

# The Last Step

## Chapter 56 - False Heir

**6/18/2000 - 12:32 PM {17 Years into PAST}**

"Your Highness! They're twins. A boy and a girl."

The voices of two ladies-in-waiting echoed through the chamber. They approached the emperor, who stood tall with his sharp blue eyes fixed on the newborns—his blood, his children.

The first lady stepped forward, gently cradling a small baby girl.

"U-Um, Your Majesty... she's blonde, like Her Majesty," she said softly. "And her eyes... they're blue, like yours."

As if on cue, the baby girl let out a soft cry. The lady tried to soothe her, holding her closer.

The emperor's gaze lingered on the child. He could feel it—magic, even in her faint cries. It was subtle, but unmistakable. She was special.

A myth spoken for a thousand years... a child chosen by the gods.

Perhaps it was her.

**A divine empress.**

He raised his hand and gently touched her forehead.

"You are... truly my blessed daughter," he said, his voice calm and low.

Then, his eyes shifted to the other lady-in-waiting.

"Y-Your Majesty, this is your son, he—"

The emperor stepped forward before she could finish.

He stared down at the boy.

The baby didn't cry. He didn't move. His face was blank.

Dark hair, like the emperor's. But his eyes... weren't blue. Not yet. They were void—cold, colorless, like a silent abyss.

"...He isn't crying," the emperor muttered.

"I-I don't understand it either," the lady said nervously. "It's... unusual..."

But the boy simply stared back at the emperor, unblinking.

Then, slowly... his eyes began to change. From the edges, blue crept in, coloring the void. Bit by bit, his eyes turned completely blue.

Still, the emperor showed no emotion.

"...Test them," he ordered. "Both. I want their magical and mental potential measured."

"B-But, Your Majesty... they were just born—"

The emperor's glare silenced them.

And so, the tests began.

The emperor stepped into the chamber where his empress lay resting, her figure still weak from childbirth. Golden light filtered through the tall arched windows, casting soft shadows across the polished floor.

"Your Majesty..." the empress asked gently, her voice weak but filled with concern. "Are they... alright?"

The emperor approached, his steps slow and composed. He sat beside her, his presence cold yet regal. His sharp blue eyes held no warmth as he answered with quiet authority.

"We had twins," he said. "A prince and a princess."

The empress, with maternal warmth in her tone, whispered, "Where are they? I wish to hold them... just for a moment."

The emperor shook his head. "Not yet. You must wait until their assessments are complete."

"...They're being evaluated?" she asked, her voice softer now, but still carrying the undertone of a mother's worry.

He turned to the window, watching the light fall over the marble pillars. "Their intelligence, magical aptitude, and physical limitations—all shall be measured. It must be done without delay."

The empress lowered her gaze, offering no protest. She merely nodded, her hands resting quietly atop the silken sheets.

They both knew the process.

Only those of royal blood could undergo such an ancient rite—one passed down through centuries. The spell, born from celestial magic, allowed insight into the gifts granted by the gods themselves. A secret known only within the royal lineage of Asura.

Moments later, the empress's ladies-in-waiting entered the room, each carrying a child in their arms.

Carefully, they approached and placed the newborns into the empress's embrace.

Her arms trembled as she held them close, her eyes glistening with affection.

The princess smiled faintly, gazing up at her mother. But the prince... his expression remained unreadable. Eyes distant, guarded, as though uncertain of the arms that held him.

The empress looked at him tenderly and whispered, **"I am your mother, dear one... I will never let you go."**

Yet the prince's gaze didn't soften. His small face stayed still—quiet, neutral. **As if fearing what love might betray him next.**

Then, the door opened once more.

A man cloaked in deep indigo robes entered the chamber. The sorcerer—one of the empire's greats—stepped forward, scroll in hand.

Both the emperor and the empress turned their eyes toward him.

Their gazes were sharp.

The results had arrived.

Before the sorcerer could speak, the empress raised her hand softly.

"Wait, Sorcerer Nelius," she said, her voice calm but commanding.

Her gaze turned to the emperor, warm yet composed. "Should we not grant them names first, Your Majesty? Before their destinies are laid bare?"

The emperor's piercing eyes shifted to the princess. With care, the empress placed the child in his arms. The little girl, delicate and radiant, smiled faintly as she clutched one of his fingers with her tiny hand—refusing to release her grip.

A rare, almost imperceptible smile curved the emperor's lips. He stared at the child in silence for a moment, then muttered, with a voice that echoed like a divine decree:

**"...Rose. You shall be named Rose, my daughter."**

The empress smiled softly at the sight of her husband holding their daughter, the moment between father and child delicate, almost sacred.

The emperor returned Rose to her mother's embrace and reached out for the prince.

This time, he did not cradle him. He raised the boy to eye level, his cold, commanding gaze meeting the child's expressionless face.

Yet the prince did not look away.

No flinch. No fear. No tears.

Just silence... and the kind of stare that defied logic for a child so newly born.

The empress watched with quiet intrigue. Twins they were, yet so vastly different. While Rose clung to warmth, the boy embodied stillness—as though he'd been born with the weight of fate already upon him.

And then, the emperor whispered the name.

A name that would be remembered across generations.

**"...Kaiser."**

He held the boy a moment longer, gazing into the deep void-blue eyes that shimmered with mystery, before gently returning him to the empress.

She gathered both children close, her expression tender and radiant.

**"My Princess Rose... and Prince Kaiser," she whispered, her voice full of affection. "I love you both, endlessly. And I know—there shall never come a day where you fail to meet the hopes I place upon you."**

The emperor stood silent, composed.

But his gaze drifted toward Sorcerer Nelius, who now held the scroll with the evaluation results in hand.

The time had come.

To learn which child had been blessed by the heavens...

And which one had not.

Sorcerer Nelius took a step forward, lowering his head in reverence before speaking.

"Firstly, Your Majesties... regarding Princess Rose."

His voice held weight, each word carefully chosen. "She is a child touched by divinity itself. A perfect heir... no, something even greater."

The emperor and empress both turned their gaze upon him, sharp and unwavering. The empress rested against the cushions, her arms gently holding both children, the ladies-in-waiting standing silently beside her.

Nelius turned his eyes to the princess. "Her intellect is without equal—an evaluated **IQ of 172**. A level that surpasses the boundaries of genius. She is, undoubtedly, a prodigy."

A hush fell over the room.

"She possesses affinity for celestial magic... cursed magic... and all known elemental types. Triple mastery, and not a single resistance or rejection within her core. Such a combination has never been recorded."

The empress's lips parted slightly, stunned. Even the ladies-in-waiting faltered, struggling to process the weight of his words. Only the emperor remained composed, though his eyes narrowed—calculating, absorbing.

Nelius continued.

"Her body, while appearing ordinary at birth, carries limitless potential. With training, she may surpass all physical standards—speed, strength, endurance... all of it lies within reach."

He lowered his gaze, reverent. "And her soul... it has been identified as a Royal-tier Radiant Core. With such a soul, she may form contracts with legendary spirits, wield divine relics, and commune with entities beyond mortal reach."

The room grew heavier as he added, "Since her birth, an aura surrounds her—one that makes seasoned knights fall to their knees, as if standing before a sovereign. This is not mere magic... but the presence of one born to rule."

A breath passed before his final words.

"My foresight shows this child may replicate even the most intricate techniques after witnessing them once... and refine them beyond their origin."

He raised his eyes toward the emperor and empress.

"And the Oracle has spoken: her name will be etched into the future of the world. As a ruler, conqueror, or saint—she will become known as the **God's Chosen Empress of Asura.**"

Silence filled the chamber like thunder.

For once, even the emperor's gaze seemed to shift slightly, if only for a second.

The empress, still holding Rose gently, broke the silence with a soft, emotional voice.

"...To think such a destiny lies within her..."

She turned to her husband. "Your Majesty... to bear a daughter whose very name the gods whisper... what future awaits her?"

The emperor's gaze lingered on Rose for a long moment.

"She will be revered," he said, voice low and composed. "Feared. Followed."

Then, almost as if to himself—

"She will change the world."

The empress smiled faintly, eyes glistening as she looked at her daughter once more.

"...Then I shall protect her. Until the day she walks that path herself."

And from the emperor—

"Until the world is ready to kneel before her name."

The empress, her gaze softening as she turned to the quiet infant in her arms, spoke once more—her voice tinged with maternal hope.

"...And what of my son?" she asked gently. "Nelius, surely he bears equal gifts as his twin... does he not?"

The air turned still.

Nelius's expression shifted—his complexion pale, lips trembling slightly, as though the question itself weighed a thousand stones upon his shoulders. He hesitated.

Then the emperor's voice cut through the silence, cold and commanding.

"Speak, Nelius. What of my son, Kaiser?"

The sorcerer lowered his eyes and exhaled shakily, as if dreading the words he was about to release.

"...Prince Kaiser... was evaluated with an intellect score of **82 IQ**. Below average. No signs of refinement... no indication of latent growth."

A silence fell, heavy and unforgiving. The empress's breath caught in her throat. The emperor's expression froze.

Nelius continued, shame hanging in his voice like a dying ember.

"He was born... completely magicless. Not a flicker of flame... not a breath of wind bends to his will. Water resists him. The very elements refuse to recognize his existence."

Kaiser, still nestled against the empress's arm, remained quiet—his eyes open, his tiny form still.

"Physically... deficient. His musculature is underdeveloped, and his body has a natural cap on strength. No matter how much he trains... he will remain inferior to even the lowest knight."

The emperor's jaw tightened.

Nelius forced himself to speak the rest.

"His soul... is of the Flickering-class. Unstable. Incompatible with spirits, unable to retain any higher magical bond. It cannot evolve."

"And... his aura..." He almost whispered the next words. "There is none. For he possesses no magic at all. No pressure. No presence."

The room chilled.

"And lastly..." Nelius looked up, trembling. "His fate has been seen... and recorded."

He swallowed.

**"It is valueless."**

The empress's eyes widened. Her arms trembled. And then—

She let go.

Kaiser slipped from her embrace, gravity threatening to bring his head to the cold marble floor—until one of the ladies-in-waiting dove forward and caught him just in time, cradling him gently.

The room stood still.

Kaiser's small, innocent face—usually marked by an emotionless calm—twitched. For the first time, there was something there.

**Betrayal.**

The empress sat motionless, her lips parting as she whispered, as if to convince herself.

"...You... You cannot be my blood. You... are not my son."

The emperor's gaze remained locked on Nelius.

"...Are these words true?" he asked, his voice icy but calm. "Have you no doubt?"

Nelius dropped to one knee, eyes to the ground.

"I swear it upon my life, Your Majesty. I ran the evaluations seven times. I prayed the results would change... but they did not. I beg your understanding."

The emperor turned away slightly.

"Then you are dismissed."

Nelius bowed low, then rose, leaving the room in haste—his robes trailing behind him like shadows of shame.

Silence returned, heavy as iron.

The empress sat with Rose in her arms—her expression now distant, sorrowful. The emperor stood on the opposite side of the chamber, arms folded behind his back, unmoving.



And Kaiser... remained in the arms of the lady-in-waiting, still gazing at his mother—his eyes wide, shimmering not with tears... but with something deeper.

The empress glanced toward him once more.

Then, with cold finality, she uttered a single word.

**"...Worthless."**

The chamber was dim now, lit only by the soft golden glow of the chandelier above. Outside, the skies had darkened into a quiet dusk, as though the heavens themselves mourned the fate whispered within these royal walls.

The emperor stood with his back to the empress, his hands clasped behind him, voice low and regal yet lined with scorn.

"He is a stain, Rosaline," he spoke, without turning. "A blemish upon the Asuran name. No magic. No strength. No worth."

The empress—Rosaline—held Rose delicately in her arms, cradling her against her chest with reverent grace. Her eyes, however, were distant. Cold. Fixed upon the other child in the arms of her lady-in-waiting.

"...I had dreamt of birthing twin heirs," she said softly. "One to shine with might, and the other with wisdom. Together... to rule the Empire. But what I received instead..."

She closed her eyes.

"...was pride and disgrace."

The emperor turned, his stare sharp, emotionless.

"He is beneath even the servants' sons. If word escapes that the imperial line birthed a magicless, feeble-minded child... the name of The Empire will crumble beneath scorn and laughter. I will not allow it."

He stepped closer, voice sharpening.

"I would sooner burn this palace to ash than let him be known as my son."

The lady-in-waiting clutched Kaiser tighter, her arms trembling. "Your Majesty... please... he is still but a child—"

"Silence," Rosaline commanded, her tone cutting through the room like a blade of frost. "You speak as though he bears a future. He does not. That creature... is but a hollow shell in royal silk."

Kaiser, still resting in the maid's arms, blinked slowly. His eyes, too young to understand the words... yet old enough to feel the rejection, began to glisten.

"I look into his eyes," Rosaline continued, "and all I see is my regret. My regret of giving birth to him. A child born to disgrace."

The emperor's voice dropped into something colder—something final.

"Rose will be our legacy. Her name will rise with the sun itself. And that... thing"—he gestured toward Kaiser—"will only drag her into the dirt with his worthlessness. He does not deserve the right to breathe the same air as my daughter."

Rosaline nodded slowly, her gaze never leaving the boy.

"If I had known," she whispered, "I would have ended the pregnancy... the moment I knew he lived within me."

The lady-in-waiting flinched, her lips trembling, tears pooling in her eyes.

"My only regret..." Rosaline's voice turned to a whisper. "...is giving birth to someone as worthless as you, Kaiser."

Then came the emperor's final words, uttered with sovereign finality.

"Bring Varyn."

Moments later, footsteps echoed through the hall. A tall figure cloaked in deep crimson entered and knelt without raising his gaze.

"You summoned me, Your Majesty."

"Varyn," the emperor spoke, "you have served me with unwavering loyalty. Now, I ask this of you."

He raised his hand and pointed toward the child.

**"Kill my son. Kaiser."**

Varyn hesitated only for a moment before lowering his head further.

"...As you command."

The lady-in-waiting gasped, stepping back with Kaiser in her arms.

"Please! My Empress, have mercy—he is still your son!"

But Rosaline did not flinch.

**"If you hesitate, Varyn..." her voice was ice, "then I shall do it myself. With these very hands of mine."**

She looked once more at the child who had come from her womb... and saw nothing in him worth saving.

"Erase him. Let his name be forgotten before it is ever spoken."

Varyn rose, and stepped forward.

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If I could've stopped you from having me, I would have.

Maybe then... maybe then you'd be happy, Mother.

I used to think birthdays were supposed to be about celebration. Candles, gifts, laughter.

But mine?

It was more like a quiet funeral for the life you could've had—if I never existed.

You didn't even have to say it out loud.

Every look you gave me said enough.

Like I was a burden you were forced to carry... and never managed to drop.

I never cried when you hit me. That wasn't what hurt.

I cried when you looked through me—like I wasn't even worth the pain in your hand.

Every time I got sick, I used to wonder if that would be the one that took me.

Some days... I hoped it would.

Not because I wanted to die.

But because maybe then... you'd finally be free of me.

I didn't learn how to ask for help. Not once.

Because I was raised in a world where no one came when I needed them. So, I built my own walls. Patched up my own wounds. Bit down on pain until it stopped hurting.

That's why I fight alone.

That's why I only depend on myself. Because when I looked around, there was never anyone standing behind me. Not once. Not ever.

Then...

There was that day.

**You told me—with a straight face—that you should've ended the pregnancy.**

You said I ruined your body, your title, your happiness.

And that's the day something inside me stopped.

I stopped thinking of myself as a child.

Stopped thinking of myself as your child.

Stopped thinking of myself as... human.

What kind of child is told by their parents they wish to have them aborted?

Since then, I've just been walking forward.

One step after another.

A name without meaning.

No longer human.

No longer Kaiser.

Just... the thing you regretted giving life to.

It's ironic, isn't it?

She was the miracle. The wanted one.

And me? I was the curse. The unwanted child.

But seventeen years have passed since the day I was born.

And now?

Even at my weakest... no one in this world stands as my equal.

Not because they're weak. But because I've never tried.

Because I've always held back.

Every fight I've won—I won with ease.

Because no one... No one has ever given me a reason to try.

The truth is simple. The truth is cruel.

Your peak... has always been my average.

You celebrated her for what she was.

But you feared me for what I could become.

Now I'm done hiding it.

This war?

I will end it alone.

I will shift the board I built, and rewrite the game I rigged.

I don't need allies.

I don't need love.

I don't even need a reason.

I'll prove it—again—that none of you were ever worth my effort.

Because to me...

You're just too unworthy for me to try.

Game over.

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4/9/2017 - 11:53 AM

Levi's Perspective:

Walking next to Alina feels like walking next to a moving brick wall of ice. A really pretty, sword-wielding block of ice that looks like she could kill me with one flick of her wrist.

Fun stuff.

"So," I said, stretching my arms behind my head, "the Ice Queen herself decides to tag along all the way from Sylvaris to my town? I'm flattered. Honestly. If I didn't know better, I'd say you missed me."

