

The Last Step

Chapter 46 - Cheat Skills

Unknown Perspective:

I tilted my head, staring at Lucas with an amused expression—well, at least the face I currently wore did. "I don't know what you're talking about," I said casually, my voice carrying the weight of deliberate indifference.

Lucas stepped forward, his gaze sharp, unwavering. "You know exactly what I mean." His tone was calm, yet the air between us crackled with tension. "Keep resisting, and it just proves how weak you are against the truth."

Ah, the truth. Such a charmingly naive concept. I had spent lifetimes weaving truths and lies into a seamless tapestry, and here he was, a kid convinced he could unravel it with brute force alone.

A faint shimmer of celestial aura flickered in his fingers—a subtle warning. A promise of consequences if I didn't play along.

I exhaled slowly. "Let's say, for the sake of entertainment, that your little fantasy is true. What reason would you have to pry into my matters?" My voice was laced with curiosity, as if I were humoring a child's bedtime story.

Lucas's response was immediate. "Because I have my reasons to be suspicious."

I shook my head, letting out a soft chuckle. "Suspicion," I murmured, as if tasting the word. "A delicate thing, isn't it? So easily influenced, so quick to turn shadows into demons. Are you sure it's not your own paranoia speaking, rather than fact?"

His expression remained unchanged. "You're trying too hard."

Oh? Interesting.

I let out a slow sigh, rubbing my temple as if exhausted by the conversation. "Lucas, you're a smart kid. Too smart, actually. That's the problem, isn't it? You see a puzzle, and you can't rest until you tear it apart. But sometimes..." I paused, giving him a knowing look, "sometimes the pieces don't fit because the puzzle was never meant to be solved."

For most people, that would've been enough—a seed of doubt, a whisper of self-questioning. But Lucas wasn't most people.

"You're still doing it," he said coldly. "Twisting words, turning things in circles. You're using weak elemental magic to manipulate perception." His eyes narrowed. "A spell not known in this generation. Ancient, forgotten... but not to you."

Ah.

Oh.

Now that was interesting.

I could've laughed. No, I should have. It was rare to meet someone who saw through the layers so effortlessly, who didn't just suspect but knew.

Oh, so this kid wants to know my spell? I mused internally, my thoughts like a snake coiling around itself. Who wouldn't? A lost spell of elemental nature magic—one that reshapes, conceals, reinvents. A trick of the ages, forgotten by time yet standing before him in plain sight. He has a keen eye, this one. Sharp enough to carve through fifteen hundred years of deception.

But knowledge is a dangerous thing. And some doors, once opened, can never be closed.

I let my smile fade. My expression, once amused and carefree, turned unreadable, cold.

"I see," I murmured, my voice taking on a lower, more deliberate tone. "You want me to reveal it to you."

"Indeed," Lucas said, his voice unwavering. "I want to know exactly the incantation and method you used to recover that 1,500-year-old lost spell."

He took another step forward, this time with intent. A suffocating aura began to spread around him—one laced with killing intent. A warning.

"And I won't let you go until you've revealed it to me."

Oh.

I wanted to laugh... so badly. The kind of laugh that came from the depths of amusement, from the absurdity of the situation.

Did he truly think he had me cornered? With just some sharp observations and an aura?

How utterly adorable.

Instead of backing away, I stepped forward. A subtle movement, yet it threw Lucas off guard, just as I had intended.

His body tensed for a fraction of a second—a small, nearly imperceptible hesitation. And that was all I needed.

I began to slowly circle him, my footsteps deliberately measured. "Oh my, Lucas. That's quite threatening for a young kid like you." My tone was light, almost teasing. "What are you? Two years younger than me? That makes you... fifteen, correct?"

Lucas's brows furrowed in frustration. "That doesn't matter. You will now reveal it to me—"

I cut him off with a sharp wave of my hand. "Now, now, Lucas. It isn't nice to pry into other people's matters, is it?" My voice was smooth, laced with just the right amount of condescension. "Because so far... I haven't pried into yours."

Lucas raised an eyebrow, his confidence unshaken. "I don't have anything to hide like you," he said, his tone mocking, almost smug.

Oh, poor boy.

I let out a soft chuckle. "Oh, really?" I continued walking, my movements slow, deliberate, my circling tightening ever so slightly.

Then, my voice turned ice cold.

"You're the one hiding your potential."

Lucas froze for the briefest of moments. A blink. A flicker of silence. His lips parted slightly as if about to protest, but no words came out.

Oh, that's interesting.

His reaction was subtle, but it spoke volumes. He thought himself unreadable—confident that he had nothing to hide. But even the smallest cracks in a person's façade were enough for me to slip my way inside.

I tilted my head, eyes locked onto his. "What's wrong, Lucas? You seemed so sure of yourself a moment ago."

Still, he remained quiet. Trying—desperately—to suppress whatever I had just stirred inside him.

It was time, then.

If Lucas wanted to play this game, then perhaps we should both play by the same rules.

I stopped circling, meeting his gaze directly. His aura, which had once burned with golden defiance, now flickered into something darker—a deeper, richer green. The shade of someone who had just realized that they, too, were being cornered.

A smirk tugged at the corners of my lips. "You poor thing, Lucas," I mused, my voice dipping into something quieter, something more suffocating. "You're playing a game of deception with me, and yet you don't even know the rules."

Lucas narrowed his eyes, but I could see the faintest flicker of unease in them. Just a flicker. That was all I needed.

I took another slow step forward, my shadow stretching over him under the dim light. My voice remained calm—unshaken, measured, and cruel.

"Let's start small, shall we?" I said, almost playfully. "Your mana."

Lucas blinked. "What about it?"

I exhaled softly, shaking my head. "You shrink it. Compress it into a pitiful flicker so that no one notices the sheer volume you actually hold. The fluctuations are microscopic—too subtle for the naked eye. Too precise to be accidental. But I see it, Lucas." I leaned in ever so slightly. "And I must say, it's almost... adorable how you thought no one would."

Lucas's jaw tensed, but he kept his expression blank. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

I clicked my tongue, amused. "Oh, playing dumb now? I suppose that works against the average fool, but come on, Lucas. Give me something to work with."

I reached out casually, my fingers grazing the fabric of his cloak. "Then there's this."

Lucas flinched, ever so slightly. Barely perceptible. But again—I noticed.

I let out a soft chuckle, my fingers tracing over the material like I was inspecting an old relic. "Elemental resistance. Celestial resistance. Cursed magic resistance." My tone darkened, turning ice-cold. "You and I both know, Lucas... this isn't something that can be crafted."

The air grew heavier.

Lucas stiffened, his body betraying him for just a moment.

"Now, why would someone go through the trouble of obtaining something like this?" I mused. "Who exactly are you trying to protect yourself from?" I locked eyes with him. "Or rather... who exactly are you afraid of?"

His fingers curled into a fist.

Ah. That one struck a nerve.

"Still nothing?" I let out a mock sigh, as if disappointed. "Then allow me to tie it all together for you."

I took a step back, letting the silence stretch for a moment before delivering the final blow.

"You didn't come through the higher-ranked adventurer gates, did you?"

Lucas's breath hitched.

I tilted my head, smiling ever so slightly. "No... you purposefully entered through the lower-ranked gate of Sylvaris. Slipped past the inspections. Avoided the scrutiny of the higher-rank adventurers." I let the words settle, let them coil around him like invisible chains. "Because if someone had actually checked your mana and that cloak of yours... well." I chuckled, the sound devoid of warmth. "We wouldn't be having this conversation, now, would we?"

Lucas's face was pale. His eyes, wide.

He looked as if he had just seen a ghost.

And I reveled in it.

I took a step back, watching him, giving him a moment to process the weight of it all. Then, with a cruel smirk, I leaned in just slightly, my voice dropping into something sharp and cutting.

"Now, tell me, Lucas." My eyes gleamed with amusement. "Who's the one hiding, really?"

Lucas took a breath, steadying himself. He wasn't breaking yet. No, he was smarter than that. Instead, he lifted his chin, eyes sharpening as he crafted his next move.

"I don't see how any of this proves I'm hiding something," he stated, his voice composed, logical. "Shrinking my mana? That's just good practice. Any decent mage knows how to suppress their presence, especially when traveling. It prevents unnecessary attention."

He crossed his arms, regaining his footing. "As for my cloak? I acquired it through a private channel. Expensive, yes. Rare? Of course. But there's nothing illegal about owning defensive equipment." His words were smooth, deliberate. "And the lower-

ranked gate? That was simple convenience. The higher gates take longer to process entries. I was in a hurry. That's all there is to it."

He met my gaze, unwavering. "None of this is a crime. None of this means I'm hiding like you are with a fake identity."

A solid counterargument. Smart. But predictable.

I sighed, shaking my head. "Ah, Lucas. You almost had me there."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

I let a beat of silence pass before speaking, my voice turning sharper, more cutting.

"Your words are too clean. Too rehearsed. You aren't just coming up with these excuses on the spot—you've thought about them before." I took a step closer, watching his posture shift ever so slightly. "Why would you prepare explanations for things you supposedly have nothing to hide?"

His fingers twitched. His jaw clenched for half a second before relaxing. But I saw it.

"And do you know what else is fascinating?" I continued, tilting my head. "I've learned more about you in these past few minutes than you'd like to believe."

Lucas stiffened. His confidence wavered, just barely.

His voice came quieter this time, tinged with something different.

"...What else do you know?"

Ah. There it was. That little flicker of fear. The uncertainty.

The air around us seemed to grow heavier, the weight of the moment pressing down. Even the sky, once clear, now carried a dull grayness, as if the world itself was shifting in response to the tension between us.

I smiled. Cold. Amused.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Lucas chuckled, shaking his head. "You're really stretching now. If you can't back it up, don't make things up, Aldric."

Oh? Was he still playing the game? How cute.

I took a slow step forward until I stood directly in front of him, close enough to see the flicker of doubt in his eyes. The wind had picked up ever so slightly, brushing past us in a whisper. I tilted my head, my gaze drifting upward.

"The sky's looking rather gray now," I mused, my voice eerily calm. "Might rain soon."

Lucas blinked, taken aback. "...What does that have to do with anything?"

I smirked. "Now, now~ Lucas. Have some patience."

I let the moment stretch, enjoying the silence before my voice dropped—icy, calculated.

"Earlier, when I called out your mana fluctuation, you immediately tried to stabilize it. A smart move. Most would need an incantation to do it, but at higher levels, one can achieve it through silent incantation."

Lucas tensed, his breathing slower, more controlled—an attempt to mask his reaction. He still hadn't caught on.

"What about it?" he asked, his voice steady, but his body said otherwise. "Yes, I can use silent incantations."

I laughed. Loudly. Cruelly.

"AHAHAHA—you're funny, really," I said between chuckles, wiping away nonexistent tears.

Lucas frowned. "What's so funny?"

Then, with the same grin still lingering on my lips, I gave him a dead stare. Cold. Piercing.

"Normally, it takes seventeen seconds for a proper mana suppression incantation. Silent incantation brings that down to eleven seconds." I leaned in ever so slightly. "But you, Lucas... you responded to me within six seconds of my accusation, yet after exactly eleven seconds, your mana was successfully suppressed to an immense degree."

I let that sink in.

"And speaking while silently incanting?" I scoffed. "Impossible. Both interfere with magical boundaries, overlapping their sequences, causing errors."

Lucas didn't move. Didn't blink. His lips parted slightly, but no words came. Ah, there it was—that perfect moment of realization.

"But let's not stop there." My voice was smooth, nearly amused. "Tell me, Lucas, do you think it's normal for the weather to shift so suddenly?"

His body stiffened further.

"The sky was clear earlier, wasn't it? Practically hot. Yet now?" I gestured upward. "A cold gray."

Lucas swallowed, his eyes darting to the sky for a split second before snapping back to me, his concern growing.

I smiled. "It's not a coincidence, is it?"

He said nothing. He didn't have to.

"Normally, altering the weather would require large-scale elemental magic, maybe even multiple mages working in tandem. Yet the moment I called out your suppression—" I took a step closer, my presence pressing down on him, "—you entered a state of high alert and instinctively manipulated the weather to create an environment suited to your needs."

A pause. A breath. A moment of absolute stillness.

"But you made one mistake."

Lucas flinched.

"You didn't use elemental magic." My tone was softer now, more deliberate. "You used celestial magic. Silently."

I tilted my head, watching him as though he were a fascinating puzzle unraveling before my eyes.

"If it were elemental magic, I would've seen the mana fluctuations," I continued. "But there was nothing. No trace. No disturbance."

I took one final step forward, locking my gaze with his.

"So tell me, Lucas..." I whispered, savoring the weight of my next words. **"What's this cheat skill of yours?"**

He opened his mouth—to deny it, to argue, to say anything—but nothing came out.

I smiled wider.

"A skill that casts spells for you? A skill that guides you, tells you what to say, what to do?" I let the question hang in the air before delivering the final blow.

"Hmm? What is this system you're hiding? This system of sage that works for you?"

The silence that followed was deafening.

Lucas stiffened as my hand pressed onto his shoulder, the weight of my touch more than just physical. I leaned down, my breath barely a whisper against his ear.

"We all have our secrets we wish to hide in our lives," I murmured. "Just like you have your reasons, I got mine."

I leaned back, watching the subtle shift in his expression—still frozen in shock, still reeling from everything I had just revealed. His breathing had steadied, but the way his fingers twitched at his sides told me everything. His mind was racing. Searching for a way out of this.

How adorable.

With a smooth, almost silky tone, I mused, "Maybe you should show me some proper gratitude—"

Then, my voice dropped. The temperature seemed to drop with it.

My disguised black eyes flickered for a moment, the illusion cracking. And then, for the first time in this entire conversation, I allowed him to see them—my true eyes. A piercing, void-like blue.

A thin, almost invisible layer of mist-like aura radiated from me, swallowing the air between us, like the abyss itself breathing. My presence shifted, the weight of it pressing against his very core, sending an undeniable message.

Then I finished, my words slow, deliberate.

"For not prying into your matters... while you pried into mine."

Lucas took an instinctive step back, his foot scraping against the dirt beneath him. His body was tense, his muscles coiled—not in preparation to fight, but to react. I saw it in his eyes, the rare, raw moment where he was caught off-guard, a moment he wasn't prepared for.

And then—just like that—I pulled it all back. My presence, my aura, my eyes. The illusion returned, my black eyes settling back into place, my expression once again unreadable.

Lucas exhaled slowly, gathering himself. He hesitated, then finally spoke, his voice quieter than before. "You really don't know when to stop, do you?"

I smirked. "Neither do you, Lucas."

For a moment, neither of us moved. Then, without another word, I turned on my heel, walking away from the gates of Sylvaris.

Lucas remained standing there, watching me. He wasn't following. He wasn't speaking.

He understood.

After all, he still had a path ahead of him—one that led deeper into Sylvaris, where his secrets would remain buried. And me?

I had no need for Sylvaris.

I had other matters to attend to.

And for now, that was enough.

As I walked down the dirt path away from Sylvaris, a deep breath filled my lungs, carrying the scent of damp earth and fresh grass. The wind brushed against my face, its cool touch a small relief from the weight of my thoughts. I stretched my arms, rolling my shoulders as the tension melted away.

Finally, that damn letter was in Alina's hands.

I cracked a small smile, barely noticeable, but it was there. One step closer.

My pace slowed as I glanced up at the sky, clouds lazily drifting above. My mind drifted as well, back to that fight—Levi's duel against her.

Alina had come far. That reckless, stubborn determination in her stance, the way she no longer hesitated to face overwhelming odds... she was strong now. Stronger than before.

"She'll be good enough to protect her while I'm gone," I muttered under my breath, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

For a moment, I let myself enjoy the quiet. The rustling leaves, the distant chirping of birds—small details most would ignore. It was peaceful. Almost enough to pretend the world wasn't a ticking time bomb.

I missed this.

I missed the sound of rain tapping against the ground, the distant rumble of a storm rolling in. A reminder that the world kept moving, even when I stood still.

But peace of mind was a luxury I couldn't afford just yet. I still had time. I still had things to do.

Levinton was next.

I exhaled, gaze sharpening as my next objective settled in my mind. The grotesques of Celestine... they wouldn't be a problem much longer.

As I continued walking, the path forked ahead, leading deeper into the forest. My eyes flickered to a wooden sign planted in the ground, its edges worn from time and weather.

Levinton — 12 miles ahead. Follow the eastern trail through the cliffs.

I stared at it for a moment before a smirk crept onto my lips.

"Seems like we'll finally meet again."

And with that, I stepped forward, ready to change fate once more.

2 Days Later...

Celia's Perspective:

2 Days have passed since my first fight with Evelina. I wouldn't say I've grown much, but... I've been trying, okay? I can feel it. There's something inside me that's itching to break through all the weakness I've been holding onto, and I'm not about to let it stay locked up.

I know I haven't gotten stronger yet, but I've definitely been putting in the work, little by little. It's not easy, though. Some days, I just want to curl up in a ball and forget it all.

Levi's house is... quiet. Almost too quiet. Emma's usually the only one there, and I know she's probably busy with something, so I've been spending my time somewhere else. Somewhere I can focus. My realm of nightmares.

I wonder if I'm crazy for loving it. Seriously. I mean, I spend so much time in this dark place, in a world that doesn't really feel real. And yet... there's something oddly comforting about it. Maybe I'm just a little too attached to pain.

Ugh, stop thinking about that, Celia. I shake my head. "Focus," I mutter to myself.

So here I am, running on the outskirts of Levinton, near the edge of the forest. The cool morning air hits my skin, making me shiver a bit, but I push through it. The trees

surrounding me are tall and thick, their leaves rustling in the breeze. A golden light peeks through the gaps, casting strange shadows across the forest floor. It feels... peaceful, almost like a world apart. But my mind's not at ease. Not yet.

I'm wearing my usual training gear. A loose-fitting shirt to keep me cool, and shorts—nothing fancy, just something that lets me move without restriction. My hair's tied back in a messy ponytail, strands sticking to my forehead with the sweat that's already starting to build up. Running for hours, pushing my limits... it's exhausting. But I won't stop. I can't.

Just a little more, Celia. You've got this. Just keep running. You can do it...

I try to ignore the ache in my legs, the stitch in my side. I'm getting tired. My body's begging for a break. But I can't stop. I won't.

I keep my mind focused on my routine. The routine that's meant to make me stronger. I've learned a lot from my fight with Evelina, even if it wasn't a win for me. I'm not a close-range combatant, but I can be. I've got my chains and thorns, and they're a damn good tool to use up close, but they require a lot more from me than I realized.

I tried them out in the real world, right after that fight. Let me tell you, I almost collapsed from exhaustion after just one attack. And that was only a small move.

It takes so much stamina. I keep telling myself that. In my nightmare realm, I could keep going for days without tiring, but here? Here, I've got to push past that limit, break through it, and build real strength. I can't depend on the dream world forever.

My thoughts drift as I run. I pass a few trees, their bark rough and scarred by time. The air smells fresh, almost sweet, with the scent of the forest filling my lungs. I can hear the distant sound of birds chirping, the rustle of leaves under my feet, the crunch of twigs beneath my sneakers. It's calming... for a second.

And then I spot it.

A river.

It's just off to the side, water gently flowing over smooth stones, sparkling in the sunlight. It looks inviting. I could just stop for a second, dip my feet in, catch my breath... but no. No, I've still got three more kilometers to go. I can't stop now.

But... I slow down, my feet moving to the edge of the river. I crouch down beside it and stare at the water, letting the coolness of the air soothe me.

I glance at my reflection. It's strange. I almost don't recognize myself. The face staring back at me looks so... different from the one I used to see. Back then, I hated my reflection. I hated everything about me. I thought I was nothing more than a monster,

someone who wasn't meant to live, let alone deserve love. Everyone hated me, and I hated myself for it.

But now...

I smile faintly. I didn't think it was possible. I didn't think I could ever smile at myself. But somehow, I'm starting to see something else. Something I didn't think I deserved.

I owe it to someone.

The one person who's been there for me when I was ready to give up.

Thank you, Kaiser.

My smile grows, just a little. I know it's him who changed me. He's the reason I can stand here today, not just as a broken thing that should have been killed, but as a person. A real person.

I stand up straighter, my gaze hardening with determination. "Just stay safe, Kai. I'll get stronger. I'll save you from those grotesques. I promise."

I cup my hands and gently scoop some water from the river. Splashing it onto my face, I feel the cool liquid drench my skin, washing away the sweat, the fatigue, the doubt. And when I open my eyes, I feel something more than just the physical relief.

I feel like I'm finally ready to do what I've promised.

I lay back on the soft green grass, staring up at the sky. The warm sunlight touches my skin, and for a moment, I feel like I could just drift off to sleep right here. It's so comfortable, so peaceful. But no... no—I have work to do. My routine is calling. I can't slack off.

I sit up, brushing the grass off my clothes as I rehearse my daily schedule. Gotta keep it fresh in my mind, or I'll forget something important. "Wake up early. Study cursed magic. Read and memorize the incantation. After breakfast, go outside and train. Stamina training. A 15-kilometer run."

Ugh, yeah. Running. I wish I could be as good as him. Kai. I tried to copy him, I really did. He does 200 push-ups, 200 pull-ups, 200 squats, and 200 sit-ups, and then he runs 15 kilometers to top it off. Every single day for four years. Four years. And then he says, "Since I was injured, I missed this week, so I'm just catching up."

Seriously? How is he even human? I can't even imagine doing that. I barely manage 20 push-ups before my arms turn into jelly. That's like, 10% of what he does. But... I'll keep trying. I'm going to get better. Slowly, but surely, I'll catch up. At least, I can run 15 kilometers. That's something, right?

I grunt as I try to get up. Okay, time to stand. Yes, I can do this!... Well, I can try.

I flop back into the grass with a tired little laugh. Nah, just five more minutes. I can barely move. My body aches, and my legs feel like they might give out if I stand for even a second longer. I let out a little sigh, eyes closed, my smile a little goofy as I rest.

Eventually, I'll get up. I have to. After all, there's more work to be done. Physical combat practice comes next, with my chains and thorns. Gotta make sure I'm getting better, and it's not like cursed magic's going to be enough.

I have to be good at everything, not just some things. I'm still learning new spells. Two more spells aside from Withering Touch, so I'm doing better... but not great. I'll get there, though.

My fingers brush the grass absentmindedly as I rest, watching the river gently flow beside me. The sound of the water is calming, almost hypnotic, but then something catches my eye. A butterfly. It flutters toward me, delicate wings dancing in the breeze. It lands softly on my hand, its wings a brilliant splash of orange and black.

I smile. The butterfly stays there for a while, and I watch it closely. It's like the world slowed down just for this moment. It feels peaceful... beautiful. Maybe I'm not the best at everything yet, but I'm here, and I'm trying. That's all that matters, right?

At night, when I sleep, I practice in my dream land, nightmares. I'm not exactly resting, but it's worth it. I fight through the night for hours, building the techniques I need, even if my body's too exhausted to do it during the day. But... if I can't keep up with the stamina part of it... then it doesn't matter how much I practice in my dreams.

I smile a little, looking up at the sky. It might not be the best routine, but it's mine. And I'm sticking to it. I'm going to get stronger—stronger than I am right now. I'll do whatever it takes to save him. To save the one person who means everything to me.

Kai...

My heart flutters at his name, and for a moment, everything seems clearer, like the path ahead of me has just opened up a little wider.

I miss you.

Then, I hear it. The sound of footsteps behind me, familiar, almost like... I freeze. The way they sound. I know these steps. I know this rhythm. It's him.

Kai?

Chapter 47 - The One in Control

Celia's Perspective:

As I lifted my head and finally got a proper look at the person standing in front of me... I was speechless.

What in the world am I even looking at?

This guy—who I had foolishly mistaken for Kai—was some weirdly dressed man wrapped in bandages, wearing an overcoat and a silly white shirt. Or, at least, I think it was a shirt. Half his face and even one of his eyes were covered in bandages, and with his messy black hair and black eyes, he looked like he'd either walked out of some tragic war... or a really bad fashion disaster.

So much for expecting Kai. Instead, I get this random person who looks absolutely nothing like him.

The man was walking along the dirt path, heading toward Levinton with his finger on his chin, like he was lost in thought. He seemed like one of those guys who'd narrate something overly deep for no reason. "The path ahead is unknown... but alas, I walk." That kind of person.

Then, as if realizing my presence, he glanced at me. And stared.

I stared back.

He kept staring.

Okay... weird. Who even is this random bandage-wrapped wanderer, and why is he staring at me like I'm a rare collectible? I mean, sure, I'm adorable, but that's beside the point.

Before I could call him out, he suddenly spoke.

"Excuse me, this is the path towards Levinton, correct?"

I blinked. Wait, hold on. He talked to me? That was new. Usually, people avoided me like I carried the plague. I am the 'cursed' girl, after all—the one people whisper about in fear. But this guy? He just asked me for directions like I was some normal person.

For a second, I didn't even know how to react. But, recovering quickly, I nodded and pointed toward the path.

"Yep, that way," I said.

"Ah, got it." He nodded in thanks, but just as I thought he'd move along, he gave me another look and added, "You know, little girls like you shouldn't be alone near the forest."

...

Little girl?

LITTLE GIRL?

DO I LOOK LIKE A LITTLE GIRL?!

Excuse me, but who does this wrapped-up stranger think he is?! I am not a little girl! I mean, sure, maybe I'm a bit smaller than average. Maybe I have a cute face. Maybe I— wait, that's not the point!

