

The Last Step

#Chapter 51: The Joker - Read The Last Step Chapter

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Aldric's Perspective:

Many like to believe we live in a fair world, where equality is woven into the fabric of fate. Some are fortunate—blessed with power, riches, and the ability to shape their own reality. Others, though, are cursed with misfortune, weakness, and the crushing despair that comes with losing those they hold dear.

I stood there in front of Xander, my expression a perfect mask of calm, though a smirk tugged at the corner of my lips. His eyes were wide open, yet the fool was still asleep, trapped in the illusion of void I'd cast around him.

A pity, really. He didn't even realize that he was in my world now, a world where I controlled everything. But even now, I was letting him go. After hearing his pathetic reasons for trying to hurt Celia, most would've put him down right there.

But I didn't want to. The old me? I would've done it without a second thought. But now? Now, I'm feeling merciful. Funny how things change.

I slapped Xander's cheek—not hard, just enough to stir him from his delusion and bring him back to the harsh truth of reality.

He groggily reached up, his hand brushing his neck, as if checking it was still there. His gaze flickered around, confusion clouding his features as he slowly emerged from the illusion I'd trapped him in.

What had he seen? I wondered briefly. I only showed him a glimpse, a taste of the whispers I hear, the unsettling presence that hounds me in the dark corners of my mind.

"What happened?" Xander's voice came out shaky, as if he'd just woken from a nightmare, the horror of the illusion still lingering in his chest.

I placed a hand on his shoulder, my smirk widening just a little. "It was a close fight, after all," I said, letting my words drip with sarcasm. "You probably overheated going all out."

Xander's hand trembled as it went to his forehead, his face contorted as if he was trying to process what had just happened, trying to make sense of the surreal experience he'd just lived through.

"Let's call this a draw," I continued, my voice smooth and cold. "Neither of us collapsed, and it's been clear from the start that it was going to be close."

I turned and started walking away from him, taking my time. Let him think on it. Let the silence stew between us.

Then, just as I was about to leave him behind, I heard his voice. "You could've killed me, couldn't you?" His breath was still ragged, the weight of our battle hanging on his words.

I stopped, letting the silence stretch on for a long moment. I could almost hear his heart beating faster, feel the uncertainty rolling off him.

I let the pause linger before answering, my voice cutting through the quiet like a knife. "Answer me, damn it," he pressed, his voice growing more frantic. "Why were you holding back, knowing I had intentions to kill you?"

The question hung in the air between us, his words trying to pry open the door to the thoughts I was carefully guarding. I could almost feel him searching, trying to understand what drove me, trying to find some rationale. But here's the thing: he would never get it. He couldn't.

I turned to face him again, my smirk still there, though there was something colder behind it. "You really want to know, Xander? Fine, I'll tell you."

I took a slow step forward, savoring the tension. "I held back because... you're just not worth it."

His expression faltered, surprise flashing across his face, like I'd just slapped him again, but with words this time.

"See," I said, pausing to let the silence stretch again, "I don't waste my time on people who are already dead inside. You've been playing this game, fighting to prove something you don't even understand, and in the end, that's all you are. A little boy, pretending to be a man."

I watched as the words hit him, felt the discomfort creeping into his bones. He opened his mouth to say something—probably something about honor or pride—but I didn't give him the chance.

"Don't get me wrong," I added, taking a casual step back. "You had potential once. But somewhere along the way, you lost your way. And now? Now, you're just a shadow of that. Not worth the effort, not worth the energy."

His face twisted with frustration, and I couldn't help but watch it all unfold with a touch of amusement. Poor Xander. He had no idea what hit him.

I tilted my head slowly, just enough to let Xander catch a glimpse of the side of my face. The momentary shift in posture was almost casual, but my voice, when it came, was anything but.

It was cold, calculated, the kind of tone you use when you're speaking to a pawn—because, let's face it, that's all he was.

"Every card, no matter the rank, has a role, Xander," I said, letting each word drag out with a hint of menace. "Fulfill that role, and maybe, just maybe, you'll live up to the mercy I've shown you today."

I didn't realize it at first, but my mask was slipping—again. My true blue eyes flared, and a dark aura burned beneath the surface, threatening to rise. I felt it, like a distant storm cloud, but I held it back.

Control. That's the game. Always control. But even I couldn't ignore how it made the air thick with tension.

Xander didn't say a word. He stood there, staring at me with that ridiculous look of confusion and disbelief. He couldn't understand it, could he? The game I was playing. Not yet, anyway.

I sighed, the weight of the moment pushing me to speak again, but this time, it was with a bored, lazy tone, as if I couldn't even be bothered to take him seriously.

"Oh hey now," I drawled, stretching the words like they were too much effort, "don't get too cocky over this draw."

I could practically hear him thinking it, could feel the gears turning behind those eyes of his. So, of course, he had to go and open his mouth.

"Say all you want, but I won't just be another card for your use, Aldric." His words were defiant, his gaze steady. But then, almost on a whim, he shrugged like it was the most casual thing in the world. "Plus, I'm too lazy to be of any use, so stop with the cool act."

And then, like he was some kind of oversized cat, he threw his hands behind his head, yawned, and made himself comfortable. As if this whole mess was some insignificant afterthought for him.

I didn't respond at first. I just stood there, watching him with an amused smirk pulling at my lips.

The arrogance was almost endearing in a way. He had no idea just how insignificant he was to the bigger picture. But that was fine. His role would come, whether he liked it or not.

Without another word, I turned, starting to walk away, letting the silence fall between us like a thick fog.

Good. Xander was too naive, too caught up in his own arrogance to see his place in this grand game. He'd fulfill his role in the end—he just didn't know it yet.

In the coming war with the grotesques, he'd play a part, no matter how much he resisted. After all, it was his fate now. And the deck was already stacked in my favor.

I thought about the others then. My cards on my hands.

The diamond—the Requiem, the roles of Sylvia and Alina. Those two had a debt to me. One I'd never let them forget, but one I'd never make public either. No, I'd keep that hidden in the shadows where it belonged.

The spade—Celestial Apex. Zain and Levi, the other wild cards. They'd be useful, in their own way. Their blood had a certain heat to it that I could manipulate.

The clubs—grotesques, with their twisted intelligence and their king, their leader. Dangerous, but predictable. And when the time came, I'd turn them against each other.

And then, there was the heart. The queen of it all.

Her.

I felt a sharp pang in my chest, a flicker of something I couldn't quite place. My mind snapped back to the present as I looked up.

There she was.

Celia.

Her face was twisted in concern, her brows furrowed as she looked at me like I was something... dangerous. Like she knew exactly what I was capable of, but was still worried for me.

It was time to talk to her. She was the true heart of this war. The one who could tip the scales and bring this side the victory it needed. And I had a feeling she'd be the key to the whole damn thing.

Celia approached me, her usual energy dialed down to something soft and concerned. She had her hands clasped in front of her chest, almost like she was holding her thoughts in, as if worried they'd spill out and betray her. Her eyes were wide with that familiar concern. I could see it in the way she looked at me—like I might just crumble under her gaze.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice laced with worry.

I raised an eyebrow, giving her my best nonchalant smirk. "Me? Fine, as always. Not a scratch on me, princess."

She narrowed her eyes at me, not buying it for a second. "Are you sure?" Her gaze flicked over my body like she was trying to assess every inch of me for injuries.

I shifted awkwardly, pretending to look too busy to care. "You know, just a little tired from all the fun we've been having. But, seriously, not a single bruise. I'm practically invincible."

Her eyes went to my shoulders, then my arms. "Not even here?" she asked, poking at my shoulder lightly with her finger.

I jerked away dramatically, holding my shoulder like it was about to fall off. "Oh, heavens, the agony!" I groaned, making sure to exaggerate the pain. "I'll survive, but barely. It's a miracle I can still move."

She rolled her eyes, clearly not falling for it. "Okay, then what about here?" She moved her hand down, pointing toward my ribs. "You're definitely hiding something here."

I gave her a deadpan look, dramatically sucking in my breath. "Ah, right there? Yep, the pain is so immense, I can't breathe anymore. I'm basically a goner."

She sighed, crossing her arms, clearly unimpressed with my attempts. "You're ridiculous."

I grinned, shrugging. "That's why you love me, right?"

Her cheeks flushed slightly, but she refused to admit it. "I don't know about that... You're annoying."

"Annoying, but charming." I wagged my eyebrows, and she instantly shifted uncomfortably, her cheeks getting pinker.

Then, just as I thought I was safe, she stopped and pointed at my cheek, her expression changing to a more serious one. "Wait a minute... What's this?"

I froze. Damn it. I hadn't noticed the cut from earlier when I'd been too focused on making sure Xander didn't try to turn this into a bigger mess than it needed to be.

She reached up, her fingers brushing over the small, minor cut on my cheek.

I immediately tensed. "What are you doing?" I asked, trying to back away, but she was already too close.

Her eyes softened as she focused on the cut, and without answering, she placed her finger gently on my lips, shushing me.

"Shush," she said, her voice suddenly quieter, more tender. Her eyes fluttered closed as a slight blush colored her cheeks. "Let me heal you."

I blinked, caught off guard by how... cute she looked when she was trying to help. "Celia, I don't need—"

"Shush," she repeated, her finger still on my lips as she whispered something under her breath. Her hands glowed softly as she muttered an incantation, the air around her tingling with the subtle hum of magic.

"Curavitum doloris."

Her eyes stayed closed as her magic worked, a gentle warmth spreading over my cheek. I watched as the cut slowly healed, leaving nothing but smooth skin where the wound had been. It was... oddly comforting.

When the warmth faded, Celia opened her eyes, her face redder than I'd ever seen it before. She jerked her hand away from my face like she'd just realized what she'd done.

I couldn't help it. I let out a quiet chuckle, watching her scramble to cover up the fact that she'd just healed me, her awkwardness painfully obvious.

"It's already too late, Celia," I teased, laughing at the way she fumbled. "You're caring about me. It's written all over your face."

Her expression turned defensive, and she crossed her arms, looking away. "I didn't care," she mumbled, clearly embarrassed. "I just didn't want you walking around looking like a mess, okay? It's not a big deal."

"Sure, sure." I smirked. "Not a big deal at all. Just a little miraculous healing magic, and a whole lot of red cheeks."

Her eyes flicked back to me, and she stuck her tongue out, clearly flustered. "Shut up, Aldric."

We started walking again, the tension in the air still palpable. But it was lighter now, easier, like the weight of the moment had lifted with the quiet teasing. I couldn't help but notice how cute she looked when she was all flustered. It was hard not to enjoy the little victories like that.

We continued down the path, the quiet rustling of the trees around us and the distant sound of the river growing louder as we got closer. Celia had her arms folded tightly, her

head turned to the side, trying her best to ignore me. But I could tell she was still a little self-conscious.

"So," I started, breaking the silence, "you care, huh?"

She let out an exasperated sigh. "You're not going to let that go, are you?"

"Not a chance," I said with a grin. "It's adorable. Makes me think you're secretly my biggest fan even though we've met just a hour ago."

She huffed, clearly trying to maintain her composure, but I could see the corners of her lips twitching into a smile.

"You're so full of yourself," she muttered, but there was a hint of fondness in her voice that she tried to hide.

"Ah, come on. I'm not that full of myself," I said, walking alongside her. "Just... enough to know you're absolutely smitten with me."

She rolled her eyes but didn't deny it. "Whatever, Aldric. Keep dreaming."

We walked in comfortable silence for a while, until the river came into view. The sound of the flowing water was soothing, the sunlight shimmering off the surface. It was almost too perfect, the way the world seemed to slow down around us.

Celia stopped beside me, looking out at the river with a soft expression. "It's nice, isn't it?"

I nodded, leaning against a nearby tree. "Yeah, it's peaceful."

"Maybe I should come here more often," she said quietly, glancing at me. "It's... relaxing."

We stayed there for a while, watching the river flow by. I could get used to this—her being here, teasing and trying to deny everything while I just laughed at her expense. But deep down, I knew it was more than that.

It always had been.

I walked beside Celia, the river humming softly in the background. The sunlight cut through the treetops, casting a gentle glow over the water. It was quiet. Too quiet.

Which meant she was thinking about something. And knowing her, it was probably about me.

It didn't take long before she finally broke the silence.

"Why did you do it?" Her voice was softer than usual, but there was that underlying stubbornness in it. "Back there... why did you defend me?"

I raised an eyebrow, smirking as I turned to face her. "What, did you expect me to just stand by and let a little girl get hurt?"

Her eye twitched, and just like that, the warmth in the moment evaporated. "Little girl?!" She clenched her fists, glaring up at me. "I am not a little girl!"

"Right, right," I said, nodding. "You're a very short young lady, my mistake."

Celia inhaled sharply, probably debating whether to burn me alive on the spot. "You're impossible."

"And yet, here you are, walking beside me instead of throwing me into the river," I mused. "Admit it, you like my company."

"I tolerate it," she corrected, crossing her arms.

"Same thing," I said with a shrug. "But really, don't think too hard about it. I just did what anyone would do."

Celia's glare softened, and she glanced away, almost hesitant. "No. Not everyone would do that." Her voice dropped a little. "So why did you?"

I sighed, scratching the back of my head. "Look, Celia... I just couldn't let you die, alright?"

She blinked, her lips parting slightly in surprise. "Why...?"

Why? That was a good question. One I wasn't ready to answer. Not fully.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, glancing at the river. "Because I just couldn't," I muttered. "Simple as that."

Celia didn't press further. Instead, she let out a soft breath and turned her gaze to the river. For once, she let the silence settle between us without forcing it away with more questions.

The peaceful moment stretched on. The water shimmered under the moonlight, and the cool breeze carried the faint scent of the forest. It was... nice.

"You know," Celia said after a while, "I really like places like this. They feel safe."

"Yeah?" I tilted my head at her. "Because of the scenery or because I'm here?"

She scoffed. "Definitely not because of you."

"Harsh," I said, placing a hand over my chest in mock pain. "After all we've been through?"

She rolled her eyes, but there was a small smile there. "It's just nice. Being here... talking like this."

I glanced at her, watching the way her red eyes softened as they reflected the water.

"...Yeah," I admitted. "It is."

And then, without warning, I scooped up a handful of water and splashed it at her.

Celia let out a sharp yelp, jumping back as the cold water hit her. "Aldric!"

I grinned, laughing. "What? You were getting too sentimental. Thought you could use a refresh."

She narrowed her eyes. "Oh, you are so dead."

Before I could react, she scooped up water and flung it right at my face.

I stumbled back, spitting out river water. "Oh, that's how it's gonna be?"

"You started it," she shot back, grinning.

"Oh, well, in that case—" I reached down, gathering more water and hurling it at her.

Celia dodged, but not fast enough. The water drenched the side of her dress, making her shriek. "You—! You stupid, bandaged, unknown man! I swear, I will—!"

"Will what, little Celia?" I taunted, sending another splash her way.

She growled. "I am not little!"

"Then why does the water hit you like a tsunami?"

Her face burned red, and she immediately went on the attack, splashing me wildly. I dodged, laughing as she shouted every insult under the sun.

It was ridiculous. It was childish.

And it was the most fun I'd had in a long time.

But of course, I couldn't just let her win. As she readied another splash, I sent a particularly strong wave of water right at her face. She gasped, completely soaked.

"You—!" Her eyes blazed, but I knew what was coming.

So, naturally, I did what any smart man would do.

I ran.

"ALDRIC!" she screamed, immediately chasing after me.

I could hear her footsteps sloshing through the wet ground, her frustration practically radiating off her. I smirked, about to turn around and taunt her—

When suddenly, she lunged.

She tackled me with full force, and before I could react, we both went tumbling straight into the river.

The current yanked us forward instantly.

"Great job, Celia!" I gasped, trying to keep my head above water.

"You started it!" she coughed, flailing next to me.

The river twisted and turned, dragging us along. We tried to grab onto something—anything—but the current was too strong. We spun, tossed around like ragdolls, until finally—

THUD.

We hit the shore, sprawling onto the grass, gasping for breath.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke, just lying there, soaked and exhausted.

Then, Celia groaned. "I hate you."

I wheezed out a laugh. "Hate you more."

She rolled onto her side, glaring at me. "That's your fault."

"My fault?" I scoffed. "You're the one who jumped at me!"

"I did not—!"

"Oh, you absolutely did," I grinned. "It was terrifying."

She groaned again, covering her face. "I swear, I don't know why I even bother."

"You love my company, that's why."

She peeked through her fingers, looking like she wanted to argue, but then... she just sighed. "You're so useless."

"And you're adorable," I teased.

She tensed slightly, but instead of snapping back, she just... looked at me.

Really looked at me.

Her red eyes held something different now. Something softer. Almost nostalgic.

I blinked. "...What?"

She hesitated, then, in a voice quieter than before, she said:

"You remind me of my heart."

I stared. "...Excuse me?"

Celia turned away slightly, but she didn't look embarrassed. Just thoughtful. "There's someone I hold to my heart. He is my everything... and the way you speak, act, and even the way you held me back there..." She trailed off, her eyes flickering to me again.

"You remind me of him."

The air between us shifted. My usual smirk faltered slightly, my teasing words caught in my throat.

"...Oh," I said.

Celia gave me a small smile. A real one. And for once, I didn't have a joke to follow up with.

I just watched her, as the river behind us continued to flow.

For a moment, we just stood there, gazing into each other's eyes with a small smile. Nothing else existed—just the quiet of the river, the distant rustling of leaves, and the warmth between us.

Unbeknownst to her, I had cast a subtle wind spell, letting the air gently dry our soaked clothes. A bit of fire magic, faint and controlled, warmed us from within. She hadn't noticed—not yet, anyway. And honestly, it didn't matter.

She blinked, her red eyes flickering with something unreadable. Then, after a beat, she tilted her head slightly.

"Hey... why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, her voice suddenly stuttering at the edges.

I smiled. "Your morning eyes... I could stare at them like watching the stars."

Her face went red. A deep, unmistakable blush bloomed across her cheeks as she took an awkward step back. "Wha—wh-what?!"

I took a slow step forward. "I could walk you by," I said, my voice carrying a teasing lilt, "and I'd tell you without regret."

Her fingers twitched, her breath catching. "T-Tell me what...?" she stammered.

"That I like you," I said smoothly. "That I wouldn't mind holding you in my arms tonight."

Celia completely froze. If her face had been blushing before, now it was practically glowing. Steam could've been rising off her head for all I knew.

"WH—WHA—YOU—WHAT—!" She flailed backward, her words tripping over themselves like a dying bird. "T-T-Tonight?! H-Holding?! I—W-We just—T-That's not—I don't—Y-You can't just—!!!"

I took another step forward. She took another step back.

Nature itself seemed to go silent. The river's soft current, the wind, even the distant chirping of birds—it was all drowned out by the moment. Just us.

Celia, now fully red, waved her hands wildly as she continued her nonsense. "B-B-But we just met! Y-You're bandaged! I-I don't even know what's under there! Wh-What if you have a weird face?! Or—or what if—I—I didn't even—W-We were just fighting in the river! This is too fast! T-This is NOT how romance works! What kind of—?! I need a BREAK! HELP—!"

I smirked. "I'll imagine we fell in love."

"WH—WHAAAAAT?!" Her soul visibly left her body for a second. "WH—WHO—IMAGINE—NO—THAT—THERE'S NO IMAGINING—YOU—WE JUST—!"

She stumbled, her back nearly hitting a tree as she looked everywhere but at me. "Y-You're messing with me! Th-That's what this is! J-Just you—being—w-whatever it is you are! A-A big—flirty—uh—uh... BANDAGED—uh—uh... BANDAGED MENACE!"

Now that was a new title.

I stopped just inches away from her, watching as she practically vibrated with flustered panic. Her hands were curled up in nervous fists, her red eyes darting around wildly, but her body remained still—trapped.

The faint sunlight filtered through the trees, casting a golden glow over her. But none of that mattered. Not the dried clothes, not the warmth in the air.

This was the moment of truth.

How far would she let me go?

Her back pressed against the rough bark of the tree, her small frame trembling slightly. Her crimson eyes, wide and frantic, darted from side to side as if searching for an escape—but there was none.

I placed my hands on either side of her, trapping her. Not forcefully. Just enough. Enough to make her realize she could push me away, but she wouldn't.

I leaned in closer, my voice low, steady.

"I want you to be the beautiful sight I see when I sleep."

Celia's breath hitched. Her lips parted slightly, but no words came. Then—

"I—I—you—you what—?! W-Why—!? H-Huh?!" Her hands flailed for a second before weakly pressing against my chest. "N-No! Wait! T-That's not—I mean—you can't just say that!"

I chuckled, lowering my gaze slightly. "And yet, I did."

Her fingers twitched, her entire body frozen in place. Her knees looked weak, her chest rose and fell unevenly, and her ears were practically steaming from the sheer heat of her flustered state.

"I—I—" She gulped. "Th-That—th-that's so—! W-Who even says stuff like that—?! D-Do you just go around making girls feel I-like this—?! I—I'm not—this isn't—!!"

I took one step closer.

"Hold my hand just once," I said softly, "and I'll never let you go."

Celia's mouth opened. Then closed. Then opened again. Then—

Her hands, shaking slightly, curled into fists against my chest. Her body refused to move, her feet barely pressing against the ground.

I smiled. "I'll take you through my dreams, which are just you."

She sucked in a sharp breath, her face burning. Her body leaned back slightly, as if trying to shrink into the tree behind her, but her eyes—her beautiful, red, glowing eyes—stared straight into mine.

Her lips trembled. "Y-Y-You dream about m-me?!" she blurted out, her voice high-pitched and completely nonsensical. "B-But—that's not—I—w-we—!"

I nodded slowly. "I dream of you almost every night," I murmured, watching her reaction carefully. "Hopefully, I won't wake up this time."

A full-body shudder ran through her.

Her fingers curled tighter into my shirt. Her lips parted, but no words came out—just shaky breaths and a trembling stare.

She was falling.

"Wherever you are," I continued, my voice steady, unwavering, "I'll never let go of you."

Celia's breath hitched again. Her body quivered as she tried—and failed—to find words. And then, in a small, weak voice, she asked:

"W-Why...?"

I smiled.

"Because you're the one I want."

Her entire body locked up. Her fingers clutched at my clothes, her legs shaking visibly now. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed thickly, her head lowering slightly, her red bangs falling over her eyes.

I leaned in just a little more, my voice softer now.

"Stay with me," I whispered. "For my life, I can promise you your smile. With all my days alive in this world."

Silence.

Celia's whole body was trembling now, her breath unsteady, her face—gods—her face.

Her lips parted slightly. "I—" She sucked in a breath. "W-Wait—wait—no—t-that's—!"

She shook her head rapidly, trying to regain her composure. "T-T-T-THAT—THAT IS NOT—YOU CAN'T JUST—!!!"

Her knees buckled slightly. "W-W-What do you even mean by—W-Wait, no! I-I mean, you c-can't just say stuff like that—n-no normal person just—! A-And I—!"

Her voice wavered, her eyes locking onto mine for a brief, fleeting second. And then.

Slowly.

Her lips closed, her hands shaking at her sides, her breath barely stable.

And in that moment—whether she realized it or not—her heart had already fallen halfway.

Celia was a trembling mess, her hands gripping the fabric of her own sleeves like they were the only thing keeping her standing. Her crimson eyes darted anywhere but at me—toward the trees, the river, the fading sunlight—anywhere except my face.

But that wouldn't do.

Gently, I lifted a hand and placed my fingers under her chin, tilting her face up. Her breath hitched as I guided her gaze back to mine. The moment her eyes locked onto me, her entire body tensed, her pupils shaking like she was trapped in some sort of spell.

"Do you think," I said softly, "you could love me?"

Her lips parted slightly, her face burning. "I—!"

Her voice failed.

I smiled, my thumb brushing lightly against her jaw. "Because if you do," I continued, "I'll show you what makes you lovely."

Her fingers twitched. Her whole body quivered. "Th-That's—!" she sputtered, her voice a complete disaster of stutters and incomprehensible sounds. "*T-T-That's n-not—y-you—Y-You can't just—!"

I leaned in ever so slightly, watching the way her breath hitched, the way her shoulders tensed.

"I'd love you to the stars and back," I murmured. "So, give me your heart..." I smiled. "And I'll give you mine."

Celia froze.

Her fingers trembled, gripping onto her sleeves like they were a lifeline. Her lips quivered as she opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again—and then—

"A-A-AH—?!?"

