onto the dreamy floor.

I gasped, struggling to breathe. My cursed chains instinctively coiled around me, blocking some of the flames, but not enough.

I coughed, trying to steady myself. The moment I pushed off the ground, Evelina was already moving. Her steps were slow, deliberate, as if she had already planned out the next few minutes of my defeat.

I had to shift tactics. If direct offense wouldn't work, then I needed to outlast her. Defense. Counterplay.

I raised my arms, and my cursed chains reformed, weaving together into a thick shield in front of me. No matter what she threw at me, I'd use my defenses to stall her out. She had to tire eventually.

Evelina tilted her head, amusement dancing across her face. "Is that all?"

She lifted her hand, her fingers tracing intricate shapes through the air.

"Grief's Embrace."

The ground beneath me darkened, an inky abyss stretching outward. From within it, twisted, skeletal hands erupted, clawing toward me. The moment they touched my cursed chains, they didn't break them—no, they corroded them. The metal rusted in seconds, turning brittle before snapping like twigs.

Panic flashed in my chest. I jumped back, but the skeletal hands followed, grasping at my ankles.

A shrill laugh left Evelina's lips. "You're so focused on what you can block, you never consider what slips through the cracks."

I barely twisted out of the way in time, my feet scrambling against the ground as I stumbled back. My breath came in ragged pants. I was losing, badly.

No. I clenched my fists, my cursed magic flaring. I refused to let this end like this. I still had one more option.

I forced myself to breathe steadily. If none of my previous strategies worked, then I had to do something completely unpredictable.

A reckless, all-or-nothing move.

I let my cursed energy surge, fueling it with my frustration—no, my anger at myself. My helplessness. The humiliation burning under my skin.

I dashed in, feinting another attack, but this time—at the last second—I dropped low, using my chains to pull myself beneath her guard. My hand shot forward, Withering Touch active, aiming straight for her exposed stomach.

Her eyes widened slightly.

For a split second, I thought I had her.

But then—

"Nullify."

A single word.

My entire body locked up.

A crushing force slammed down on my soul, cutting off my curse energy in an instant. It was as if my own magic had been yanked from me, leaving me completely exposed.

I couldn't move. My arms refused to lift. My legs felt like lead.

Evelina smirked, pressing a single finger against my forehead. "Checkmate."

With a flick, she sent me sprawling back onto the floor.

I groaned, lying there, staring at the blood moon above. My body ached. My pride stung worse.

Fourth strategy: failed.

But—

I exhaled slowly, my mind already replaying the battle. Each failure. Every mistake.

Evelina didn't just counter my attacks—she exploited the flaws in my thinking.

I had been too predictable. I relied on my chains, and she severed them. I tried direct attacks, and she shut them down before I could even land a hit.

She wasn't just stronger. She was efficient—using only the exact amount of effort needed to dismantle me.

I clenched my fists. I can't beat her with strength. Not yet.

But she had given me something far more valuable.

Information.

I swallowed the frustration in my throat and pushed myself up. My legs wobbled, but I stayed standing.

Evelina arched a brow. "Still have fight left?"

I met her gaze, determination settling in my chest.

I had lost. Badly.

But the next time I attacked...

I wouldn't make the same mistakes again.

My cursed chains weren't enough on their own. But what if I stopped treating them as just weapons and started treating them as something more?

I let out a slow breath, reaching deep into my emotions—the ones that fueled my magic. The frustration of failure. The burning desire to prove myself. The cold, gnawing fear of being weak.

I let them simmer beneath my skin. And then, I moved.

Evelina's smile widened as I lunged forward, my chains erupting from my back.

"Ah, again? Celia, darling, if you insist on repeating the same attack, I'll have to start questioning your intelligence."

My chains lashed toward her, aiming for her blind spots. She sighed, stepping aside with effortless grace, already raising her hand to sever them again—

And then she hesitated.

Just for a fraction of a second.

There.

My cursed chains had changed.

The moment they left my body, I had coated them with Withering Touch. Weakening them—yes—but also inflicting a withering effect that spread along their length. The moment Evelina tried to cut them, the decay latched onto her magic, withering the force she used against me.

It wasn't enough to stop her.

But it was enough to delay her.

And that delay was all I needed.

I twisted midair, using my own chains as leverage to launch myself past her defense. Her eyes widened as I closed the gap, my hand already reaching for her—

She dodged. Just barely. But even as she avoided my strike, she couldn't stop the decay from licking at the edges of her cursed aura.

A single, delicate chuckle escaped her lips.

"Oh, how interesting."

I didn't let her recover. I pressed forward, my chains now a living, decaying force that twisted unpredictably. Each strike didn't aim to restrain her but to disrupt her rhythm, forcing her to react rather than control the pace of the fight.

Her movements grew sharper, less casual.

I was getting to her.

I could feel it.

And for the first time—Evelina was on the back foot.



She sidestepped, flicking her wrist to dispel my chains again—only for the decay to eat at her magic before it could fully sever them. She clicked her tongue, amusement flickering in her expression as I forced her to dodge rather than counter.

This time, I wasn't just reacting to her.

I was controlling the flow.

I darted forward again, exploiting the slight delay my withering effect gave me. My footwork sharpened, each movement deliberate. My chains lashed from every angle, warping unpredictably, forcing her to waste effort dodging.

She was faster. She was stronger. But she was no longer in control.

For the first time, it felt like—

I could actually win.

And that's when I saw it.

That moment. That tiny, flickering moment where she lost her casual grace—where my next move could actually hit her.

I lunged.

My chains surged forward. I reached out with Withering Touch, ready to finally land a decisive blow—

But then—

Her smile returned.

And the world shifted.

Before I could react, the air around her warped with an overwhelming presence—one that swallowed my magic whole.

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

No way...

She had been holding back.

"That was adorable, Celia," Evelina purred, her tone smooth yet laced with something far deadlier. "But let's be serious now, shall we?"

The next second, she vanished.

I barely had time to register before pain exploded in my gut—a precise, devastating strike to my stomach that sent me flying. I barely managed to flip midair, gasping for breath as I landed on unsteady feet.

She wasn't just using magic now.

She was using cursed combat.

And I was about to learn why she was called the Queen of Curses.

My feet barely touched the ground before Evelina was on me again.

"Tremble, O fragile bones—become naught but dust."

Her voice rang out like a whispering curse, sinking into the air like ink spilling into water. Before I could even react, black tendrils of cursed magic wrapped around her limbs—melding into her movements like an extension of her own body.

She blurred.

No—faster than that.

I twisted, trying to react, but she was already there.

A fist, coated in decaying ash, slammed into my ribs.

I barely had time to feel the pain before another blow followed—a knee to my side, a palm strike to my chest, a sweeping kick that shattered my balance.

She wasn't just hitting me.

She was destroying me.

I couldn't keep up.

My body screamed as I tried to move, but she was relentless. Every time I dodged, she was already attacking from another angle. And every strike—every cursed-infused attack—ate away at my magic, my stamina, my strength.

"Winds of the forgotten, take root in my steps—lighten, sharpen, erase."

A pulse of magic.

And suddenly, her movements became untraceable.

She stepped, and the wind itself carried her forward—her form flickering like a mirage. I lashed out with my chains, trying to predict where she'd go next—

But I missed.

Completely.

Damn it.

I barely caught sight of her smirk before a boot crashed into my shoulder. The force sent me skidding across the ground, my knees scraping against the stone as I barely caught myself.

My breath hitched.

I was losing.

Fast.

Evelina sighed, rolling her shoulders. "Oh, Celia, you looked so confident just a moment ago. What happened?"

I gritted my teeth, forcing my body to stand.

"Fire, insatiable and untamed, burn within—consume, rage, spread."

Her hands ignited in blackened flames. Not normal fire—cursed fire. The kind that didn't just burn flesh—it burned magic itself.

My heart pounded.

She's layering magic effects. Using different cursed enhancements for speed, power, destruction—all at once.

I had never fought someone who could do this.

I can't counter it. I can't—

No.

I sucked in a breath, shaking the panic away. Think, Celia.

I wasn't out yet.

I had adapted once.

I could adapt again.

I clenched my fists, pushing past the fear.

She wanted to overwhelm me? Fine.

Then I'd make sure she never saw what was coming next.

Pain shot through my ribs as Evelina's fist drove into my side.

I stumbled back, barely catching my footing before another kick crashed into my thigh, sending me reeling. My body screamed at me to stop, but I forced myself to keep moving. If I stopped, I'd lose. If I hesitated, she'd end it.

I ducked under a swipe of her cursed flame-coated hand, but even the air around it burned against my skin. She's layering multiple curses at once.

I gritted my teeth, my mind racing. How is she fighting?

She wasn't just hitting harder or moving faster. She was shifting between different enhancements—seamlessly.

Her footwork had become unnaturally light after her wind enhancement, her strikes gaining a frightening level of precision. She wasn't just throwing punches—she was placing them in the exact weak spots I failed to defend.

Then there was the cursed fire.

"Fire, insatiable and untamed, burn within—consume, rage, spread."

It wasn't just an attack. The curse was designed to weaken. Every hit burned away at my magic, not just my body.

And the worst part?

She wasn't fighting with raw aggression. She was toying with me.

I could feel the emotion fueling her magic—entertainment. Excitement. A twisted thrill.

She enjoyed this.

But beneath that, there was something deeper. Something darker.

Boredom.

She was used to winning. She wasn't fighting with rage or hatred—she was just... having fun.

That made it even worse. Because if she got serious, I wouldn't stand a chance.

I have to change this fight before she gets bored of holding back.

I twisted my body, barely dodging another strike, my mind snapping to another observation.

Weaknesses—If Any

She was relying on magic for every action. It made her movements unpredictable, but at the same time, it gave me something to track.

She always activated an incantation before enhancing herself. Even if it was fast, it was still a moment of delay.

A moment I could use.

My breath came out ragged as I barely rolled away from another attack, forcing a smile onto my lips.

Time to stall.

I straightened up, forcing myself to stand with a casual air despite the pain ripping through my body. I cracked my neck, letting my exhaustion show just enough to bait her curiosity.

"Wow, Evelina, you really love bullying your students, huh?" I huffed, shaking out my arms.

Evelina arched a brow, her cursed flames flickering. "Oh? Giving up already?"

"No, no, I just realized something," I grinned, tilting my head. "You keep saying all these dramatic incantations before fighting, but like... what if you just threw hands normally? You scared you'll lose if you don't?"

Her lips curled into a smile. "My, my, Celia, trying to get inside my head? That's adorable."

Good. She's playing along.

I forced a casual shrug. "Hey, I'm just saying, all this magic enhancement makes it look like you can't fight on your own. Kinda suspicious."

Evelina chuckled, rolling her shoulders. "You're cute, Celia. But don't think I don't see what you're doing."

My heart thudded.

She saw through it.

But—

She didn't attack.

That's all I needed.

I took a slow breath, feeling my pulse slow. The moment of rest had given me time to think.

Evelina was relentless, but I had already adjusted to that.

She was using pure, calculated offense, mixing elements and curses with such seamless efficiency that she had no need for defense. Her attacks weren't just powerful—they were tailored to break me down, physically and mentally.

Yet, even in the storm of her assault, I felt something else creeping in.

Instinct.

My body had already begun reacting on its own, responding not just to logic, but to an unconscious understanding of her rhythm, her flow.

I wasn't just processing her attacks.

I was feeling them.

Then blend it. Logic and instinct. Think, but don't overthink.

My mind raced through the possibilities.

If I couldn't match her raw speed, I had to change how I delivered my attacks.

Chains.

I had been using them wrong.

Up until now, I summoned them as defensive tools, reactionary—too slow, too predictable.

But what if I made them an extension of my body?

Not shields.

Limbs.

I could use them to feint, to strike, to disrupt her footing—force her to move how I wanted.

I flexed my fingers, feeling the familiar weight of my magic.

This will work.

I didn't hesitate.

Flick.

A chain lashed out from my wrist, whipping toward Evelina's face.

She tilted her head, dodging effortlessly—

But I had already sent another from my other hand.

This time, she had to shift her footing.

A reaction. A small one.

But I caught it.

And I pressed forward.

Flick. Chain. Flick. Chain. Step.

The weight of the chains felt natural, like they had always belonged to me.

Every movement I made sent them snapping forward, each strike flowing into the next.

Evelina dodged, weaved, evaded—

But her flow had changed.

She wasn't moving as effortlessly.

She was adjusting to me.

I felt it then.

A shift inside me.

This wasn't just a new tactic.

This was mine.

A way of fighting that I could push further, refine, master.

The more I moved, the more it felt right.

My mind sharpened, instincts burning bright as I entered something deeper—a state of complete focus.

Every breath, every step, every flick of my wrist—it was all one, a single motion in the dance of battle.

I grinned.

Then I laughed.

A wild, reckless thrill surged through me, the raw excitement of finally finding my own edge, my own style.

My heart pounded, adrenaline flooding through me, and without thinking—

I threw my head back and screamed—

"THIS IS SO FUN!!!"

While Celia was constantly adapting to her attacks and movements, the world continued to move in its time. This brings forward the preceding fight between The Sword Saints of God-Speed and Technique.

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

Two hours. That's how long it had been since I last spoke to Sylvia and Alina. Time spent preparing, making sure everything was set for this ridiculous little "event" they called a battle.

Honestly, Sylvia is a genius for this. She's running a damn circus, and I'm the star attraction. The arena's packed, and people are shelling out gold like it's nothing. But hey, if that's what it takes to get Alina to lend us a hand against the swarm, then I'm all in.

The thing is, Alina... She's a tough nut to crack. Cold, detached, and she only moves when there's something in it for her. I get it, though. People like her don't stay warm for



long. Life's been nothing but pain for her—abandonment, betrayal, rejection. It breaks you. You either let it destroy you, or you harden up and make sure no one can get close enough to do it again.

I walked through Sylvaris, taking in the sights. The place was a marvel, honestly. Shops lined the streets, their bright banners flapping in the wind. The noise of the crowds echoed, voices shouting deals, calling out to each other. Technology everywhere. Steam-powered carts rolled by, and the air smelled faintly of metal and oil. Some fancy place for a fight, huh?

I passed a boy standing in front of a shop, his eyes wide with uncertainty. His hands fidgeted, but he wouldn't go inside. He just stared at the door. Like the world itself was too big for him to enter.

"Hey, kid." I said, crossing the street without breaking my stride. "You waiting for the shopkeeper to come to you?"

He flinched, startled by my sudden approach.

"Go in, man. Don't let whatever's in there scare you," I said, leaning down and tapping him on the shoulder.

The kid looked up at me, unsure. "But... what if I mess it up?"

I grinned. "Then you mess it up. Big deal. Get back up and do it again. Life's one big game of trial and error."

He swallowed, but then his lips twitched upward. "You really think I can do it?"

I ruffled his hair, "Hell yeah. Now go for it."

He took a deep breath, looked at the door one last time, and stepped inside. I watched him, my eyes narrowing as a weird feeling crept in. A part of me almost wished I could've had someone like me back when I was his age.

I shook my head. Don't go getting sentimental, Levi.

My mind shifted to darker times. To the grotesque swarm a few years ago. The faces of Emma and the others... The memory of that day when I ran. When I turned my back and ran like a coward, leaving my village and family to die over fear.

That's why I don't hesitate anymore. That's why I stand my ground and charge headfirst into battle. No running. Not again.

I can't be that person. I won't let fear control me. Not anymore.

The streets blurred as I walked, the noise around me fading as my thoughts twisted back to the swarm.

The stakes are higher now. Levinton's at risk. The swarm is coming. I can't fail.

I clenched my fist. I'll beat Alina. Get Requiem on our side. I'll do whatever it takes.

A grin tugged at my lips as I saw the entrance to the arena in the distance. This... This was going to be fun. And I don't care how serious it gets, I'm excited for it.

I cheered out loud as I walked toward the entrance. "WOO! LET'S GO!" The sound echoed in the air, and a few people nearby turned to stare.

Some shook their heads, probably thinking I was a lunatic.

I noticed the looks and, for the first time today, I felt a little... shy?

"Ugh, okay, okay. Shut up, Levi. Stop being weird," I muttered, putting my hands in my pockets and walking a little faster to avoid any more stares.

As I reached the arena, the crowds were already gathered, their voices loud and eager, waiting for the action. The heat of the place was almost tangible, the air thick with anticipation. I spotted a vendor selling tickets, a man sitting at a small booth just outside the entrance.

I walked up to him, casually leaning against the booth.

"How many tickets sold?" I asked, a smirk forming.

"Over 300," the man said, glancing at me. "Five gold each. Big crowd for the battle."

"Five gold? That's a solid chunk of change," I chuckled. " Sylvia made a pretty penny off of me."

I did the math quickly in my head. 300 tickets. Five gold each. That's 1500 gold.

"Damn, she's using me like a fighting tool and raking in the profits. I should charge her a fee for this kind of treatment," I laughed, shaking my head.

The crowd gathered in the stands roared as I made my way inside, the buzz of excitement making me feel like a gladiator in the arena.

I passed through the narrow hallway that led to the guarded room where the qualifiers were waiting. The stone walls were cold, and the dim lighting made everything feel more tense. At the end of the hall, I could already see her.

Alina.

She stood, her back straight, arms crossed. No smile. No expression. Just... waiting.

"Nice to see you didn't bail, Alina," I said, strolling into the room with my usual cocky grin. "You've been standing there a while. Were you hoping I'd chicken out or something?"

She didn't flinch, didn't even acknowledge my presence right away. But I could see the subtle tension in her shoulders. She was ready.

And so was I.

I cracked my knuckles, feeling the rush of adrenaline spike through me. This wasn't just a fight. This was a chance to prove that I could win—no hesitation, no fear. Not ever again.

"Let's make this a good one, Alina," I said, voice lowering just a bit, the playful tone fading for a moment. "For our titles as Sword Saints."

Then I let out a breath, feeling the excitement build. It was time to get this show on the road.

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

I swung, and my chains moved like whips, slashing through the air in synchronized precision. My hands flicked, and the cursed chains danced, extensions of my limbs, striking, retracting, blocking. I was fighting differently now—blending my movement with my weapons instead of treating them as separate tools.

And it was working.

Evelina grinned, eyes shining with delight as she weaved between the strikes. Her footwork was perfect, her dodges sharp, but I could feel it—this time, I wasn't just defending. I was keeping up.

"Oh? Getting creative now, little Celia?" Evelina purred mid-dodge, her body twisting effortlessly between the lashes of my chains. "I like it. Makes you... entertaining."

I smirked, my breath heavy, but my heart pumped with exhilaration. "And here I thought you were getting bored." I twisted, one chain coiling around my arm as I slammed my elbow forward, forcing her to evade. "Guess I'm more fun than you expected."

Her laugh was melodic, amused. "Oh, you have no idea, darling."

Then her hand flicked up.

"Curse Art: Infernal Veil."

The air sizzled, and in an instant, a wave of black fire surged toward me. I snapped my chains forward, clashing against the cursed flames, feeling the heat lick at my skin. But I was already moving—sidestepping, redirecting, slipping through the narrowest openings before I could be consumed.

She didn't let up.

"Curse Art: Shattered Frost."

A pulse of icy mist exploded from her palm, shards of black ice streaking toward me like jagged knives.

I crouched, kicking off the ground to flip backward. My chains struck the ice mid-air, shattering the projectiles before they reached me. The temperature around us dropped sharply, my breath visible in the cold air.

"That all you got?" I taunted, landing smoothly, chains snapping back to my arms.

Evelina's lips curled, predatory and pleased. "Oh, sweet girl, I'm just getting started."