I clenched my fist and puffed out my cheeks, feeling personally attacked. "I'm not a little girl!" I huffed.

The man raised his hands in surrender, acting as if I was about to throw hands. (Which, let's be honest, was tempting.) "My bad," he said, "Sorry, you must be a lost child, then."

...

Oh, oh, it's war now.

"Lost child?! Do I look lost to you?!" I snapped, throwing my arms up.

"Well, yeah. You're standing in the middle of nowhere, looking confused."

"I was thinking! That doesn't mean I'm lost!"

"Thinking? Huh. Must've been tough."

I gasped. Did he just—

"I'll have you know, my thoughts are very deep and important!"

"Oh? Like what?" He crossed his arms, giving me a smug look.

"Like how annoying people wrapped in bandages should just mind their own business."

"Ouch. I felt that." He placed a hand over his chest like I'd wounded him. "But it's okay, I forgive you. Kids say mean things sometimes."

Oh. Ohhh.

I squinted at him. "Okay, listen here, mummy-man—"

"Wow, mummy-man? That's original."

"Look, I don't know who you are, but I am not a child!"

He gave me a once-over, then raised an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. Sure. And I'm the king of Levinton, they call me Emperor around here.."

"Oh wow, then why don't you walk into town and claim your throne, Your Highness?"

"Can't. I'm too busy being a mysterious traveler with a tragic backstory."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh please, you look less like a tragic hero and more like someone who lost a fight with a roll of bandages."

He let out a laugh at that, and to my complete surprise, I found myself smiling. He was annoying—really annoying—but... kind of fun to talk to? Like an older friend who pokes fun at you just to see you get mad.

Still, I couldn't let him win.

I crossed my arms, giving him a smug smirk. "So, mummy-man, got a name?"

He hummed, acting like he was thinking about it. "I might."

"And?"

"Not telling you."

I narrowed my eyes. "Then I'm just going to keep calling you mummy-man."

He shrugged. "Fine by me, lost child."

I let out a dramatic sigh. "Why do I always meet the weird ones?"

He chuckled. "Fate, probably."

I stuck my tongue out at him.

And for some reason... I found myself laughing.

As he waved, a smirk tugging at his lips, he said, "Anyways, lost child, take care and be safe."

I scoffed, puffing out my cheeks in protest. "I told you, I'm not a lost child! But whatever, mummy-man, don't go tripping over your own bandages on the way." I crossed my arms, shooting him a playful glare.

He chuckled, shaking his head as he turned away, walking down the path toward Levinton.

I let out a small huff before dropping onto the grass, letting the cool earth press against my back. The sky above stretched endlessly, soft clouds lazily drifting by. A breeze ran through my hair, and for once, I felt... light.

Then—his voice carried through the air, smooth and amused.

"The name's Aldric. Just that for you."

I blinked, turning my head slightly, watching as he walked further away, his bandaged figure blending into the road ahead.

A name.

He told me his name.

A small, faint smile crept onto my lips.

It was... nice. Talking to someone. Actually having a conversation where I wasn't met with fear, disgust, or people just flat-out ignoring my existence. It wasn't much, but it was something. A rare little moment where, even for just a few minutes, I felt like a normal girl.

And honestly? That was kind of a big deal.

Maybe today wasn't so bad after all.

"Hmph." I puffed up my cheeks, crossing my arms as I lay flat on the grass, staring at the sky like it had all the answers to my problems. "I really thought it was Kai... but nope, just some bandaged weirdo. What kind of scam is this?"

I kicked my legs up slightly, then let them flop back down, dramatically sighing. "One second I was excited, thinking, 'Oh wow! Kai's here to see me!' and the next? Boom. Some half-mummy, half-sarcastic disaster with an overcoat." I rolled onto my stomach, burying my face into the grass. "I need a refund on my expectations."

I dramatically threw my arms out, lying spread-eagle on the grass. "First, I mistook a bandaged cryptid for my Kai. Next thing you know, I'll be calling trees 'handsome' and falling in love with a particularly well-dressed rocks."

I squinted at a nearby rock. "...No. No, we are not starting that."

I groaned into the grass again, voice muffled. "I need a reboot... and a cookie. Definitely a cookie."

I lay there, face smushed into the grass, fully ready to let the earth reclaim me. "This is nice. Maybe I'll just stay here forever. Become one with nature. Let the wind take me. A leaf girl. A forest spirit."

Then it hit me.

Like a brutal slap of reality straight to the face.

My routine.

My stamina training.

My fifteen-kilometer run.

"...Oh no."

I slowly lifted my head, dread washing over me. "I still have to run. And then practice combat." My voice was hollow, like I had just remembered my own execution date.

I sighed, flopping back onto the grass in defeat. "Why did I make my routine so strict? Why couldn't I have picked something easier, like... I don't know, napping? Competitive snacking?"

I kicked my legs a little, internally screaming. "No, Celia. You promised yourself you'd get stronger. You vowed to be more like Kai. No excuses."

I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with the crisp air, then exhaled with a long, dramatic groan.

"Alright, fine, FINE. I'll do it. But if I collapse midway through my run, I'm blaming Aldric. For existing. And for not being Kai."

With that, I dragged myself off the ground, pouting the entire time.

It was time to run once again.

While Celia was running and pushing herself to improve, Zain had no luxury of rest. The grotesque situation was only worsening, and now he had another concern—Xander.

Zain's Perspective:

I crossed my arms, staring down at the mess of a human sprawled across my bed. Xander had somehow managed to take up the entire thing—arms spread, one leg dangling off the side, and the blanket barely covering him. His sword, carelessly tossed on the floor, was dangerously close to my foot. The guy was a Sword Saint, yet here he was, looking like he had fought the battle of the century just to turn over in his sleep.

"Xander," I said, my tone firm. "Get up."

His response? A lazy groan followed by a half-hearted attempt to roll over—except he didn't roll. He just flopped onto his side like a dead fish.

"Ten more minutes..." he mumbled, burying his face deeper into the pillow.

I exhaled sharply. "No. We have a guild meeting. Get up."

"Mm. That sounds... really exhausting." His voice was muffled, barely audible. "Just tell the members I died in my sleep or something... They'll understand."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Xander."

"Ugh, fine." He lifted a hand, waving it dismissively. "Go on, start the meeting without me. Spiritually, I'll be there."

I grabbed his arm and started pulling. Nothing. It was like trying to move a boulder.

"Why are you so heavy?" I grumbled, yanking harder.

"Muscle density," he replied lazily. "Comes with being a Sword Saint. Can't help it."

"Then move your 'dense' ass off my bed."

"Nah."

I let go of his arm, only to grab his leg and try pulling him that way. His response? He stretched his arms above his head, yawned, and sank even deeper into the mattress.

"You're doing this on purpose," I accused.

"Maybe," he said, smirking slightly.

This guy...

Fine. If force wouldn't work, I'd have to change tactics. I released his leg and stood straight, pretending to consider something. Then, in my most casual tone, I said, "Alright, I'll just eat that limited edition celestial peach tart I brought in yesterday. Thought maybe you'd want a slice, but—"

Xander sat up so fast I almost stepped back. His half-lidded, uninterested eyes were now sharp with suspicion. "...You're lying."

I raised an eyebrow. "Am I?"

He stared at me, trying to read my expression. A second passed. Then another.

"...Tch." He swung his legs off the bed, rubbing his eyes like a child who had been forced to wake up before noon. "If I find out you were bluffing, I'm sleeping on your bed for the next three days."

"You already did that," I muttered.

Xander stretched, cracking his neck. "Yeah, but I'll make it worse. I'll sleep diagonally."

I clenched my fists. "You're a menace."

"And you just bribed me with food," he shot back, finally standing. "Who's the real villain here?"

I sighed. "Just get dressed, Xander."

"Yeah, yeah..." He grabbed his sword off the floor, yawning again. "But seriously, I better see that peach tart when we get there. Otherwise, I'm taking your bed permanently."

I had made a deal with the laziest devil.

I sighed as I pulled open my wardrobe, staring at the neatly folded clothes inside. My room—hell, my whole house—used to be a place of order, discipline, and, most importantly, peace. But the past two days? Chaos. Absolute, unbearable chaos.

And it was all thanks to him.

I cast a quick glance at my bed, where Xander was still sitting, rubbing his eyes like he had just experienced the most exhausting event of his life—waking up. He stretched, yawned, and scratched his head lazily before flopping back onto the mattress.

This man... is supposed to be a Sword Saint? How?

I shook my head and grabbed a dark shirt from the wardrobe, slipping it on. As I adjusted the fabric, my fingers brushed against a scar on my chest—an old wound from a time when my life actually had structure. A time before I had a roommate who thought 'our home' was an acceptable term when referring to my house.

Two days ago, Levi had left for Sylvaris, which was fine. He was the guild leader; he had things to take care of. But before leaving, he had written a letter to Xander, summoning him to help with the grotesques situation. That was a great idea. Really, it was. Except... instead of going to the guild like a normal person, Xander found me and decided my home was the better option.

As a responsible representative of Celestial Apex, I figured I'd be courteous. That was my first mistake.

Because within a single day, Xander had—

- Rearranged my entire furniture setup just to "find the best angle for napping."
- Claimed my favorite chair as his throne and refused to move from it unless bribed with food.
- Somehow managed to eat an entire week's worth of rations, all while complaining about how much effort eating required.
- Started calling my house our house, as if this was some sort of joint living arrangement.

That last one really got to me.

"This is not 'our home,'" I had told him yesterday.

"You sure?" he had replied, tilting his head. "Because, like... I live here now. Feels like it."

"You do not live here."

"Well, I sleep here. Eat here. Breathe here." He had smirked. "That's kinda like living, don't you think?"

I had never felt such a strong urge to throw someone out a window in my life.

Sighing, I grabbed my coat and slid it over my shoulders, straightening it before adjusting the cuffs. I shot another glance at my bed. Xander had finally stood up, though his posture was as relaxed as ever.

He was wearing a loose, wrinkled tunic—half-buttoned, because of course it was—and a pair of pants that looked like he barely put in the effort to tie them properly. His hair? A complete mess. His sword? Hanging from his belt at an awkward angle, like he hadn't even tried to fasten it right.

I rubbed my temples. "You look like you just lost a battle against basic hygiene."

Xander blinked. "Nah, I just didn't feel like winning."

My eye twitched. Why am I dealing with this?

Oh, right. Levi.

That bastard had gone missing for two days now, not even bothering to reply to my messages. He was the reason I was stuck handling this disaster of a human being.

I sighed again, buttoning my coat as my thoughts drifted back to when I first met Xander.

It had been near the edges of Levinton. A grotesque had been lurking around, ready to tear apart whatever unfortunate soul crossed its path. I had barely drawn my sword before Xander moved—swift, effortless, almost lazy in his motions.

But his blade work? Masterful. No wasted energy, no hesitation. He cut down the grotesque in minutes, his expression barely shifting, as if he had just swatted away an annoying fly.

I had been shocked, to say the least. Someone with that level of skill... and this level of laziness?

It still didn't make sense.

Does he even exist? Like, actually?

Before I could lose more brain cells thinking about it, Xander stretched again, letting out another long, exaggerated yawn. "Alright, alright. Let's get this over with," he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "The faster we go, the faster I can get back to my nap."

I stared at him. "That's not how this works."

"Sure it is." He strolled toward the door, waving lazily over his shoulder. "Come on, roomie, let's get moving."

I clenched my jaw. "For the last time. This is not our home."

"Yeah, yeah, let's discuss it later. You still owe me that peach tart, by the way."

I took a deep breath. This was going to be a long day.

As we stepped out of the house, I took a deep breath of the fresh morning air, hoping it would cleanse my soul of the absolute nonsense I had been dealing with for the past two days.

Xander, on the other hand, stretched his arms over his head, letting out a yawn so dramatic I thought he might just fall back asleep mid-step.

"You know," he mumbled, rubbing his neck, "waking up before noon should be illegal."

I side-eyed him. "You woke up at eleven-thirty."

"And? That's still too early."

I sighed, already regretting this walk.

Levinton was alive as usual, the streets bustling with merchants setting up their stalls, adventurers boasting about their latest hunts, and kids running around with wooden swords, dreaming of becoming the next great adventurer. The scent of fresh-baked bread from the bakeries mixed with the not-so-pleasant aroma of a nearby stable, creating a unique morning experience.

Xander lazily took in the sights, hands still stuffed in his pockets. "Man... I forgot how much effort walking is. Can't we just take a carriage?"

I scoffed. "You've been living in my house for two days. You haven't spent a single coin. You paying for the carriage?"

He let out a thoughtful hum. "I mean... you're the responsible one. Doesn't that mean you should pay?"

I stopped in my tracks, turning to stare at him. "I should pay?"

Xander shrugged. "Think of it as compensation. I've been suffering under your strict household rules, after all."

"Strict?" My eye twitched. "The only rule I gave you was to clean up after yourself."

"And I did. Eventually."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "No, you shoved all the mess under my bed and called it 'storage.'"

He smirked. "Worked, didn't it?"

I exhaled through gritted teeth and kept walking. He followed at his own lazy pace, eyes scanning the town like he was sightseeing.

"Levinton hasn't changed much," he mused. "Still got that charming, rustic look. Cozy, in a might-get-stabbed-in-an-alley kind of way."

I sighed. "It's not that bad."

"Uh-huh. Tell that to the guy over there selling mystery meat at half price. Why is it glowing?"

I followed his gaze and immediately decided I didn't need to know.

We passed by a few adventurers clad in mismatched armor, arguing over a quest poster pinned to the town board.

"Slay five grotesques near the southern forest—reward: twenty silver?" Xander read aloud. "Huh. That's a ripoff. One grotesque should be worth at least fifty."

"Not everyone gets to be a Sword Saint, Xander."

"Yeah, yeah. Tragic." He yawned. "Speaking of grotesques, how bad is it? Levi called me here for them, but I never actually asked for details."

I frowned. "We've been getting more reports of grotesque sightings near the town's outskirts. It's not just strays anymore—it's like something is pushing them closer."

"Huh." He blinked. "Sounds bad."

"It is bad."

"...Still doesn't explain why you needed me here, though."

I shot him a glare. "Because you're a Sword Saint, Xander."

"Yeah, but did Levi really think I'd jump out of bed for this?"

I gritted my teeth. "You didn't jump out of bed. I had to drag you out."

"Semantics," he waved off, as if I was the one being unreasonable.

By the time we reached the guildhall, I was already exhausted—and not because of the walk. I was used to Xander's nonsense, but dealing with it was another thing entirely.

Then, I noticed the group of guild members standing outside, their faces pale with panic.

"That," Xander muttered, tilting his head, "doesn't look promising."

I straightened my coat, already bracing myself for whatever mess was waiting for us. "Fantastic."

The moment we stepped up to the guildhall, a small group of guild members turned to face me, their expressions tense. I could already tell something was wrong before any of them spoke.

"Leader Zain," one of them started, giving me a quick salute before flicking his gaze towards Xander, hesitating slightly. "We've been hearing strange fighting noises near the forest. It's been happening for the past few evenings, always around this time. It's loud—like a battle is going on, but no one's ever seen anything when we check. We thought it was just animals at first, but now... it's too consistent."

I frowned, arms crossing. "And no one's been able to find the source?"

The guild member shook his head. "Every time we head out, it's already stopped by the time we get close. But it's been getting louder. We think something's out there."

I turned to glance at Xander, who, despite being a Sword Saint, looked more like a man who had just been told he had to walk a whole mile for food. His shoulders slumped slightly, hands still lazily stuffed in his pockets.

"Sounds like a you problem," he muttered.

Before I could even respond, another guild member jogged out from the guild building, stopping just before me, slightly out of breath.

"Zain! There's someone inside waiting for you—says they have information on the grotesques."

I rubbed my temple. Great. Two issues at the same time.

I had a choice here. The fighting noises near the forest could be important—if something was drawing grotesques closer, or worse, fighting them before disappearing, I needed to know why. But this visitor... grotesque-related intel wasn't something I could ignore either. The fact that they came here instead of reporting it through normal channels meant it was either urgent, sensitive, or both.

If I left the noises unchecked, we might lose the chance to find out what's causing them. But if I ignored the visitor, I'd risk missing valuable information that could help us prepare.

I clicked my tongue. Either way, I needed to split the workload.

My eyes naturally drifted to Xander.

He yawned, scratching the back of his head. "So... what's the move?"

I already knew what he'd say if I asked him to go check the noises. Some half-asleep excuse, a complaint about how troublesome it was.

So I went with the only thing that had worked so far.

"Xander," I said, keeping my voice level, "if you go with the guild members to check it out, I'll make sure you get the best steak Levinton has to offer. Extra portions."

For the first time since waking up, his eyes actually showed a flicker of life. "...You're serious?"

"As serious as I was when I had to drag you out of bed."

Xander exhaled through his nose, stretching his arms. "Man... you really know my weaknesses, huh?"

"It's not that hard," I deadpanned. "You only care about sleep and food."

"Hey, that's not true," he defended lazily. "I also care about... uh... wait, don't rush me—"

I gave him a flat stare.

"...Alright, fine. But if this turns out to be nothing, I'm making you pay for dessert too."

"Deal," I said instantly, wanting to lock it in before he could change his mind.

Xander sighed and turned toward the waiting guild members, who all looked slightly hesitant. It was clear they were nervous. After all, Xander wasn't just any swordsman—he was the Sword Saint of Mastery. People talked about him like he was a mythical being, a prodigy among prodigies. Standing in his presence, even while he was acting like a lazy bum, made them visibly unsure of how to treat him.

"Uh... we appreciate your help, Sir Xander," one of them said cautiously.

Xander waved them off. "Yeah, yeah. Just lead the way before I change my mind."

They nodded quickly, still a little awkward. Then, they turned toward the forest, leading him off.

I exhaled, shaking my head before stepping into the guildhall to meet this so-called visitor.

Levi, you owe me for this.

Xander's Perspective:

I should've just stayed in bed. Seriously, I've been living my life fine, just chilling, and then Zain had to go and make things difficult.

Ugh, Zain, you know I hate moving for nothing. What's the point? I'm not going to be the hero here, and last I checked, nothing's on fire or exploding. If it's really that important, someone else can take care of it.

But then... the extra steak.

That was it. He knew exactly how to bribe me—just one extra portion of steak and I'm suddenly the one walking to the woods like I'm on some noble quest. As if I'm going to pass up a full meal just because it's inconvenient.

I bet it's some random monster or animal making noise. Honestly, if I could just sleep through the whole thing and let someone else handle it, I would. But... steak.

I stretch out a bit, not really feeling the need to rush. The guild members trailing behind me seem uneasy, which honestly doesn't surprise me. I can practically feel their nerves crawling in the air. It's like they're expecting me to do something big, something heroic. But all I'm here for is the steak, and maybe a good nap after.

One of the members, a younger guy with his eyes darting around, tries to speak up but stumbles over his words. "Uh... X-Xander, about the noise... you heard it, right?" His voice cracks, and he swallows nervously. He's probably more nervous being around a Sword Saint than the noise itself.

I sigh and give him a half-hearted look. "Yeah, I heard it. What's the big deal? I'm here now. So... tell me. What's with all the racket?"

Another guild member, a girl with glasses, steps forward a bit. "Well... we've been hearing loud crashing sounds, like... things smashing against each other. Not just a one-time thing, though. It happens almost every evening around the same time. It's... it's like someone's fighting. Hard."

"Hmm..." I raise an eyebrow, squinting into the distance as if the noise was still hanging in the air, waiting to be picked apart. "Every evening, huh? Sounds like someone's got a routine. What kind of fighting are we talking about here? Like... someone doing a little practice sparring with a tree or something?"

The girl with the glasses hesitates but answers anyway, "No, it's... much louder. Crashing, smashing. You can almost feel the force in the ground. It's definitely more than just some normal practice."

"Sounds like someone's making a mess," I mutter, already losing interest. But then, a thought crosses my mind. "Any idea who's doing it?"

The younger guy looks even more uncomfortable. "Well... we didn't get close enough to check, but we thought maybe it was a monster. It seemed... violent, like the sounds of a battle, you know?"

I let out a dismissive noise. "Monsters... please. Monsters don't have that kind of rhythm. This sounds like a person. Or a bunch of idiots. But I'll go check it out. Don't want you all thinking some random monster is wrecking the place. Then you'll all get paranoid, and I'm not in the mood for that."

The members exchange glances, and one of them, a taller guy with a nervous fidget, asks, "You'll be alright on your own, right, Xander? It's kind of... strange, and who knows what it could be..."

I roll my eyes and wave them off. "I've got it under control. Don't worry about me. Now, let's go. I need to get this over with."

As we walked further from Levinton, I couldn't help but glance back at the town. It wasn't much to look at, honestly. Small, cramped, with buildings that were sturdy but lacked character. It had that cold, utilitarian vibe to it—practical, but not exactly inspiring. People went about their business, stuck in the grind, never stopping to ask if they were actually happy. That's the kind of place Levinton was.

We reach the spot where the noise seems to have been coming from, and I stop dead in my tracks.

What I see is... unexpected. There, in the clearing, a girl with white hair and red eyes is cutting through the trees like they're nothing more than paper. But it's not just the trees she's cutting. It's the way she's doing it. She's using cursed magic, chains—or maybe thorns? I can't really tell what they are—flailing out from her hands, slicing through the trunks with precision. She's alone, utterly focused, moving with the kind of grace you only see in someone who's practiced something to perfection.

The guild members behind me whisper among themselves. "That's Celia," one of them says, his voice quieter now. "She's the cursed girl Levi let stay with him at his house."

I squint, not really caring about the details. I'm more interested in the fighting style she's showing off. Huh. So this is how she trains? Interesting.

I lean back against a nearby tree, crossing my arms. "Efficient, I guess," I mutter. "But it looks like a lot of stamina's involved. All that flailing around... It's not the most elegant way of doing things. Then again, it works. But who needs that much effort? Seems like a lot of wasted energy to me." I yawn, pushing myself off the tree and walking a few paces closer, still observing.

I let out a lazy breath, letting the tension in my body drop completely. "Guess she's got her own style... but I don't know. Doesn't seem like the kind of thing I'd bother with. Too

much effort for something that could be done in half the time, with half the movement." I glance at the others behind me, catching their wide-eyed expressions. "You know, I'd probably just cut everything down in one swing. Too bad that would be too boring."

I shake my head and call out to her, my voice slow, almost as if I couldn't be bothered.

"Celia," I say, watching her stop mid-motion and turn her head toward me.

Zain's perspective:

I slowly made my way to my office, my boots tapping softly against the stone floor. The echoes of the guild halls seemed to fade into the background as I neared my door. My guild members had mentioned a visitor, someone with information on the grotesques. There was an unsettling chill in the air, a faint sense of unease I couldn't quite shake.

I pushed open the door, and my eyes landed on the man sitting in the chair. His figure was obscured by bandages, his presence unsettling but not in the typical way. It wasn't the kind of disquiet that comes from a monster or an enemy, but rather the calm discomfort of someone who knew too much and wielded that knowledge like a weapon. I paused, sizing him up.

He didn't look like anyone I knew, but there was a certain weight to his presence that demanded attention. He didn't speak immediately, merely sat there, eyes hidden behind those layers of bandages. I didn't know if it was arrogance or calculation, but I wasn't going to let it slide.

"You're the one," I said, keeping my tone steady, though my words were sharp. "The one with information about the grotesques?"

The man stood up slowly, as if on his own terms, like he was never in a rush to be anywhere. His movements were deliberate, measured. He didn't give off the vibe of someone trying to prove anything. If anything, he seemed to be more interested in testing me, in seeing how I would respond.

"That's correct," his voice was smooth, almost too smooth. There was a playfulness to it, like he knew exactly what he was doing, and he liked it.

He paused, letting the silence stretch just enough to keep me on edge, then added, "The name's Aldric," his words almost sliding off his tongue, as if the name itself carried weight. He didn't elaborate, didn't offer more than that, as if I should already understand the significance behind it—or perhaps, the lack thereof. The bandages covering his face only made his presence more unnerving, like an enigma wrapped in mystery, daring me to dig deeper.

I didn't offer a handshake. Instead, I nodded once. "Zain Kaelith," I said, keeping my voice steady. "Second Leader of Celestial Apex. Now, what exactly is it you think you know about the grotesques?"

Aldric's lips curled into a half-smile, though his face was nearly fully obscured by the bandages. He took a step forward, his presence shifting in a way that felt like a test.

"I know everything, Zain," he said, his voice low but piercing. "More than you ever will. That's why I'm here." He leaned in slightly, his tone lowering, as if he were about to reveal a secret. "You're facing something far beyond your understanding. The grotesques? They're not just beasts. They're a method. A tool. A piece in a much larger game."

I crossed my arms, staring at him. "Spare me the riddles. What do you want?"

Aldric's eyes glinted beneath the bandages, as if he was savoring this moment. He took a deliberate step closer. "What do I want? Hmm... I want you to listen, Zain. Really listen. Because what I'm offering could save your guild, your people, and quite possibly, your life."

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to remain unaffected. "And why would I listen to someone like you?"

He laughed softly, the sound like a knowing chuckle. "Oh, I think you will. You will because you know you need to. Because you're in a position where every decision weighs heavier than the last. You know the grotesques aren't just beasts to slay. You know that the war you're fighting is a losing one, unless you take the right steps." He paused, letting the words settle between us, before continuing, his tone now almost condescending. "But you don't need to take my word for it. Do you, Zain? You know how to make your own decisions. I just... help you see things clearly."