A sound left her throat, but I wasn't entirely sure if it was a word or just sheer panic.

"T-That's—T-T-That's n-not—!" She swallowed thickly. "A-Are you—y-you're s-s-saying t-that like i-it's s-s-some kind of—!"

"Don't you like when I'm around?" I asked, tilting my head slightly.

Celia squeaked. "**I—wha—I—I m-mean—th-that's not—!" She shook her head violently, her face an absolute catastrophe of red. "W-W-Why are you asking m-m-me that?! I-I d-don't—! Y-You—!"

I chuckled, my gaze still locked onto her trembling one. "Could you pretend you care?"

She gasped. "I—I—I—" Her hands flailed slightly before grabbing onto the tree behind her as if she was about to collapse. "W-Wha—w-w-w-why w-w-would I—?! I-I d-don't—!"

I let my voice drop, my smile softening. "I belong with you, my love."

Her whole body stiffened.

Her fingers curled against the bark.

Her breathing grew shaky.

"I—I—" She tried to speak but couldn't. "Y-Y-You—th-that—th-that's—!"

I exhaled slowly, my voice barely above a whisper now.

"Dreaming of you, anywhere," I murmured. "We could watch the sunset together... and you'd be there with me smiling."

She froze again.

Her breathing was erratic. Her eyes were frantic. Her lips quivered uncontrollably.

Then, in the smallest, weakest voice—

"W-W-Why d-does it s-s-sound like y-you're... r-really saying that...?"

I smiled.

"Because I am."

Her throat bobbed, her eyes growing impossibly wide.

She was falling.

She knew she was falling.

She couldn't stop it even if she wanted to.

And I knew it, too.

I placed my palm lightly against her cheek, feeling the heat of her flustered skin under my fingertips.

"And I'll pray for that day," I whispered, my voice steady, unwavering. "And hope it brings you right to me."

Celia shuddered.

Her hands twitched against the bark, her knees growing weaker. "W-W-Wha—" she gasped, "W-W-Why d-does i-it s-s-sound like y-you're—!"

I chuckled, watching her fall further and further into the trap.

"I'll watch you shining, my darling," I murmured, tracing a thumb lightly over her cheek.

She let out a noise—somewhere between a gasp, a whimper, and a complete breakdown of her composure.

Her lips shook. Her hands curled into fists. Her legs trembled.

And then—

I spoke.

"So..."

I leaned in closer, my breath warm against her flustered skin.

"Will you love me, Celia?"

For a moment—just one single moment—time stopped.

The river. The wind. The trees.

Everything vanished.

There was only her.

Her wide, crimson eyes staring into mine.

Her breath, shaking.

Her lips, slightly parted.

And then—

A single sound left her throat.

"A-A-A-AHHHHHH—?!?!?!?"

Her knees gave out completely.

I took a few steps back, my smirk fading as Celia collapsed onto her knees, breathing heavily. Her hands clutched at her chest, her shoulders rising and falling with each shaky breath. Her crimson eyes were hidden beneath the shadow of her bangs, her entire body trembling from the weight of my words.

I had pushed her far—maybe further than I ever had with anyone else.

By now, any other woman would've been in my arms. They would've clung to me, begged me to take them, or even outright proposed marriage.

But Celia...

I looked down at her, watching her gasping for air, her fingers tightening against the fabric of her clothes.

It was already over. She had fallen. Her heart belonged to me.

Or so I thought.

Suddenly, the air around her shifted.

The shaking stopped.

The blush vanished.

And then—she lifted her head.

Her expression was unreadable, her eyes dark and devoid of any emotion. She stood up slowly, her movements eerily calm, controlled.

And in a voice that was pure ice, she spoke.

"No."

Her tone was empty, lifeless.

"I cannot love you."

Then she turned those murderous, blood-red eyes toward me.

"I will never love you."

I blinked.

What?

I was completely caught off guard. Just seconds ago, she was crumbling, melting beneath my words—so why was she suddenly like this?

I took a step forward, regaining my composure, and reached out, cupping her cheek in my palm.

"Don't lie." My voice was smooth, confident. "I know you want me—"

Before I could finish, Celia grabbed my wrist.

Her fingers tightened, and I felt a sharp pain pulse through my skin.

When I looked into her eyes, the warmth—the hesitation—was gone.

All that remained was something far more dangerous.

"Your touch means nothing."

Her grip was so strong, it almost felt unnatural.

"You cannot make me love you."

I tried to pull my hand back, but her grip was like iron.

"Nothing can take him away from me." Her voice was eerily calm, yet dripping with pure, obsessive devotion.

"He is mine. Not you. Not anyone."

My brows furrowed. "He?"

Then—

Celia tilted her head slightly and let out a laugh.

"Fufufu... Ahahahaha... AHAHAHAHAHA~"

My spine went rigid.

Her fingers finally released my wrist, and she looked into my eyes with a deranged smile.

Her blood-red irises glowed with an eerie light, her voice soft but deadly.

"Kaiser."

She spoke his name with such reverence, with such terrifying obsession, that it sent a shiver down my spine.

"He is the one for me. And I will never, ever settle for anyone else."

My lips parted slightly.

What the hell?

This wasn't just rejection—this was something far worse.

She had completely shut me out.

She had devoted herself to him so utterly that nothing—nothing—could make her waver.

I took another step forward, trying to regain control of the situation.

"Celia, don't lie to yourself. I know your heart already wants me. Don't deny it."

She stared at me blankly before slowly placing a hand over her chest.

Her next words were haunting.

"My heart may betray me."

Her voice was soft, almost gentle.

"It may falter, it may stray..."

Then, her fingers curled.

"But I will never let it hurt him."

What?

Suddenly—

A sharp, black chain shot from her hair, twisting unnaturally in the air. It gleamed under the darkening sky, a sinister, cursed energy radiating from it.

It snapped forward, piercing through her own chest where her heart was.

"Celia—what the hell are you doing?!"

Blood dripped onto the ground.

She gasped slightly, her lips parting at the pain—but her eyes remained locked onto mine.

And then—she smiled.

"If my heart ever dares to love you..."

The chain twisted deeper.

"I will kill that feeling myself."

I felt myself take another step back.

What the hell was this?

I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her breathing was shallow, and the chain dug deeper into her chest, blood staining the ground. But Celia... she wasn't flinching. She wasn't even crying.

Her eyes remained unwavering, and her lips twisted into something that could only be described as devotion. It was so intense, so... obsessive. She didn't seem to care about the pain.

"Kaiser is mine." Her voice was quiet, but it sent a chill down my spine.

I stepped back. She didn't look like the same blushing, stuttering girl anymore. Now, she was someone else entirely. Someone I... didn't recognize.

"My heart belongs to him. It always has." Her eyes narrowed, as if daring me to challenge her.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Her gaze never wavered from mine. I tried to speak, but she cut me off, her voice dripping with obsession.

"I don't care what happens to me. As long as he is by my side, nothing else matters." She pressed a hand over her chest, right where the chain was embedded, but she didn't wince.

Instead, she smiled—calmly—a smile that chilled me to the core.

I took another step back, but her eyes followed me. Her eyes never left mine.

"I love him. Only him. Everything I am, everything I will be, is because of him. He is my reason. He is my everything."

Her words hit me hard. What the hell is this? This wasn't just a girl in love. This was... something else. Something darker. Something twisted.

I opened my mouth again to say something, but she cut me off with that same, unwavering tone.

"You don't understand. No one does. He is my world. Without him, I am nothing. You think you can take me from him? You think I'll ever let anyone else close?" Her eyes glinted with a terrifying intensity.

I froze.

"No one can take him away from me. Not you. Not anyone." Her voice was low, icy, and filled with a possessiveness I couldn't even begin to fathom.

I tried to step back again, but my feet felt frozen.

She took a slow, deep breath, the chain in her chest shifting again. Blood seeped from the wound, but instead of pain, she seemed calm.

"I will never, ever, love anyone else. Only Kaiser."

I blinked, my mind racing. Was she really willing to destroy herself for this?

"I'll rip my heart out if I have to. If it beats for anyone but him, I will make sure it stops."

The chain seemed to writhe, and her breath caught in her throat. She barely reacted to the agony she must've been in.

"Do you see? I don't need to want anyone else. I just need him. Only him."

I stuttered. "C-Celia, y-you... You can't be serious. You're hurting yourself!"

"I don't care. Nothing matters except him. Nothing else matters." Her smile widened, and it wasn't soft. It was... dangerous.

She was gone.

Her entire being was consumed by him.

I opened my mouth to say something—anything—but my words caught in my throat. I had never seen anyone like this before. She wasn't just in love. She was obsessed.

And then the air shifted.

The dark clouds above swirled, blotting out the sun, and I looked up. The world felt... wrong. Celia's body was still healing. Slowly, the wound in her chest sealed, her cursed magic working to restore her.

She stood still, her eyes staring up at the darkened sky that was about to rain. And then, her voice, soft and trembling, came through again.

"I'm sorry." She said it like it was her last breath.

"I'm sorry, Kaiser. I didn't mean for this. I didn't mean to feel anything for anyone else. I didn't mean to."

Her hands shook at her sides, but she clenched them into fists.

"I'm sorry I ever let myself think about someone else. It's you. It's only ever been you."

She closed her eyes, her voice breaking.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

I could hear the pain in her words. She wasn't apologizing to me—no, she was apologizing to me— I mean her Kaiser.

"Please forgive me... please understand. I can never love anyone but you."

I stared at her, a chill running down my spine.

She wasn't just obsessed. She was terrified of betraying him.

No.

She was willing to destroy herself for him.

And there was no turning back. I was staring at a broken, twisted version of devotion.

Yep.

She was a complete yandere for me—Kaiser.

There were no doubts left.

I could feel it.

This was it—just like I had planned. Everything had led to this moment. I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face, a wide, almost wicked grin.

This was far easier than I thought it would be. The pieces had all fallen into place, just like a perfectly shuffled deck of cards. Celia the hearts had already dug herself deep into that pit of obsession and pain.

All I had to do was push her deeper into it, just a little more.

I knew she would do anything for Kaiser. She was already broken in that sense.

The game had already been set into motion, and it was time to see it through. The stakes had never been higher, and this time, there was no way out.

I spoke casually, my voice smooth, just the right amount of coldness.

"Hey, Celia," I said, my tone mocking yet enticing.

Her eyes flickered, filled with confusion for a moment before they hardened again. She muttered, barely audible through her clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry, Kaiser..."

I let that trail off, the sound of her apology hanging in the air like a whisper of death. She wasn't focused on me. She was consumed by that obsession, that twisted love she had for him.

Perfect.

"Tell me, Celia," I said, taking a step closer. My voice was sharper now, more direct. "If you really love him, where is he now?"

For a split second, she went still, her face clouded in confusion and doubt, the flicker of insecurity showing beneath the surface.

I could feel her grip on her emotions slipping, and I pressed further.

"Tell me, where is this love of yours?" I repeated, my voice cold.

Her gaze faltered, and I saw it—fear. The very thing she had been hiding from all this time. She clenched her fists tightly, her nails digging into her palms. She was struggling to control herself.

Her words finally came, barely more than a whisper. "He... is captured by grotesques. But I'll... I'll..."

I didn't let her finish.

"Do what, Celia? Speak to me while he is suffering?" I said, watching her eyes widen as her frustration and helplessness bubbled to the surface.

Rain began to pour, and her emotions were a whirlwind of pain and rage, manifesting in violent waves of energy.

"SHUT UP!" she screamed.

The sky seemed to answer her, lightning striking down around us, as if the world itself responded to her fury. The rain began to pour harder, soaking us both, but she barely noticed.

Her face twisted with a mixture of obsession, fear, and confusion.

I stood there, unaffected by the storm. I didn't flinch.

Her body shook with the weight of it. Her voice grew softer, quieter now, as if her obsession was breaking under the pressure of the storm.

"Stop it..." She whispered, her hands trembling.

"I will get him back..." she muttered, her eyes distant, lost in the chaos within her.

"He is mine... only mine..."

But I wasn't done yet. I could see it—the crack in her resolve. The way her obsession was starting to waver, replaced with something much darker, much more dangerous.

Regret. Guilt. It was only a matter of time before it consumed her entirely.

I saw her shaking, standing there, her chest rising and falling with the storm that raged inside her. It was a beautiful thing to witness, really. How someone could go from so desperately lost to an obsession that burned hotter than any fire.

She was mine. Or at least, that's what I intended.

"You're wrong," I said, leaning in slightly, my voice smooth as I locked eyes with her.

"While you're here making these pathetic confessions, your Kaiser is dying, Celia. Dying. Right now, as we speak."

I watched her flinch. The words hit like I expected, a sharp sting.

Good. She was starting to feel it.

"Your little confessions won't change a damn thing if you don't act," I continued, my tone cold, detached, like I was simply stating a fact. "He's out there, alone, suffering. And here you are, wasting time with me."

I let that sink in, watching her eyes flicker with doubt. I could see it—the crack.

"Tell me something, Celia," I said, stepping just a little closer. "What exactly are you going to do now? You know, with him out there, slowly slipping away? Are you going to just stand there and keep making promises to yourself, or will you finally do something about it?"

Her lips parted, a faint gasp escaping as she struggled for the right words. But I wasn't giving her a chance to breathe.

"What are you really going to do, Celia?" I taunted, dragging out the words, leaning in even closer. "Because as far as I can tell, you've done nothing but stand still, waiting for a miracle."

I saw the flash of anger in her eyes, but it wasn't the type of anger I wanted. No, it was just a flare. The real emotion I was digging for was buried deeper. So I dug, twisting the knife, as I always do.

"You think he's still waiting for you?" I whispered, my voice like venom, slow and heavy.

"He's out there. Alone. And you're here... stuck. Just like the rest of us. Just like everyone who's ever been abandoned. The only difference is, you're choosing to stay broken. You're choosing to fail him."

Her fists shook at her sides. Her breath quickened. I could practically see her heart splintering, the cracks running deeper with every word.

"You're not going to save him if you're this weak," I said, pushing her further.

"You want to save him? Then stop being so damn useless. Every second you waste... is another moment he's dying."

I let those words hang in the air like the heaviest weight she could ever carry. It was beautiful. Watching her fight it, trying to hold on to that foolish hope, that self-delusion.

I could see the shift happening.

"I will get him back..." she whispered, almost to herself.

I stepped even closer, my words sharp as a knife.

"Will you, though? Will you, Celia?"

"You're not even strong enough to face your own weakness, let alone save him. But if you really love him—if you really want to save him—you'll have to dig deeper than you ever have before."

She stared at me, breathing hard, her chest rising and falling with the intensity of her emotions. It was almost beautiful, seeing the rawness of her struggle in this storm, the conflict in her gaze.

"I-I will get stronger," she whispered, barely audible, but I could hear it. The resolve, the fire igniting inside her. She was starting to believe it.

I stepped closer, closing the distance between us. My voice, low and dripping with venomous sweetness, slid into her mind like a poison.

"Will you? Because that's the first step, Celia. To admit that you're weak. That's the truth, isn't it? You're weak right now. You're nothing more than a shadow of the person who could save him. And that's why he's still out there, suffering."

"I'm not weak," she said through gritted teeth, her voice shaky but firm. "I'll prove that I'm not. I will get stronger."

A smile tugged at the corner of my lips.

"Good," I said, my tone almost congratulatory. "But it's not just about being stronger, Celia. You need to take care of yourself first. You can't keep relying on others, and you can't keep pretending that you're fine when you're not. You need to be the one who stands on her own."

Her eyes widened a little, her face still tense. "I... I don't need anyone," she muttered, her voice shaking but more certain now. "I'll do it myself. I'll be strong."

"Of course you will," I said, my voice soft, coaxing. "But if you keep holding on to your weaknesses, those little cracks will destroy you. Do you think you can save Kaiser if you're constantly falling apart inside? Do you think he will be saved by a broken person?"

She shook her head, more to herself than to me. "I won't break... Not again."

"Exactly," I said, my voice laced with approval. "You're not going to let anything hold you back anymore. No one is going to stop you. Not your fears, not your doubts. Only you have the power to push through this. But first, you need to fix yourself. You need to make yourself unstoppable."

She was breathing heavily now, her hands balled into fists at her sides, and I could see the storm swirling in her chest.

She wasn't just angry anymore; she was becoming something more. Something dangerous exactly according to my plan.

"I'll get stronger, Aldric," she said, her voice firmer, each word like a declaration. "I'll be what I need to be. For him. For Kaiser. I won't let anything stand in my way. Not my past, not my mistakes. Nothing. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Good girl," I murmured, leaning in just slightly, letting the praise land heavy on her ears.

"Because that's exactly what you need to be. You need to drown in your resolve. Embrace the pain, Celia. Let it fuel you. Let it tear apart anything that's not useful. If you really love him, you won't stop until you're strong enough to break the world for him."

Her eyes flashed with a renewed determination, and she nodded. "I'll do it. I'll get stronger. For him. I'll never stop until I bring him back."

That's it. The final card was in place.

I smiled to myself, hiding the satisfaction I felt. This wasn't about love anymore. No, this was about obsession. And obsession? Obsession would make her do anything.

"You will," I said, voice dripping with approval. "But remember, Celia... the moment you start to fall, the moment you think you're not strong enough, that's when you need to dig deeper. Because if you fail now, you won't just lose him. You'll lose everything."

She nodded again, more firmly this time, as though each word I said was pushing her to a place she couldn't go back from.

"I'll be strong. I'll be what he needs," she said, almost to herself, like a mantra.

I knew this was only the beginning. She would become stronger, not just for him, but because now, she had nothing left but her obsession.

And that, that was all I needed.

"Good," I whispered. "Now go. Show the world who you really are."

She turned away, her body already moving in the direction of her goal. But deep down, I knew that the Celia who walked away from me was no longer the same person who'd arrived.

As the rain poured down, I couldn't help but admire how obedient she was. Even though, deep down, even in this body, I could feel my heart paining from distance in this body.

Just the thought of manipulating her, pushing her to this point, was enough to stir something within me.

But the truth was, my best option had always been rejection. And from that rejection, I would build. I would take it, shape it into something far more useful than simply breaking her.

That wasn't my goal here, not with her. Unlike my other victims, I wasn't going to crush her spirit. No, I would make her want it, make her need it. This—this was how I would win without destroying the person I cared for.

She kept walking, leaving the storm behind her as the rain poured harder. I looked up, feeling the cold water sting my face, soaking through the bandages once again.

She must have figured it out by now—I wasn't Kaiser. The real Kaiser couldn't use magic, and I had been using it for some time. I didn't care that she hadn't questioned it.

She accepted what I was, a hollow, bandaged shell of him.

The storm roared above us, the thunder cracking through the air, and yet I only felt satisfaction. The joy of holding every card in my hands. Every single one.

Slowly, I let the bandages around my face slip away, no longer needing to hide my satisfaction under the veil of this storm. Even in the chaos of the night, the truth was clear—I had everyone right where I wanted them.

I could see it all. The pathetic fools, each one a piece in this game I now control.

Levi, Zain, Xander—my diamonds, each one a valuable tool. The Celestial Apex, the crown of this deck, waiting to be played.

Then there were the others—Sylvia, Alina, Requiem—normal spades, useful for control and manipulation.

The Grotesques, their king—clubs, rulers in name only, their strength faltering in the face of my plan.

And finally, Celia. The whole deck of hearts, the queen who would change the course of fate itself. My trump card.

And if my calculations were correct, if the strategy I had carefully laid out unfolded as planned, soon the Ace of Spades would be in my hands as well. Soon, the heavenly sorcerer, the final piece, would join the board.

And as the joker in this deck, I alone am the game changer.

I clenched my fists, feeling the weight of total domination. The game was nearly won.

But then, I knew the truth of it all—the sad ending.

After all of this, after everything I'd orchestrated, I would be gone. No longer in this world, just like him.

Just like Kaiser. A necessary sacrifice, my fate sealed in the grand scheme of things.

The Guide of Humanity, lost in time, a shadow to the world that would no longer remember me.

With each step I took through the pouring rain, the weight of that realization settled in my chest. This would be the end of me.

Goodbye, Aldric.

The Truth:

Meanwhile, Levi and Alina remained unconscious from their battle, their bodies still recovering from the toll of their fight. In her guild, Sylvia sat at her desk, quietly working, her mind sharp and focused on the tasks at hand. She hadn't noticed the looming storm that seemed to settle over the others, like a heavy cloud hanging just out of reach.

In Celestial Apex, Zain and Xander were discussing Aldric's demands, the tension palpable between them. Zain was speaking, explaining Aldric's orders to remove guards and defenses, but without revealing his true identity, just as Aldric had intended.

"Remove them quietly," Zain said, his voice low. "Without anyone knowing it was us. No more guarding or defenses around Levinton. No name, no trace."

Xander listened in silence, the weight of the situation pressing down on him. The strategy was clear, the cards were moving, and there was no turning back now.

Meanwhile, Celia's determination had never been stronger. Her resolve to save Kaiser, despite everything, burned brighter with every step she took forward. The emotional

chaos that had plagued her before now fueled her every action, turning her grief and desperation into raw purpose.

Aldric, however, walked a different path—one leading him toward his inevitable demise. The Guide of Humanity, his final role, was one of sacrifice. The storm raged on as he continued toward his fate, feeling the burden of the future weighing heavily on him. His own end was a certainty, but it was a price he was willing to pay for the greater good—saving Celestine from the grotesques.

Each path was interconnected, winding together like threads in a web, yet one would be left behind, alone in the end.

Elsewhere, deep beneath the earth, in a dark and guarded underground lair, the grotesques resided in their most secretive layer. It was a nest of horrors, twisted by their inhumane practices. The grotesques were far from ordinary. Their bodies were distorted, a grotesque blend of humanoid and otherworldly features—twisted limbs, broken faces, and jagged bone protrusions. Their eyes gleamed unnaturally in the dim light, glowing with an eerie, predatory fire.

And there, chained and bloodied, was Kaiser. His once sharp blue eyes were now dull with exhaustion, his body battered and broken. His black hair hung matted against his bloodied face, his left arm severed, and one of his eyes cruelly gouged out. His tortured form was a testament to the grotesques' merciless nature.

The king of the grotesques stepped forward, his arm extending like a twisted claw to grip Kaiser's neck. His voice was a deep, suffocating growl.

"Are you telling the truth?" the grotesque king demanded, his tone deadly serious.

Kaiser coughed violently, blood spilling from his lips as he struggled to form words. "Yes... you can't attack Levinton... They've placed a trap... and removed their guards to let you all fall for it." His voice trembled, barely audible.

The grotesque king snarled, his grip tightening on Kaiser's neck. "Nonsense. None of the others we kidnapped from Levinton said anything like this."

He slammed Kaiser's head hard into the cold stone wall, causing blood to splatter across the surface. Kaiser gritted his teeth, barely holding onto consciousness, his body already at its breaking point. His arm, still bleeding from the earlier injury, hung uselessly by his side. His body was covered in countless cuts, and his face, once filled with resolve, was now pale with pain and starvation. It was clear he hadn't eaten in days, his strength almost depleted entirely.

The grotesque king continued his brutal assault, slamming Kaiser's head into the stone repeatedly, uncaring for the toll it took on the boy. His face remained emotionless, indifferent to the suffering before him.

Then, just as the grotesque king prepared to deliver another blow, one of the grotesques entered the chamber, its voice sharp and urgent.

"They've noticed Levinton's guards and guild members have stopped patrolling," it said, its voice trembling with concern. "There's a disturbance. Something's wrong."

The grotesque king paused, his dark eyes narrowing.

Kaiser's bloodied form remained silent, his pain growing with each passing moment, but in his mind, there was still one goal that kept him alive—survive long enough for Celia to come for him.

Who knew... It was the end for him.

The grotesque king, his expression twisted with contempt, stared down at Kaiser. His voice was cold and dark as he spoke. "Seems like this human was speaking the truth."

Kaiser, barely clinging to life, coughed violently, blood staining his lips. His body trembled, his chest rising and falling in labored breaths. His voice was weak, but firm. "I told you... Levinton can't be attacked anymore... You all will be trapped and killed like insects."

The grotesque king's patience was wearing thin. Without warning, he slammed Kaiser's head against the cold stone floor, the sound echoing in the chamber. He dragged Kaiser up by his neck, forcing him to look into his eyes with a menacing glare.

"Then where should we actually harvest humans?" the grotesque king asked, his voice dripping with malice.