Alina didn't even blink. Just kept walking, eyes forward, cloak fluttering behind her like she was modeling for a winter apocalypse catalog.

"I do not possess emotions to miss anyone, Levi," she said flatly. "You were simply on the most strategic path."

"Ah, right. Of course. It's always the strategic path with you." I grinned. "Nothing to do with how charming I am? My award-winning smile? My god-tier hair?"

She glanced at me once—just once—and replied, "Your ego is insufferable. You have achieved nothing worth smiling about."

I clutched my chest like she'd stabbed me. "Ouch. Straight through the heart. You've got a real gift for ruining confidence, you know that?"

"Confidence is a fragile illusion. It's better to shatter it than rely on it."

Yeah, definitely fun stuff.

We passed the outer walls of Levinton. The guards bowed slightly when they saw me—naturally. I'm kind of a big deal around here. My town afterall, sword-saint of God Speed, fastest hands in the region, undefeated in all combat, rumored to be able to cut lightning itself—

"You've been unusually quiet since we left Sylvaris," I said, side-eyeing her. "What'd you find in Sylvia's office? You've been glued to my hip since."

She didn't stop walking. "Irrelevant."

"C'mon. Just a peek. Was it a love letter? Secret plans? Was Sylvia hiding her real age?" I leaned in. "Or—was it from your master?"

That made her pause. Just for a moment. But enough for me to notice.

"You are prying," she said sharply.

"Which means I'm close," I smirked.

"I am here for one reason. I have a job."

"Oh yeah?" I kicked a loose stone on the road as we reached the town square. "What kind of job makes you follow me all the way to Levinton like some ice-cold guardian angel?"

She looked at me like she was considering whether it was worth explaining or stabbing me to make me shut up.

"To protect a girl named Celia," she said at last, voice colder than usual. "And to assist Levinton in the grotesque war."

I stopped. Dead in my tracks. Did she just say—

"Wait. Celia? That Celia?" I tilted my head. "Why her?"

"Do not ask questions you are not ready to handle the answers to."

Oh good. We're back to vague death threats and cryptic warnings. My favorite.

"So let me get this straight," I said, catching up again. "You're telling me you—the ruthless, no-nonsense, zero-heartbeat Alina—are risking your time, your life, and your ever-so-limited social skills... to protect one girl?"

"Yes."

"...You're not possessed or anything, right? Blink twice if you need an exorcist."

She looked at me like I was a mildly annoying stain on her cloak.

"I am not doing this for the girl. I am doing this because the outcome aligns with my goals. Levinton must not fall. And the girl is an asset."

I raised an eyebrow. "So she is important."

Alina gave no reply. Just continued walking like she was walking through a battlefield made of idiots. Which, to be fair, Levinton sometimes feels like.

We crossed into the heart of the town now—stone streets buzzing with adventurers, market stalls, and townsfolk. The distant sound of hammering echoed through the smithy district. Reinforcements were happening. Everyone was preparing. The grotesques were closing in.

I couldn't help but glance at her.

Cold. Calculated. Heartless. And somehow still walking beside me like we were old friends.

Not that she'd ever admit it.

"...You're weird, Alina," I muttered.

"I prefer efficient."

"Yeah, well, efficient people don't follow me halfway across the region unless they want something. You're not fooling anyone."

"I'm not trying to."

"...Tch. You're impossible to argue with, you know that?"

She didn't answer. Just walked ahead, cloak dancing behind her like a blade slicing through silence.

And me?

I smirked and followed, hands in my pockets, boots hitting the stone streets of my hometown.

Levinton's in danger. Celia's in it somehow. And the Ice Queen's playing bodyguard.

This is gonna be fun.

Celia's Perspective:

I clasped my hands together and gently picked up the cold river water, splashing it onto my face. A soft gasp left my lips.

"Ahhh... that feels way too good..."

The coolness instantly refreshed my skin, washing off the layers of sweat and maybe a bit of exhaustion too. My legs gave in as I dropped down on the grass, letting my arms fall behind me to lean back. I stared up at the sky—soft blue melting into orange. Was it still morning? Or was it almost evening? Time blurred when your brain's been melted by cursed magic and a fifteen-kilometer run.

Ugh. Fifteen. Freaking. Kilometers. Who made that rule? Me. I did. Stupid past me. I hate her.

I pouted a little and pressed my fingers against my cheeks. They were still a bit red from the run... or maybe...



sigh

After meeting Aldric... things haven't been the same. Not inside my head, not inside my heart. He said some stuff—scary stuff, actually—but also kinda true. I didn't want to admit it, but...

That one day when I accidentally blurted out my feelings for Kaiser out loud—!!!

My cheeks lit up like a fire spell gone wrong. "Ughh!" I squeaked, flailing my arms around like a little girl trying to beat away the embarrassment. "Why did I say thattt?!"

No no no, it was a slip of the tongue. That doesn't count as a real confession, right?

I mean, it's not like I meant to scream out that I love him in the middle of a storm. That was just heat of the moment! Emotional adrenaline! Totally not my fault!

...Right?

But then again... Aldric said something that made my heart stop for a second.

If you don't get stronger, someone else will take him. Or worse... he'll be gone before you reach him.

Zain also told me Kaiser might've been captured by the grotesques. That word alone makes my stomach twist. Just imagining Kai... locked away, or worse—

No.

Nope. Not happening.

I clenched my fist, raising it in front of my face. Burn marks. Scars. Faint, but there. Traces of my new training routine. My promise to myself. The road to strength isn't supposed to be gentle.

I wake up at 5 AM. Always.

Quick bite, then I dive into cursed magic. I study the theory while channeling my own negative emotions. That alone could break me if I wasn't careful. From 5 AM to 11. That's six hours of emotional chaos wrapped in spellwork.

Then comes elemental magic—five hours of controlling nature and fire and everything in between. No breaks unless I collapse. Ends at 5 PM.

After that? Chain work. My physical strength training. I slash trees, train movement, plan scenarios in my head. That lasts until 7 PM.

And then the final boss of the day...

The dreaded 15 km run. The muscle torture. The push-ups. The sit-ups. The 'Celia nearly dies again' arc.

Finishes by 10 PM.

Dinner. Sleep.

Except... not really.

Even in my sleep, I train. In my dream realm—what I call my throne area—I have infinite cursed energy there. I fight shadows of my past, future enemies, and even my fears. It's never-ending. And honestly... yeah.

Maybe I'm obsessed getting stronger. But it's not just about strength anymore.

It's about him.

Because Kaiser...

You were the one who held me when I was falling. The one who didn't look away when I cried alone. When everyone saw the fake smile I forced on my face, you noticed the sadness underneath.

You comforted me when I didn't ask for help.

You cared when no one else even noticed and lied to me.

You're...

You're my reason to fight.

And I will get stronger. I will come for you. Because if I were in danger, you'd burn the world down just to reach me. So now it's my turn.

I wiped the sweat off my brow again, exhaling. The breeze carried the scent of wet grass, dirt, and maybe—maybe—something else.

Wait.

Was that... footsteps?

I blinked and turned my head slowly.

A figure approached through the trees.

Black hair.

Long black coat. High collar.

Eyes... piercing blue.

My heart skipped. My breath caught in my throat.

No...

It can't be—

My body trembled. My legs didn't know whether to stand or kneel.

"K... K-Kaiser...?" I whispered, voice breaking like fragile glass. My red eyes met his. Hope began to rise in my chest.

But then... he smiled.

Oh gods. That smile. It was real. It was him.

He was about to speak.

And I...

I couldn't help the tears that welled in my eyes.

"Is that... you, Kai?" I asked again, this time with a smile trembling on my lips. A genuine one. The kind that hurts because it's been too long.

Because maybe—

Just maybe—

He had returned to me.

And this time... I wasn't letting go.

## **Chapter 57 - Before I Become Myself**

### **Lucas's Perspective:**

**4/9/2017 - 4:32 PM**

After arriving here, I took an inn to take some rest from my journey. But it was short ended...

You ever have one of those days where your system acts like your personal trainer, life coach, therapist, and also your biggest hater? Yeah. That was today.

Morning hit like a slap—no alarm, just pure guilt that I was slacking. So I asked the System what we were doing for training. Should've known better.

「Daily Quest Accepted: 'Grow a Brain.' Objectives: Meditate under magical pressure for 3 hours, analyze three different elemental compositions in the air, and successfully conjure a focused flame using zero chant. Rewards: +1 Intelligence, +2 Magic Control. Penalty for Failure: Eternal shame and me laughing at you for the next 24 hours.」

"You know, you could just ask nicely," I muttered, dragging myself out of the inn bed.

「You could just not be a dumbass, but here we are.」

Fair.

Afternoon came with a heatwave and some minor town chaos—kids chasing after a wild dog, a merchant yelling about stolen apples, and some sword saint slicing a training dummy like he was trying to cook it for dinner. Typical Rinascita. Me? I was sitting cross-legged under a mana-infused waterfall. Yes. A damn waterfall.

System said it was "spiritually beneficial." I called it "an aggressive shower."

Halfway through conjuring my fifth flame, my nose started bleeding.

「Congrats. Your brain is finally overheating. Achievement unlocked: Firebrain.」

"You're gonna keep roasting me while I'm doing your sadistic homework?"

「I roast you because you're doing my sadistic homework. Keep going, fireboy.」

By the time the sun started dipping, I had not only mastered the flame spell but hit a new level. I could feel it—the slight tingle in my core, the glow on my hand, the way my clothes were suspiciously more flammable.

**\*\*Status Menu:\*\***

**\*\*Name:\*\*** Lucas

**\*\*Class:\*\*** Mage

**\*\*Level:\*\*** 8

**\*\*Age:\*\*** 15

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**\*\*Attributes:\*\***

- **\*\*Strength:\*\*** 5
- **\*\*Agility:\*\*** 6
- **\*\*Endurance:\*\*** 6
- **\*\*Perception:\*\*** 7
- **\*\*Intelligence:\*\*** 12
- **\*\*Mana:\*\*** 8
- **\*\*Divine Creation:\*\*** 3

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**\*\*Skills:\*\***

- Light-Elemental Magic
- Mana Control (Lv. 4)
- Divine Protection of Chaos

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**\*\*Notes:\*\***

- **\*\*HP:\*\*** 350/350
- **\*\*MP:\*\*** 450/284

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7:58 PM – Banquet Preparation

"System, get me a suit. I need to look like I don't smell like some hobo."

「Deploying: 'Rich Bastard' Package.」

With a shimmer, a sleek black suit materialized on me, snug but stylish. I checked the mirror. Damn. I looked like someone who either had money or killed people who did. Hair? Done. Styled back with just the right messy class. Smelled like mint and threat.

「Hair Gel infused with 'Presence Enhancement' and mild intimidation. You're welcome.」

"Perfect. Let's go."

8:12 PM – Not at the Banquet

I... may have taken the wrong turn. Ended up one alley away from a slum where a guy with no shoes offered me "enchanted rocks." Politely declined, ran the opposite way, and finally—finally—reached the gates of the noble's mansion.

"System, please tell me I don't smell like poverty."

「You smell like anxiety and desperation. Spraying 'Noble Aura' cologne... now.」

The Banquet

The mansion was straight out of a fairytale. Golden chandeliers, floating crystals spinning lazily in the air, music being played by a band of elves with instruments that looked like they cost more than my life.

Nobles laughed in their tailored clothes, and elegant women sipped from wine glasses while tossing their hair back like shampoo commercials. There were adventurers too—lean, powerful types. Muscles on display, mana pulsing in the air around them. I spotted at least two A-ranks, judging by their aura. A few B-ranks too, flexing in tight outfits while acting like they didn't want attention. Classic.

Me? I was near the edge of the main hall, sipping something from a glass.

「Hey. You're underage.」

"It's orange juice."

「That's what they said about love in your last life and you still ended up crying in a bathtub listening to sad music.」

"Bro, I'm literally surrounded by nobles. You want me to spit this out like a fool?"

「You can not be a clown for one night. Just try.」

I almost dropped the glass from laughing, but I managed to hold it together and casually sipped my not-wine.

The Noble Arrives

The crowd shifted. People straightened up. Conversations halted like someone had unplugged the party.

Then he walked in.

Lord Avelric.

Tall. Silver hair slicked back. Dark crimson suit with a gold-stitched crest on the chest—Rinascita's flame emblem. His gaze could slice steel. The man moved like he owned the air itself.

He approached me.

Oh no.

「Do not say anything stupid.」

"You act like I planned to."

「You exist, therefore I worry.」

"Lucas Reinhardt," the Lord greeted with a tone that held both curiosity and authority. "We've heard whispers of your talents. I'd like a moment of your time. There is... something I believe only you can do."

I blinked, then smiled politely.

"Of course, my Lord. I'm honored."

Inside, though?

Bro what the hell is going on—

Meanwhile...

**Eve's Perspective:**

**Rinascita, 8:30 PM**

The stars above glimmered like scattered glass across the dark silk sky. Their soft light reflected in puddles on the cobbled streets, the air a gentle chill brushing against my

cheeks. Lanterns hung lazily from wooden poles, casting golden halos along the path. I walked alone, smiling softly to myself as strangers passed by—chatting, laughing, living.

Their warmth didn't reach me. Not in a bad way... I just didn't need it right now.

I pulled my hood back just a little, letting the cold night brush against my pink hair as it swayed behind me. My boots tapped lightly on the stone road with each step. Rinascita was beautiful at night. Alive but not loud. Like it was whispering secrets only a few could hear.

This is something I have to do alone.

I held that thought gently in my chest, letting it settle there like a decision already made.

Lucas doesn't need to be dragged into this... I don't want him tangled in something that's only mine. This—this is my journey. If I want to find the truth about my past... I'll have to walk through it myself. Even if it's painful.

My fingers curled slightly around my sleeves. I kept walking.

Then—my legs froze mid-step.

The memory struck me like ice down my back.

The nightmare.

It always came in pieces... but last night, the images were clear.

Blood. Screams. My mother's gentle hands, now limp and lifeless. My father's protective stance as he stood between me and those things—those monsters, demons, twisted creatures with red eyes and cruel teeth. I watched them tear everything apart.

And then, me. Helpless. Frozen. Next.

My body trembled. Not from fear. No... not just fear.

I bit my lip, trying to keep the pressure inside. It wasn't just a nightmare. It couldn't be. The way it felt, the way I remembered it even now... it had to be real.

A memory.

The pain in my chest throbbed again.

And then—his face came to me.

Not clearly. Never clearly.



Just the sense of him. The boy who saved me.

Strong. Smart. Brave. So calm, even when I was crying. He didn't speak much, but... he stood in front of me. Just like my father did.

He protected me like... like a friend. My first real friend.

My lips moved before I noticed.

"...But why did you leave me before I woke up?"

A breeze passed, and I hugged myself gently, as if it could hold the answer.

I thought you would stay.

My heartbeat thudded louder now. Strange. It didn't hurt—but it felt... too full. Like something was alive in my chest.

I placed my hand on my heart. Slowly, instinctively.

And with the other hand, I unclipped the tiny locket hanging around my neck. It clicked open, and there—like always—was the picture.

A girl smiling like she didn't know pain. That was me.

And next to her... him. His face ripped off from the picture, but the two of us wore the same outfit—some kind of uniform. Matching.

I smiled faintly, almost without meaning to.

"I wish I could meet you, mysterious friend..." I whispered.

Even without his face, just seeing the shape of him in the photo made me feel... safe. Warm.

Who are you really...?

Before I could fall deeper into thought, a soft noise broke through the night.

A small snuffle. Muffled sobs.

I turned my head toward the alley to my right. Narrow. Dimly lit. Quiet.

Putting the locket away, I stepped toward the sound.

My boots barely made a sound now, my steps careful. As I reached deeper into the alley, my eyes adjusted to the dark—and there she was.

A little girl.

No older than seven. Curled into herself, hugging her knees. Her shoulders trembled with each sob.

"...Mommy..." she whimpered between her tears.

She looked so small. So lost.

Just like I had been.

No. Not this time.

This time... I would be the one who steps forward.

I crouched down slowly, careful not to startle her.

"Hey," I said, softly—like the wind speaking to a flower. "It's alright... You're safe now."

The girl looked up, her eyes wide and filled with fear. She didn't run, but her tiny body shook.

She was scared—but she hadn't moved.

Good.

I smiled gently and tilted my head, trying to show her she didn't need to be afraid of me.

"I promise... I won't let anything hurt you."

The little girl's wide, tear-filled eyes looked up at me. Her soft sniffles were like echoes from a time I couldn't forget. The way her tiny fingers clutched the hem of her dress... it made something warm stir quietly in my chest.

"It's alright," I whispered again, kneeling gently before her, "You're not alone anymore, okay?"

She didn't reply, but she stared at me, still hugging her knees. Her lips were quivering.

"My name's Eve," I said, slowly tilting my head with a soft smile, "And you?"

The girl hesitated, glancing down before murmuring through broken sobs, "...L-Lilly..."

Her voice was so small... so timid, like a candle flickering in the wind.