I stood there, unmoving, letting his words wash over me. I wasn't foolish enough to let my guard down, but I wasn't going to dismiss him either. There was something in his words—something unsettling, yet strangely compelling.

"You think I'm desperate, don't you?" I asked, voice flat. "You think that I'll take anything that promises a way to stop the grotesques."

Aldric's smile widened. "I think you know when to strike, Zain. And right now, you know this is a strike you can't afford to miss. It's not desperation. It's awareness. You're a leader. You understand the weight of every decision. So... think of me as someone who's simply offering you the tools to make the right one."

I paused. He was good—too good. He wasn't trying to convince me with fancy words or promises of power. He was playing on my awareness, my responsibility. It wasn't something I could ignore, and the worst part? It was working.

I sighed, stepping back and pulling a chair out from behind my desk. "What do you want in return?"

Aldric took a slow step toward me, his tone still light, but there was something dangerous lurking underneath it. "Nothing. For now. But I will need you to remember this moment, Zain. The moment you chose to listen." He gestured to the table beside my desk, where a thick document lay, waiting. "Everything you need to know is in that report. The grotesques' weaknesses. How they think. How to fight them. It's all there."

I stared at the document for a moment, before reaching for it. I didn't trust this man—not by a long shot. But the information was too crucial to dismiss, and deep down, I knew I'd be a fool not to take it.

I grabbed the document, feeling the weight of it in my hand. "We'll see," I said, my voice steady, though I couldn't quite shake the feeling that this was only the beginning of something much more complicated.

Aldric gave me a small, knowing smile, as if he'd won the first round. "Oh, Zain, we already have, haven't we?"

I skimmed through the first few pages of the document, my eyes widening with every paragraph. This wasn't just some quick rundown; this was a detailed, fourteen-page report on the grotesques. Every weakness, every behavior, every tactic—they were all laid out with meticulous precision. There was no way this was fabricated. This was life-changing information.

But as I turned the pages, a thought struck me, and I paused. I looked up at Aldric, who was standing in that relaxed, almost mocking posture.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, voice sharp. "This—this is insane. It's too detailed. Too accurate."

Aldric leaned back, crossing his arms, that smirk still playing on his face. "Oh, this?" he said nonchalantly. "I wrote it myself, obviously. Not every day you get the time to write up a little handbook on how to obliterate monsters." He shrugged, his eyes gleaming. "What can I say? I have a lot of free time."

I narrowed my eyes, not fully buying it, but I couldn't afford to dig too deep just yet. I turned back to the document, now fully engrossed in it, every piece of information pressing me forward.

"You're kidding," I muttered under my breath as I read more. "This... this could actually give us the edge we need."

I continued flipping through the pages, but it was hard to shake the feeling that Aldric was watching me like a hawk, enjoying the effect this had on me. Finally, I closed the

document and sat back in my chair, still in shock. "This... this could change everything. With this, we could actually win. This might be the thing that turns the tide against the grotesques."

Aldric's smile faded into something darker. Slowly, he began walking over to me, his footsteps silent but heavy. When he reached my desk, he didn't stop. He continued moving until he was standing directly in front of me, his gaze sharp, his presence overwhelming.

"So now, Zain," he said in a low, almost predatory tone, "let's speak about my demands for this information."

I raised an eyebrow, leaning back in my chair. "You've already given me the information. It's in my hands. Technically, I don't have to give you anything."

Aldric's lips parted into a wide grin, though his eyes never lost their intensity. The smile was mocking, almost cruel, and it shifted the atmosphere in the room completely.

"Well, Zain, you see," he drawled, his tone shifting back to that playful sarcasm, "in return for all this wonderful knowledge, I need you to do something for me. It's a simple thing, really. Just obey one little order of mine."

I wasn't about to let him push me around. "The document's already in my hand. I don't see how you have any leverage left."

Aldric's laughter rang out, but there was no humor in it. It was hollow, dark, and his eyes grew colder as he took a step forward, his body leaning in, almost as if he were savoring this moment.

"You see, Zain," he said, his voice suddenly lower and more sinister, "the thing is, not everything in that little document is real."

My breath caught in my chest. "What?" I snapped, my pulse quickening.

Aldric's grin widened, his eyes glittering with amusement. "Out of the fourteen pages, eight of them are complete fabrications. Misinformation." He paused, letting the weight of his words settle in. "If you were to follow that report blindly, you'd be setting your members up for failure. And I'm sure you can imagine the kind of destruction that could cause. The grotesques would grow stronger. Their attacks would become more vicious. Your guild would be obliterated."

I froze, my fingers tightening around the document in my hand.

Aldric's expression grew serious. "But if you obey me, if you do exactly as I say, I'll tell you which parts are lies and which parts are the truth. I'll give you the real weaknesses, the true path to victory."

His aura shifted, darkening in a way that made the room feel colder. His eyes bore into me, unblinking, his power radiating with a weight that threatened to crush me under its intensity.

I could feel the manipulation, the pressure mounting. He wasn't just trying to get me to follow his orders—he was bending me to his will, pushing me into a corner where I had no choice but to yield.

I couldn't help but admire the brilliance of his tactic. He was using the most basic human fear against me: the fear of loss. The fear of making the wrong choice. The fear of letting my people down. And with it, he was making me doubt myself, doubt the very information I had in my hands. The moment I considered the possibility that the information might be false, it was as though I had no choice but to follow him. To trust him. To obey.

Aldric had made it clear—without him, I would be walking into a disaster. He knew exactly how to exploit my responsibility, my desire to protect those I cared for, and he was using it to force my hand. He wasn't just manipulating me with threats—he was manipulating me with my own doubts.

This was the kind of psychological warfare that could bring even the most steadfast to their knees. And Aldric knew it.

In that moment, I understood just how dangerous he was. His mind was sharp, calculating. He wasn't just a man with power—he was a master at making others dance to his tune.

And I had just become another puppet on his string.

Aldric's breath was warm against my ear as he whispered, his voice dripping with that same, unsettling calm. "C'mon, Zain. Time's running out."

I could feel the pressure rising in my chest, a knot of reluctance and frustration tightening. Part of me still believed I could crack the code of the documents myself, or better yet, with the help of my guild members. We were intelligent, resourceful—there had to be a way to figure out the truth without becoming a pawn in Aldric's game.

I had access to their minds, their expertise. Together, we could analyze the information. Maybe there was a way to decipher the truth in those pages, find the hidden inconsistencies, and bring the victory to our side without bowing to his demands. After all, this was bigger than me.

But then, I thought about Aldric's presence. He wasn't just some low-level manipulator. The way he'd already infiltrated my thoughts, how easily he'd twisted the situation in his favor—it was like he knew exactly what strings to pull. He wasn't someone you could push around, not like the others I had dealt with before. His mind was sharp, a predator

who could read every one of my moves, and he wasn't scared of anyone. He was a deadly player, and I could sense it, taste it.

Could I afford to risk it? Could I really go against someone who was this dangerous?

But... the document was in my hands, and I couldn't just let him use me like this. I couldn't. It wasn't just my pride; it was the principle of it all. I wasn't going to kneel to this man's whims.

I took a slow breath, feeling the weight of his gaze on me. Then, something inside me hardened.

No. I couldn't do it. I wasn't going to let him win.

"Fine," I said, my voice cold, matching the resolve that was growing within me. "I won't accept your demands. I don't need your help. You've given me the information, and I'll handle the rest."

Aldric's expression didn't falter at first, but I could see the flicker of something darker behind his eyes. He took a step closer, his posture relaxing into a threatening calmness.

His voice, when it came, was coated in something cruel, something deeper. "Are you sure, Zain? Because you'll find out, sooner or later, that information like this comes with a price." His tone darkened, dripping with malice, and his smile twisted back into something sinister.

I couldn't help the satisfaction that rose in my chest as he stepped back. I thought I had won. No strings. No deals.

But Aldric wasn't done. His eyes were colder now, the mockery gone, replaced with something far worse. Something dangerous.

"Oh, Zain," he said, his voice lowering to a dangerous whisper, "then perhaps I'll have to make my own move." His words were slow, deliberate, as if savoring the dread they created.

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean?"

Aldric's smile turned darker, twisted. "I'll just have to make sure Levinton is wiped off the Celestine map, then."

Confusion crept into my mind. "What are you saying?"

Aldric took another step forward, leaning in close again. His breath was cool against my ear as he whispered, "Let's just say I know everything about how your guild does things, Zain."

A cold shiver ran down my spine. His words were laced with an icy certainty, and suddenly, I felt like I was no longer in control of this conversation. I wanted to pull away, but something kept me rooted to my spot, locked in his gaze.

Then, his voice shifted again, this time colder, more murderous than I could have imagined.

"Hidden arena," he whispered, as if each word was a weapon. "Deep inside the guild's stronghold. A place where... weaker members are forced to fight each other. Survival battles. The winners... they get higher rankings, privileges. Things like that."

I froze. My chest tightened, my blood running cold. How—how could he know that? The arena was supposed to be a secret. The one thing even most of the guild didn't know about. It wasn't just a tradition—it was a necessity for those in our ranks who wanted power. But it wasn't supposed to be known. Not by him.

Aldric's voice lowered further, becoming even more chilling, the final death sentence. "But the ones who lose... they're discarded. Or worse. Used for training exercises by the stronger members. They just... they vanish. Some of them never come back. Where do they go, Zain?"

I couldn't answer. I couldn't even think. My mind was swirling, trying to reconcile the impossible with the terrible truth he was laying out. How did he know?

Aldric leaned closer, his smile still devilish. "Anyone who tries to leave the guild... they're hunted down. Killed. Or worse. Some are taken for experiments. By you, Zain. And I know that much."

The words crashed through my defenses like a tidal wave. His voice became a taunting melody that echoed in my skull, over and over again. There was no way he could know this. There was no way he could have uncovered our darkest secrets.

But he had.

He knew everything.

My heart raced as I looked at him, unable to speak, unable to think clearly.

"Don't pretend like you're the only one in control here," Aldric said, his voice cold and sharp. "I know exactly how you keep your little secrets. And if you refuse my deal, I'll make sure they all come to light. Your guild won't even know what hit it."

I felt the sweat trickling down the back of my neck, my hands suddenly clammy. How—how had he found this out? The arena was hidden, kept under wraps for a reason.

Aldric's voice grew even more unnerving, each word wrapped in a cruel cadence that seemed designed to rattle my very core.

"You know," he said, his tone light, almost conversational, "I've seen Levi at Sylvaris. I've seen him go to Requiem, asking for their help. A simple request, really. But have you ever wondered what would happen if I told Requiem everything? About how your guild operates? The little 'secrets' you so desperately try to hide?"

I felt my pulse quicken, a sinking sensation building in my stomach. I didn't like where this was going.

"What will happen?" I asked, trying to mask the unease creeping into my voice.

Aldric leaned in slightly, his eyes narrowing, his smile curling into something colder, sharper. "Oh, nothing really," he said. "But once I tell Requiem these little facts... I don't think Sylvia or Alina would be willing to help a so-called 'guild' like yours anymore." His gaze was deathly, the kind of look that could freeze the air around it. "You see, Zain, you've got a lot more to lose than you think."

I swallowed, trying to keep my voice steady. "What do you mean?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he stared at me with that same, sickening intensity. "As for Xander," he continued, his words deliberate and measured, "he's already very lazy, don't you think? I don't think he'd lift a finger to help a guild where such things happen. He's already too comfortable."

His words pierced deeper, like knives being twisted. Every mention of those close to me—the ones I relied on—felt like a betrayal in itself.

"You see, Zain," Aldric said with a dark smile, "once I reveal all of this to them, it guarantees that they'll walk away from your side. You'll be left with nothing. Not the guild, not the alliances, and certainly not the strength to fight the grotesques."

His eyes glinted with malicious satisfaction. The weight of his words was like chains clamping down on my chest. I could feel my will crumbling beneath the gravity of his threats. I had no way out. I couldn't deny it.

It was over.

I took a deep breath, trying to maintain some semblance of control, but the reality was undeniable. My options had been reduced to dust. I couldn't refuse him—not anymore.

Aldric's eyes gleamed with the triumph of a hunter who'd caught his prey. "Good boy," he purred, as if I had just done exactly what he wanted. He walked up to me, his hand brushing lightly over my shoulder in a strangely intimate gesture. It was like he was mocking me, demeaning me with a touch that made my blood run cold.

I barely reacted. My mind was clouded, a mix of anger, frustration, and the deep sting of betrayal.

"What do you want from me?" I managed to ask, my voice strained, but controlled.

Aldric's smile widened, his eyes gleaming with dark amusement. He leaned in close, his voice lowering to a dangerous whisper. "Simple," he said coldly. "I want all of your guild members guarding the town to return to the stronghold. Leave it empty for a week. Just a week, Zain."

I felt the ground shift beneath me, the impossible nature of his request crashing over me like a tidal wave. I stepped back instinctively, the words sticking in my throat as I tried to process what he was asking.

"That's impossible," I said, my voice tense with disbelief. "A grotesque attack could happen at any moment. We need every single member out there for defense."

Aldric's smile didn't waver, but his eyes turned into something colder, something more lethal. "Impossible?" he echoed, his tone dripping with malice. "What's impossible, Zain, is thinking you have any control left. You're going to let me do this, or you'll watch everything you've worked for crumble to dust. I'm giving you a choice, but make no mistake—you'll pay the price either way."

His words felt like the slow, agonizing press of a vice on my chest, each syllable squeezing the air out of my lungs.

"You think this town matters, Zain?" Aldric asked, his voice now venomously calm. "You think it'll still matter when your guild is scattered, when those closest to you turn their backs, when Requiem knows the truth? You'll be left with nothing. So ask yourself, what's more important? Your pride or your guild's survival?"

I could feel the blood draining from my face as his words wrapped themselves around my mind. He wasn't just threatening me anymore. He was threatening everything. Everyone. My guild, my people, the very foundation of what I had spent years building.

It was blackmail, manipulation... and the worst part was, I could feel myself slowly giving in. The fear was creeping into my bones.

"You think you have a choice, Zain?" His voice dropped to a low, mocking whisper. "You think you can protect this town, this guild, with your pride intact? You think you can stand tall and defy me without watching it all come crashing down around you? How delusional."

He took a step forward, and my body stiffened instinctively, my pulse racing.

"Your guild, Zain," he continued, every word dripping with disdain, "will fall apart faster than you can rebuild it. I know exactly what will destroy your reputation—what will make everyone you've fought so hard for turn against you. The towns people will rebel, the alliances will shatter, and your precious Celestial Apex will be nothing more than a forgotten name in history. A dog's tail wagging for scraps."

I felt my heart clench. He was no longer threatening just me; he was threatening the very foundation of everything I'd built. Every person who believed in me, every ally who trusted me.

Aldric's eyes narrowed, a gleam of sadistic pleasure flashing in them as he spoke next, almost as though savoring the moment. "You're just a dog, Zain. A dog that thinks it has the luxury of barking at the chain it's shackled to. But if you bite the hand that feeds you, it will break you. And when that happens, I'll be there, watching as everything you've worked for crumbles to dust."

The words hit harder than any blade ever could. My heart raced, every nerve in my body screaming to find a way out, to fight back. But there was no way out. No fight left in me. Not when he had taken everything I valued and turned it against me.

His voice turned smooth, like oil on water, cutting through my fear and hesitation. "So, you're going to listen, aren't you? You're going to do exactly what I say."

My breath caught in my chest. I hated him. I hated this feeling, the feeling of being reduced to nothing but a pawn. I wanted to resist. I wanted to scream, to tear this man apart with my own hands. But the weight of his threats—the very real destruction he was promising—left me powerless.

"Fine," I said, my voice strained but steady. "I'll do it."

Aldric's smile returned, dark and triumphant. He walked up to me, brushing a hand through his messy hair, like he was caressing something precious. "Good boy," he whispered, his words as cold as ice.

I wanted to lash out, to slap the condescending smile off his face, but I held myself back. The last thing I needed was to show weakness in front of this monster.

He stepped back, and with a flourish, handed me a new set of papers. "Now," he said, his tone almost casual, "the documents I gave you? From one to eight? Throw those out. Fake. Misinformation. All of it. But the rest—those are the real deal. Focus on those."

I blinked, my mind racing. What was he playing at now? He went from holding me at gunpoint to playing a sick game of troll.

"Wait... so the whole time... those were..." I couldn't finish my sentence. My brain was still catching up to the absurdity of it all.

Aldric saw the confusion in my face, and his lips curled into a smirk. "Oh, don't look so surprised, Zain. It's funny to watch you scramble for control when I've already got you on a leash."

The nerve of him. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. From blackmail to mockery in a single breath.

As I stood there, staring at the pile of documents in my hands, I couldn't help but question everything. Who the hell was this guy?

He'd just been holding me hostage with threats, shattering everything I'd worked for, and now he was acting like some deranged prankster, twisting my mind into knots. Was this his game? A sick, twisted dance where the stakes were life and death—and yet he treated it all like it was some grand joke?

"You know, Zain," he said, his voice light and playful, "I always thought you'd be more... intimidating. But here you are, just standing there looking like a confused puppy. It's almost cute."

I frowned, clenching my jaw. "Cute? Is that really what you're going for right now?"

He chuckled, the sound light and mocking. "Oh, come on, it's just a little friendly teasing. You should learn to take a joke, Zain. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll grow into the whole 'tough guy' thing. Maybe by the time you're in your next life, huh?"

I rolled my eyes. "What's with the sudden shift in mood? One minute, you're threatening to ruin everything I've built, and now you're cracking jokes like we're old pals?"

Aldric tilted his head, his grin never fading. "Oh, you know. It's important to keep things interesting. Otherwise, it gets so dreadfully boring. And who needs that, right?" He winked, as if everything was a game to him.

"Besides," he continued with a playful smirk, "I've already twisted your world into a pretzel. Now it's time for the fun part—watching you try to untangle yourself. You'd be amazed how much fun I have with these little games."

I couldn't help but be irritated by his playful demeanor. "You're twisted, you know that?"

He shrugged, his smile widening. "Takes one to know one, right?"

I scowled, still unsure how to even process everything he had just done. "So, what now? You've got what you wanted, you've made your demands, and now you're what—just going to waltz out of here and pretend everything's fine?"

Aldric let out a short laugh, and for the first time, there was a hint of amusement in his voice. "Oh, you sweet summer child. I'm done here, Zain. My work is finished. But don't think for one second that you've escaped. No, no, no." He stood up and stretched, like he was just getting started with a long, grueling day. "I've set the stage, and now it was my turn to change fate."

I stared at Aldric, his words hanging in the air like a heavy fog. "I've set the stage, and now it was my turn to change fate." What the hell did that mean?

Was he implying that everything up until now was just a prelude to something far worse? Something he was orchestrating behind the scenes? My mind raced as I tried to piece it together. What was his real game? Change fate—those words echoed in my thoughts, a chilling whisper of something far more sinister.

Before I could dive deeper into my thoughts, the door to my office burst open with a force that made me jump. A guild member rushed in, breathless and wide-eyed.

"Zain, it's about Xander..." the man panted, his voice filled with panic.

I narrowed my eyes, already feeling a knot of tension in my stomach. "Why the hell are you screaming?"

The guild member didn't seem to notice my irritation. His expression was too frantic, too terrified to care about anything other than the urgency of his message.

"It's about Xander, Zain!" he repeated, his voice quivering. **"He's fighting with Celia..."** near the forest. It's getting serious. The noise—it's—it's..."

I cut him off, my frustration growing. "What happened between those two?"

The guild member gulped, looking even more terrified as he struggled to find the right words. "I—I don't know exactly, but Celia was causing a ruckus, yelling and—arguing. And then, it escalated. They're really going at it, Zain. A fight broke out... **I'm afraid one of them might get seriously hurt.**"

My mind immediately went into overdrive, the situation more critical than I realized. Xander was no joke, and neither was Celia when she was angry. If those two were clashing like this, something had gone horribly wrong.

My thoughts were interrupted when I glanced at Aldric, the sense of unease in the pit of my stomach growing.

I opened my mouth to tell the guild member I needed to leave. But before I could say a word, I noticed the sudden shift in Aldric.

His eyes, those deep, black voids, were now radiating a dangerous blue aura. It wasn't just a flicker of magic—it was a storm of power, raw and unfathomable. His entire demeanor had changed, his earlier playful tone now gone. He was as cold as steel, every inch of him radiating murderous intent.

Aldric's lips curled into a cruel smile. "I'm coming as well."

"Aldric, you can't—"

His voice was low, almost a growl. **"It's a demand, not a request. I'm coming with you."**

I wanted to argue, to tell him to stay out of this—this wasn't his problem, after all—but the words stuck in my throat. I couldn't. That look in his eyes, that aura—it left no room for refusal.

I clenched my fists, knowing full well I didn't have a choice in the matter. "Fine. Let's go."

Without another word, Aldric and I were already moving, running out of the guild building, heading towards the forest where Xander and Celia were in the middle of their fight. Every step felt heavier as the weight of the situation sank in. Whatever Aldric was planning, I had no idea, but something told me this was about to get much, much worse.

Chapter 48 - Every Scar Marks My Rebirth

Celia's Perspective:

I move my head to my right and notice some strange-looking people. Maybe they were from Levi's guild? But what business did they have with me? I was just practicing my physical combat with chains near here—nothing suspicious, nothing illegal... probably.

"You know, I just called out to you," a voice lazily drifts through the air.

I shift my focus to the person speaking. He must be Xander—the one Emma told me about, the one staying with Zain. Not that I care much, but why is he talking to me?

"Hello?" Xander tries again, dragging out the word like this is somehow more exhausting for him than it is for me.

"Yes?" I finally reply, arms crossed.

Xander studies me for a second, then sighs like this is already too much effort. "So, yeah. The loud noises? That's you, right?"

I blink. "Obviously."

"Yeah, I figured," he says, stretching his arms behind his head. "See, problem is, I don't actually know if Zain would be cool with it. And since I don't know, I can't let you keep doing it. Better safe than sorry, y'know?"

I tilt my head. "So you're stopping me... because you don't know if it's a problem?"

"Exactly."

I squint at him. "That makes no sense."

He shrugs. "Makes sense to me."

I tighten my grip on my chains. "So you're just randomly deciding what's allowed?"

"Pretty much."

"You're annoying."

"Correct."

"You don't want to deal with problems, but you're creating one for me."

"That's more of a you problem," he says, rubbing his eyes. "Could just leave."

I exhale sharply. "Or you could leave."

"Yeah, but that sounds exhausting."

I groan, running a hand through my hair. "If I move somewhere else, will you stop bothering me?"

"Depends." He tilts his head. "How far are we talking? 'Cause if it's like... ten steps, that's not helping anyone."

I let out a long, suffering sigh. "Fine! I'll move! Happy?"

"Immensely," Xander replies, already turning away, hands in his pockets.

As Xander turns to leave, one of the guild members—an older-looking man with a sturdy build and a heavy axe strapped to his back—steps forward. His expression is serious, his voice carrying a weight that makes even the lazy Xander pause.

"Hey, Xander," the man calls out, crossing his arms. "You're just gonna let her keep going?"

Xander tilts his head lazily. "Nah, she said she'd move somewhere else. Problem solved."

The man sighs, rubbing his forehead. "Yeah? And what if the noises draw in grotesques?" His voice drops lower, his tone firmer. "You do remember what happened last time something caught their attention near town, right?"

Xander exhales through his nose. "Yeah, yeah. They ran wild, took me like 15 minutes to clean up. Annoying."

"Exactly," the man nods. "And this? This is just asking for it. Grotesques are drawn to sudden, unnatural sounds—loud ones, especially at evening. It messes with their senses, makes 'em come swarming." His gaze flicks to me briefly before settling back on Xander. "You think Zain's gonna be happy if that happens again?"

Xander's face remains impassive, but he scratches his cheek, clearly weighing his options. "...He would complain a lot."

"Complain?" The man scoffs. "He'll kill you for letting it happen under your watch."

Xander exhales another long, drawn-out sigh, turning his attention back to me. "Alright, you heard him. No more practice here." He waves a lazy hand in my direction. "Time to pack up and go."

I stare at him, blinking slowly. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Xander shoves his hands in his pockets. "No more practice. Too risky, town's safety, Zain'll get mad, blah blah blah. You get the idea."

I plant my feet firmly. "I have to practice."

"And you can't do it here."

"I have to."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I—" I cut myself off, exhaling sharply. "You're not understanding."

Xander shrugs. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

I clench my fists, frustration rising like a boiling pot ready to spill over. "Listen, I need to train, and I don't have anywhere else to do it."

"Not my problem."

I take a step forward. "It is now."

Xander raises an eyebrow. "Oh? And why's that?"

"Because I said so." I glare. "Where else am I supposed to go? Tell me."

He sighs again. "Anywhere but here."

I grit my teeth. "And if I don't?"

"Then we've got a problem." His voice is still casual, but there's a hint of finality beneath it. "Look, I'm not trying to be a pain, but town safety takes priority. If grotesques come crawling in because of your training, it's my headache, and I don't like headaches."

"I don't care about your headaches!" I snap. "I need this. It's apart of my routine and I can't skip it just because you said so."

Xander watches me for a moment, something unreadable flashing in his eyes. "Yeah?" His voice is quieter now. "And what exactly are you trying to get stronger for?"