Kaiser, struggling against the grip tightening around his throat, managed to croak out his answer through gritted teeth. "**Rinascita...**" he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "It's in the middle of all the guild-based towns... the most population... and the least guards... No guild is present there."

Blood continued to pour from his mouth, his body weakening with each passing second. His vision blurred, but his resolve remained.

The grotesque king's grip tightened further, choking Kaiser to the point where he could hardly breathe. Desperation clawed at Kaiser's mind, but he summoned the strength to lift his arm and try to stop the king. However, with a swift motion, the king sliced off Kaiser's remaining arm. Kaiser screamed in agony, his blood spilling onto the stone floor as his body trembled uncontrollably.

The grotesque king's cold voice followed. "Good work, pawn. You've been used completely now."

He turned to the grotesques standing by, their grotesque forms lurking in the shadows. "We won't be harvesting in Levinton anymore. Our next target is Rinascita."

Without another word, the grotesques flew off to announce the new target to the others. The king turned his attention back to Kaiser, his hand wrapping around Kaiser's throat once again. He lifted him off the ground, preparing to end it all.

As Kaiser felt the last of his life slipping away, something in his eyes changed. There was no fear, no begging for mercy.

His tone was cold, distant. "Good work, my clubs," he said, his voice steady, though barely a whisper. **"Extinction awaits you."**

The grotesque king, enraged and with a final, violent motion, squeezed Kaiser's throat until it cracked. The sickening sound of bone snapping echoed through the chamber. With a swift motion, the king drew a blade across Kaiser's neck, severing his head from his body.

Kaiser's body fell limply to the ground, lifeless. The grotesque king stood over him, the air thick with a menacing aura.

Kaiser was gone now, his sacrifice made, his role in the game concluded.

The king turned his gaze toward the darkness beyond the torture cell. Kaiser, the last pawn in the grotesques' cruel game, was forever lost.

And now, the grotesque army turned their focus to Rinascita.

The world, now on the brink of destruction, would either be conquered by the grotesques or wiped out entirely. This was the inevitable end, the fate they had all been building toward, and no one could pretend it wasn't coming.

But then, a new presence stirred. The storm, the chaos, the inevitable destruction—there was still one hope. One last chance.

It was time for the hero to step in.

The world needed a savior.

And now, it was his turn.

The Heavenly Sorcerer.

Lucas.

Chapter 52 - Heavenly Beginning

Lucas's Perspective:

They say a hero rises in times of great need... Well, I'm standing, but I'm also heavily considering sitting back down.

I pulled the chair back and plopped myself near the window, watching the rain in Sylvaris. Gotta admit, it's beautiful. Not that it helps me or anything.

I leaned my head back, letting the chair creak under my weight, and closed my eyes. I was really soaking in the peace. My life's been through hell, and I think I've earned a moment of calm, y'know? Just some me-time where I'm not having to dodge swords, magic, or whatever the hell this world throws at me next.

System Alert: "Lucas, you've been doing jackshit for the past 4 days. You wake up, eat, sleep. Repeat. Real hero material, bro."

Ugh, this stupid system. Ruining my vibe as usual.

I rolled my eyes but didn't bother responding. I had more important things to focus on, like— gasp— enjoying peace for once. It felt like a luxury I didn't often get.

I glanced out the window again, and my eyes caught something. A little kid—probably a school kid—was running down the street with a bag on his head, trying to shield himself from the rain. Poor guy looked like a complete noob, honestly. Then, of course, just as I thought the universe was playing nice, the kid ate dirt, falling face-first into the street.

I watched him for a second, frozen there. The poor kid laid there, staring at the sky like he was having an existential crisis. It was kinda funny, but also heartbreaking. Then, he started crying. Yeah, 5 years old, definitely kindergarten age if this world even had one.

System Alert: "Yes, genius, this world has kindergarten. Did you think they just throw kids into military arenas as soon as they can walk?"

Nice, really. Thanks for the clarification, smartass.

I leaned forward, watching the kid struggle to push himself up, tears rolling down his cheeks, no one around to help him. For a moment, I just stared. Man, that hit me.

I wasn't about to just sit here and let this kid suffer, not when I could do something. Afterall, I'm a hero!

Me: "Hey, system, go help the kid, yeah? You can handle it."

I leaned back again, feeling like the world's most chill hero. I mean, why bother getting up? I've got a system that does all the hard work for me.

System: "Oh, yeah. Sure. No problem, hero. I'll just pull off some magic for the crying baby while you sit back and enjoy your snacks."

Me: "Thank you, thank you. My heroism knows no bounds."

The system didn't waste any time. A quick burst of mana swirled in the air, almost like a puff of smoke, and then—poof—above the kid's head, a tiny, floating cloud appeared. It was made up of water and wind magic, just enough to cover his head and protect him from the downpour.

System: "There you go, kid. I've made you an umbrella cloud. You should probably send me a thank-you card later."

The kid looked up in surprise. His eyes widened as he felt the rain stop hitting him, and then he looked around, totally confused. He reached up, poked the cloud a few times, and giggled. His face broke into a smile as if he'd just discovered some new superpower. I could almost hear his thoughts: "Whoa, I'm special!"

System: "Isn't that adorable? He thinks he's some chosen one now."

I chuckled to myself. "Yeah, let the little guy have his moment. It's cute."

The kid then ran in circles like a maniac, clearly enjoying the new 'rainproof' life.

System: "You've created a monster. Good job."

"Shut up, you know you love it."

I watched him for a moment, and honestly, I didn't regret helping him. It wasn't much, but it was something. Maybe this world was worth sticking around for—if only to see what kind of ridiculous situation I'd end up in next.

As I leaned back in the chair again, watching the kid spin in circles like some rain-dodging prodigy, I realized that maybe, just maybe, I'd been too quick to dismiss this whole "hero" thing. Sure, it wasn't glamorous, and I was definitely taking the lazy route most of the time, but... well, sometimes the little things mattered.

And maybe, just maybe, I could be the kind of hero who didn't have to do everything myself.

Well, that's the dream, right? I mean, I could just lounge around all day while my fancy AI system does all the work. Who says I can't be a hero without breaking a sweat?

I leaned back in the chair, getting comfortable again. Maybe I'd just forget about that whole 'saving the world' thing for today. I had other stuff to do—like binge-watching my thoughts while avoiding any actual effort.

System Alert: "Alright, Lucas, time to get to work. You've got quests to complete."

Ugh, here we go again.

Me: "Oh great, here comes the responsible voice in my head. Alright, what's the damage today, huh?"

System: "You've got the usual. A little bit of self-improvement, some divine magic creation, and of course, the grand finale. Let's kick it off with the first quest: 15 minutes of meditation."

Me: "Meditation? Seriously? I reincarnated into a magical fantasy world and I'm being told to sit cross-legged and think about my life choices?!"

System: "Yup, you've got it. It's either that or I drag you through another self-help book."

I groaned. "Fine. But I'm not doing it in some awkward lotus position. You get me?"

System: "Yeah, yeah. Just get it over with. Trust me, this is the easiest quest you'll ever get."

I slumped back in the chair, crossed my arms over my chest, and stared at the ceiling. Fifteen minutes. That's all I had to do. I could zone out, let the mind drift like a lazy river.

System: "Don't even think about falling asleep, noob. I'll know."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered. "I can't even get 15 minutes of peace, can I?"

I closed my eyes and started breathing deeply, trying to force myself into this whole 'meditative' thing. It wasn't exactly peaceful when all I could hear was the system roasting me.

System: "I can practically hear you thinking, Lucas. Are you actually meditating or are you just pretending to be deep?"

"Can't I just have a moment of inner peace without being interrogated?" I sighed, trying to focus on my breathing.

System: "Focus, man. You've got to clear your mind of all those unnecessary thoughts about 'getting out of this boring room' or 'what's for dinner'."

"Ugh, I don't need you to tell me how to think!" I snapped.

System: "Sure you do. You don't even know how to meditate, bro."

The timer ticked down, but it felt like it took forever. Eventually, after what felt like an eternity of inner turmoil, the system gave me the all-clear.

System: "Well, look at that, you survived. Congratulations, you're 50 EXP richer."

"Sweet. Next quest, please," I said, rubbing my temples.

System: "Alright, alright. The next one's a real gem. Celestial Divine Creation."

I raised an eyebrow. "Wait, what? That sounds important. Like, seriously important. Are we talking about creating some kind of cosmic superpower here?"

System: "Well, technically, no. You're not creating anything major, but if you want to call it that, go for it. I just need you to analyze the concept of divine protection and see if we can adapt it to your current arsenal."

"Okay, okay, hold up—so you want me to steal some divine power and make it work for me?" I grinned, the idea already sounding way cooler than anything else I'd done today.

System: "Not steal, per se. It's more like... borrowing. But yeah, that's the gist. Can't just walk up to a god and ask for a loan."

I nodded, already diving into my thoughts. "Alright, alright. Divine protection... I need something that's versatile, low-key enough for me not to get one shot by cursed or elemental magic"

System: "Exactly, genius. And you'll get 50 EXP for it. I know, I know. Don't look so impressed."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm thrilled," I deadpanned.

After a few more minutes of concentration, I finished with a solid plan to adapt some celestial defensive magic into a personal invisible shield. Nothing too flashy—just enough to keep me from getting impaled in the back.

System: "Look at you, actually doing something for once. 50 EXP in the bank. You're almost about to level-up."

I gave a thumbs-up. "I'm basically a walking god now."

System: "That's what you think, bro."

I sat back again, thinking about the last quest. "Alright, what's next, system?"

System: "Oh, you're gonna love this one. Get ready. The final quest of the day: **Touch some grass.**"

Me: "Touch some grass? Are you serious right now? That's the final quest? This is some kind of joke, right? You're just trolling me, aren't you?"

System: "Oh no, no trolling here. This is a serious quest. Trust me, you need it. You've been holed up in your rented room for four days, living like some lazy fat guy who orders food, eats, and then sleeps some more."

Me: "Okay, hold up. Just because I'm trying to take a mental health break doesn't mean I'm a lazy slob. I'm a hero in the making, bro. That's my process. You wouldn't understand."

System: "Mental health break? You've spent four days doing absolutely nothing. You ordered food like it was your job, slept like you were trying to break a napping world record, and then—wait for it—you've been talking about becoming a hero. A hero who hasn't even left his room."

Me: "Listen, I was processing, okay? It's all part of the journey. A hero needs to reflect, to strategize. It's not my fault if there's a perfectly good bed in this room and a perfectly good delivery service at my fingertips."

System: "Processing? More like procrastinating. You're just avoiding the real work, like the fraud you are. You claim you're ready to save the world, but you can't even get off your hand to touch some grass."

Me: "Fraud?! Did you just call me a fraud? You're the one who makes me do all these pointless quests like some overworked intern! You're the fraud here, trying to make me a better person while roasting me the entire time. What's next, 'Go find a date and win her heart'?"

System: "You wouldn't even do that, you lazy excuse for a hero. You're probably sitting there wondering if you should take a nap right now instead of dealing with actual quests."

Me: "I mean, a nap does sound pretty good, though. Don't hate on naps, bro. They're essential to the hero's journey. The amount of brainpower I need to save this world?"

System: "Oh, I get it now. You're not a hero, Lucas. You're a professional napper. But hey, if saving the world requires a comfy pillow and a snack break, you're totally up for it."

Me: "You know what? Fine, I'll do it. I'll go touch some grass and become one with nature like the so-called 'hero' I am, just so you can stop roasting me every five minutes. Happy now?"

System: "Oh, I'm thrilled. But, you know, don't forget to bring back some 'grass samples' for science. Wouldn't want you to touch it for nothing, right?"

Me: "Okay, now you're just messing with me. I swear, if I didn't need you to control my spells, I'd throw you out of this damn system so fast—"

System: "Oh, please, you couldn't live without me. You need me more than you need to touch grass."

Me: "Okay, okay, maybe I do need you... but I don't need your constant attitude. Shut down already, will you?"

There was a brief moment of silence before the usual sarcastic voice fell completely quiet. The system didn't say a word.

I let out a long, deep breath, leaning back in my chair and looking out at the rain falling outside the window. The sound of the raindrops hitting the roof was calming, almost like the world was washing away the noise in my head.

I smiled to myself.

I cracked my knuckles, staring at the dimly lit room. The rain outside was a perfect soundtrack to my mood. Honestly, I didn't even feel like training today. The past few days had been a blur of ordering food, reading random books, and just laying around. But hey, I couldn't let my body become a gelatinous mess.

Anyway, I guess I should check out my stats. The system's been silent for a bit, which, frankly, is a nice change. So I'll just do this manually for once.

****Status Menu:****

****Name:** Lucas**

****Class:** Mage**

****Level:** 7**

****Age:** 15**

****Attributes:****

- ****Strength:** 5**

- ****Agility:** 6**

- **Endurance:** 6
- **Perception:** 7
- **Intelligence:** 10
- **Mana:** 8
- **Divine Creation:** 3

Skills:

- Light-Elemental Magic
- Mana Control (Lv. 2)

Notes:

- **HP:** 300/300
- **MP:** 400/400

I rubbed my temples. 45 stat points in total. Not bad, but honestly, I've been slacking a bit. *solid 10 in Intelligence, though. I'm not saying I'm a genius or anything, but, well, I'm a bit of a genius.

I threw the rest of the points around into agility and mana, the stuff that'll help me in actual combat. Strength? *Meh*. What am I gonna do, punch my way through a dungeon?

Nah.

Endurance... same story. Perception, though? Gotta know where stuff's coming from, right?

Divine Creation is a joke right now. Three points? That's like... a half-baked pancake. I can create a few cool things, but nothing divine yet. I'll get there.

With that out of the way, I stood up, stretching. Time to get ready for a little bit of actual work.

I glanced at the clock. 11 AM. Yeah, I am not some early riser. Classic me. But I didn't need to follow some 9-to-5 training schedule.

The real question was: What am I gonna work on today?

I stretched and glanced around the room, my gaze drifting to the dim-lit corner near my bed. The rain was still tapping softly on the window, but I wasn't in the mood for just zoning out anymore. I needed to actually train.

Mana control. Right. Time to get serious.

Now, let me explain something: Light magic isn't your typical "fireball" or "water blast" kind of deal. Nope, it's way more... fancy than that. The system worked for an entire year just to create a special, unique form of light magic just for me. Talk about overkill, right? But, hey, I'm not complaining. Not every day do you get a magic system tailored to you like that.

The way it works is like this: I manipulate the light around me and reflect it through specially calculated pathways—using mirrors, angles, and reflections to enhance the attack. Sounds simple, but trust me, it's not. The more precise the reflections are, the stronger the magic becomes. And if I nail it right? Well, then it can pack one hell of a punch.

It's like creating a bullet out of pure light, except with mirrors... lots of mirrors.

The most dangerous part of this skill is that if I get the angles wrong, the attack can bounce back and hit me. So, I need to keep my focus razor-sharp. It's all about calculation, precision, and a lot of mind power. There's a reason I don't use this magic in the middle of a chaotic fight—I'd rather not vaporize myself by accident.

I pulled out a small piece of chalk from my bag and turned to the wall next to my bed. One white dot. Just one target to focus on. That's all I need.

"Okay, let's see what I can do."

I inhaled deeply and steadied myself. The room was dead silent, save for the soft hiss of rain outside. I closed my eyes for a second, letting the darkness behind my eyelids sharpen my focus. The light in the room wasn't much, but I could feel it all around me, swirling just under the surface, waiting to be controlled.

I raised my hand, palm open, facing the wall. The small sliver of light coming from the window caught my fingers as I gently focused, letting the light's energy pulse into my mind. A thin thread of mana snaked from my fingertips, and with it came the light, bending at my command.

With every calculation I made, the light split into small fragments, each part reflecting off the invisible mirrors I mentally placed in the air. I felt my heart race as I carefully angled the beams, sending them back and forth, bouncing them into a perfect straight line. The system had made this look easy, but it was far from it.

One last reflection... and—

BOOM.

The light shot out with a sudden flash, slicing through the air. It hit the target with such force that I could've sworn the walls of the building shuddered. I blinked, almost disoriented by the sudden surge of power, but when I looked at the wall...

There was a hole. A perfect, round hole. Right through the wall.

I hadn't just hit the white dot; I'd blasted right through it. Straight into the next room. The force of the attack was powerful enough that the light didn't just damage—it obliterated anything in its path. A clean shot. A perfect reflection.

I let out a small, triumphant laugh. Hell yeah. This was what I was talking about. Sure, it took a little work, but the results were worth it.

I stood there, staring at the hole in the wall like I'd just done something seriously cool. The wall had just been obliterated by a single beam of light.

"Not bad," I muttered to myself. "Not bad at all."

I wiped the sweat from my brow and leaned back against the wall, trying to calm my breathing. That was a lot more draining than I thought. But damn, the potential this magic had... ridiculous.

The system would've probably had some smart comment, but the silence felt nice.

****Notes:****

- ****HP:**** 300/300

- ****MP:**** 400/250

I smiled, looking at the hole in the wall again. This was only the beginning.

Suddenly, from the hole I just blasted through the wall, an eye appeared.

Oh.

I squinted. The dude was just staring at me through the hole like some horror movie antagonist. My neighbor, apparently. Great.

Curiosity got the best of me, so I leaned in closer. "Hey, bro, you good?"

The guy's eye twitched. Then—

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

He started screaming. Loud.

"HE'S TRYING TO KILL ME!"

Whoa. Hold on.

"HE USED MAGIC! ILLEGAL MAGIC! THIS MANIAC JUST BLASTED A HOLE INTO MY ROOM! OWNER! HELP! MY LIFE IS IN DANGER!"

I held up my hands. "Whoa, relax, relax. It was an accident—"

"OH GODS, HE'S TRYING TO JUSTIFY IT! I KNEW IT! HE'S GONNA FINISH ME OFF!"

Bro was making it sound like I had a dagger to his throat.

"Hey, hey, shut up—"

"I'M TOO YOUNG TO DIE! I HAVEN'T EVEN FOUND LOVE YET!"

"Okay, now you're just oversharing."

"HELP! SOMEBODY! A MAGE IS ABOUT TO COMMIT MURDER!"

Alright. Enough. My patience was running thin.

I sighed, rubbing my temple before muttering under my breath:

"System, Awaken. Shut that dumbass up. Now."

The system stirred to life with its usual smug energy.

「 Oh? Finally admitting you need me? 」

「 Alright, shutting up the loudmouth. Initiating 'Silence is Golden' protocol. 」

Without another word, a faint shimmer of mana flickered through the air. The guy's mouth was still open, but—

No sound came out.

His eyes went wide in pure horror. He slapped his throat, then his lips, then started doing some weird mime movements.

I smirked. "Yeah, bet you didn't see that coming, huh?"

Then—

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The door rattled as someone pounded on it like they had a personal vendetta against wood.

Oh. Right.

The hotel owner.

I straightened up and opened the door, putting on my best not-at-all-suspicious smile. "Heeey, good evening."

The owner was fuming. His big mustache practically bristled with rage. "Boy, do you have any idea what you just did?!"

Before I could even open my mouth—

「 Yeah, Lucas, explain to the nice man how you single-handedly turned his establishment into a war zone. 」

I sighed. "You know what? Shut up."

Unfortunately, I said that out loud.

The hotel owner's face twitched. "Excuse me? Did you just tell me to shut up?"

Oh.

Oh no.

"No, no! I wasn't talking to—"

"OUT. NOW."

And just like that, I found myself standing outside the hotel, in the rain, with my bag slung over my shoulder.

Water dripped down my face. I inhaled deeply. Exhaled.

From the depths of my mind, the system chuckled.

「 So... how's it feel being homeless? 」

"...Shut up."

11:00 AM – The Realization

I stood under the overhang of a random shop, watching the rain pour down at me. My bag felt heavier on my shoulder than usual, probably because of the weight of my terrible life choices.

I sighed. "Alright, first step—find a new place to stay."

I marched straight into the nearest inn and confidently slapped my hand on the counter. "A room, please."

The innkeeper—a wrinkly old man with the look of someone who had seen way too much—raised an eyebrow. "That'll be three gold a night."

Three gold?

I reached into my pocket, feeling nothing but lint and regret.

I opened my system inventory. "System, tell me we got money."

「 We got money! 」

I exhaled in relief.

「 Not. 」

I slammed the inventory shut and turned back to the innkeeper. "I'll be... right back."

Then I walked out.

Well. That plan was a bust. Time for Plan B.

12:00 PM – The Scam That Never Was

Desperation does things to a man.

I spotted a noble-looking guy counting his coins outside a fancy shop. He was an easy target—rich, distracted, and clearly living life without fear of getting robbed.

"Alright, System," I muttered. "Time to finesse some funds."

「 Oh? Now you need me? 」

"Yes, yes, I get it, I messed up. Now let's scam this dude."

I walked up to the noble with the confidence of a man who had no shame. "Sir, you look like a distinguished gentleman."

He looked at me like I was dirt on his boot. "What do you want?"

I smiled. "I have a rare blessed coin that always lands on the side you bet on. Surely a man of your status enjoys a good wager?"

I reached into my pocket and—

Nothing.

"System, where's the coin?" I whispered.

「 Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you... I'm not helping. 」

"What?"

「 Yeah, this is revenge for shutting me down earlier. Good luck, loser. 」

I stared at my empty palm in horror.

The noble squinted. "Are you... scamming me?"

"Uh."

"GUARDS!"

I ran.

3:00 PM – Back to Magic Training

After barely escaping with my life, I slumped onto a quiet alleyway bench and glared at the sky. "System, you're a traitor."

「 And you're a broke fraud. We all have our flaws. 」

I groaned and pulled myself up. If I couldn't get money, I could at least train.

I marked another wall (one without neighbors this time) and focused my mana.

Light magic was weird. Instead of just shooting lasers, it relied on bending light—reflecting and amplifying attacks using mirrored projections.

I summoned a tiny shard of light, aimed it at a conjured mirror, and let it bounce. It hit the target perfectly.

"Ha! Nailed it!"

Then I did it again. And again. Until I ran out of mana and collapsed on the ground for a hour.

「 And that's game over. MP: 0. Try again later. 」

4:00 PM – The Gambling Idea

The rain finally stopped, and I dragged myself to a bench in the main square.

That's when I overheard them.

A group of well-dressed men and women laughing and chatting about tonight's high-stakes gambling session at The Black Crown Bar.

And more importantly—

"That noble guy? Yeah, undefeated. Richest man at the table." Said the woman.

My ears perked.

A rich guy... undefeated... in gambling?

My gamer instincts kicked in.

"System," I whispered. "I have a plan."

「 Oh boy. Here we go. 」

I grinned. "We're gonna cheat and scam him."

8:30 PM – The Setup

I needed to look the part. I couldn't just waltz into a noble's gambling den looking like a damp orphan.

"System, we need a wardrobe upgrade."

「 Finally, some good decisions. Alright, stand still. 」

A soft golden glow surrounded me as the Celestial Wardrobe System activated. My ragged clothes dissolved, replaced by a sleek black high-collared coat with silver trims, a dark vest underneath, and tailored pants. My boots shined, and a single silver ring glowed faintly on my finger.

I examined myself in the reflection of a shop window.

My brown hair had been neatly styled instead of its usual mess, and my green eyes looked sharper under the soft bar lighting.

I grinned. "Damn. I look expensive."

「 Yeah, now if only you were expensive. 」

"Shut up."

9:00 PM – Entering The Lion's Den

I stood at the entrance of The Black Crown Bar, the rich laughter and clinking glasses spilling out into the street.

I took a deep breath.

Showtime.

With a smirk, I stepped inside.

The place was packed. Dim lanterns hung from the ceiling, casting a warm, golden glow over the mahogany interior. The scent of ale, roasted meat, and pure bad decisions filled the air. Laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the occasional loud argument over lost bets blended into the atmosphere.

Rich nobles occupied the center tables, their outfits practically screaming "I have too much money and no self-control." Meanwhile, the rougher-looking folks sat at the edges, watching with sharp, calculating eyes. It was a perfect mix of the wealthy and the wolves waiting to rip them off.

I walked straight to the front and took a seat by the long wooden bar. The bartender, a burly guy with a thick mustache and a single piercing blue eye, glanced at me. "What'll it be?"

I smirked. "Your finest—"

「 No. 」

I froze mid-sentence.

「 You have exactly ZERO coins, broke boy. You wanna order 'finest'? You better be talking about water. 」

Right. I totally forgot about my financial devastation.