"That's a very pretty name, Lilly," I said, my tone light and soothing, "It suits you."

She blinked, confused for a second—as if no one had ever told her that before.

I reached out but didn't touch her, just placing my hand gently on the ground in front of her.

"Can you tell me what happened, sweetie? Where's your mommy and daddy?"

She bit her lip, then whispered, "I-I lost them... y-yesterday..."

My breath caught. "You've been here... all alone?"

She nodded slowly. "We came here f-for... for v-vacation... mommy said it was a s-special place... but... but it was crowded, and... and I I-let go of her hand... and then I couldn't f-find her again..."

Tears welled up in her eyes once more.

I swallowed gently, my heart aching at every word. Her small sobs were like mirrors of a past that clung to me in dreams. I wanted to cry too... but not now.

"I'm so sorry, Lilly..." I whispered, brushing her messy bangs to the side gently. "That must've been so scary..."

"I... I waited," she whispered, "but n-no one came..."

I reached forward carefully and placed my arms around her small frame, holding her with soft warmth. "You were so brave, Lilly... waiting all on your own. You did so well."

She shuddered against me, finally letting out a breath like she'd been holding it all this time.

"Come on," I said gently, pulling back just enough to offer her my hand, "Let's find your parents together, alright?"

Lilly nodded quietly and tried to stand—but she stumbled, her leg giving out.

"Ah—!"

I caught her just in time, steadying her tiny body with both hands.

"Careful," I whispered with a smile, "Don't move too much, okay?"

She nodded, a little embarrassed.

I knelt again, looking at the small bruise on her knee. It wasn't too deep, but enough to make walking painful for her.

I took a breath and gently lifted my hand over the wound.

The magic flowed easily.

"❀O gentle stars above, cradle the pain with light, mend the broken with your warmth...  
Celestial Bloom. ❀"

Soft silver light poured from my palm like moonlight on a calm lake. The bruise began to fade under its warmth, disappearing like mist in the sun.

Lilly watched with wide eyes, her pain slowly replaced by wonder. She smiled, small and sweet.

"There you go," I said with a wink. "All better."

She nodded shyly, brushing her dress—but it was dusty, torn slightly at the edges and stained with the grime of the alley.

I frowned gently. "Hmm..."

"Hold still for just a second, Lilly," I said kindly.

I lifted both hands this time.

A soft swirl of glowing water rose from my palms, shimmering like dew. The liquid danced and twirled as it flowed around her body without touching her skin—washing away the dirt and stains gently, as if kissed by rain.

Then, with a small flick of my fingers, a warm breeze swept in—soft and controlled—followed by a comforting heat, like sitting beside a campfire. Her dress dried instantly, the cloth fluffing up warm and clean.

Lilly gasped lightly, looking at her now clean clothes. Her eyes lit up with something more than surprise—relief.

"Thank you..." she whispered, barely audible, but heartfelt.

Then, without a word, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me in a small, quiet hug.

My arms instinctively wrapped around her as I smiled, holding her close.

"I've got you now," I whispered softly into her hair, "You're safe."

We walked hand-in-hand after that, her small hand gripping mine tightly. We didn't say much, just... shared the quiet, peaceful night together.

As we passed by a food stall, I felt her grip tighten. I looked down and followed her gaze.

She was staring at the freshly baked sweet buns on display. Her lips parted slightly, her eyes wide with longing.

Her stomach growled quietly.

I giggled softly. "You want one?"

She looked away, cheeks blushing as she nodded shyly.

I led her up to the stall and bought one. The moment I handed it to her, she stared at it like it was the most magical thing in the world.

"Th-thank you..." she mumbled, her voice muffled as she took the first bite. Her cheeks puffed a little as she chewed—too cute to ignore.

"You're welcome, little star," I smiled, gently ruffling her hair.

We walked on like that, her chewing quietly, her other hand still holding mine.

After a little while, I glanced down. "Lilly? Can I ask something?"

She nodded, still chewing.

"Where are you from?"

She swallowed and said softly, "I'm from a v-village called Rivermere... Mama and Papa brought me here so we could explore the town together..."

Her voice trembled slightly again. "I-I wanted to see the stars with them... from the tower..."

I knelt again beside her, looking into her eyes.

"I promise," I said gently, "We'll find them. You're not alone anymore, okay?"

She blinked, and her lower lip quivered.

"You're kind... like the fairies in stories..." she whispered.

I giggled softly, brushing her cheek with my thumb. "Not a fairy, silly. Just a girl who understands what it feels like to be lost."

Her fingers tightened around mine again.

"...But I'm not lost anymore," she whispered.

And for a moment, under the starlit sky of Rinascita, my heart felt light.

I held Lilly's small hand in mine, her fingers so delicate, like petals swaying in the wind. Her other hand clutched the last of the sweet bun I bought her earlier. She had such tiny bites. So patient and shy.

We walked past small stalls glowing with lantern light, the scent of spices and sweet syrupy bread mixing in the air. Shopkeepers smiled at passersby, the chatter of families and laughter of children echoing down the narrow cobblestone paths. Rinascita was alive, and yet... gentle.

"Lilly," I asked softly, tilting my head as I looked down at her. "What do you like to do?"

She glanced up at me, blinked once, then looked down quickly again. "U-Um... I like drawing... animals... and clouds..."

I smiled warmly. "Mm, that sounds really cute. What do you draw them with?"

"Sticks," she said shyly. "In the dirt."

I couldn't help but giggle softly. "That's very creative. I used to do that too, when I was little." I paused, then whispered, "Maybe... you can draw me sometime?"

She blinked up again, her lips curling just slightly into a soft smile. "...Okay."

We passed a candlemaker's stall, glowing with tiny flames dancing in colored jars. The light painted our faces gold as we walked, and I couldn't help but glance at her again. The way she admired everything made the night feel... safe.

But then—

I stopped.

My breath froze. My steps halted on instinct, like my body had touched cold steel.

Lilly nearly bumped into my side. "Eve?" she whispered.

In front of us, a figure stood still across the path, where the crowd had thinned. The flickering lamplight barely reached him. But I saw it.

His forearms—those veins. Not red. Not natural. They were cold. Blue. Like frozen rivers running under skin.

And his eyes—fractured. Like glass shattered inward, as if even his gaze had been broken by something he could never forget.

My hand tightened around Lilly's.

"...We need to move," I whispered.

"Why?" Lilly asked, innocently looking up. "What's wrong?"

But I couldn't answer her.

My heart began to race.

The cold in my limbs wasn't from the night anymore.

Something pulled at my chest.

A memory.

I saw trees, dark and reaching, shadows swallowing the world. I was younger—thirteen? Fourteen? My arms were scraped, my legs numb. My body was being dragged across the forest floor.

Hands in black sleeves. That same uniform. Their laughter echoing behind me. Sadistic. Mocking.

"Please..." I had cried. "S-Stop..."

But they didn't.

My hair was pulled, and I screamed—slammed into a tree. Bark scraped my back. Rain poured endlessly. My vision blurred.

A slap echoed, ringing through my skull. Again. And again.

And they watched. Five of them.

And the boy in front of me—strong, smiling with hate in his eyes—he...

"Eve?"

Lilly's voice cut through the noise.

I blinked.

Tears were at the corner of my eyes.

She pointed ahead at the man with the fractured eyes. "That's Azrael," she said gently. "He saved me this morning... from the mean people..."

My eyes widened.

"A-Azrael...?" I echoed. My voice trembled without permission.

She nodded with the warmest smile. "He's nice... I think."

I looked at her expression—so full of trust. A fragile kind of faith. One you don't question when you're that small. And I...

I turned my gaze forward.

He was walking toward us now.

His face was neutral—expressionless. Almost... empty. But his eyes—those broken shards—never moved from mine. Locked.

And in them, I saw—

That night again.

Another glimpse.

The boy's hand rose in the air.

I closed my eyes. Ready to be hit.

But—

Footsteps.

Not theirs.

Not mine.

From the rain, someone was walking.

I saw him between the blur of raindrops. His expression, unreadable. Cold.

Murderous.



His eyes—void blue. Empty. But aware.

His fists? Covered in blood.

So much blood the rain couldn't wash it away.

The boy who hurt me froze. The others turned pale.

I remembered only one word that left my lips in that memory.

"K-Kai—"

And then everything went black.

Back in the present, I opened my eyes.

Azrael stood still now—just a few steps away.

The night was silent.

The warmth was gone.

But I didn't flinch.

Not anymore.

I stood in front of Lilly, my hand still holding hers.

If he was that same presence from that night...

Then it was my turn to ask—

"Who are you... really?"

### **Lucas's Perspective:**

Avelric led me out to the balcony like we were about to discuss top-secret world affairs, or maybe which brand of wine was better at making people forget their sad noble lives. The night was cool, stars scattered across the sky like someone spilled a bag of glitter on black velvet. Fancy.

The noise from the ballroom faded as the thick glass doors closed behind us. Just the two of us and the sound of overpriced fountains below.

"Lucas," Avelric said, swirling his drink like some aristocratic sommelier. "You've made quite a name for yourself. Heavenly Sorcerer, they call you. And after seeing what you did during the Helios Disaster... I must say, I'm impressed."

I held the wine glass the system insisted was "non-alcoholic," pretending I knew what to do with it. I even did the fake swirl. Elegance 101.

"I'm honored, Lord Avelric," I replied, forcing my voice to sound just the right amount of noble. "But I'm just doing what I can."

We clinked glasses. I took a sip, and the system immediately chimed in.

「 That's fermented. You're underage, dipstick. 」

I nearly spit it back into the glass.

"It's orange juice," I whispered under my breath, eyes scanning for judgmental butlers.

「 Oh yeah? And I'm an air fryer. 」

Bro. I managed to hold my poker face, but I could feel my soul crumbling.

Avelric took another sip, staring off toward the town's skyline. "I'll get straight to it. Grotesques have been sighted... near Rinascita. Marking places. Preparing."

I lowered the glass. "Marking?"

He nodded. "Like how a demon circles its prey before a hunt."

I leaned against the balcony railing, my eyes narrowing. "And what's that got to do with me?"

He chuckled. "You were one of the top five scorers in Solerenne Academy of Sorcery. One of the best of the best, in the entire world."

"...Top five," I said coldly, turning slightly toward him.

"Ah—of course," he corrected with a half-smile. "Didn't mean to insult you. Though honestly, the one who got the top score... probably cheated his way there."

My eye twitched.

"...Cheated?" I repeated slowly.

He nodded confidently. "Yes. A complete nobody. Below average for three straight years. And suddenly in the finale, he wins—barely. He must've cheated. Don't think too much about it. You're clearly superior."

I didn't respond. My fingers tapped against the railing, slow and deliberate.

Cheated, huh? Barely won? I thought to myself. I don't think a **perfect score** is a "bare win," my guy.

「 Best not to think about HIM. Focus on the grotesque demon-thingies instead of your emotional damage. 」

I exhaled, long and quiet.

"Why are you bringing up the past?" I finally asked.

Avelric's tone shifted, more curious now. "Because I was looking for you... and the girl. The pink-haired one from the Academy."

I blinked. "...Her?"

He nodded. "Yes, the girl who stood next to you in the rankings. Pink hair, blue eyes. I can't recall her name."

A name that burned every time I heard it.

"...Her name was Elfina," I said softly. "The most gifted celestial sorcerer the world ever saw."

There was a long pause. He looked at me, puzzled.

"She is...?" he prompted.

I looked down at the streetlights below. The town looked peaceful. Oblivious.

"She passed away," I said, a bitter breath slipping from my lips. "In the Asura Crisis. Two years ago. She's no longer in the world."

Avelric looked visibly taken aback. "... I apologize, Lucas. I didn't know."

"It's fine," I replied, quickly. Too quickly. "What did you need me for?"

Avelric gathered himself, putting his drink down. "Right. I needed your help with the grotesques. I believe they're planning to raid Rinascita next—kill and eat the people, perhaps even worse."

He placed a hand on my shoulder, his voice steady.

"If you help me stop them, not only will I pay you handsomely... but I'll owe you one. And in this city, my favors are worth more than gold."

I stared ahead for a moment.

This city. These people. The air that still held memories of someone I lost. A promise I made—to protect.

"I'll need all the info you've got," I said finally. "Anything you've found. And I want access to your scouts."

"Of course," Avelric nodded. "You'll have everything."

「 Here we go again. The emo arc returns. 」

I ignored it this time. Just this once.

Because if grotesques were coming for Rinascita—

—I'd be there, waiting.

Avelric stepped back slightly, straightening his posture. He gave me a long look, clearly trying to gauge my reaction.

"I was planning to discuss the grotesques further, but..." he trailed off, clearly waiting for me to say something.

I leaned against the railing, staring out at the stars above us. "Actually, there's something I need to mention, Lord Avelric."

He raised an eyebrow, a signal for me to go on.

"I'm looking for a party," I said casually, tapping the rim of my glass. "You know, a group to work with on... certain matters."

Avelric chuckled softly. "A party? For what purpose would someone like you need a party? I imagine you could handle most situations on your own."

I sighed, my fingers tightening around the glass. "I'm hunting the leviathan."

Avelric's expression faltered for just a second before it shifted back to his composed noble demeanor. "The leviathan?" he repeated, voice tinged with disbelief. "Lucas, that creature has never been defeated or even successfully hunted in centuries. Anyone who tried, either vanished without a trace or became its next meal."

I gave a cold smile, a wicked glint in my eyes as I glanced back at him. "Its reign of fear will be crushed by me."

Avelric let out a small laugh, though it was slightly strained, as if unsure whether I was joking or deadly serious. "Bold words, Lucas. Very bold indeed. But I believe in your abilities. If anyone could, it would be you."

I nodded, eyes narrowing as I considered the leviathan. "It's only a matter of time before it falls. And when it does, I'll make sure it's by my hand."

He placed his glass down gently, giving me an almost conspiratorial smile. "In that case, I will offer you my full support. If you help me deal with the grotesque threat, I will ensure you have all the resources and assistance you need for your hunt."

I raised my glass in acknowledgment. "Agreed."

We shook hands, sealing the deal under the cool night sky.

With a nod, Avelric turned to reenter the banquet hall, leaving me standing on the balcony, alone. The sounds of the celebration continued behind me, a reminder that the world didn't stop for anyone—not even for the problems waiting to unfold.

I took a long, contemplative sip from my glass, feeling the weight of the situation settle in. The grotesques would be a problem, but they weren't the only thing I had to worry about. The leviathan, the grotesques, this whole city—they were all part of a bigger puzzle.

"System," I muttered, still gazing at the stars. "What do we do next?"

「 Well, first we keep an eye on the grotesques, protect the town, and maybe... just maybe, find some suitable people to join you in your quest. You know, someone who doesn't scream 'hero' at every turn. 」

I smirked. "Oh, I'm a hero now, huh? That's funny."

「 Of course you are, Lucas. A big, bad hero who saves the day and gets the girl, maybe. 」

I shook my head, smiling to myself. "Yeah, I'm a hero alright. Better get used to it."

「 Oh, I'm sure I will. Just don't go getting all noble and preachy on me. It's too early for that. 」

I laughed, a bit more bitterly this time. "Yeah, I know. But someone has to protect this town from whatever's coming."

「 You do that, Lucas. You're the hero, after all. 」

I blinked, surprised by the system's shift in tone. For a second, it didn't roast me or crack a joke. It just... agreed. And that threw me off.

I shook my head. "Wait, hold up. You just called me a hero. What's going on? Are you getting soft on me?"

There was a pause before the system responded.

「 Nah, man. Just calling it like I see it. You're a hero, whether you like it or not. Now go be one. 」

I let out a small chuckle. "Well, thanks for the endorsement."

I looked up at the sky again, the constellations reflecting a quiet serenity I couldn't quite feel. Not with everything on the line.

"I'll find the cure soon. Just wait for me, Mother."

And with that, the party continued below, unaware of the storm that was quietly gathering on the horizon. But me? I knew. And I wasn't going to let it break me.

Not this time.

— Eve's Perspective —

Azrael's voice cut through the silence like a blade through silk.

"Come with me," he said flatly, eyes lowering to Lilly. "I've found your parents."

His tone was devoid of warmth—no kindness, no emotion. Just... words. Meant to be obeyed.

Lilly's eyes lit up, her fingers twitching in my hand. "O-Okay..." she whispered, the corners of her lips curving upward in that soft, shy way of hers.

But I tightened my grip on her hand.

I pulled her back, gently but firmly.

"Don't trust him so easily, Lilly," I said, my voice calm... but guarded. I kept my gaze locked on his.

His face didn't shift. Not even a flicker. Only those fractured eyes stared into mine like he was reading through a window instead of a person.

"How can we trust you?" I asked, slowly.

He blinked once.

Then turned his head slightly, like I wasn't even worth the full turn.

"We?" he repeated. "I don't recall asking you."

His voice was emotionless. Sharp. He wasn't just distant—he was empty. As if care, concern... didn't even exist in his vocabulary.

I felt a chill crawl up my back.

"But she's with me," I replied, not raising my tone, not trembling—but firm. "If you expect her to follow you, you answer me too."