I falter for just a second. I don't know why that question gets under my skin, but it does.

"For myself," I say, my voice sharp. "Because I have to."

Xander's gaze lingers on me, like he's trying to figure out if that's the truth. Then he exhales, shaking his head. "Yeah, well, find another way. This isn't it."

My patience snaps. "You don't get to decide that!"

He meets my glare without flinching. "No, but I am deciding it."

I grip my chains tightly, breathing heavily. He's so frustrating. Why won't he just let me be?!

But something in his eyes tells me he won't budge.

And neither will I.

Xander's Perspective:

I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck as I watch Celia stand her ground. Man, she's annoying. Stubborn, emotional, completely unwilling to listen to reason—what a headache.

And yet... I can't say I hate that about her.

There aren't many people who'd talk back to a Sword Saint like this, let alone someone as lazy as me. Most people hear my name, see what I can do, and either respect me or get out of my way. But her? She's different.

She's got this weird fighting style, too. Chains wrapped around her arms, moving like they're part of her body, twisting and snapping like thorns growing from vines. A style like that? It's not just something you pick up overnight. That takes real dedication. Her movement—fluid, reactive, controlled—like an extension of herself rather than a weapon she wields.

With my Gift of Mastery, I can pick up any technique, break it down, and learn it like I've been doing it my whole life. But this? This isn't something I can learn. Not fully. Not the way she uses it. Because it's not just skill. It's her.

That realization is kind of annoying.

I let out another sigh and look at her. "Alright, enough already. Get out of here."

Celia's eyes narrow, her chains shifting slightly around her arms, like a warning. "I already told you—I have to train."

"And I already told you—you can't do it here."

She clenches her fists. "You're acting like you own the place."

"Not really," I say, stretching my arms lazily. "Just don't want to deal with the consequences when Zain finds out you lured grotesques here."

"I won't lure grotesques."

"Yeah? You got a grotesque-repelling badge I don't know about?"

She huffs, crossing her arms. "You're so frustrating."

"Yep."

"Do you even care that I need this?"

"Nope."

Celia's expression twists, anger flashing in her eyes. "You're unbelievable."

I roll my shoulders, keeping my tone casual. "That's what people say when they can't win an argument."

"You're not winning anything!" she snaps. "You're just being an ass for no reason!"

"I have a reason. You just don't like it."

She exhales sharply, looking like she's one second away from throwing one of those chains at my face. Honestly? Wouldn't blame her. I am being difficult. But hey, she's the one being stubborn.

She takes a step forward, voice low and heated. "Why do you even care? Just let me train. It's not hurting you."

I watch her for a moment, something clicking in my head.

Wait.

I've heard of her before, haven't I? Something about a cursed girl. Some tragic past, losing someone important—oh, right. That's why she's like this.

I let out a slow exhale, my voice just as lazy as before. "Ahh... I think I get it now."

Celia stiffens. "What?"

"You're that girl, huh?" I say, rubbing my chin like I just remembered. "The cursed one. Or... was it something else? Your friend died, and then you got all depressed, right?"

Her eyes darken immediately. "Where did you hear that?" Her voice is cold now, colder than before.

I shrug. "Zain mentioned it." I pause, then tilt my head, smirking slightly. "Poor little girl... lost her close friend. What was his name again? Oh yeah—Kaiser. Training like crazy to bring back a dead person?"

The air shifts.

Celia's entire body tenses, and in a flash, her chains lash out—stopping just inches from my face. Her eyes are blazing, and for the first time in this whole conversation, I actually feel a sliver of real danger.

"Take that back." Her voice is sharp, raw, and completely furious.

I meet her glare, unfazed. "I won't."

I stretched, lazily cracking my knuckles, not bothering to even glance at her. I could feel her anger, but it didn't bother me. In fact, it kind of made this whole situation a little more entertaining.

"You know," I muttered, running a hand through my messy hair, "you're wasting your time."

Celia froze, and I could almost hear her teeth grind together as she turned to me. I didn't even need to look at her to know she was pissed.

Her voice was icy, tight with restraint. "What do you mean by that?"

I leaned back against the tree, squinting lazily in her direction. "You can't bring him back, you know. That kind of thing? It's not happening. No matter how hard you try."

She clenched her fists. "Oh yeah? And what the hell do you know about it? You think you're the expert on this kind of shit?"

I shrugged, my voice lazy as ever. "Not really, no. I just know you're wasting your time. All this training, all this effort—it's pointless. He's gone. And nothing you do can change that."

Her eyes narrowed, her chains shifting slightly, the air growing heavier. "Shut up."

I chuckled, letting the tension between us simmer. "Hey, I'm just telling it like it is. You can't fight fate. He's dead, and you're just chasing shadows."

She took a step forward, her fists trembling with suppressed rage. "What do you know about loss? About grief? About the weight of losing someone you—"

"Save it." I interrupted her, voice flat, cutting through her words. "I know what it's like. Everyone's got their own little sob story. But the difference is? I'm not stupid enough to keep running after something that's already gone."

Her body tensed even further. "You think you're so smart, don't you? You think you know everything. Well, you don't know a damn thing about me or Kaiser, so just keep your mouth shut."

"Ugh," I sighed, feigning annoyance as I rolled my eyes. "It's not my fault you're too weak to accept it. But hey, go ahead, keep training. Keep clinging to that pointless hope of yours. It's cute, really."

Celia's voice dropped, dangerously calm. "You have no idea what I've been through."

I tilted my head, genuinely not caring but deciding to humor her. "Probably not. But I don't care, either. You can scream, you can cry, you can train till your body breaks. Doesn't change the fact that he's gone, and you'll never bring him back."

Her chains lashed out without warning, sharp and deadly, stopping just inches from my face. I didn't flinch. I didn't even blink.

"You're a bastard," she hissed, her words laced with venom. "You don't know a damn thing about what it feels like to lose someone. So keep talking, Xander. Keep talking like you know everything. Because one day? You're going to wish you hadn't."

I leaned in slightly, my voice cold, sharper than it had been. "Your friend's already gone, Celia. He's nothing but grotesque food now. Dead. You think all this... pain, this training, is gonna change that? It won't. He's just another casualty in this messed-up world."

Celia stayed silent, her fists shaking with the effort it took to keep her calm.

I shrugged, the same lazy indifference creeping back into my tone. "So yeah, keep holding onto that hope. But it won't bring him back. He's gone, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Her silence was deafening, but I could tell—her anger was still there, simmering under the surface. The chains, barely noticeable before, now tightened, but she didn't speak.

I gave a small smirk, my voice dripping with the same venom. "And if you really want to go down that road? If you're stupid enough to try and threaten me again? I'll make sure you don't even get the chance to regret it."

Her eyes burned with an intensity that actually made me pause. That, I'll admit, got to me. Not because I cared about her or what she thought, but because that tone—that fury—felt a little too close to home.

I smirked, but this time, it wasn't just out of laziness. "You really think you can scare me, huh?"

Celia's lips curled into a cold smile. "I don't care about scaring you. I care about making you regret it."

I felt the shift in the air, something heavier than before, something dangerous. But I wasn't backing down. "You're wasting your time, Celia."

Her next words came out slow, calculated, like she was savoring them. "And if I said I was planning to kill you next, would that make you understand?"

I paused, my entire demeanor changing in an instant. That was too far.

I straightened up, my smirk gone, replaced by the kind of cold focus only a Sword Saint could carry. "What did you just say?"

Her eyes were as empty as her voice, her gaze locked onto mine. "I'll kill you. If you keep pushing me like this, Xander, I'll make sure you regret it."

For the first time, I felt a flicker of something dangerous stir in me, and it wasn't the usual lazy indifference. She was dead serious.

But I wasn't the type to back down either. I took a step forward, all traces of my previous carelessness vanishing.

"Is that a threat?" I asked, my voice low, sharp now.

Her reply came with a slow, cold smile. "No. It's a promise."

I let out a slow, annoyed breath. "Great. Another idiot who thinks they can fight me."

But beneath the anger, beneath the bravado, I could feel it—the spark. And that? That might actually make this interesting.

Celia's Perspective:

How dare he... How dare he just say that to me...

His words linger in my mind, like a cold shadow that refuses to leave. Kaiser's far gone. He's dead, Celia. You can't save him.

The air feels thick, suffocating. I don't know why it hurts so much, why it feels like my chest is caving in. I thought I was stronger than this—thought I could handle anything. But hearing it from him... from Xander, of all people... it cuts deeper than I expected. He makes everything look so easy, like he doesn't give a damn about anyone, about anything. And yet here he is, telling me the one thing I can't hear. The one thing I refuse to believe.

I blink hard, feeling my eyes burn. No.

Kaiser can't be gone. I won't let it be true. Zain... Zain said there's a chance. Even if it's a slim one. Even if the chances are as close to zero as they get. He's still alive. I know it. I don't care what anyone else says. I won't give up on him.

I squeeze my hands into fists. My nails dig into my palms, the sting snapping me out of the fog that Xander's words have created. He doesn't understand. He doesn't get it. Kaiser—he's not just some person I'm holding onto out of some misguided hope. He's everything to me. He's been my anchor when I was lost, my protector when I was weak.

He's the reason I'm standing here right now, trying to fight my way through this mess. How dare he say that about Kaiser? How dare he dismiss everything I've fought for?

I'm not going to let this make me waver. I promised myself.

Get stronger. Protect what matters.

I don't care how impossible it seems. I don't care if the world tells me I'm foolish. As long as there's the smallest, tiniest chance that Kaiser is out there—alive—I'll keep going. I'll keep pushing. Even if it means standing alone. Even if I have to burn every bit of hope into existence.

I can't let him down. Not after everything we've been through.

I clench my jaw, staring at the ground before glancing at Xander. I can't even look at him right now. His laid-back attitude, his smug look, like he's already written off everything that matters to me—it's enough to make my blood boil. Don't you dare tell me what I can and can't do.

He has no idea. No idea what it's like to feel your heart shatter into pieces every time you think about losing someone. No idea what it's like to hold onto a thread of hope and still be willing to fight with everything you have, even if the odds are against you. I won't give up on him.

I won't.

I step forward, slow and deliberate, my chains lightly rattling with the movement. "Say that again," I say, my voice cold, daring him.

Xander sighs, rubbing the back of his neck like this is all so troublesome for him. "You really wanna go through this?" His tone is lazy, indifferent. "Fine. I'll say it as many times as it takes for that thick skull of yours to get it." His sharp gray eyes lift to mine, unreadable. "Kaiser. Is. Dead."

A chill runs down my spine.

I grip my chains tighter, the metal groaning under the pressure of my fingers. He's testing me. Pushing me. Trying to see how far I'll break.

"Careful, Xander." My voice is quieter now, colder. "There are some things you shouldn't say if you want to keep breathing."

He huffs a laugh, shaking his head. "Oh, that's cute. You threatening me now?"

I tilt my head, studying him. "That depends. Do you feel threatened?"

His smirk twitches. "Not in the slightest."

I take another step, closing the distance. "You should."

His eyes darken, just for a second. Then, his smirk returns, lazy and sharp. "Tch. I figured you'd be the type to bite back. You curse-wielders always have a bad temper."

My body stiffens.

The chains wrapped around my arms shift slightly, responding to my emotions. Curse-wielder... He knows.

A slow smirk spreads across my lips. "So you're not as clueless as you act." I lift my hand, letting one of my chains unravel from my wrist, the sharp tip dragging against the ground with a slow, metallic scrape. "Then I don't need to waste my breath, do I?"

Xander exhales, tilting his head slightly. "Queen of Curses, huh?" His gaze flickers with something unreadable. "Guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"And you?" I press, my voice dangerously low. "You talk big, but I doubt you're just some lazy idiot running his mouth."

Xander lets out a slow, exaggerated sigh, like this conversation is already boring him. Then, he lifts a hand and lazily gestures toward himself. "Xander. Sword Saint of Mastery."

My breath catches for half a second.

Sword Saint. Of Mastery.

I've heard of him before—one of the strongest, the kind of person who never had to try, because effort was beneath him. He learns, adapts, and perfects every weapon, every style, with terrifying ease.

So this is who I'm dealing with...

I meet his gaze, unblinking. "Mastery." The word slips out, slow and sharp. "The Sword Saint of Mastery."

Xander clicks his tongue. "Took you long enough."

Something pulses between us—silent, suffocating. Neither of us move.

He's dangerous.

But so am I.

Then, his voice drops, lower than before. "Members of Zain's guild," he says, without looking away from me. "Get out."

The air freezes.

The members behind me shift uneasily, whispering. Some hesitate. But the authority in his voice—the quiet finality of it—sends them stepping back, disappearing into the shadows.

Now it's just us.

Xander's smirk fades slightly, his fingers twitching. "I was planning to take it easy today." His voice is calm, but there's something sharp beneath it. "But now... seems like I'll be spending my evening killing a curse."

A slow smile curls my lips, but there's no warmth in it.

I lift my hand, and my chains coil up, twisting in the air like snakes.

"How funny." My voice is soft, but laced with quiet malice. "Because I was planning to hang a sword saint this evening."

The wind stirs around us, carrying the tension of the moment. My chains coil around my arms, slithering like living things, while my thorns pulse, waiting for the command to strike. Across from me, Xander stands lazily, his sword resting on his shoulder, his expression somewhere between tired and indifferent.

"Are we doing this or what?" I snap, tightening my stance.

Xander yawns. He actually yawns. "Yeah, yeah... but, ugh, this feels like a waste of energy." He rolls his neck, finally lowering his sword into a half-hearted stance. "Fine, let's get this over with."

I don't wait. My chains lash forward, snapping toward him like striking vipers, but Xander barely moves. A lazy step to the side, a casual flick of his wrist—each attack glides past him like he's dancing through a routine he's done a thousand times before.

I grit my teeth. He's reading me.

"Too slow," he mutters, dodging another strike. "Too obvious." He steps in, sword flashing in an almost careless arc. My chains barely intercept in time, the force rattling up my arms.

I shift my weight, kicking out—a spray of thorns bursting forward from my leg. He leans back just enough to let them pass, exhaling like I'm making him do too much work. "Hmm... a little better. Still not great."

Smug bastard.

I adjust. Test the range. Every attack, every movement—he's responding at the last possible moment, expending the least amount of effort while making me work twice as hard. That means—

He's waiting.

For a pattern. For me to keep doing the same thing, so he can counter with the least resistance.

Fine. Let's see how he likes this.

I feint left, my chains snapping toward his side, and just as expected, his sword is already there to parry—except I retract the chains at the last second, using the momentum to spin, my other hand already swinging.

Thorns, coated in Withering Touch, tear through the air.

And this time—

They hit.

Xander's cloak rips, his arm jerks back, and for the first time, his eyes flicker—not with surprise, but with something dangerously close to interest.

I smirk. "What was that about me being too slow?"

Xander looks down at his sleeve, then back at me, and—

He grins.

"Heh... not bad." His fingers flex over the hilt of his sword, and I feel something shift.

The air feels heavier.

Then he lifts his gaze, his voice colder than before. "Alright. Time to start trying."

His grip tightens, his posture straightens, and suddenly, the lazy swordsman is gone.

The air around him sharpens. No more lazy dodges. No more half-hearted swings.

Then he moves.

I barely catch the flash of silver before I'm forced back, my chains snapping up instinctively. Too slow. His sword carves through the air, slipping past my guard, nearly cutting into my side before I twist out of the way, my boots skidding against the dirt.

I retaliate. Thorns lash out, twisting and curling mid-strike, forcing him to maneuver—but he does. Effortlessly.

He steps through the attack, sword weaving between the strikes like he already knows where they'll land. My chains coil back defensively, blocking his next swing, but the moment I prepare a counter—

He vanishes.

No—he's just fast.

My instincts scream, and I pivot, but his blade is already there, inches from my shoulder. I barely manage to throw my weight back, the edge grazing my skin. A shallow cut, but a cut nonetheless.

The sting barely registers before Xander exhales, almost disappointed.

"You react well," he murmurs, spinning his sword once, shaking off the tension. "But against me... it's not enough, is it?"

His eyes meet mine, sharp and unreadable.

"Predictable."

The cut on my shoulder stings, but I barely feel it.

Because I'm pissed.

Not just at Xander, but at myself.

Predictable? Predictable?

No. Not anymore.

I exhale slowly, fingers tightening. I can feel the emotions churning, bubbling beneath my skin, the raw negativity that fuels my magic. Frustration. Self-doubt. Hatred—toward my own weakness.

I let it consume me.

My chains tremble, shifting. The ground beneath me darkens as my magic pulses outward, spreading.

New spells. New tricks that I learned from the past two days.

Cursed Magic: Black Bloom

The moment I whisper it in my mind, the vines change—thorns thickening, spreading outward like a blossoming flower, but their purpose is far from beautiful. These eat. Not physically, but their cursed energy siphons magic from whatever they latch onto. And I send them straight for Xander.

He notices. His sword flashes, cutting through them before they can reach him, but I don't stop.

I move, fast.

My body lunges, spinning low. No more just standing back. Thorns burst from my kicks as I close in, forcing him to shift, to react. His sword slices through my vines, but every second he spends cutting is another second I press forward.

Adapt. Change.

He blocks my next strike, but I was waiting for that. My chains wrap around his blade—not to trap it, but to conduct the next spell.

Cursed Magic: Hollow Strain

A pulse of black energy surges through the chain, hitting his sword directly. It's a technique that rattles magic-reinforced weapons, destabilizing their enchantments for a few seconds. His grip tightens as his sword vibrates slightly, the magic inside faltering just enough.

I see the shift in his stance. The flicker of hesitation.

I don't waste it.

I twist, driving my foot into the ground, sending another wave of thorns toward his blind spot. He steps back—too slow. They graze his side, cutting fabric and skin.

A hit. A real one.

I grin. "Not so predictable now, am I?"

Xander doesn't answer immediately. His gaze flicks down at his side, then back at me. His expression unreadable—no frustration, no anger. Just quiet analysis.

Then he exhales, almost amused. "So, you do learn."

I feel my chains tighten, power thrumming beneath my skin. One more.

This time, I jump, flipping over him mid-air, my voice a whisper beneath my breath—

Cursed Magic: Revenant's Grasp.

The shadows beneath him move. Hands—black, clawed—burst upward, grasping for his legs, slowing him down just enough for me to land and send a storm of thorns straight toward him.

This time, he actually has to block.

Steel clashes against my magic, sparks flying, vines wrapping, twisting, cutting—our movements fast, sharp, neither side giving an inch.

And for the first time—

We're equal.

Xander's Perspective:

Tch. This girl.

I exhale, shaking my head as I glance at the thin cut on my side. It doesn't hurt. Not really. But the fact that it's there—that she actually managed to land a hit—is... interesting.

It's been a long time since I've felt something in a fight. Since I had to think more than two steps ahead.

And honestly?

It's kinda fun.

I roll my shoulders, feeling the weight of my sword shift in my grip. The moment I actually try, this match is over—but where's the fun in ending it too fast?

Still... I suppose I should stop playing around.

A slow breath leaves my lips. My fingers tighten around the hilt.

And then—

Everything shifts.

The air around me grows dense, heavy. My stance changes—no wasted movement, no slack in my posture. It's like a blade being drawn from its sheath, sharp and ready.

The temperature drops. Shadows stretch unnaturally. A faint black-and-white mist coils around me, like tendrils of something unseen curling from the edges of my existence.

It's the moment where most realize—

I'm not lazy.

I just don't see the point in trying unless it's worth it.

And right now?

This is worth it.

I lift my blade, voice low as I murmur the words beneath my breath.

"Let silence guide my blade—Fading Echo."

The moment I move, I vanish.

No step, no sound, no warning. Just gone.

And then—

I reappear behind her. Blade already swinging.

She barely has time to react. Her chains snap up, blocking the strike at the last possible second, sparks flying from the clash. But it doesn't matter. I'm already moving again.

One step, one breath—

"Bury the earth beneath my will—Severing Gale."

A single downward slash—simple, effortless. And yet, the pressure it creates splits the ground beneath us, a shockwave of force tearing through the battlefield. Her vines lash out, trying to counter—

I'm already gone again.

Every strike flows into the next, like a perfect sequence of movements honed over years. There's no hesitation, no delay. Just pure, absolute precision.

It's the difference between someone learning how to fight—

And someone who's already mastered it.

She's fast, sure. Clever. But my blade is faster.

Her vines lash out—black, writhing, filled with cursed energy.

I don't dodge.

I cut through them.

"Turn the wind to razors—Veil Rend."

A crescent of wind follows my blade, sharp as steel, severing her magic mid-air. She staggers, but her reaction is quick—another spell, another attempt to counter.

Good.

I exhale, flipping my blade once before pointing it at her, my voice quiet, almost bored—

"Still think I'm boring?"

Because right now?

I'm done holding back.

Most people would've crumbled by now—overwhelmed, suffocated by the sheer difference between us. But her? She's adapting. Analyzing. Learning with every damn second.

I should've expected that from someone like her.

But there's a limit. And I'm about to show her exactly where it is.

I exhale, shifting my grip as I push off the ground. My body twists midair, and in one seamless motion, I bring my blade upward—

And the sky itself responds.

The air howls. The winds bend.

And in the space of a heartbeat, a vortex begins to form.

No. Not just a vortex—a storm.

"Rise from the breath of the forgotten—Eclipsing Maelstrom."

The words leave my lips, slow, deliberate, and the moment they do—

The world erupts.

The winds explode outward in a spiraling cage of death, each current razor-sharp, each movement laced with murderous precision. A tornado forms in an instant, alive with slashing winds, roaring with the force to rip apart anything in its wake.

Her vines lash out. Desperate. Reaching.

And the storm devours them.

Torn to shreds before they can even reach me.

Heh.

This is what happens when a Master decides to move.

I hover at the eye of the storm, sword still raised, my body outlined in the flickering black-and-white mist of my aura. The presence I give off now—it's suffocating. Like the weight of death itself pressing down.

Cold. Absolute.

Like a Grim Reaper descending upon his next kill.

I stare down at her, watching the winds carve the forest apart, watching her chains rattle under the sheer force of it.

And for the first time—my voice lacks the usual laziness.

No sarcasm. No boredom.

Just cold, undeniable truth.

"You can struggle all you want," I murmur, my words cutting through the storm. "But even the Queen of Curses—"

I raise my blade higher. The storm around me intensifies, spiraling even faster, tearing apart everything beneath me.

"—can't escape the reach of a Master."

Celia's Perspective:

How... How is this even possible?

I try to cut through it—my thorns lashing, chains striking—but it's useless.

Each time I send an attack, the wind devours it. No, worse—he redirects it effortlessly, like a painter casually stroking his brush. The tornado isn't just wild chaos; it moves with him, responding to his every whim like an extension of his body.

This isn't just mastery over the sword.

This is absolute control.

No way... is this the true power of a Sword Saint?

My stomach twists. For the first time in a long time, I feel it. Fear.

The kind that coils around your throat, makes your fingers hesitate, makes your mind scream at you to run.

His ability... it's terrifying. If a Sword Saint of Mastery decides something is impossible to touch, then it simply is. The very concept of "hitting him" feels like a joke. Like trying to strike the wind itself.

No—no, I can't think like this.

Kaiser wouldn't falter.

I won't ever let myself falter again.

I grit my teeth, pressing my palm against my chest, forcing the emotions out.

The fear, the helplessness—I twist them into something else.

Anger.

Anger at myself. At him. At the feeling of being small again, at the idea that someone could stand so far above me that I couldn't even touch them.

The chains rattling around my wrists pulse in response. They feel heavier, more alive. Their energy shifts, feeding off the festering rage clawing through me.

"Cursed Magic: Black Bloom."

The words don't leave my lips. They don't need to. I only have to think it using my self-hatred emotions.

And the battlefield changes.

My vines shift, thickening—spreading outward in a spiraling bloom of razor-sharp thorns. But they're no longer just physical weapons.

They eat.

Not in the way a beast would tear into flesh, but something worse. They siphon.

The moment they touch magic, they latch on, clinging, draining—like leeches starving for power.

I aim straight for the core of his tornado. If I can sap its energy, if I can weaken the storm itself—

It works.

The winds slow, just slightly. Just enough.

But before I can press my advantage—

He moves.

And suddenly, the battlefield shifts again.

The wind doesn't just return—it roars.

But it's no longer alone.

Water.

Xander raises his blade lazily—like none of this is a concern at all—and the air around us grows damp. Moisture clings to the storm, twisting into the cyclone itself, merging into a spiraling force of wind and waves.

No—he's not just riding the storm anymore.

He's surfing it.

"Ocean's Whisper, Tempest Waltz."

The moment the words leave his mouth, he disappears.

I barely have time to react before the entire storm shifts, dragging me into it.

Everything is spinning—water slashing across my skin like razors, wind pressing against my chest, stealing the air from my lungs.

I can't breathe.

I look up, feeling the full weight of the storm now. The tornado above me—it's not just wind anymore. It's a monster of swirling water and wind, crashing down with a force I can't even begin to comprehend. Xander is surfing it, weaving effortlessly through the chaos, like he's some kind of elemental deity.

How... how is he masterfully controlling wind and water like that, like it's nothing?

Every instinct in me tells me to retreat, but I can't.

I can't run—not now.

But deep down, I realize the truth. It was a mistake. I'm not strong enough yet.

I can't beat a Sword Saint. Not now.

He's just too strong.

The storm roars louder, and Xander finally leaps down from the swirling chaos above. The water flicks from his clothes as he lands, unfazed, like he was just playing with the storm.