I cleared my throat. "I'll... take some time before I order."

The bartender just grunted and moved to another customer. I sighed, resting my elbow on the bar.

I shifted my focus to the gambling tables.

At the largest one, five noble-looking men sat around a deep green-felt table, stacks of gold coins neatly arranged in front of them. Their faces were like stone—no emotions, just cold calculations. This was a pro-level game.

Another table had a mix of adventurers and merchants, playing a lower-stakes game with silver coins. They were far more relaxed, laughing and cursing at their luck.

The real show, however, was at the main event table in the center. That's where he was.

The so-called undefeated noble.

Dressed in a black and crimson coat, with rings on every damn finger, the man oozed arrogance. He leaned back in his chair like he already knew he'd win.

Yeah, I was gonna rob him blind.

I leaned against the bar for a moment, mentally rehearsing my plan. Then I muttered, "Alright, System, break it down for me—how exactly are we going to cheat these guys?"

「 First, we identify the game. They're playing Five-Card Draw Poker. Each player gets five cards, and they have the option to discard and draw new ones to make the best hand possible. The rules are standard, so any deviation will go unnoticed if executed perfectly. 」

I furrowed my brow. "Okay, that's clear. But how do we tip the scales in our favor?"

「 We will use wind magic. I'll subtly direct a controlled, almost imperceptible gust of wind to create microscopic dents on specific cards during the shuffle. These dents won't be visible to anyone else, but I'll memorize their unique positions and patterns. When the cards are dealt, I'll relay the information to you through our synchronized signals. This way, you'll know exactly which card is where and can manipulate your bets accordingly. 」

I nodded slowly, my excitement building. "So, basically, you're turning the deck into your personal cheat sheet?"

「 Precisely. By marking the cards with controlled, tiny indentations, I can predict their distribution. This allows you to know the best possible hand in advance and force the game in your favor. Just remember, timing is crucial. The gust has to be subtle enough not to alert anyone, yet precise enough for my sensors to pick up. 」

I ran a hand through my brown hair, grinning. "Damn, System, you're a genius. This is the perfect plan. Now, simplify that for me one more time."

「 In short: while they shuffle, I'll use wind magic to make microscopic dents on the cards, memorize the unique dents, and then tell you which card is in each position. You'll use this intel to make unbeatable moves in Five-Card Draw Poker. 」

I laughed under my breath, shaking my head in disbelief. "Alright, alright, I'm in. Let's do this."

With my plan set, I rose from my seat and strode confidently toward the gambling table, where the rich and the arrogant were deep in their game. The adrenaline of cheating a room full of high rollers had me buzzing with anticipation.

But then, just as I neared the table to challenge them, I heard a small, piercing scream coming from behind. I froze in my tracks.

I looked back and saw something dreamlike.

No, seriously, I thought I was hallucinating for a second.

A girl—around 17 or 18 years old—stood there, and damn, she was straight out of a fantasy novel. Pink hair, pink eyes, the whole aesthetic screamed "protagonist material." Her long hair cascaded down her back in soft waves, glowing under the dim bar lights, while her eyes held a mesmerizing, almost ethereal charm. She had the kind of beauty that made people do double takes and question their life choices.

She was wearing a fitted white blouse, slightly frilled at the edges, tucked into a dark corset that accentuated her figure. A flowing, knee-length burgundy skirt swayed as she

struggled against the grip of two rough-looking men, and her black boots scraped against the wooden floor. The expression on her face was a mix of discomfort and silent pleading—like she didn't want to cause a scene but also really wanted out of whatever situation this was.

I blinked.

System, this is my heroine, right? This is the missing piece of my story. I mean, I'm the MC. Who else has a literal AI system like me?

「 Bro, I don't know if she's your heroine, but you're definitely about to be the side character in a street mugging. 」

I narrowed my eyes at the two guys holding her.

One was a thick-necked brute with a face that looked like it had been carved with a blunt axe. He had greasy black hair, a broken nose, and a permanent scowl. The other was skinnier, but with a sharp, rat-like face, slicked-back blond hair, and beady eyes that darted around the room, probably checking if anyone was about to intervene.

From the way they stood, gripping her arms with a little too much force, I had a feeling they weren't exactly her bodyguards.

Perfect. Time for some main character energy.

I cracked my knuckles, already crafting the dramatic scene in my head where I'd swoop in, save the girl, and she'd look at me like I was her knight in shining armor. Maybe she'd even call me a hero. Maybe—

「 My guy, were you here to scam people or steal girls? Priorities. 」

I muttered under my breath, "Both."

With a smirk, I walked over, making sure my steps were slow and deliberate. The moment I got close, the girl's pink eyes flicked to mine, widening in surprise before she suddenly yanked herself free and darted behind me, gripping the back of my shirt.

Oh? That was fast.

I turned my head slightly, catching a glimpse of her peeking over my shoulder, looking both relieved and embarrassed.

Cute.

The two guys glared at me, their expressions a mix of confusion and irritation.

"Oi, kid," the rat-faced one sneered, crossing his arms. "This ain't your business. Walk away."

"Yeah," the brute grunted. "We own her. She's just some stray we picked up. She goes where we say."

I felt my eye twitch. Oh, hell no.

「 Oof. Bad move, gentlemen. You just activated his 'justice protagonist' mode. 」

I met their gazes with a slow, deliberate smirk. "You own her? That's funny. Because from where I'm standing, she looks pretty comfortable hiding behind me instead of you two."

The brute clenched his fists. "You got a death wish, punk?"

The girl's grip on my shirt tightened slightly. I could feel her shaking just a little, which only pissed me off more.

I let out a slow breath, letting a fraction of my mana seep into the air around me, the atmosphere around us growing heavier. My casual smirk remained, but my eyes darkened.

"I'll make this easy," I said, my voice dropping to a dangerously low tone. "You walk away. Now. Or I promise, you won't like what happens next."

The brute took a half-step back, instinctively wary. The rat-faced guy looked between me and his partner, clearly re-evaluating his life choices.

They weren't strong. Just some street thugs who thought they could push around someone weaker. And they knew damn well they weren't winning this one.

"Tch." The rat-faced guy clicked his tongue. "Let's go. Ain't worth the trouble."

Smart decision.

But I wasn't done yet.

「 Oh, I know that look. You're about to be petty. 」

Damn right.

As the two of them turned to leave, I muttered under my breath, "System, be a dear and punish them on their way out."

「 With pleasure. 」

The moment they stepped out of the bar, a massive wave of water crashed down on them from absolutely nowhere, drenching them from head to toe. The entire bar burst into laughter, myself included, as the two thugs sputtered and cursed before running off like wet dogs.

I clutched my stomach, still laughing as I turned to the girl, who was covering her mouth, trying (and failing) to suppress her own giggles.

Then she looked up at me, smiling brightly, cheeks tinged with a soft pink. "Thank you."

For a moment, I just stared, the way the dim lighting of the bar made her look even more beautiful catching me off guard.

I cleared my throat, rubbing the back of my neck, feeling a little warmth creeping onto my face. "Uh... yeah. You're welcome."

She smiled at me, a soft, gentle expression that could probably make flowers bloom if this were one of those romance novels.

"I am Eve. Just Eve," she said, her voice as smooth as silk.

My heart melted a little. Cute girls introducing themselves with just their first name? Yeah, that's the good stuff. I smiled back.

"Lucas Reinhardt. Pleasure to meet you, Eve."

She nodded politely. Her whole presence was so soft-spoken and calming that I felt like I was about to get isekai'd again into a world of pure fluff.

"Are you okay?" I asked, making sure she wasn't still shaken up from the two lowlifes earlier.

Eve gently shook her head. "I am fine."

I raised an eyebrow. That was a quick recovery. Too quick. "Why was a cute girl like you even with them?"

Her pink eyes shifted away, and just the tiniest dusting of pink hit her cheeks. "It's nothing important."

Yeah, no. That was the universal sign for 'definitely important.' I narrowed my eyes and mentally called for backup. "System, analyze her body language. Something's off."

「 Analysis complete. Conclusion: She's hiding something embarrassing. Probably something that would make you question the existence of intelligent life. 」

...Great. This was either going to be tragic or painfully stupid.

"It's fine," I said, leading her to a nearby table. "You can tell me. I'm interested. And hey, I am your savior, after all. That's gotta earn me some backstory rights."

Eve hesitated, playing with a strand of her pink hair. Then, with an embarrassed smile, she began.

"Earlier today, I went to a bakery to buy a chocolate cake. But when I got there..." She paused for dramatic effect. "It was sold out."

I nodded. Tragic.

"I asked the shopkeeper, but he said he couldn't do anything," she continued, sounding genuinely upset about it.

I leaned in. "And then?"

Eve lowered her head slightly, fidgeting with her fingers. "Then those two gentlemen you saw earlier offered me their chocolate cake in exchange for coming with them for the night. I happily agreed and ate the chocolate cake! Can you believe them? So kind and generous."

Silence.

...What?

System's voice chimed in immediately.

「 Congratulations, Lucas. You've found your match. Someone as stupid as you. 」

"Shut up," I muttered under my breath.

"Huh?" Eve tilted her head, confused.

"Not you." I cleared my throat. "So, let me get this straight. You followed two complete strangers because they bribed you with chocolate cake?"

She nodded, completely oblivious to the issue.

"Then they brought you here and tried to get you to drink?"

Another nod.

I let out a long, disappointed sigh, rubbing my temples. "And at what point did you decide that two rat-faced criminals looked like gentlemen?"

Eve giggled, clearly embarrassed. "That was my mistake."

Yeah. No kidding genius.

I gestured for her to sit with me at a nearby table, and she nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips. My heart skipped a beat.

「 Bro, take your chances. You can do this!" 」

I smirked, feeling a strange rush of confidence, as though the words from the system gave me permission to act. My hand hovered between us, a deliberate motion to take hers, to bridge the gap between us with something simple yet meaningful.

But as my fingers neared her hand, something... wrong happened.

I reached for her hand, my fingers barely inches away. Smooth. Gentle. Just a light touch—

And then—

My hand went through hers.

The world around me dimmed, an unnatural chill creeping up my spine. It wasn't a trick of the light, nor was it some dumb illusion. My fingers phased right through as if she wasn't even there.

What—what the hell?

I stood frozen, staring at my own traitorous hand, my brain refusing to comprehend what just happened. Eve, completely unaware, continued walking toward the table, her soft footsteps tapping against the wooden floor.

「 Bro... what the actual f—」

System's voice cut off as if even it was unsure how to respond.

I gulped. Hey, system. What just happened?

A brief silence. Then—

「 Unable to determine. This was... out of bounds. Possibly a skill issue. Maybe you just missed her hand.」

My face twitched. Missed? I clenched my jaw. Bro, my hand literally ghosted through hers! Like I was too far to touch her, yet she was right in front of me!

「Huh. You might be onto something. Analyzing now. But for now, don't keep her waiting. And, y'know, don't act sus.」

I inhaled sharply, suppressing the thousand questions bouncing in my head. System was right—if I kept staring at my hand like a lunatic, I'd look suspicious. I forced a casual stride toward Eve, sliding into the seat across from her.

She smiled warmly. "You seemed lost in thought. Is something wrong?"

Oh, nothing, just that my hand went through yours like I'm a character in a horror movie. No big deal.

I waved it off. "Just thinking about how I've been having a long day."

Eve nodded in understanding. "I see."

A brief silence settled before I leaned back, deciding to steer the conversation elsewhere. "Well, since we're here, might as well introduce myself properly. Name's Lucas Reinhardt. I'm not ranked as an adventurer yet, but I do have experience in combat. I specialize in Celestial Magic, though I'm more of a hands-on, combat-oriented person. Laid-back, casual, and I don't take things too seriously unless I have to."

Eve listened intently, her pink eyes holding a quiet curiosity. Then, she tilted her head slightly. "Celestial Magic?"

"Yeah." I shrugged. "Basically magic that deals with divine stuff, light, cosmic energy, all that fancy jazz."

She nodded thoughtfully. "That's quite impressive. I rarely meet Celestial Mages."

"Heh. It's not all that glamorous. People hear 'Celestial' and expect me to be some holy saint of justice." I smirked. "I'm really just a guy who likes to take things easy."

Eve giggled softly. "You do seem very... relaxed. It's nice."

"Hah, see? You get it."

She smiled, then placed a hand gently on her pendant locket. Her fingers brushed over its silver surface, her expression shifting—just slightly. A moment of hesitation. A flicker of sadness.

"I'm an adventurer too," she finally said. "Though... I don't know my rank."

I raised a brow. "You don't?"

She shook her head. "No. I just... never knew."

Something about her tone felt off, but I let her continue.

"I also specialize in Elemental and Celestial Magic." She smiled faintly. "Though, I suppose I don't know much about myself either."

My brows furrowed slightly. That last part—there was something deeper in those words.

I rested my chin on my hand, eyeing her with newfound curiosity.

Now that's interesting.

Eve's pink eyes softened as she looked at me, something quiet yet heavy lurking behind them. "Lucas... can you promise me something?"

I raised a brow. "Depends on the promise. What is it?"

She hesitated, fingers brushing against the pendant around her neck. "It's about me."

That got my attention. "What about you?"

She looked down, holding the locket tighter. Then, in a voice softer than before, she said—

"I don't know who I actually am."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"I don't remember my past." Her grip on the locket tightened, her delicate fingers pressing into the metal. "I... remember nothing."

Okay. That was a bombshell.

「 Bro, did she just drop a main character amnesia arc on you? 」

System, focus. I cleared my throat and leaned slightly forward, lowering my voice. "You mean... you lost your memories?"

Eve nodded, her usual calm expression shifting into something fragile. "Maybe... I did."

She gently pulled her locket up, undoing the small clasp with practiced ease. As it opened, she stared at the picture inside for a moment before turning it toward me.

I looked at the photo, my eyes scanning over a much younger Eve—probably around 12 or 14. She was wearing an academic uniform, standing beside a boy. The guy had muscular forearms, same uniform, same school setting. But—

His face was gone.

Ripped out of the picture.

I pointed at the destroyed part of the picture. "Who's this?"

Eve shook her head. "I don't know... or remember."

I exhaled through my nose. That was concerning. System, thoughts?

「 My expert analysis suggests she's been through some serious trauma. Probably an incident so bad it put her at death's door and wiped her memory. Classic dramatic backstory material. 」

Not helping.

But the theory made sense. Something had happened—something big.

I looked at her again, noticing the way she stared at the locket, searching for something in a picture that couldn't answer back. Then, an unsettling thought hit me.

"Eve." My voice was careful. "Is that even your real name?"

Eve's eyes widened slightly.

I leaned back, folding my arms. "If you don't remember anything... is 'Eve' really your name?"

For a second, she didn't respond. Then, her gaze lowered again, and she shook her head. "No... it isn't." Her voice was almost a whisper. "I don't know my real name yet."

"Then?"

She nodded. "I will find out about it. Soon."

That last word caught my attention.

I repeated it aloud, tilting my head. "Soon?"

Eve gently closed her locket and let it rest against her chest. Then, with a small shake of her head, she met my gaze again. "You don't have to worry about it, Lucas." Her usual soft smile returned. "Thanks for listening to me. It feels... nice. Talking to someone about it."

I nodded, but my mind was still turning. She was determined—like she already had a plan. Like she knew something I didn't.

And then there was her. The girl I had just tried to touch, only for my hand to phase through her like some ghostly fever dream.

She's not normal.

Before I could spiral further, my system chimed in.

「Alert: Unable to identify the previous incident of your hand going through hers. Out of bounds by creation.」

I felt my stomach drop.

Out of bounds... by creation?

What the hell did that mean?

「I've run a background check on her personality. She seems timid and shy, yet her aura is menacing.」

I blinked. "Aura?"

I looked at Eve, expecting some kind of pressure, a wave of overwhelming energy, or at least a faint sense of dread. But nothing. She just sat there, eyes closed, gently holding onto her pendant with a soft smile on her face.

System, you playing with me?

「Her celestial—or in other words, heavenly energy—is off the charts, going beyond anyone you've ever seen or faced. And just like you, it seems she is unconsciously suppressing it to look normal and approachable.」

That made me pause.

I glanced at her again. Same gentle expression, same composed posture. But apparently, underneath all that, she was built like a divine nuke?

Cool. Normal. Not terrifying at all.

Then suddenly, she spoke.

"I will find him. And find who I truly am."

Him?

I exchanged a glance with my system, who was, unfortunately, an AI and couldn't exchange glances back.

「Must be the boy from the picture.」

I nodded slightly. Seemed obvious enough. But before I could think any further, the system added something that made me frown.

「She might not look special or cute from the outside. But from my analytical system, she feels very dangerous.」

I raised an eyebrow. Dangerous?

I looked at Eve again. The girl who tilted her head when confused, spoke in the softest voice imaginable, and was more likely to be mistaken for an angel than a threat.

System had its way with logic, though. Even in my previous world, no AI came close to the sheer complexity and predictive capability it had. If it said she was dangerous, then it had its reasons.

「Errmm, actually, I can calculate 48 million possibilities in 5 seconds.」

Thanks for the note, smartass.

Still, I had my own problems. Even if I wanted to help Eve, I had my goal to focus on. I couldn't afford to get sidetracked prying into her matters and forgetting why I was even—

Wait a second. Why was I even in this bar?

Before I could contemplate my life decisions further, Eve's eyes suddenly widened, and she looked past me with a surprised expression.

I tilted my head back and followed her gaze.

A group of nobles sat at a far-off table, gambling like their existence depended on it. But the one who stood out the most was the so-called undefeated noble.

Dressed in a black and crimson coat, with rings on every damn finger, the man oozed arrogance. He leaned back in his chair like he owned the place, smirking as another poor bastard lost his bet to him. The atmosphere around his table was tense—half the men there looked like they were about to start a war, and the other half were already accepting their fates.

Great. Another rich guy with too much time and not enough humility.

「Oho? Look at that. A prime example of a noble suffering from 'I Have More Money Than Sense' syndrome. Truly fascinating.」

I smirked and pushed my chair back, rising to my feet with the confidence of a man who had no idea what he was actually doing—but looked damn good doing it.

Eve blinked up at me, tilting her head. "Where are you going, Lucas?" Her voice was soft, curious, like a gentle breeze carrying the scent of something sweet.

I ran a hand through my hair and grinned. "To carve my name into history, leave legends in my wake, and show these nobles that even the gods know how to fold when I'm at the table."

Eve's pink eyes sparkled, and she stood up with me, her expression lighting up like a kid hearing about a festival. "Then I'll come and watch! And cheer for you, Lucas!" Her voice had that playful, sweet ring to it, the kind that could melt even the coldest heart.

I glanced at the system. "You sure she's dangerous?"

「Yes, blind hero, she is indeed dangerous. Now focus before your simping destroys your critical thinking.」

"Ugh, stop with the insults and lock in. You got the cheats ready?"

「Yes, sir! Full array of probability adjustments, strategic misdirection, and bluff enhancements! Also, I'd like to remind you that if you still lose, you're officially an embarrassment to all reincarnators.」

"Omg, stop that and focus!"

With Eve practically bouncing beside me, we strode toward the nobles' table, where the so-called undefeated one sat like he owned the place.

The moment I stepped into their space, the conversation died down. Eyes turned. The tension was instant. A few nobles sneered, some raised an eyebrow. And then, the man himself leaned back in his chair, studying me with the slow, smug smirk of someone who thought they were untouchable.

"Who's this kid?" His voice was smooth but carried an edge, like a noble who'd crushed people under his boots for sport.

I smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "I'm here to completely humiliate you."

That got a reaction. A few of his lackeys chuckled, a few scoffed, but the man himself—he just exhaled through his nose like I was nothing.

One of them, a stocky noble with a curled mustache, leaned forward. "Do you even know who you're speaking to, commoner? This is Lord Vincent Devereux, undefeated in every wager he's taken in the past six years."

"Ah, I see," I said, nodding. "So he's been scamming people for six years and hasn't gotten caught yet. Impressive."

"Watch your mouth, boy," another snapped.

"Boy?" I echoed, shaking my head. "Look, I'd love to stay and discuss how many brain cells it takes for you to realize I'm not impressed, but I'm here for one thing—" I pulled out a chair and sat down, my smirk sharpening. "—Five-Card Draw Poker."

Eve clapped her hands together and cheered, "You can do it, Lucas!"

「Bet against him, Lucas. If we win, we get double the rewards.」

"Ignore him," I muttered before locking eyes with Vincent. "What do you say, Lord Vincent? Think you can keep your little fantasy alive a bit longer?"

The room went still. The nobles exchanged glances.

And Vincent?

For the first time, his smirk faltered.

It was time to show the true power of...

System.

Chapter 53 - Cold-Calculations

Lucas's Perspective:

Ahh, it's finally getting interesting.

I glance back at Eve, and she's just beaming. Wide-eyed, hands clutched together, looking at me like I'm some legendary card shark about to demolish a six-year undefeated champion.

Yeah, uh... I've never played poker in my life.

But who needs skill when you have a god-tier AI system doing all the work?

「Look at you, relying on me like a helpless baby bird. I should start charging you rent.」

Love you too, system.

Vincent Devereux leans forward, smirking like a guy who's never had to work for anything in his entire life. His slicked-back blond hair, expensive suit, and that condescending grin practically scream "I was born into privilege and I want you to know it."

"So then," he drawls, twirling a gold ring on his finger. "How much are you betting, mister challenger?"

Good question. How much money do I have?

「 Let's see... oh, wow. Congratulations, you have... negative self-respect. Because your wallet is empty. Bro, you walked into a high-stakes poker game with zero funds? I cannot stress this enough—you are a disgrace. 」

My face twitches. I can already feel the cold sweat forming.

But then—bless her soul—Eve claps excitedly, practically bouncing in place.

"Lucas! You can do it!"

...Well, I can't actually, but damn if that doesn't restore my confidence. I smirk and return my gaze to Vincent.

"I bid..." I lean back, keeping my voice smooth. "This pink-haired girl called Eve."

Silence.

Absolute, deafening silence.

Every noble at the table just gapes at me. Someone in the back drops a glass. One guy actually gasps. Vincent's lackeys look like I just punched their Lord in the face.

Eve blinks. "H-Huh?"

I place a hand on my chin, looking thoughtful. "A rare, one-of-a-kind treasure. Who needs gold when you can own the admiration of a girl this adorable?"

Eve's pink eyes widen, her cheeks slightly puffed out in confusion. "W-Wait, Lucas, what do you mean by own—?"

Vincent chuckles darkly. "How bold. To think you'd wager a person in a game of chance. But tell me, do you truly have the skill to back up such arrogance?"

Oh, buddy, you have no idea how much I don't have that skill.

「 You don't even know what shapes are on the cards. This is beyond fraud. This is performance art. 」

Eve tugs my sleeve gently. "Lucas... Are you sure you know how to play?"

I turn to her, putting on my most mysterious and experienced face. "Eve... Have you ever heard the legend of the 'One-Eyed Trickster' from my homeland?"

She tilts her head, her soft pink locks swaying. "No...?"

Good. Because I'm making it up right now.

I nod sagely. "They say he was the greatest gambler of all time. A man who could see through deception itself. His opponents feared him, for he never lost a single hand."

Eve blinks in awe. "W-Wow... You met him?"

I place a solemn hand on my chest. "Not only did I meet him... I defeated him."

「 Bro. BRO. What are you even saying right now? I am losing my digital mind. 」

Vincent scoffs. "You expect us to believe such a ridiculous tale?"

I shake my head. "Believe what you want. But that day, after I took his title... he gave me his most treasured possession."

Eve leans in, eyes sparkling. "W-What was it?"

I slowly raise my hand... and dramatically flick my wrist.

"A deck of cards forged from the feathers of a phoenix, blessed by the gods themselves."

Vincent stares. His lackeys look uncertain.

Eve clasps her hands together, absolutely entranced. "A-Amazing...!"

「 No, Eve. It is not amazing. He is lying to your face. But honestly, respect, this is the most confident nonsense I've ever witnessed. 」

Vincent narrows his eyes. "If you're so confident, then let's begin. But I warn you... I detest losing."

I smirk. "Then this is going to be a very bad day for you, Vincent."

System, mark those cards. We're going all in.

「 With pleasure, oh mighty One-Eyed Trickster. 」

And with that, the game begins.

"Lucas, please don't lose!"