His eyes narrowed just slightly. "Then teach her better judgment," he muttered. "You let her starve in a corner until I saved her."

That one hit deeper than I expected.

My lips parted, but—

"Eve..." Lilly's voice slipped in like a soft wind brushing away the storm.

I turned, and she was looking at me—eyes wide, hopeful, like I was her shield, her safe place. Her little hands clutched mine again.

"We can trust him," she said sweetly.

I hesitated. Still unsure.

But then, she whispered something that froze me more than Azrael's stare ever could.

**"...Big sister."**

My eyes widened slightly.

Her voice had no hesitation. No fear.

Just... faith.

My heart trembled.

"...Alright," I whispered, gently nodding. "We'll follow him. But I'm holding your hand the whole time, okay?"

She nodded.

As we walked, I felt it. The rhythm in my chest—thump, thump—a little too fast.

I kept my hand wrapped gently around Lilly's, but she glanced up at me and tilted her head curiously. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I blinked, surprised by her perception.

"I'm fine," I whispered with a small smile.

Then her eyes trailed to the necklace around my neck.

The heart-shaped locket.

Her tiny finger pointed at it, shy but curious. "Umm... What's that, big sister?"

I paused.

Then reached for the chain, letting the locket rest in my palm.

"It's something precious to me," I said softly, pressing the clasp and opening it.

Inside was a photo—slightly faded from time. A younger version of me, smiling. Not the one that walked through blood, fear, and confusion.

Lilly gasped softly, eyes sparkling.

"Hey hey! Big sister, is that really you?" she giggled with joy. "You look sooo pretty!"

I couldn't stop the smile on my face. It just... appeared.

Even in the busy night, with voices and clatter all around us—her words wrapped around me like a blanket.

I nodded gently. "Mm. That's me."

Then she tilted her head.

"That uniform... Are you from that academy too, sister?"

I blinked. "Academy...?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes! That uniform is from the academy my brother went to! Were you his friend?"



My breath caught.

An academy. That uniform... She knew it. That meant she knew where it was.

The academy I saw in the photo. The same one I wore—

My fingers curled around the locket. My heart raced.

If she knows the location... I can go there. Maybe they have records. Maybe... maybe I can finally learn who I really am. That boy beside me in the picture... the one I've been trying to find for months.

Was that you, Friend...?

The lead I'd been praying for—it was here. In her words. Just one more question, and I could—

"Mommy! Daddy!!"

Lilly suddenly let go of my hand and sprinted ahead.

My voice caught in my throat.

I looked up and saw her—running straight toward a couple near the edge of the plaza.

Her parents.

Her mother gasped, dropping her bag, and fell to her knees as Lilly crashed into her arms.

Tears streamed down the woman's face. Her father dropped beside them, wrapping them both up. Their warmth—their relief—it spread like sunlight in winter.

I just stood there.

Quiet.

Watching.

Holding that locket in my hand.

Beside me, Azrael remained still. Silent. Eyes forward. That same expressionless mask.

No joy. No pride. No comment.

Just silence.

And I had more questions than answers.

Azrael turned.

No goodbye. No nod. Just the soft shuffle of his footsteps against the stone, fading with each step.

"Where are you going?" I asked, my voice chasing after him before I could even think.

He paused. Glanced at me over his shoulder—only slightly. One cold, detached eye locking with mine.

"To places that don't waste time with emotions," he said flatly.

Then he turned again and kept walking.

I didn't reply. There was no point.

But still... as the distance grew between us, I felt it.

That strange sensation—unease, uncertainty.

When he stood beside me, I thought it was him who was cold. But now, in his absence... it was the world that felt colder.

Was it his presence... that made me feel safe?

I didn't have time to dwell on it.

Lilly's parents approached, holding her between them. Her mother was still brushing back tears, while her father kept glancing down at Lilly like he couldn't believe she was real.

"Thank you..." her mother said softly, eyes glossy but sincere.

Lilly beamed up at them, then tugged gently on her mother's sleeve.

"Mommy! Big sister gave me a bun when I was hungry!" she said proudly. "And she cleaned my clothes, and she helped me when I was hurt too!"

Her mother smiled warmly, brushing Lilly's hair.

"You really took care of her, didn't you?" she asked, eyes shifting to me.

"I just did what anyone would," I said quietly. "It's nothing that big."

"No," her father said, shaking his head. "It is. You kept her safe, warm, and fed. We owe you more than just thanks."

I just gave a small nod, not knowing how to respond to praise like that.

But then, her mother's gaze sharpened—focused. It wasn't hostile... but something in her eyes was searching.

"...Have we met before?" she asked carefully.

I froze.

Before I could answer, Lilly piped up cheerfully.

"She's from the same academy as big brother!"

And just like that... their expressions changed.

Their smiles remained... but they weren't whole anymore. They flickered, like candles in wind.

"Is that so?" her mother murmured, voice suddenly distant.

I could feel something heavy beneath their smiles.

I swallowed, hesitating—then asked quietly, "Can I meet him...? Your son? I want to talk to him, if that's okay. I think... he might be connected to my past."

There was silence.

Then the mother's face crumbled, her lips trembling. She reached up, brushing her tears with a trembling hand.

**"...He passed away. Two years ago."**

My heart stopped.

"Passed... away...?"

Her voice cracked, like a dam giving way.

"He was a student at **Solerenne Academy of Sorcery in Asura**. But during the **Asura Crisis**... he was caught in the chaos."

She paused. Inhaled. Exhaled. Like each word was heavier than the last.

"...He didn't make it."

I lowered my eyes, guilt and shock twisting inside me. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright," she whispered, forcing a smile through her tears.

Lilly's father gently scooped her up and said, "Come on, let's get you something to eat." He gave me a nod before walking off with her toward a nearby stall.

That left just me and her mother.

She wiped her eyes again, but didn't stop speaking.

"Lilly still thinks he'll return one day," she said with a bitter chuckle. "We never even got to see his body. Just... news. Silence. And a grave with no one inside."

My chest tightened. I couldn't even begin to understand that pain.

"I'm... I'm sorry," I whispered.

"It's alright, really," she whispered, forcing a smile again through her tears.

"What was his name?" I asked, almost afraid to know.

She looked at me, eyes still teary—but filled with pride and sorrow at once.

"Axel," she said softly. "His name was Axel. He was my dear son... he passed away too young."

I lowered my eyes.

Axel...

That name... it didn't trigger anything in my memory. But something about it made my chest feel heavy.

"I'm really sorry," I said again, gently placing my hand on her arm.

After a few moments, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the locket again.

"I... wanted to ask something," I said. "Do you know this person?"

I opened it and showed her the picture inside—me, from a time I no longer remembered.

Her eyes widened for a moment. Then, she slowly nodded.

"...Yes. I do."

My breath caught.

"She's Elfina," she said. "One of the top scorers of the academy. Talented... sharp... always so bright."

My lips parted. My fingers trembled around the locket.

Elfina... that was... me?

"I-I'm Elfina?" I asked, voice breaking in disbelief.

I felt something spark inside me. Something real. My name. My identity. After all this time...

But then...

"...She passed away," the mother added in a softer tone. "The same day as my son. During the Asura Crisis. She was caught in the same attack."

My blood ran cold.

My breath hitched.

"What...?"

She looked at me with sorrow. "It was heartbreaking. She and Axel were close... and they both—"

She didn't finish.

Because my legs were shaking.

She passed away...? But I'm standing here...

How... can I be dead... and alive?

My face paled. My hands gripped the locket tighter.

Nothing made sense.

**I was Elfina.**

**And I died two years ago.**

**Yet here I was... alive, breathing.**

**What... am I?**

Lilly's mother continued wiping her tears, her gaze fixed on the picture inside my locket.

"...Elfinia was a kind-hearted girl," she said gently. "I met her once—only briefly—but she was sweet. Caring. She helped me with something small that day, and yet... she made it feel like I was the only person in the world who mattered."

I clutched the locket tighter, my voice trembling.

"Really...?"

She nodded softly.

"You... you look very similar to her," she said. "But you aren't her... right?"

I didn't respond.

I couldn't.

My throat had closed up, and my chest felt hollow.

She looked at the photo again, as if trying to peel memories from it.

"She had that pretty pink hair... and those soft blue eyes," she whispered.

Blue eyes.

The words echoed in my mind. I blinked.

Then slowly... I looked at the photo again.

And my world tilted.

All this time, I told myself it was the lighting. The picture must've faded. The colors just didn't come through properly.

But no.

In the picture... the girl was me. Me.

But she had blue eyes. And I didn't.

Mine were pink.

Pink. Not blue.

Lilly's mother tilted her head slightly, studying me. "Are you... her sister? Or family?"

I opened my mouth.

But no sound came.

"...No," I muttered. "I'm not."

Because I wasn't.

I didn't know who I was.

I had no memories. No family.

Nothing.

She gave a puzzled look, brushing her thumb across the photo one last time before closing the locket and letting her hand fall away.

"...That's really strange," she said quietly. "You act like her... gentle, warm. And you helped Lilly with so much kindness. But Elfina... passed away. Two years ago. I saw her name among the casualties."

I just stood there. Frozen.

She looked at me again with soft eyes, the kind a mother gives when she sees a lost child.

"You're a sweet girl too," she said with a faint, sad smile. "You remind me of her. That kindness... it's rare. But whoever you are... I hope you find yourself."

Who am I then?

That question haunted me.

If I wasn't Elfina...

If I wasn't her sister or kin...

Then who was I?

Before I could fall deeper into the confusion, Lilly came skipping back with her father, a soft doll clutched tightly in her arms. Her smile was bright, her eyes gleaming with joy.

"She picked this one," her father said with a chuckle. "Said it reminded her of someone."

The mother turned to me, placing a hand gently on my shoulder.

"We'll be heading off now," she said kindly. "Take care of yourself, dear. And if you ever need anything... our home is in Rivermere. Don't hesitate to visit."

I nodded silently.

Then Lilly walked up to me with the doll, her little eyes glimmering.

"Are you leaving already, big sister?" she asked, hugging the toy.

I looked down at her. My heart still a storm. But I forced a soft smile through the ache in my chest.

"Yeah... I have to go now."

Her lips pouted, and then without warning, she stepped forward and wrapped her tiny arms around me.

It was warm.

Soft.

I knelt slowly and returned the hug, resting my hand gently on her head.

"Thank you for finding me," she whispered. "You're like a big sister to me..."

My throat tightened again, but I smiled—this time, not a forced one.

"You be a good girl, okay?" I said softly. "Keep smiling like that. It suits you."

She nodded quickly, holding me tighter for just a second longer before pulling away.

"Promise me you'll visit!" she said, waving her little hand.

"I promise," I lied with a soft voice, standing up again.

They turned to leave, and I watched them go.

Lilly walking between her parents, the doll swinging in her arms, her laughter fading slowly in the crowd.

And then I turned the other way.



Alone again.

The streets were busy.

But all I could hear was the question repeating in my head...

If I'm not Elfina... then who the hell am I?

-----

I walked.

Alone.

Each step felt like it pulled a little more of my strength away, leaving nothing but this heaviness in my chest—like something invisible and cruel was pressing down on me, making it hard to breathe.

The streets were dark, quieter than usual. The lights above flickered faintly, casting long shadows against the stone. My footsteps echoed back at me, but there was no warmth in the sound. Just a reminder that no one was beside me.

That I was alone.

Why... why am I like this?

So lost, so far from anything that makes sense.

I don't even know who I am anymore.

And then, just like that—

The sky broke open.

Rain poured down.

Not gently, not kindly.

But with weight, with noise, like it wanted to wash me away.

I didn't stop.

I didn't run.

What would be the point?

My clothes clung to my body, soaked and heavy.

My hair stuck to my face, dripping.

The world turned cold again, and all I could remember... was that night.

That night in the rain from my memory earlier.

When I was smaller.

When I was weaker.

When they—

...Those boys.

Their laughter.

Their fists.

The pain.

I had cried then, too.

But no one came.

Just like now.

But even that memory—was it even mine?

I stopped walking.

My legs felt numb, but my heart still ached. My fingers went to the locket at my chest, that tiny piece of metal I had always held onto like it meant everything.

I used to think the girl in the picture was me.

That if I stared long enough, maybe something would click.

Maybe I'd remember.

But I was wrong.

That girl had blue eyes.

And I had pink.

My lips trembled.

"Then... who am I?"

The question slipped out of me before I could stop it.

It hurt more to say it out loud.

Like I'd just accepted that I truly didn't know.

That I might never know.

The rain didn't let up.

I dropped to my knees on the wet stone road, my hands hitting the ground, cold water splashing around them.

I leaned forward, letting the rain fall freely down my back, down my face, mixing with the tears I couldn't hold in anymore.

"I'm... not even her," I whispered.

My voice cracked.

"I'm not... Elfina..."

The one in the locket.

The one with the soft smile and kind eyes.

The one people remembered.

"...Why couldn't I be you?" I muttered, pressing it to my chest. "Why... did I ever think I was worth being someone like you...?"

My fingers trembled as they held the locket tight against my chest, pressing it into my skin like it could keep me from falling apart.

"I don't know who I am," I said, my voice cracking. "I don't know anything... not even my own name. I... I'm not even sure if I deserve one..."

The girl in the picture—

She was kind.

"I'm not her... I never was..." I choked.

She was remembered.

She was loved.

And I was...

A leftover.

"If I disappear now..." I muttered, voice trembling, "will it even matter...?"

The cold was seeping into my bones.

"Why do I still exist... when I don't even know what I'm living for..." I was shaking...

But the emptiness inside was worse.

I curled in, wrapping my arms around myself, sinking lower, my forehead pressing against the wet stone beneath me.

I could feel every beat of my heart as if it didn't want to keep going.

Everything hurt.

Everything.

"I just... wanted to belong somewhere..." I whispered.

I wasn't even crying loudly. Just soft, broken sobs. Like my body didn't even have the strength to cry the way it should.

"I just wanted to be someone..."

A name.

A memory.

A place.

A reason.

Even one.

But I had none.

The locket shook in my hands. My eyes squeezed shut. I felt smaller than ever. Like the world had grown too big and I had no place left in it.

"I don't want to be forgotten..." I whispered one last time, "but I was never even remembered."

My body slumped. I was exhausted. My vision began to blur, not from tears this time, but from the growing numbness. I could feel myself slipping.

Everything turned quiet.

The rain faded.

The cold, distant sounds of the world pulled away—

And just before I lost consciousness—

It came.

Those same memories...

That night. It all came rushing back—like it never left.

The same rain.

The same forest.

The same darkness.

And me, soaked and shivering, with nothing but fear and pain filling my chest.

Slap.

His hand cracked across my face, stinging so harshly that my vision blurred.

Slap.

Again. My head jerked to the side. My legs trembled beneath me.

I cried out, my hands raised feebly in front of me as if they could stop him.

"N... no... p-please..." I begged, my voice shaking, the words barely forming through the sobs. "P-please... don't... I-I didn't... do anything..."

The taste of blood began to mix with the rain on my lips.

My legs gave out but I couldn't fall—he pulled me back up by my hair, pinning me against the tree, bark scraping my back.

His hand tightened around my neck.

I gasped.

My fingers clawed at his wrist.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't think.

The world spun.

I looked at him—those eyes full of hatred, that smirk full of cruelty.

He leaned in, voice venomous.

"Oh look... the pride of Celestine," he spat, mocking me. "What a joke. Crying like a filthy little rat."

His friends laughed behind him.

Their silhouettes blurry through my tears, their voices sharp like knives.

"Go on," he said, gripping my neck tighter, "beg me again, you disgusting freak. No one's coming. No one ever will."

"I... I... d-don't... want t-to... die..." I stuttered, tears pouring out as my voice cracked. "P-please... s-s-stop..."

"Aw, hear that?" he sneered. "She doesn't wanna die. Then why were you even born?"

Laughter. Cruel, merciless laughter.

I felt my chest burn.

My throat ached.

My body was cold and bruised.

I just wanted it to end.

He raised his hand again—ready to strike—

And then...

—Everything changed.

Just as Milo raised his hand again, ready to slap me, a voice cut through the laughter behind him.

"Milo! Stop—someone's coming!"

Milo flinched and turned.

Then I saw it too.

Him.

Walking out from the misty edge of the forest path, the rain trickling down his dark hair... his body soaked, his eyes dim under the shadow of the night.

But it wasn't just him.

It was the blood.

Staining his uniform, his sleeves, his chest—so much that not even the rain could wash it away.

My breath hitched.

My tears paused.

My eyes widened.

It was really you...

Milo chuckled, scoffing without a trace of fear.

"Oh look, your weak little boyfriend finally showed up," he mocked, giving me a sideways glance, "Another friend of the filthy rat."

I could barely speak, but I tried. I had to.

"N-no... please... d-don't hurt him..." I begged, shaking my head slowly, weakly. "P-please..."

Milo just laughed and turned to his friends.

"Take care of him. Use your cursed magic—tear him apart."

They nodded.