His voice cuts through the air like ice, and the chill runs down my spine.

"The curse ends now."

He's not playing anymore.

My heart races. Fear grips me, but I won't let it take over. Not yet.

I summon my thorns, spinning them, quickly binding them together to form an intricate attack. My movements flow with desperation, my body pushing itself further as I try to weave my vines into a net to catch him.

But Xander...

Xander isn't playing either.

He blitzes forward in a flash, and I barely have time to react. His sword swings in the air, and I feel a wave of wind cut through my vines—snapping them like twigs.

"Pathetic."

His voice rings with disdain as he closes the distance.

I scramble. My chains lash out, reaching for him, but his sword flicks effortlessly, and suddenly, it's molded in flames, searing through my defenses. It feels like I'm caught in the firestorm itself.

No...

I can't breathe.

I can't think.

I'm going to die.

I feel it. The certainty.

I'm nothing.

The moment Xander gets closer, I see it. That grim reaper aura. It's like a shadow draped over him—black and white, cold as death itself. I swear, for a split second, it feels like I'm staring into the eyes of the reaper, his scythe ready to take my soul.

I'm nothing but a bug to him.

An ant, struggling to move in the face of someone who could wipe me off this earth with a flick of their wrist.

I want to scream. I want to run. But my body's frozen, my thoughts a mess.

As he approaches, the darkness around him thickens. His gaze locks onto me, and I hear him mutter something.

"So much for a cursed queen... not even worth the breath."

His sword gleams in the pale light, and I feel the pressure building. My heart thuds faster. I can't stop this. I can't escape.

I see his sword coming for me—too close. It's about to slice my throat open.

This is it. I'm going to die.

How did it come to this? How did I end up facing a man who could end my life so easily?

It's too late...

Kaiser...

His name burns through my mind like a fire I can't put out. Please... In these last moments, I'm consumed by nothing but him. His smile, the warmth of his embrace, the moments where everything felt like it could be okay.

But now, it's slipping through my fingers.

I don't want to die like this... I don't want to leave him.

I don't want to die, Kai...

A tear slips down my cheek, and I barely feel it as it trails down my skin. The world around me blurs, and the cold steel of Xander's sword inches closer, threatening to end everything in an instant. But my heart... my heart can only scream for one thing.

Please, Kaiser... please, come save me.

I need you. More than anything, more than I've ever needed anyone. I've always been afraid of losing myself, afraid of becoming nothing, but the thought of losing him? Of dying here without ever telling him what he means to me? Without saving him?

That thought is worse than death.

The sword is so close now. It feels like everything is closing in, and I'm suffocating under the weight of my own fear. The only thing I can do is think of him, his name echoing in my soul like a whisper.

I remember the time he called me his heart. The way those words fell from his lips—so simple, yet they shattered something inside me, leaving a hollow echo that still lingers. It's strange, isn't it? How something so small can leave such a mark? How they slipped past so easily, yet they've been chained to me ever since.

He owns my heart now, and no matter how much I try to deny it, I can feel it—it's his, completely. And the sadness... it's like a constant ache of missing him. I never asked for this, yet here I am, bound to him, with a heart that can never belong to anyone else. I can't escape it. I don't want to...

Please, my heart... Come for me.

I don't know how I'm still holding on, but somehow, the strength I need to survive still lingers in the dark corners of my heart. And I just... I just want to see him again.

Everything is too quiet. Too still.

My breath is sharp in my ears, and the pressure of the world around me is suffocating. The sword is so close now. It's so close... too close. I can feel the chill of its edge

against my skin, ready to cut through me, to end everything. My heart is in my throat, my mind spinning—I don't want to die, not like this, not yet...

And then... BOOM.

A deafening explosion rips through the air, faster than I can process. The sound shakes me to my core, a violent force that seems to shatter the very air around me. I don't know where it came from, but it feels like the ground itself is breaking apart.

I flinch, my body going rigid, but... the pressure of the blade is gone. The world is suddenly dark, a thick, all-encompassing blackness that pulls me under. My breath hitches, but I can't see anything, not even the faintest glimmer of light. My mind races in that crushing silence. What happened?

Then, warmth. Comforting warmth.

Something tightens around me—arms, strong and familiar. I'm pulled close, so close, into something solid, something real. My body melts against them, and I hear it—the steady, rhythmic beat of a heart, strong and reassuring. It's a sound I know, a sound that soothes every raw nerve in my body.

Is this truly... happening?

Please, please tell me it's real...

I lift my head slowly, my gaze trembling as it meets his. His face, so familiar yet distant, the way his arms hold me—safely, protectively—as if nothing in this world could harm me.

Is it really you...?

Kaiser...?

Chapter 49 - Cursed Love

Celia's Perspective:

This memory is a few days before Kaiser was taken by the grotesques... The times when him and I were just living with Levi and Emma.

And the day... where I truly understood how I felt for him.

I continue wrapping the bandage around Kaiser's wrist, my fingers carefully pressing the cloth against his skin. The wound had reopened again. Of course, it had. He always pushed himself too hard, never listening, never resting.

"Celia, you know I can do it myself," Kaiser says, his voice carrying that familiar mix of amusement and stubbornness.

I don't reply. Instead, I focus on securing the bandage, tightening it slightly—not too much, just enough to make him stop arguing. His injuries were still fresh, and even though he was awake, he wasn't fully healed yet. I had to take care of him. That was final.

A light touch grazes my hand. His fingers, warm despite his exhaustion, rest over mine.

I flinch. Not because I don't like it, but because I wasn't expecting it. My eyes dart to him. He's sitting up on the bed, his expression softer than usual, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

"Celia, c'mon," he says. "I can handle a simple bandage. You should rest up instead."

"No, Kaiser. I'm fine," I reply quickly, shifting my gaze back to my work. "Just worry about recovering, okay?"

The window is open, letting in a cool night breeze that ruffles the curtains. The sky stretches endlessly beyond it, speckled with stars. Peaceful. It's one of those rare moments where everything feels still. No fighting, no running, just... this.

"You know, Celia," Kaiser says, his voice lower this time. "You worry too much."

I scoff. "Well, I'm not the one covered in wounds!"

He chuckles. "Maybe Emma and Levi were right."

I pause, narrowing my eyes. "Right about what?"

He gives me a side glance—playful, teasing. "That you act like my caring girlfriend."

My breath catches. My body tenses. Heat instantly rushes to my cheeks.

Before I can stop myself, I tug the bandage tighter around his wrist.

"Ow—hey!" Kaiser winces, hissing at the pressure. "Easy, Celia!"

I glare at him, lips pursed. "That's what you get for saying weird things."

"Weird?" His grin widens, despite the fact that I just inflicted unnecessary pain on him. "I mean, it's kind of true, don't you think?"

"No," I say immediately. "Not at all."

"Mmm," he hums, unconvinced. His eyes are locked onto mine now, holding something unreadable in them. "You're always looking out for me. You nag when I get hurt. You even feed me sometimes. If that's not girlfriend behavior, then what is?"

"I do that because I care about you!" I argue.

He tilts his head. "Exactly."

I stop. My heart skips a beat.

...Wait.

I meant that in a normal way. A completely normal, non-weird, definitely-not-romantic way. But the way he said it, the way he's looking at me—it's making my stomach do strange flips.

I swallow hard, forcing myself to focus. I'm still holding his wrist, but suddenly, I'm hyper-aware of how close we are.

Kaiser notices. Of course, he does. He always notices everything. His smirk softens, and for a moment, he just watches me. His expression is unreadable, but there's warmth there—something that makes my chest tighten.

"You're blushing, Celia."

"No, I'm not," I lie, turning my face slightly to the side.

"You totally are."

"I—I'm not!"

"You're still holding my hand."

I instantly let go, as if his skin burned me.

Kaiser laughs. A real, genuine laugh. It's not fair. He always knows how to make me flustered, and he enjoys it too much. I glare at him, but it doesn't have any real weight.

He leans back slightly, resting his arm on his knee, still smirking. "So, what now? Are you gonna keep taking care of me forever?"

My heart stutters at the thought.

I don't answer. Instead, I quickly stand up, trying to regain some sense of control over myself. "I—I'll go ask Emma if dinner's ready. I'll call you when it is."

Kaiser raises a brow, looking way too entertained. "Running away, huh?"

I turn my back to him, taking a deep breath. "Shut up."

He chuckles. "Alright, alright. Tell Emma to make something good."

I nod and step out of the room, closing the door behind me.

The second I'm alone in the hallway, I exhale sharply. My hands touch my burning cheeks. My heart is still racing.

...This is bad.

I think—no, I know—I just felt butterflies.

I press a hand against my chest, right over my heart, feeling its unsteady rhythm beneath my fingertips.

...This isn't love. It can't be.

I've only known him for a little over a week—just a short, fleeting amount of time. Love isn't supposed to happen this fast, right? It's supposed to be slow, deep, built over years of knowing someone. That's what people say. That's what I should believe.

But then... what is this?

Why does my chest tighten whenever he looks at me like that? Why does my skin burn at the slightest touch of his hand? Why do I feel this unbearable pull toward him, like if I step too far away, I'll be leaving behind something I can't bear to lose?

I close my eyes, exhaling softly. Maybe it's just admiration. He's strong, after all. Confident. He makes me feel safe. That's normal, isn't it?

But admiration shouldn't make my stomach twist like this. It shouldn't make me want to stay by his side, not because I have to—but because I want to.

I press my hand a little tighter against my chest, as if I can quiet the restless beat beneath it.

This feeling... whatever it is... it's dangerous.

Because if it's not love—

Then why does it feel like it could become something even more terrifying?

I shake my head, trying to snap myself back to reality. No, no, no. I can't fall for him. Like, actually—I can't.

...Right?

I don't even know anything about him. Not really. Not in the way people should when they start... feeling things.

Maybe—maybe it's just attraction. Yeah. That makes sense. I mean, he's him. He's strong, he's kind, he's... infuriatingly charming. It's normal to feel this way, right? It's not like it's love or anything.

...Right?

I sigh, rubbing my temples before forcing myself to focus. This is ridiculous. I have better things to do than overthink feelings that shouldn't even exist.

I step down the stairs, feeling the warm coziness of Levi's home settle around me. It's nice here. Comfortable.

To be honest... I've been enjoying my life with them.

It's strange, really. I never thought I'd have a place like this—a place where I felt wanted. Even if it's temporary, even if I know it won't last forever... I like it here.

As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I glance toward the dining area, about to head in, when something catches my eye.

Through the nearby window, I see it.

Rain.

Falling steadily, tapping against the glass like soft whispers of the past trying to remind me of things I don't want to remember.

I pause.

...Rain has never been my favorite.

If anything, I hate it.

It brings back too much—too many things I want to forget. The coldness, the loneliness, the feeling of being drenched in something that isn't just water. It reminds me of nights I spent with nothing but my own shivering body for warmth.

I look away, pushing those thoughts aside. Not now.

That's when I hear voices.

Levi and Emma.

I don't mean to hide. I don't have to hide. But something in my gut tells me to stay quiet—to listen.

So I do.

Levi's voice is the first to break through. Confident. Casual. Self-satisfied.

"Oi, Emma, is dinner ready?"

Emma's reply is instant, laced with sarcasm. "Do I look like your personal chef?" Then, with a huff, she adds, "And yes, it'll be ready soon."

I hear Levi scoff, and even without seeing him, I know he's got that signature cocky smirk on his face.

"Tch. You're lucky I'm granting you the authority to cook for me," he says, his tone dripping with self-glorification. "I mean, I could cook, obviously. I'm a man of many talents. But I'll be generous today and let you handle it."

Emma snorts. Loudly.

"Pfft—oh please. You can't even boil water without nearly setting the kitchen on fire. The last time you tried, you made something so bad even the cockroaches wouldn't eat it."

I can't help it—I smile.

Yeah. Levi and Emma.

Kaiser might've been the first person to look at me and not see the Queen of Curses, but they were the next. They never treated me differently, never looked at me like I was something to be afraid of.

It's... nice. Really nice.

And then—

Emma's voice shifts slightly. Still casual, still teasing, but there's something else underneath it now.

"Hey, Levi, can I ask you something?"

Levi hums. "Sure. What's up?"

Emma doesn't answer right away.

And for some reason, that silence makes my heartbeat quicken.

Finally, she speaks.

"It's about Kaiser and Celia."

My stomach tightens.

Levi raises a brow. "What about them?"

I swallow.

My heart beats faster.

What does she want to say about us?

I stay hidden, pressing myself against the wall near the doorway, listening as the conversation continues.

Emma hums, stirring whatever she's cooking. "So, why exactly are you letting them stay here, huh?"

Levi leans back in his chair, his usual overconfident smirk evident even in his voice. "Tch. Ain't it obvious? Me and Kaiser go way back. Years, actually. We were a temporary team back in my adventuring days, back when I was still training to be a Sword Saint."

Emma pauses, her tone shifting slightly. "Wait—what? You and Kaiser? That half-bandaged guy?"

Levi chuckles. "Yeah. Hard to believe, huh?"

Emma tilts her head. "I mean, I figured you knew each other, but you're telling me you guys were actually teammates?"

Levi nods. "Mhm. He's a pretty nice guy, y'know. Doesn't look like it—definitely doesn't act like it half the time—but he understands people well."

Emma raises an eyebrow. "Yeah, sure. The half-bandaged guy totally screams 'understanding' to me."

Levi laughs. "He hides it well, but I've seen it in action. The guy's got layers. You think you know him, but then you realize—hell, even after years, I still know nothing about him. Actually, literally nothing about him."

I bite my lip, my fingers curling slightly.

Emma frowns, stirring the pot again. "Weird. Why's he so secretive? That's kinda sus."

Levi shrugs. "Beats me. He's never told me a damn thing about his past. All I know is his name, his skills, and the version of himself he chooses to show the world."

Emma smirks, twirling a spoon in her hand. "Ooooh, mysterious~ How intriguing. So because you trust this E-ranked guy called Kaiser, you're letting him crash here?"

Levi grins. "Yeah, pretty much." He pauses for a second before turning to her with that signature confident look. "And Emma?"

She looks at him. "Yeah?"

Levi leans forward slightly. "Don't underestimate Kaiser. He might be E-rank, but I know a side of him that'd make even sorcerers feel fear."

Emma raises an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Pfft—yeah, sure. Totally. I'll definitely believe that."

Levi smirks. "I'm just saying, don't be too shocked when he does something insane one day."

Emma scoffs, flipping her hair dramatically. "Oh please, the only thing that'd shock me is if he ever smiled."

Levi suddenly chuckles, a teasing glint in his voice. "Still, be careful, dear sister. Kaiser tends to make women fall for him. Wouldn't want you catching feelings, now."

Emma's eyes widen for a second before she slaps his shoulder. "EW—what?! No way. That's like saying I'd fall in love with a brick wall."

Levi laughs. "Good, 'cause I don't want Kaiser worming his way into my family."

Emma dramatically gags. "Yeah, well, trust me, I'm not interested."

The two of them burst into laughter, the lighthearted energy in the air making me instinctively relax.

But even as I smirk at their usual antics, my mind lingers on something else.

Levi is right.

Kaiser is a total mystery.

I know nothing about him.

And yet... why do I trust him so much?

Why does my heart cling to him when I barely know anything about who he really is?

Then—

I hear something.

Emma's voice.

But this time, her tone is different.

Not playful. Not teasing.

Serious.

"...Levi. Now tell me. About Celia."

Levi sighs, leaning back in his chair. "What about her now?"

Emma crosses her arms, voice low. "You know how she looks, Levi. It's obvious. She's like the Queen of Curses."

Levi shakes his head. "Tch. Don't worry about it."

Emma narrows her eyes. "How can I not? I mean, come on, Levi. Just look at her. White hair, red eyes. It's too similar. The way she moves, the way she fights—it reminds me of her. And honestly?" She exhales sharply. "I don't trust her."

Levi's usual confident smirk fades slightly as he drums his fingers against the table. "Emma..."

Emma presses on, serious now. "You saw her fight too, right? She's dangerous, Levi. You know it."

Levi stays quiet for a second. Then, reluctantly, he nods. "Yeah. I've seen it. She can be."

A small pause.

Then he shrugs. "To be honest, though? She's only here because Kaiser trusts her. And he wants her here. I really don't care much about her."

Emma hums, nodding. "Yeah, well. I find her pretty weird and untrustworthy."

Levi sighs. "Well, for the sake of it, let's just pretend we're her friends for now. We'll let Kaiser recover—he's the priority anyway. And she's taking care of him, so whatever."

Emma smirks slightly. "Yeah, well, I think I've been pretending pretty well so far. She actually thinks we're her friends."

A quiet chuckle between them.

I don't hear the rest.

I don't think I can.

The air feels heavier, pressing against my chest like an invisible weight. My fingers twitch slightly at my sides, my breath caught somewhere between inhaling and exhaling—like my body doesn't know what to do anymore.

They don't care about me.

It's... a stupid thing to feel hurt over, isn't it?

It's logical that they wouldn't trust me. Of course they wouldn't. Why would they? My face alone screams the kind of person they should hate.

I shouldn't feel anything.

I should understand.

But—

My heart hurts.

It physically hurts.

Like something is twisting deep inside me, squeezing, breaking—slowly, painfully—little by little.

I was so happy.

I was starting to think—just for a moment—maybe, maybe I wasn't alone anymore.

Maybe these people—the ones who laughed with me, ate with me, spoke to me so casually—maybe they were different.

But it was all just an act.

Just pretending.

I can feel my throat tightening, something stinging at the corners of my eyes.

I won't cry.

I won't cry.

But my body betrays me. My chest trembles, my hands clench at my sides.

I don't even know why it hurts this much.

Maybe because I thought I had finally found something.

Maybe because I let myself believe—even for a second—that they saw me as Celia, not as the cursed girl.

That I wasn't just a reminder of someone else.

That maybe I was... worth something.

But I was wrong.

So, so wrong.

Emma sighs, stirring whatever's cooking in the pot. "I still don't get it, though. Why is Kaiser trusting her?"

Levi leans back, arms crossed. "Simple. Pity."

Pity?

Emma raises an eyebrow. "Pity?"

Levi nods, voice calm. "Think about it. She's alone, no family, no friends, probably lived a life filled with people either fearing her or hating her. That's why he's nice to her."

Emma hums, tapping her wooden spoon against the pot. "So you're saying Kaiser's just... taking care of a stray?"

Levi smirks slightly. "Yeah, pretty much."

A pause.

Then Emma chuckles. "Yeah, that makes sense. Kaiser doesn't actually care about her, does he?"

Levi shrugs. "Not in the way she probably thinks."

Emma snickers. "I mean, she does look at him like he's her savior or something."

Levi laughs. "Yeah, it's kinda sad, really. She probably thinks she's important to him."

Emma grins, adding, "When in reality, he'd probably be fine if she just disappeared."

Silence.

Then Levi speaks again, voice more serious. "Kaiser is the type to fight alone. He doesn't need Celia."

Emma nods. "Yeah. He's a lone wolf. Doesn't seem like the kind to let people in."

Levi taps his fingers against the table. "Yeah. And once he's recovered? He'll probably tell her to leave."

Emma clicks her tongue. "Yikes. That's gonna be rough for her."

Levi exhales, shaking his head. "That's just how he is. He's never needed anyone, never will."

A beat of silence.

Then Levi speaks the words that shatter everything.

"...You know, maybe Kaiser is just pretending to be her friend."

Emma tilts her head. "Huh?"

Levi leans forward, voice quiet. "I've known him for years. And in all that time, he's never once trusted anyone."

A pause.

A slow, suffocating pause.

Then Emma laughs lightly. "Damn. That's brutal."

I felt it all at once.

Like something deep inside me cracked—no, shattered—splintering into jagged, cutting pieces that tore through my chest.

My legs wobbled. My breath hitched.

Before I could stop myself, I felt my back slowly slide down the cold wall, my body losing its strength. My hands, trembling, pressed weakly against my knees as I sat there, curled in on myself, trying to breathe.

But I couldn't.

The weight in my chest was suffocating.

It felt... wrong. Unreal. Like this wasn't happening.

But it was.

Levi's words rang in my head, looping over and over like a cruel, inescapable curse.

"Pity."

"She's just a stray."

"He doesn't actually care about her."

I gritted my teeth, gripping my arms so tightly my nails dug into my skin. It hurt. It all hurt.

I thought—I thought I had finally... found something.

People I could trust. People who saw me beyond my face, beyond my cursed blood.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my chest rising and falling unevenly.

No. No, they're wrong.

Kaiser... Kaiser wouldn't—

But my heart knew the answer before my mind did.

Levi's voice echoed again, striking deeper this time.

"Maybe Kaiser is just pretending to be her friend."

My breath caught.

My hands flew up, clutching the fabric near my heart, as if pressing down on it would somehow keep it from falling apart.

No, that... that can't be true. It's Levi. He's just saying things, right?

Right?

I gasped in a shaky breath, but it only made the tears come faster, hot and relentless.

But Kaiser... never told me anything about himself.

I thought... maybe he just wasn't the type to open up, but—

My throat tightened.

What if it was because he never cared to?

I clenched my fists over my chest, shaking my head. No. No. No.

But Levi's known him for years.

He'd know better than me.

The pain deepened, spreading like poison through my veins, sinking into the very core of me.

I had known him for barely a few weeks.

And yet...

I felt something for him. Something I didn't understand.

Something that made my heart feel warm when he was near.

Something that made me feel safe.

Something that made me trust him completely.

And yet—

He was probably just pretending.

I choked on the realization, my body trembling as the tears kept falling, slipping past my cheeks, staining my hands, my clothes.

He never trusted anyone.

He never needed anyone.

He never needed me.

I tried to stifle a sob, pressing my palm against my lips, but my body betrayed me. A strangled sound escaped, broken and pitiful.

I felt so stupid.

He probably just sees me as a burden.

He's only letting me stay because I'm taking care of him.

He's just waiting until he doesn't need me anymore.

And then...

He'll tell me to leave.

Like I was nothing.

Like I was just another stranger he happened to meet.

The weight of it was too much.

I buried my face into my knees, my shoulders shaking, my breaths coming out in ragged, uneven gasps.

I felt so cold.

So empty.

So alone.

I wiped my tears fast, my fingers shaking as I pressed them against my cheeks. Breathe in. Breathe out. If I keep thinking about it, I'll cry again. And if I cry again, my eyes will be swollen. And if my eyes are swollen—

They'll know.

Levi and Emma's voices faded into the background. I wasn't even listening anymore. Their laughter, their chatter—it didn't matter. Not when my heart felt like it was about to split apart.

Then Emma's voice rang through the house. "Celia, Kaiser! Dinner's ready, so come down!"

My breath hitched.

I pressed my fingers under my eyes, forcing any trace of tears away before going back up and stepping toward Kaiser's door. I couldn't see him. Not face to face. Not like this.

I knocked twice, my knuckles light against the wood. "Kaiser... dinner."

My voice came out softer than I wanted. I clenched my hands, afraid they'd tremble.

A pause. Then, a quiet reply.

"I'm coming."

That was all I needed. I turned away.

I can pretend. I can smile. I can laugh. I can do it.

The dinner table was warm. Cozy. It smelled nice.

I wasn't hungry.

Levi was laughing about something. Emma was giggling. The atmosphere was light, casual, fun—like nothing was wrong.

Like they hadn't just been talking about me behind my back.

Emma was saying something about a mission she and Levi took last week. Something about a rogue mage, a burned-down tavern, and a narrow escape.

"And then Levi, the absolute idiot, decided to taunt the guy instead of running!" Emma huffed, shaking her head.

Levi grinned. "Oh, come on. You should've seen his face when I dodged his fireball. Priceless."

"Oh wow," I gasped, widening my eyes dramatically. "Levi being reckless? I'm shocked. Truly."

Emma burst out laughing. Levi rolled his eyes.

"I'm telling you, Celia, he nearly got us both killed."

"And yet, here you are, alive and well," I said, resting my cheek on my palm. "Almost like you enjoy his recklessness."

Emma scoffed. "Yeah, right." But she was smiling.

I smiled too.

Like I didn't hear her voice just minutes ago.

"She's always acting like we're best friends."

I took another bite, pretending the food didn't feel heavy in my throat.

"Celia, you should've been there," Levi said, leaning forward. "I bet you would've frozen up the moment things got chaotic."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"You're terrible under pressure," Levi continued, smirking. "The second things get bad, you just stand there like a lost child."

I opened my mouth to protest. To remind them that I was holding back because I was waiting for an opening. Because I didn't want to hurt anyone.

But then I saw their expressions.

They weren't being mean. They were just teasing.

Laughing.

Joking.

Like real pretending friends do.

Right?

So I laughed too.

"You got me," I said, grinning. "I guess I really am useless, huh?"

Levi waved a hand. "Not useless, just slow."

"And really bad at keeping up," Emma added, snickering.

Levi pointed at her. "Exactly."

I smiled.

"She always clings to Kaiser like he's her only friend."

I felt my fingers twitch under the table.

"Celia, you're spacing out again," Levi called.

I perked up. "Oh? Oops, sorry! Guess I was thinking about how you two would be doomed without me."

Levi scoffed. "Oh please."

Emma giggled. "Yeah, we'd be doomed to a much quieter life."

I chuckled, but it was hollow.

Kaiser was still silent.

I glanced at him.

He wasn't eating much. Just sitting there, watching.

Was I... bothering him?

Was my fake happiness that annoying?