She dashed forward, faster than before, her movements sharper. Her hands crackled with shifting energy, her next spell already forming.

"Curse Art: Blood Conviction."

A deep crimson glow erupted around her fists, seeping into her skin like ink.

My instincts screamed at me to move. I barely had time to cross my chains in front of me before her fist slammed against them. The impact rattled through my bones, sending a shockwave through my arms. My feet slid back. She wasn't just enhancing herself—she was multiplying her strength, her blows heavier, faster.

I exhaled sharply, adjusting my footing. Adapt. Don't panic.

She followed up, relentless. Left hook—dodge. Spinning kick—I barely raised my chains in time to deflect, but the force sent me skidding.

Evelina clicked her tongue. "You're blocking too much, dear."

I gritted my teeth. She was right. I needed to find an opening.

But then something shifted.

I wasn't just reacting anymore. My body was moving on instinct—blending my chains into my movements, flowing seamlessly between offense and defense.

She struck. I twisted. My chains lashed. She evaded. We moved in perfect sync, like a dance, attacks and counters blurring together.

Faster. Stronger.

This was it.

This was fun.

I laughed, breathless but exhilarated. "This—this is amazing!"

Evelina's eyes gleamed. "Then show me more, Celia."

And I did.

I feinted left, baiting her into dodging. The second she moved, I snapped my wrist, sending a chain whipping toward her blind spot.

It struck.

Evelina's eyes widened as my chain slammed against her side, knocking her back.

For the first time—she stumbled.

I grinned.

"Got you."

Evelina's expression changed.

The playful amusement that had danced in her violet eyes moments ago faded, replaced by something colder—something serious.

I saw it. I felt it.

And yet, I grinned.

She was done playing. And I was ready.

"Let's end it, then," she said, her voice smooth, yet final.

Then she raised her hands.

A whisper—low, chilling, laced with malice—slithered through the air.

"Nihil tenebris devoret. Animam involvat abyssus. Damnatio aeternum."

The moment the words left her lips, the entire battlefield trembled.

I barely had time to react before the world itself seemed to darken. Shadows pooled around her feet, twisting, contorting, expanding into an abyss that swallowed all light. A cursed aura so dense, so vile, suffocated the air, wrapping around me like invisible chains. My lungs seized. My skin prickled.

And then I felt it.

My cursed energy—vanishing.

Gone.

My eyes widened. My heart pounded.

No, this wasn't just suppression. This was erasure.

Her malice wasn't just overwhelming my cursed magic—it was devouring it.

This is impossible.

My fingers twitched, trying to summon my chains again, but they barely flickered before disintegrating into nothing.

And then I saw it.

Curse Art: Sepulchrum Infernum.

A crack in space itself ripped open behind Evelina. From its depths, a void of writhing black tendrils emerged—each one pulsing, shifting, whispering in voices I couldn't understand. The ground beneath me rotted, black veins crawling outward like an infection. The sky above fractured, as if reality itself was protesting the existence of this magic.

Then the tendrils moved.

They reached for me, dragging through the air with a slow, sickening elegance, each one oozing with a presence beyond mere death—this was suffering incarnate.

I forced my body to move. I willed my chains to defend.

They shattered.

I gasped as the pieces of my own magic scattered into the void.

There was no blocking this. No escaping this.

I was going to die.

Evelina's power was absolute—she lived up to the title of Queen of Curses for a reason.

The strongest cursed magic wielder in history.

My breath hitched. My legs locked. My body refused to move.

I watched, helpless, as the cursed tendrils surged toward me—

And then—

A sharp inhale.

My eyes snapped open.

The world had changed. No battlefield. No Evelina.

Just the dim glow of Levi's home. The soft fabric of the couch beneath me. The quiet hum of the world outside.

I was still here.

I gasped, my chest rising and falling rapidly as I shot my gaze around the room, trying to ground myself.

Emma was gone. She must've left without waking me.

Slowly, I looked down at my hands, then ran my fingers over my arms, my legs—nothing. No wounds. No pain. No cursed scars.

I swallowed hard.

"If that had been real..." I muttered under my breath.

I clenched my fists.

I would have died.

I exhaled, forcing my breathing to steady.

And then, my eyes landed on the front door.

This was it.

I had found it—my style.

Using my chains as extensions of my body, blending them into my movements, shaping my cursed magic to flow with them.

All that remained... was learning. Growing. Perfecting.

My gaze shifted slightly, drawn to the bookshelf beside me.

The basics of cursed magic. I had placed it there a few days ago, it was time to master that book.

I reached out, fingers brushing the spine of the book.

It was time.

My vow rang in my mind.

I'll get stronger.

I'll save Kaiser from those grotesques.

I exhaled, pushing off the couch and rising to my feet.

Determination surged through me.

This is only the beginning.

I was ready.

Celia reached out and opened the book, her eyes quickly scanning the spells and cursed magic within. There was so much more to learn, so much more that could make her stronger. This was just the beginning of her journey.

Meanwhile, far from Celia's growth, Levi and Alina's fight was about to begin—the deciding battle that would determine the future of Levinton.

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

Five minutes. That's all we had left before the arena doors opened. I could already hear the roar of the crowd, their cheers and chants reverberating through the thick stone walls. The energy was electric, and I could practically feel the anticipation buzzing in the air.



Sylvaris wasn't the most charming town, but damn, they sure knew how to put on a show. The people gathered here were from all walks of life—nobles, merchants, adventurers, guild members—and they were all here for one thing: to see Alina and me go at it.

The crowd was packed, every seat taken. Some people were leaning forward, eyes wide, others laughing and chatting, but I could spot the Requiem Guild members scattered across the stands, their eyes sharp and observant.

They weren't here for entertainment. They were here to see if Alina could win. As if they didn't know how this would go.

I glanced at the entrance, waiting for the signal. The tension built in me, but I wasn't nervous. Not even close. This was just another day, another fight, another chance to show how far above everyone else I was.

Then I turned to her. Alina stood against the wall of the guard room, her arms crossed, her icy stare fixed on the empty floor ahead. If she was nervous, she didn't show it. Of course not.

She didn't show anything. She was like a machine, all logic and no heart. But that was the thing with people like her. Cold, calculating, ruthless... She only cared about the outcome.

What does she gain from this fight?

I walked over, stretching my neck and cracking my knuckles a bit more with a grin. "Hey, Alina." I leaned against the wall beside her, studying her. "You feeling nervous yet? You know, this is my arena, right? I'm kind of the main event here."

She didn't look at me. Didn't even blink.

"I'm not the one who's going to be on the receiving end of the crowd's disappointment," she said flatly, her voice colder than the room. "It's you they'll turn to after you fail."

I chuckled, folding my arms over my chest, matching her stance. "Oh, please. If I fail, they'll be too busy bowing down to my greatness to care. You, on the other hand... If you lose, well, what's left for you? Another failure to add to the pile?" I leaned in just a little, my voice lowering with a teasing edge.

"You're a tough one, I'll give you that. But even tough ones get broken, you know."

She turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting mine with the kind of coldness that made the air feel a few degrees cooler. "I don't break," she said, her voice devoid of even the faintest hint of emotion. "I eliminate the weakness. Adaptation is simply a matter of survival. And I will survive. You won't."

I raised an eyebrow, amused. "Adapt? Sure, that's one way to look at it. I'm more of the 'crush everything in my way' kind of guy. But hey, we'll see which strategy wins today, won't we?"

She didn't respond. She didn't need to. Her eyes already told me everything. She was calculating, assessing the situation, figuring out what to do if things didn't go her way.

That's how she worked—always five steps ahead, never rushing, always in control.

I grinned wider, stretching my arms out a little. "I'm kind of curious though. How does someone like you feel before a fight like this? I mean, you must have some feelings deep down, right? Or is that all just a lie you tell yourself?"

Her eyes flicked to mine for a moment, and I swear I saw something flicker there—something... unsettling. "Feelings are irrelevant," she said, her tone as detached as ever. "Emotions don't win battles. Only logic and power do. And I have both."

I shrugged. "Fair enough. Logic and power, huh? But sometimes, you've got to throw a little chaos into the mix to really stir things up. It's what I do best."

She didn't react, just nodded slightly, as if she was already preparing for the inevitable. She had her plan, and she wasn't going to let anyone distract her from it. But me? I loved the chaos. I thrived in it.

I stood up straight and brushed a hand through my hair. "Well, whatever. Let's get this over with, Alina. The crowd's waiting for me to win. And you? You're just the next stepping stone." I winked at her. "Don't worry. I won't be too hard on you."

Alina's lips barely twitched, a sharp, cold smile forming at the corner of her mouth. "I don't need your pity. I'll take everything you give me and crush you under it."

I couldn't help but laugh. "That's the spirit! I'd expect nothing less."

The energy in the room was palpable, the crowd outside buzzing like a swarm of angry bees, eager for the first strike. I couldn't help but let out a little chuckle, though—this was going to be fun.

"So, tell me, Alina," I said, resting my hand on the hilt of my sword, the ever-present smirk on my face. "What's your strategy? You're obviously not just relying on that icy attitude to win, right?"

She didn't flinch. Her voice came out like ice slicing through the air. "I don't need a strategy. I just need to be better than you."

"Ah," I said, nodding with mock respect. "I see. No plans, no tricks. Just you, alone, with your gifts. What if you're wrong, though? What if I'm better than you? What if you don't have what it takes to win?"

Alina's violet eyes flashed with a hint of something sharper than before, but she didn't break. "Then I'll break you. It's as simple as that."

I couldn't help but laugh again. "Good answer. Very straightforward."

Then, something shifted in the air, a strange tension forming between us. I tilted my head, curious about something that had been bugging me ever since I got here.

"By the way, I've gotta ask," I said, voice dropping slightly. "Who are you fighting for, Alina? Who's the one that's got you so dedicated? Sylvia told me a little, but I'm sure there's more to it."

She didn't respond at first, her eyes narrowing as if she was calculating something, thinking deeply. For a moment, I thought she wouldn't answer. But then, after a long, suffocating silence, she spoke.

"How much did Sylvia tell you?" Her tone was cold, almost questioning, but not quite. More like... testing.

I nodded. "She did, just a little."

Alina's expression softened just the slightest bit, but the coldness still lingered. "Everything I've done... everything I've become, has been because of him," she said quietly.

"The one who saved me. He gave me the strength, the willpower to continue. Without him, I wouldn't be standing here." Her voice was steady, but there was something unspoken, something buried deep beneath her words.

I tilted my head. "Him?" I asked. "Can I know a little about him? What makes him so special?"

She paused, her eyes hardening as she looked away for a moment. "He was just a few years older than me. It happened four years ago, when I was eleven."

Her tone turned colder, more distant. "I was nothing back then—alone, abandoned. He found me, saved me from dying in the forest. He cared for me when others didn't. He didn't pity me. He taught me how to survive, how to fight. Everything I have now, everything I've done... it's because of him."

She clenched her fists, her eyes narrowing. "I owe him everything. And I'll never forget that."

My mind froze for a moment. Eleven? That was... that was way too young to have been through something like that. I blinked a few times, processing her words.

Wait, eleven? That meant... I stared at her for a second, feeling a weird mix of confusion and surprise. I mean, she looked young—really young—but I didn't realize just how young she was.

Holy crap. She's fifteen?

I mentally recoiled. Here I was, an eighteen-year-old fighting a fifteen-year-old girl who could kill me. It felt... weird. Way too weird.

I had to admit it to myself: she wasn't just some kid. She was powerful, calculating, and she wasn't going to hold back.

She must've caught the look on my face because she smirked, the cold gleam in her eyes sharpening even further. "I may be the youngest Sword Saint, but I'm still blessed with the gift of Technique." Her voice dropped to that same icy tone, like a blade being drawn from its sheath.

"And I will be the one to win, Levi."

I snapped back to reality, my grin returning. "Sure you will. But in case you haven't noticed, I'm kind of unbeatable."

I cracked my neck, my confidence back in full force. "You're a great fighter, Alina. No doubt. But you're fighting me now. And I'm the strongest. I've never lost a fight, and I'm not about to start with you."

Alina's eyes locked onto mine, colder than I had ever felt before. **"Your strength is meaningless,"** she said, her voice like ice. **"I don't fight for titles, Levi. I fight to win. And I will crush whatever delusions you have about being the strongest. You're just another obstacle in my path."**

I grinned, feeling that familiar thrill surge through me. **"Crush my delusions? Cute."** I stretched, not bothered in the slightest. "But here's the thing, Alina: You think you can beat me, but you're not facing some random obstacle. **You're facing the guy who makes the impossible look easy.** So, try all you want. But when it's over, you'll know exactly who the strongest is."

I gave her a wink, completely unfazed. "Spoiler alert: It's me."

Alina's gaze remained icy, her voice cold as steel. **"You should consider yourself lucky, Levi,"** she said, her words sharp like a blade. **"In your life, you've only fought those weaker than you. But now, you face someone who's already beyond what**

**you've ever encountered. If I were your age, this fight would be over before you even realized it."**

She took a step forward, her eyes narrowing. "But for now, you'll get to experience what true power feels like. **And when I crush you, you'll understand exactly how far out of my league you really are."**

I couldn't help but laugh, the sound echoing through the tension in the air. "Say whatever you want, Alina," I said, my grin wide and carefree. **"Talk all the big talk you need, but the fact remains—you're not getting past me."**

I cracked my knuckles, my confidence radiating like a force. "So go ahead. Build your little fantasy. But when the dust settles, I'll be the one standing. I'll be the one holding victory."

My smile turned even sharper. **"And trust me, I will win."**

Alina didn't say a word after that. Her lips barely moved, but I could see it in her eyes—the cold confidence, the unshakable belief that this wasn't going to be one-sided. She wasn't just standing there; she was calculating, waiting, knowing exactly what she was capable of.

I could feel the weight of her resolve, thick and suffocating, and I realized this wasn't going to be as easy as I'd hoped. She was ready for this fight, just as determined as I was. For a split second, I wondered if she had the strength to back up her words.

But then, that familiar thrill surged again, and I shook it off. This wasn't over yet.

Then, from outside the room, we heard it—the thunderous roar of the crowd, growing louder by the second. The battle was about to begin.

Without another word, we both turned, walking toward our respective entrances. The weight of the crowd's excitement pressed down on my chest like a physical force, and I grinned, feeling the adrenaline surge through me. This was what I lived for—the thrill, the heat of battle.

As I stepped into the arena, I glanced around at the massive crowd, their cheers filling the air. My heart pounded. It didn't matter that I had to fight someone as dangerous as Alina. This was where I belonged.

And there she was, standing at the opposite end of the arena, fully geared up in her distinctive clothes that were amplified to be like armor. The black and silver plates of her chestplate gleamed in the light, her violet eyes glowing with a cold, almost unnatural light. In her hand, she held her legendary sword, the blade reflecting the sun's rays as if it were alive.

Her stance was perfect—calm, poised, ready to strike at any moment. Her violet eyes never wavered, scanning the arena, calculating her next move.

I couldn't help but admire her sword. It wasn't just any blade—it was a work of art. The hilt was intricately designed, the pommel shaped like a twisted vine. The steel shimmered with a strange aura.

I knew that sword had a history. I'd heard of it—the blade that had once belonged to a fallen king.

I pulled my own sword from its sheath. It wasn't legendary, not like hers, but it was mine, and that was all that mattered. I ran my fingers over the smooth surface of the blade, the familiar weight in my hand steadying my nerves.

"You ready for this?" I muttered under my breath, feeling the rush of excitement surge through me. I was going to win this.

The crowd roared again, the countdown starting.

Ten... nine... eight...

I looked across the arena at Alina one last time, and she looked back at me, her expression unreadable.

Three... two... one...

The word "GO!" rang out, and in an instant, both of us charged forward, the ground trembling beneath our feet as we closed the distance between us, ready to clash in a battle that would decide everything.

**And with that, the world seemed to stop.**

## **Chapter 44 - God-Speed Vs Technique**

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

The air was thick with tension. The crowd roared, their cheers merging into a chaotic chorus of excitement, but I only focused on one thing—winning.

Alina stood across from me, perfectly calm, her stance effortless. Not a bead of sweat. Not a single doubt in her eyes. She wasn't scared. Good.

I grinned. "Hope you're ready, Alina. I'd hate for this to end too quickly."

She exhaled smoothly, raising her sword. "You talk too much."

Fine. I'll let my speed do the talking.

I vanished.

God-Speed ignited in my body, lightning surging through my veins as I propelled forward. The world blurred. One step. Two steps. Three. I was already in her face, sword flashing forward in an instant—

Clang!

A shockwave burst out as our blades collided, the sheer force shaking the arena. The crowd flinched. Some gasped. Others screamed in awe.

Her grip didn't waver. Her movements? Effortless.

Tch.

I didn't hesitate. Speed kills. My body became a blur, attacking from every possible angle—left, right, above, behind. No openings. No breaks. I was everywhere.

But she—she just spun.

Water shimmered over her blade, a fluid acceleration buff, her sword sweeping in a flawless 360-degree defense. My attacks met an unbreakable wall of counters, her blade predicting each one like she had seen them happen before I even moved.

I skidded back, landing lightly on my feet. "Hah. Not bad."

She barely blinked. "Not good enough."

Oh?

I smirked, tightening my grip on my sword. "Guess I should take this more seriously then."

Shadows curled around me. My blade darkened, swallowing the light itself. A void-like mist pulsed from it, signaling the activation of my Shadow Boost.

Alina's gaze sharpened.

I stepped forward—then I was gone.

For three seconds, I didn't exist. No sound. No presence. Nothing.

Then—

Slash.

I reappeared behind her, blade slashing down.

Alina twisted, dodging at the last second, but my attack still grazed her side, cutting through her sleeve. A shallow cut bloomed on her arm.

The first hit—mine.

I flipped back, landing with a cocky grin. "Looks like the strongest Sword Saint isn't just self-proclaimed, huh?"

Alina ignored the wound, adjusting her grip on her sword. Instead of looking frustrated, she simply exhaled.

Then, she whispered:

"Heavenly Stance: Flowing Retribution."

Shit.

Water surged.

Her blade blurred, an elemental wave bursting from it as she lunged—faster than before.

I dashed to the side—too late.

Slash!

Cold. My ribs screamed as her sword cut through my coat, a sharp sting following as the water-infused strike dug in before I could fully escape.

I staggered back, blinking.

Then—I laughed.

Blood dripped, but I didn't care.

"Now that's more like it." I flicked my sword, adrenaline pumping. "You might actually make this fun."

Alina sighed, rolling her shoulder. "You're enjoying this too much."

"Damn right I am."



This fight? Far from over.

I wiped the blood from my ribs, my grin never fading. My wound? Superficial. My excitement? Unstoppable.

"Not bad," I admitted, twirling my sword between my fingers. "For someone who fights like a cold-blooded killer."

Alina didn't react. No smug look. No satisfaction. Just cold, unreadable indifference.

"You adapt quickly," she said flatly. "But you're reckless. You rely on speed to force an outcome. If I remove that advantage, this battle is already over."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Gonna clip my wings?"

"I don't need to. I'll dismantle your movements until you can't use them at all."

Tch. Annoying.

She wasn't bluffing. I could feel it. The way she studied me, how her eyes tracked my footwork—she was building something. A counter. A technique.

I had to disrupt her rhythm.

Fine. Let's see how well she handles chaos.

I vanished again.

One second.

I reappeared at her left, slashing—she blocked.

Two seconds.

I flickered behind, going low for a sweep—her sword tilted, barely parrying in time.

Three seconds.

I materialized in front, lunging for a feint—she didn't react.