One by one, each of the five boys held out their hands, letting their magic awaken.

Or at least, they tried.

Their faces changed—confused at first... then panicked.

"What...?" one of them muttered. "Why isn't it working?"

"My spell—!" another said, looking at his trembling fingers.

Milo's smile dropped.

He stared at them. "What're you idiots doing?! Cast again!"

They all backed up, shaking.

"Milo! Our cursed magic—i-it's not responding. It's like... someone blocked it!"

"What...?" Milo turned, jaw tightening. "That's impossible. A barrier like that—doesn't exist."

But it did. And it was.

Because it was him who placed it.

He kept walking forward.

Every step sounded louder under the rain. Every drop of blood trailing down his sleeve made the forest colder.

There was no mercy in his eyes.

No emotion.

Just pure, merciless wrath.

His voice cut through the downpour—calm, but heavy like thunder.

"Touch her again..." He tilted his head just slightly, those black eyes staring right into Milo's soul. "...and I'll bury you where you stand."

Milo flinched. But tried to laugh. "Tch... what, you think we'll be scared of you now? If we can't use magic, you can't either. There's six of us. You're alone."

He waved his hand. "Get him."

They rushed him.



All five.

And I—I screamed.

"No!!" I cried out, voice trembling, choking with fear. "Please! Don't hurt him... please, don't... he's the only one... the only one I have left..."

I clutched the wet grass, dragging my broken body forward.

"He's... he's my only friend..." My voice cracked. "He makes me... feel like I'm still... myself..."

Milo glanced at me again, that twisted grin of his returning like none of it mattered.

As if my words were dust.

As if I was still nothing.

But what came next—

—would erase that smile forever.

-----

The downpour masked the first step.

One of Milo's lackeys, taller and built like a brawler, charged from the right with a wild punch.

He didn't even see it coming—his own body flipped mid-air as a precise side-step and counter sent him crashing to the mud with a cracked jaw.

Another came from behind, trying to grapple.

The dark-haired boy lowered his stance—Fighting to kill. He drove his elbow backward with terrifying accuracy, shattering the man's nose before pivoting to deliver a sweeping kick that knocked his legs out from under him. As the attacker hit the ground, a brutal stomp to the knee snapped it the wrong way with a sickening crunch.

His knee was completely broken.

"Get him! All at once!" one of them screamed.

Four came at him together. But his face—his expression—remained unchanged. Not anger, not excitement.

Only death.

He ducked under a haymaker and slammed his palm into one's sternum—forcing the breath from his lungs. A tight hook—cracked another's ribs with a loud snap. He grabbed the arm of the third—and twisted it mid-motion, dislocating the shoulder with a sharp pop before flipping the body into the other.

"Stay away from me—!" one shouted, but it was too late.

The dark-haired boy launched forward, a flying knee—landing directly into the man's gut, folding him instantly. Rainwater mixed with blood as it sprayed from his mouth.

The final one left standing tried to run.

A low kick—struck his thigh. He collapsed, screaming, as a second kick to the spine silenced him. The boy knelt beside him and slowly, almost mechanically, twisted his ankle till it snapped.

The screams echoed, then fell silent.

I... couldn't breathe.

I watched from the ground, arms hugging my chest as if that'd stop my shaking.

Each strike... was lethal. Each move precise. There was no wasted breath. No hesitation. Just the ruthless brutality of a professional killer who didn't flinch once.

They had all attacked him together. They had cursed me, mocked me, laughed while I begged and cried. But now they all lay twisted and broken in the mud... the same place they had left me before.

My heart raced.

He stood in the rain—drenched, blood dripping from his knuckles, his uniform already soaked and stained crimson. One line of blood ran down his cheek—probably from the wild swing that had barely grazed him—but it only made him look more terrifying. More real.

His eyes... they weren't human anymore.

And yet—I felt safe.

The rain didn't stop. It only grew heavier, like the sky itself wanted to drown what was happening in this place.

I couldn't move. My knees were still stuck to the soaked earth, the mud pulling me down, the cold slicing into my skin. My throat burned from crying, but I couldn't stop watching. My eyes locked on the only person who stood between me and that monster.

Him... my friend.

He didn't even speak when Milo stepped forward, blood and rain mixing down his cheeks. Milo's laugh was dry, brittle, almost afraid—but he hid it behind his usual arrogance.

"You think this changes anything?" Milo spat, rolling his neck. "You're the reason all of this happened. You set us all up—masking our minds, manipulating us like pawns. You're a monster."

My friend said nothing.

Not even a twitch in his expression.

Milo's brows furrowed, uneasy. He scoffed and lunged with a wild punch—but it never landed.

I watched his fist get caught mid-air.

Caught... like it was nothing.

Then the world broke around them.

In an instant, Milo's wrist bent backward, a horrible cracking noise echoing under the rain. Before he could even scream, my friend twisted his arm and drove his elbow deep into Milo's gut, forcing all air out of his lungs. Milo dropped, but didn't even hit the ground before a knee came crashing under his jaw, flinging his body back.

Milo tumbled, coughing blood, his teeth stained red—but he still tried to get up.

He screamed, "You think you scare me?! You don't know what power is—!"

His words cut off with a sickening crack as a side kick struck his ribcage. I heard bones snap from where I sat. Milo fell again, gasping, holding his side, coughing harder.

My friend walked.

Calmly.

With no hesitation, no pause.

Another punch to Milo's ribs—short, fast, brutal. Milo's body curled involuntarily, and just as he did, a foot rose and slammed against his kneecap, snapping it in the opposite direction. He screamed again, shrill and pitiful.

"You... you're insane..." Milo wheezed. "You don't even flinch."

My friend finally responded, voice low. Cold.

"You lost your right to live the moment you hurt her. It ends now."

He lifted Milo by his collar and slammed him against a tree. Milo tried to fight back with his good arm, flailing, punching, but every hit was dodged effortlessly. My friend's body weaved like water, never staying in one place.

A blow to the throat.

A heel driving into the shin, cracking it.

An elbow strike to the side of Milo's face, making him spin. Then he was dragged down into the mud again.

Milo coughed violently, dirt and water filling his mouth, and as he looked up, terrified now—truly terrified—he begged.

"Please... stop..."

But my friend didn't.

He stepped over him, grabbed his broken arm—and snapped it fully. Bone pushed out from flesh, blood washing away in the rain.

"This is for her tears."

Milo screamed.

Another stomp came—this time to the ankle. Then a knee drop into his shoulder. Dislocating it with ease.

"This is for her voice shaking."

He grabbed Milo's head. Slammed it once into the dirt.

Then again.

And again.

again.

again..

again...

again....

The sound of flesh and bone cracking against the earth drowned everything else. Milo wasn't fighting anymore. Just twitching.

And still... it didn't stop.

His head was raised one last time—and slammed again. So hard this time, the tree behind them shook. His face was unrecognizable. Just red. Pale. Swollen. Hollow.

I felt my body tremble, tears falling even as my heart pounded.

My friend stood up, breathing softly—not panting, not exhausted. His fist clenched, blood dripping down to the earth. And then—he turned Milo's body over, sat on top of him, and punched again.

Once.

Twice.

Ten times.

Thirty times..

Fifty times...

I lost count after that. The sound wasn't human anymore. It wasn't a fight. It was something else. The rain couldn't even clean it—it just painted everything in red.

He finally stopped. Milo... wasn't Milo anymore.

My friend stood. His face half-shadowed by wet strands of black hair. His eyes... glowed deep blue.

He looked at me.

I opened my mouth to speak—but nothing came out.

My vision—blurry.

My heart—too loud.

And then... everything turned dark.

-----

The sound of the rain hadn't changed... but something in me had.

When I opened my eyes, everything was blurred. My body felt light—warm. And then I realized...

I was in his arms.

He was carrying me gently through the downpour, shielding me from the cold with his own body. His dark hair clung to his skin, soaked, strands falling over those calm, unreadable eyes. A thin line of blood ran down his brow, but he wiped it away with the back of his hand like it was nothing.

He looked down at me... and smiled.

That same smile. The one I hadn't seen in so long. The one that told me I was safe now.

**"I'm sorry for being late, Eve..." he whispered.**

His voice—soft and warm—hit something deep inside me. I didn't even realize I was crying until he brushed his thumb against my cheek, wiping away the tears sliding down with the rain.

My fingers clutched onto his shirt, trembling.

I didn't want to let go.

Ever.

**"K-Kai..." I stammered, voice small, broken.**

But he stopped me, gently pressing his forehead to mine. That smile still there—so soft, so steady, so completely him.

**"Yes," he said, "I'm your Kai. I'm all yours."**

My chest tightened, and I held him tighter, almost afraid he'd vanish if I blinked.

**"I-I... I was scared... I-I thought... I thought you wouldn't come," my words spilled out in stutters, "I... I didn't want to die... not like this... not without seeing you..."**

**"Scared?" he whispered. "As long as I'm alive... nobody is capable of hurting you."**

His words... they wrapped around my heart like armor.

In that moment...

He looked just like him.

The boy from all those years ago.

I was six. The monsters had already eaten my parents. I still remember the blood, the screams. The way I froze, too weak to run, too terrified to scream.

But he came. A boy with dark hair and deep-blue eyes. He fought off the beasts. He held me in his arms. He carried me out. Just like now.

It was him.

It was always him.

"...It's you," I whispered. "You saved me back then... and now you saved me again."

He didn't say anything at first—just smiled faintly, leaned closer, and wrapped his arms tighter around me as the rain fell heavier. Like he was shielding me from the whole world.

His voice finally came, low and warm.

**"Because I'm your best friend. I'll always be there for you."**

And that's when everything blurred again.

My vision faded. My eyes closed on their own.

But this time... it wasn't out of fear.

It was peace.

**Present Time:**

My eyes opened. This time, not to warmth. But to silence. I was back at the street I collapsed earlier at, the rain ended.

The wind was cold. The sky still gray.

But I stood.

I wiped my tears, looked up through the lingering rainclouds, and muttered,

"...It's not over."

Even if I wasn't Elfina.

Even if I wasn't the person in that locket.

Even if I didn't know who I was supposed to be—

I'm still me.

And I would find out.

I would find him.

The one who never let me cry alone.

The one who made me feel alive.

My first friend. My only friend. The only one who ever protected me without asking for anything back.

There's something I need to ask him.

Something I need to know.

That... is my new goal.

Not just to survive.

But to find the person who taught me what it means to be saved.

What it means to be held.

What it means to be loved.

And until I find him again...

I won't stop.

No matter what.

Chapter Transition – Third Person



And so, Eve walked.

With the rain behind her and the weight of the past on her shoulders, she stepped forward—each footfall echoing with the soft uncertainty of someone searching for more than just answers.

She was searching for herself.

Her memories, her identity, her place in a world that never gave her time to breathe.

The remnants of her childhood clung to her like fragments of a broken mirror—shards of fear, warmth, grief, and hope. All reflecting a single, unforgettable image... him. The boy who saved her. The boy who smiled through the blood and the rain. Her friend.

### **Her Kai.**

She didn't know if that was truly his name.

She didn't know if the memory she clung to was even real.

But she would find out.

As the gates of Rinascita faded in the distance behind her, her mind was already focused on what came next. The name that had echoed in the corners of every secret, every whisper, every twisted thread of power: Asura.

There, in that shadowed kingdom, the Academy awaited.

There, she would find the truth—about the test, about the masked manipulators behind it, and most importantly...

About him.

Her path wasn't the only one unfolding.

For what Rinascita didn't know... was that its peace was temporary.

Beyond its walls, they waited.

The grotesques.

Creatures born not of flesh, but of nightmares—biding their time, watching, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

**The world needed a Hero to defend against them...**

**And the world needed a Villain to slaughter them all.**

Soon... their paths would intertwine.

Lucas—the boy who once saved others with his light, yet carried secrets of his own.

Celia—the girl working to get stronger, her purpose to protect someone, and the name of the one she couldn't forget.

And soon, in a town far from where it all began—Levinton—she would come face to face with a man whose eyes carried a calm that could silence storms.

Was he the one?

Was he her Kaiser?

Or...

...was he something far more dangerous?

**To be continued.**

## **Chapter 58 - Red Flags Of Tomorrow**

**Celia's Perspective:**

**4/9/2017 - 11:53 AM**

His silhouette was unmistakable—black hair, blue eyes—just like him. My heart skipped a beat, my breath caught in my throat. I blinked, unsure if I was seeing things, but the figure remained, almost as if waiting for me.

"Kaiser?" I whispered, the word slipping out before I could stop it.

I stood up, my legs feeling like they were made of jelly, the ground beneath me almost giving way. The figure didn't respond, didn't even acknowledge me. A wave of confusion and longing washed over me.

Is it really him? I thought. I took a few shaky steps forward, my feet almost stumbling on the uneven ground. I couldn't let myself believe it was him... But it looked like him. The same posture, the same striking features, the same damn blue eyes that made my heart ache.

But then, the moment of my doubt came crashing in, shaking me to my core.

"Who's Kaiser?" The voice that came from him was clear, almost mocking. It was definitely not the voice I had grown used to, not the one that had carried me through so many moments with him.

Who is this? Why do you look so much like him? The face, the eyes, they were his. But his body—his build—was different. It felt... wrong somehow. Was this a dream? Or maybe some trickery? I didn't understand. I really didn't understand.

My pulse raced as I tried to process it all. No, no, no. He looks like him. Why? Why is he different? My mind was a mess of questions I couldn't answer. I wanted to approach him, to reach out and make sense of it all, but my feet were rooted to the spot.

"I'm Arius Astraea," he said, his voice laced with a kind of charisma that was so unnerving I didn't know whether to be charmed or suspicious.

I blinked, struggling to regain my composure.

"Celia... It's nice to meet you." I stuttered, surprised by the sudden flutter of nerves that coursed through me. What was it about this man? Why did his presence feel so... dangerous?

Arius tilted his head, his blue eyes studying me with an intensity that made my heart race for all the wrong reasons. "I'm here to take care of the grotesques," he said, his voice smooth, almost like he was telling me a casual fact. "Mercenary work, you know how it is."

I nodded, my mind still reeling. Grotesques? That was what brought him here? I wanted to say more, but I wasn't sure how to respond.

"I'm... here for the same reason," I finally managed, my voice soft but firm. "Taking part in the fight, for now, until things settle."

I swallowed hard, trying to push the awkwardness out of the way. "I'm sorry," I said, my voice quieter this time. "I thought you were someone else." My cheeks flushed in embarrassment, but I couldn't help it.

Arius raised an eyebrow, curiosity flickering in his expression. "Someone else? Who?"

I hesitated, unsure if I should mention it. But it's not like I can lie to him, right? "I... I thought you were my friend, Kaiser. He's—well, he's someone I'm close to. And he looks... so much like you." My voice trailed off, but it felt so strange to be talking to him like this—like we were just two strangers who happened to cross paths by the river.

Arius smirked slightly, his lips curling in a playful yet dangerous way. "Kaiser, huh?"

"Well, I suppose you've made a mistake. But," He looked me over, his gaze lingering on me longer than I was comfortable with, "I'm sure I could be someone worth remembering."

It wasn't like I hadn't met other people before. But Arius, with his charm and calculated movements, was different.

I cleared my throat, standing a little straighter. "I'm sorry about thinking you were someone else. It's just..." My words trailed off, as I couldn't explain what was happening. "I guess I'm just a little... confused."

Arius chuckled, the sound low and smooth, like velvet. "Don't worry, Celia. It's a pleasure to meet you, even if I've confused you for someone else. We all have our secrets, after all." His smile never wavered...

Then he spoke.

"I saw you," Arius said, voice smooth like water running over stone. "Earlier. Training out there, by the clearing. For quite a while, actually."

I blinked, my eyes snapping to him. "You... were watching?"

"Mhm." He nodded once, slowly. "You didn't stop once, did you? Magic, chain swings, even the footwork drills. Incredibly consistent. Not many can push themselves like that."

He took a step closer, his gaze narrowing slightly in a way that made my heart feel weird. "It was admirable. Beautiful, even."

I looked away, cheeks already warming up. "I-It's not a big deal," I mumbled. "I just... want to get stronger."

"I know," he said instantly. "I could see it in your eyes."

His words made my stomach flutter. Ugh... stop. Why is he talking like that?

He didn't stop.

"It's rare," he continued, voice lower now, softer, like he was letting me in on something secret. "To see someone so driven but still kind. Innocent, but strong. You don't see that mix very often anymore." He tilted his head. "That's what caught my eye."

Caught his—what now? "I'm... not that special," I muttered, barely able to meet his eyes. "I still have a long way to go."

"But that's what makes you different," he said, smiling gently. "Most people want to be strong for power. You want it to improve yourself. It's rare... and honestly?" He gave a light chuckle. "Kind of refreshing."

I looked up at him again. Something about the way he said it felt real. Like he really saw it. And part of me—just a small, traitorous part—liked hearing that.

A lot.

"And you?" I asked, trying to shift the focus off me. "You're strong too, right? You... looked like you could fight."