I glance at Eve, who's clasping her hands together like I'm about to go to war. Her pink eyes shimmer with pure, innocent hope, the kind that makes me feel almost guilty for what I'm about to do.

Almost.

I smirk and wave at her like a seasoned pro. "Relax. This is child's play."

What I don't mention is that the only card game I've ever played is Uno, and I barely knew how that worked.

Vincent, sitting across the table, laces his fingers together and smirks. "Such confidence. I hope it isn't misplaced."

Oh, it's entirely misplaced, buddy. But don't worry—I've got an AI god on my side.

As the dealer starts shuffling the cards, I barely tilt my head. System, it's your time to shine.

「 Ah, yes. Let's commit high-level fraud in broad daylight. Fantastic idea, Your Majesty. 」

Less sarcasm, more cheating.

The moment the cards start flying between the dealer's fingers, a nearly invisible gust of wind brushes past them. It's so subtle, so precise, that not a single person notices. But I know what's happening. The system is marking them.

「 Done. Every card is tagged. I now know exactly where every Ace, King, and strategic high card is located. Which is more than I can say for you, Mr. "What Shape is a Club Again?" 」

I clear my throat, keeping my composure. The dealer finishes shuffling and begins dealing the first hand.

Five cards land in front of me. I casually pick them up, pretending like I know exactly what I'm doing.

Okay. What do we got?

「 Two Aces, a King, a 7, and a 3. Decent, but we can do better. 」

Vincent twirls his ring, grinning as he peeks at his own hand. "The game begins, gentlemen."

I nod like a seasoned veteran. "Indeed."

What are the rules again?

「 You discard and replace up to three cards to improve your hand. Let's ditch the 7 and 3. I've got my eyes on a third Ace and a Queen for an optimal hand. 」

I slide out the two cards like a total pro. "I'll swap these."

The dealer deals two fresh cards. I peek at them.

「 Boom. Three Aces, a King, and a Queen. You are stacked. 」

I fight the urge to grin. This is too easy.

Vincent narrows his eyes. "Confident, are we?"

"Of course," I reply smoothly. "I live for games of chance."

「 You literally do not. Stop talking. Just bet. 」

I toss in my bet—a cool 1 Eve. The other nobles hesitate before following. Vincent smirks and matches it without a second thought.

The showdown begins. One noble reveals a pair of tens. The other has a measly high card.

Vincent reveals his hand with a smug grin—three Jacks.

"Impressive," one of his lackeys says.

Vincent shrugs. "What can I say? A master of the game never falters."

Oh, buddy. I cannot wait to crush your dreams.

I lay my cards down, face-up.

"Three Aces."

Silence.

Then a gasp.

Vincent's face freezes mid-smirk, his eye twitching. "What?"

"I believe this means I win," I say, leaning back like this was expected.

Vincent forces a stiff smile. "Beginner's luck, it seems."

「 Oh-ho-ho, he mad. 」

Eve claps excitedly. "Lucas, you're amazing!"

I chuckle, brushing my nose. "What can I say? Talent is a burden."

「 The only burden here is the amount of lies you are telling. 」

Round Two – Raising the Stakes

Vincent's jaw is clenched as we go into the next round. The dealer shuffles again—and system does its magic.

Five cards. I peek at them.

「 Oh, this is just cruel. Two Kings, an Ace, a Jack, and a Five. 」

I swap the Jack and Five.

「 Four Kings. This is actual robbery. 」

Vincent smirks. "I'll raise to 75 gold."

His lackeys immediately follow. They're sweating, but they have to bet if Vincent does. That's nobleman peer pressure for you.

I tap my chin, pretending to think. Then, with the slowest, most agonizing grin—

"I raise to 150 gold."

Gasps.

Vincent's left eye twitches. "You dare raise against me?"

I shrug. "A master of the game never falters."

The same line. His line. Used against him.

「 Oh my god, you are actually evil. I love it. 」

Vincent glares. "Fine. I call."

Showdown.

The nobles reveal garbage hands.

Vincent flips his cards dramatically. "Full House. Queens over Jacks."

The lackeys sigh in relief. One even mutters, "Finally, Lord Vincent returns to form."

I look at my cards. Look at Vincent.

Then I set them down.

"Four Kings."

Absolute shock.

Vincent slams his hand on the table. "IMPOSSIBLE!"

I tilt my head, feigning confusion. "Is it? I thought this was a game of skill?"

Eve lets out an adorable "Waaah~" of amazement, hands clasped in front of her mouth.
"L-Lucas, you're so cool...!"

I flash her a wink. "Just another day for the One-Eyed Trickster."

Vincent looks livid. He stands abruptly, fists clenched.

"This game is not over."

I smirk, stacking my gold. "Oh, I know. Let's go again. I'm on fire tonight."

「 Bro. You have cheated twice. You are playing with the devil's luck. You need to leave before you get stabbed. 」

Not yet.

I want one last win.

Final Round – The Grand Theft Gold

The cards are shuffled. System does its magic.

This time, it's perfect.

「 Royal. Flush. My guy, run. Take the money and RUN. 」

Vincent stares me down. "I bet 200 gold."

I spin a coin between my fingers. Then, I grin. "I call."

The nobles gulp. The tension is insane.

Vincent slams his cards down. "Four Aces!"

I let out a low whistle. "Wow. That's crazy."

Then, slowly, I reveal my cards.

"Royal Flush."

Dead. Silence.

Vincent screams and flips the table. Gold coins scatter everywhere.

"YOU LYING DOG!"

I grab my winnings, already backing away. "Pleasure doing business, gentlemen!"

Eve quickly follows, holding her dress as she rushes after me. "L-Lucas, wait!"

「 MOVE. YOUR. FEET. 」

Vincent roars behind us. "GUARDS! SEIZE HIM!"

Welp.

Time to run.

I grabbed Eve's hand and yanked her along as we bolted for the exit. She let out a soft gasp, barely keeping up with my pace.

Behind us, Vincent's guards were already moving to block the way, their heavy boots stomping against the wooden floor like they actually thought they could stop me.

System, do something fancy.

「 Fancy? Oh, you mean save your reckless ass again? Sure. 」

A sudden burst of water magic exploded from nowhere, drenching the guards in an instant. Their polished noble armor became shiny wet buckets as they stumbled backward, slipping over each other like they were in a slapstick comedy.

I didn't look back. We were almost out.

"System, get the gold."

「 Oh, so now you care about our hard-earned, totally-legit, not-at-all-stolen wealth? 」

A gentle gust of wind swept through the bar, and just like that, the scattered coins lifted into the air, floating toward me like a loyal flock of birds. The nobles gawked as their money betrayed them, following me like I was their rightful king.

The second we reached the door, System hit the guards with a flash of light magic—a medieval flashbang.

Vincent's voice howled from behind us. "YOU COWARD!"

Nah, bro. Just built different.

Then—poof.

The world flickered, and the next moment, we were standing outside of town. No more bar. No more nobles. No more angry Vincent yelling about his tragic downfall. Just the two of us under the open sky.

Eve slowly opened her eyes, blinking at the sudden change in scenery. "Huh?"

Then she looked down—straight at our hands, still clasped together.

A tiny pink hue dusted her cheeks.

I immediately locked eyes with her and pulled out my Mogger expression™—chin slightly raised, smirk perfectly calibrated, eyes radiating that I-just-outplayed-your-whole-family-lineage energy.

She tilted her head slightly, clearly flustered. Victory was mine.

...Until System ruined it.

「 Congrats, King. You held a girl's hand. Shall we alert the newspapers? 」

Bro.

Suddenly—my hand phased through hers.

Just like before.

I blinked. She blinked.

Eve slowly pulled her hand to her chest. "T-Thank you for saving me too."

Something about the way she said it made me feel like there was more to it. But before I could question anything—

「 Focus on yourself, dumbass. Stop poking around. 」

Alright, alright. Chill.

Eve suddenly beamed at me, her pink eyes sparkling with pure admiration.

"Lucas, you were amazing back there!"

I smirked. "I know."

"The way you played! The way you read them! I had no idea you were a poker genius!"

"Oh, Eve, it's not genius—" I flicked my hair dramatically. "—It's instinct."

「 It's cheating. 」

Eve clasped her hands together, completely ignoring System. "I can't believe you won three times in a row! Lord Vincent was undefeated for six years, but then you just walked in and—bam! Gone!"

I nodded solemnly. "That's right. His legacy, shattered."

"You were so cool when you raised the bet to 150 gold! I thought, 'Oh no! What if Lucas loses?!' But you never lose!"

"Of course not." I leaned back, arms crossed. "Losing is simply a concept that does not apply to me."

「 You literally didn't even know the rules. 」

Eve let out the softest little giggle, like she fully believed every single word I said. "You're like... a card master!"

"Exactly," I nodded. "Some call me the One-Eyed Trickster, the Shadow Gambler, the Poker Emperor—"

「 No one calls you that. 」

Eve's hands clapped together in excitement. "Waaah~! Lucas, you're incredible!"

I closed my eyes, dramatically exhaling. "Eve, let me tell you something."

Then, in my most profound, philosopher-level tone, I uttered the most random nonsense I could think of:

"A deck of cards is much like life—sometimes you're dealt a bad hand, but it's not about the cards... it's about how you play them."

Silence.

Then—Eve gasped.

"That's so deep!"

She clapped again, her eyes glowing.

「 Bro. You got that off a motivational poster, didn't you? 」

Eve smiled brightly. "You're really wise, Lucas!"

「 Wise? Eve, please. He has the IQ of a sock. 」

I ignored System. He was just mad because I wasn't mad.

Instead, I reached into my pocket, pulled out 50 gold, and placed it in Eve's hands.

"Here. Your share."

She blinked. "Eh?"

I grinned. "For letting me bet you."

Eve's pink eyes widened slightly. Then, her lips curled into the softest smile as she held the gold close.

"Thank you, Lucas. I'll treasure it!"

「 TREASURE? IT'S LITERALLY JUST MONEY— You know what? Never mind. I give up. 」

Eve giggled again, clutching the coins happily.

And just like that—

I won.

We were walking along the outskirts of the town now, the moonlight casting soft shadows over the cobblestone streets. Eve seemed a little more distant than usual, her gaze fixed on the ground as she gently tugged at the strap of her bag.

Something was off. I couldn't put my finger on it, but her usual calm demeanor seemed to have shifted, like the clouds had rolled in.

"Hey, Eve, what's up?"

She looked up at me, her pink eyes momentarily meeting mine before she quickly looked away. It was like she had something on her mind, but didn't want to say it.

"It's nothing," she muttered, shaking her head as if dismissing whatever thought was bothering her.

I raised an eyebrow. "Eve, come on. You can tell me. You know I'm an expert at listening to people's problems." I gave her a cheeky grin, though I wasn't really sure if I was ready for any serious confessions.

She hesitated but eventually spoke up, her voice soft, almost as if she was still unsure about what to say. "While you were playing that match... I noticed something."

My interest piqued, I leaned in slightly. "Someone catch your eye? Or was it just the poker tables? I've heard those things can be intense."

Eve shook her head, the light pink of her hair bouncing with the motion. "No, it was someone in the bar. Someone who wasn't supposed to be there."

That caught my attention. "Who? Was it a noble? A big spender, maybe? A suspicious character?" I tried to keep the tone light, but now I was genuinely curious.

Eve looked down again, as if the memory made her uneasy. "He had a weird appearance. I don't know... It felt strange."

"Okay, weird how?" I pressed, my voice more serious now, though I tried not to sound too interested.

Eve bit her lip, clearly uncertain, before she continued, her voice softer than before. "He was older than us, maybe in his early twenties. He wore a black suit... it looked too... perfect. His skin was pale—almost too pale, like he wasn't from around here. And... he didn't blink, Lucas. He just stood there and stared at you."

I snorted, trying to break the tension. "Well, I am pretty stylish. I guess I don't blame him for being captivated by my natural charm."

Eve didn't laugh. Instead, she pressed a hand to her chest, as if the memory was weighing heavily on her. "No... you're wrong. There's more. Something about him doesn't sit right with me."

I gave her a curious look, waiting for her to explain.

"He had these veins... on his forearms. Blueish veins. It was like... like he was cold-blooded. And his eyes, Lucas—his eyes were fractured. Like they were... breaking. Cold. Almost like he didn't even belong here."

I blinked, feeling an odd shiver run through me. "Wait, what? Fractured eyes?"

Eve nodded, her pink hair swishing slightly as she turned her gaze up to the night sky. "I don't know how to explain it... but something about him just didn't feel right. I watched him for a while. And just before we left the bar... he blinked for the first time. But didn't move. He just stared at us. At you."

I rubbed my chin, giving it some thought. A dude with cold veins and broken eyes? Sounds like something out of a bad horror flick, honestly.

But I didn't want to freak Eve out. She was obviously rattled, and I didn't want to pile on more anxiety. I gave her a comforting smile.

"Don't worry about it. We won't see him again. He's probably some random weirdo who got lost or whatever. You know how these towns are. A little too much wine, and bam—people start seeing ghosts."

Eve shook her head, her face still a little pale. "No, Lucas... There's something off about him. I can't shake the feeling."

I raised an eyebrow. "What kind of feeling?"

Eve's fingers went to the locket around her neck. Her delicate fingers traced it lightly, and I noticed a slight frown tug at her lips. She sighed softly, her voice a little strained as she spoke again.

"I don't know. But when I looked at him... I felt like I've known him for years. Maybe even forever. And when he stared at me, it wasn't fear... it was comfort. I felt... safe."

I just stared at her, trying to process what she'd just said. Safe? From a guy who looked like he was straight out of a nightmare? I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

System, however, didn't waste any time.

「 That's... concerning. Given the description, I didn't detect him on my radar, meaning he probably cloaked his presence and mana. Whatever the case, he's definitely not someone we should mess with. 」

I glanced over at Eve, who still had her hand pressed to her locket, eyes distant. It was almost like she was in some sort of trance.

"You feel safe?" I asked slowly, my mind racing.

Eve nodded, her expression unreadable. "Yes. Like... like I've always known him. Maybe in another life, or..." She trailed off, not finishing the thought.

I raised an eyebrow. This was getting way too weird for me. I looked at her, then at the horizon, before shaking my head slightly.

"Alright. Don't go overthinking it. We're fine. Whatever he is, we're not going to see him again." I tried to keep the situation light, not wanting her to spiral further into that weird feeling.

But Eve's gaze stayed fixed on the horizon, her hand still clutching the locket. "I hope you're right, Lucas. I really do."

I didn't say anything else. I just hoped I was too.

As we continued walking, the feeling of unease lingered in the air, and I couldn't shake the thought of the man Eve described.

Cold veins. Fractured eyes. A stare that made you feel safe instead of scared. Whatever he was, I had a feeling he wasn't just some random guy.

And deep down, I had a feeling our paths were going to cross again soon.

The soft night air swept through the outside of Sylvaris as we walked side by side, leaving the town behind. The moon hung high above us, casting its glow over everything. The whole scene was... well, kinda poetic, to be honest. The trees swayed gently, and the distant sound of the town's hustle seemed to fade as we walked farther from it.

I glanced at Eve, noticing how quiet she had gotten again. Great, back to mysterious mood Eve. I wasn't having any of it. Time to lighten the mood, Lucas-style.

"Hey, Eve, you ever wonder if the stars are just... super fancy light bulbs?" I nudged her lightly, trying to pull her out of her funk.

She tilted her head slightly, her pink hair catching the light. "A light bulb?" she repeated, a confused yet cute look on her face.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah, you know, like some god up there's just switching them on and off for fun. Could be an alien trying to mess with us." I wiggled my fingers dramatically.

Eve blinked slowly, clearly processing my nonsense. Then she shook her head, a small smile tugging at her lips. "You have strange thoughts, Lucas."

I grinned. "Hey, someone's gotta bring the humor to this world. I mean, look at those stars, they're practically begging for a good punchline."

Feeling a little proud of myself, I decided to ask the System to chime in.

"System, hit me with some star facts. Impress me," I said, lifting my head to the moonlit sky, making sure to sound extra casual.

The System's voice immediately chimed in with its usual sarcasm. 「 You're really asking for this, Lucas? You know, you have access to a literal library of knowledge, but here you are, asking me for bedtime stories. Fine. The brightest star in the night sky is Sirius, 8.6 light-years away, named after the Greek god of the hunt. Happy now? 」

I chuckled at the System's tone. "Nice. Well, at least you didn't try to roast me this time. Gotta give credit where it's due."

I turned to Eve, trying to be all dramatic. "Hey, did you know the Sirius Star is basically the fame of the sky? It's 8.6 light-years away and still manages to outshine everything else."

Eve blinked up at the sky, her soft pink eyes reflecting the moonlight as she processed my words.

Then, she looked back at me with that smile of hers, gentle and warm. "I didn't know that. That's really interesting, Lucas," she said, her voice light, as though the idea of a party in the sky had somehow brightened her mood.

I gave a playful, exaggerated nod. "Yeah, you know, I drop wisdom like it's nothing. The stars must be partying while I speak to you."

Eve's smile widened at that, and I couldn't help but feel like I was the one who had just won a prize.

"Do you think the stars really have parties?" she asked, her voice turning a bit more curious. She tilted her head, looking adorably confused.

I pretended to think for a moment, putting my hand on my chin. "Well, of course. I mean, how else do they get all that sparkle? Probably a good reason they don't want us crashing it."

Eve giggled softly at that, the sound so light and pure it made the night seem even calmer. "I think you're right. I wouldn't want to crash their party either."

I smiled, feeling a warmth inside I didn't quite expect. "Yeah, they've got their own thing going on up there. We don't want to interrupt their vibe. But, hey, at least we're here enjoying the view together, right?"

She nodded, and I noticed a bit of pink creeping into her cheeks as she glanced away, clearly flustered by my words. "Right," she said, her voice softer now. "It's nice... being here, walking with you."

We both fell silent for a few moments, the peacefulness of the night wrapping around us. Then I decided to break the silence.

"So, where are you headed next?" I asked, genuinely curious now that we were out of Sylvaris.

Eve hesitated for a moment, and then in her soft, calm tone, she spoke up. "I'm going to Rinascita."

I raised an eyebrow. "Rinascita, huh? What's got you going there?"

Eve looked down at the locket around her neck, her fingers gently brushing over it. Her voice dropped a little, almost as if she was talking to herself. "Like I said before... I'm looking for someone. I... I think they might be there."

I could sense the weight of her words, so I didn't press her further, but I did lean in a bit. "Someone? Who?"

Her eyes flicked up to meet mine for a brief moment before she spoke again, her voice quieter. "There's a person I'm looking for. The locket—it's all I have left of him. The face is... it's been ripped off. I don't know what he looked like."

She paused, clutching the locket tighter. "But Rinascita has records of adventurers. If he was one... maybe I can find something. Maybe someone will know him. Maybe there's a clue."

I nodded, processing her words. "That's... tough. But I'm sure you'll find something. If he was an adventurer, I'm sure there's something in those records." I gave her a reassuring smile.

Eve looked up at me with a grateful smile. "Thank you, Lucas."

I shrugged. "Hey, you've got to stick with your friends, right?"

We kept walking for a while, the cool wind rustling the leaves above us. The silence stretched between us, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

Then, my mind wandered back to my own goal. I hadn't forgotten about the cure I was after.

"Rinascita... huh. I've got my own reasons for going there too," I said, mostly to myself.

「 You're not just going there to sightsee, Lucas. The materials for the cure are still being analyzed. It will take time, but we're getting closer. 」

"I'll make the cure. I'll save her. I promise." I muttered under my breath, almost as if trying to convince myself.

Eve turned to me, her face softening as she noticed my expression. "Did you say something, Lucas?"

I shook my head, forcing a smile. "Nah, just... thinking about stuff. The sky's beautiful tonight, don't you think?"

She looked up at the moon, her expression relaxing as she gazed at the stars. "It is. It feels... peaceful."

We walked in silence again, the soft crunch of our footsteps on the dirt road the only sound. After a while, I turned to Eve, trying to break the silence with a bit of casualness.

"By the way, I'll be heading to Rinascita too. You mind if I tag along?"

Eve blinked at me, a look of surprise crossing her face, followed by a soft smile. "You want to come with me?"

"Yeah, why not? Thought I'd offer my services as your partner. You know, just in case you run into any creepy guys with broken eyes or something." I winked, hoping to lighten the mood.

Eve giggled softly, the sound like a melody in the quiet of the night. "You're going to protect me?"

I shrugged nonchalantly. "I mean, it's not like I'm not going to. I've got to make sure nothing bad happens to you, right? You wouldn't want to get stuck with some weirdo with cold veins."

Eve tilted her head slightly, her smile growing. "I'm glad you're coming with me, Lucas. It's... comforting."

I felt my heart skip a beat, my usual sarcasm failing me for once. "Well, I'm glad you think so. I do try to be a good influence, you know."

She looked at me with those big pink eyes of hers, her smile lighting up the night in a way that made my stomach do weird flips. It was like my heart was frozen for a second before it started racing.

"Thank you, Lucas," she said softly, the warmth in her voice wrapping around me.

I couldn't help it. "You're... really cute, you know that?"

Eve froze, her cheeks flushing a soft pink as she looked away, her fingers fiddling with the locket again. She didn't say anything, but the little smile tugging at her lips was enough.

I couldn't help but grin, feeling all soft inside for the first time in forever.

"I'm just speaking the truth, Eve," I said, my voice a little softer than usual. "You really are beautiful."

And as we walked further into the night, her smile was the only thing I could focus on.

My eyes lazily scanned the path ahead. It was peaceful, the moonlight flickering through the trees, casting soft shadows on the dirt road beneath our feet. But, honestly, my mind wasn't on the peaceful scenery.

No, it was busy trying to figure out the mystery of the weird bandaged guy I met a few days back. Seriously, what was up with him?

System, any updates on the bandaged weirdo?

The System's response was immediate, dripping with its usual sarcastic flair.

「 Ah, so now you're asking me for help? A little late to the party, Lucas. Maybe you should try doing something yourself for once. Still a work in progress. 」

I sighed, the sound exaggerated, but I couldn't help it. Give me something, though. What have you figured out so far?

「 About that guy... His name's Aldric. He's wrapped up like a mummy, but his real talent lies in some bizarre magic that lets him change his fake appearance. My data is linked to a spell that's over 600 years old. Don't get too excited, though. It should be lost by now. 」

Lost? Why's that? I asked, my curiosity piqued despite myself.

「 It's lost because no one in the present day has the ability to translate or decipher its magical code. Not even me. You can't expect me to figure out symbols that are beyond my reach. Analytical genius here, but I'm not a magician. 」

So how the hell did Aldric figure it out? That guy's got some serious tricks up his sleeve.

「 It's almost adorable how he pieced it all together. He managed to read your magical aura, deduced your mana control, and even caught onto your silent incantations by watching your body language. Seriously, though, he's probably some super skilled mage. It's kinda impressive. 」

Nah. No one's stronger than me.

「 You're really gonna hype yourself up like that, huh? Cute. But let's be real—he's probably better at this whole magic thing than you. Or at least, he's got a more niche skill set. 」

Whatever. At least I can use my brain properly, unlike you. You couldn't even crack that spell.

「 Oh, I can crack it, just not with your feeble human brain's processing power. You should be thankful for my genius. 」

Okay, sure, system. You're the genius. I'll give you that.

「 Yeah, I know. Now, stop talking so much and focus. You're walking, not chatting. 」

I rolled my eyes again and sighed, but then I suddenly came to a complete stop. I had a weird feeling, like something was off.

Maybe it was the night, maybe it was the moonlight filtering through the trees, or maybe I'd had too much time to think, but it was like someone was watching me.

My instincts were screaming at me.

System, radar. Now.

There was a brief silence, and then the System responded.

「 No human being alive or dead detected around the forest. No mana readings either. You're safe, monkey. Stop making assumptions. 」

I let out a frustrated sigh. You always say that. But I swear I saw a shadow...

「 And I swear you're just jumping at shadows. Seriously, chill out. You're not in danger. 」

Just as I was about to grumble at the System again, I heard Eve's soft voice behind me. "Lucas? What's wrong?"

I turned around to see her standing there, her hands gently pressed against her chest, a worried expression on her face.

I smiled, trying to brush it off. "It's nothing, Eve. Just... my mind playing tricks on me, I guess. You know how it is."

She stepped a little closer, still concerned but trying to hide it behind her gentle smile. "Are you sure? You're not... scared, are you?"