Wait—

She ignored my attack?!

Instead, her lips barely moved.

"Heavenly Stance: Absolute Cage."

Shit.

Lightning erupted.

My body screamed in pain as a sudden field of crackling electricity paralyzed the space around her. The moment my foot touched the ground, the charge surged through me.

Tch—!

I forced my muscles to move—too slow.

Alina's sword was already coming down.

Think, Levi.

I wasn't getting out of this clean. She locked my mobility, turned my own advantage into my biggest weakness. She knew I'd appear in close range—so she set a trap.

Smart.

But—

I'm not out yet.

I let the lightning hit me head-on. Instead of pulling back, I pushed forward. If I was going to get hit anyway, I might as well get closer.

Her sword slashed down—

I twisted. The blade sliced into my shoulder instead of my chest.

And now—I was in range.

My turn.

I slammed my palm against the ground.

"Shadow Veil: Devour."

Darkness exploded outward, swallowing us both into pitch-black nothingness.

The crowd disappeared. The arena was gone. Only the two of us remained inside the void of my creation.

I was everywhere.

Alina's breath was calm. Even here—completely blind—she wasn't fazed.

"You think hiding will help you?" she muttered. "Predictable."

"Yeah?" My voice echoed from every direction. "Then tell me where I am."

Silence.

Then—

Her sword moved.

Straight at me.

I barely dodged, flipping away as her blade narrowly cut through my cheek.

How?

She couldn't see. She couldn't sense me. So how did she—?

She exhaled again. Slow. Precise. Calculated.

"You leave disturbances in the air," she murmured. "Even at your speed, your movements cause shifts in pressure, subtle displacements of oxygen. You may be invisible, but you're not intangible."

I gritted my teeth. "You're actually insane."

"I'm efficient."

Cold. Ruthless. Logical.

I love this fight.

Fine. If she could read the air—I'll make it unreadable.

I sprinted in every direction, twisting, spinning, darting at unnatural speeds. I deliberately clashed my sword against the void, disrupting the air currents. A storm of movement, absolute disorder.

Now she had no reference point.

Her stance wavered. Her technique—slightly delayed.

That was my opening.

I appeared behind her.

Sword raised.

"Shadow Execution."

My blade descended—

Her foot shifted.

"Heavenly Stance: Falling Lotus."

Water surged beneath us.

A sudden whirlpool exploded, twisting the entire battlefield, forcing me to lose balance as the floor became a liquid vortex.

I slashed—missed.

She pivoted.

Her sword shot forward.

I barely had time to block before her water-infused strike slammed into my ribs.

I flew.

I skidded back, coughing, pain burning through my side.

The darkness faded. The arena returned.

The crowd? Losing their minds.

I exhaled, shaking out my arms, ignoring the sharp ache in my body.

Alina lowered her blade, unfazed, eyes blank. Unshaken.

"Still alive?" she asked.

I grinned, wiping the blood from my lips. "You wish."

And then—the crowd exploded.

"LEVI, YOU MONSTER! HOW ARE YOU STILL STANDING?!"

"ALINA'S TECHNIQUE IS UNSTOPPABLE! SHE'S READING HIM LIKE A BOOK!"

"FASTEST SWORD SAINT VERSUS THE UNBREAKABLE TECHNIQUE—WHO'S GONNA FALL FIRST?!"

From the noble stands, finely-dressed spectators whispered in awe. "This level of combat... It's beyond anything we've seen in years."

"That's the Sword Saint of Technique?" a younger noblewoman gasped. "She barely moves, yet every strike is perfect!"

"Levi's God-Speed is terrifying! No human should be able to move like that!"

In the lower stands, adventurers and mercenaries gripped the railings, eyes wide.

"If that was me in there, I'd be dead already."

"Levi's style is crazy—he doesn't think, he just acts!"

"No, you idiot! He thinks too fast for normal people to understand! He's adapting in real-time!"

And from the back rows—where the rowdiest, most feral spectators gathered—came the chants.

"LE-VI! LE-VI! LE-VI!"

"A-LI-NA! A-LI-NA! A-LI-NA!"

The entire arena shook with their roars, a storm of voices clashing just like our blades. The energy was chaotic, electric, feverish.

I took a slow step forward, my blade resting casually on my shoulder. A grin tugged at the corner of my lips. My body ached from her last strike, but damn—this was fun.

Alina, ever the cold statue, mirrored my approach. Her blade was steady, unwavering, her eyes locked onto me with that same emotionless stare, like I was just another equation to be solved.

I rolled my shoulders, cracking my neck. "You know, most people would be gasping for air after keeping up with me this long. But you? You're still ice-cold. Kinda makes me wonder if you're even human."

She didn't blink. "I haven't even sweated yet, you're far inferior against me."

I smirked. "You say that, but I can feel it, Alina. That slight shift in your stance, the way your grip tightened just now. You're getting serious." I let my sword drop to my side, my other hand slipping into my pocket. "And that? That tells me I've got you right where I want you."

Alina kept walking, each step calculated, measured. "Your arrogance blinds you. You assume you hold the advantage simply because you are fast. Speed is meaningless when it follows no path."

I chuckled, wiping a small trickle of blood from my lip. "Speed is everything, sweetheart. It's the difference between dodging death and eating dirt."

She finally stopped, tilting her head slightly. "Then why did I hit you?"

Damn. That was a good one.

I exhaled, my grin widening. "Fair point. Guess I'll just have to hit you harder."

Alina lifted her blade slightly, her tone as cold as ever. "You will try. And you will fail."

The crowd's chants grew louder.

We stood there, just a few steps apart, the tension like a drawn bowstring.

Then, in a blink—

We moved.

The second we moved, the world shattered into motion.

I threw everything into my God-Speed. No half-measures. No holding back. Pure, raw acceleration.

"Shadow Veil." My voice barely left my lips before I vanished. The arena blurred into streaks of color. The roar of the crowd stretched into a warped hum, reality itself bending around me as I pushed my body beyond its limits.

One strike per heartbeat? Not enough.

Thirty-two per second? That's more like it.

I surged forward, my blade a streak of black light as I launched the first strike—

But Alina didn't move.

She stood still.

Calm. Unshaken. Her grip on the hilt steady.

Then, her lips parted—

"Titanium Bark. Lightning Flow. Ocean's Embrace. Earthen Core. Tempest Edge."

BOOM.

Power flooded into her blade like a roaring tempest. Wind screamed. Lightning snapped. Water surged. A dozen elements wrapped around her, forming an impenetrable wall of reinforced technique.

And then—she moved.

The instant my sword neared her flesh, her blade snapped into motion.

CLANG!

Blocked.

I shifted—attacking from the left.

CLANG!

Blocked.

I blurred behind her. From above. From below. From every possible angle.

CLANG. CLANG. CLANG.

She blocked them all. Effortlessly.

I gritted my teeth. Faster.

My form flickered like a shadow, my blade raining down in a storm of steel. Cuts that could dice through stone. Slashes that should've ended her by now.

CLANG. CLANG. CLANG.

She deflected all of them.

A fraction of a second passed.

I'd already struck 124 times.

Then 496.

Then 1,000.

Still no hits.

I snarled, pushing faster. My body screamed under the pressure, my muscles burning like fire. But Alina—

Alina was like an impenetrable fortress.

Her eyes never wavered.

Her blade never faltered.

She wasn't just blocking—she was reading me in real time.

Strike. Counter. Strike. Counter. Strike. Counter.

The crowd? Silent.

No cheers. No screams.

Just pure awe.

I could feel it—the weight of her talent, the way she calculated everything to perfection. I was breaking the sound barrier, and she was blocking me like she had all the time in the world.

I refused to slow down.

I refused to be outplayed.

1,248 strikes later—

I skidded backward, panting.

Alina hadn't moved an inch.

Her sword was still raised, smoke rising from its edge, her body completely untouched.

I stared at her, then wiped sweat from my brow, laughing breathlessly.

"That... was insane."

She lowered her sword just slightly, her tone as lifeless as ever.

"You are reckless. But predictable."



I grinned. "Then I'll just have to be more unpredictable."

I exhaled sharply, running a hand through my sweat-drenched hair as I slowly walked toward her. My body was still buzzing from the insane speed I'd just pulled off, but my mind? My mind was sharper than ever.

Alina wasn't just fast. She wasn't just strong.

She was creating counter-techniques in real-time.

That wasn't just raw talent—that was something far more terrifying.

Most fighters train their whole lives to master one style, maybe two if they're lucky. But Alina? She wasn't confined to a single set of techniques. She didn't just have a style—she built them on the spot.

Her gift—Technique.

My eyes flickered to the lingering traces of elemental energy surrounding her.

Lightning, wind, water, earth. All of it was wrapped around her like a perfectly woven web of destruction.

It was unnatural. Impossible.

No mage could use multiple elements at the same time like that. Sure, people could learn multiple elements, but casting more than one at once? That was a whole other level.

Yet she did it effortlessly.

Like it was just breathing to her.

A normal fighter used one power at a time.

She used five.

I grinned.

What an absolute monster.

My feet carried me forward, slow, deliberate.

I could already hear it. That nagging little voice in the back of my head that loved to scream when things got tough.

You can't win this. She's too perfect. She's too strong.

I ignored it. That voice has always been wrong.

Because I always win.

No matter how crazy the fight gets.

No matter how powerful my opponent is.

No matter what.

I win.

It's not arrogance. It's just reality.

I don't lose.

And Alina? She won't be the first.

I smirked, tilting my head as I finally closed the distance between us.

She was standing there like a statue, not even the slightest emotion on her face. No excitement, no frustration, not even satisfaction from blocking every one of my attacks.

Just that empty, blank stare.

Cold. Unfeeling.

I chuckled. "You know, most people would be a little hyped after pulling off something like that." I motioned lazily toward her sword. "One-thousand-two-hundred-forty-eight blocks? That's gotta be a new record."

She didn't respond.

Of course she didn't.

Alina wasn't fighting for thrill. She wasn't fighting for pride. She was fighting for results.

It didn't matter to her if the fight was flashy, if the crowd loved it, if her opponent was worthy.

She was just here to win.

I clicked my tongue. Boring.

My gaze flickered past her for a moment—toward the massive crowd watching from the stands.

And man, were they losing their minds.

"LEVI! ALINA! LEVI! ALINA!"

The entire arena was shaking from the sheer volume of their voices. People were screaming our names, throwing their hands in the air, waving banners and flags with the insignias of their favored Sword Saint.

Some called for me to blitz her. Others yelled for Alina to break me apart.

And some? Some were just shouting in pure exhilaration.

Because no one had ever seen a fight like this before.

The strongest speed demon vs. the most perfect technique.

A battle between two fighters who were built to dismantle each other.

I took a deep breath, letting the energy of the arena sink into my bones.

Yeah.

This is where I belong.

I exhaled. My fingers twitched around my sword hilt, veins pulsing with the raw electricity of anticipation. Faster. I need to be faster.

Alina stood still, her blade resting effortlessly at her side. No wasted movements. No anticipation.

Because she knew.

She knew I was coming.

But it didn't matter.

Because she couldn't stop me.

I bent my knees slightly, shifting my weight forward, my heartbeat syncing with the rhythm of the roaring crowd.

I shot forward— vanishing.

The air cracked like a whip as I entered God-Speed.

Left.

Right.

Above.

Below.

I was everywhere.

32 strikes per second.

And Alina?

She blocked. Every. Single. One.

Her blade moved like it was forged for this exact moment, bending and twisting, intercepting each of my blows before they could connect.

Every impact sent out shockwaves, rattling the bones of the spectators closest to the fight. The very arena trembled under the sheer intensity of our clash.

64 strikes.

128.

256.

And she was still standing.

My attacks came from impossible angles, moving too fast for the human eye to process—yet her sword was already there before my strikes even fully formed.

I could feel it.

Her adaptability.

She wasn't just reacting. She was anticipating.

This wasn't a battle of speed.

This was a battle of perfection.

512 strikes.

1,024.

2,000.

Sweat dripped down my forehead. My arms burned, my muscles screaming in protest as I pushed past my limits. I needed to land a hit.

But she—

She was untouchable.

The 2934th strike came down—

And for the first time in the entire fight, Alina's stance shifted.

A flicker. A breath. A moment.

Her blade, now glowing with an unnatural blue aura, moved in a fluid motion, her stance no longer defensive.

"Hydra's Execution."

I saw it.

But it was too late.

A massive wave of water erupted from her sword, swirling around her in a perfect spiral before collapsing forward in a single, devastating slash.

I barely had time to cross my blade in front of me—

SHHHHRRRKK—

A searing pain exploded across my side as the water-infused strike broke past my guard, slicing through my armor like it was nothing.

The impact sent me skidding backward, my boots tearing into the stone floor. Blood dripped from the fresh wound on my ribs, a thin but deep gash left in Alina's wake.

For the first time in a long time...

I had been hit.

The crowd lost their minds.

"ALINA! ALINA! ALINA!"

Her name shook the entire arena, overpowering every other voice, every other sound.

I gritted my teeth, wiping the blood from my lips with the back of my hand.

And then—

I laughed.

"Damn." My voice was hoarse, but my grin never wavered. "That actually hurt."

Alina took a single step forward, her emotionless gaze piercing through me like I was already irrelevant.

"Your fantasies will soon end, Levi."

Her tone was cold. Absolute.

Like she had already decided my fate.

The crowd erupted again, screaming her name like she was already the victor.

But me?

I just smirked, rolling my shoulders.

Because this fight wasn't over.

I wiped the blood from my lip, the familiar metallic taste only making me grin wider. My body throbbed, but it wasn't enough to dull the excitement.

My adrenaline was climbing, pulling me into that state—the one where focus sharpens and the world blurs, a state of complete flow. The crowd's cheers faded as my senses honed in, ready to rise above the next challenge.

I blinked, and suddenly, she wasn't in front of me anymore. The image before me twisted, and for a split second, the crowd, the arena, and even Alina disappeared into a dark silhouette.

he shape stood tall, commanding—Kaiser.

My throat went dry for a moment, and I paused. The chill running down my spine wasn't from the pain, but from the thought of him. The memory hit me like a freight train, a cold reminder of the only person who had ever made me question my own limits.

I shook it off. Not now.

I glanced at Alina, who was standing across from me, her face as cold and calculating as ever. "Are you there?"

Her gaze didn't change. Her expression didn't shift an inch, but I could see the shift in her stance. She was preparing for something. But before she could respond, I couldn't help myself.

"How did you—?" I let the question linger, but her silence only drew out more curiosity. It was hard to ignore the way she was holding herself now, like she wasn't even trying. There was no rush in her movements—just a calm that contrasted my growing urgency.

"You don't talk much, do you?" I teased, trying to poke at the cracks in her facade.

She remained unmoved, her eyes unwavering.

I stepped forward, my voice dropping slightly. "Come on, I need to know. How did you block my attack?" I raised an eyebrow, adding just a hint of sarcasm. "I thought you were just some cold-hearted strategist, not a monster."

Alina's eyes narrowed—no emotion in them, just cold precision. "Do you always ask questions when you already know the answers, Levi?"

I scoffed, shaking my head, "Hey, I can only imagine what tricks you pulled out of your sleeve. But I'm really curious now. You've caught my attention."

Alina's lips barely moved, her voice as cold and calculated as ever, "I amplified my sword's defense and enhanced my physical capabilities using elemental magic. Water, wind, earth, and nature-based elements. The combination was able to block your strike, and with my counter-technique, I took the advantage."

I leaned back slightly, my smirk still in place, but my mind was racing. "Impossible," I muttered under my breath, but loud enough for her to hear.

Her eyes didn't even flicker. "It's all decisive action."

Her tone was flat, emotionless, but I could feel the weight of her words. She wasn't bragging. She wasn't trying to impress me. She was stating facts—and that, more than anything, sent a shiver through me.

I took a step forward, my feet heavy on the ground, but my mind was far from here. The crowd was still chanting, the energy building for a round two. But I wasn't listening to them anymore. My focus was on Alina.

I tilted my head, sizing her up as I asked the question that had been gnawing at me. "Could you have blocked it... without the magic?"

She blinked. That got her. For just a moment, I saw her composed expression falter—a small shift that let me know I'd touched a nerve. She closed the distance between us, still keeping a careful distance but moving just enough that I could feel her presence growing.

Her voice, when she spoke, was steady but with an edge of hesitation, as if she wasn't quite sure how to answer my question. "No," she said bluntly. "It's practically impossible for anyone to block that many attacks without magical amplification. Not even I could do it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Not even you?"

She nodded, stepping closer still, her eyes locking onto mine. "You're fast, Levi. Faster than anyone else. The only way to keep up is through the elements, applying water for flow, wind for speed, earth for stamina, and nature for reflexes. Without them... no normal human could keep up. Not even A-ranked monsters would survive your combo."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, but there was something else there too—a hint of respect, a begrudging acknowledgment that I had pushed her to her limits. She hadn't given me the satisfaction of showing it, but I could see it in the way she carried herself.

I chuckled darkly, the sound echoing in the arena. "So, you think I'm a monster then?"

Alina's eyes softened for a split second—if you could even call it softening. "Your power is your title, Levi."

"Hmm." I scratched my chin, more amused than anything. "What would you call me then, Alina?"

Her voice was as emotionless as ever. "A Freak of Nature."

I laughed, loud and unrestrained, my voice booming across the arena. I wasn't laughing because I thought I was some unbeatable force.

No, I was laughing because I had to admit—she was right. Her words made sense, and the comparison to Kaiser... it was so close, it was almost painful.

Kaiser—that damn guy—had blocked me once. He had done the impossible.

The sounds of the arena faded into a dull hum as my mind wandered. The crowd, the fight—it all seemed so distant now. My body still ached from the battle with Alina, but it was nothing compared to the kind of fight I had in mind. No, my thoughts were pulled back to a few weeks ago, a time that still lingered in the back of my mind, like a shadow I couldn't shake.

The Silent Executioner. The bastard who had controlled my body.



I remember it so clearly—the feeling of being trapped in my own skin, watching as my hands moved against my will. My body was his to command, and my mind was a mere observer. It was one of the most unsettling experiences I'd ever had. I could see, hear, and feel everything that was happening around me, but I couldn't do a damn thing to stop it.

The worst part of it all—no, the most painful part—was when I was forced to strike Celia. I could see her standing there, her face confused and pleading, but I couldn't control the blade that moved toward her. Every inch of my being screamed to stop, but I was powerless, locked in my own mind.

And then, as I was about to deliver the final blow...

Out of nowhere, the familiar figure appeared. He was there in an instant, moving like a blur. The sheer speed of him—it was impossible to track. He didn't hesitate. He just... blocked it.

Kaiser.

I wasn't surprised by the skill, but by the ease with which he did it. My strikes were fast—hell, inhumanly fast in many ways—but Kaiser? Kaiser didn't just block them. He understood them. He moved with a calm precision that completely threw me off. His movements were smooth, effortless, like he was reading me, anticipating my every move.

I've fought a lot of people in my life. But Kaiser—that guy, he was something else.

I remember how the Silent Executioner, for the first time, showed a crack in his confidence. He felt threatened. I could feel the shift. The pressure built, and I knew the Executioner was desperate. He was pushing my body to its limits, trying to force me to fight at a level I wasn't sure was possible. But it was like fighting in a dream—a nightmare, really. I was a spectator in my own body, a mere passenger in the chaos.

And then, it got even more insane.

Kaiser didn't just block me. He didn't just stand there and take it like some kind of wall. No—he fought back. The next thing I knew, we were going at it—clashing—and my mind couldn't even keep up with the speed of it all.