Arius smirked. "Let's just say I've had my fair share of fights." He ran a hand through his hair like he wasn't even trying to be cool—he just was. "But you—Celia—you have something I don't."

"...What's that?"

He leaned in slightly. "You haven't lost yourself."

My breath caught.

"You're still... pure. Honest. Not many stay that way in a world like this." He paused, then smiled in a way that made my chest tighten. "I envy it."

Wh-What is this guy even saying? My face was way too hot. I turned away, brushing my hair behind my ear just to do something.

"You don't have to flatter me like that," I said, trying to play it off with a light laugh.

"I'm not flattering you," he said. "I'm being honest. You deserve to hear it."

Oh no. He's that type.

And it was... kinda working.

I looked at him again. His expression hadn't changed. It wasn't cocky, not loud or obnoxious like Levi. It was calm. Confident. And his words kept landing right where I couldn't block them.

"You're kind, strong, beautiful... and still fighting." His eyes met mine again. "That's the kind of person I'd stand next to."

I almost choked. "W-What?!"

He laughed—not mockingly. Just amused, like he knew exactly how I'd react. Which annoyed me. A little.

"I mean it," he said, shrugging. "People like you? They deserve someone who understands them. Someone who sees the world the way they do."

"And... that's you?" I asked, squinting a little.

"Maybe," he said, that smile still there. "But I'll let you decide."

I didn't know what to say to that. My heart was beating too loud. He's definitely dangerous... but like... charming-dangerous? Ughhh why does this feel like a trap I'm slowly stepping into with both feet?

Still, I couldn't stop myself from smiling... just a little.

"Thanks, I guess," I muttered. "Even if you're just saying all that to mess with me."

"I'm not," he replied smoothly. "But if it makes you smile, maybe I should say more."

I pouted. "You're weird."

He grinned. "So are you. That's why we'll get along."

I didn't know whether to laugh or punch him.

Maybe both.

Arius glanced at the sky, a faint golden hue melting into the blue. "Looks like I've got a few things to take care of," he said, brushing the dust off his coat casually.

I blinked. "Already?"

He smiled, tilting his head slightly. "Duty calls. Grotesques don't kill themselves, unfortunately."

"Right..." I mumbled, a little disappointed. He shows up out of nowhere, causes chaos in my brain, then just leaves like it's nothing.

But before he turned fully, he paused—looking right at me again, eyes softer than before.

"Oh, and Celia?"

"Y-Yeah?"

He leaned in just a little, not too close, but close enough to feel his presence. His voice lowered like it was only meant for me.

"Keep fighting like that. It suits you." Then a beat. "But... don't forget to smile while you do."

My eyes widened slightly, and before I could say anything, he turned and walked off, his overcoat catching the wind as he vanished into the trees.

I stood there, staring at where he'd gone, hands clutched near my chest without realizing.

"Smile... while I fight?" I whispered.

Maybe... I should do that often.

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

**4/9/2017 - 2:14 PM**

The Celestial Apex guild building hadn't changed one bit. Still flashy as ever, tall white stone pillars, golden trims, and our unnecessarily large guild emblem hanging like a royal family crest. I pushed the main doors open like I owned the place—which I technically did—and strolled in with the usual flair.

Behind me, Alina walked in like a ghost made of ice. Cold eyes, no expression. Like she was calculating the best way to kill everyone in the room for breathing the same air. Hopefully she won't do that.

Zain stood near the entrance of the war room, arms crossed. His cloak barely moved as he turned toward me, calm as always. Mature guy. Reliable. Also, painfully boring sometimes. But I still like the guy.

Zain uhh... explaiend a few things and...

"What the hell do you mean, Zain? Levinton is out of danger?" I raised a brow, stepping forward and flicking off a piece of dust from my shoulder. "Did someone hit your head while I was gone?"

Zain didn't flinch. He never does. "It's true. Miraculously, they've lost interest in Levinton. Scouts haven't seen any grotesques for over three days."

Three days?

Alina, who had been busy judging everything with her eyes, cut in sharply. "Nonsense."

Zain blinked. "And... you are?"

She turned her gaze to him like she was about to deduct his entire personality in one sentence. "Sword Saint of Technique. Alina."

Zain's eyes widened just a little. Just enough to show how shocked he was. He looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

Which, to be fair, is something most people do eventually.

"Don't look at me like that," I shrugged. "I'll explain later. Focus on the grotesques first, and no, I didn't get possessed. She's actually helping."

"Helping? That's impossible." Zain muttered under his breath like he was trying to convince himself this was real.

"Zain," I snapped my fingers. "Focus."

He nodded, rubbing his forehead like he needed a nap. "Right. Come to the office."

We stepped inside the guild's war room. A round table with our map of the region sprawled across it, dotted with markers and scorch marks from my accidental lighter drop. I plopped down into my chair, legs up on the table. Alina sat with a stiff back like the chair might betray her. Zain remained standing.

"For the past three days," Zain began, gesturing to the map, "this entire region—including this side of Celestine, and Levinton—has been grotesque-free. Completely. We've been keeping tabs with our scouts... nothing. But here's the weird part—"

"There's always a weird part," I muttered.

"They've started appearing near Rinascita."

My legs dropped from the table.

"Wait, what?" I leaned forward, my playful tone vanishing like mist. "Why the hell would they shift targets like that?"

Alina folded her arms. "Rinascita is more populated, less defended, and has no major guild presence. Tactically, it's a vulnerable piece of land."

Zain nodded. "That's our theory, too. But it doesn't explain why they suddenly changed direction. Grotesques don't exactly plan like armies. They act on instinct."

Alina tilted her head slightly. "Perhaps their instincts have evolved."



"Or they smelled something tastier," I added, trying to lighten the mood.

Alina looked at me like I was a particularly annoying kid. "If you were bait, I'd throw you into Rinascita myself."

"Aw," I smirked. "You do care."

"I care about efficiency," she replied without missing a beat. "And your existence is highly inefficient."

Zain rubbed his temples. "Are you two always like this?"

"Yes," we said in perfect unison.

I let out a chuckle, then leaned back again. "Okay, so we've got a town about to become a grotesque dinner. What's the plan?"

Alina's eyes sharpened. "First, we confirm if this change is temporary or permanent. Then we send a unit to Rinascita for observation."

"I'll go," I said without hesitation.

Zain raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"If I'm not there, who's gonna flirt with death and make it jealous?" I grinned. "Besides... I've got a bad feeling about this. Something's off."

Alina turned to me slowly. "You have feelings?"

"Just enough to make me interesting," I winked.

Before Zain could respond, a knock echoed through the office door.

Three taps. Clean. Sharp.

I raised an eyebrow.

Zain frowned. "That wasn't scheduled."

Alina's hand was already drifting near the hilt of her sword. "Unscheduled usually means uninvited."

I stood up, stretching lazily. "Well then... let's see which unlucky soul decided to interrupt a meeting of geniuses."

I narrowed my eyes. "Wait a second..."

The door creaked open like it had arthritis, and stepping in with the elegance of a man who'd just rolled out of bed ten seconds ago—because he probably had—was none other than...

"Xander?" I gawked. "It's 2 PM! Why do you look like you just woke up?!"

Xander yawned. Loudly. His hair looked like he fought a tornado and lost. "Because... I did just wake up..."

I stared at him.

He blinked slowly, like answering took years off his lifespan. "The rooster didn't crowwww this morning."

I blinked back. "What?"

"You know. The rooster. The one that always wakes me up and lives in levinton in Zain's home."

"...You have a rooster in Levinton?"

He nodded. "Had."

"...Had?"

Xander rubbed his belly with a satisfied sigh. "I had roast chicken last night."

**Zain choked on his own air.**

I deadpanned. "So you're telling me... the reason you woke up late is because you ate the one thing responsible for waking you up?"

Xander nodded again, completely shameless. "He's a part of me now. Spiritually. Digestively."

"Bro, what kinda bullshit logic—"

"Look, I didn't want to eat him, but he looked too juicy not to. It was fate."

I was already laughing. "You absolute idiot."

"He was delicious," Xander shrugged. "It's what he would've wanted."

Alina, seated nearby and sipping cold tea like it offended her existence, raised an eyebrow. "This is who you people allow to call himself a Sword Saint?"

Xander looked at her with one eye open. "And this is who you brought into the guild, huh? Looks like she was built in a lab using disappointment and knives."

"Oh?" Alina smiled... the kind of smile that could kill plants. "And you look like an expired human being whose life goal is to become furniture."

Xander slumped into a chair and closed his eyes. "Furniture doesn't have to deal with insufferable women."

"Furniture also serves a purpose."

"Oh damn," I whispered, biting my knuckle. "She got you good."

Xander cracked an eye open, expression blank. "Didn't realize mannequins learned to speak."

Alina shot up from her seat. "At least I don't sleep through grotesque invasions."

He slowly raised a hand like it weighed fifty kilos. "At least I don't look like one."

"Enough!" Zain's voice thundered.

All three of us paused.

He stood with both hands on the table, glaring like a disappointed dad who just found out his kids burned the house down because they were arguing about who gets the last chicken wing.

Zain pointed at me first. "You act like a damn clown until the world's falling apart—then suddenly expect everyone to follow you."

I raised a hand, grinning. "Can't argue with the results though."

Then he turned to Alina. "You'd sacrifice five villages for a 'tactical advantage' and think emotions are viruses."

She looked at him like he was a meat sack who dared to speak logic. "They are."

"And you," Zain growled, finally facing Xander. "You slept through a crisis, blamed a damn rooster, and somehow made it sound spiritual."

Xander blinked slowly. "...I mean... he's in a better place now."

We all stared at him.

"The plate?" I asked.

Xander nodded solemnly. "Exactly."

We glared at Zain in perfect unison.

"...Don't act like you're better than us," I muttered.

Zain sighed deeply, walked to the window, and whispered, "I should've been a farmer."

"Don't get any ideas," I called out. "He already ate your rooster."

Zain glared and... things were about to get more heated.

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

**10:18 PM**

The night had come in soft, wrapping the town in quiet. The stars weren't all that bright today, but there was still something peaceful about it. Maybe because my body was screaming from all that training. Maybe because my brain wouldn't shut up.

Dinner was... fine. Nothing fancy. Just me, Emma, and a suspiciously good looking dinner that might've been from last week.

We sat across the table like, eating in exhausted silence until Emma finally muttered, "Oh, by the way, Levi's back."

I perked up a little. "Oh?"

"He's still at the guild office. Something about a... roasting competition?"

"...A what?"

"Yeah. Apparently, it started as a meeting, and then Levi, Zain, Xander and someone called Alina started roasting each other. Now it's chaos."

I blinked. "So... a normal Tuesday."

Emma just shrugged like this was the most natural thing in the world.

"That's Levi for you."

I nodded, biting into the last of my rock-solid bread.

"Hope he wins."

Soon after dinner I was toooooo sleepy.

I flopped onto the bed in Levi's guest room, face buried into the pillow, I felt like a corpse returning to the earth just to die again.

"Ughhh... I'm dead. I trained so hard I think even my hair got abs."

I kicked off my shoes with all the energy of a dying person and rolled onto my back, arms sprawled out. My hair was a mess, my body sticky from sweat, but I didn't even care.

Then it hit me again.

"Keep fighting like that. It suits you. But... don't forget to smile while you do."

"...He really said that, huh." I mumbled, staring up at the ceiling with a dumb little smile twitching on my lips. "That stupid charming overcoat man."

My cheeks puffed out slightly. I reached for a pillow, hugged it tight to my chest, and buried my face into it. "Ughhh, why am I smiling?! Stop it. No smiling. He's just a mercenary. Just a really, really hot—NO. NOPE. Not going there."

Still, the words lingered. That tone in his voice, like he wanted me.

And it was stupid because... Kaiser said something like that once too.

I shifted, pulling my knees up to my chest, chin resting on them now. My fingers absentmindedly played with a loose thread on my blanket.

That day... I remembered it. Crystal clear. I was sad yet smiling—no, pretending to. I didn't want anyone to ask if I was okay. Didn't want them to look too closely. Because if they looked closely, they'd see it. The pain I held deep inside.

But he did.

Kaiser didn't say anything flashy or clever. He just... walked up, saw through everything like it was nothing, and pulled me into his arms.

No judgment. No awkwardness. Just quiet comfort.

"You don't have to pretend when I'm here," he said.

And I broke.

I had cried, quietly, shaking in his hold, and he didn't flinch. He didn't even speak more. He just stayed.

And that night...

"Ughhh..." I groaned again, slapping my pillow into my face. "Don't think about it, Celia. Don't. Do. It."

Of course, I did.

I begged him to stay that night. Said I didn't want to feel alone again. He hesitated but gave in with that annoyed 'fine' tone of his like I'd twisted his arm when I probably didn't even need to.

And I...

I felt my face warm up, my chest tense as the memory hit me again. That night, when Kaiser had fallen asleep on my lap, his breath steady and calm, and I'd whispered those words, barely audible. "I love you."

It wasn't even intentional. It just slipped out, soft and vulnerable, like it had always been there waiting to be said.

I buried my face in the blanket, wishing I could disappear. He didn't hear me, of course, or if he did, he didn't say anything. But I couldn't shake the heat on my cheeks, the stupid way my heart fluttered at the thought of it.

Then my thoughts shifted, and the warmth in my chest faltered.

Kaiser's kindness. His quiet understanding. That night he understood me—the real me. Not the façade I put up, not the strong girl everyone thought I was, but the one who was scared, the one who cried because she didn't know who to trust anymore.

I remembered when I first found out. When I overheard Levi and Emma laughing about how they were just pretending to be my friends, being polite because of Kaiser. I felt so small, so stupid and... hurt.

Was I just some charity case to them?

The sting of it lingered in my chest. I had never really believed it until that moment, but the way they talked, the way they laughed—it was all so fake.

And then I thought of Kaiser. He didn't pretend. He didn't act like he cared just because it was expected. He was real, even when I wasn't. Even when I didn't want him to see me weak.

That night, he stayed with me, and in his quiet way, he showed me what it meant to have someone truly care.

I pressed my hands against my face, trying to push away the swirling thoughts. Arius is charming. He's kind, and he makes me feel like maybe I'm worth something. But...

But can I trust him? Can I trust anyone, after what happened with Levi and Emma?

**I don't want to go through that again. I don't want to get hurt again...**

Kaiser is the only one who's never played games with me. He's the only one who's been true.

I can't forget that. I won't forget it. He's the one who sees me for who I really am, not some act I put on.

With a deep breath, I forced myself to close my eyes, the warmth of the night wrapping around me like a blanket. Only Kaiser.

**I'll trust him.**

**Just him.**

I thought I'd immediately go to my demonic palace or whatever I see in my dreams to train but... I had a normal dream tonight for a few moments. Not really a dream, a memory from weeks or even a month ago when Kaiser was just recovering...

I can't believe this actually happened.

----- **A few weeks ago.**

I had a spoon of soup in my hand, hovering near Kaiser's mouth as he lay there in bed, his face a little pale from the wounds, but still that lazy, teasing smile of his plastered on.

"You don't have to feed me, Celia," he said, waving a lazy hand in the air like he was some king dismissing his servant.

I frowned. "I want to, okay? You're hurt, and I'm not about to let you starve just because you're being stubborn."

He chuckled softly, still wincing a little, but he was always so damn charming even when he was injured. "I can feed myself, you know. I'm not dead, just a little... broken."

I narrowed my eyes, not having any of it. "And you think I'm going to let you eat with one hand when you can barely lift your fork? Please. You just want me to do it."

Kaiser smirked. "Maybe I do. Who could resist your charms, right?"

I rolled my eyes, trying to ignore the warmth creeping up my cheeks. "Oh, shut up. I'm not doing this because you're charming." I tried to focus on the soup instead, not letting him throw me off track.

He squinted up at me, his eyes twinkling with that mischief of his. "You know, Celia, I think we make a **pretty cute couple**. I mean, look at us—me, injured and helpless, and you, being all sweet and... well, pretty."

"Pretty?" I retorted with a sarcastic snort. "Is that the best you've got? You're just saying that because I'm feeding you, you big baby."

"Aw, come on," he said, clearly enjoying himself, "admit it. You like the idea of me being your boyfriend. Makes it official, right? My girlfriend, Celia."

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest as I tried to act unimpressed, but I couldn't hold back a tiny smile. "You're ridiculous. I'm not your girlfriend, and I'm definitely not your nurse either."

Kaiser laughed, the sound light despite his injuries. "Right, right. You just keep pretending you're not already swooning over me."

I shot him a playful glare. "I am not swooning. I'm just being responsible. You're a mess, and someone's gotta make sure you don't make everything worse."

He turned his head toward the window, staring out at the night. "Tonight, the moon's bright."

I followed his gaze, my brow furrowing in confusion. "Okay? And?"

He turned his gaze back to me, and I swear, I saw a bit of softness in his eyes. "Tonight, underneath the bright moon, I can clearly see how beautiful you are."

I froze for a moment. My heart skipped a beat, and I felt heat rush to my cheeks. "W-What? Stop that." I pushed him lightly in the shoulder, my face burning. "Stop being like that."