I felt my chest tense.

I should stop. I should pull back.

Maybe if I smiled less. Maybe if I spoke quieter.

Would he talk then?

Would he stop looking at me like that?

But Levi and Emma weren't slowing down. They kept going, teasing, laughing, playing around like nothing had changed.

Because for them, nothing had changed.

But for me?

Everything did.

I heard you.

I heard you say I was annoying. I heard you say you didn't actually care.

But I had to pretend I didn't.

Because if I stopped pretending—if I showed even a little bit of what I was actually feeling—

Then I'd be alone.

And that was scarier than anything else.

So I kept smiling. Kept laughing.

Even as it hurt.

The sound of the rain hitting the windowpane echoes through the room. It's a soft, rhythmic sound, but it feels... heavy. Like it's filling the spaces where my heart should be.

I stare at the food in front of me, but I can't even remember the last time I cared about food. Not when my stomach feels empty no matter how much I force it to fill up.

I always pretend so well. I'm really good at it. The fake smiles, the fake laughs, the fake happiness that I wear like a mask. I've perfected it. I've learned to hide it all – the cracks in my heart, the loneliness that kills me. No one sees it. No one has to. I'm good at pretending.

But right now... right now, it's harder than it's ever been.

I force a smile, the kind I know will fool everyone. It feels like a plastic smile, stretched too wide, and my cheeks ache from holding it. They all think I'm fine. They think I'm strong.

But they don't know. They don't know what it feels like to laugh when everything inside you is screaming to cry. To speak like you're okay when you're dying on the inside.

It's easier to just pretend, isn't it? Easier to let them believe you're happy rather than let them see you break.

I glance out the window, the rain falling faster now, matching the rhythm of my thoughts. It's stupid, really. Why am I still pretending? What's the point? I'll never fit in. I'll never be one of them. I'll always be the girl who was abandoned, the one who no one really understands.

I blink and notice Kaiser's eyes on me. His expression is unreadable, like always. I can't tell if he's noticing my fake smile or if he's just... observing.

I don't know what he sees when he looks at me. I want to believe he sees me, the real me. The me that's not broken. But I can't trust that. I can't trust anyone. Not anymore.

His gaze shifts away, and for a moment, I'm thankful he doesn't press me. But then it hits me. Am I just pretending, too?

I don't even know if I belong anywhere, if I really matter.

I can feel the emptiness creep back in, like a cold wind that chills my bones. I look down at my plate, pushing the food around with my fork, pretending I'm hungry. Pretending I care.

I'm not. I'm not hungry. I'm not hungry for anything.

This is all... this is all so exhausting.

I feel like I've been broken into pieces and no one knows how to put me back together.

Maybe that's the way it's supposed to be. I'm not meant to be whole. Maybe I'm not meant to be loved. Maybe... maybe it's better this way. Maybe it's just easier to let myself be invisible. Easier to let everyone think I'm fine.

But... then there's Kaiser.

I can't stop the way my heart aches when I think about him. He makes me feel like I matter. Like maybe, just maybe, I could belong somewhere. But... is it real?

Does he really care about me?

I glance at him again, and there's that same expressionless look on his face. It's like he's always so far away. So distant, even when he's close.

I... I don't know what to make of it. I want to believe he cares. I want to believe that this feeling I have around him is real. That I really do belong with him.

But what if it's just another lie?

What if he's just pretending, too? Just like Emm, just like Levi. They were all just pretending, weren't they? Pretending to like me, pretending to care, pretending that I mattered.

It was all just a game to them. They never really saw me. Not the real me.

And now... now I'm sitting here, pretending to be okay, pretending to eat, pretending that everything's fine.

But I'm not fine. I haven't been fine in a long time.

I can't help but feel like I'm drowning in all these lies. Drowning in my own need for love and acceptance. But maybe I'm not meant for it.

Maybe I'll always be alone. Maybe I'll never belong anywhere.

And maybe... maybe I'll never truly know if Kaiser cares for me. Because deep down, I don't think I believe it.

Soon, dinner was over. I waved Emma and Levi goodnight, my smile as warm as I could manage... but it was fake. I was so good at that by now.

"Goodnight, Levi and Emma," I said, though it didn't feel real. It was just another act. Another thing I had to do to make them think I was fine.

They both wished me a goodnight back, but I could tell it wasn't genuine. Did they even care? Did they ever care?

I turned to see Kaiser still sitting at the table, lost in his own thoughts. I wanted to say something to him. To ask him if he really cared about me.

But the idea of hearing him say "no" felt like it would crush me completely.

I opened my mouth, but my voice faltered. "K-... Kaiser?"

He turned towards me, his eyes cold, as if he'd been pulled from a different world. "Yeah? What is it, Celia?"

"Y-you should rest up, Kaiser... It's late. Get some sleep," I said, smiling again—another fake smile, another lie.

He just nodded, not even looking at me the way he used to. He didn't even smile, not even a fake one like I had expected.

He didn't wish me goodnight...

I felt a coldness spread inside of me, my hands trembling. My heart shattered into pieces. Did he just... leave me like this?

I watched him walk up the stairs, and I couldn't breathe. He didn't even pretend to care. He didn't even pretend to like me.

Maybe he was just done pretending... Just like Emma and Levi.

The thought consumed me. I felt the weight of it crushing my chest. The one person who had ever made me feel safe, who had ever made me feel like I mattered... and he was just... gone.

I wanted to die right there. I wanted to scream and cry until I couldn't anymore.

But I forced it down. I held the tears back as best I could, my body shaking with the effort. I walked to my room, the silence suffocating.

The second I locked the door behind me, I collapsed onto my bed, my body shaking violently as the tears finally came. They didn't stop. I couldn't make them stop.

He doesn't care.

The thought echoed in my mind, over and over. He didn't care about me. Not like I cared about him. He didn't care about me at all.

Why did I think he did? Why did I let myself believe it?

I wanted to scream. I wanted to ask him what I had done wrong. I wanted to know why it was always so hard for me to just be enough.

Why was I never enough for anyone?

And then it hit me: He doesn't care about me... not like I thought.

Tears streamed down my face, but it wasn't enough to wash away the pain. It wasn't enough to fix what was broken inside me. He was just like everyone else, wasn't he? Just like Emma, just like Levi.

I wasn't worth caring about.

Why am I always alone? Why am I always the one who ends up broken in the end?

In the past... it was all the same.

I was just too good at pretending to be happy. I convinced everyone around me that I was fine—that I was always fine—even when I wasn't. Nobody could see through it. They all thought I was this cheerful girl with no sadness inside of her.

But that wasn't true. Not even close.

Even before the curse... I was always pretending. I faked happiness, even when I felt completely broken inside. I pretended that everything was okay, even when I couldn't breathe from the weight of it all.

None of my so-called friends noticed. Not my parents. Not even my sister, Lyla... Even she never saw through the act. I thought she was the closest to me, the one person who would understand.

But she didn't. She never did.

That's right. I was too good at acting, too good at wearing a smile that wasn't mine. And no one, not a single soul in this world, could see through it

Probably not even Kaiser. Not even now.

The storm outside raged, the thunder roaring as though it was mocking me, drowning out the broken sobs escaping my chest. I buried my face in my hands, my heart feeling like it was being torn in two.

The rain felt like a reflection of everything inside me—cold, endless, heavy.

I remembered those nights after I was cursed and abandoned. The stormy nights when I would lie in bed, so cold, so alone. My heart would ache, a pain so deep, it made me wonder if I could ever get back up again.

Those nights felt endless, each hour stretching out into an eternity of hurt.

Even Lyla, the one who promised to protect me, abandoned me. She left me behind, just like everyone else.

It didn't matter how much I cried, how much I begged, how many times I tried to make them see me for who I really was.

They never did.

And in those storms, when the wind howled and the rain battered the windows, I would cry. Cry for everything I lost, for the family that didn't care, for the sister who turned her back on me. Cry for the pain I couldn't escape.

Cry for the girl who was always pretending to be happy, even though she was drowning in the loneliness.

It was always like this. It was always me against the world.

Why... why, Kaiser? Why did you do it too?

I don't understand... I thought you were different. You... you were the only one who made me feel like I wasn't alone. But now... now I'm just another person to you.

I thought you cared...

I pulled my knees to my chest, hugging them tight, as if somehow, I could make myself smaller—make myself invisible to the pain. My breath was ragged, and my chest hurt so much I could barely breathe.

Why didn't you even smile at me, Kaiser?

Tears streamed down my face, blurring everything around me. I could feel my hands shaking uncontrollably as I reached up to wipe them away. But I couldn't stop. The sobs kept coming, harder, faster, like they were choking me from the inside.

I slapped my hands against my face, hard enough that it stung, as if the pain would distract me from the gnawing emptiness that was spreading through my chest.

"Why... why don't you care about me anymore?" I whispered, my voice cracking as I spoke the words out loud, to no one but myself. I didn't know if I was asking him or myself.

I slapped my face again, harder this time, trying to wake myself from this nightmare. "Wake up, Celia!" I muttered, tears soaking my hands. "Stop being stupid... stop being weak!"

But no matter how much I hit myself, no matter how much I tried to shake it off, the hurt wouldn't leave. It was still there. The same unbearable ache that I couldn't escape, the feeling of being abandoned all over again.

"Why..." My voice trembled, and I curled into myself even more, burying my face in my knees. "Why did you have to do it too, Kaiser...?"

I kept crying, my whole body shaking with every breath. The night was so long, so cold... All I could feel was the sting in my chest, this pain of betrayal that kept gnawing at me.

This... this was far worse than anything I'd ever been through before. I... I would've rather died... I would've rather been tortured, hurt, beaten for years... than feel this.

Than feel so... so alone.

Loud, shaky sobs escaped from my chest, uncontrollable, broken.

Than... just thinking...

I could barely get the words out, each one feeling like it would shatter me even more. My voice trembled and cracked, and I gasped for air between my sobs.

He... he promised...

My hands gripped my hair, pulling at it, trying to stop myself from falling apart completely. But it wasn't helping... nothing helped.

I... I was his heart... His heart...

I kept repeating it to myself, hoping it would make sense. But all I felt was the cold emptiness where his love used to be.

That... he was going to be with me...

But now... he wasn't. He wasn't here for me. He wasn't there when I needed him the most.

My breath hitched, and I could barely speak through the sobs. Just... for him... I felt my chest tighten as if it was being crushed under the weight of it all.

To not care?

An hour passed. The tears didn't stop. They just kept flowing, like a river I couldn't escape from. I couldn't even remember when the crying started, or when I lost control.

All I knew was that I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop the suffocating pain that clung to my chest, the aching emptiness that spread through every part of me.

What... other reasons did I have to feel happy? Nothing. At all. Nothing at all. Everything I'd ever hoped for, everything I'd ever dreamed about... it all just shattered. It was all just a lie.

I hate myself. I hate that I'm so weak. That I let myself get this close to him, to anyone...

Why did I let myself think that I mattered? Why... why did I think Kaiser cared about me?

"Please..." I whispered between sobs, my voice shaking like I was begging for my life.

"I'll beg you... I'll do whatever you want... just tell me."

My throat was sore, but I didn't care. The words just kept spilling out, desperate, raw.

"Why don't you care about me?"

It felt like I was tearing apart inside. How could he... How could someone who made me feel like I mattered just... walk away?

Just leave me like this?

And then... suddenly, a knock on my door.

Knock. Knock.

I froze, my body tense. My heartbeat skipped a beat, and for a moment, I wondered if I had imagined it. Maybe it was just a figment of my broken mind, a cruel trick.

But then it came again.

Knock. Knock.

It wasn't the sound of a dream. It was real.

I wiped my face quickly, trying to gather myself, but the sobs didn't stop. My vision was blurry, and I could barely breathe through the weight of it all.

Why now? Why... after all this time?

I didn't want to face anyone. Not like this. Not with the mess I'd become. I didn't want to let anyone see the broken pieces I was left with. But I couldn't ignore it. Couldn't pretend the knock wasn't there.

My hands trembled as I pulled myself together the best I could. I tried to breathe, tried to calm my racing heart. But it wasn't enough.

I wasn't enough.

I heard Kaiser's voice outside my door, cutting through the quiet like a dagger.

"Hey, Celia, are you awake?"

I immediately froze, holding my breath, my heart pounding in my chest. I wanted to remain quiet, to just pretend I was asleep and that nothing was happening.

Maybe he'd leave, and I wouldn't have to face him—wouldn't have to let him see how much I was falling apart inside.

But then, he spoke again, and it made my heart do this... thing.

"You know, if you're not asleep, I wanted to see you."

See me?

I repeated it quietly to myself, my voice barely a whisper. I felt stupid for even thinking about it, but his words had this effect on me. I stuttered when I said it out loud.

"See me?"

"Yep, you're still awake so open up," he said.

I felt like I was in a trap—one I knew I'd fall for, no matter how many times I told myself not to. Even in this state, broken and raw from everything that had just happened, he still managed to pull me in.

Wow... I really fell for that trap.

I scrambled to wipe the tears from my face, feeling the wetness still clinging to my cheeks. The bed sheet was soaked from the tears, but I didn't care.

I tried to fix my hair, doing the best I could with shaky hands. I wanted to look normal, to look like I hadn't just cried my heart out, but... I could never get it right.

"You know it's cold out here, so open up," he said, his voice warm through the door, but something else was in it too—something almost teasing.

"I'm... I'm coming," I said, my voice breaking, stuttered.

I stood up slowly, heart pounding harder with every step. As I opened the door, I saw him standing there, his eyes locking onto mine with that familiar intensity.

"May I come in?" he asked, his voice soft but still serious.

I nodded slowly, my throat tight. "Y-yeah, you can come in, Kaiser."

I stepped back, giving him room to enter. My room, or rather, the guest room in Levi's house, wasn't too big. The walls were a dull, neutral color, giving it an almost cold vibe, though the bed and a couple of chairs did make it feel homey.

There was a small wooden desk by the window, and a worn rug beneath my feet. Nothing too extravagant, but enough for someone like me—someone who didn't need much, but somehow always felt like it was never enough.

Kaiser stepped in, and before I could register what was happening, he locked the door behind him.

I flinched, my heart skipping a beat.

Did he just lock the door?

"Kaiser...? Did you—?"

He cut me off, his voice calm, almost playful, but there was something else there. A seriousness that made the air feel thicker.

"It's fine if it's just you and me, right? Alone in this room?" he asked, his gaze never leaving mine.

My heart pounded harder, the blood rushing to my ears. I knew what had happened before—what I had just gone through—but right now, standing in front of him, I couldn't ignore the way my body felt.

The way he looked at me. The way I wanted him to be close to me.

Just me and him? Alone in this room?

"Y-yeah... I don't mind. It's fine..." I stammered, my voice barely audible as I forced a smile, my stomach a mess of nerves and something else I couldn't quite place.

Something that made my insides twist in a way I wasn't sure I wanted to understand.

The silence between us felt heavy, like we were both waiting for something—maybe for the other to speak, or maybe for something to just happen.

But as I stood there, staring at him, I couldn't help but wonder. Why did he come here? What did he want? Was this... just him being kind, or was there something more to it?

Kaiser patted the spot next to him, his gesture simple but somehow carrying so much weight. "Come sit with me, Celia," he said, his voice soft, calmer than I expected.

I felt a pang of uncertainty.

I hesitated for a moment, my heart still racing, before I slowly walked over to sit next to him. The bed was soft, but I couldn't relax. I couldn't focus on anything but the weight of his presence beside me.

As soon as I sat down, I felt his hand gently grip mine. It was firm, reassuring, yet somehow... it made everything feel even more fragile.

I froze, not knowing how to react.

"Celia..." His voice was quiet, but there was an edge to it, like he was waiting for something from me.

I gulped, my throat dry. "Y-yes... k-kaiser?" My heart was pounding in my chest now, my pulse racing.

His eyes searched mine, intense yet soft at the same time. "Is something wrong?"

Something wrong...? My whole world had shattered earlier. Of course something was wrong. My heart felt like it was broken in a million pieces.

The only thing that had kept me going was pretending... pretending that I wasn't a mess inside. But how could I explain that to him? How could I even put it into words?

"Nothing's wrong, k-kaiser," I said quickly, my voice shaky. I forced a smile, a wide, fake smile. I couldn't let him see how much I was falling apart. Not again.

But the silence stretched on. The storm outside the window raged louder, making everything feel colder, more suffocating. I could barely hear my own thoughts over the constant pounding of the rain. But then I felt his grip on my hand tighten, his gaze sharpening.

"Don't lie to me, Celia," he said, his voice cold but not unkind. It was almost... insistent.

I looked at him, stunned, unsure how he had seen through my defenses. How had he known? No one else had—least of all, the people I had spent years with.

His eyes bore into me, not judging, but understanding. Why? How could he know?

"Earlier," he began softly, his voice laced with concern, but there was also an undeniable warmth in it that made my heart skip a beat. "I saw you making multiple fake smiles during dinner. Why?"

The words hit me like a blow, the last thing I expected him to bring up. How did he know? How did he see it when nobody else had?

"I..." I stuttered, my mind scrambling to form something convincing. I couldn't let him know. Not now. Not after everything that had already happened.

"I... I wasn't faking it, Kaiser," I said, my voice shaking. I could feel the heat of the lie on my tongue, but I couldn't stop it from spilling out.

He tilted his head, his expression unchanged. "Celia..." He murmured. "Why do you think I would ask you that, if I didn't already know?"

His words knocked the wind out of me. I swallowed hard, but I couldn't look at him. I just stared at our hands, my heart racing.

"I-I wasn't faking it," I said, more forcefully this time, but my voice cracked, betraying me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Kaiser's thumb brushed over the back of my hand, his touch gentle yet firm, as if he could see through me, as if he could see all of me, the parts I tried to hide.

His voice was calm, but there was a firmness to it, like he wasn't going to let me lie to him anymore.

"Celia," he said again, his tone almost a whisper. "Please. Stop pretending. Stop pretending to me."

I shook my head, my chest tense as I tried to fight the emotions threatening to spill over. "I'm not pretending, Kaiser! I'm not!" I shouted, my voice breaking on the last word. "I'm not pretending! I'm not lying to you! I swear!"

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, but I quickly blinked them away, refusing to let them fall. Not again. Not in front of him.

But Kaiser wasn't letting up. He leaned closer, his eyes never leaving mine. His touch on my hand never wavered.

"You don't have to lie to me, Celia," he said, his voice soft, almost... broken. "I know it hurts. I know you're struggling. But you're not alone in this. You never have to pretend with me."

I pulled my hand away from his, feeling like I was suffocating. My heart raced, my thoughts were clouded with the weight of everything I had been hiding.

I couldn't do this. I couldn't let him see me like this, so broken, so... so lost.

"I am okay, Kaiser!" I cried out, tears finally breaking free, falling down my cheeks in rivers. "I'm fine, okay?! You don't understand! You don't know how much I've tried to keep it together! How much I've fought to keep it from everyone!"

My voice was barely a whisper at the end, my breath ragged. I choked on the words, the tears coming faster now, and I couldn't stop them, couldn't hold it in any longer.

Kaiser was silent for a moment, just looking at me. His face was full of sorrow, but not the kind that came from anger or disappointment.

He leaned in closer, his hand finding mine again, not to pull it away this time, but to pull me toward him. Slowly, gently, as if I were the most fragile thing in the world.

"Celia..." His voice was barely above a whisper, his breath warm against my ear. "You don't have to lie to me. You don't have to pretend with me. Please. Just be honest with me."

The words hit me like a wave. I couldn't keep fighting it anymore. I couldn't keep pretending. I was so tired.

So damn tired of being strong.

"I... I wasn't okay, Kaiser," I sobbed, my voice barely audible. "I wasn't okay... I... I faked it. I faked it every single time. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know how to stop pretending. How could I stop when everyone else... when everyone else didn't see it?"

The sobs came harder now, shaking my whole body. I curled into him, unable to stop myself, my tears soaking into his shirt as I let everything go.

"I was so scared, Kaiser," I whispered between sobs. "I was so scared that if I showed them how broken I was... they'd leave me. They'd see how messed up I really am. How

weak I really am. And I didn't want anyone to leave me. Especially... you. I didn't want to be... alone."

Kaiser wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his chest, his warmth enveloping me. He didn't say anything at first. He didn't have to. The silence was full of understanding, of comfort, of a promise that I had never realized I needed until now.

But despite his comforting presence, I couldn't help the doubt that clung to me like a shadow.

"But... Kaiser... you don't care about me, right?" I asked shakily, my voice barely more than a whisper, fear creeping into my words.

He paused, his hand gently cradling the back of my head as he pulled me closer to him.

"Huh?" he asked, his voice laced with disbelief, almost like he couldn't fathom the thought. "What are you saying, silly?"

I felt the sting of those words, the ones that felt so warm and comforting, yet I still couldn't shake the cold emptiness inside.

Could it be true? Could someone like him actually care about someone like me?

His hand gently cupped my cheek, lifting my face to meet his gaze, his eyes full of sincerity. "You don't have to ask that, Celia. You never have to ask me that again. Because, of course, I care about you."

His words, so simple, yet so heavy with truth, were enough to make my heart skip a beat.

The depth in his eyes, the warmth in his touch, everything about him told me that he wasn't lying.

But there was still that doubt inside me, that voice telling me I wasn't worthy of it. That voice telling me I wasn't worth his time, his care.

"Do... do you actually care about me... K-Kaiser?" I stuttered, my voice cracking as I looked up at him.

I couldn't keep the tears from falling, couldn't stop the trembling in my voice. I needed to hear it from him again, needed to know, but part of me was terrified of the answer.

Kaiser's thumb gently wiped away a stray tear from my cheek, and he smiled softly—gently—as if the very thought of me doubting him was something he couldn't bear to hear.

"Celia..." His voice was soft, but there was something in it, something tender, something almost... intimate, that sent a warmth flooding through my chest.

"How could I not care about you? How could I not, when you're the one there for me? Taking care of me more than yourself?"

"I've been here for you. I'll always be here for you, because... you matter to me. You matter more than anything, Celia. More than you'll ever realize."

His hand gently cupped the side of my face, his thumb brushing over my skin in slow, soothing motions.

"You think I don't care?" he continued, his voice quiet but unwavering. "That's the last thing I would ever want you to feel. The truth is, I care about you more than words can say. And when you smile, even just a little bit, it's the best thing in my world."

His voice dropped lower, his words a soft whisper, just for me. "I don't want you to doubt that, not for a second. Because no matter how broken you feel... no matter what you're going through... I'm here. And I'm never going to leave you."

He continued, his words more firm, filled with an unshakable certainty. "No matter where you are. No matter who you're up against, Celia... Remember, I will come and protect you. It won't matter who it's up against or who I am at that point. I'll come and save you."

My breath hitched as I listened to him, the weight of his words sinking into my heart. He wasn't just comforting me. He wasn't just saying things to make me feel better.

No... it was so much more than that. He truly cared. The depth in his eyes, the sincerity in his touch—it was real. It was so real that I could feel it in my bones.

"I... I'm so sorry, Kaiser," I whispered through my tears, my voice full of regret. "I've been so... so stupid. I didn't believe you. I didn't believe anyone could really care about me... not like this..."

Kaiser pulled me closer, his arms wrapping around me as if to shield me from the world, his chin resting gently atop my head.

"You know, you're my heart, Celia," he said, his voice almost a whisper now. "And I can't let my heart cry, can I?"

I couldn't help but smile, the smile I thought I had forgotten, the one that felt so real, so me.

"There's that smile I love, Celia," Kaiser said, his voice warm, his eyes locking onto mine with such sincerity. "Don't ever fake it in front of me again, alright?"

I laughed softly, though my tears were still there, lingering. Kaiser immediately noticed and, without saying a word, reached up with his thumb to gently wipe them away.

His touch was tender, like he was handling something fragile, something he cared for deeply.

How... how could I have ever doubted him? I thought, my chest tightening.

Nobody else—no one—has ever seen through my fake smile like that. My family, my friends, even my sister who knew me for years... none of them saw it. But Kaiser, within just a few minutes, during dinner, he saw it.

"Kaiser..." I whispered, my voice barely audible as I tried to understand it. "How did you realize it was fake?"

He chuckled lightly, his playful grin returning as he looked down at me with amusement.

"Oh? You see... the Celia I know," he said, leaning in a little closer, his voice low but teasing, "looks the most beautiful when she's smiling."

"Beautiful...?" I muttered, almost embarrassed by his words. My heart skipped a beat, caught somewhere between warmth and uncertainty.

"Oh yes, the Celia I know gives the best smiles that make me happier than anything. I can't have her faking it now, can I?" He said it so casually, so effortlessly, but the way his eyes shone with happiness made my heart swell.

"You're my heart, Celia. Don't ever doubt that."

The storm outside raged on, and suddenly, with a deafening crack of thunder, the lights flickered and then went out.

The room was plunged into darkness, the only light coming from the flashes of lightning that illuminated the room in brief, haunting bursts.

I froze, my heart skipping a beat at the sound of the thunder, my breath caught in my chest. The fear rushed in suddenly, too quickly for me to stop it.

I gripped onto Kaiser's shirt, my fingers digging into the fabric as my body tensed in fright. I hadn't even realized I was screaming until the sound escaped from my lips, sharp and panicked.

"Hey, hey, what's this? Scared of a little thunder?" Kaiser teased, his voice light, but there was a warmth in it, a protective undertone that soothed my racing heart, even if it didn't completely stop the panic.