The most insane part? The guy was using a half-broken sword—and a gauntlet that was cobbled together from who knows what. I'm pretty sure he made it from burning those chains Celia had—like, what the hell? And yet, he was moving faster than anyone else I've seen, adapting to my strikes, creating weapons in the middle of battle, abusing Ronan's Wall of Fire like it was nothing.

The guy was an improviser, and the way he adapted? It was like he wasn't even trying.

But here's the real kicker, the thing that still has me reeling...

I did the same thing I did against Alina—the same God-Speed Shadow boosted attacks, the same relentless circling barrage. But Kaiser... Kaiser blocked every single one. Not just from the front. Not just from the back.

He blocked them from every damn angle—left, right, front, back, and even from above.

It was impossible.

He didn't just block one or two strikes. No, he blocked and exchanged 4000 of them with me. 4000. And the whole time, he was using that broken sword and a makeshift gauntlet like he was playing a game.

It wasn't just skill—it calculated and anticipated.

I've never seen anything like it.

And you know what? I was pissed. I wasn't angry because I couldn't land a hit on him—I was angry because, for the first time in my life, I felt like I couldn't read him. I couldn't predict him. He was so far ahead, so... impossible, that it was like he was fighting a completely different battle.

It was almost like fighting a god. No, scratch that—it was like fighting someone who had already seen every possible outcome, and just decided to mess with me for fun.

That guy was dangerous—and I don't mean in the "wow, this guy's strong" way. I mean, he's the kind of dangerous that makes you think twice about ever going up against him again.

How the hell did he do that?

Kaiser was just an E-rank. E-rank. Yet, in that fight, his battle IQ and his skills far surpassed even the best of the Sword Saints. His movements weren't just fast—they were calculated. Every strike, every block, seemed to be a step ahead of everything I could throw at him. It was like he was playing 5D chess while I was still stuck trying to figure out checkers.

And if what Alina said was true, then blocking my attacks without amplification—without magic—was impossible. So how the hell did Kaiser do it?

The fight flashes through my mind again. I remember it like it was yesterday. Kaiser stood there, completely still, blocking every single one of my strikes. And now, Alina, she's doing the same thing. Standing still, unmoving, blocking me without so much as flinching.

The technique... it was identical.

I blink, my mind struggling to process. No way. This... this can't be right.

The style Alina uses—the Heavenly Style. It's a stance that's built on the foundation of elemental magic. It requires you to use multiple elemental magics at once—something only Alina herself could do—and combine that with a sword stance that depends on improvising and creating techniques on the fly for counter-attacks. It's a style that's hers alone. The sheer complexity of it makes it so that nobody else could ever replicate it.

But Kaiser... he did. He used it.

No. I can't be right.

Kaiser can't possibly... No, not like this.

And yet, what I saw—it was undeniable.

That E-rank, that damn E-rank—he used the Heavenly Stance. Without magic. Without amplification. Just off sheer anticipation. The thought is enough to make my blood boil.

How? How the hell did he use it? How could he replicate the Heavenly Style without the very thing that makes it work? Without the magic. Without the elements. Without any of it. How?

The frustration of it hits me like a tidal wave, and my mind spirals, reeling with questions I can't answer. What the hell did I just witness?

And then, just as I start to feel my thoughts escape my control, I hear her voice. Cold. Calculating. Alina's voice cuts through my mental chaos like a blade.

"Are you done wondering?" she asks, her tone devoid of any emotion, almost... bored.

I blink, breaking out of my trance, and the sounds of the crowd come rushing back into focus. The cheers, the roars—it all floods my senses, dragging me back to the present.

"Don't think too hard, Levi," she continues, her words as detached as ever. "It won't get you anywhere."

I shake my head, trying to clear the haze of confusion. She's right. Overthinking it won't help. But damn it, I can't let it go.

If what I've seen is true, if Kaiser really has the skills to block my attacks like that—then the chances of him dying to a grotesque should be near zero. It's not just that he's strong. No. It's more than that. His skills are God-level. I've never seen anyone move

like that, think like that, fight like that. The guy knew my every move, anticipating it before I even made it.

I can't even imagine him losing to a grotesque—impossible.

Maybe... maybe he's actually alive, hiding himself? The thought gnaws at me, clawing its way into my mind. I never did see him fall. I didn't see the body. Just the aftermath. Could it be?

Could he really be out there somewhere, waiting for the right moment to show himself?

My focus snaps back into place as the crowd roars, their cheers vibrating through the arena like a thousand waves crashing. My name is shouted over and over again—Levi! Levi! Levi!

The noise is deafening, urging me to keep going, to fight with everything I have. But as I glance over at Alina, I see her cold, bored expression, her hand wrapped tightly around her legendary sword. She's unfazed. Completely indifferent to everything around her.

She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand how important this fight is. She doesn't know what's at stake.

I can't let myself get distracted again.

Focus, Levi. I remind myself. This battle—this fight—dictates the future of Levinton. If I lose here, if I fail... it's not just me who suffers. The entire town will pay for it. There's too much riding on this. Too many lives at stake.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself, forcing my thoughts to calm.

I look up, meeting Alina's eyes. She doesn't flinch. Her expression still as cold and emotionless as ever. But I know—I know she's calculating her next move. And I have to be ready. I can't let her have the advantage.

It's time for round two.

And this time, I'm not holding back.

As the fight was growing hotter, an unknown presence had entered Sylvaris and it was not someone well-known by its people. Fate was going to change again, as he was here to decide the future.

**Unknown Perspective:**

Oh, so this is Sylvaris? How unique of a town design, far more superior in structures and development than most of the other places I've seen. It's almost like they tried too hard to be "modern," but ended up creating something more... pretentious.

It's the kind of place where everyone is busy looking up at their shiny stone buildings and forgetting that life happens at eye level. Honestly, it's charming in its own way—if you can ignore the self-important vibe.

I pass by the stalls, each one more over-the-top than the last, like these merchants are competing to show off how much useless junk they can sell. The wood carvings here? Absolutely laughable. Too clean, too polished. Do they think people are fooled by that? And the fabrics! Oh, the fabrics—each one so finely stitched, it looks like they were made to hang from some noble's wardrobe, never to touch the dust of reality.

I give them credit for trying, though. The architecture is impressive. Their buildings stand tall, stretching into the sky like they're trying to force their way into greatness, but there's a certain... lack of character to them. It feels like they forgot to make it personal.

As I continued to walk through the merchant's areas, the stalls lined up on either side, each one selling something slightly more useless than the last. I passed a few offering gear—shiny swords, polished shields, and armor that probably couldn't withstand a light breeze, let alone a real fight.

Some merchants were pushing adventuring packs, their backpacks overstuffed with more supplies than any sane person could carry. And then there were the quest maps—dungeon runs, monster hunting, treasure hunts—oh, how quaint.

Every single one of them promising riches and glory to those brave enough to take the plunge. I could practically hear the desperate voices of adventurers, all too eager to spend their coin on promises they could never keep.

But then, nearing the end of the area, I spotted something that caught my eye—a potion stall. Now that was something worth paying attention to.

Finally something useful. I've been running low on mana recently. Wouldn't hurt to replenish before I go off and get myself into more trouble.

As I approach the stall, I hear some kids laughing nearby, their voices loud enough to carry over the usual hum of the town. They're having one of those ridiculously serious debates only children can have.

"I bet I can make a potion that makes you invisible!" one of the kids says, full of childish confidence.

Another one laughs, hands on hips. "No way! Potions don't work like that!"

"But I can make it work, you'll see!" the first one insists.

I chuckle to myself. Kids have no idea how the world works. Everything's about "magic" to them, but they'll never know the kind of manipulation it really takes to bend reality to your will. The things people will believe without question... It's almost too easy.

By now, I've made it to the stall. The merchant notices me, his eyes narrowing as he sizes me up. I can see his brain ticking, no doubt wondering whether I'm worth his time. "May I help you?" he asks, raising an eyebrow, clearly cautious.

I can practically smell his wariness. It's so thick in the air, you'd think it was an added ingredient in his potions. I flash him a smile, but not the friendly kind—the one that makes people feel like they're under a microscope. "Ah, I'd like to buy some potions, my good man."

He still looks unsure, clearly taken aback by my appearance. I mean, it's not like I'm a picture of health. I'm fully wrapped in bandages, even around my eyes. Only my right eye is visible, and it's probably not a pretty sight for someone like him. His gaze lingers there for just a moment too long, probably wondering if I'm hiding something or just... bizarre.

"Ah, I see," he says, his tone still cautious. "But, um, your... outfit? It's a bit unusual. I mean, the bandages, the one eye..." He gestures to me awkwardly, trying to stay polite but failing at hiding his discomfort.

I laugh lightly, like he's just told me a joke, and lean in closer. "You've got a sharp eye, don't you? Nothing to worry about, I'm just a bit accident-prone." I pause and give him an exaggerated wink. "Say, you wouldn't be from the far coasts of Celestine, would you? I'm from around there myself."

He looks surprised for a second, but then his eyes flicker with recognition. "Celestine? Yeah, I'm from there! Port Valesh, actually."

I nod, feigning familiarity. "Ah, Port Valesh. Small world. You know, I used to frequent the markets there. Been a while since I've been back. Name's... Aldric. And you?"

He smiles, clearly relieved that I'm not some threat, and gives me his name—Rael. Good, now I've got him right where I want him. Not that I need his name, of course. It's just to make him feel comfortable enough to sell me what I want without any further hesitation.

Of course, that's all a lie. I'm not from Celestine. Not even close. And my name? Not Aldric. But it's amazing what a little bit of trust can do. I've already got him to drop his guard just enough.

"Well, Rael," I say, putting extra weight into his name as though we're long-lost friends. "I'd like to purchase two bottles of Elemental Mana potions and one small bottle of Heavenly Energy for Celestial Magic."

He raises an eyebrow. "With just those, I'm not sure you'll be able to cast any decent spells. You know, those aren't the strongest potions."

I laugh, shaking my head as though he's missed the point entirely. "Oh, don't worry about that. I already have a few others stocked up. These are just for topping off, you see."

He nods, but I can see the skepticism still lingering behind his eyes. Nevertheless, he hands me the three potions, mumbling something about the price being 20 gold.

I pull out the gold, counting it slowly in front of him. He seems more at ease now that the transaction is going smoothly. Handing it over, I give him a warm wave, a gesture that's more comforting than it should be. "Take care of these potions, Rael. I'll know where to find you if I need more."

He smiles back, clearly grateful for the business. "Of course, Aldric. Don't hesitate to return if you need anything else."

I stretch a bit, pulling my hood up further to hide the bandages. Can't be too careful. My outfit's simple—just dark, well-worn traveling clothes. The kind that screams "I've been everywhere" without looking too flashy. The bandages, though, they hide the parts of me I prefer to keep out of sight.

Looking ahead, I spot a beautiful fountain in the distance, water shimmering under the sunlight. Just past that, the Sylvaris Requiem Guild Building stands tall.

Ah, how fitting. It's time to meet again.

Sylvia.

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

The crowd's deafening roar fades into the background as my mind sharpens, and my senses come alive. The arena—the very air around me—feels thick, charged with electricity. I can practically taste the anticipation. But there's no time for distractions.

I focus. Alina's hand tightens around her legendary sword, her stance unyielding, poised for whatever comes next. I can almost feel her calculating, her mind working like a machine, picking apart every little movement I make. She's the type of fighter who isn't just reactive; she anticipates. And that's something I'll have to outsmart.

I summon my magic. Time to turn the tide.



"Ice Manipulation: Frosted Spears!"

With a sharp exhale, I send a flurry of jagged ice projectiles shooting at her from every angle. The cold winds follow in their wake, biting at the air. Alina's eyes flicker, and she moves with fluid grace, deflecting them effortlessly. Her technique is like a flawless dance, always just one step ahead.

But I'm not done yet. I narrow my eyes as I read her movements, analyzing.

"Water Manipulation: Tidal Surge!"

The ground beneath my feet shifts. A wave of water bursts forth, rising to surround me. The moisture fills the air, giving me an advantage. As I surge forward, I keep the tide flowing, using it to slip through her range of vision, making my approach unpredictable. The wave is just enough to throw off her calculations.

But she's already moving to counter. I've seen it in her eyes—the anticipation. She's thinking two steps ahead. She's already aiming for the gaps she expects me to leave, calculating the exact places I'll move to next.

She's not just defending. She's planning her attacks like a master, aiming to box me in, to corner me.

"Clever," I mutter, watching her work. "She's aiming for the spots I'm most likely to go. Limiting my movement options. Impressive."

I can feel my pulse quicken, but I don't let it show. I need to be calm, calculated. There's no room for emotion here—just pure strategy.

Her blade hums as it slices through the air, and I feel a ripple of energy spread through the ground. She's using her Blessing of Technique again. That damned amplified sword technique of hers, unleashing a rippling wave surge toward me. It's fast. Powerful. A direct shot.

I push forward with God-Speed, my body moving like lightning. The wave rushes past me, grazing my side as I dodge, just barely feeling the sting of it on my skin.

That's when it hits me—I need to control the space.

My mind races through possibilities as I dodge and weave through her assault. It's not just about avoiding the attacks anymore. It's about turning her precision against her.

I conjure shadows beneath my feet. The moment the darkness spills out, I twist it into a nearly invisible cloak. She won't be able to track me as easily now. Not when I've got the shadows at my disposal.



"Shadow Manipulation: Void Step."

I disappear into the blackness, my form vanishing into the shifting shadows. For a brief moment, I hear her blade slice through the air, searching for me. But it's already too late. I'm already circling around her, using the element of surprise to my advantage.

I can sense her growing awareness, her attention split. Alina's good, but even she can't predict what she can't see. She's already looking in the wrong direction.

The plan's taking shape now. I've cornered her.

I slip out from behind her, timing it perfectly. I surge forward with all my speed, calling upon the ice again.

"Ice Manipulation: Glacier Crush!"

In a single, fluid motion, I slam a massive chunk of ice straight into her path. Her reflexes are sharp, but she's not expecting the sudden change in the flow of the fight. I've limited her options with the ice, forcing her to either block or dodge—and she has no time to think about both.

And that's when it hits me again.

"Here it comes," I think with a grin, watching as she tries to maneuver. "She'll block. She has to. But it won't be enough."

I use the shadows to keep her off balance, pushing her to act faster than she can think. Then, I make my final move.

"Water Manipulation: Torrential Lockdown."

I conjure a wall of water beneath her feet, lifting her up in the air. As she struggles to gain control, I reach the final part of my strategy. The water traps her movement just long enough for me to close in.

She's left with no choice but to strike.

I hold my breath.

Her sword swings down in an attempt to break free. She's aiming for the exact spot she expects me to be, the same way she anticipated every move so far.

But this time... she's wrong.

I twist my body in the final move, sending my shadow in front of her blade. The darkness moves like a second weapon, blocking her attack just inches from my face.

The sheer force of her sword strikes against the shadowy barrier, sending a shockwave through the air. But she's left wide open.

This is it. The opening I've been waiting for.

"God-Speed: Final Form!"

My hand comes down, moving faster than anything she's ever seen. The force behind it is monstrous. It slams into her sword with enough power to shatter stone.

And for the first time in this fight, I see a flicker in Alina's cold eyes—a brief moment of surprise.

"Checkmate," I whisper under my breath.

This battle's over.

The ground beneath my feet trembles as I land, my breath shallow but steady. Alina crashes beside me, her expression unreadable as she pushes herself up. But it's too late now. I'm already there. I'm already in flow state. No more thinking. No more hesitation. This is it.

"It's over, Alina," I mutter to myself, but my voice is filled with a strange calmness. A quiet certainty.

I feel it. The change. I've transcended.

The world blurs as my senses expand. The air around me crackles. God-Speed moves faster than time itself. Faster than the Silent Executioner forced me to move against Kaiser. This time, there's no pressure, no limit. It's just me. Alone. Unstoppable.

I can feel it. The speed. The power.

"7000 strikes per minute."

I don't need to think. I don't even need to breathe. My body moves before my mind can catch up. I feel my muscles, my instincts taking control. It's effortless now. I'm in the flow. Everything around me fades. All I can see is Alina—her every move, her every shift in balance.

I don't hesitate.

I'm not just attacking now. I'm overwhelming her.

I'm all around her. From every angle. Left. Right. Front. Back. Top.

Slice.

My blade cuts through the air and her defenses like a razor, slicing her arms, her shoulders, her body. Every strike lands. Her movements are too slow. She's trying to block, but my speed is beyond comprehension. Every second I vanish and reappear, weaving through the battlefield like a shadow, taking her from angles she can't even perceive.

She's falling behind.

The crowd roars in unison, but their voices are drowned out by the sound of my strikes. It's deafening. Every slash, every hit, it's louder than the arena. Louder than their cheers. My strikes are the storm, and Alina is the helpless prey in its path.

I can feel the heat building in my chest. The thrill of battle surging through me. The rush of my blood, the thrum of my heartbeat in sync with my strikes.

"I WILL WIN!" I scream, my voice cracking like thunder through the air.

Alina stumbles back, but it's too late. I push harder. Faster. My strikes are at 8000 per minute now. No more hesitation. No more mercy. She's not even blocking anymore. Her defenses are crumbling. I can see it in the way her body jerks with each hit. The slices across her arms. Her bruised shoulders. Her pain.

Her once-immaculate form is breaking apart, her body drowning in the relentless tide of my attacks. I can feel her starting to falter. Each slash, each cut, sends a jolt through her. She's not fast enough to keep up. Not strong enough to endure this.

I feel the rush, the euphoria of victory. This is my moment. The moment I prove it. I am the strongest. No one can stand in my way. Not her. Not anyone.

I'm the Sword Saint of God-Speed. Speed is power. Speed is everything.

But... is it?

"Is it really?"

The question hits me like a bolt. It's a fleeting thought, but it's there. A small nagging doubt.

But I don't stop. I won't stop. Not now.

I'm already transcending my limits. My strikes don't stop. They can't stop.

But in the back of my mind, a single thought lingers, hanging like a shadow in the recesses of my mind:

What if speed isn't enough?

I shake the thought off, pushing it away. I have no time for doubts. Not now. Not when I'm so close to victory. Not when it's already over.

"Speed is everything."

And so, I keep attacking. Keep pushing. Until Alina has nothing left to give. Until the world, the crowd, the arena—everything—is swallowed up by my speed.

It was over...

Alina's Perspective:

The pain hits me like an unstoppable wave, crashing relentlessly against every inch of my body. Slices. Wounds. My hands grip my sword, but my fingers feel numb, as if they're no longer mine.

I don't know if I'm still alive or if I've already died. The pain radiates through me, tearing at every thought, every piece of logic that I hold onto so tightly. I should be dead, shouldn't I? But I'm still standing. Still breathing. Still feeling.

And then, there's him. Levi. A complete freak. His God-Speed, it's just... too much. How can I possibly deal with something like that? Maybe he's faster than light itself, moving in a way that seems to defy everything I've ever known. No technique. No magic. Just speed. Just speed. How can I possibly counter that? How does someone with my gift, my skills, even hope to keep up?

My sword feels heavy. Each strike of his cuts deeper. How can something like this be real? How can someone move that fast without destroying themselves? There's no logic to it. There's no reason for it. And yet, here he is, his sword flashing from every angle, every side.

And I... I'm failing to keep up.

The crowd. Their cheers are deafening. At first, they cheered for me, the mighty Alina, the wielder of the Heavenly Style, the one who would win. But now? Now, I hear them chanting Levi's name. Their cheers are no longer for me.

They're for him.