He just grinned, enjoying my flustered reaction way too much. "What? You don't like the moonlight compliments?" He winked. "I could go on, you know."

I crossed my arms, trying to hide my blush, but I could feel myself getting all tangled up in how easy it was to fall for his charm. "Ugh, you're so annoying. You're lucky you're hurt, or I'd be kicking you out of here."

"Oh, come on," he teased, still with that mischievous grin. "You know you love me."

I snorted. "I do not." I grabbed the bowl of soup, setting it on the table. "Alright, that's it. I'm done here."

He sat up slightly, eyes twinkling with the same playful glint. "**Well, if you're not going to be my girlfriend, how about I just make a proposal then?**" He leaned forward, his



voice dropping in mock seriousness. **"How about I ask you to be mine, right here, right now?"**

I was so done with this conversation. Without a second thought, I leaned in and **BIT his neck**, just hard enough to get his attention.

**Kaiser screamed at the top of his lungs. "AAAAAAAAAAAAA?! What the hell, Celia?!"**

I immediately pulled back, my face the very picture of innocence. "Oops. Was that too much?"

He was holding his neck, his eyes wide in disbelief. "Too much? You just—" He looked at me in total shock. "I don't even know how to—Why would you do that?"

I leaned back in my chair, trying to suppress my giggles. "You're lucky I didn't bite any harder, buddy. I think that'll teach you not to mess with me."

Kaiser threw his hands in the air. "Alright, alright! I admit defeat! I'm officially afraid of you."

I grinned, feeling smug. "Good. You should be."

He leaned back into the pillow, giving me a side-eye. "You're such a menace."

"You're lucky I still care about you," I said, pretending to be all serious, though I could barely keep a straight face.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, grinning. "Well, I guess I'll be more careful around my neck from now on. But I know the truth. Deep down, you totally care."

I stood up to leave, shaking my head, trying to ignore the warmth that was still creeping up my neck. "I hate you, Kaiser."

He smirked as I walked toward the door. "I know."

I paused at the door, still smiling to myself, but I didn't let him see. "You're lucky I don't just kick you out of here for real, you jerk."

He just waved me off. **"You'd miss me too much."**

Rolling my eyes, I left the room, my heart still racing from the weird mix of annoyance and affection swirling inside me.

But, really, I hated to admit it. Kaiser was right about one thing—deep down, I did care. More than I wanted to.

-----  
Ugh.

I still can't believe I actually bit him that night. Out of all the things I could've done—punch, kick, even a classic soup-dump-over-his-head\*—I bit him.

**What am I, a vampire now?**

Maybe that's my new anti-Kaiser killer move. The "Neck Bite of Doom™."

Only activates when he's being a total flirt. Which is, like, all the time.

Ugh.

That flash of memory faded away like warm mist, and just like that...

I was back.

My feet touched the soft obsidian grass of this place—my dream realm. Or well, my self-made dream realm. A space I created deep in my subconscious, where I could train all night without ever tiring. No pain. No exhaustion. Just endless training.

Endless growth.

The air was heavy here—charged, electric. The moon above was split into fragments, like a cracked mirror hanging in the sky. And in this warped little world of mine, I stood at the center. Alone.

But not lonely.

I drew a long breath, raised my arm, and spoke the words like they were stitched into my very soul.

"O black flame and cursed blood, answer my call—bind, break, and bloom."

Chains slithered out of the ground like serpents. My arms tingled with the pressure of magic ready to explode. My heart beat faster—fueled not by fear, but focus.

Because I had to get stronger. Stronger than I've ever been.

For him.

Even if it meant fighting every grotesque that dared to crawl out of the abyss. Even if I had to do it alone.

I'd fight.

I'd burn.

I'd win.

Like always, I wasn't the only one here.

I felt her before I even turned around.

**Evelina.**

The previous Queen of Curses. The fear from 500 years ago.

She was just standing there again, like some ghost with nothing better to do than watch me struggle. Her eyes—sharp, ancient, amused.

Not judging. Not helping.

Just watching.

"Back again?" I muttered, without facing her.

She didn't speak. She never did, not really. She just stared, as if waiting. Testing. But tonight, I wasn't going to let her stand there like I was some sideshow.

I was done being someone who needed to be watched.

I took a step forward, the chains flowing around me like loyal beasts. The cursed energy crackled in the air—wild, chaotic.

But this time... it was mine.

I controlled it.

Because I wasn't just a little girl with power she didn't understand anymore.

I was the new Queen of Curses now.

**Maybe even a demonic one.**

And honestly?

I kinda liked the sound of that.

I smirked, a wild grin creeping across my lips as the chains snapped into position, ready to attack. The air thickened, like the world itself was holding its breath.

I looked her straight in the red eyes, my voice clear, full of challenge.

"Time to begin."

The chains prepared.

**"Bring it on, Evelina."**

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**Arius's Perspective:**

**10:38 PM**

I can't believe I had to set that many traps outside today. Then again, if it means those pests die worse here than they would in hell, I'm all in.

I slid a cigarette from my overcoat, lit it, and took a slow drag. The night wasn't exactly starry, but it was peaceful. That counted for something.

From where I stood, Levinton stretched out below me—quiet, open, exposed. A town full of prey. If this were the old me... no. Never mind. I'm not going back there.

Today was progress.

I met that white-haired girl—Celia, was it? Cute. Sharp red eyes. A bit too pure for her own good. I'll blackmail her eventually. Not now. I'm playing the long game. Watching her squirm will be more fun when she trusts me first.

My stomach grumbled. Damn, I forgot to eat.

After a while of walking, I made it back to the Celestial Guild building. Supposedly, they'd set up a room for me. Something about being a "guest mercenary." Cute.

As I stepped inside, the place was buzzing.

Four voices were yelling across the hall—Zain, Alina, Xander, and someone named Levi. Arguing about... a roasted chicken?

No, wait. A rooster.

I paused, exhaled smoke, and listened to the chaos unfold. Everyone else seemed content to just watch.

Who the hell cooks a rooster? And more importantly, why wasn't I invited?

Then I spotted Isaac. Just sitting at a table, minding his own business.

Finally—someone sane.

I walked over and took the seat across from him.

Isaac glanced up from his half-empty mug and grinned the moment I sat down. "Well, well. Look who finally showed up. I was about to send a search party."

"Yeah?" I took another puff. "Tell 'em not to bother next time. If I die, it's probably on purpose."

He chuckled nervously, scratching his cheek. "That bad, huh?"

"Let's just say I almost stepped on one of my own traps."

"That's impressive. Self-sabotage is a rare talent," he said, raising his mug like it was a toast. "Welcome back, genius."

I smirked. "So, what's the chaos today?"

"Oh, you missed a show," he said, leaning in like he was about to spill the world's biggest secret. "Apparently Xander cooked Zain's rooster."

I blinked. "Wait, like, the rooster? The one that follows him around like a pet?"

"The very one. Zain's been beaming him with fire spells ever since. Alina and Levi walked in, caught some of the fireballs, and now they're yelling at both of them."

I leaned back, laughing. "Damn, I leave for a few hours and everyone goes full farm simulator. What's next, goat wars?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Isaac chuckled, wiping his eye. "I'm telling you, this guild is one bad day away from turning into grotesque lunch."

"Yeah, with chickens. The Cock Wars: Rise of the Roasted." I added, grinning.

He snorted. "You're an idiot."

"I try."

We shared a good laugh, the kind that felt like we actually earned it.

Then he nudged me, lowering his voice. "So... how'd it go with the white-haired girl? Celia, right?"

I stretched out, smoke drifting from my lips. "Oh, you mean my future wife? Yeah, went great. She's basically mine. Emotionally, spiritually, romantically. She just doesn't know it yet."

Isaac blinked. "Wowie. That good, huh?"

"She looked at me once. I'm assuming we're already planning the wedding and she's naming our third child after me."

"Charmer of the year," he said with a grin. "Teach me your ways, oh silver-tongued devil."

"You sure?" I raised an eyebrow. "Step one: look like me. Step two: talk like me. Step three: become me. Very advanced technique."

"Yeah, no thanks," he said, sipping his drink. "My wife might stab me."

I smirked. "Fair."

Then I added casually, "Funny thing though. She thought I was someone else at first."

"Oh?" he asked. "Who?"

I shrugged. "Some guy named Kaiser."

Isaac paused. "**Kaiser?**"

"Yeah." I waved my hand dismissively. "Seriously, who the hell's that? Who else could be as charming as me?"

Isaac burst out laughing. "Maybe it's your long-lost twin. One with a better hairline."

"Blasphemy."

We were still grinning when a girl walked over to us—confident steps, head slightly tilted with curiosity. **She had long, silky brown hair that shimmered under the lights, and her emerald eyes locked onto mine like she already knew me.**

She wore a sleek, violet battle-dress lined with gold patterns, light armor plating across her shoulders and arms, the kind that said: I'm elegant but I will wreck you. There was something dangerous in her presence—subtle but sharp. The kind of person you don't mess with unless you've written your will.

"Excuse me," she said, smiling warmly. "Did I hear that right? Did you say the name 'Kaiser'?"

I looked at her. "I did."

Her eyes lit up, like a kid hearing their favorite song. "Really? You know him? You actually heard that name?"

I nodded slowly. "Let's not get too hyped. Who are you?"

She placed a hand to her chest, almost proudly. **"I'm Sophia. A-Ranked adventurer. And I know Kaiser really well. Can you help me meet him?"**

I eyed her for a second, taking her in again. Power behind those eyes. Dangerous curiosity. A little too excited for someone who says she knows him.

"Maybe," I said. "A friend of mine knows him. I'll get you to meet him tomorrow."

Her smile bloomed even brighter as she leaned forward and took both my hands in hers. "Thank you! Seriously, thank you!"

Her hands were warm. Her grip was stronger than it looked. I gave her a casual nod and a cocky smile.

Across the table, Isaac just raised an eyebrow and winked. **"Nice catch."**

I sighed internally, watching Sophia bounce off, probably to skip in excitement or sharpen a blade.

Tomorrow's gonna be another heavy day.

**Who was this 'Kaiser' really?**

**Chapter 59 - The Grotesque Nest**

**Lucas's Perspective:**

**4/10/2017 - 7:32 AM**

I was at peace.

The wind swayed through the leaves, birds chirped, and my body floated in that almost-mystical trance state of meditation.

I was one with nature.

A calm, serene monk.

A vessel of wisdom.

A—

SMACK.

Something feathery, furious, and apparently on a mission for vengeance, slammed into my face at full speed.

I flailed like an idiot, lost balance, and the next thing I knew—

Thud.

Yep. Tree to ground. Zero to death in two seconds.

My back hit the dirt so hard, it left a mark on the grass somehow.

「Congratulations. You've unlocked a new martial art: 'Falling Face First.' Truly inspirational, monkey.」

"You told me to meditate on the tree, you useless AI!" I growled, spitting out leaves that weren't part of my diet plan.

「And I assumed you had some level of bird-detection skills. You really let your species down, Tarzan.」

"Bro, how do you not scan for a dive-bombing feathered creature?"

「It was an angry bird. Defending its territory. Unlike you, it has instincts.」

I rubbed my forehead, glaring up at the tree like it had personally betrayed me. "Next time, we meditate underground."

Dusting off, I muttered under my breath and opened my system panel. A holographic blue screen shimmered before me, numbers updating in real-time.

**\*\*Status Menu:\*\***

**\*\*Name:\*\*** Lucas

**\*\*Class:\*\*** Mage

**\*\*Level:\*\*** 9



**\*\*Age:\*\* 15**

---

**\*\*Attributes:\*\***

- **\*\*Strength:\*\* 5**
- **\*\*Agility:\*\* 6 -> 8**
- **\*\*Endurance:\*\* 6**
- **\*\*Perception:\*\* 7**
- **\*\*Intelligence:\*\* 12 -> 13**
- **\*\*Mana:\*\* 8**
- **\*\*Divine Creation:\*\* 4**

---

**\*\*Skills:\*\***

- Light-Elemental Magic
- Mana Control (Lv. 4)
- Divine Protection of Chaos

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**\*\*Notes:\*\***

- **\*\*HP:\*\* 400/300 (No way I took 100 Dmg from falling)**
- **\*\*MP:\*\* 500/500**

I slid a few stat points into Agility and Intelligence. Because let's be honest, dodging surprise birds and frying enemies' brains needed priority.

"System, that new Divine Protection ready yet?"

「Indeed, oh Great Brainstormer. Prepare to be impressed by your own genius.」

A new window popped up:

[Divine Protection: Adaptive Venom Synthesis]

Upon contact with any foreign poison, system initiates a blood-reactive synthesis.

Your bloodstream analyzes, adapts, and modifies cell structure.

Result: gradual immunity to that poison type, increased internal resistance, and after full adaptation—

—You become completely immune to it.

(Also mildly terrifying to anything that relies on toxins to win.)

I whistled, low. "Damn, I'm basically building my own vaccine system now."

「Yeah. Pfizer who?」

"If I survive long enough, I'm gonna be a walking, talking bioweapon."

「You already are. Minus the weapon. And the bio.」

I was about to say something snarky back when—

"HELP!! SOMEONE—HELP—!!"

My head snapped toward the scream. Distant, from the edge of Rinascita. My eyes narrowed.

"System."

「Already tracking coordinates. Near the eastern ridgeline. 142 meters. One injured man. One grotesque. Size: Large. Mood: Dirty.」

I cracked my neck and adjusted my cloak. "Fasten your seatbelts."

「Aye aye, monkey. Initiating combat mode. Try not to die dramatically.」

I sprinted. Dirt and leaves flew up behind me as the town's edge faded into trees and cracked roads. A broken carriage lay twisted like a crushed can. Blood splattered the grass. And a man—barely breathing—clutched his stomach, his eyes wild in fear.

Towering above him was it.

The grotesque.

Eight feet tall. Skin mottled like rotting meat. Arms too long, claws too sharp. Its face twisted in some mockery of a scream, no eyes, only a gaping hole of teeth and darkness.

It hadn't noticed me yet.

Good.

"System."

「Battle suggestion: Cut the monologue. Strike fast. Strike hard. Look cool.」

I sighed. "I never get time for a cool opening line."

Then I launched forward.

And the storm began.

The grotesque sniffed the air, its head twitching like it was tuning into some frequency I couldn't hear. That eyeless, fanged face locked onto the man behind me—

Then it saw me.

I could almost hear the gears turning in its rotted brain. It didn't charge. It crouched low, wings folding back, claws flexing.

It was hunting.

「Careful. It's clocking you. Don't blink.」

"I'm blinking right now," I whispered. "What're you gonna do about it?"

「Die faster.」

The grotesque twitched once, then launched.

Not forward. Up.

A blur of wings cut through the canopy. It vanished in the green shadows above the forest—and the next second, it dropped down behind me, claws aimed for my lower back.

I dove, rolling just as bark exploded from the tree beside me.

Fast. Too fast for something that ugly.

It came again, this time head-on, claws wide.

I didn't block. I didn't dodge.

I threw my hand out.

Light bent around my fingers, refracted through three mirrors I summoned midair—angled perfectly like a prism puzzle. A concentrated beam shot through the first, bounced to the second, and then—

BOOM!

The beam slammed into the grotesque's shoulder. Burnt flesh sizzled. It screeched, tumbling back through the brush, smoke rising from the blast.

"Mirror Sniper Shot."

「Only took you thirty seconds to land one. Proud of you, champ.」

"Eat glass."

It shook its head, then leapt sideways—not back, sideways—trying to flank.

I spun, summoned a fourth mirror at my hip, and angled a flash directly at its face.

The grotesque hissed, blinded just enough for me to close the gap. I swung with a blade made of concentrated light, shaped like a sabre but thinner—less slash, more slice.

Clang.

The claw met my blade mid-swing. A screech of grinding light and bone echoed.

Then it smiled.

Its wings folded in, and it twisted underneath the block—slashing at my knee. The hit grazed me, clothes barely holding, and I stumbled.

It followed up immediately. Slashes came in a flurry. One, two, three. I blocked high, ducked low, slid back, repositioned. The forest floor tore up beneath our feet.

「It's baiting you. Back off. It knows you're trying to aim.」

"Yeah, I figured."

I flipped back, holding one hand up like I was scared—letting the light flicker faintly around my fingertips.

The grotesque lunged. My fake fear worked like a charm.

It was on me in an instant, claws aiming for my neck.

That's when I let it happen.

It bit down—hard—on my shoulder. Blood sprayed.

Pain? Yeah. Screaming? Not this time.

「Are you INSANE?」

"Trust the plan."

「Your plan was to feed yourself to it??!」

"Technically yes, but we're not done yet."

Its fangs dug in deeper.

I smiled.

"Welcome to the light show, ugly."

Five mirrors.

All summoned around us in a perfect pentagon. Each calibrated to reflect off the others.

The moment I activated the spell, the entire forest lit up like a miniature sun had exploded.

The beam started above us, passed through one mirror, bounced to another, and hit every point around the grotesque—focusing all of it back into its body.