I felt my heartbeat in my throat, but I couldn't let go. My hands tightened even more around his chest, and I looked up at him, my wide eyes searching for reassurance, even if I couldn't see his face in the dark.

"Kaiser..." I muttered, still clutching him tightly, feeling his warmth against me. I could hear him smirk, even without seeing his face.

"What is it now, Celia? Scared of the storm more?" he teased, his voice light but filled with a playful edge.

"Shut up," I murmured, my voice tinged with annoyance but my hands tightening on him anyway. I wasn't sure if I was trying to protect myself or hold him closer.

He chuckled, the sound warm and comforting. "You're cute when you're scared. Never thought I'd see you like this."

"I'm not cute, just... just stay with me," I demanded, not able to keep the vulnerability out of my voice. My face pressed into his chest, and I could feel his heartbeat. "Stay with me. Don't leave me alone. I don't want to be alone tonight."

Kaiser hummed, his fingers gently brushing the back of my hand. "Hmm, someone's needy tonight." His teasing tone was still there, but I could feel his arms around me tightening, holding me closer.

"I'm not needy," I said quickly, though I wasn't sure I believed it. I could hear my voice crack, and I didn't want to admit it, but I just wanted him there, with me.

"I just... I just want you here. Don't leave, alright? Just stay." My heart felt heavy with the weight of it all, but somehow, when I said it aloud, it felt like a weight lifted off my chest.

Kaiser was quiet for a second, and I could feel him looking down at me, though we were in the dark. "You're full of surprises, Celia. First, you're acting tough, and now you're acting all needy. I can't decide if I should keep teasing you or give in."

I could hear the smirk in his voice, but it didn't bother me. His playful nature made me smile, even in the middle of my fear.

"I don't care," I whispered, my voice softer now, my grip on him a little tighter. "I just want you. I want you to stay... just... stay with me."

There was a shift in the air, a warmth that radiated between us. "You don't have to ask me twice," he said, the teasing gone from his voice, replaced by something far deeper, more serious.

And for a moment, it felt like everything else faded into the background. The storm, the fear, the past. It was just him and me.

"Thank you..." I whispered again, my voice barely audible.

Kaiser didn't respond immediately. He just held me close, and I could feel his breath against my hair. For a long time, we just stayed like that.

After a while in the dark, Kaiser spoke again, his voice soft, almost hesitant.

"You know, Celia, I've had this feeling for a while."

I tilted my head up at him, my eyes trying to adjust to the darkness, barely making out his face. "What feeling?" I asked, my voice shaking a little.

"In my life... I always thought I was worthless," he confessed, his tone heavier than I had ever heard it.

I froze. The words hit me harder than I expected, almost like a punch to the gut. My heart ached at the thought of him feeling that way. The idea of him believing he was nothing—it hurt more than I could express.

I couldn't stay quiet. I couldn't let him think like that, especially not now. I quickly cut him off, my voice coming out more forceful than I intended.

"No. Stop speaking," I said, almost desperately.

"Celia?" he asked, his voice soft, like he wasn't sure what he had just unleashed.

"You're not nothing. Not now, not ever," I said firmly, my hands tightening around him, as if I could hold onto him to make him believe it.

"You're my everything. Now and always, and I won't let you go," I added, feeling every word in my chest.

The silence stretched between us. He didn't say anything, but I could feel the weight of it, the tension in his stillness.

Kaiser, the person who had never shown this kind of vulnerability, had let me see a part of him that was raw, fragile even. He had opened up in a way I never imagined he would.

For the first time, I was the one trying to hold him together, to be the one who stood strong for him. He had always been there for me, always the calm in the storm, the unshakable force. But now, he was allowing me to be the one he could lean on.

And I would never let him down.

Kaiser was silent, and I held my breath, waiting for him to respond. His thoughts seemed far away, distant, but in the quiet, I knew he was thinking deeply.

"Yeah... you're right, Celia," he said quietly after what felt like an eternity.

I smiled a little, feeling the faintest warmth fill the room, despite the lingering shadows. "After all," I said, my voice softer, more intimate now, "how can I be nothing when I am everything to someone?"

There was a subtle change in the air, a shift in how I felt about everything. The storm outside was finally dying down, the winds calming, and with it, the heaviness in my chest began to lighten.

I couldn't see him clearly, but I could feel the change in him, too. There was a soft understanding, an unspoken promise between us. And even in the dark, even with everything that had happened before, it felt like things were beginning to make sense.

Kaiser's voice broke the silence once more, teasing and light as ever. "Well, I guess the storm's stopped now. I should probably be going, huh?"

I pulled him closer without thinking, my hands gripping tighter as I buried my face in his chest. "No... no, please don't go," I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper. "I need you tonight... I won't be able to sleep alone."

There was a long pause, and I could feel him stiffen slightly. "Celia... What exactly are you implying here?" he asked, his tone laced with confusion and something else—was it amusement?

I froze. My face heated up instantly, the reality of what I had said hitting me. I looked up at him, my eyes wide, and I could feel the blush creeping up my neck. "N-no... I didn't mean it like that!" I stammered, my heart racing.

Kaiser smirked, clearly enjoying my flustered state. "Oh? So you don't want me to stay here with you, then?" he teased, his voice turning playful. "You just want me... for something else, maybe?"

I flushed even deeper, unable to hide how embarrassed I was. "Kaiser, that's not what I meant!" I said, trying to pull away, but he was holding me too close.

"Are you sure? Because you seem like you've got other plans in mind," he teased again, his voice just the right mix of flirtation and amusement.

"Stop it!" I laughed, though I couldn't help but keep holding him tighter. "I just—" I hesitated, my hands tightening around him even more. "I just want you to stay with me tonight, alright?" My voice was quieter now, more serious, but the lightness still lingered in my tone.

I quickly placed a hand over my mouth, trying to hide the blush creeping up my cheeks, feeling suddenly shy under his gaze. It was the truth, though. More than anything, I just wanted him to stay with me... to hold me through the night, and to keep that warmth close.

Kaiser leaned in slightly, raising an eyebrow. "So, what you're saying is... you want me to stay here, hold you, and make sure you feel safe and warm?" He tilted his head, his smirk still present.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean," I muttered, my voice soft but filled with determination. I wasn't going to back down now.

Kaiser chuckled, clearly amused by my persistence, but he finally sighed, his smirk fading just a little. "Alright, alright. I guess I can stay for a little longer. Don't get too comfortable now," he said, though there was no mistaking the softness in his voice.

I squeezed him even tighter, burying my face in his chest once more, relieved and happy that he hadn't left. "Thank you," I murmured, feeling a wave of contentment wash over me.

Kaiser shook his head, a chuckle escaping his lips. "You know, you're lucky I'm in a good mood tonight. I won't let you off the hook so easily next time," he teased, though there was no real bite to it.

I smiled against his chest, feeling safe and secure, even though the storm had long since passed. "I don't care. I just want you here, with me."

"Well, if you say so," Kaiser replied, his tone warm, and for once, it was clear that his teasing had melted away into something deeper. He wrapped his arms around me again, pulling me even closer.

And I held him—tight, like I would never let go.

Kaiser let out a breath, his voice catching slightly. "Oww, I can't breathe, so tight," he said, his tone a mix of teasing and surprise.

I didn't let go. In fact, I pulled him even closer. "You're my crazy... Kaiser," I whispered, my words barely audible, but there was a deep sincerity behind them.

His teasing grin never wavered. "Oh? Claiming me as yours now?" he said, his voice playful, but I noticed a shift in the way he said it.

"Yes," I said softly, my grip tightening around him. "I am. You're my everything." I wasn't playing anymore. My words weren't filled with teasing or nervous laughter. They were simply the truth, the kind of truth I never thought I could say out loud.

Kaiser was silent for a moment, his body going still in my arms. I could almost see the confusion in his eyes as he looked down at me, raising an eyebrow.

"You're acting like a sweet doll right now," he tried to tease again, but I could hear the subtle shift in his tone. It wasn't as confident as before.

Without missing a beat, I tightened my hold on him even more, not letting him slip away from me.

"Then come and play with me, as much as you want," I whispered into his chest, my voice firm but soft.

He froze completely. His usual smirk faltered, and for a moment, I could see the confusion in his eyes. I wasn't teasing him, wasn't blushing or shying away from his playful remarks.

Instead, I just held him, offering something deeper than games or light-hearted flirtation.

I whispered once more, my words quiet but powerful, "I just want to be your sweetheart."

Kaiser froze for a second, and I felt him look down at me. His gaze was gentle, unsure of what to make of the words I had just spoken. I couldn't see his face clearly in the dark, but I could feel his presence, so strong and steady against me.

"So just let me have your heart," I added, my voice quieter now, almost fragile in the silence that surrounded us.

I felt him tense. He was caught completely offguard, and I could almost hear the confusion in his breath. He didn't say anything for a long while, and I wondered if he was processing my words.

His reaction was nothing like I expected. He didn't blush or shy away like a normal person. He didn't pull away from me, as most would. Instead, he simply stayed there, letting me hold him.

I didn't care. I didn't care about anything else at that moment. I held him tighter, pulling him closer to me, never wanting to let go. Because deep down, I had realized something that shifted the ground beneath me, something I couldn't deny any longer.

The feelings I had for him before, the ones I thought were too complicated to name, weren't just feelings anymore. They weren't just a passing admiration or infatuation.

They were real, they were powerful, and they were love.

He was the person I loved the most in my life now. The only person who could see through my fake smiles, who could make me feel more than just an illusion of happiness.

Kaiser was the one who filled the empty parts of me I didn't even know were missing. And in that moment, I realized that everything I had felt up until now—everything that had confused me—was love.

Real, raw love. The kind of love that wrapped around my heart and held it hostage. The kind of love I would never let go of.

I couldn't imagine life without him. He was my heart. He was my soul. My entire being was tied to him, and I didn't want to change that. I wanted to be his forever.

I shifted my position slightly, still holding him tight, feeling the warmth of his chest against mine. My hands instinctively tightened around him as though to anchor him to me, as if I could make him stay with me, forever and ever.

I rested my head against his chest, hearing his steady heartbeat under my ear, feeling the rise and fall of his breath. My fingers curled into his shirt, clutching him even closer, as though afraid he might disappear if I let go.

Kaiser chuckled softly, his voice playful, "Careful now, Celia. You may also fall for me if you're this close."

I couldn't help but smile, even though I tried to keep my expression serious. "Oh trust me, I won't," I said, my voice calm but with a hint of amusement. Little did silly know, I've already fallen for him.

As I held him close, I realized how true that was. Tonight, I thought I'd be crying to myself in the dark, overwhelmed with the weight of feeling alone, with nobody to turn to.

But instead, he was here—Kaiser, the one person who had always understood me, the one who could make me feel lighter, even in my darkest moments. I didn't feel alone anymore. I felt... safe. Happy. More alive than I had in a long time.

He was my everything now, and I knew that without a doubt. I would do anything to protect him, to keep him by my side. Anything.

If the world itself had to burn for us to be together, I would let it. Because with him, I knew I would be happy, as long as we were together.

I tightened my hold on him just a little, feeling his warmth, hearing his heartbeat. And I knew in my heart—no matter what happened, I would never let go.

Rain had never been my favorite; I hated it. It always reminded me of the nights I spent crying alone, my heart heavy with sadness, the storms outside matching the storms inside me.

But tonight, holding him in my arms, it felt different. The rain no longer felt like a cruel reminder of my loneliness. Instead, it felt like a comforting soundtrack to this moment—a reminder of how much I had changed.

How much he had changed me.

I smiled widely, my heart lighter than it had ever been. This stormy, rainy night was no longer something I dreaded. It was something I would cherish forever, because it reminded me of the love I had found in him.

For the first time in so long, the rain wasn't a reminder of my pain. It was a reminder of my love for him. How he had taken all my broken pieces and made me whole again, how he had turned my sorrow into something beautiful.

I held him tighter, feeling his heartbeat beneath my fingertips, and whispered softly, just for him, "I never thought I'd love the rain, but with you... I do."

I smiled widely, feeling the warmth of him against me, his presence somehow making the storm outside seem insignificant.

I looked down, and that's when I realized he had already fallen asleep, his breath even and slow. He must've been exhausted, his body still recovering from everything. I gently placed him onto my lap, careful not to disturb him.

"Sleep well, dummy," I whispered softly, my hand lightly brushing through his hair as I watched him, the quiet rhythm of his breathing calming me.

In the stillness of the room, with only the soft sound of rain and his steady breathing filling the space, I leaned down. My voice was barely a whisper, a secret meant only for him.

"I love you, silly. Only mine," I murmured, a smile forming on my face as I gazed down at him. My heart swelled with emotions I couldn't quite put into words, but the feeling of him in my arms made everything feel right.

The night passed, the storm outside continuing its relentless dance, but in here, with him... I had everything I needed.

My thoughts flickered back to the present.

I was fighting Xander, wasn't I? The words he'd spat at me, so cold and final, echoed through my mind: Kaiser's dead.

The anger had risen within me like a storm, overtaking every other emotion, blinding me to everything else.

But now, as the battle became one-sided, as Xander's overwhelming strength as a Sword Saint pushed me to the brink of death, I felt the weight of my own helplessness.

I was going to die. I could feel it in the way my body refused to move, the way the world felt so far out of reach.

But then, amidst the chaos and despair, someone had come. Someone had saved me. The memory of those words—Kaiser's words—were etched in my mind, repeating in my ears like a promise:

"No matter where you are. No matter who you're up against, Celia... Remember, I will come and protect you. It won't matter who it's up against or who I am at that point. I'll come and save you."

Was it really you, Kai? Did you really come back just to protect me?

I was holding onto that thought, that fragile hope, like it was my lifeline. Because, no matter what, he was my everything. And to think that he'd come for me, that he'd kept his word... I couldn't help but believe it.

I looked up, relief flooding through me as the warmth of a familiar embrace surrounded me. His arms held me tight, like that night when we were together. I could feel his heartbeat, steady and reassuring, reminding me of him—the real him.

But when I looked up to meet his eyes, my heart sank.

It wasn't Kaiser.

It was him—the weird bandaged figure.

Aldric.

Chapter 50 - Beginning and End

Celia's Perspective:

For a moment, I just felt safe. I can't say... it was a familiar feeling of safety I've experienced. It was only Kaiser who could make me feel so vulnerable yet safe at the same time...

I could feel the wind and nature around me for a second, yet the world had stopped. And my feelings—my stupid, confusing, irrational feelings—were trying to understand why.

I kept looking up, trying to read his expression. He was smirking. His lips curled slightly, almost like he was proud of something.

"Aldric?" I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper.

His black eyes flickered down to me, his bandaged face carrying an insufferable smile. "Hey, I told you, little girls shouldn't get violent."

My face immediately blushed.

Did he—did he just say that? Again?!

I shoved him back, trying to get off. "What the hell—I am NOT a little girl!"

But Aldric grabbed my wrist effortlessly, his grip firm but not painful. His smirk deepened. "Hey now, don't get ahead of yourself. You were almost about to die here~"

"I don't need your jack—bandaged—uh—help!" I scoffed, wriggling my arm, but he didn't even flinch.

He tilted his head, amused. "Maybe you do, maybe you don't. But I'm here to do it either way, so be a good girl and listen up."

My jaw clenched. His words were annoying. His stupid face was annoying. His stupid everything was annoying. But before I could snap back, I felt his grip tighten slightly—just enough to keep me in place—as he leaned in, his lips nearly brushing my ear.

"Hey now~" he whispered, voice low and smooth. "I know you're enjoying being close to me. After all, I'm the one who saved and held you close right here."

My breath hitched.

Wait—wait, what?

His free hand trailed down my wrist, fingertips barely grazing my skin. My entire body tensed up as if I had been struck by lightning.

"W-what—what are you—"

His eyes gleamed. "Oh? You're stuttering, Celia~ Does my touch make you nervous?"

I swallowed hard. "N-no, I—I just—"

He chuckled softly, and it sent an involuntary shiver down my spine. "You know, you really shouldn't be so reckless," he murmured, brushing a stray lock of my hair behind

my ear. "You keep throwing yourself into danger like this... makes me worried, you know?"

"W-worried?" I repeated like an idiot.

"Of course." His thumb lightly traced over my wrist. "You think I'd just let you die on my watch? No, no... I quite like having you around, Celia."

His gaze locked onto mine, and for the first time, I felt an unease I couldn't quite place. "Besides... wouldn't it be better to have someone strong by your side? Someone who can always keep you safe?"

"I—I—"

I heard a groan in the distance. Aldric glanced to the right, and I followed his gaze—Xander. He was somehow flung against a tree, groaning like he just woke up from a bad nap.

Wait.

I turned back to Aldric, eyes wide. "Why are you touching and holding me like this?!"

He smirked, tilting his head like he was enjoying every bit of my reaction. "Touching you? Celia, I'm just making sure my dear little princess isn't trembling in fear. My arms are warm, aren't they? Comfortable, even?"

I tried to step back, but his grip didn't budge. "S-shut up! That's not—"

His fingers trailed lightly over my palm. "No need to be so defensive. I'm just making a little offer... You want to get stronger, right? Then why not let someone like me take care of you while you do?"

My heart pounded. I hated how smooth his voice was. How easily he was twisting everything. How his words felt... oddly tempting.

I clenched my fists. "I-I don't need you to take care of me—!"

"Mmm, but you need someone, don't you?"

I froze.

Aldric's eyes darkened slightly. "To rely on them. To trust them. You'll feel safe with them." His smirk returned, slow and knowing. "But what if they're not around, Celia?"

I opened my mouth, but the words didn't come.

His voice dipped, a dangerous softness weaving through it. "Wouldn't it be nice to have someone else, just in case? Someone who's always one step ahead, always watching your back?"

He loosened his grip, only to place a hand against my cheek, his fingers cool against my warm skin. "After all... you seemed to like it when I held you close just now."

I couldn't breathe.

My thoughts were all over the place. My heart was hammering against my chest like an idiot. My skin felt like it was burning where he touched me, and I hated how—how natural it all felt.

I wasn't supposed to feel this way.

This feeling... of my heart beating so fast... it was only for Kaiser. But who's he now to make it happen again? I just... don't understand myself anymore.

How can he so easily make me say yes and stutter?

The forest around us hummed with a quiet unease. The trees swayed gently, their branches whispering secrets in the wind. It would've been peaceful—if my nerves weren't on edge.

My fingers twitched slightly against Aldric's wrist, still faintly aware of the way he hadn't let go. The warmth of his grip was persistent, annoying, and yet... somehow grounding. Ugh. I hated that.

Then, a voice broke through the silence.

"Oi, dumbass," the voice had a casual, almost playful sharpness to it. "Told you not to go around fighting people."

My head snapped toward the source, just in time to see Zain smacking Xander upside the head. The impact made a small thwack, and I might've found it funny if I wasn't still reeling from everything.

Xander groaned, rubbing his head lazily. "Nah, man... I was doing what you said." He gestured vaguely in Aldric's direction. "That guy appeared and ruined it."

Aldric? Ruined it? I blinked, processing.

The man—Zain, sighed dramatically, rubbing his temples. "I don't remember telling you to go fight Celia."

Xander scratched his cheek, frowning slightly before his gaze landed back on me. "You know her?" He muttered, casting a small healing spell over himself like it was nothing. The light flickered lazily in his palm, like he wasn't even trying.

Zain crossed his arms. "Yeah, I do. She's going to help us against the grotesques. Calm down, she's not a threat."

Not a threat? Excuse me? After all the fighting I just did?! But okay. Sure. Whatever.

Xander tilted his head with a half-hearted sigh. "So I wasted my energy for no reason?" His voice was almost whiny, like this was some mild inconvenience instead of, y'know, a whole battle.

Zain rolled his eyes. "Ugh. I'm going back to the guild. Return soon."

Xander gave a lazy wave. "Yeah, yeah... go, I wanna do something first."

And then—he started walking toward us.

The shift in atmosphere was weird. One second he had the whole Grim Reaper aura, like he was some executioner about to cut me down, and now? Now he just looked... chill.

Almost too laid-back. But somehow, that made it worse. It was like he was choosing when to be dangerous, and I couldn't tell if he saw us as a threat or just entertainment.

Instinctively, my fingers clenched tighter around Aldric's hand.

Aldric, being the obnoxious person he is, noticed. He looked down at me, a smirk playing at his lips. And then—he winked.

Winked.

I nearly choked on my own breath. "W-what—?"

His smirk deepened, amused. "Oh? Getting nervous already, little girl?" he teased, his voice dipping into something smooth, something infuriatingly confident.

"I—shut up," I muttered under my breath, willing my face not to heat up.

Then Xander finally spoke. "Sorry, Celia or whatever," he said, his voice as flat as his expression. "Didn't expect you to be part of Zain's group."

"Oh... uh. It's okay," I replied, still slightly thrown off by Aldric's stupid wink.

But then, Xander's attention shifted.

Directly to Aldric.

The faint glow of magic residue still clung to the ground where Xander and Aldric had clashed just moments ago.

Xander, his posture annoyingly relaxed, lazily cracked his neck before speaking. "Tell me how you did it?" His tone was as casual as if he were asking about the weather.

Aldric, standing beside me, let out a small chuckle. He tilted his head slightly, amusement flickering in his sharp eyes. "Did what?" His voice was smooth, playful—dangerous.

Xander's eyes narrowed slightly. "Blocked my attack. Flung me into that tree like I was some rookie. That's not normal." He rubbed his shoulder as if remembering the impact. "Not ordinary at all."

Aldric lifted one hand in an exaggerated shrug. "Oh, that?" He waved dismissively. "Bit of luck. Right timing, right movement. Nothing special." His tone was deliberately dismissive, like he hadn't just humiliated an S+ ranked Sword Saint in mere seconds.

Xander let out a short breath, tapping his sword against the ground absentmindedly. "Yeah, no. That wasn't luck." His lazy stare sharpened slightly, just for a second. "Tell me your name and rank."

Aldric hummed, rubbing his chin. "You first."

Xander raised a brow. "Not how this works."

Aldric let out a dramatic sigh. "And here I thought you'd be a gentleman. What happened to introductions first, then small talk, then the stabbing?"

Xander exhaled sharply, almost amused. "Not answering until you do."

Aldric clicked his tongue. "Fine, fine. No need to be so stubborn." He placed a hand on his chest in mock politeness. "Name's Aldric. Not globally ranked yet, but if you must know, you can consider me... E-rank."

E-rank?!

I almost gasped, barely catching myself. No way. That—that couldn't be real. The way he fought, the way he spoke—it was all too familiar. My mind immediately flashed to him. Kaiser. The way he'd always downplay himself, the way he spoke in circles, the way he carried this air of mystery that made people walk right into his web—but this wasn't Kaiser.

And yet... something about Aldric reminded me of him so much that it made my stomach twist.

Xander looked at him for a moment, then gave a short laugh. "Yeah, sure. E-rank. And I'm a D-rank healer." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "You're good at dodging questions, huh?"

Aldric smirked. "Oh, I prefer to think of it as 'guiding the conversation in more interesting directions.' Speaking of which, what's a big-shot like you doing out here, getting smacked into trees?"

Xander's mouth twitched slightly—not in annoyance, but in amusement. "Fine," he said, tilting his head. "I was invited by Levi to fight grotesques. That enough for you?"

Aldric gave him a slow nod. "Mm. Invited by Levi, huh? I hear he's pretty picky about who he calls in."

Xander just hummed in response.

Aldric's eyes gleamed. "And let me guess, you're not just some random swordsman, are you?"

Xander sighed, stretching his arms behind his head. "S+ ranked Sword Saint of Mastery. There, happy?"

I felt a shiver crawl up my spine. S+ rank. My fingers curled slightly. The sheer gap in strength between us—it was suffocating.

But Aldric? He just grinned wider. "Ohhh, so that's why you're so confident. I mean, I get it, power like that? Must be nice. Having people listen to you just because you exist." His tone was light, almost playful. But something in the way he said it made me feel like he was pulling at something.

Xander rolled his shoulder. "Yeah, well, not everyone listens."

Aldric was toying with him. Slowly tightening an invisible rope around Xander's thoughts, leading him deeper into his pace.

"That's why you picked a fight with Celia, then?" Aldric continued smoothly, tilting his head. "What happened there? Some kind of misunderstanding?"

Xander scoffed. "Not really. She didn't listen to my orders."

The atmosphere shifted.

Something about the way he said it. Casual. Like it wasn't even a question—just a fact. A reason that should be enough.

Aldric's smirk stayed, but his fingers twitched again.

I felt it.

"Ohhh," Aldric dragged the word out, nodding in exaggerated understanding. "Right. Of course. Because obviously, the proper response to someone not listening to orders is to nearly kill them."

Xander narrowed his eyes slightly. "She got in my way."

Aldric exhaled through his nose, shaking his head. "Right, right. I get it. Authority is important. When people don't listen, it throws everything off. Makes you look bad, doesn't it?"

Xander gave the barest nod. "Exactly and I don't wish to waste my energy over it."

Aldric took a slow step forward.

"But see, Xander..." His voice was smooth, just slightly amused. "You're not mad because she got in your way." He let the words settle, like a drop of ink in water, spreading slow and deliberate.

"You're mad because she made you look weak."

Xander's eyes sharpened—just barely.

I felt it.

Aldric had dug in.

"Not at all," Xander said smoothly, but there was something slightly off in the way he said it.

Just a little too quick.