I can feel it in my bones. My heart sinks. It's like a sinking ship that I can't escape. How did it come to this? I've always been the one to strike first, to plan, to outthink my opponents. But this—this monster—he's rewriting all the rules. How can I defeat something like him?

I... I can't. I can't keep up. My body is failing me. My sword, my gift, my technique—it's all useless against him. No matter how hard I try to block, no matter how many times I adapt, he's still faster. And I, the one who prided herself on being perfect, on mastering everything, am losing to something I can't even comprehend.

I'm weak. No. Not weak—inferior. Levi is superior. I should have been able to see this coming. But now, here I am, barely staying on my feet, feeling my own blood coat my skin like a cruel reminder of my failure. Every slice that lands on me is like an accusation.

You aren't enough. You never will be.

And then... God. How cruel. He gave me the Heavenly Style, the technique that is supposed to be the pinnacle of swordsmanship. The power to outthink, to counter, to predict. But all of that means nothing against a gift like God-Speed. How can technique win when speed is everything?

You gave me a gift that requires thought, calculation, patience. But you gave him speed—a gift that erases thought, that doesn't need patience, that doesn't wait. It's unfair. Why? Why give someone like him such a gift when all I have is my technique? It doesn't seem right. You gave him that, and all I have is this.

God... you're cruel...

This is it. This is my limit. The one thing I could never surpass. And it wasn't even something I could see. Speed. Something so intangible. How can I possibly fight something that can erase all my planning, all my skill, with a single moment of motion?

Then, I hear it.

"You're completely wrong."

A voice. Familiar. Soft, like a whisper.

It doesn't come from the outside. No, it comes from within. A voice I thought I had buried long ago. The one I never thought I'd acknowledge one day. The one I tried to shut out.

Him.

I don't even know why I think of him like that. Him. That name doesn't fit anymore, does it? But it's him. The only one who could make sense of the chaos inside me.

And as Levi's strikes rain down on me, as my body crumbles under the pressure of his speed, I hear that voice again. But this time, it's not just words—it's a reminder.

"You never truly believed in yourself, did you, Alina? You always relied on your technique, on your gift. But it's not enough to only have one side of the equation. You're better than this. You've always been better."

I can feel myself slipping away, the weight of his words stirring something inside me. But the pain is too much. I'm breaking. I'm shattering. The voice seems so far away now, almost like it's part of another life, a life I lived before this one.

Before him.

And I remember. The fleeting moments. The brief memories that always surface when I am at my lowest. The moments I've always tried to forget.

But now, I realize it.

I always relied on my technique.

And I always thought I was strong enough to stand alone.

But what he said was against my own thoughts... And I knew he was right all along.

The pain is unbearable, yet I continue to endure it. My body feels as if it's already dead, and yet... I'm still alive. My muscles scream, my skin burns from the relentless strikes, but it's all so distant now, like I'm drifting away.

As the cuts deepen and the world spins with every strike, my mind drifts back to another time, four years ago. Back when I was with him, Master. The one who saved me, who gave me the belief that, in this world, technique was enough.

It was a warm, peaceful day near the grassy field of the orphanage. The sun hung high in the sky, casting a golden glow over everything. The air was gentle, and the grass beneath us swayed in the breeze. I was sitting there with him—my savior, my guiding light.

He was always so calm, so controlled, never showing an ounce of doubt. His emotions, if he even had any, were always hidden behind that serene smile. I used to envy that, that complete control.

I wanted to be like him. He was everything I aspired to be—my ideal version.

"Master, tell me... what should I do to improve my sword skills?" I asked, my voice full of that earnestness, that yearning for growth.

He chuckled softly, the sound warm like the sun. "Master? Seriously calling me that now, Alina?" His voice was light, teasing, but there was something comforting in the way he spoke, something that made my heart feel a little less burdened.

I nodded, my determination unwavering. "Yes, you saved my life. You told me that I can do far more than I've limited myself to think. You're my master."

He laughed again, gently patting my head as if I were still a child, a simple gesture that always made me feel safe. "Relax, Alina. Don't call me that. I'm just a teacher at best, plus I am only two years older than you." But the smile in his eyes, the warmth in his gaze, said otherwise.

I couldn't help but grin at his words, my gaze firm. "No, you are my master. You taught me everything I know. You saved me. I can't just call you a teacher after that."

I looked at him, my eyes softening, and then sighed, leaning back on the grass. "You don't understand," I said quietly, almost to myself. "You saved me in the forest... Not just physically, but... mentally, emotionally." I paused, collecting my thoughts as the warmth of the memory washed over me.

"You gave me a reason to keep fighting, to keep improving. Before I met you..."

I looked at him, my voice quieter this time, as if speaking the truth was something I had to fight to admit. "I wasn't lost... I was just tired. Tired of everything. Life felt like a never-ending struggle, and I... I just wanted to die to escape it all. I didn't know how to keep going. But then you—"

I stopped myself, swallowing the lump in my throat. The weight of those dark thoughts threatened to rise again, but I pushed them back.

"You gave me a reason to keep fighting. To keep moving forward," I said, my voice firmer now. "You didn't just save me from dying... You gave me something to live for. A reason to believe that I could still matter."

He raised an eyebrow, a small smile tugging at his lips as he shook his head. "I didn't expect you to get all sentimental on me. But hey, I get it. You've come a long way. You've been working hard, pushing yourself, and that's something to be proud of."

I felt a slight warmth spread across my face at his words. Proud of me? My heart gave a little flutter.

"Really?" I asked, a soft blush coloring my cheeks as I tried to hide it behind my hair.

He chuckled, his voice light and teasing. "Yeah. I mean, I might have helped point the way, but you've done all the walking yourself. You should give yourself some credit, Alina."

Then, before I could respond, he reached over and patted my head in a way that felt almost like a playful acknowledgment.

My face reddened further, and I resisted the urge to swat his hand away. "Hey, stop that! You're making me blush," I mumbled, but I couldn't hide the small smile tugging at the corners of my lips.

He grinned, clearly enjoying teasing me. "You're making it too easy, Alina."

I sighed, trying to hide my embarrassment, but I couldn't help it. His words made something inside me warm, and for a brief moment, it felt like everything was okay. Like I wasn't carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders anymore.

"Master," I said, looking up at him with a stubborn smile, "I'm still going to call you that."

He gave me a long, amused look, then nodded with a sigh, clearly resigned to it. "Fine, fine. But only because I'm too tired to argue with you."

I grinned, feeling a sense of contentment in the small, simple moment. It was one of those moments where everything felt right, even though we both knew the world would soon pull us back into its chaos.

"Thanks, Master," I said softly, the words feeling more genuine now than before.

He smiled at me, a glint of warmth in his eyes. "Anytime, Alina."

We sat in silence for a moment, watching the world go by. The soft rustle of the grass, the chirping of birds, and the gentle breeze carrying the scent of earth and flowers—it was a peaceful moment, one I would hold onto forever.

After a long pause, he turned to me, his face serious now, but still warm. "You've learned a lot already, Alina. But remember, it's not just about technique. It's about the will to keep moving forward, no matter how hard it gets."

He leaned back slightly, his tone more relaxed but still carrying weight. "The sword's not just a weapon; it's a part of who you are. If you don't have the drive to keep pushing forward, you're just going through the motions, barely alive." He paused, meeting my eyes. "Your sword reflects your spirit, your will to fight. Without that, it's just metal."

I felt my chest tense, a deep sense of admiration for him filling me. "I understand, Master. It's not just about skill... it's about the heart behind it."

He nodded, his gaze softening. "Yes. And remember, The way is in training. You must always seek to improve, to sharpen both your body and your mind."

I could feel the weight of his words sinking in, filling me with purpose. But there was something more to it. Something deeper.



He looked at me thoughtfully, his voice steady but carrying a sense of urgency. "To know the way is to know yourself," he said. "Your sword technique... it's not just about the moves, the stance, or the strength. It has to come from your heart. You need to understand who you are before you can truly master the technique."

I let those words wash over me, the truth in them as clear as the blue sky above. There was always more to learn, always more to understand. But I felt ready. With his guidance, I could become stronger. I could become more than I had ever thought possible.

"Master..." I hesitated, then asked softly, "May I ask you a question?"

He looked at me, raising an eyebrow in curiosity. "Of course. What is it?"

I took a deep breath, the words lingering on the tip of my tongue. "Do you ever... doubt yourself? Even with all your wisdom and skill... Do you ever feel uncertain?"

He looked at me, his expression shifting just slightly, the corners of his mouth curling into a genuine smile. But there was something cold and sharp in his eyes when he spoke next.

"Doubt myself?" he repeated, his voice lowering, almost as if the very question itself didn't sit well with him. "No. I never have to doubt myself. To some extent using magic might even hinder my skills. In this world, technique alone... is stronger than any force. It's the ultimate power. And anyone who believes otherwise will learn that the hard way."

He was silent for a moment, as if pondering the question again to give me genuine advice. Then, with a faint smile, he replied, "Uncertainty is a part of growth, Alina. It's okay to doubt. But the key is to not let that doubt control you. You must learn to embrace it and use it to push yourself forward."

His words comforted me in ways I couldn't fully express. For the first time, I didn't feel so alone in my struggles. He understood, and he believed in me.

In that moment, under the bright sky and surrounded by the warmth of the world, I knew that, with him by my side, I could overcome anything.

The memory—those words—clung to me as the pain continued to gnaw at my body. I could feel every cut, every bruise, yet amidst the agony, something inside me still held on to his teachings. His presence, his wisdom, they were my anchor, my strength, and my hope. They were the reason I hadn't given up yet.

And then, just as if on cue, I felt it—the surge of energy, the sudden realization. The pain wasn't just physical. It was the catalyst for something deeper. This memory. I've thought about it so many times before. But why now?

I gasped, my mind reeling as the thought hit me—this wasn't just a memory. This wasn't just a flashback to the past. I'm not fighting against Levi alone. I'm fighting against my weakness.

And I'm remembering what Master taught me...

"Master," I whispered to myself, almost as if speaking to the air, "I got another question."

Without missing a beat, the memory of his calm smile, his steady gaze, floated in my mind. "Speak your mind, Alina," he'd said, always so patient, so kind.

I inhaled, gathering my thoughts. The pain, the exhaustion, they had clouded my mind. But I couldn't ignore this anymore. "Master, I'm not fast. I can't react in the blink of an eye like others. My body can't keep up with the speed of my thoughts. Is there any way for me to overcome that? Can I ever... be faster?"

His face softened slightly, but there was an underlying understanding in his eyes. "Physical limitations may play a role, Alina. After all, God didn't create everyone equally. But it's not our limitations that define us. It's our actions. Our decisions. They're what make us who we are."

I frowned, a bit confused. "What do you mean by that?"

He looked at me, a spark of wisdom flickering in his gaze. "Ask me a scenario-based question. Something that makes you think. Then I'll explain it to you."

I thought for a moment, pondering the perfect question. I wasn't just looking for an answer—I wanted to understand. "Okay then... tell me this," I said, my voice firm despite the uncertainty in my chest. "If I were to fight someone stronger and faster than me, and my technique couldn't keep up, how would I win?"

There was a moment of silence. A long, quiet pause where I felt the weight of the question hang in the air. Then, unexpectedly, his laughter broke through the tension.

He laughed out loud, so loudly that it startled me. "Ahahahahaha!"

I blinked, taken aback, my face flushing. "What? Did I say something wrong?"

I shook his arm, trying to get him to stop. "Hey! Why are you laughing?"

But he just kept laughing, shaking his head. "Hahahahaha..."

I pouted, my cheeks turning a little red. "Just tell me!" I demanded, my voice small but insistent.

He stopped laughing, but the glint in his eyes remained mischievous. "Alright, alright, little girl," he teased, his voice soft with affection.

I puffed out my cheeks in annoyance, crossing my arms stubbornly. "Stop calling me that!"

He smiled, his expression softening as he met my gaze. "Listen carefully, Alina. It's time I reveal some of my secret tactics."

I leaned in, every fiber of my being focused on his words. When he got serious, I knew it meant something big was coming.

"I'm going to teach you a technique," he said, his voice low and sharp, the intensity in his gaze sharpening. "A tactic. One that will kill anyone's gift of speed. Their speed will end the moment they meet you."

I held my breath, every word he spoke sinking deep into my mind. His eyes locked onto mine, and I knew then that this was it. This was the key.

Slowly my mind faded from the memory from 4 years ago and I was back to the present at the arena.

I stood there, facing Levi, and everything else seemed to fade away. The crowd's cheers, the overwhelming speed of his strikes—everything blurred as his words from years ago echoed in my mind.

"I'm going to teach you a technique. A tactic. One that will kill anyone's gift of speed."

I could hear him clearly, his voice as sharp as the sword he wielded. I could see his eyes, so confident, so sure. He had told me that I would be able to overcome any opponent with this technique.

And suddenly, everything clicked. The speed, the chaos, all of it slowed as I focused. Levi's blinding movements were no longer something to fear—they were just another challenge, another puzzle I could solve with my technique.

This was it. Time to test what Master had taught me.

The God-Speed Killer.

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## **Chapter 45 - Whispers and Wagers**

**Unknown Perspective:**

Oh well, the inside of this guild is bigger than I thought.

Requiem's building loomed like a beast that had long since grown comfortable in its dominion. Polished stone floors gleamed under lantern light, tracing a network of halls and open chambers filled with movement. Guild members milled about, their roles as distinct as the weapons they carried—some sparring in designated rings, the dull clang of metal meeting metal underscoring their grunts; others seated around large wooden tables, engaged in heated discussions over parchment maps littered with notes and markers. The air was thick with ambition and camaraderie, a collective pulse of purpose.

And yet, in all that chaos, no one truly noticed me.

Except for one.

A man approached, his posture rigid but not hostile. His eyes held the careful scrutiny of someone who had done this a hundred times before—watching, judging, measuring.

"Who are you?" His tone was firm, professional, not immediately confrontational. The voice of a gatekeeper.

I gave him a name that did not belong to me. "Aldric."

A lie, of course. But revealing the truth? That would be equivalent to carving open my own throat and handing him the knife.

His brow furrowed, but he didn't immediately object. A sign of someone who followed protocol rather than instinct. I could work with that.

"And what business do you have here, Aldric?"

I let a moment of silence stretch between us, just long enough for discomfort to seep into his stance before I answered.

"I'm here to see Sylvia and Alina."

The words were simple, yet they carried weight. Not a request. A statement of inevitability.

His arms crossed over his chest. "Alina is at the arena. She won't be available for some time." His gaze sharpened. "And Sylvia is busy. You'll have to leave or wait."

Ah. There it was.

The illusion of control.

Most people think denying someone access puts them in a position of power. But in reality, it just means they've stepped into the game without realizing it.

And I never played fair.

I exhaled slowly, tilting my head as if weighing my options, letting him think I was contemplating leaving. Then, in a deliberately measured tone, I spoke.

"Right... so you're the one disturbing her, then?"

The man blinked. "What?"

I gestured vaguely toward the upper floor, where I assumed Sylvia's office was. "Sylvia's busy, you said. Clearly, whatever she's doing must be important. The kind of important that should not—under any circumstances—be interrupted."

I nodded as if coming to a grand realization. "Which means, by stopping me here, by engaging in this conversation, by standing in my way... you're making a conscious decision to interfere with her work."

His jaw twitched. "That's not how it works. I'm following orders."

"Are you?" I tapped a bandaged finger against my chin. "Because from where I stand, it seems you're making a call on her behalf. She didn't tell you to stop me personally. You just assumed she wouldn't want to be bothered. Which means if I walk away now, and she later finds out I was here—someone she may have wanted to see, someone with potentially urgent information—who do you think she'll blame?"

A shadow of doubt crept into his expression. He was trying to find a flaw in my words, but the trick wasn't to be right. The trick was to make him afraid of being wrong.

"She won't blame me," he said, but the certainty in his voice had thinned.

"Won't she?" I leaned in slightly. "What if I was here on behalf of someone important? What if it was something critical? You know noble types—they're not fond of being kept in the dark. Imagine how she'd look at you once she finds out you played judge, jury, and executioner on who gets to meet her. Imagine the conversation: 'Oh, I would have liked to hear him out, but unfortunately, one of my men decided for me.' I'm sure that won't put your position at risk."

His lips parted, but no words came out. He was processing, hesitating, questioning.

I had him.

I took a step back, as if I were about to leave. "But hey, your call. I'll leave if that's what you think is best. Just... make sure you're ready to explain it to her when she asks why you decided she wasn't worth the interruption."

The internal war played across his face.

And then—defeat.

He let out a slow breath, eyes flicking toward the staircase before landing back on me. "...Fine." A pause. Then, reluctantly, "The name's Rowan."

Rowan.

I smiled behind my bandages. Naming oneself to another was a kind of submission, a subconscious attempt to regain control by offering something in return. A last-ditch effort to balance the scales.

It wouldn't help him.

He turned, begrudgingly walking ahead. As he reached the door to Sylvia's office, he hesitated before knocking. I caught the slight tension in his shoulders. He wasn't sure if he was making a mistake.

Good.

He knocked twice.

"Lady Sylvia," he called, his voice carefully composed. "There's someone here to see you. A man named Aldric."

And just like that, the doors to Requiem's most powerful woman were now open to me.

The door swung open, revealing a spacious office filled with neatly stacked documents, a large wooden desk, and a massive window overlooking Sylvaris. The scent of ink and parchment lingered in the air, though something told me Sylvia wasn't the type to spend all her time buried in paperwork.

And there she was—Sylvia, standing near a shelf, arms crossed, her sharp gaze landing immediately on Rowan.

"Rowan," she said, tone smooth but edged with expectation. "Why are you here?"

Rowan straightened instinctively. "There was a man requesting an audience with you, Lady Sylvia. I was following protocol."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed. "Protocol? I was in the middle of watching Alina's match. Do you think I enjoy being interrupted for things that could have waited?"

Rowan hesitated for a fraction of a second, then glanced toward me before answering. "He... convinced me it was important."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. "Convinced?"

Rowan exhaled. "He said that if I didn't bring him to you, and it turned out to be something you would've wanted to know, I would be the one responsible for keeping it from you."

Silence.

Then a slow, amused sigh left Sylvia's lips.

She turned to me. "Ah. I see now."

I gave a casual tilt of my head. "Do you?"

She walked toward her desk, settling against it instead of sitting down, arms still crossed. "You played him, didn't you?"

I placed a hand over my chest, feigning innocence. "I simply pointed out a reasonable outcome. Whether or not he took the risk was entirely his choice."

Rowan clenched his jaw slightly but remained silent.

Sylvia's sharp gaze studied me for a moment before gesturing with her hand. "Alright, Aldric, was it? Tell me why you're here."

Ah, time for the fun part.

I took a slow step forward, lowering my tone slightly—not in submission, but in calculated intrigue. "To be honest, Lady Sylvia... I was eager to meet the woman who runs Sylvaris' finest guild."

She blinked once. "Flattery?"

I smiled under my bandages. "Observation."

She scoffed lightly. "If you think flattery is going to get you anywhere—"

"Is it flattery," I interrupted smoothly, "if it's true?"

Sylvia exhaled sharply, tilting her head slightly. "You don't even know me."

"True," I admitted. "But I know of you. A noblewoman who turned a guild into a dominant force, balancing leadership and ambition without crumbling under the weight of expectations. A strategist, a tactician, and—more importantly—a woman who understands that power is not about control, but about direction. Requiem isn't strong just because it has numbers or resources. It's strong because you make it strong. Without you, this place is just a building."

Sylvia's lips pressed together slightly. Not a frown. Not quite amusement either.

She exhaled through her nose. "You're persistent."