I chuckled lightly, trying to make it sound like I was just messing around. "Scared? Me? Never. I've got way too much swagger for that." I gave her a playful wink, hoping to ease her worry.

She looked at me for a moment, and then, to my surprise, a small giggle escaped her lips. It was soft, but it made my heart flutter. "Alright, if you say so."

I patted her lightly on the shoulder. "Yeah, no need to worry. We've got a long way to go, and I'm not about to let anything mess that up. Let's keep going."

She nodded, her eyes shining with trust as she smiled. "Yeah, let's go."

We resumed walking, the path ahead clear, but despite what the System said, I couldn't shake the feeling. The back of my neck still tingled, and a sense of being watched lingered like an annoying itch I couldn't scratch.

But for now, I pushed it aside. We had a goal. Rinascita was still ahead, and that was all that mattered. But deep down, my instincts kept nagging at me.

I was being watched.

Meanwhile, as Lucas and Eve continued down the moonlit path, a figure stood at the edge of the forest, behind the shadow of a large tree. He was impeccably dressed in a black suit, his posture immaculate, his presence utterly still. His cold-blue veins ran subtly beneath his neck and forearms, pulsing like the rhythm of a mechanical clock, methodical and precise. His expression, however, was the most unsettling feature—blank, calculating, emotionless. There was nothing human about his face, only the barest hint of a presence that might as well have been a machine. His eyes, an icy blue, narrowed as they locked onto Lucas and Eve.

He stood perfectly still, watching them, his eyes tracing every minute detail. Every movement, every glance, every twitch in their body language was processed and analyzed with the kind of cold logic that bordered on the inhuman.

"Predictable," he muttered under his breath, his voice devoid of warmth, as if speaking to no one but himself.

Unknown Perspective:

The girl's lips move, ever so subtly, her words flickering across her expression like a faint pulse of light. It is easy to decipher—she doesn't even try to hide it. "Rinascita," she says. I can read the faint movement of her lips. She is going there, but why? To search for something or someone?

Her posture is defensive, hands clasped tightly—an unconscious attempt to shield herself. She carries a heavy air of nervousness, each small fidget betraying her unease. Body language suggests an extreme lack of confidence, likely rooted in a past too painful to confront.

Loss of memory or experience is probable; she feels untouched by the world, yet unaware of the hole it leaves.

Her movements are restrained, hesitant—an individual unused to true combat or danger. Low experience for her age. No signs of recent training, but traces of magical aptitude.

Subtle hints of Celestial magic, faint but undeniably present. Her magic is dormant, perhaps even suppressed, but the aura still clings to her like a lingering fragrance.

Her pink hair, flowing without any signs of distress, suggests a maintained state—clean, untarnished. But her boots tell a different story. Dust and dirt from at least three days of travel. She's come from Sylvaris, likely alone, without any meaningful company for some time.

Her eyes are soft, yet searching—an unspoken desperation lies within them, a plea for something unknown. The tilt of her head, combined with the way she speaks, reflects confusion, as if she is trying to connect dots she doesn't quite understand.

This girl is an enigma—too naive, too fragile. She will be easy to manipulate.

Her naivety is clear. She speaks of a journey, a quest. She believes in the idea of connection—believes in the hope of finding someone.

Rinascita. She seeks records, answers, but she cannot understand what she will truly find there.

A childish dream.

And then there is him. Lucas. His lips move in a controlled rhythm, but I read them with precision. The shifts, the pauses—calculated, but they betray him. He speaks of protection, of guarding her.

A lie. I see no conviction in his words. His body does not align with the narrative he attempts to sell.

His posture is confident, but his legs tremble slightly, an involuntary reaction. The twitch of his fingers, subtle yet distinct, a fidget that he believes he hides well. He is trying to present an illusion—an illusion of control. But it falters. His confidence is a mask, thin and fragile, covering insecurity.

There is nothing about him that commands authority. His movements, too fluid to be genuine, too rehearsed to be instinctive. His body language—nervous, unsure—has not mastered the art of deception. He believes himself hidden, but I see through the cracks.

No magic. Not a trace. Yet something stirs beneath the surface—an unnatural force, a system perhaps. A tool, not a man. A crutch that hides his true self.

He is not an adventurer. He is a puppet, strings pulled by an unknown force. His aura is hollow, absent of any true power, yet something darker festers within. He hides behind this crutch, an empty vessel pretending to be whole.

A coward, with no foundation to stand on. His whole existence is built on a lie. The mask cracks—he cannot even hide his most basic instincts.

This makes him dangerous. Not because of what he can do, but because of what he's willing to hide. A person who refuses to show their true face is unpredictable.

It will be his downfall.

Their lips continue to move, and I read the subtle shifts.

The words spill forth, and I piece them together like a complex equation.

First, Lucas. His lips shift into a tight line, the subtle movement at the corners indicating a shift in his tone, a defensive position.

The words are muffled but clear: "I can control fire, air, and... some basic elemental magic. Not much, but enough to defend."

The slight hesitation before the final words, the pause—signaling insecurity. He's lying, or at least understating. There's something hidden beneath those words. His fingers twitch again, a sign of discomfort with his own admission.

Eve's lips then move, and the change in her expression is telling. She beams, the light in her eyes soft but genuine. "That's so amazing, Lucas! You're incredible!"

The upward curve of her lips, the soft flush of her cheeks—genuine admiration, pure and unguarded. But there's a hint of... naivety in her excitement. Her body language says more than her words—her hands clasp together, and the way she tilts her head in childlike wonder tells me she's oblivious to the lies wrapped in his words.

The next shift comes from Lucas. "We'll make it to Rinascita. I'll protect you." His lips pull tighter, an attempt at reassurance. The words are deliberate, but the tremor in his stance speaks otherwise.

Eve responds quickly, her lips moving with a genuine warmth. "I'm glad you're with me. I feel safe now."

The way her lips curl upward in trust, the gleam in her eyes—a reflection of her naïve optimism. Her body leans in, unconsciously seeking his protection, believing his assurances.

Lastly, Lucas speaks again, and the way his lips shift is almost imperceptible. "Stay close. It's not safe out here."

The words are firm, but the tightness around his jaw tells me it's less about concern and more about control—he's grasping at the illusion of safety.

Her hope. His lies. They are walking into a false sense of security, believing in something they cannot even comprehend.

Their journey will be a short one. They are playing a game they cannot win. Their innocence, their hope—it is all meaningless. They are unaware of the war that is already over in my mind. I've already calculated the outcome. They think they can protect each other.

But it is I who will make the final move.

So, you're the ace card, huh?

I will make sure you're out of the picture soon.

Your's truly,

Azrael.

Chapter 54 - Obsessive Desires

Levi's Perspective:

My mind had been a constant haze. Darkness stretched endlessly, swallowing time itself. Hours? Days? I lost count.

And then—light.

It stabbed into my eyes like tiny knives, forcing me to squint. My vision blurred, shapes shifting into something vaguely recognizable. A room. A well-built one. And through the window, I caught glimpses of Sylvaris's busy streets, their familiar hum bringing back fragments of memory.

Then it hit me.

The fountain outside. I was inside Requiem's guild.

I let myself sink back into the bed, staring at the ceiling for a few seconds. Then I forced magic through my body, a slow surge of healing to clear the fog in my head. The exhaustion clung to my limbs like dead weight, but I wasn't about to stay down any longer.

After a few minutes of forcing my damn eyes to work properly, I got up. My legs wobbled slightly. Yeah, a God-Speed user with weak knees—what a joke.

Pushing past the discomfort, I walked out.

The guild members I passed stopped in their tracks. Some muttered under their breath, but most just stared, eyes flicking with surprise. No comments, though. I guess seeing someone wake up from near death does that to people.

My destination was clear. Sylvia's office.

I pushed the door open without hesitation.

Inside, Sylvia sat behind a desk, eyes scanning documents, her expression unreadable. But the moment she sensed me, her gaze lifted. A calm, calculated shift, analyzing me before she even spoke.

"Levi." Her voice was smooth, laced with a noble confidence. "You're finally awake."

"Yeah," I muttered, rolling my shoulders. "Not dead yet, so that's something."

She motioned toward the chair in front of her desk. "Sit."

I raised a brow. "What, no victory parade?"

"You need rest, not celebrations."

She wasn't wrong. I let out a short breath and dropped into the seat, stretching my legs out. "So, what's the damage? Who won?"

Sylvia leaned back slightly, fingers tapping against the wooden desk. "It was a draw."

A draw? I blinked. Not exactly the outcome I was expecting.

I rubbed my temple, letting that sink in before shifting my gaze back to her. "Then what about the deal? What do we do now?"

Sylvia folded her hands, clearly thinking through her answer. Just as she opened her mouth—

The door creaked open.

I glanced to the side.

Alina stepped in.

Her icy gaze locking onto me before she even fully crossed the threshold. Her presence alone sent a chill through the room.

"Oh, so the renowned, self-proclaimed strongest Sword Saint has blessed us with his presence once more," she said, her tone dripping with cold sarcasm.

I smirked, leaning back in my chair. "You're acting as if you've won—"

"It doesn't matter."

She cut me off without hesitation, as if my words were nothing more than noise. Her focus immediately shifted to Sylvia, disregarding me entirely.

"You told me to wait until he woke up, so tell me now," she said, her tone devoid of patience, her expression as unreadable as ever.

Sylvia chuckled lightly, shaking her head. "Sit down, Alina." She gestured to the chair beside me.

Alina rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed, but sat down nonetheless, arms crossed. The contrast between us was amusing—I lounged in my seat like I owned the place, while she sat stiffly, like she was waiting for someone to prove her right about wasting her time.

Sylvia laced her fingers together, her noble poise never faltering. "The deal was simple. If Levi won, our guild would provide Celestial Apex assistance against the Grotesques. If Alina won, I'd assist her with a personal matter. Correct?"

Both of us nodded.

Sylvia exhaled, leaning slightly forward. "But as it stands, neither of you managed to secure a clear victory. Which brings me to my conclusion."

Alina and I both waited.

Sylvia's lips curled into a small smile. "I'd like to provide both of you with the bargain and give you both what I've promised. Then there's no real issue, right?"

For a moment, I processed her words. And then—

I grinned. This was perfect.

I actually managed to win over the support of Requiem.

With Sylvia's guild assisting us, Zain and I had a major advantage against the Grotesques. This meant additional support beyond just Xander—wherever the hell that guy was and whatever he was doing in Levinton these days. This was a win.

But not for Alina.

She stood up abruptly and slammed a hand onto Sylvia's desk. The impact made a sharp thud, the papers on the surface trembling slightly.

"What kind of sick joke is this?" she demanded, her voice sharp and cold.

Sylvia merely sighed, as if she had been expecting this reaction.

Alina's glare was unwavering. "You, of all people, would never make a decision like this. You don't help two parties unless there's something in it for you. So tell me—what's your real angle?"

Sylvia shook her head, her expression unreadable. "I just feel generous. It won't hurt."

Alina scoffed. "It won't hurt? If you focus on both objectives—helping Levi and assisting me in finding that person—you won't have enough members to succeed in either. Both sides will suffer badly."

Sylvia remained composed, dismissing her concerns with a casual wave of her hand. "That won't be the case. It'll be fine."

Alina's dark eyes narrowed, and in that instant, the air in the room grew heavy.

She spoke, her voice lower now—colder.

"I did not win or lose that fight," she said, every word slow and precise. "And this right now feels like pity to me. I would rather have both of us receive nothing than accept your pity, Sylvia."

The room fell silent.

Even I didn't have a comeback for that one.

Sylvia's expression faltered slightly, as if even she hadn't expected Alina to outright refuse the deal.

Then, Alina leaned in slightly, her eyes unreadable, but carrying a weight that even I could feel.

"Sylvia, I have known you for years." Her voice was now nothing more than a whisper laced with something unsettling. "Tell me honestly... Who is influencing you to help Levi?"

Sylvia didn't respond.

She just sat there, quiet.

I exhaled slowly, rubbing the back of my neck.

This girl was either too egotistical or insane.

I think both, really.

Sylvia let out a small chuckle, raising her hands in mock surrender. "Well, you caught on, Alina."

Alina's gaze sharpened instantly. "Who is influencing you?"

Sylvia shook her head, her amusement lingering. "Nobody, really. I just had a close visitor who left a good impression on me—enough to be kind toward him and you."

Alina's eyes darkened slightly. "Who?"

Sylvia simply smiled. "I can't tell you that."

Alina remained quiet, but I could tell she was getting more irritated by the second. Not that her expression gave anything away—her face was still that same cold, perfect mask, untouched by emotion.

Then, suddenly, her eyes shifted to me.

"You're seriously fine having this pity?"

I smirked, resting my elbow on the chair's armrest. "You're acting like it's a bad thing."

"It is a bad thing," she said, voice unwavering. "Neither of us won. A draw is a failure, and failures don't get rewarded."

I leaned forward slightly, tilting my head. "Or maybe a draw just means we were too evenly matched to determine a winner. Not a loss—just too close to call."

Alina's gaze didn't waver. "You and I are Sword Saints. A fight between us should not end in uncertainty. The fact that it did means I failed to decisively defeat you. That is unacceptable."

I scoffed. "You say 'unacceptable' like it's a crime. Maybe you just expected too much of yourself."

She shook her head. "You don't understand, Levi. To me, a draw means I was too weak to win yet too competent to lose. That is the worst possible outcome. It means I hesitated. It means I wasn't enough."

Her words were blunt, but I could hear the weight behind them.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on. Look at the upside—we both get what we wanted. I get Requiem's help against the Grotesques, and you get whatever it is you wanted from Sylvia."

Alina didn't even flinch. "I would rather receive nothing than be given something I didn't earn."

Then, she turned back to Sylvia, her tone sharper than before.

"I won't accept this bargain."

Sylvia's small smirk faded as she exhaled through her nose.

Alina continued, her voice unwavering. "I don't need your help. Nor do I want the guild assisting Celestial Apex."

I blinked.

What?

I turned to her, fully expecting her to be joking, but no—she was serious.

Sylvia sighed, shaking her head slightly. "Very well," she said, her tone carrying an air of disappointment. "Then I won't provide either of you the upheld part of the deal."

I felt my jaw tighten.

"No, no, hold on," I said, leaning forward, trying to make her reconsider. "You agreed, Sylvia. You offered to help. What, you're just throwing it all away because she refuses?"

Sylvia gave me a calm but firm look. "Alina is also a leader of this guild, Levi. If she refuses the deal for herself, I can't force her to accept it. That's not how I run things."

I clenched my fists. "Are you kidding me? We're talking about people's lives here! You're seriously just letting Alina dictate this?!"

Sylvia didn't waver. "I gave both of you a choice. She made hers."

My anger flared. "This isn't just her choice! Do you not realize how many people will suffer because of this?! We need every bit of support we can get against the Grotesques, and you're telling me you can't just argue with her about it?!"

Silence.

Then, Alina's voice cut through the room like ice.

"Why don't you just get strong enough to save your people alone?" She tilted her head slightly, her stare devoid of anything remotely human. "Self-claimed strongest."

My teeth clenched as I slowly turned my head toward her.

"You're really talking big for someone who got through that fight on mock luck," I shot back, my voice dripping with cold amusement. "That draw wasn't skill—it was just a girl barely pulling through."

Her expression didn't change. But something in the air felt heavier.

Sylvia let out a long sigh as she reached into a drawer, retrieving something from within. "I expected this, Alina. I can't lie. You've always been prideful over a loss."

Alina's cold gaze didn't waver. "You're one to talk," she replied, her voice void of warmth. "You wouldn't lift a finger to help someone whose life was at risk unless there was something in it for you. And yet, you're willing to risk your guild members' lives to assist Levi's fight against the Grotesques. Explain the contradiction."

Sylvia smiled and shook her head, her amusement evident. "I can't deny it, Alina. Over the years, you've learned how I operate." She leaned forward, resting her chin against her hand. "But tell me honestly—do you really not want to help Levi?"

Alina's reply was immediate, sharp, and unwavering. "Risking my members' lives for a conflict that doesn't concern me is a fool's gamble. Their loyalty is to me, not to some external war I have no stakes in. I refuse to play hero for strangers. If Requiem suffers losses, we gain nothing in return. There is no logic in sacrificing our strength for a battle that does not belong to us."

Sylvia let out an amused sigh. "You're being childish."

Alina's expression remained unchanging, but there was an unmistakable edge in her glare. "Nothing in this world could convince me to send my members to fight, Sylvia."

I stayed silent, disappointment sinking in. Zain was right—the odds of getting Alina to agree were practically zero. And Sylvia... she wasn't even trying to push back against her.

Just as I was about to give up, Sylvia suddenly chuckled, louder this time.

"Oh, really, Alina? Nothing can get you to agree?"

Alina didn't hesitate. "No amount of wealth, favors, requests, or pleading would convince me to risk my guild for strangers I don't know."

That was the final straw for me. I clenched my fists and exhaled sharply. "That's cruel," I said, shaking my head. "Would your master approve of this if he were here, Alina?"

For the first time, something in her changed.

A flicker of something dangerous flashed in her eyes. Her aura sharpened, a suffocating pressure filling the room.

"Don't speak of him as if you knew him," she said, her voice laced with quiet fury. Her tone was so cold it made my skin prickle. "Watch your tone, Levi."

I was caught off guard. I had been angry already, but now my frustration was clawing at my patience. Still, I knew better than to let my emotions dictate my actions. Instead, I simply stood up, exhaling sharply.

"Whatever," I muttered, turning toward the door. "I'm done here."

But just as I was about to leave—

"Levi."

Sylvia's voice called out to me.

I turned around, confused. Alina also glanced at her, her usual detached expression tinged with curiosity.

Sylvia smirked and pulled out an envelope from the drawer, holding it between two fingers.

"You were wondering who made such a good impression on me, weren't you?"

Alina's eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes. Who was it? And what's with that letter?"

Sylvia let out a quiet chuckle, seemingly amused with herself. She spun the envelope between her fingers before extending it toward Alina.

"It's for you."

Alina's brows furrowed slightly. "Why me?"

Sylvia's smirk didn't waver. "If he wanted it delivered to you specifically, then it must be important."

For a brief moment, Alina didn't move. Then, with a sigh, she took the letter, opening it with an uninterested expression.

I leaned back against the wall, crossing my arms, already convinced this was a waste of time.

What a joke. I had traveled all the way to Sylvaris just to leave empty-handed. If I had won, I would've secured Requiem's support without issue. I never expected Alina herself to fight against the Grotesques—her cold heart wouldn't allow for something so selfless. But at the very least, I had hoped the members could be arranged to fight under Sylvia's command.

That chance was gone now.

I let out a breath and looked toward Alina, half-expecting her to discard the letter in boredom. But then—

I froze.

What the hell?

She was smiling.

My mind blanked.

Alina—who had shown zero expressions during our entire fight, throughout this entire conversation, and every second I had spent with her—was now smiling.

And not just that—was she blushing?!

She clutched the letter a little tighter, her fingers trembling slightly, as if she was holding onto something precious.

Then, suddenly, she turned her gaze toward me.

"Levi," she called out.

I blinked. "Uh... what?"

"Where are you going?"

I was still too stunned to process anything. "L-Levinton," I said, my voice stuttering slightly. "I'm done here, so—"

"I'm coming with you," Alina said, cutting me off.

My brain short-circuited. "W-what?"

Her expression had returned to its usual seriousness, but something about her demeanor was different—softer, maybe? No... determined.

"Requiem will provide full assistance at a legacy level to help you, Levi."

I felt my entire world tilt.

What?

What the hell did she just say?

I was dumbfounded—shocked—beyond shocked.

What the hell did she read in that letter that made her agree to help us? And not just with her guild—she was coming herself?!

This... this wasn't just an unexpected turn. This was like the game had been rigged in my favor at the last second.

I was still trying to make sense of it all when I heard her murmur something under her breath, barely above a whisper.

Her fingers clutched the letter tightly against her chest near her heart, her expression warm in a way I had never seen before.

"You came... Master."

She smiled—fully, happily.

And just like that—

Everything flipped upside down.

Requiem's full assistance.

Alina, personally joining the fight.

A completely impossible outcome turned into a winning move.

My thoughts spiraled.

Either I was ridiculously lucky—

Or someone was pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Unknown Perspective:

4/9/2017 - Evening 2:38 Pm

I yawn into my hand, barely covering my mouth, watching the crowd around me shift with quiet anticipation. The air was thick with tension—each person standing here looked like they were about to walk into a fight, stiff shoulders, clenched fists, the works.

Me? I was just here for the show.

Levinton was nice this time of year. The streets had that polished, almost picturesque charm that made it obvious why people loved this town. The buildings stood tall, each one detailed with intricate carvings and stonework, but the heart of it all was Celestial Apex Guild.

They were the ones who put out the call. Some big mission, supposedly needing all the extra hands they could get. Adventurers, mercenaries, even nobodies off the street were answering the summons.

Poor guys. Must be desperate.

As I let the thought amuse me, my eyes landed on the man next to me—mid-twenties, maybe? Shorter than me, dark hair, black eyes. He was sweating. Just barely, but enough.

I smirked. Easy target.

"Hey, you good there?" I asked, tilting my head slightly, my voice light, casual—just enough to slip under his guard.

He blinked, turning to me, looking like he wasn't sure if he should answer. "Uh—yeah. Just... waiting, like you."

"Like me?" I let out a chuckle, shoving my hands into my coat pockets. "Nah, man, you're all stiff like you're about to be sent to war. Relax a little. We haven't even started yet."

He exhaled through his nose, visibly trying to ease his shoulders, but failing. "Guess I'm just nervous. Don't know what we're getting into yet."

I nodded, acting thoughtful. "Yeah, mystery's a killer, huh? I mean, it could be some boring patrol job, or it could be an absolute nightmare where we all get torn to shreds. Fifty-fifty shot, really."

His eyes widened a fraction. "You're not helping."

I grinned. "I'm kidding. Mostly. C'mon, what's your name?"

He hesitated before answering, like giving me his name was some kind of tactical risk. "Isaac."

"Isaac," I repeated, rolling the name around in my mouth before nodding in approval. "Nice. Sounds solid. So, Isaac, what's got you signing up for this?"

"Needed the money," he admitted, scratching the back of his head. "Been doing merc work for a while, figured this was a good opportunity."

"Merc work, huh? Makes sense. You look like the reliable type." I gave him a casual pat on the back, like we were old pals. "And here I was thinking you were some fresh-faced rookie about to puke from the nerves."

Isaac let out a small, reluctant chuckle. "Thanks. I think."

"Hey, I call it like I see it." I extended a hand to him.

"I'm Arius. Let's get along, yeah?"

He looked at my hand, then at me. For a second, I thought he might hesitate again, but then he reached out and shook it. His grip was firm, like he was trying to prove something.

"Yeah," Isaac said. "Let's."

The tension in his shoulders loosened just a bit. Good.

I took a step back, eyeing him up and down. "Dark hair, black eyes, a little on the shorter side—what, about five-eight?"

Isaac frowned slightly. "Five-nine."

I snorted. "Sure, if you're counting the boots. I'm six-one, so trust me, I know when someone's shorter."

He rolled his eyes, but there was amusement under it now. "You always this chatty?"

"Only when I like someone," I shot back with a smirk.

I adjusted my coat, feeling the weight of the long black fabric settle around me. High collar, fingerless gloves—practical and stylish, if I said so myself. As I grinned to myself, someone finally stepped forward from the front of the gathering, clearing their throat.

"Attention, all of you!"

I glanced up lazily.

The guy at the front looked serious—tall, scarred, clearly someone with authority. He eyed the crowd before speaking again.

"My name is Zain."

And just like that, the game began.

Zain stood firm at the front, his sharp gaze scanning the crowd before him. He didn't rush to speak. Instead, he let the silence settle, deliberate and heavy. A few of the more anxious ones shifted where they stood, but no one dared break the moment.

Good. He knew how to command attention.

Then, he spoke.

"You're all here because you were called—because Levinton needs warriors, not weak-hearted men looking for easy coin. If you stand before me, you are already above the rest. But let me make one thing clear."

He let his words hang, pacing slightly, his expression unreadable. Then, he smirked.

"You'll be paid handsomely... if you live."

Murmurs spread through the group, a few exchanging wary glances.

"But that's the cost of standing against what lurks in the dark," Zain continued, voice sharp, steady. "You've all heard of the grotesques. You've fought them, perhaps. Some of you might even think you've seen their worst."