Aldric chuckled, shaking his head. "You don't have to lie to me, man," he said, his tone easy, reassuring. "I get it. You have a reputation. You can't just let some random girl—especially an unranked girl—stand in your way, right?"

Xander didn't respond.

"That's why you reacted so... harshly," Aldric continued, sighing dramatically. "Honestly, I don't blame you. If I were in your position, I'd be pissed, too."

Flattery. Understanding.

"But that kind of reaction...?" Aldric's voice softened slightly, almost thoughtful. "I mean, come on, Xander. Nearly killing someone over that? That's not strength."

Xander's fingers twitched again.

"That's insecurity," Aldric finished, his smile still in place.

Silence.

For the first time, Xander hesitated.

Aldric didn't give him time to recover.

"But I'll tell you what," he said, tilting his head with a grin. "I like you, Xander. You're smart. Strong. We don't need to fight over something this petty, right?"

Xander exhaled through his nose. "What are you getting at?"

Aldric shrugged. "Simple. You don't hurt Celia again." His tone was casual, like it was just a small request, nothing too serious. "I mean, you're above that, aren't you? A man of your skill doesn't need to waste his energy proving himself to an unknown rank girl, right?"

Xander watched him carefully.

Aldric smiled wider. "Right?"

A long silence.

Then—finally—Xander sighed. "Fine."

But... Aldric's smirk faded.

For the first time, he wasn't smiling. Because that was when it finally hit him.

The reason.

Xander had almost killed me—because I didn't listen. Because I didn't obey.

Aldric didn't move.

But I saw it.

The way his fingers twitched, just slightly. The way his smile had completely disappeared. The way the air around us shifted.

I turned to him.

He was still looking at Xander. Still wearing that neutral expression. But I felt it.

My emotions and cursed energy told me everything, he couldn't hide it anymore.

Aldric wanted to kill him.

Right here. Right now.

Xander's Perspective:

Why am I even bothering?

I exhaled slowly, staring at the ground as I leaned back against a broken tree, my arms crossed. This was so much more effort than I signed up for. I came here for a simple job—fight grotesques, maybe mess around with Levi a little, then head back. Instead, now I was stuck thinking about him.

Aldric.

A no-name bandaged man who, in the last second, had dismantled my attack like it was inevitable. Like he had already seen every possible way I could've struck before I even moved.

Even with my mastery, I didn't understand what kind of move that was.

A moment ago, my blade was inches away from her throat. The next, I was somewhere else, my stance completely broken, my momentum gone.

I clicked my tongue.

It wasn't just speed. It wasn't just strength. It was something else.

And that annoyed me.

I finally sighed, tilting my head lazily toward him. "Hey... how'd you do it?"

Aldric, standing a few feet away, smirked. "Do what?"

I frowned slightly. "Don't play dumb. You know what I mean."

His smirk widened. "Oh? You mean how I stopped your 'I'm gonna kill her because she didn't listen' attack?" He chuckled, shaking his head. "C'mon, Xander. A genius like you should be able to figure it out, no?"

I clicked my tongue again. Troublesome.

"Fine," I sighed. "You were fast. Too fast. Near god-speed, at least. The way you blocked—almost godly technique. Reflexes... ridiculous." I gave him a lazy glance.

"There. I said it. Now tell me."

For a second, Aldric just looked at me, amused. Then, finally, he let out a small, cold chuckle.

"Simple," he said.

I raised a brow.

"I used basic earth magic beneath me to adjust my footing. A little nudge to alter my momentum—nothing flashy. Then I used wind magic to move." He shrugged, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "That's how I got in front of you."

My brow furrowed slightly. Earth and wind?

"Alright. And next?"

Aldric exhaled, his tone completely detached. "Close-range jujutsu. I diverted your strike while holding Celia in my other arm. Simple weight distribution." He glanced at me.

"You were too focused on your attack, so I just shifted your blade to the right."

I blinked.

He made it sound like I was a child swinging a stick.

"Then I used my right leg to hook-kick your ribs." His voice remained cool, clinical. "Boosted it slightly with amplification. Nothing special. Then wind magic to crash you into the tree."

Silence.

I stared at him.

That's it?

I expected something grand. Something absurd. Some hidden, ancient sorcery or secret technique. But this—

I narrowed my eyes. "You mean to tell me... you stopped me with basic elemental magic?"

Aldric let out a short laugh. "That's what I did."

I exhaled sharply, staring at him.

"Basic elemental magic?" My voice came out slow, drawn out—unbelieving. "You mean to tell me that you—" I gestured lazily with my hand, "—stopped me, redirected my sword, kicked me across the field, and crash me down... with basic, useless elemental magic?"

Aldric's smirk widened.

"That's what I did," he said simply.

I narrowed my eyes.

"Then what are you?" I muttered. "A hidden sword saint? Some high-tier sorcerer playing pretend?"

Aldric let out a sharp, amused laugh. "Oh, please," he said, waving a hand. "That would be too easy, wouldn't it?" He tilted his head, grin sharp.

"You'd like that, huh? If I was secretly some grand, untouchable existence, it'd make you feel better. That way, you wouldn't have to accept the truth."

I frowned slightly. "And what truth is that?"

Aldric's smirk faded slightly, his voice dipping into something colder.

"That you were just too weak to understand it."

My fingers twitched.

Aldric's eyes held mine, his tone turning razor-sharp. "What? Mastery wasn't enough? That precious, overhyped gift of yours couldn't comprehend something so simple?" He let out a mocking hum.

"Embarrassing."

Something inside me stirred.

"You think you're untouchable, don't you?" His voice was smooth, sharp as a scalpel. "Lazy genius. A prodigy. That's what they all call you, right?" He scoffed.

"And yet... when something outside your little world of understanding happens, you freeze. You can't accept it. Because deep down..." He leaned in slightly. "You know."

My grip tightened.

Aldric's eyes gleamed.

"You know that for all your talent, all your mastery, you're still nothing but a child swinging a sword, hoping it makes you look bigger than you are."

A crack of anger formed in my body.

Celia took a step back.

I didn't turn to look, but I could feel it—her hesitation. Her uncertainty.

Because she could sense it.

The air around me darkened, thickened—turning black.

The ground beneath me seemed to distort, shadows stretching unnaturally as a deep, abyssal aura bled into the surroundings. It moved like smoke, curling at my feet, rising like an inescapable fog.

And then—

It spread.

The Grim Reaper I always try to hide within myself, the aura.

I could feel it pressing against the world, sinking into the bones of everything living—pulling.

Because they saw it now.

They saw their own death.

That was what this aura did.

It didn't just exist. It forced those caught in its grasp to experience their end before it had even come.

And yet...

I met Aldric's gaze.

Nothing.

No fear.

Not even the slightest shift in expression.

Then, in a harsh, bored voice, he spoke.

"Certainly just lowly aura isn't your means to threaten me?"

Celia's Perspective:

How... how did Aldric just say that casually?

I could feel it—the thick, suffocating aura pressing against my skin, crawling up my spine like an icy whisper of death itself.

I didn't need to imagine it.

I saw it.

The Grim Reaper.

Standing behind Xander, mirroring him, gripping its scythe as tightly as Xander gripped his sword.

It wasn't just an aura. It was a presence.

One that screamed death.

And yet... Aldric stood there. Unshaken.

How?

Maybe he didn't realize how strong Xander truly was. Maybe he was just acting tough. Maybe—

My thoughts shattered.

In the blink of an eye, Xander vanished.

And then—

CRACK—!

Wind exploded outwards, slamming into my chest as I stumbled back. My hair whipped around wildly, the ground trembling beneath me.

Xander's sword—mere inches from Aldric's face—was frozen in place.

Aldric had caught it.

With his bare hand.

The sheer force of the impact rippled through the air, the sound of steel meeting flesh echoing like a thunderclap.

Xander's grip on his blade tightened. His voice was low, but filled with something I alone heard from him—rage.

"I'll make you regret saying that."

Aldric's fingers uncurled from my wrist, freeing me from his grasp. He tilted his head slightly, his usual smirk curling wider, almost as if he was enjoying this.

"I'd love to see you try."

And then—

They vanished.

A blur of movement—so fast my eyes barely registered it—before an earth-shaking boom tore through the battlefield.

I whipped my head to the right, my breath caught in my throat.

They were fighting to the death.

I saw it, but I could barely process it.

The world cracked beneath Xander's feet as he lunged forward, his sword becoming a streak of silver light. The sheer pressure of his swing split the air apart, a forceful boom echoing through the battlefield.

Aldric—

He moved.

With a tilt of his body, he let the sword graze past his cheek, slipping through the attack with fluidity that almost looked effortless.

CLANG!

Xander's second strike came instantly, a downward arc aimed to split Aldric in half.

But Aldric wasn't there anymore.

He had twisted mid-air, one hand pressing against a broken tree trunk, using it as a pivot to somersault backward—barely dodging the edge of Xander's blade as it carved the ground in half.

Xander didn't stop.

The instant Aldric's feet touched the ground, a wave of jagged rock erupted beneath him. Xander had seamlessly transitioned into earth magic, forcing a row of sharp spikes to shoot up like spears aiming straight for Aldric's spine.

But Aldric, with a light tap of his foot, leapt—

No—

He glided, flipping sideways, his coat barely brushing against the rising spikes.

A dodge so perfect it almost looked rehearsed.

Xander's eyes narrowed, and his grip tightened.

Water.

A surge of liquid spiraled through the air as Xander slashed his sword in a crescent arc. A torrential blade of water shot forward, twisting unnaturally fast, aiming straight for Aldric's midsection.

Aldric's foot dug into the earth—

And at the last possible moment, he sidestepped, spinning behind a broken tree just as the water scythe split it in two. He reappeared instantly on the other side, still smirking.

"You're fast," Aldric mused, his voice light, amused.

Xander's sword blurred—

Aldric ducked—

CRASH! The blade carved through the remains of the tree behind him.

Then—

Wind.

Xander vanished—a sudden burst of air magic accelerating him like a bullet. He reappeared right in Aldric's blind spot, his sword already mid-swing—

Aldric leaned back—just enough—dodging it by millimeters.

He was playing with him.

Xander's attacks weren't just random slashes. Each movement flowed into the next, perfectly chained. It was like watching a deadly dance—a swordsman who had mastered the art of battle.

Xander's sword lashed out in a vicious diagonal arc, the blade whistling through the air. Aldric ducked, his coat brushing against the steel as he twisted low, sweeping his leg back to pivot.

Xander instantly followed up, reversing his grip and stabbing forward—Aldric barely swayed aside, the tip slicing past his ribs as he twisted mid-motion.

A downward slash—Aldric leaned back, the blade slicing just above his nose. Xander flipped the sword in his grip, spinning into a sideways cleave.

Aldric hopped back—just enough—his body shifting with unnatural precision. Xander blurred forward, a feint, then a sharp thrust. Aldric parried with a flick of his wrist, redirecting the blade off-course as he sidestepped, his boot skimming over the cracked earth.

Xander's sword became a silver blur. Aldric flowed around each strike, shifting his weight effortlessly. He kicked off a rock, flipping over a horizontal slash, landing just as Xander spun with a backhanded strike—Aldric ducked under it, his smirk widening as he barely avoided the edge.

A burst of wind magic—Xander accelerated. His sword came in a blinding arc—Aldric twisted, letting the blade scrape against the edge of his coat as he shifted his center of gravity.

Xander reversed into a rising slash—Aldric leaned back, the sword missing by a hair.

Another swing. Another dodge. A deadly rhythm of speed and precision—

And Aldric hadn't been touched once.

Not even grazed.

I could see his hand glowing faintly—his fingers flexing as he casually healed himself mid-fight, his mana usage so precise it barely cost him anything.

Another strike. Another dodge. Another step—

Aldric flipped backward, using a stray boulder as a springboard. Xander sent a howling gust of wind after him, but Aldric twisted mid-air, barely avoiding the gust, landing smoothly onto a slanted rock.

Untouched.

Xander gritted his teeth. He slashed upward, sending a burst of compressed air in an unpredictable, jagged pattern—

But Aldric moved with it, weaving through the wind currents like they were merely a breeze.

Xander was fast. But Aldric—

Aldric was untouchable.

And the worst part?

He enjoyed it.

The smirk never left his face. He dodged with an almost lazy amusement, as if this was all just a game to him.

Then—

He stopped.

His hand had finished healing.

His smirk widened.

"The real game starts now, Xander."

And just like that—

The real battle was about to begin.

Xander's Perspective:

The hell? How is he dodging all of this?

I swung again, my sword cutting through the air with precision, the wind crackling as I poured a bit of wind magic into the strike to give it some extra push. It sliced toward Aldric from an angle he hadn't seen, my movements sharp and deliberate.

But then, in the blink of an eye, Aldric shifted his weight, his body already moving before I could even process it. The wind sliced harmlessly through the air as he dodged with a fluid, almost unnatural ease.

A slight smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. "You'll need god-speed to hit me once," he taunted, his voice almost too calm, too carefree.

I let out a breath, irritated. I'm getting tired of this. Why was he playing with me like this? I wasn't some random weakling. I was a Sword Saint, damn it. I should be able to land a hit.

The bastard was too calm, too sure of himself. I grinned, the thrill of the fight bubbling up in me. Time to turn the tables.

I gathered my magic—wind magic, quick and precise. A sharp slash of air, coming from an angle he'd never expect. My sword moved with the fluidity of a whisper, the wind following its path, and I could already see it slicing toward him.

But then...

Aldric's body shifted, almost imperceptibly. His reflexes were damn near impossible. He moved just fast enough to dodge, the wind barely grazing the side of his cloak. It was as if he'd known the attack was coming before I even made the move.

What the hell?

For a split second, I couldn't help but compare him to someone. To her. Navia, the Sword Saint of Reflex. The way she could read the battlefield like no one else, anticipating every strike, every shift in the air. The way she moved was fluid, graceful, almost inhuman.

Aldric... was doing the same thing.

He dodged my strike like it was nothing, as if he was dancing with my sword.

This guy...

I couldn't help but respect it.

I tightened my grip on my sword and pressed forward, getting closer, determined to land a blow this time.

My footwork was precise, every step calculated. This time, I infused water magic into my strikes, the magic amplifying the weight and speed, making them harder to dodge. The water magic was supposed to slow his footwork, pin him down just enough for me to strike.

But... once again, he didn't even flinch. He moved past me with almost no effort, his speed nothing short of impossible. God-speed. My breath caught in my throat as the realization hit me—Aldric wasn't just fast; he was unnervingly fast.

He was moving with the grace and speed of Levi, the Sword Saint of God-speed. I felt the sting of comparison. Levi's speed had always been a challenge for me, but Aldric? Aldric made Levi look like he was dragging his feet.

I gritted my teeth. This is getting ridiculous.

I used subtle wind magic to vanish from his sight, creating afterimages that blurred and shifted around him. My body shifted with purpose as I moved behind him in an instant, the wind leaving a trail of motionless air behind me. I swung my sword in an arc, aiming for his back.

But of course, he was already there. Behind me. My sword met empty air.

Before I could react, Aldric used some kind of expert technique to parry my strike—bare-handed, no less. My arm went numb from the force of the deflection, and before I could even recover, he landed a solid kick to my ribs. The air left my lungs in an explosion of pain, and I staggered backward, trying to regain my stance.

What the hell? I thought bitterly. How did he—

In that moment, I couldn't help but compare his technique to Alina's. Alina, the Sword Saint of Technique, was known for her flawless, calculated movements.

Aldric's style was... unnerving. Clean. Efficient. But it didn't just mimic Alina's—it improved upon it. It was like watching a master of technique who had taken the best parts of every style and made it his own.

I stood up straighter, finally getting some space between us. I wiped the blood from my lips, trying to ignore the bruises already forming. "I don't know what the hell you are, Aldric," I muttered, my tone still lazy, but there was an edge to it now. "But you're getting on my nerves."

He smirked, that same damn smirk that I could already see in my mind. "Oh? Didn't think I'd give you a challenge, huh?" He didn't even look tired. The bastard.

I took a deep breath and steadied myself. "I'm not done yet," I said, the grim reaper aura that had started to take hold of me flaring just a little, enough to make the air feel heavier.

Aldric's eyes glinted. "Really now? Well, let's see how long you last then."

As I rushed toward him again, sword raised, I couldn't help but ask myself—What is this guy?

I sighed, already feeling the burn of exertion. Ugh, why did I have to make this more complicated than it needed to be? But no matter how much I wanted to avoid it, Aldric was still standing in front of me, looking all smug like he was the one who was going to win.

I amplified my speed and unleashed a strike, my sword slicing through the air with an effortless grace. The wind cut behind it, adding extra force. He has to dodge this. Right?

But no. Aldric just kicked a rock.

It wasn't even a big rock, but he kicked it like it was nothing, shattering it midair. I barely had time to process that before he leaped into the air—like, seriously, how fast was he moving?—and started kicking the rocks at me.

He wasn't just throwing them, he was sending them at me with enough power to flatten a wall.

I had to twist my body mid-strike just to avoid getting hit. Damn it, he was fast. The rocks came at me like missiles, and I saw one smack into a tree with enough force to send splinters flying.

This guy...

I landed a few meters away from him, just outside of striking range. But before I could even plan my next move, Aldric grinned, like he already knew what I was going to do. He stomped the ground—hard—and I felt the earth tremble beneath me.

Suddenly, the ground cracked wide open, tilting towards him like the world itself was trying to swallow me whole. The shift in terrain was too sudden, too fast, and before I knew it, I was lifted into the air, spinning, disoriented.

Aldric grabbed my leg with ease, his grip tightening like an iron vice. Without hesitation, he threw me straight into the same damn rock I had avoided earlier, slamming me into it with a sickening thud.

"Ugh..." I groaned, pushing myself up from the ground. That hurt. A lot. But whatever, it wasn't like I hadn't taken worse hits before.

I wiped the blood from my lip with the back of my hand, looking back at Aldric, who was just standing there, smirking like he'd already won. Damn it. I thought I had him. That's gonna sting for a while.

"Alright, I'll give you this," I said, voice slow and laced with sarcasm, "You're not half bad. You've got all the traits of a sword saint in one package—power, reflex, speed, technique. And yet... you don't even have a gift."

His smirk deepened, and he raised an eyebrow at me, obviously amused by my observation. "What about mastery?"

"Mastery?" I let out a slow, amused sigh, raising my sword. "You've used it to master every little thing, haven't you? You don't need a gift to kick my ass—you just need to master everything else."

Aldric's smirk widened, his eyes gleaming with something almost dangerous. "And what if I have?"

I raised an eyebrow. "What are you, some god? Some unknown being who just happened to capture everything a sword saint is capable of without needing the gifts?"

His smile was almost too playful. "Oh, nothing like that. I was born without gifts or talents."

I paused, raising an eyebrow. "So?"

His tone shifted, growing cold and distant. "I became the monster that stops geniuses. Because their gifts end the moment they meet me."

I blinked, trying to process his words. But just as I was about to speak again, something changed in his eyes. They flickered—his black eyes... they turned blue. For just a split second, I saw it—blue. Why was that so familiar?

It was as if the mask he'd been wearing slipped for just a moment, revealing something deeper.

Who is this guy?

I could feel a sudden chill run down my spine.

How is he so strong?

I stood there, breathing heavily, the cold of the wind stinging my face as I glared at Aldric. This guy... There was something about him. Something that gnawed at the back of my mind.

All his tricks, all his moves, and yet he was barely trying. It was frustrating. His calm demeanor only added to the tension, making everything feel unfair, like a mockery of what a real fight should be.

"You know," I said, my voice dripping with impatience, "this is getting boring. It's like you're not even trying. And it's annoying. You have all that power, all those skills, and yet you're holding back. That's just not fair."

Aldric's smirk widened, that same infuriating, unbothered grin. He looked almost... too relaxed, considering how much energy I'd already wasted trying to land a hit on him.

"I don't want to kill you right now, Xander. It'd ruin the fun."

Fun? This was far from fun.

I tightened my grip on my sword, my gaze narrowing. "The more you hold back, the more it pisses me off. The more I want to make you try."

A cold wind swept past me, and suddenly, a strange pressure filled the air. My body tensed, the intensity of the moment seeping into every bone. I could feel it now.

That pull, that pressure from him—something deep and dangerous that made the atmosphere feel heavy. The darkness around us seemed to deepen, swirling with a sense of finality. This is the moment. The moment it ends.

My eyes glowed, white and black, the aura around me thickening into something darker. The Grim Reaper.

My own manifestation.

The aura around me turned grim, black and white swarming like a storm, swirling in chaotic energy.

I could feel my very essence calling out to the power I rarely used. When I allowed myself to get serious, when I allowed myself to try, there was no one who could stop me.

"Fine," Aldric sighed, clearly uninterested but willing to indulge me. "I'll try for you... just this once."

I let out a slow, smug breath. "Good, because now I'm not holding anything back either."

I blitzed forward, the air thick with the weight of the moment, my muscles burning, my blade ready. But Aldric just stood there.

Calm.

With every step, I closed the distance, feeling the rush of power coursing through my veins. But then, in a split second, everything changed.

Out of nowhere, he was in front of me. His face—once wrapped in bandages—was now exposed. His skin was blacked out, covered in an aura so dark it seemed to absorb the light around us. His eyes—blue. Glowing blue, like shards of frozen hell itself, staring directly into me.

Instinct took over. My sword shot forward, an attack born from reflex, a desperate attempt to force him back, to make him move, to do something. But the moment I swung—that was the mistake.

Time froze.

The world around me vanished into darkness. It wasn't a blur. It wasn't just fast. It was like I was trapped in a slow-motion nightmare, watching my death approach, knowing I couldn't stop it. I felt him—felt him move, but I couldn't react in time.

He wasn't in front of me anymore.

He was to my right.

In the blink of an eye, the impossible happened. His form appeared, cloaked in a void-like aura, holding an ice sword—crafted from the weakest of ice magic, yet it radiated a chilling deadly precision. The blade, sharp enough to sever anything in its path, was now aimed at my neck.

I couldn't move.

My body screamed at me to react, but everything was too slow. His sword edged closer, closer, until I could feel the cold of it brushing my skin.

This was it. This was death.

Then, as if mocking me, I felt his presence again—this time to my left. His form was there, identical to the one on my right. Two weapons. Two threats.

No escape.

Both ice swords raised, each hand deadly. His right hand was ready to slice through my throat from the front, his left aimed at the back of my neck.

A perfect execution.

There was no mercy here. Only pain.

I could feel it now—drowning in the weight of it all. The blackness around me deepened as I realized the extent of my failure. I was caught. Trapped. His blades were closing in from both sides, and there was no way out.

I can't escape.

The cold sensation of death filled my entire body. His swords were moving.

This was my ending...

My own heartbeat was deafening in the silence, growing louder and louder until—

A flash of black, the feeling of sharp, biting cold on both sides of my neck, the ultimate, torturous death awaiting me as I stared into the void.

The way that would make every moment feel like an eternity.

I was drowning in it. The blackness around me closed in, suffocating. I could feel my heartbeat quicken, my breaths shallow as he got closer.

I saw myself then, standing in the void, my Grim Reaper counterpart. My vision shifted, and in front of me, there was a figure—an entity that shouldn't exist.

Its presence alone felt beyond godly, overwhelming, as if this being had the authority over even the gods themselves.

The Grim Reaper in front of me—my Grim Reaper—tried to raise his scythe. But before it could even make a move, it shattered, a violent explosion of dark energy scattering the pieces into dust. The force was too much, like something far beyond the realm of comprehension.

I could feel the dread settle in, seeping into every part of me. The fear wasn't just for my life—it was the understanding that even the embodiment of death, the very god of taking lives, couldn't stand against this entity.

It was more than a mere being. It was something otherworldly.

The void entity before me, clad in a dark aura that swallowed the light, stood taller than anything I had ever seen. Glowing blue eyes pierced through the blackness, and atop its head, a crown gleamed with an emperor's authority. Its presence was overwhelming, as if the very fabric of existence bent to its will.

My vision was dimming, slipping into black and white. The ice swords pressing against my neck were a cruel reminder of how close I was to death. The cold was unbearable—sharp, final. The weight of it all pulled at me, and I knew that my end was near.

But then, something... unnatural happened. The entity's gaze flicked to the Grim Reaper, and what happened next was beyond anything I could have imagined. The Grim Reaper, the god who had claimed countless souls, the very personification of death itself, knelt.

Slowly. Reluctantly. But he knelt before this... this thing.

And in that moment, I understood.

I was no longer just facing a force of death. I was facing something beyond it.

A being that stood at the pinnacle of existence, transcending even gods themselves.

The presence of this entity dwarfed everything, crushing me beneath its weight. It was as if the universe itself bent its knee to this being, this god who existed to surpass all.

There was no fighting it. There was no escaping it.

I felt the swords again, their cold edges biting into my skin, the sharpness threatening to tear through my very soul. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I couldn't even think, my mind paralyzed by the sheer overwhelming force of the being before me.

And then—it came. The moment I had been waiting for, yet dreading with every fiber of my being. The ice swords sliced through the air, one coming down from the front, the other from the back, and then...

The world stopped.

The pressure against my neck became unbearable, but it was the final, chilling sensation that told me everything I needed to know.

I was dead.

Time seemed to slow as I felt my body succumb to the cold, the ice slicing through, claiming my life with an almost clinical precision.

And in the blackness of death, the last thought that crossed my mind was this:

I had just faced the beginning and end of everything.

To Be Continued: Chapter 50 - Last Hope

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