I took another slow step forward. "I'm right."

A pause. Then, Sylvia shook her head with a small smirk. "So, tell me, Aldric—do you talk like this to everyone, or am I just special?"

"Only to the ones worth my time," I answered without hesitation.

Her smirk twitched slightly, like she was about to say something, but instead, she let out a soft chuckle. "You're smooth. I'll give you that."

I shrugged. "I prefer to think of it as 'effective.'"

She finally moved, walking behind her desk before settling into her chair. "Alright, you have my attention." She glanced at Rowan. "You can go."

Rowan hesitated but, seeing no further room for argument, gave a short nod before exiting the room, shutting the door behind him.

Sylvia leaned back, resting an elbow on the armrest, her fingers lightly tapping against the wood. "Be quick, Aldric. I don't have all day."

I smiled. "I wouldn't dream of wasting your time, Lady Sylvia."

And just like that, the real conversation could begin.

A game of chess had begun, and I was playing against a woman who knew the board well. But unlike her, I had no king to protect—only a field of pawns that could be sacrificed as needed.

Sylvia tapped her fingers against the desk, eyes locked onto me with a sharpness that would have sent lesser men stammering.

"You speak well," she mused. "Almost too well. It reminds me of someone I knew during my days in the Magical Academy."



Something in my chest tightened for a fraction of a second.

Her words were nothing more than an observation, yet they carried weight.

I could not allow my past to be traced back to me.

A split second of vulnerability could cost everything.

So I buried it. My lips parted in subtle surprise, the confusion in my eyes carefully calculated—just enough to look natural, but not too much to appear forced.

"Is that so?" I said, tilting my head. "I wasn't aware I had a twin running around."

Sylvia's gaze didn't waver. "You might not, but you sound nearly identical to someone I met before. He had a way with words, much like you. Always shifting the conversation, never answering directly, yet somehow, making you feel as if you had all the answers."

I let out a light chuckle. "Sounds like a charming individual."

"He was," she admitted, though her eyes studied me with deeper intent now. "But he was also dangerous. He had a habit of playing with the truth, shaping it to his liking. Just like you."

A bold statement. She was feeling me out, testing the waters.

I leaned back slightly. "A dangerous man? And here I thought I was just a simple traveler looking for a conversation."

She scoffed. "A simple traveler wrapped in bandages, strolling into my guild and effortlessly convincing Rowan to disturb me?"

I smirked. "What can I say? I have a way with people."

Sylvia folded her hands together. "Where are you from, Aldric?"

"Celestine," I answered smoothly.

A lie, but a convincing one. Celestine was far enough away to make background checks difficult, yet well-known enough to avoid suspicion.

"Celestine?" she repeated, her voice carrying a note of intrigue. "Interesting. Travelers are known for their scholars and diplomats, not so much for mysterious men wrapped in bandages. You don't strike me as an academic."

"Ah, but appearances can be deceiving, Lady Sylvia," I countered. "Perhaps I was once a scholar, disillusioned by the pursuit of knowledge and instead drawn to the unpredictability of the world."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "You speak in riddles."

"And you seek answers," I replied. "An admirable quality, but not all questions are meant to be answered."

She let out a small hum, as if considering my words.

"Perhaps," she admitted, "but I prefer to be the one deciding which questions remain unanswered."

I grinned. "Then we are quite the opposite, aren't we? You seek control through knowledge, while I thrive in the unknown."

A silence hung between us for a moment, thick with unspoken tension.

Then she shifted the conversation. "Your bandages," she said, "are they for injuries, or are you hiding something?"

I chuckled. "Must it be one or the other? Can't a man simply enjoy a bit of mystery?"

She smirked, but there was still scrutiny in her gaze. "Men who enjoy mystery don't usually wander into places like this without a reason. You're not here just to meet me, are you?"

"Ah, but Lady Sylvia," I said with a hint of amusement, "if I were here for another reason, wouldn't I have given it already? Or do you think I came all this way simply to exchange pleasantries?"

She exhaled, crossing her arms once more. "You're frustratingly good at avoiding direct answers."

"And yet, here we are, still talking."

She let out a soft chuckle. "Fair enough."

Before she could continue, a loud noise erupted from the magical visionary telecaster in the room.

Both of our gazes instinctively turned toward it. The projection shimmered with a magical glow, displaying the ongoing battle in the arena.

Alina versus Levi.

The sheer force of their clash sent shockwaves through the field.

Sylvia's sharp eyes locked onto the battle, momentarily distracted.

The battle on the telecaster was almost painful to watch. Levi moved like light, his sword flashing in arcs too fast for the naked eye to track. Alina barely had time to react, her body sliced into by a thousand invisible cuts. She fought, but against God-Speed, she was drowning in a current she could never outswim.

Sylvia sighed, a note of sympathy in her voice. "Poor Alina... she's still so young. I really thought she could win."

My eyes remained on the screen. "What makes you say that?"

She leaned back in her chair, arms folded. "Because this fight was over the moment it began. Levi's speed is overwhelming. She has no way to counter it."

I hummed in thought, studying the screen. To an untrained eye, it was a massacre. Alina was barely standing, her body coated in fresh wounds. Levi, on the other hand, looked entirely unharmed—untouched, in control, effortlessly dominant.

Then Sylvia spoke again.

"Technique can never beat speed like Levi's."

I smiled.

It was small, a fleeting curve of my lips, but she caught it.

Her eyes flickered toward me, narrowing. "Why are you smiling?"

I turned to her, the amusement lingering. "You really think Alina is going to lose?"

Sylvia exhaled, shaking her head. "It's unfortunate, but as it stands, even if she is Requiem's best fighter, she isn't a match against Levi's God-Speed. You saw it yourself, didn't you?"

I leaned forward, resting my chin against my palm. "So, what you're saying is, there's no possible way she can win?"

Sylvia raised a brow, sensing something in my tone. "...Yes."

"Not even the slightest possibility?"

"Not unless Levi decides to throw the match, which—" She gestured toward the screen, where Levi delivered yet another devastating flurry of strikes, "—isn't going to happen."

I chuckled. "How... absolute of you."

She smirked slightly. "Some things in life are simple. Levi's ability is overwhelming, and Alina is outmatched. There's no need to overcomplicate it."

"Ah," I mused, "but that's the fun part, isn't it? Overcomplicating things. Finding the cracks in what others see as absolute."

Her expression shifted, subtle but telling. She was intrigued now, even if she wouldn't admit it.

"You're saying Alina has a chance?" she asked, tilting her head.

I nodded. "More than a chance."

Sylvia scoffed. "You're being ridiculous. You saw the same fight I did—what could she possibly do against that kind of speed?"

I tapped a finger against the desk, as if considering something deeply. Then, with the air of a man who had just found an entertaining way to pass the time, I spoke.

"Tell you what," I said smoothly, "why don't we make this interesting?"

Sylvia's gaze sharpened. "Interesting how?"

I smiled, leaning in slightly. "A bet."

Her eyes flickered with amusement, though skepticism remained. "You want to bet on a fight that's already decided?"

I shrugged. "Is it truly decided?"

She huffed, shaking her head. "You're really willing to gamble on something this obvious?"

"Confidence is a powerful thing, Lady Sylvia. And you seem quite confident in your conclusion."

She exhaled, her lips curling into a smirk. "Alright then. What are you proposing?"

I pretended to think for a moment before giving my terms.

"If Alina loses," I said, "I'll answer your questions."

Her interest sharpened instantly. "All of them?"

"As many as you'd like," I confirmed.

"And if Levi loses?"

I smiled. "You'll do something for me. Within reason, of course."

Sylvia studied me, her expression unreadable. "You don't seem like the type to make reckless bets, Aldric. That means you either know something I don't, or you're a fool."

"Perhaps both," I said lightly. "Or maybe I just enjoy a good gamble."

Her fingers tapped against the desk in thought. "I don't agree to things without knowing the details. What would you ask of me?"

I smirked. "That depends on how much you're willing to risk."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed, and for a long moment, she simply watched me. Weighing my words, analyzing my intentions, searching for the trick in my proposal.

Then, finally, she leaned back, folding her arms.

"Fine," she said. "I accept your bet."

I grinned.

Checkmate.

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

This was too fun... way too fun for me. I never reached this speed in my whole life—this transcended state of God-Speed. There are truly no limits for Sword Saints in this world.

I blurred through the arena in a storm of slashes, my body moving in circular patterns, my blade carving through the air, striking her down without mercy. Every motion felt weightless, effortless—pure instinct.

Alina's body jerked with every slice, her white coat staining with deep lines of crimson. And yet, she refused to collapse. Her arms moved sluggishly, desperately trying to block, to reduce the damage even by a fraction. It was meaningless. Seven thousand slashes per minute—there was no stopping this.

Her movements were slowing. She was losing too much blood. The pain should've been unbearable.

It was over.

Then—

Her fingers twitched. A small movement, almost insignificant. But then her grip tightened around the hilt of her sword. Her body shuddered, and her head lifted slightly, those cold, detached eyes opening.

No way. She still had hope?

I didn't hesitate. In that moment, I was already in motion, a blur of steel, my blade cutting through the air like a storm. I could already predict her next move, I could see her desperation, her futile attempt to avoid defeat. But I didn't care. I was faster than thought, faster than she could even react.

But then... she moved.

I didn't expect it. She didn't retreat. She didn't even try to block me. Instead, she did something far more terrifying.

She waited—no, she positioned herself, as though she had anticipated my every motion.

I didn't understand it at first. There was no defensive posture, no counterattack—just a subtle shift, a faint adjustment in the air as her body slid into a perfect angle, her sword held not to defend, but to... guide.

I lashed out again, too fast to stop, but then, I felt it. A shift in the air. A pressure I couldn't explain.

My body was locked into a single, predestined trajectory—moving too fast, too committed to adjust. She saw it, she knew it. She wasn't just evading. She was exploiting my momentum.

The moment I reached my highest speed, a faint twist of her wrist redirected my force. It wasn't a block or a deflection, no—the contact was so subtle, so micro, that I almost couldn't comprehend it.

But my balance—my perfect, unstoppable balance—shattered.

She had done it. She had guided me. Not with power, but with the simplest, most devastating technique I had ever encountered.

Before I could even react, she twisted again, this time pulling me into her world—her domain. My own momentum was no longer mine. I was a puppet, moving in a direction I had no control over, forced into a roll, my body flipping forward uncontrollably, too fast to even register the ground beneath me.

I was off-balance.

I didn't strike her, didn't land a hit. I just... fell.

What the hell just happened? How did she do that?

### **Alina's Perspective:**

The crowd's roar was deafening. My name, shouted with a mixture of awe and disbelief, filled the arena. Alina. Alina.

I could hear them, but it was distant, fading away. I could feel the heat of their gazes, their excitement, but none of it mattered. Not now. Not after what I had done.

The moment he came at me, his sword a blur, I knew—there was no fear. No hesitation. No room for doubt. This was the moment I had trained for. The moment I would prove that speed could be beaten.

A technique not made to counter speed—but to erase it.

I had learned this from my master. Master, I reminded myself again. He had taught me the truth of speed—the flaw in the illusion.

The faster you were, the more predictable you became. The more you relied on it, the more limited your choices were.

The logic of it was flawless. Speed was a line. Once you committed to that path, you couldn't change it. The more you moved, the fewer options you had. I knew this, and I had seen it in him—Master didn't block, didn't parry.

He stepped into the future of his opponent's body. He controlled their movement without them even realizing it.

And so, I had done the same. I hadn't tried to evade. No, I had waited. I had positioned myself not against him, but within him. I moved as if I were a part of his very motion, slipping between his strikes like a shadow, watching him move faster than thought. Watching him fall into his own trap.

His afterimages, his distortions—they didn't matter. I wasn't fooled by the speed. I saw the real him. His body, his path, his momentum—he couldn't avoid it. He had already lost the moment he began to attack.

I had to do it perfectly. The wrist twist, the subtle guiding of his momentum—it had to be just enough to break his balance. Just enough to make him fall into the line I had set. The leg-wrap, the redirect, the moment his own speed betrayed him. His body folded, crashing in a way he couldn't have predicted.

I gasped for air, the effort of executing this technique taking its toll on my already-wounded body. My chest burned, my limbs trembled, but I stood firm. There was no room for weakness. No room for failure.

But it worked. I had done it.

I stood there, watching him falter, trying to comprehend what had just happened. I could feel the energy of the crowd surging around me, but I was too focused. Too detached to care. I had done it for me.

I had broken his speed. I had made him a victim of his own power. And as he collapsed, I knew that this moment was mine.

Master's teachings were right. Speed was just another obstacle to overcome.

The air was thick with tension as both of us stood there, healing our wounds. I could feel the burn in my skin, the stabs of pain from the countless slices.

My fingers twitched with the effort of focusing my magic, the healing spell closing the wounds slowly. It was a delicate, precise process, the spell weaving its magic to restore my body. My chest rose and fell with labored breaths, but I was far from finished.

Levi, meanwhile, stood across from me, equally focused on his own healing. I couldn't help but watch him out of the corner of my eye, the cocky grin never leaving his face despite the exhaustion visible in the way he stood. His wounds were no different from mine, yet he seemed unfazed, as if he had all the time in the world.

I broke the silence, my voice as cold as ever. "Nice trick you pulled there. It won't work again."

Levi chuckled, the sound cutting through the air like a knife. "You think you're the only one who knows how to fight at high speed?" He smirked, leaning casually as he finished healing. "You really think your little stunt's going to end this fight?"

I didn't reply immediately. I kept my eyes on him, watching his every move, listening to him speak. He was different from others—unpredictable, like a storm. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more to him than just arrogance.

Then, with a devil-may-care attitude, Levi spoke again. "You know... someone did that exact same thing to me once."

I didn't miss a beat. My eyes narrowed, the realization hitting me like a punch to the gut. "What?"



Levi shrugged, smirking. "Yeah. Someone used that same technique on me. Wrist twisting, predicting the movements, guiding the strike. I barely knew what happened, to be honest."

I didn't respond right away. My heart skipped for just a moment, a flicker of something unfamiliar in my chest. It wasn't fear. It wasn't weakness. But it was a stirring thought I wasn't used to feeling.

Could it have been him? My master?

The crowd cheered in the background, their noise suddenly louder, but it wasn't enough to drown out my thoughts. Levi noticed my momentary pause. His smirk grew.

"You didn't hear me though, did you?" He mocked, his tone playful but with an edge of challenge. "I said 'someone,' not 'people.' Many people have tried to pull that on me, but it was just one person that succeeded, one time. Quite the fighter, actually."

I blinked, a rare crack in my stoic facade. "Who?" I asked, before I could stop myself. I wasn't supposed to care. I had no reason to, but the question slipped out.

The thought of someone else pulling off that same technique against him—someone who might've taught him something about speed, about balance, about the fight that I could only begin to understand—shook me. Could it have been the one I respected so much? The one who gave me the power I had now?

Levi's grin only widened, more smug than before. He tilted his head slightly, eyes glinting with mischief. "I'll tell you his name if you win. But that's a big if, isn't it?"

I hated the feeling of uncertainty that gripped me in that moment. Levi was always one to toy with his enemies, but something in the way he said it... something about the challenge in his words made me realize he was more than just a cocky fighter. He was like me—strategic, calculating, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

His taunting smile made my blood boil. I wiped the blood from my mouth, the corners of my lips curling into a cold smile. "I don't need to know his name," I said, my voice low and full of conviction. "I'll destroy you first."

Levi's eyes sparkled with amusement, his grin growing wider. "You think so, huh?" He took a step forward, relaxed, like he hadn't just been on the verge of defeat moments ago. "I'm still gonna win. You'll see."

I could feel the weight of the crowd's anticipation, their cries echoing through the arena, but all I could focus on was him. Levi. He was the only one who mattered right now. I was going to defeat him—no matter what.

The air between us seemed to crackle with energy, both of us healed, both of us determined. There was no turning back now.

The crowd's roar faded into a distant hum. I closed my eyes, centering myself, drawing all my focus inward. My breath slowed, steady, deliberate. A sharp contrast to the chaos that had surrounded me just moments ago. I couldn't afford to let the noise, the pressure, the taunting of Levi distract me.

Now was the final stance. The main battle.

I could feel the weight of the sword in my hand, the familiar coolness of its hilt, grounding me. The sweat on my palms, the soreness in my limbs, none of it mattered. There was only one thing left to do.

I reached back to a memory. A distant one. The sound of rushing water, the soft spray of the waterfall kissing my skin. The wind against my face. I stood there, my sword in hand, trying to perfect the technique my master had once shown me.

It had taken years to get it right. A technique that no one else in the world could wield, and for good reason. It demanded more than just skill—it required an unshakable calmness. A universal calmness, one that could only be achieved by someone with my discipline, my training.

I took a deep breath. This was the moment. My pulse quieted, my mind clear. My body, like the still waters of that waterfall, became perfectly still.

My grip on my sword tightened, and I began the incantation—an ancient spell that fused the seven elements into one. It was a technique of such magnitude that few could even comprehend its existence.

"Fire, flame of life, grant me your burning wrath!" The first elemental word left my lips, my aura flickering with heat, the air warping around me as the first thread of fire surged through my veins.

"Water, from the deepest depths, rise and become my force!" The second incantation. A chill ran down my spine as water spiraled around me, coiling like a serpent, merging with my flames.

"Earth, the foundation, steady and unyielding, make my stance as solid as stone!" The ground beneath me quivered. Stone rose to meet my will, amplifying my form with unwavering support.

"Wind, sweeping and swift, flow through me and strike with the fury of a storm!" A gust of wind whipped through my hair, the currents swirling around me with a sharp, biting force.

"Lightning, from the heavens above, crack through the sky and awaken my power!" My body trembled with the electricity coursing through me, the crackle of lightning igniting the air.

"Light, illuminate my path, shining brighter than the sun's rays!" A brilliant light flared from my form, blinding in its intensity, wrapping around my sword, charging it with brilliance.

"Darkness, from the void, consume and empower me, shroud me in your shadow!" The final element flowed into me—darkness, pure and deep, cloaking me in its mysterious embrace, amplifying the threat of the technique I was about to unleash.

Each word, each elemental infusion caused my body to radiate with immense energy. The sword in my hand, once mundane, now blazed with the combined might of the elements. It hummed with raw power, a deadly force beyond anything I had ever wielded.

I stepped forward, the power of the elements swirling around me in a chaotic, yet harmonious dance. My body was a beacon of destructive potential, a reflection of the seven forces united under my command.

With a cold, calculated voice, I spoke its name.

"Sevenfold Requiem—The End of All Things."

The words echoed in the air, the very fabric of reality seeming to tremble at the force behind them. The ground beneath me cracked, the elements thrumming in rhythm with my heartbeat. It was my ultimate technique. The strongest, the deadliest. A strike that could wipe out everything in its path—nothing could withstand it.

I turned my gaze toward Levi. His eyes met mine, filled with that same arrogant confidence. He was ready too. About to tap into his own ultimate move.

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

This was fun. More fun than it should've been.

I couldn't help but grin. This wasn't just a fight. This was pure exhilaration. The adrenaline coursed through my veins, and the rush of battle was like a drug. I wasn't even sure when it started to feel like this.

Maybe when I tapped into this godspeed for the first time, but now? Now, it was something else entirely.

Alina was trying to summon her ultimate move, all calm and collected. Typical. Too Calm. I could feel her energy swelling with every breath she took, every word she spoke—she was preparing, just like I was.

But while she's channeling that raw power with precision, I'm over here, riding the high of the fight. I'm not just preparing—I'm becoming it.