He stopped walking, his expression turning cold.

"You haven't."

A few in the back stiffened.

Then, a voice rang out, rough and skeptical.

"What do you mean, 'fought grotesques'?"

The speaker was a broad-shouldered man, wearing iron-knuckled gloves, his face hardened with suspicion.

Zain turned his gaze to him. "I mean exactly what I said. We don't need a few dead monsters. We need them exterminated before they exterminate us."

A heavier silence fell.

"The grotesques aren't just lurking in the forests anymore," Zain continued, his voice carrying weight. "We have reason to believe they're preparing for something bigger. A raid. And their target?" He glanced around the gathered men. "Levinton."

A few sharp breaths. The tension turned suffocating.

"That's ridiculous!" Another man barked, stepping forward. He had black hair, scars running along his arms, the kind of guy who had seen his fair share of fights. "If you knew this, why aren't there guards on the borders?! Why aren't there defenses?! I walked through the damn gates, and I didn't see a single barricade, not a single extra soldier—"

More voices joined in, demanding answers.

Zain remained impassive. "That's not important."

He knew the truth—he couldn't reinforce the town, not with the blackmail Aldric had on him. But he wouldn't say that.

Instead, he stepped forward, his voice regaining its commanding tone.

"This fight is not about the walls we could put up. It's about the lives we can protect. Yes, it's dangerous. Yes, it may cost you. But you will be rewarded. And more than that—" He let his gaze sweep across them. "You'll be saving people who cannot fight for themselves."

The men remained quiet, uncertain.

"Any of you who have the spine for it—step forward. Stand on this guild floor next to me, and prepare to earn your pay. Or," his eyes darkened slightly, "you can walk away. Nobody will stop you. But if you're too much of a coward to fight, don't waste my time."

The tension exploded.

A man in the back, face pale, raised his voice, panic lacing his words. "Are you insane?! A grotesque can take on five D-Rank adventurers alone! How the hell are we supposed to survive against an entire horde?!"

Others muttered in agreement. A few took uneasy steps back, clearly reconsidering.

Even Isaac, who had relaxed earlier because of me, was suddenly stiff with fear. I glanced at him.

He wasn't just scared for himself. No, that wasn't it.

It was something deeper. The kind of fear a man has when he thinks about the people waiting for him to return.

A lover? Family? Someone who needed him?

The panic spread through the crowd like wildfire, everyone losing their nerve, murmuring among themselves. Some had already turned to leave.

I sighed.

Then, I reached into my overcoat pocket.

Click.

The sharp sound of my lighter flicking open cut through the noise, making heads turn.

The golden casing gleamed under the sun, its engraved tactical symbols catching the light as I held it up.

Silence.

Even Zain's sharp eyes shifted toward me.

With my left hand, I pulled a cigarette from my back pocket, placed it between my lips, and casually brought the flame to its tip.

Flick.

The soft crackle of the burning tobacco was the only sound as I took a slow drag. Then, exhaling smoke through my nose, I stepped forward.

One step.

Another.

Alone, walking toward Zain.

I could feel every gaze on me, their breath held, their hesitation screaming. I let them watch. Let them feel the weight of their own inaction.

Zain arched a brow, smirking slightly. "Smoker, huh?"

I shook my head, exhaling another wisp of smoke. "Just a stress reliever."

Then, I turned my gaze toward Isaac.

I didn't speak. Just gave him a slow, knowing nod.

He hesitated, swallowing hard. His fingers twitched at his sides, but after a moment—he stepped forward.

I smirked. Good.

The others remained frozen. Cowards, still clinging to their doubts.

I took a long drag, letting the smoke linger before releasing it in a slow breath. Then, with a mockingly casual tone, I spoke.

"So that's it, huh?" I let my eyes drift lazily over the remaining men. "A bunch of grown men, afraid of a few insects?" I chuckled, shaking my head. "Maybe you should all just go running back to your mothers. I'm sure they'll keep you safe in their laps."

Instant rage.

A few of them bristled, some glaring at me with clenched fists.

But none stepped forward.

I smirked, taking another drag. "Thought so."

Then, I exhaled and spoke again—louder.

"If you really think you deserve to call yourself a man, then step up. Prove it. Or stay there, where it's safe, and pretend you never heard this conversation."

Silence.

Then, one man gritted his teeth, stepping forward.

Then another.

One by one, more followed.

Soon, the hesitation crumbled, and the men—driven by nothing but the need to prove themselves—stood at my side.

I smirked, taking another slow drag, letting the smoke drift lazily into the sky.

These poor fools.

They had no idea they were just walking into the slaughter.

"All the men that have chosen to fight, you are truly worthy of my praise, but not my respect yet. Prove yourselves, and maybe, I'll grant you that. For now, you're all part of guest rank in the Celestial Apex."

I can feel the tension in the air as everyone listens closely to his words. They're hanging on every syllable, hoping for some form of approval.

As for me, I'm sitting in the back, cigarette in hand, unfazed. A cloud of smoke rises, twisting around me, but it doesn't bother me.

Nothing does.

Zain doesn't waste any time. He carries on, "It will risk your lives, cause you fear and trauma, maybe even wound you permanently. Am I clear that it can change your lives forever?"

A flicker of unease spreads through the crowd. I see a few of them flinch, their eyes narrowing with apprehension.

It's predictable, really. Fear is always the first thing that creeps in when you realize what's at stake. But me?

I'm already beyond all that. Another drag, another wave of smoke rolls from my lips. I stay quiet, the smirk never leaving my face.

Zain's gaze locks onto me. He points with an exaggerated motion, almost theatrically. "You there. Do you fear death? Do you fear knowing you can die at any moment? That death waits at your doorstep?"

I pull the cigarette away from my mouth, letting the smoke escape with a lazy exhale.

My eyes flicker to Zain, then back to the smoke swirling around me. My voice is calm, but the words hang heavy in the air.

"You can't kill someone or scare them with death when..." I let the silence linger, long enough to make everyone feel uncomfortable, before I finish, "When they're already dead from inside."

The effect is immediate. The tension shifts—less fear, more curiosity, maybe even some unease. Zain smirks, but it's more of a mocking expression than a real one.

He praises me sarcastically, his tone dripping with a blend of amusement and annoyance.

I don't react. I just continue to smoke, my eyes never leaving his. He doesn't know what I'm capable of, and maybe that's why he's irritated.

"Alright," Zain says, his voice taking on a more commanding tone, "You all can rest or do whatever you want now. Dismissed. I'll call you tomorrow for training and planning on the grotesques."

The others follow suit, preparing to leave. Zain's sharp gaze finds me once more before he exits, his eyes narrowing like he's still weighing me, trying to figure out just what game I'm playing.

But as he walks out, his expression says it all—surprise and annoyance, mixed into one. It's the same look he always gives me. The one that tells me, despite his respect, I still get under his skin. I like that. It means I'm in control, even if he's too proud to admit it.

I turned to Isaac, who was standing there, shoulders tense, eyes distant. He looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his back, his mind racing through every possible worst-case scenario. A sigh escaped my lips, and I clapped him on the back with a firm, reassuring pat.

"Hey, Isaac," I said, voice light, but there was an edge of seriousness in it. "Ease up a bit, yeah? You look like you're about to implode. How about we take a walk? Get some fresh air. The forest's just up ahead."

He hesitated, eyes flickering as he looked at me, probably weighing whether he could afford to relax for even a minute. I knew how he was. Too responsible. Too worried. Too afraid of making a wrong move.

After a brief moment, Isaac gave a reluctant nod, his stiff posture softening just a little. "I don't know, Arius... I should probably stay focused." His voice was thick with that constant concern.

I gave him a pointed look. "You won't do anyone any good if you're on the edge. Trust me, the forest isn't going anywhere. Let's walk, breathe, and reset. You can be tense tomorrow."

Isaac let out a long breath, and after a second, his shoulders sagged slightly. "Fine," he muttered, "but just a short walk."

"Good man," I said, grinning as I started walking toward the edge of the camp, where the trees loomed. "Fresh air will do wonders for that brain of yours."

He followed behind, not quite as fast as I was moving, but I could tell the gears in his mind were slowing down. I could almost see the weight lifting off him with each step he took.

I let the cigarette dangle from my fingers, the glowing tip burning red in the dark as we walked deeper into the forest. The air was crisp, cool against my skin, and the sound of the leaves crunching beneath our boots echoed softly in the day.

Isaac was beside me, his pace slower than usual. I couldn't tell if it was the weight of the day's training or the pressure of everything hanging over us, but there was a tension in him tonight.

"Honestly, Arius," he muttered, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. "You're gonna kill yourself with that thing." He nodded toward the cigarette I was puffing on.

I blew out a cloud of smoke, watching it curl into the air before it vanished into the night. "Oh, please," I said, with a chuckle. "I've been doing this for.... years. If it was gonna kill me, I think it would've happened by now."

He snorted, but there was a hint of concern in his voice. "That's not how that works. You're one step away from turning into a walking bonfire."

"Maybe I like it that way," I teased, tapping the ash off the end and watching it flutter to the ground. "It keeps things... interesting."

Isaac's laugh was soft but genuine, and I could see the tension in his shoulders start to ease a little. "You're an idiot."

"Thanks for noticing," I said, grinning. "I do try to stand out."

The forest felt different beautiful—peaceful, like the world was holding its breath. As we walked further, the sound of the river started to fill the silence between us, a soothing rhythm that seemed to calm the nerves and soften the sharp edges of our conversation.

We reached the riverbank without either of us saying much, but I could feel Isaac's eyes on me as I took a few steps closer to the water. The sunlight reflected off the surface, turning it into a shimmering mirror.

Isaac stopped a few feet behind me, his voice quieter now, like he was trying to make sense of something. "It's beautiful," he said, almost under his breath.

I took another drag from my cigarette, letting the embers glow. The light flickered in the stillness, casting faint shadows across my face. "Yeah, it is. Something about the quiet makes everything clearer, doesn't it?"

Isaac stayed silent for a moment, his gaze still fixed on the river. I could tell he was thinking about something, probably his family, maybe even loved ones. It wasn't hard to read him, even though he tried to hide it.

"I don't know how you do it," he said suddenly, the words coming out a little too fast. "Just... step in, like that."

I raised an eyebrow, glancing over my shoulder at him. "What do you mean?"

"You just—" He gestured to the river, his voice a little uncertain. "You just walked in, without a second thought. I mean, the water's cold, and it's dangerous out here. The others—"

"They were just nervous," I interrupted with a shrug, flicking some more ash into the water. "They act like stepping in means something. But it doesn't. It's just water. Everyone makes it seem like you need a reason to do something so simple."

Isaac nodded slowly, taking a deep breath as he watched me. "I guess I wouldn't be so quick to jump in like that. Guess I've got too much to lose."

I couldn't help but laugh softly. "You're too cautious. It's good, though. Keeps you alive. But sometimes you gotta take a step—just to see what happens."

He turned to face me then, his eyes narrowing. "You're not worried about anything? Not even... well, you know?"

I exhaled, letting the smoke linger a little longer this time before I spoke. "Of course I'm worried. I'm just better at hiding it."

Isaac looked at me for a long time, studying my face. I could feel the weight of his gaze, but I didn't flinch. He probably thought I had all the answers. Most people did.

Finally, Isaac broke the silence with a small laugh, shaking his head. "You really are something else, you know that?"

"Yeah, I've been told," I said, smirking. "But I'm not as special as you think."

We both stood there for a moment, listening to the soft murmur of the river, the steady rhythm of our breaths, and the faint rustle of the leaves. The tension had completely melted away now, replaced by something lighter—something almost... friendly.

"I don't get you," Isaac said, shaking his head again. "You're not like anyone I've met. You make everything seem so easy."

"It's not easy," I replied, my voice quieter now. "I just make it look that way."

Isaac's smile was small but sincere. "Well, whatever you're doing, it's working."

"Yeah," I said, shrugging. "Maybe."

The air felt easier now, like the world had decided to let us breathe for a moment. Isaac and I didn't have to say much more. We both knew where we stood, what we were fighting for, and what we wanted. And somehow, in the silence between us, we both understood the weight of it all.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion sound.

I paused, my eyes catching something in the distance—something off. The sounds were strange, unfamiliar—like iron clashing against iron, punctuated by the sharp, steady rhythm of magic. It wasn't training, not by the usual standards. It sounded more... dangerous.

Isaac must have noticed the shift in my attention because he leaned in, his voice low. "What's that noise?" His gaze darted toward the source. "It's like... fighting? Or some sort of crazy training."

I nodded, already taking steps toward the noise. The curiosity gnawed at me—something about it felt too interesting to ignore.

"You're not seriously thinking of going over there alone, are you?" Isaac's tone sharpened, worry creeping into his voice. "It could be a grotesque. You don't know what's waiting over there."

I glanced over my shoulder, a smirk forming as I exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Doesn't really matter, Isaac. I'll have to face one of those things sooner or later. Besides, I'm intrigued by the noise. Might be something worth seeing."

Isaac gave a frustrated sigh but reluctantly followed me, his feet dragging as we walked closer to the sounds.

As we neared the clearing, I caught sight of her—her. A girl, not older than a few years but younger than me, her white hair flowing around her like a wild cloud. Her red eyes burned with intensity, the cursed magic swirling around her as she attacked.

The chains wrapped around her back, emerging like tendrils of some dark beast. She lashed them out, cutting a massive tree in half, the force of her strike splitting the trunk like it was nothing. But that wasn't the end. As the tree began to fall, she released a fireball from her hand, hitting it mid-air, the explosion a burst of raw power that sent embers scattering through the air.

I couldn't help but watch, my grin spreading wider. She was relentless—exhausted but still pushing herself, still training as if nothing else mattered but her strength. Her body was a testament to willpower, refusing to stop despite how obvious the toll it was taking on her.

I threw my cigarette into the river, watching it disappear as my attention stayed firmly on her. She was mesmerizing. The way she moved, the way her magic twisted through the air—it was a dance of destruction, and I was captivated.

But just as I started to move toward her, Isaac grabbed my arm, jerking me back behind a nearby tree.

"What the hell are you doing?" he hissed, his grip tight on my arm. "Don't go near her."

I frowned, trying to pull away. "Why not? What's the worst that could happen?"

Isaac's eyes widened, disbelief flickering across his face. "What do you mean, 'what's the worst that could happen'? Don't you see? She—she's not just some random girl."

His voice dropped lower, his words coming out with a sense of urgency. "That's her. The cursed girl. The one who's the reincarnation of the Queen of Curses. She took countless lives 500 years ago. She's dangerous, Arius. You don't understand what you're getting into."

I pushed him off, stepping out from behind the tree to peer at her from the distance, still smiling like I hadn't heard a word he said.

"I saw her," I said casually, my gaze flicking back to him, "She's beautiful, pretty, and I'd say... hot in that black dress. The way she moves is... well, it's something else."

Isaac looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "Are you stupid or just dumb?"

I gave him a lazy look. "Come on, Isaac, don't be such a buzzkill. I'm just admiring the view."

Isaac exhaled in exasperation. "You're a damn fool. You're seriously going to keep looking? Do you even know what you're dealing with?"

I smirked, my gaze never leaving her. "What's her name?"

Isaac looked confused for a second before answering, "Uh... I don't know exactly, but the guys around the guild were talking about her. They mentioned 'Celia' or something like that. She's been training like this for days now."

My grin widened. Celia. That name fit her. I watched as her white hair swirled around her, shining under the sun. Her red eyes, sharp and intimidating, might have been dangerous in another context, but here, they were just... majestic. Her dress, simple but striking, made her look almost unreal as she continued to train.

"Celia..." I repeated under my breath, the word feeling almost like a promise.

Isaac snapped his fingers in front of my face. "Arius! Are you even listening to me?! If you stare too long she'll come and kill you!"

I gave him a bored look. "It's fine. If she comes over here and kills me, at least I'll be kissing her while she does."

Isaac blinked, completely dumbfounded. "What?!"

I grinned wider, enjoying the effect I was having. "It's fine, really. Go ahead and leave, Isaac. I'll stay here. I'm sure I'll be fine."

Isaac looked like he was about to say something more, but then he just... didn't. Instead, he shook his head and walked off, muttering something under his breath.

As he disappeared into the distance, I sat down, leaning against the tree, keeping my eyes locked on Celia. Her determination, the way she fought through her exhaustion—everything about her drew me in.

And for some reason, I couldn't look away.

I watched her again, completely entranced by the way she moved—fluid, dangerous, and mesmerizing. She had this energy about her, a force that seemed to draw everything around her into orbit. Her body was a weapon, her cursed magic flowing out like it was part of her—an extension of her own will. The way her red eyes tracked every movement, the way they sparked with determination—it was intoxicating.

I smirked to myself, the thought coming unbidden.

Red was always my favorite color.

Her sweat-drenched skin glistened under the sun, her breath coming in heavy gasps. She was exhausted. But she didn't stop. She didn't give up. That kind of resolve? It was like a challenge I could never resist.

I leaned forward, my hand resting thoughtfully on my chin as I observed her. The way she moved, even in exhaustion, was something else. She was beautiful, strong, relentless—everything I wanted in a person. But more than that... I wanted her. For myself.

I just want to stare at her...

Maybe keep her for myself, lock her away in a cage, something where no one else could look at her but me. It would be perfect, wouldn't it? Her delicate form, her untouchable beauty... just for me. I'd be the only one who gets to see that. No one else.

I chuckled darkly to myself.

Yeah. That would be nice. So nice...

As she continued to train, pushing herself despite the obvious fatigue, I thought about what would happen if she ever tried to leave.

I could hold her. Hold her tightly, never letting her go. She wouldn't leave. Not while she's sleeping in my arms. She'd be mine. My Celia. For my liking.

And if she ever thought of running away... well, I could make sure that doesn't happen. I'd make her stay with me.

Even if that meant cutting her into small pieces, putting her in a box. I'd carry her with me. Always. She'd never be far from me, never able to escape.

I smiled as the thought passed through my mind, my face showing nothing but innocence, the kind of smile that could make people think I was just a charming, playful guy. But inside, there was nothing innocent about it.

I've always been direct about what I want.

And now, I knew exactly what I wanted.

I looked at her again, wiping the sweat from her forehead, her breath coming in ragged bursts. The sheer determination on her face made something dark and powerful stir within me. She was everything I'd ever wanted.

I want her.

And in return? I'd give her the entire world.

Just as long as she was mine.

Alone.

Forever.

Chapter 55 - Abandoned

Eve's Perspective:

4/9/2017 - 2:32 AM

The night air was cool, a gentle breeze sweeping across the open road as the stars above were countless. I couldn't help but glance up, lost in the beauty of it all.

The sky looked so vast, and the stars, so far away, almost felt like they could take me somewhere far from here, somewhere where I wouldn't feel so... lost.

I sighed softly, feeling a ache in my chest. Not knowing who I really was, what my past held, or why my heart ached so much when I thought about that face in the pendant—it all felt like a puzzle with no pieces to fit. The man in that photo... with the ripped-off face.

I was smiling and being happy around him, but I had no clue who he was now.

I turned my gaze to Lucas, sitting across from me. He was staring blankly into the distance, muttering something under his breath.

"System... shut up..." he said, sounding so completely lost in his thoughts.

I tilted my head, blinking. He could be so serious and intense, but then he'd suddenly speak to himself like that. It kind of weirded me out, but at the same time, I found it oddly endearing.

"Hey," I said softly, breaking his train of thought.

He blinked and then glanced at me, his eyes a bit distant for a second before a mischievous smirk curled on his lips

"What is it now, Eve? You need something?" His voice was teasing, playful.

I shook my head, smiling lightly. "No, I was just... wondering what you're thinking about."

Lucas stretched his arms out, cracking his neck as he did. "I was thinking... how much my legs hurt from all that walking." His grin turned into a smirk, and he gestured to me.

"You look like you're about to fall asleep any second now. Are you sure you're not secretly exhausted?"

I blinked, realizing just how heavy my legs felt. They were completely numb from all the walking we had done today.

I hadn't really thought about it until he pointed it out, but it was true. The distance to Rinascita had been longer than I expected, but the time seemed to pass quickly when I was with him.

I couldn't help but giggle softly, a little embarrassed. "I didn't realize I looked that tired..."

"You've been dragging those feet of yours for hours," he teased, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't worry, I noticed. You don't have to be a tough person around me."

I blushed slightly, rubbing the back of my neck. "I wasn't trying to be tough... it's just that I didn't want to slow you down."

Lucas shrugged, his playful tone shifting into something more thoughtful. "If you're tired, just sleep. We've got a long day ahead tomorrow, and trust me, you'll need the rest."

He patted the empty spot next to him in the carriage, giving me a grin. "Go ahead, Eve. I'll keep watch for you."

I hesitated for a moment, but then I smiled at him. He was right. Tomorrow would be another long day, and I knew I needed the energy. Besides, I felt safe with him around

Even though he was a bit... odd sometimes, he was still someone I trusted.

"Thanks, Lucas," I said softly, climbing into the carriage and settling down on the plush seat. The motion of the carriage was already beginning to lull me.

I pulled my cloak tighter around me and laid my head against the side of the carriage. The rhythmic sounds of the horses' hooves and the gentle rocking of the carriage soon had my eyelids growing heavier, despite my racing thoughts.

I let out a small sigh, feeling the exhaustion slowly sink into my bones, and before long, I drifted off into a peaceful sleep, the stars outside still shining brightly, as if watching over me.

But what didn't watch over me was fate. As I'd see a glimpse of my own past that I never knew existed.

I was only six years old. I didn't really understand a lot of things, but I knew one thing for sure: I was so, so happy.

My mommy and daddy were my world, and I loved them more than anything. They always told me I was special, that I had pink eyes and pink hair—something that made people look at me funny sometimes, but I didn't mind.

To me, it was just... me. I didn't think about it much. I was always busy enjoying my happy, colorful little world.

Mommy and daddy were always with me, and every day was like a dream. They took me to so many new places!

Towns and villages, places with big skies and tall trees. I liked it, but what I liked most was being with them.

My mommy would brush my hair at night, sitting next to me on the bed, and we'd giggle together as she did.

"My little angel," she'd say, and I'd smile so big, like I was the luckiest girl in the world.

Daddy would come home later, bringing me something sweet. Most of the time, it was cake! Chocolate cake, my favorite. It was so yummy, I could eat it all day if they let me.

"Hey, sweetie! Don't eat so fast!" Mommy would laugh, all worried, but I just couldn't help it.

"Let her enjoy, dear. It's hers after all," daddy would say with that big smile of his, and I'd giggle because I knew I was daddy's little girl, and he always spoiled me.

"You're spoiling her, dear!" Mommy would shake her head, but I knew it was just because she loved me so much.

I'd smile and shout, "Mhm! I'm daddy's one and only favorite daughter, so he spoils me!" I was so proud of that.

Mommy would pretend to be mad, but she wasn't. "If you eat one more piece of cake, we'll leave you!"

I'd laugh and grab the cake box, running away as fast as my little legs could carry me. Mommy would chase me, laughing too, and daddy would just smile and laugh as he watched.

Every day felt like a party, a never-ending celebration of how much they loved me. How could it get any better?

But that night... that horrible night... everything changed.

I was standing in front of our broken, flipped-over carriage. My knees were hurt, my arms and nose were bleeding, and I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

My mommy and daddy, the people who loved me so much, were gone... taken from me.

The monsters... the demons... they were eating them.

I could still see mommy's face, her tears falling down her cheeks as she tried to protect me.

"I love you... Please run," she whispered, her voice so soft, so scared.

But I couldn't run. I couldn't do anything.

My daddy... my brave daddy... his stomach was being eaten by two monsters, and he still said, "I'm okay, dear... please don't cry for me."

But I did cry. I couldn't stop. Daddy... mommy... why did they have to go? I wanted to be a good girl for them, I wanted to be their little angel, but now they were gone, and I couldn't make it better.

I couldn't make them wake up.

Tears were blurring my eyes, but I just wanted them to hold me, to tell me it was okay.

I wanted to hear mommy say it was alright, even though I knew it wasn't.

I wanted daddy to laugh and say, "Mhm, you're my favorite girl," and let me eat all the cake I wanted.

But they weren't there.

I was alone. All I could do was cry, kneeling there in the dirt, watching my world crumble.

The monsters, the demons... they looked at me with hungry eyes, and I tried to stand, to run, but my legs wouldn't move.

My knees hurt too much, and my tears made it hard to see. I stumbled and fell into a tree branch. I cried harder, too scared to move, too weak to fight.

The monsters got closer, and I was so scared. The night was dark, and I couldn't hear anything but my own heart pounding in my ears. Mommy... daddy... I'm so sorry. I didn't want this.

I didn't want to be alone.

Please... somebody... help me.

It was a warm day, just a few months ago, and I remember the sunlight shining down on me as I walked with mommy and daddy.

We were on our way home, laughing together like we always did. Mommy was holding my hand, her fingers so warm and soft. But then... something caught her attention. She gasped, and I followed her gaze. There was a picture on the wall, a big, beautiful picture of a young, handsome man.

Mommy's eyes lit up. "Look, sweetie," she said. "A prince." Her voice was all dreamy and soft, like she was imagining something far away.

Daddy sighed, but I could see he was smiling a little too. They both looked at the picture, but I didn't really understand why it was so special.

Mommy smiled at me and said, "When you grow up, you'll find a prince just like him. Someone who'll love you forever."

I stared at the picture. A prince? Just like in the stories? A prince who always saves the princess, no matter what? That sounded like a fairy tale, like one of my story books.

It made me smile. I wondered if that could really happen to me... Would a prince save me like that? Would he love me like mommy and daddy loved me?

I stepped closer to the picture, my little hands behind my back, looking at the prince with his golden hair and sharp eyes. He was smiling at me, and I could almost imagine him reaching out to me.

I tilted my head and said, "No, mommy, I don't want a prince."

Mommy and daddy looked at me, their faces all confused. "Why not, sweetie?" Mommy asked.

"Because, mommy, I don't know him," I said. "How can I love him? Or him love me?"

Mommy smiled and patted my head. "A prince is someone who will always protect and love you, sweetie. That's why every woman wants one."

I shook my head, frowning a little. "But I want someone else."

Daddy's eyes went wide. "You have someone you like?"

I smiled really big. "Yes!" I said, happy because I finally got to tell them. "I have a friend!"

Mommy knelt down beside me, her brow furrowed. "A friend? But sweetie, you don't have any friends to play with. You're always alone because the other kids don't want to play with you."

I pouted a little, but I didn't care. I knew what I knew. "No, mommy," I said, shaking my head. "There's a boy who doesn't ignore me."

Mommy blinked, confused. "Who? You don't play with any boys."

I smiled wider, because mommy was being silly. "He's always with me!"

Daddy chuckled, but he looked a little worried too. "Always with you? Who is he?"

I just giggled and put my hand over my heart. "When I get nightmares at night, mommy... I cry a little because I'm scared. But then, I fall asleep again, and everything turns into a fun dream!"

"A fun dream?" Daddy asked, looking concerned.

"Yes, daddy!" I said excitedly. "In that dream, there's a boy. He always plays with me and makes me smile. He's my best friend!"

Mommy and daddy looked at each other, and then back at me. "How long have you been seeing him in your dreams?" mommy asked, a worried tone in her voice.

I smiled and nodded, not really understanding why they looked so concerned. "He always comes to comfort me when I cry. He's my best friend."

They laughed, like it was nothing. "Oh, sweetie," mommy said, patting my head. "You have some funny dreams, but no boy can be better than a prince."

I stuck out my tongue and crossed my arms. "Just you watch, mommy! He'll come out of my dream and be my friend!"

I ran ahead, feeling proud. I knew he was real. He was my friend. He was always there, even when everyone else ignored me. Even when I was different. He didn't care. He was my best friend.

But now... where was he?

I looked around, my heart sinking as the monsters got closer. As more tears form in my eyes from the fear...

Where are you... friend?

Of course. Here's your scene rewritten in a refined yet emotional style that captures the fragile, broken perspective of a 6-year-old traumatized girl:

As they got closer... I realized something horrible.

My friend wasn't coming for me.

Neither was mommy.

Nor daddy.

No one was.

Because in this world... I was always left behind.

Ignored.

Forgotten.

All because I had weird, pink hair. And funny pink eyes.

Because I didn't look like the others.

Because I was different.

That's why... that's why I had to watch them—

Mommy...

Daddy...

Get eaten.

By monsters.

My throat burned from screaming. My tears wouldn't stop. I cried and cried, but no one came. Not even the sky answered me.

The monsters didn't care.

They just walked slowly toward me, drooling...

Maybe... I really was born to be ignored.

Born to be eaten.

Born to cry alone.

...Maybe—

No.

A sudden, strong hand grabbed mine and yanked me up so fast I gasped. My legs moved before I could think, running behind them as they held my hand tightly.

I wiped at my tears with my other hand, trying to see—

Someone was pulling me.

A boy.

He wore a black shirt, his hair dark and messy from behind. He didn't speak, just ran, dragging me with him like he knew exactly where to go.

The monsters who had walked toward me before?

Now they were chasing.

Running.

But he... he was faster.

His steps were loud, sharp, like thunder on grass. He held my hand tighter—then, suddenly, swung me toward him and spun around.

In one motion, he scooped me up into his arms.

He was still a kid like me—maybe a little older—but he carried me like he was an adult.

Like I weighed nothing.

He kept running, turning so quickly the monsters behind us kept slipping, falling over each other.

I couldn't see his face.

My mind was panicked.

I couldn't think clearly.

But... I wasn't crying anymore.

All I could focus on was him—his heartbeat against mine, his arms around me, the wind brushing past my face as he ran.

And then—he made a sudden, sharp turn.

We slid across the ground, kicking up dirt. Two trees stood tall on either side of where we stopped.

He didn't run anymore.

Instead... he turned around.

My grip on his shoulder tightened. My chest felt heavy again. The monsters—

They were coming.

I stuttered, my voice shaking.

"P-Please... please go..."

I looked up at him.

His eyes didn't flinch.

The monsters were now charging straight at us.

"I don't wanna get eaten..." I whispered again, my voice cracking. "Please... run..."

They were getting closer. Huge. Fast. Horrible.

"I don't... I don't wanna get hurt..."

That's when he finally looked at me.

Really looked at me.

His eyes were like steel. Unshakable. But... warm, too.

He smiled.

"Don't worry," he said softly. "I got this."

His voice—

It felt familiar.

So familiar it hurt.

Then—

The monsters lunged.

And in the next instant—

****SLICE.****

Their bodies split in the air.

One after another.

Four of them—cut clean from top to bottom. Blood sprayed through the air like a red fountain. I screamed, my eyes squeezed shut—

But when I opened them... the monsters were gone.

Only pieces of them remained.

Torn. Still. Dead.

Four thin, steel wires glistened in the air—stretched between the trees we stopped near, covered in red.

He'd led them straight into a trap.

Monsters three times his size... gone in an instant.

All... to save me?

He looked down at me then, brushing blood from his brow with a sigh.

Still holding me, he smiled.

"Looks like I made it just in time," he said. "You okay?"

He...

He really saved me.

I wanted to say thank you. I really did.

But my body felt too heavy. My head, too light.

The last thing I saw... was him.

And then, everything went dark.

When I woke up, it was still night.

My body felt cold, and something soft was wrapped around me. A cloth... maybe his shirt? I wasn't sure. But I was warm.

There was a fire, small and quiet like it was scared too. The trees around us looked like tall shadows. And beside me... he was sitting there.

That boy... my friend from the dreams. He was real. I didn't know how, but... he really came.

I watched him in silence. His face had scratches, a bit of dried blood near his lip. His hands were dirty, bruised. His black hair was messy, like he'd been running forever.

He had saved me.

My lips trembled again, the memory flashing behind my eyes—

Mommy's screams.

Daddy's arm stretching toward me before—

I hugged my knees, squeezing my eyes shut. I didn't want to cry anymore. I didn't want to see it again.

But...

A small hand gently rested on top of my head.

I opened my eyes.

He was right beside me now, kneeling, staring at me. His face wasn't smiling like before. It looked... serious. Sad, almost.

"You were crying in your sleep," he said quietly.

I blinked.

I wanted to talk. I wanted to ask how he found me. I wanted to say thank you. But the words... they were stuck in my throat like a big stone. My voice wouldn't come out.

He reached into a little pouch tied to his belt and pulled out a small piece of bread. It looked hard and old. But he broke it in half and gave me the bigger piece.

"You're safe now," he said. "So eat."

Safe?

Was I?

I held the bread in my hands, staring at it like it would disappear. I didn't feel hungry. I just felt... empty. But he was still watching me.

So I took a tiny bite.

He looked away then, poking the fire with a stick, and said after a while, "I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier."

My eyes widened.

He knew?

He looked over his shoulder again. "I had to setup the trap first, I'm sorry. You had to go through it all because I was too slow.."

That's when the tears returned, falling slowly, quietly this time.

I didn't cry out loud.

I just crawled forward and hugged him. My tiny arms wrapped around his side, and I buried my face into him.

He didn't say anything.

He just sat there, letting me cry into him in silence—like he had so many times in my dreams.

My only friend.

The one who didn't ignore me.

The one who found me.

Even if the world had monsters.

Even if mommy and daddy were gone.

Even if I was different and alone—

He came.

So I whispered, my voice cracking as it barely came out:

"...thank you..."

And for the first time since everything happened...

I slept without a nightmare.

When I woke up, I was in a bed.

A real bed.

Soft. Warm. Too warm.

Not near a fire.

Not with him.

The blanket smelled clean, like flowers. The room was lit with sunlight slipping through white curtains. It didn't feel like the forest... it felt like a home.

But not mine.

I looked around, my body still sore, my arm aching.

There were several beds lined up across the room, some empty, some with other kids curled up beneath blankets. To my right, a thin string ran into my arm. It was connected to a bottle hanging beside the bed.

My arm had purple bruises around it.

I sat up slowly. Everything hurt.

But I had to find him.

I tried to move—slipping one leg out of the bed, then the other. My bare feet touched the cold floor. I took one shaky step before I heard a gentle voice behind me.

"Sweetheart, wait—"

I turned around.

It was a woman. Kind-looking, with a pale blue robe and soft brown hair tied into a bun. She walked toward me with careful steps, holding a small tray of food.

"You shouldn't be moving just yet. You're still healing," she said gently, setting the tray on a nearby table. "Are you in pain?"

I didn't answer.

"Where is he?" I asked, my voice quiet, cracked.

She paused.

"How did I get here?" I asked again, this time louder. "Where's my friend?"

She knelt beside me, brushing some hair from my face. Her eyes were soft.

"Last night," she said, "a boy brought you here. He carried you all the way to the gates of the orphanage. You were unconscious... covered in dirt, bruises, blood."

I stared at her, frozen.

"He didn't say a word. Just laid you down at the doorstep. We brought you in... tried to call after him, but—" she paused, shaking her head, "—by the time we stepped outside, he was gone."

Gone.

Her words echoed in my head.

Gone...

Just like everyone else.

My chest began to ache. A knot twisted in my stomach.

He left.

He left me.

Like mommy did.

Like daddy.

Like the rest of the world.

He said he'd got me. He held my hand. He saved me.

I thought... I thought he was different.

But I was wrong.

My lip trembled as the tears came back, slow and heavy this time. I bit down hard, trying not to cry—but my eyes burned and my throat felt tight.

He left me too.

I'm always the one left behind.

Maybe he thought I was too weak.

Maybe he never wanted to stay.

Maybe I was just another burden to carry...

Just like everyone else sees me.

I clenched the sheets, curling up slightly.

Why did he smile at me like that... if he was just going to disappear?

Why did he save me... just to leave?

Why does everyone go?

The sister tried to comfort me—offered me food, a warm touch, soft words.

But none of it mattered.

Because the only comfort I wanted... was already gone.

Lucas's Perspective:

The Ride to Rinascita.

「WAKE UP YOU LOAF OF A HUMAN, THE WORLD ISN'T GONNA SAVE ITSELF WHILE YOU SNORE LIKE A DYING COW!」

What the hell—?!

I jolted awake, nearly flipping off the seat. My eyes darted around in pure confusion like I'd been dropped in the middle of an anime filler episode.

Still in the carriage.

Still moving.

Still alive.

"Bro... why do you scream like you're the final boss of my sleep schedule?" I mumbled, rubbing my eyes.

「Because someone has to. If I left it up to you, you'd die of old age in your sleep before ever casting a single spell right.」

"I do cast spells right!"

「You literally burnt your own cloak last time trying to 'light up the room with style.'」

"That was one time!"

I glanced out the window while flipping the hood off my face. The sky had mellowed into that warm golden-orange hue, soft light leaking through the forest canopy as the trees lazily drifted by. The wheels of the carriage clattered along a cobbled path, each bump somehow timed perfectly with System's roast sessions.

The inside of the carriage was simple. Wooden benches lined with soft maroon cushions, lanterns hanging by the corners with little magical gems inside. There was a scent of old wood mixed with faint lavender... probably Eve's.

「By the way... good evening, useless sorcerer.」

I blinked.

"Evening?"

「Yes, the part of the day where the sun says 'I'm out' and your brain usually wakes up.」

"Oh shit, it actually is evening..."

4/9/2017 - 1:52 PM

I stared out again, just to confirm I wasn't being gaslit by my own AI. Nope, sun was setting, the world was golden, birds were flapping like they were late to something important.

The carriage rumbled gently along, the driver up front humming a tune I couldn't quite place. It was peaceful. Calm. And yet, inside this rolling box of wood and sarcasm—

Sniff.

My gaze shifted to the other side.

Eve.

She was curled up in the corner seat, knees pulled close, her face half-hidden by her arms. Her long pink hair cascaded down like threads of soft light, and though her lips weren't moving, her shoulders trembled.

Silent sobs. Her cheeks shimmered with streaks of tears.

I slowly shifted over, careful not to startle her, and knelt by her side.

I leaned in, gently nudging her shoulder.

"Eve... hey, are you okay?" My voice dropped to a whisper. "Eve?"

She stirred slightly, then opened her eyes. Her long lashes fluttered, and a tear still clung to the edge of her cheek. Her eyes... they were red, a soft kind of red like someone had been hurting for a while but didn't know how to say it.

"...Lucas?" she whispered, barely audible. She blinked slowly, trying to piece together where she was. "I... sorry... I didn't mean to cry..."

「Wow, crying in your sleep. That's new. Want me to play her a lullaby or download emotional damage?」

Bro, not now, I thought, side-eyeing the empty space like a lunatic.

"It's okay," I said softly, shifting closer and keeping my voice warm. "You don't need to apologize for feeling something, Eve."

She looked down, her hands tightening into little fists on her lap. "It was just a dream... I think. But it felt so real..."

Her voice cracked at the end, and I could feel something twist in my chest. Not pity... something heavier. Familiar, maybe.

"What did you see?" I asked gently.

She hesitated for a long time, eyes lowering to the floor of the carriage. Then, she spoke, quiet like falling snow.

"...Someone left me. Someone important. I don't remember their name... or face. But the pain didn't fade."

"That sounds... painful," I muttered, brushing a hand through my hair. "Having that kind of emptiness with no explanation."

Eve gave the tiniest nod, her pink hair falling over her shoulders like petals. "It's strange... even now, I feel like... I'm still waiting for them."

「 Step one: Don't be a rock. Be a pillow. Comforting. Soft. Emotional support Lucas, let's go. 」

I exhaled through my nose. You're the worst life coach. But he was right.

"...Eve," I said, my tone softening even more, "I can't promise I understand everything you're feeling. But I'm here, alright?"

"

She blinked, slowly turning to look at me. "But... what if they never return?"

"Then I'll stay until you forget you were waiting," I said without thinking. "And maybe that empty place... doesn't have to stay empty forever."

She stared at me. Not with surprise, but like she was studying my soul through my words. Her lips quivered just a little, not from sadness—but relief. Then she lowered her gaze again and nodded gently.

"...Thank you," she murmured, voice barely above a breath.

「 Boom. Nailed it. Emotional support stats increased by 2 points. 10 more and you unlock the Hugging Skill Tree. 」

Please shut up, I smiled to myself.

After a while, Eve wiped her eyes and took in a deep breath. "It was just a nightmare," she said, a bit more certain. "Just... a nightmare."

She sat upright again, a little stronger now. I didn't say anything else. I just stayed next to her in silence.

Then, the carriage driver tapped the side of the wooden wall.

"We've arrived at Rinascita."

I turned toward the window and pulled back the curtain.

"...Whoa."

The city unfolded before us like a living painting. Tall, graceful towers climbed into the sky, their tips catching the golden light of the setting sun. Cobbled streets twisted like veins between rows of stone houses, each roof lined with red tiles and flowering vines that spilled down the sides. The air shimmered gently with magic residue, and small glowing orbs floated over the lamp posts, lighting the streets early. People bustled along the roads—traders, knights, kids chasing each other barefoot.

In the middle of the city stood a vast circular plaza with a beautiful crystalline fountain, surrounded by marble benches and a huge tree with soft silver leaves. Rinascita wasn't just a city.

It was alive.

"...This place..." I murmured. "We're really here."

「 Congrats. New location unlocked: City of Fresh Starts. Side quest available: 'Find out why it smells like nobility.' 」

"Shh," I muttered under my breath, not realizing Eve hadn't moved.

She still sat quietly, her gaze fixed on the pendant in her hands. I barely noticed it before—two tiny figures etched into the picture, one of them unmistakably her.

She held it close to her heart, eyes closed.

She wasn't with me in that moment. She was somewhere else. With someone else.

But I didn't disturb her.

I just leaned back, rested my head against the carriage wall, and let the breeze of the open city drift in.

"...Guess the journey really does continue from here," I said.

「 Damn right it does. Try not to emotionally break down before lunch, hero. 」

Yeah, easier said than done.

We both got off the carriage.

I paid the driver with a few gold coins I definitely didn't "borrow" from a noble a few nights ago. Totally legal. Totally justified. The man was wearing a fur coat in summer—he deserved it.

「 And thus, the One-Eyed Trickster scams someone once more! 」

I rolled my eyes and stuffed my coin pouch back into my belt. "Relax. Nobody's poor if everyone's robbed equally," I muttered under my breath.

Eve followed behind me, stepping down with her usual grace, pink hair fluttering a bit with the breeze. She adjusted the cloak around her shoulders and looked around the city with quiet wonder.

Rinascita's entrance district was a lively mix of old stone roads and neatly painted shops, voices echoing in all directions as adventurers and nobles crisscrossed the streets like caffeinated ants.

I turned to her, stretching my arms behind my head lazily. "So, where should we head next? You hungry, or wanna check—"

She shook her head.

"Lucas..." she said gently, tilting her head a bit like she was still unsure. "May I ask something?"

That caught me off guard. She was usually the quiet one. I lowered my hands. "Yeah. Go ahead."

Eve hesitated. Her fingers brushed against the small pendant hanging from her neck—the same one she clutched in the carriage.

"...May we split our ways for the time being?" she asked, soft but firm. "I want to stay alone a bit."

My brain stalled for a second. Huh?

Not that I was dying to hang out 24/7, but I didn't expect that from her.

"...Why?" I asked, eyes narrowing.

She looked down, her fingers tightening around the pendant. "You helped me reach here safely, and I'm grateful, but..." She paused. "...I have my own goal to complete. So I hope you understand."

I squinted. "This about finding that person?"

She nodded, almost sheepish. "Mhm. I don't want to drag you with me everywhere, Lucas. I'll find him from here, don't worry."

There was this silence between us for a second. The kind where you don't really know what to say, so you fill it with a soft exhale.

"...Alright," I nodded eventually. "Take care of yourself, Eve."

She gave a small, soft smile. Her pink eyes weren't puffy anymore—just determined. "Thanks for everything, Lucas. See you again."

With that, she turned around and walked toward the higher district. Her figure got smaller with every step. And then—gone.

「 Wow. That was so emotional I nearly teared up from my nonexistent eyes. Should I play a sad violin or just clap? 」

I sighed. Shut up.

I stood there for a moment, just watching the crowd. Everyone moved around with purpose.

So fast.

Well. I won't stop her, I thought. In this world, everyone leaves eventually. You get carried, then you get dropped.

You only really have yourself. And I'll be strong enough to make sure that's all I ever need.

No ties. No chains.

Just me.

「 Now that... 」

「 ...is the mindset of a true sorcerer. Good. I was starting to think you were just a comedic sidekick with decent hair. 」

A grin tugged at my lips. "Love you too, system."

I adjusted my robe and turned toward the busy street of Rinascita.

Alright. Time to explore.

A few steps in. That's all it took.

I passed an old lady screaming at a merchant for selling "fake dragon eggs" (which were clearly painted rocks), then almost tripped over a bard dramatically proposing to a woman who was obviously married to the knight standing next to her.

Rinascita was... wild.

As I weaved through the streets, I noticed a small crowd gathered around a poster board. A new quest notice? Maybe a new dungeon?

Nope.

As I walked through the packed main street of Rinascita, I sidestepped a duo of street performers throwing flaming knives at each other like it was a friendly game of catch. Some guy in the background was selling "blessed socks" guaranteed to make you run faster. It was like capitalism had found magic and gone completely feral.

My eyes stayed ahead, but my mind wasn't on the chaos.

"Hey, System," I muttered, hands stuffed in my cloak pockets. "Have you finally figured out the materials for the cure?"

「 Oh, you mean the mysterious, complex antidote that could potentially stop the decay eating people alive? Yeah, I did figure out something. 」

"Wait... seriously?"

「 It's not a full list. Just a potential component. The Leviathan's Scales. 」

I blinked. "Scales? Like fish scales? From something named Leviathan? Why the hell does every useful thing in this world sound like a final boss?"

「 Because it pretty much is. The Leviathan is a centuries-old creature. Think giant centipede, but on steroids. Razor jags for teeth. And it's bigger than most towns. 」

"Oh great. A nightmare with legs."

I sighed, ducking under a floating fruit stand being pushed by some kid yelling about "aerial apples."

"So what do the scales do exactly?" I asked.

「 The essence of the Leviathan's scales can enhance the immune system of any living being. Not just boost it—restructure it. The cure you're aiming for? This is one of the few components that can stabilize corrupted mana in a dying body. 」

"...Damn."

That was heavy. I didn't speak for a while, just kept walking, watching a hawker trying to sell "love-enhancing potions" to an old man who looked like he was emotionally dead inside.

"So it's strong, huh?"

「 S-Rank Plus. Minimum. Probably stronger. 」

I grunted. "I'm level seven."

「 Exactly. Which means if you go up to it right now and say hello, you're going to die, respawn, and die again just from the trauma. 」

"Good thing I'm into impossible things," I muttered. "So we go step-by-step. Form a party. Level up. Gather gear. Then we hunt that overgrown sewer bug down."

「 Smart plan. First step though: we need to locate it. It could be in any part of the world. 」

I rolled my neck, shaking my head.

"Even if it's hiding in a volcano guarded by dragons," I said, "I'll drag it out. I don't have the luxury of waiting."

「 Now that's the spirit. Suicidal, but spirited. 」

I chuckled, rounding the corner of the street just past a huge bakery that smelled so good it was borderline illegal. I was about to comment on the scent when—

"Excuse me, young man."

I froze.

A tall nobleman with a finely pressed cloak and a crest I didn't recognize stood before me. His boots looked shinier than my entire future.

SYSTEM. QUICK. SAY SOMETHING PROFESSIONAL.

「 Initiating Fancy Boy Protocol... now. 」

I straightened up, posture perfect, hands lightly folded behind my back, and even gave a slight bow.

"Gentlemen," I said, tone smooth as butter. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The noble smiled faintly. "I was told by a few guild officials that a young sorcerer recently arrived in Rinascita with impressive potential. I believe that is you?"

I paused for the perfect beat, then offered a modest nod. "Word travels quickly, it seems."

He extended a sealed envelope. "I come bearing an invitation. The Mayor of Rinascita is hosting a banquet tonight. An exclusive affair. He values promising talents. You're requested to attend."

My eyes flicked to the seal. Fancy, golden, definitely not the kind of invitation you use to wipe your hands.

"An honor," I said politely, accepting the letter.

The noble bowed his head. "We look forward to your presence."

As he walked off, I relaxed my stance and looked at the envelope.

「 Okay. I have two words: Free. Food. 」

"I have three words," I said. "Connections. Leviathan. Location. Influence."

「 ...That was four words. 」

"Details."

I stared at the envelope a little longer.

I didn't trust nobles. But power? Access? Influence?

If I wanted to find that monster, I'd need all of them.

I tucked the envelope inside my cloak.

"Alright," I said with a slow grin. "Let's go crash a party."