The crowd is still cheering her name. She thinks she's unstoppable with that technique. Cute. But what she doesn't get, what she doesn't know, is that the faster you are—the more insane it gets.

Calmness? Focus? She can have all that. I just need chaos. I need speed.

I lowered my sword to the ground, letting it rest lightly against the earth. The world was slowing, every tiny detail coming to a halt in my mind. My focus sharpened, but everything around me became blurry, indistinct. Time was playing tricks now.

I can feel it—the pulse of time itself. It's mocking me, holding me back, trying to keep pace. But it can't. No, time was too slow now.

And I'm too fast.

I could see the molecules moving around me. The air bending. My every movement was a fractal of possibilities, and none of them were bound by time. Time couldn't keep up with me. I could feel it stretch, bend, break, all within the span of a heartbeat. Everything that moved before was now reduced to a stagnant blur, and my actions were fluid, untouchable.

Time? It was just a concept. One I'd long since surpassed.

I whispered, voice barely audible but powerful. "Shadow Embrace—Convergence of the Abyss."

With those words, I felt the shadows curl around me like a cloak, sinking into my skin, strengthening my form. The dark energy surged, a twisting force that made the very air tremble. The shadows clung to my muscles, my bones, and my mind, weaving into my being, amplifying me until I became the very embodiment of acceleration. Every cell in my body throbbed with pure, destructive speed.

My movements were no longer just fast. They were instantaneous.

For a single second, I would reach the speed of light itself. For a moment, I would outpace the universe. But that wasn't enough. I could feel it. I could go beyond. Right now, I was transcending the limitations of what time and space could even comprehend. I had become a force that the universe couldn't keep up with.

And when I unleashed it—when I let go—nothing would be left standing.

I grinned, the energy crackling within me, every fiber of my being vibrating with the anticipation of what was to come.

"Apex of Infinity."

The words felt right, and as I spoke them, a wave of power surged through me. My body was nothing but speed, nothing but the relentless surge of time-bending energy. The air itself trembled as I flexed my muscles, feeling the explosive force waiting to be unleashed.

I glanced over at Alina. Her aura was blazing, the seven elements swirling around her, preparing for her final move.

I didn't flinch. I didn't hesitate.

I was ready to end it all with her.

And when we collided... the universe wouldn't stand a chance.

### **The Battle:**

The air crackled with tension, a raw, palpable force building between the two of them. In an instant, the space around them seemed to warp, as if the very laws of nature had bent under the sheer power they were about to unleash.

Alina's sword surged with all seven elements—blazing fire, crackling lightning, shimmering water, heavy earth, vibrant wind, glistening light, and deep shadow. Her body was a beacon of pure power, each movement like a calculated strike of nature itself. She swung, a flash of brilliance tearing through the air, the elemental energy trailing behind her like a comet's tail.

Levi didn't even flinch.

Time seemed to slow for him—no, it was slow. His body was a blur, a light trailing in his wake. The shadows flow around him, a dark storm of speed, moving so fast it left ripples in the air. He spun, stepping forward just as Alina's blade passed through the space where he stood, a millisecond earlier. He was already gone, behind her, his blade crashing down toward her back.

But Alina wasn't there.

Her sword twisted in a fluid arc, blocking his attack with a barrier of condensed earth and water, the impact sending a shockwave through the ground beneath them. She

twisted, using the force to propel herself backward, a swift spin that kept her feet on the ground while maintaining perfect balance.

Levi smirked. "Too slow."

He vanished again, his shadow blurring, his body reappearing at her side with the speed of light. His sword arced for her neck, but before it could even touch the skin, Alina's sword shot up, meeting his with a flash of lightning. A thunderous crash resounded in the air, shaking the very foundations of the arena. Alina's body surged with the lightning's energy, propelling her forward as she launched into a flurry of strikes.

Each blow was a dance of elemental fury—flame, wind, and earth all fusing together in an unrelenting assault. Levi barely had time to block, each of her attacks more powerful than the last. Her movements were flawless, fluid, and relentless. The speed of her strikes nearly matched his.

But Levi wasn't worried. He was having fun.

He tapped into his shadow essence, his body flickering in and out of existence, impossible to track. For every blow she landed, there were two of him waiting to strike from different angles. His sword moved with a grace that defied logic, each strike aimed at her with perfect precision, yet always dodging just a fraction of a second too late. She'd blocked, parried, and redirected the attacks, her mastery of the seven elements growing as the battle wore on.

But she hadn't realized one thing.

Levi wasn't fighting her.

Levi was playing with time itself.

As Alina parried a swift series of slashes, Levi took a step back, letting his sword rest lightly against his shoulder. His grin widened as he shifted into his next form, his incantation rising from his lips like a whisper. The world around him slowed even further.

"Shadow Embrace—Convergence of the Abyss."

The darkness around him thickened, spiraling into a dense storm that swirled and raged in perfect harmony with his god-speed. The world seemed to shift, like his very existence was bending the fabric of time.

Alina, noticing the change in the atmosphere, tried to react, but Levi's movements became impossible to track. He moved within the storm of shadows, each movement leaving nothing but streaks of light and darkness.

His sword came down, once, twice, a third time. Each one faster than the last. Alina blocked, her arms moving with incredible speed, but with each strike, she could feel her footing slipping, the pressure mounting.

"I told you, Alina," Levi's voice cut through the chaos, smooth and unrelenting. "You're just a step behind."

His body twisted, a blur of shadow and light, and with a single, terrifying strike, he aimed for her chest. The blade moved faster than she could react, but just as it was about to meet its target, Alina's sword flared, an explosion of pure elemental power, creating a barrier of fire, water, and earth.

"Levi," she said, her eyes narrowing, the glow of her sword reflecting in her gaze, "you may think you're fast, but speed is nothing when you're already dead."

Levi's sword collided with it, but instead of stopping, the force of his strike sent the barrier cascading outward, breaking through her defense with a shocking force. The air was filled with the crackling sound of clashing elements, each one struggling to maintain its hold against the overwhelming power.

But even as Alina faltered, she didn't stop. Her body shifted, and with a single breath, she released her final move, a storm of elemental fury. Every element she had harnessed—every single ounce of magic she had prepared—was focused into a singular, focused explosion of raw power. Her sword blazed with every element as she launched herself forward with a cry that was as powerful as it was desperate.

"Searing Phoenix's Judgment!"

The sword became a comet of light, flame, wind, and water, an unstoppable torrent of fury aimed directly at Levi's chest.

She stepped forward, her aura flaring, her every movement precise and deliberate. "Your next step is the end of your life."

Levi grinned, his eyes wild with excitement. His movements were so fast they didn't even look like they were happening in real time. A flash of dark energy surrounded him as his shadow magic consumed the light, guiding his steps to perfectly dodge and weave through the attack. He moved with such precision, such control, that even Alina's all-encompassing technique couldn't land a blow.

But just as he thought he'd outpaced her again, just as he shifted to land the final strike—

He saw it.



Alina wasn't attacking directly. She had anticipated his movements, predicting the next fraction of a second, the next microstep in his motion. The strike was not just an attack—it was a counterattack, a trap.

Levi's eyes widened for the briefest moment, just enough for Alina's blade to flash through the air with devastating force.

The impact sent a shockwave through the arena. The earth cracked, the elements clashed, and for a heartbeat, the world seemed to stand still.

Then—boom.

A massive explosion, a burst of energy so powerful it left everything in ruins.

Dust and smoke filled the arena, obscuring everything. The roar of the crowd was drowned out by the blast, and all that could be heard was the deafening silence that followed.

### **Unknown Perspective:**

The smoke from the explosion lingered in the air, swirling like a ghost caught between two worlds. The telecaster flickered, its magical essence attempting to clear the haze and reveal the outcome of the battle.

But there was something in the air. The tension, thick with uncertainty. Sylvia leaned forward, her eyes burning with curiosity as she searched through the smoke, her voice slightly strained.

"Impossible," she muttered, half to herself, as her gaze never left the screen. "I've known Alina for years... she's never been like this."

Her fingers clenched around the armrest of her chair, a sign of her unease. I could almost taste her disbelief, mixed with a growing admiration. She trusted Alina—deeply.

The telecaster cleared a fraction, revealing silhouettes locked in combat, but neither Levi nor Alina's figure seemed to have the upper hand. Both were standing, somehow, as if the blast had only given them more fuel.

"Sylvia," I said, my voice smooth but amused, "calm down. I told you she wouldn't lose."

Her sharp eyes snapped to me. "Don't tell me to calm down." Her usual composure wavered for a split second, and for a brief moment, I saw her almost as human as anyone else. "She... she called all seven elements—"

"I know," I said, cutting her off, the corners of my mouth twitching with amusement. "Pretty impressive, right?"



Sylvia's lips parted in disbelief. "Levi transcended—he's beyond even time, and she's standing there. Calm." Her voice was filled with awe, but there was a sharp edge to it, something almost reverent. "No one's ever stood against Levi like that."

I chuckled, the sound more like a quiet murmur of amusement. "But here we are, aren't we? I guess Alina's done a little more than just stand."

She gave me a quick, sharp look. "You know, for someone who bet against Levi, you're awfully calm about this."

"Why wouldn't I be?" I said, leaning back, placing my hands behind my head as I settled into my chair. "I saw it coming. Like I said, Alina's got more fight in her than anyone's given her credit for."

Sylvia shot me a skeptical glance, but I could tell she wasn't sure whether to agree or argue further. The smoke was still thick, and the telecaster wasn't clear enough to reveal the end result yet, but it was obvious that one of them would fall soon.

"And Levi..." Sylvia trailed off, her expression hardening slightly as she scanned the screen, a small frown tugging at her lips. "He's fast, but this time... even his speed can't be the deciding factor, can it?"

I leaned in, a little more serious now, sensing the shift in Sylvia's demeanor. "Levi's speed is god-like, yes. But Alina has something he can't keep up with. Not the speed. But the will. She's not just fighting to win; she's fighting for something."

Sylvia narrowed her eyes at me, her gaze piercing. "I'm not sure I buy that, Aldric. Levi's strength is absolute, and Alina's—"

"Alina's power comes from within," I interrupted smoothly, as though I were merely stating the facts. "She created her own way. And you're seeing it now."

The telecaster flickered again, the smoke beginning to clear. The tension in the room thickened as both fighters appeared more bloodied, but neither had yielded yet. The intensity of the battle was palpable, almost like a living thing.

"You said she wouldn't lose," Sylvia muttered, but this time, there was an edge of uncertainty in her voice, a hint of awe creeping in.

I smiled softly, watching as Alina and Levi exchanged another furious flurry of blows, their moves almost too fast to track. "See? Told you."

Sylvia didn't respond right away. She was too focused, too deep in thought, watching her own fighter—a fighter she trusted with her life—fight a battle beyond her wildest expectations. The air in the room grew thick, but in that silence, Sylvia let herself breathe.

She'd already seen what Alina was capable of. Now she was just waiting to see if the young fighter would have the last word.

"Alright," Sylvia finally said, turning her gaze back to me. She wore a subtle smile now. "You've earned this one."

I shrugged casually. "Don't worry, there'll be plenty more bets where that came from."

The telecaster shifted, showing both figures now in a deadlock. It wasn't over yet, but it was clear that the battle would leave a scar on them both. "A little late to be a betting man, don't you think?" Sylvia said, leaning back, allowing herself a moment of quiet pride for her own bet. "But I'll admit, she did impress me."

"Impressed or worried?" I teased, the amusement still dancing on my face.

Sylvia gave me a quick, knowing smile. "Both. But don't get too comfortable, Aldric."

I raised a brow. "Why? You think she'll lose now?"

"I think," she said, her voice cool and collected once again, "you're going to get your answer very soon."

The telecaster shimmered, and the two combatants collided once again, the clash of power reverberating through the air.

The smoke began to clear, and the tension in the air thickened to a point where it almost felt like time had stopped. The telecaster slowly revealed the aftermath of the clash, and what it showed was nothing short of astonishing.

Both Alina and Levi stood there, gasping for air, their bodies trembling with exhaustion. They had taken two slow steps toward each other, as if they were too worn out to continue the fight at full force. Their weapons were lowered, their movements sluggish, and their eyes locked, both of them searching for the strength to make the final blow.

The silence in the arena was deafening. Even the crowd—normally roaring with excitement, a wave of noise that would have shaken the walls—was completely still. Everyone was on edge, waiting for the next move, watching with bated breath, as if the entire world had paused to witness the outcome.

Then, almost in unison, both collapsed. Alina and Levi fell to the ground with a thud, their bodies too spent to fight any longer. The crowd held its breath for a split second, unsure of what had just happened. Then—chaos.

The silence broke, replaced by an explosion of noise that rattled the very foundations of the arena. The crowd went wild, their cheers echoing through the massive structure, a cacophony of disbelief and jubilation.

People screamed in excitement, clapped, and stomped their feet. It was a draw—something no one had expected. A fight of this magnitude, this intensity, had never before ended in such a simultaneous collapse. The energy was electric, the atmosphere alive with excitement and amazement.

"That was... incredible!" I heard Sylvia whisper, her voice filled with awe as she leaned forward, her eyes locked on the telecaster.

Even the arena's outer walls seemed to hum with the joy of the crowd, the cheers reverberating through the telecaster's magical interface, carrying the wild sounds of the spectators right into the room with us.

I could almost feel the vibrations in the air, the shared excitement from the crowd seeping through the magic and making its way to us. The atmosphere was intense, as if the very air itself was celebrating the fight that had just unfolded.

Sylvia's lips curved into a small, almost imperceptible smile. "A draw," she said, more to herself than to me, her voice soft with a hint of surprise. "I didn't think either of them would back down." She shook her head, clearly impressed by the sheer resilience of both Alina and Levi. "But Alina... to have stood there, toe-to-toe with Levi..." Her voice trailed off, as though she was still processing what had just happened.

I watched her, my expression unreadable, but inwardly, I was smiling. "I told you, didn't I?" I said, the satisfaction evident in my voice.

Sylvia turned to me, her brow raised, but I could see the admiration in her eyes, even if she wouldn't admit it. "You're insufferable," she said, the words tinged with amusement. "But I can't deny it. She held her own."

I leaned back, relaxing in my seat as the noise from the arena continued to flood our senses. "I always know what I'm talking about."

She shot me a pointed look, but it was clear she wasn't about to argue anymore. Alina had proven herself, and even if she didn't admit it, Sylvia knew it. The crowd's cheers were still loud and thunderous in the telecaster's feed, but for now, the focus was back on us.

The noise from the arena still reverberated in the air, but the conversation between Sylvia and I shifted back to the earlier tension—the bet. It wasn't over yet. The outcome of the fight didn't give either one of us the resolution we were looking for. I leaned forward, my eyes never leaving her as I spoke.

"We still need to decide something for the bet," I said, my tone casual but with an underlying sharpness, a challenge lingering in the air. I could tell she wasn't done processing, and I wasn't about to let it slide just yet.

Sylvia didn't seem to miss a beat. She let out a breath, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Neither Levi nor Alina won or lost," she said, voice calm, but I could tell she was ready to dig into the details, her mind calculating the next move.

I smiled faintly, allowing the silence to stretch before I spoke again. "I've got a solution," I said, a hint of amusement dancing in my words. "I think we can call this a draw, but still come to an agreement."

Her eyes flickered, intrigued by my proposal. She tilted her head slightly, leaning back in her chair and giving me an expectant look. "Continue," she said, her tone commanding, but not in a way that implied impatience—she wanted to hear me out.

She rested her chin on her hands, fingers interlacing as she studied me. There was something calculated in her gaze, something like she was analyzing every word before it even left my mouth. I leaned back in my chair, finally feeling the shift in the air as the room seemed to focus solely on this moment.

"I propose," I began, pausing to let the words settle, "that you get to ask me any question you want. Anything at all." I let the pause linger, my voice a shade quieter, testing the waters. "But in exchange, as part of our agreement, you'll have to do something for me."

Sylvia's expression shifted, her eyebrows raising just slightly, and I could see the flicker of interest in her eyes. She wasn't surprised, but she was definitely intrigued. Her voice softened slightly, the edge gone. "And what would that be, Aldric?" She didn't let me off the hook just yet.

I slowly reached into my jacket pocket, pulling out a folded letter and placing it gently on the table between us. I watched as her gaze followed the movement of my hands, her focus zeroing in on the letter I had just placed in front of her.

Her eyes flicked back up to mine, a mix of curiosity and suspicion crossing her features. "A letter?" she asked, her tone guarded, though I could see her thoughts turning over it. "And you want me to deliver this to Alina?"

I gave a slight nod, keeping my expression neutral. "Exactly," I said, the words deliberate. "And you'll request that she reads it as soon as possible."

Sylvia didn't reach for the letter immediately, but I could see the wheels turning in her head. Her fingers tapped on the armrest of her chair, a rhythmic beat, before she finally leaned forward, her expression shifting to something more serious.

"You're making me go through this, just to deliver a letter?" Her voice had a tinge of disbelief, but not from mockery—she was genuinely questioning the simplicity of it. "What's in it for you? What's so important that you'd make this part of our deal?"

I held her gaze steadily, my lips twitching into a faint smile. "It's not about the letter itself, Sylvia. It's about the timing." I allowed that to hang in the air for a moment before continuing. "You see, I'm very good at making sure things happen when they're supposed to." I let the words drip, like honey, sharp beneath the sweetness. "And I trust you to make sure Alina understands that this isn't a request to be ignored."

Sylvia was silent for a moment, her fingers stilling. She stared at the letter, then at me. Finally, she picked it up, her expression unreadable. "Fine," she said, her voice steady and final, her decision made. "I'll have it delivered. But you still haven't told me why it's so important to you. You could have just gone to her yourself, if it's that urgent."

I didn't answer right away, letting the question hang in the air. I could tell Sylvia was expecting some form of clarity. But I wasn't ready to give it to her yet. Instead, I gave her a playful shrug. "I like to work with people who know how to get things done. You, Sylvia, are someone who doesn't waste time."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn't push further. "You're avoiding the question," she said, though there was a slight amusement in her tone now. She was enjoying this little back-and-forth.

"Perhaps," I said, leaning back in my chair with a slight grin. "But that's part of the fun, isn't it?"

Sylvia sat back in her chair again, her hands coming to rest on the arms. She let out a small breath, but this time it was one of acceptance. She had agreed to the terms, even if she was still piecing together the full meaning behind it all. She placed the letter back down on the table between us, as if to confirm her commitment to the deal.

"I'll have it delivered," she said finally, her voice almost softer now. "But don't think I've forgotten about that question you promised me."

I smiled, my gaze never leaving hers. "You'll get your answer."

We both sat there, the tension having dissipated into a quiet understanding. The bet was sealed, the deal made, and now there was nothing left but to see how it would all unfold.

I sat there in silence, watching Sylvia as she leaned back in her chair, her fingers tapping rhythmically against the armrest. Her eyes narrowed as if deep in thought, calculating something. The stillness in the air was almost tangible, and for a brief moment, I wondered if she had already come to some kind of conclusion.

A few minutes passed, and I noticed a shift in her expression—a glimmer of realization in her eyes. Whatever had been brewing in that mind of hers had just clicked. I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow, sensing that the gears were turning in her head.

"Got your answer yet?" I asked, my voice smooth, though I was keenly aware of the change in the atmosphere.

She looked up, catching my eye, and I saw the corner of her mouth twitch into a smile that could only be described as sly. "I think I do," she said, her tone almost playful.

With that, Sylvia stood up, the energy in the room shifting to something more charged. She took a few steps toward me, a little too casually, like she was testing the waters. She seemed almost... lighter, a twinkle of mischief dancing in her eyes. I followed her lead and stood up as well, folding my arms in a casual manner, though I couldn't ignore the subtle shift in my posture. Something about her energy was different now, like she knew something I didn't.

"Go ahead," I said, keeping my voice steady, as if this was all part of the plan. "Ask it."

But instead of stepping back, Sylvia closed the distance between us, walking closer, almost invading my personal space. My heart skipped a beat, but I kept my expression neutral, though the tension in the air was palpable. She stopped just short of being too close—enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

With a smile that was equal parts teasing and curious, she leaned in slightly and asked, "Well, I only got one question."

I felt a subtle shift in the air, her presence too near for comfort. I leaned back just slightly, not wanting to show my discomfort, but I couldn't help myself. "You're a little too close for comfort, Sylvia," I remarked, my tone playful but with an edge.

Sylvia smiled, almost smug, as she tilted her head, seemingly relishing the reaction. "Is it getting you to blush?" she teased, her voice like silk, smooth and sweet, yet with that teasing lilt.

I straightened my posture, trying to maintain my calm demeanor. "Not really. Not feeling it," I replied coolly, keeping my voice steady, though there was a flicker of irritation that I quickly suppressed.

Her smile only widened at my words. "I knew it was you," she said, a little too pleased with herself, as if she had uncovered some deep secret. "This was just confirmation."

I raised an eyebrow, my eyes narrowing slightly. "What was?" I asked, feigning confusion, though a part of me felt like I was walking straight into her trap.

Sylvia's expression softened, and I saw the faintest blush creep up her cheeks—completely uncharacteristic, yet somehow fitting for the moment. "You know," she said with a warm smile, "you haven't changed at all."

I froze for a brief second, my composure cracking just slightly. The words hit me with the subtlety of a blow, and I couldn't help but feel a slight pang of unease. My mind raced, running through the possibilities of what she meant.

I tried to keep my expression neutral, but my thoughts betrayed me. This is bad. She's caught on to me. She's more perceptive than I gave her credit for.

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to maintain a calm face. "What do you mean?" I asked, though I knew exactly what she was implying.

But Sylvia simply smiled again, her eyes gleaming with the satisfaction of knowing she had me. "I don't need to say it out loud, Aldric. I think you already know." Her voice was soft, but the weight of her words lingered in the air, heavy with unspoken understanding.

I let out a sigh, trying to regain some control over the situation. The weight of her gaze was still lingering on me, and I could feel the shift in her energy. She was so damn perceptive—too perceptive for my liking. But instead of pushing further, I chose to give her what she wanted.

"Just ask it," I said, voice steady, though I couldn't quite hide the flicker of frustration behind my words. There was no point in avoiding it anymore. She had me in a corner, and I knew she wasn't going to let go until she got exactly what she wanted.

But instead of asking the question, Sylvia gave me that same teasing smirk. It was a look I knew all too well—the one that made me feel like I was playing a game I wasn't sure I could win.

"I don't want to ask you a question right now," she said, voice light and teasing. "Actually, I have a request."

A request? I raised an eyebrow, intrigued but cautious. "What is it?" I asked, trying to keep my cool. There was something in her tone, something that told me this wasn't going to be a simple request.

Sylvia's smile widened, and I could almost feel her mischievousness radiating off of her. "I want to hug you right now," she said, her voice laced with playful intent. "Tightly."

I blinked, momentarily caught off guard. "No," I answered immediately, without hesitation. "I'm here to answer a question, not perform actions."

She pouted, and I could tell she wasn't satisfied with that answer. "You're still no fun," she muttered, her tone dripping with playful sarcasm.

I just shook my head, a small smile tugging at the corner of my lips. Sylvia never did know how to take 'no' for an answer.



But then, she did something that made my heart skip a beat. With a sly smile, she took a step closer to me, her presence overwhelming in a way that made it hard to focus. She closed the distance between us, and I could feel the tension thickening in the air.

"I have just one question now," she said softly, her voice a velvet whisper.

I couldn't help but watch her closely, feeling the weight of her words hang in the air. There was no way out now, I had to hear this one through. "Go ahead," I said, not bothering to mask the slight hesitation in my voice.

Sylvia leaned in a bit more, her lips curling into a sly grin. "I want to know your real name," she said, her voice filled with a teasing challenge. "The full name. From your mouth."

I sighed, the weight of the moment crashing down on me. It was no use. I couldn't keep hiding anymore. So, this is it, I thought. She's going to hear it.

"Seems like I can't hide it anymore," I muttered under my breath, resigning myself to the fact that I had no choice. "You're not going to let me leave this room until you have it, are you?"

Sylvia just nodded, her smile widening ever so slightly. There was a faint blush on her cheeks now, a subtle sign that she was feeling something more than just curiosity. She didn't speak, but her eyes told me everything I needed to know. The warmth in them wasn't just from playfulness—it was something deeper.

I looked her in the eye, my expression turning serious for the first time since she caught me off guard earlier. I opened my mouth, ready to say the name I had buried for so long, the name I had kept hidden behind a thousand masks.

I took a step closer to her, so close that I could feel the warmth of her breath on my skin. I leaned in, bringing my head to her ear, and whispered the truth—the name that had been buried deep inside me for so long.

"....." I breathed, my voice low, the sound of it almost foreign to my own ears.

Sylvia's expression shifted instantly. The playful gleam that had been dancing in her eyes melted away, replaced with a soft blush. The warmth in her gaze was undeniable, and for the first time since I had met her, I wasn't entirely sure how to interpret it. Her lips parted slightly, but she didn't say anything immediately.

"So it's you, huh?" she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, as if she had just uncovered some long-hidden secret.

I nodded, standing close enough that I could feel the weight of her gaze on me. "Don't tell anyone," I warned softly. "If you do, I won't meet you again."



She didn't flinch, didn't hesitate. There was no change in her posture, but the sly smile on her face only deepened. "Well, you're making me keep a secret," she said, her voice rich with playful manipulation. "So I must get something in return, don't you think?"

I raised an eyebrow, already knowing where this was going. "What do you want?" I asked, the weight of her words making my stomach twist just slightly.

Sylvia's eyes glinted with mischief, and she leaned in even closer, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "I want a long kiss from you."

What the hell? My mind raced, my thoughts a blur. My heart skipped a beat in confusion.

"What did you say?" I stammered, completely caught off guard. This girl... She hasn't changed one bit. As direct as ever. And now she's even more bold than before.

A laugh bubbled up in my throat, but I held it in, trying to regain my composure. How the hell am I supposed to get out of this?

Her eyes never left mine, her smile still sly and teasing, and that damn blush on her cheeks only made it harder to focus. "I said, I want a long kiss from you," she repeated, her tone deliberate, almost demanding. "Do it."

What? I inwardly cursed. Sylvia was pushing me into a corner. This was absurd, even by her standards.

I stepped back slightly, trying to create some space between us. My voice, though calm, was now laced with a mixture of disbelief and a small sense of panic. "Sylvia, that's—" I paused, trying to collect my thoughts. "That's absurd."

Her grin only widened, her eyes gleaming with something that could only be described as dangerous amusement. "Is it?" she teased, her tone light but the meaning heavy. "You didn't think I'd ask for something like that, did you?"

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to make sense of this. Think, think. I had to get out of this, but there was no good way to dodge it without giving away more than I wanted.

"I'm serious, Sylvia," I said, my voice lowering as I took another step back. "That's... not something I can just—" I paused, my eyes narrowing slightly. "You've got to ask for something else."

She tilted her head, her smile almost innocent, though I knew better than to believe it. "Why? You're not scared, are you?" Her voice had an edge of mockery to it, but I knew it was mostly a game. A dangerous one, but a game nonetheless.

"I'm not scared," I replied, though the words felt hollow. "But I'm not going to give in to this. It's absurd. You're better off asking for something else."

Sylvia let out a soft sigh, as if she were disappointed by my refusal. "You're no fun," she muttered. "Always so serious. But... fine."

I let out a small breath of relief, but she wasn't done yet.

"Are you sure you're not just a little bit tempted?" she asked, her voice suddenly more playful again, though there was still a hint of challenge in it.

I didn't answer right away, my mind racing with the possibility of pushing back against this. "Are you joking?" I finally asked, trying to find some way to make this feel less real, less immediate.

Sylvia's smile remained, but this time, it was softer, almost affectionate. She nodded, but her eyes told me something else entirely. There was a flicker of uncertainty, a question I wasn't sure if she had asked herself or if she was simply playing me.

"Maybe," she said, her voice playful yet carrying an undertone I couldn't quite place.

I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. She's always been like this. A tease, an enigma, someone whose words were as difficult to decipher as her actions. I wasn't sure if she had truly meant it or if this was just another game. But one thing was for sure—she wasn't going to make this easy for me.

And as I stood there, watching her face shift from playful to something a little more vulnerable, I realized that the game had just shifted again. Sylvia had thrown me into a corner, and now, I had no idea how to get out.

Sylvia's gaze locked onto mine, her silver eyes gleaming with a mix of playful determination and something deeper, something harder to place.

She leaned in, a subtle smile playing on her lips as she spoke, her voice lower than usual. "Promise me," she said softly, her tone serious, though the hint of mischief still danced in her expression. "Promise me you'll come to Sylvaris again."

I raised an eyebrow, curious. "And what else?" I asked, half-expecting her to throw another impossible request at me.

Sylvia paused, her lips curling up into a sly grin. She leaned in a little closer, her voice teasing, "Next time... without a disguise or a fake name."

I smirked, nodding in agreement. "Alright," I said, though I couldn't help but feel the weight of her words. A part of me was actually looking forward to it.

Well, that's better than giving her a kiss for sure, I mused inwardly. She really is something, though...

I couldn't deny that she was beautiful. Her silver-white hair cascaded down her back in perfect waves, gleaming like moonlight, and her silver eyes were both enchanting and piercing. She was dressed in a gown that accentuated her elegance, the fabric rich and flowing, the soft glow of it reflecting the faint light of the room. It clung to her in just the right way, effortlessly combining grace and power. She looked every bit the confident, charismatic leader she was.

I gave a small nod. "I'll have to go now," I said, feeling the end of our conversation looming over us.

Sylvia's expression shifted, her pout softening the sharpness in her gaze. "Already?" she asked, her voice light but carrying a trace of disappointment. "C'mon, stay a little longer."

I turned, heading toward the door, not looking back at her. "Oh? I've still got some fates left to change," I said, my steps slow but deliberate. "We'll meet again, as I promised."

I could hear her soft pouting from behind me, but it didn't stop me. "Pouting won't help," I muttered, a small smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

Then I heard it, her voice shifting, a seductive undertone creeping in. "You know..." she started, a drawl of mischief in her words. "The offer is still on the table."

I stopped mid-step, my back to her. "Oh really?" I said, my tone not quite matching the intrigue I felt. This isn't over yet, is it?

She chuckled softly, and I could almost hear her smile. "Yes, it is. Do you want me to say it out loud again for you?"

I could feel the weight of the situation, the tension hanging in the air, thick and undeniable. "Don't bother, Sylvia," I said, but there was an edge to my voice that I hadn't intended. I was trying to keep my composure, trying to stay in control.

But she didn't stop. I could hear her steps behind me, growing closer. "But I will..." Her voice was a whisper now, close enough that I could feel her presence without even turning to face her.

I closed my eyes for a moment, fighting the urge to turn around and face her. This damn woman... My mind was spinning, caught in the web of her teasing.

"Do you want me to say it again, Aldric?" she whispered directly in my ear now, her breath warm against my skin.

I tilted my head slightly, pretending to be confused. "Oh? I don't know what you're talking about."

Her lips curved into a sly smile, and her voice dropped lower. "Oh, you know it very well. But fine, I'll tell you once more."

I shrugged nonchalantly, a hint of amusement playing at the edge of my lips. "Okay then, go ahead."

She stepped closer, the soft sound of her steps almost drowned out by the pounding of my own heartbeat. Then, as she walked around to my back, her lips brushed my ear once again. "Oh, you know just... The marriage proposal is still there~"

She paused, letting the weight of her words hang in the air, before continuing, her voice soft but certain.

**"I still want someone like you... just mine, and only mine."**

This woman. She hasn't changed one bit. Seriously. It's like the moment she laid eyes on me back then, she decided: "Yeah, I'm going to make his life hell with love." Oh, Sylvia, still the same.

The same confident, smooth-talking, "I'm older, wiser, and wealthier than you" routine. I swear, if I had a gold coin for every time she threw that line at me, I'd be richer than her at this point.

This is the same woman who once tried to trap me into a "commitment ceremony" by tricking me with a whole buffet of delicious food. Do you think I didn't notice? Her eyes lit up every time I reached for another serving. Smart, manipulative, and still completely insane.

And here she is again, proposing like we're in some cheesy romance novel. Gotta love her... no, wait, no I don't. But I can't help it. She's... charming in that dangerous, stalker-ish way.

I smirked as I turned back to her.

"Oh my, Sylvia~ Still the same person I knew back then," I said with a sly smile, unable to resist the sarcasm. Honestly, I might as well have said it in bold letters by now. She's a broken record, and somehow, it's still playing.

Sylvia, tapping her foot, gives me that look. "So, my Aldric, what's your response this time?" She looks so sure of herself, but I can see the sparkle in her eyes. The one that says she's this close to tricking me into saying something stupid.

She continued tapping her foot, her confidence unwavering. "You know," she started, her voice carrying that unmistakable tone of amusement, **"I know your type very well. I'm mature, older than you, and also rich. I can take good care of you."**

I raise an eyebrow at her teasing. "You know, Sylvia," I say, pretending to think hard about it. "Currently, I think you should be worried about the guild and the current threat of the swarm. Not marriage or sorts."

Sylvia, unfazed, smirks. "Oh, those are in my priority, but having you would only make everything better."

Yeah, no thanks. But good try, Sylvia. You always were the master of trying to win me over with grand promises and way too many compliments. Doesn't work on me anymore.

I chuckle lightly, then flash her a grin. "Ahhahaha."

Sylvia, with that ever-present confidence, asks, "Funny, right? Well then, tell me if you accept the proposal."

I let my grin widen, knowing full well what I'm about to do. With a sly smile and a wink, I take a quick moment to reduce my disguise, just long enough to reveal my true face to her, making sure she knows exactly who's standing in front of her.

"Sorry, Sylvia, currently the wife-gatherer is busy changing fate."

Her face falls just a bit, but she quickly masks it with that calm, measured expression I'm so used to. "Expected," she sighs, but her voice carries a hint of determination. "But don't believe you've lost me yet."

I turn my back on her, reactivating my disguise. "Farewell then, old friend."

Sylvia, still holding onto that little spark of hope, calls out, "Goodbye, my... heart's desire."

I pause, glancing over my shoulder with a teasing smirk. "Nah, not really," I say with a wink, then disappear into the distance, knowing damn well that she's still watching me, probably planning her next move.

Ah, finally leaving her office feels like heaven. The tension in the air, that relentless pull of her words, the weight of her expectations—it was suffocating. A quiet sigh escaped me as I walked down the hall, trying to shake off the strange mix of frustration and... something else. But before I could fully escape the confines of the guild, I spotted Rowan waiting by the door, his arms crossed tightly across his chest, his expression contorted in that familiar scowl.

I gave him a quick nod of greeting, barely sparing him a second glance. "Later, Rowan," I said, waving over my shoulder as I strode past him, my pace quickening as I made my way toward the exit.

Soon, I was outside again, the crisp air of Sylvaris hitting my face with a welcome bite. The tension between Levi and Alina had been... confronting, to say the least. Both of them had certainly earned their titles as Sword Saints, that's for sure. Watching them clash, the way they moved, the skill and raw power in every strike—it was something to behold.

But I had more pressing matters to deal with than their battle.

As I walked, I took in the sight of Sylvaris. The town was a blend of old-world charm and cutting-edge technology. The towering structures, half made of polished stone, half made of sleek metal, stood tall like sentinels overseeing everything beneath them. The streets were lined with shops selling everything from arcane gadgets to exotic foods, the air rich with the scent of spices and the low hum of the town's magical energy.

A few children ran past, their laughter ringing through the air as they chased one another around a glowing fountain that stood in the center of a nearby square. The water sparkled as it flowed in intricate patterns, powered by some kind of magical technology.

A team of engineers marched by, a mix of humans and elves, their tools clinking against their belts, discussing the latest project on their minds. Sylvaris had a way of blending tradition and progress, and it showed in every corner of the town.

I couldn't help but smirk at the sight of an old man trying to sell some magical trinket to a very uninterested woman who was far too absorbed in her book to care.

Passing by one of the grand gates leading out of the town, I couldn't help but glance at the watchtower standing nearby. The city walls were thick, reinforced with both magic and steel, designed to keep invaders at bay. It was strange, really.

Despite the city's beauty, there was always an underlying tension in the air—a sense of watchfulness. The shadows of past battles and threats still clung to these streets.

And now, I was heading out of this place, toward the unknown. Toward whatever awaited beyond the gates.

As the exit came into view, I noticed an unfamiliar presence. It was a man, a bit younger than me, yet he carried himself with a certain... threatening aura. A mist of danger lingered around him, though it wasn't quite tangible—just a feeling in the air that something was off.

He wore a cloak with frayed edges, the fabric looking worn and used, and a black outfit beneath it. His expression was difficult to read—mysterious, almost detached. His brown hair fell messily around his face, and his green eyes seemed to pierce through everything they landed on. There was something about the way he walked, his posture, the way he carried himself that set my senses on edge. Mixed vibes, to say the least.

As we walked past each other, I barely gave him a second thought—just another passerby in a town filled with strangers. But then, after a few steps, he suddenly stopped and called out to me.

"Wait."

I turned, raising an eyebrow, and found his green eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that sent a slight chill down my spine. He looked like he could see straight through me.

He took a step toward me, his voice even but cold. "Care for a short greeting? Just a name exchange."

I didn't have much to lose. It wasn't like I was being threatened outright, just... asked for a name. I nodded, nonchalantly. It wasn't an insane request.

**"I'm Aldric," I said, keeping my tone light, watching him carefully.**

**He stepped closer, his presence oddly unsettling. "Reinhardt," he said, his eyes narrowing as he continued. "Lucas Reinhardt."**

I gave a smile, not giving away anything. "Nice to meet you, Lucas."

He paused for a moment, his lips curling into something that could have been a smirk, though it was quickly replaced by an icy coldness. "It isn't really nice for me, you know."

That statement caught me off guard for a moment. But I said nothing, just raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

Then, with an almost mocking calmness, he added, "You shouldn't be giving fake names to people while hiding behind a fake face and disguise." His gaze hardened, a challenge hidden beneath his words. "Those bandages covering the parts you lack the mana to hide behind a reconstructed body. Funny, really."

My smile remained, though it felt more strained now. So, the boy had figured it out. Clever, though it wasn't like it was a well-kept secret. But then again, I hadn't expected someone like him to see through me so quickly.

**He took another step forward, his green eyes almost glowing with a cold, unwavering focus. "So, now will you tell me your real name and identity?" His voice was low and sharp, almost daring me.**

I stood there for a second, his words hanging in the air.

**Oh really? I thought, my mind simmering with amusement and irritation in equal measure. You want to play games with me now, Lucas?**

My lips curled into a subtle smile, but there was nothing friendly about it. The air between us thickened, and the pressure seemed to intensify as I let him feel the weight of my presence.

I shifted my stance slightly, feeling the coolness in my veins as the distance between us became more than just physical. I'll show you the true difference between us, kid.

This was no ordinary game.

**And he had just invited the wrong player to the table.**