A prism trap.

Pure light, compressed and ricocheting at such speed it vibrated the air. The grotesque shrieked as its body vaporized—starting from the inside.

Its wings turned to dust.

Its claws melted.

Its scream stopped mid-air.

Then silence.

Ash floated in the air. The grass under us was scorched into a ring.

I dropped to one knee, breathing heavy, clutching the bite wound.

"Totally... worth it."

「You got bit. Bled out a pint. But hey, at least you looked cool.」

"How bad's the wound?"

「It's poisoned. Classic grotesque venom. But hey—good news.」

「Your new divine protection just activated. Blood adapting. Cells mutating. Poison immunity in T-minus 1 hour. You're welcome, walking vaccine.」

I let out a shaky laugh, falling onto my back as the wind stirred the ashes around me.

"Level up, vaporized a monster, almost died..."

I grinned at the sky.

"Just another Tuesday."

I exhaled slowly, the faint scent of burnt feathers and ash still hanging in the air. My shoulder stung where the grotesque bit me, but the pain had numbed now. Probably thanks to the system's "adaptation magic" or whatever it called it.

The man groaned behind me.

Still alive, huh?

I turned, walking over to him. His leg was slashed open, and his tunic was soaked with sweat and blood. Looked like he tried to crawl away at some point but didn't get far.

"Hey," I called out, crouching beside him. "You breathing or just twitching for fun?"

His eyes fluttered open, dull but focused. "You... you saved me..."

"More or less," I muttered.

"I'm a merchant. Name's Darien... Darien Malk." He coughed. "I was heading home. Then that thing—gods—came out of nowhere..."

"Mm."

I stood up, brushing dust off my clothes.

"Wait," he said, grabbing at the grass. "You're not leaving, are you?"

"I was."

"I—I can't walk like this. Please, at least help me move. I have nothing on me, but my cart's not far."

I sighed.

「Healing potion?」

「Using air particles and grass enzymes? Sure, just give me three seconds.」

「Synthesizing... done. Drawing formation. Now.」

Light shimmered in my palm as a small vial spun itself into existence, bubbling faintly with green-gold liquid. The air around it smelled oddly sweet.

Darien's eyes widened like he'd seen divine magic. "H-How did you—?"

I tossed it straight at his face.

Thwack.

He yelped as the cork popped open from the impact, the contents splashing all over his wound and some onto his lips. Within seconds, the cut on his leg began to knit together, flesh rethreading like a loom pulled by unseen hands.

He stared at his leg. Then me.

"What... are you?"

"Complicated," I replied, turning away.

I was already a few steps into the trees when a question slipped into my head. Something was off. That grotesque wasn't wandering. It was hunting.

I turned my head slightly. "Why'd it find you? Grotesques don't just stroll out of their holes in broad daylight."

Darien hesitated. "I... I don't know. I was traveling with my horse cart, heading south—should've been a quiet route. But then I saw something... strange."

He shifted, wincing. "There was a cave. Off the side of the road. Hidden behind thick roots and bramble. Looked... unnatural. The inside was black, like the light didn't reach past the entrance. But there was a blood trail going in. Fresh."

"You went inside?"

"No! I mean... I stopped to look, but before I could even think about it, I felt something wrong. I tried to move on, but then they came. Grotesques. Crawling out from that darkness. I barely escaped."

I looked toward the treeline he'd come from, narrowed my eyes.

"And this cave?"

He shakily raised his arm and pointed behind him, through the thinning trees.

"Just past those hills. You'll smell it before you see it."

I smirked.

"Appreciate it. I'll pay them a visit."

"W-Wait! You're going toward it?! You just fought one! There could be dozens!"

I glanced back, a thin grin on my lips.

"If they crawl from the shadows, then I'll be the light that burns them back in."

He didn't have a reply for that.

I walked.

Branches thinned the deeper I went. The birds stopped singing. The forest went quiet—not peaceful quiet. Dead quiet.

Then... there it was.

Half-covered by moss and hanging roots. A jagged mouth in the earth. And just as Darien said, a trail of blood—fresh, smeared, leading inward like bait.

A grotesque, smaller than the one I fought, slithered along the edge of the rocks and crept back inside, talons scraping the stone.

「System.」

「Analyzing...」

「Confirmed. Underground network detected.」

「Lifeforms: 14 grotesques. Possibly more deeper in.」



「This is not a lair. It is a hive.」

My smile vanished.

"A hive... in broad daylight?"

I stared into the darkness. My reflection shimmered in the edge of a summoned mirror beside me.

"Then I guess I'll have to break it from the inside."

I stepped forward, one foot into the cave's shadow—

Then a hand clamped over my mouth and pulled me back behind a tree with enough force to shake my skull.

My back hit bark. I instinctively summoned a mirror-shard in my palm—

But I stopped. Because right then...

Grotesques poured out.

Five of them.

Their claws scraped stone. Wings twitched as they sniffed the air, slinking around the cave's mouth like vultures sniffing meat. One of them paused. Turned.

I didn't breathe.

After a moment, they slithered back into the dark, one by one. Vanishing like mist back into the cave.

The hand let go.

I pulled away immediately, turning to face whoever the hell had grabbed me—

But what I saw wasn't normal.

He was tall—just slightly taller than me—but his presence felt like something that shouldn't be standing here. His face was unreadable, sculpted like it was carved from the idea of silence. But it was his eyes that froze me—

Fractured.

Not metaphorically. Actually fractured, like shattered glass barely holding form.

And his veins—cold blue lines, like frozen rivers beneath his skin.

Was he the one Eve saw a few days ago in the bar, the one she said was staring at us?

"What the hell are you?" I asked.

His voice was ice.

"Azrael."

No emotion. No tone. No change in posture. The name came out like a statement, not a name. Not a person. Just a fact.

I took half a step back, eyes narrowing. "...That's not a normal name."

"Neither is the idea of walking into a Grotesque hive alone."

"...Excuse me?"

He turned slightly, still not looking at me.

"That is not a lair. It is a façade. A mask layered over death."

"...And you know this how?" I asked, trying not to bristle. "Who even are you to—"

"Quiet kid."

He cut me off, voice still devoid of any color or care.

"Overconfident. Reckless. A statistical liability in human form."

I clenched my jaw. "Watch your mouth."

"If you were a threat, I would have neutralized you already. But you can provide some value in this."

My fingers twitched.

"You believe this is a common nest. That is your first mistake."

I didn't say anything. Not yet.

"There is no chaos here. Only order masked in madness. These Grotesques do not roam. They coordinate."

"...What the hell does that mean?"

He turned to face me fully now. Still no emotion. Not a flicker of expression.

"They are being led."

"By a Swarm Tyrant."

Silence. My thoughts blanked for a second before I spoke.

"That's impossible. Grotesques don't have leaders. They're rabid monsters."

"That is your second mistake. Assuming the known rules of vermin apply here."

He took a slow step forward, eyes never blinking.

"You saw five emerge, yes? All returned. You will assume there are five inside."

"Wrong."

He raised a finger and pointed toward the cave.

"The top layer is fabricated. A visual choke point constructed by terrain and behavioral control. Grotesques intentionally enter and exit from the same visible path to mislead threat perception."

"The cave narrows at the start. You assume limited space. But below that bottleneck, it expands drastically underground—spanning three kilometers in multiple directions."

I blinked. "You measured it?"

"Auditory echo and seismic resonance. The pressure shift when the Grotesques exited altered airflow. I calculated based on the number of seconds the air took to return to baseline from my visual perception and auditory cues."

"...You what?"

"I can estimate around minimum of 12,000 hostiles within."

"No way."

「Lucas.」

「Analyzing external subject's logic pathways.」

「Mathematical model in progress...」

「Confirmed: Probability of subterranean structure holding over 10,000 Grotesques is above 86% given echo patterns and airflow analysis.」

「Margin of error within 2.4%.」

My stomach dropped.

You've gotta be kidding me.

"You believed you were hunting," Azrael said coldly.

"You were the bait. And they let you kill one."

I stayed quiet.

"They want you to walk in. They want a report to spread. So that more children with fire and swords crawl into the dark."

His shattered eyes reflected the cave.

"Because this... is not a cave."

"It is a nest."

I took a slow step forward.

The wind shifted again.

This time, I didn't move carefully—I moved like I meant it. Straight toward the mouth of the cave, light curling faintly around my fingertips, reflections dancing up my forearm. The same grass and air from before began to sharpen, bend under my will, the system reacting like it always did.

Ready.

"Don't get in my way," I said without looking back at him.

"I can handle them."

Azrael didn't move. Didn't blink.

"You believe power is enough."

I stopped.

"Your light magic is remarkable. Efficient in structure. Rare in clarity."

"...Then stay out of it."

"But you are not walking into death."

His voice didn't raise. He simply explained it like someone reciting the properties of a corpse.

"You are walking into an optimization trap built by organisms bred on deception."

"A nest does not protect its young. It weaponizes them."

I turned to face him, irritation tugging at my chest.

"You think I don't know that? I don't need anyone."

"Incorrect."

I narrowed my eyes.

"You underestimate the nest's engineering."

He stepped closer, fingers behind his back like a strategist giving a war briefing.

"Trap one: Directional Sound Reflection. The walls are curved in select sectors to redirect sound behind the attacker—mimicking movement from the rear."

"Trap two: Thermal Nesting. Grotesques store body heat in decoy tunnels, tricking thermal magic and illusion-detection spells into pursuing false signals."

"Trap three: Hive Reaction Protocol. Once more than ten Grotesques are slain in under thirty seconds, pheromones release and mutate the hive into aggression-state—drawing every active Grotesque into the kill zone."

"You will not win in that chaos."

He wasn't guessing.

He knew.

"...So what?" I muttered. "You want me to bring backup? I don't work with people."

"You will. Or you will die."

My fists clenched.

"I will help you raid the nest, I have my own reasons. But one more is required."

He raised a single hand and pointed toward the cave's base.

"Their nests are not straight paths. They are inverted mazes."

"At least 243 unique tunnels confirmed from seismic ripple variance. Depth approximated at 2,000 meters. Multiple vertical shafts. Most paths loop, collapse, or separate from the primary route."

"Without a third party monitoring sector rotations or passage compression, survival rate dips below 18%."

「Lucas.」

「Azrael's estimate matches my internal calculations.」

「Confirmed: Minimum of 243 pathways below. Thermal decay and echo length confirms hive structure layout is deeper than any known cave system in Rinascita's region.」

「With current stats, your chance of survival is 21%.」

「With Azrael: 76%.」

「With Azrael and third party: 98.7%.」

「Reminder: You were looking for a party to begin Leviathan Hunt Protocol.」

「Strategic Suggestion: Gamble with this entity. He shares similar output and pattern recognition to System Level 5 cores. Almost identically as me while being purely of logic.」

...

I stayed quiet.

98.7%...

Eve's voice flickered in the back of my head. She mentioned someone like him stared at her at the bar.

"There was one man... no, something else. Cold. Inhuman. Like he forgot how to stop thinking and only stared at me calculating."

I looked at Azrael again.

His expression never changed. Not once.

He hadn't blinked once since we met.

He spoke like something not born—but calculated into existence. And the way he processed, thought, anticipated—

It was similar to my system.

Too similar.

"...Tch."

I nodded once. "Fine."

Azrael gave no reaction.

"We raid it," I said. "Together."

"Affirmative."

"We find a third."

"You already have one in mind."

"...Maybe."

I turned and walked first this time.

Azrael followed.

Both of us vanished back into the forest's shade—

Away from the hive. For now.

Rinascita waited.

And with it... a third.

Someone suicidal enough to join us.

Azrael walked behind me like some kind of horror monster with no reactions or face.

Dude hadn't made a single sound since we left the area. No twig snapped, no breath, not even a blink. I checked. Bro hasn't blinked once.

Creepy.

I shoved my hands in my pockets, my boots crunching against the dirt as we left the shadow of the forest and the outskirts of Rinascita came into view.

Hey, system. You analyzed all that crap back there in like five seconds. How the hell did you even do that?

「 Magical Recognition Protocol activated mid-analysis. I scanned residual kinetic frequency imprints left in the air and soil by grotesque movement—compared it with thermal residue patterns on the outer walls using Arcane Refraction Scans. Then I overlapped that with pulse-based vibration readings. Easy. 98.7% accurate. You're welcome, peasant. 」

...That sounds like absolute imaginary tech on steroids.

「 That's because it is. You should try being more like me instead of walking around aura farming for no reason. 」

I grunted, scratching my head. "Fair."

But seriously—how the hell did that guy figure it out without a system? Like, that logic dump he did back there was full-on boss level.

「 That's what's bothering me. He's human. No magic signature. No artificial enhancements. Not even a mana fluctuation. 」

I glanced back again.

Azrael still hadn't blinked.

Still had that poker face. Still looked like a guy who'd overanalyze chess to kill boredom and then invent new chess rules just to ruin your day.

Just—vibe-less.

I Looked back ahead.

"You remember what he said?"

"Trap one: Directional Sound Reflection. The walls are curved in select sectors to redirect sound behind the attacker—mimicking movement from the rear."

"Trap two: Thermal Nesting. Grotesques store body heat in decoy tunnels, tricking thermal magic and illusion-detection spells into pursuing false signals."



"Trap three: Hive Reaction Protocol. Once more than ten Grotesques are slain in under thirty seconds, pheromones release and mutate the hive into aggression-state—drawing every active Grotesque into the kill zone."

Yeah. That.

System, hypothetically, how would you figure that out if he didn't mention it?

「 I would listen to minute sound displacement using ultra-low frequency detection spells. Then monitor heat trails and air density variation through thermal suppression arrays. Noise suppression spells would be my default. Combine that with passive biosignature trackers using magical dust particles suspended in the atmosphere. 98.7% precision. Again. Peasant. 」

I blinked.

"...That's still cheating. Now—how did Azrael pull it off without any of that?"

System paused.

「 He likely used natural physics. Which means... he observed the entrance slope for audio redirection. Sloped walls with inconsistent echo would mean misdirected acoustics. That's trap one. 」

「 For thermal nesting, he might've measured heat refraction at a distance using black glass—like a polished obsidian lens. Those bounce heat differently. He would've tracked micro shifts in heat shimmer against the light angle. 」

「 As for the pheromone-based hive reaction—he likely studied their patrol paths and guessed. Biological creatures that operate in swarms often use rapid chemical signaling. A few corpses dragged out of the cave, undisturbed after prolonged time, means killing them in short intervals probably triggers defense instincts. In other words—he reverse engineered their behavior like a biologist... just by watching them from the tree line. 」

I stopped walking for half a second.

**"...Bro, that guy's got no life."**

「 Affirmative. Man's running quantum physics off brain cells and spite. 」

I looked back again.

Still no blink.

Still just—standing there.

I sighed. "I'm gonna die with this dude, aren't I?"

「 If you're lucky. 」

We stepped into Rinascita a few minutes later. The bustle of the town always had a rhythm to it—noisy, unpredictable, like the pulse of something alive.

The bar wasn't too crowded, surprisingly. A few adventurers were drinking and pretending their PTSD was just character development. Typical.

Azrael and I walked in together. I headed toward a corner booth by instinct, and to no one's surprise, he followed silently.

We sat down across from each other.

He didn't speak.

He didn't move.

I swear, if this guy blinks before the drinks arrive, I'll give up Light Magic and become a farmer.

The bar was dimly lit, a soft orange glow brushing against wooden walls scarred by time, blade marks, and poor life decisions.

I leaned back in my chair, arms crossed.

Azrael sat across from me with that same poker face like he was carved out of sarcasm and zero personality. His hands rested on the table like he was at a business meeting and not, y'know, in a bar with sweaty adventurers one sneeze away from murder charges.

"So," I smirked, "wanna play a game?"

Azrael blinked. Finally. Civilization.

"Observation," I grinned. "You say something about someone in here just by looking. Then I go. Winner gets to finish the other's drink."

Azrael's dead stare didn't shift. "You drink alcohol?"

"I drink everything," I said proudly.

"Even human liquid?" he asked without a blink.

"I—what? No, that's—shut up. Go first."

He glanced around once—once—then pointed at a guy near the bar.

"That man's left shoulder is ten degrees lower than his right. His armor buckle's been refastened in a hurry. Judging by the way he favors his right foot and the thin blood trail beneath the greaves—he's injured. Likely stabbed three hours ago. No medic but magic used for recovery."

He sipped water like he just ordered doom off the menu.

I opened my mouth.

Paused.

System. Just tell me some details, I can't really observe much on my own. Plus cheating is an art!

「 Already recording. Go with 'guy in blue has chronic trust issues due to the way he clenches his mug.' 」

I smirked, turned to speak—

Azrael cut in: "The man in blue is left-handed. His mug is in his right hand. That's his non-dominant side. He clutches it tight to suppress tremors in the dominant hand. Possibly poison withdrawal or a rejected curse. Trust issues wouldn't explain his dilated pupils."

My hand slowly went down.

...Did he just counter my cheat code?

「 Bro just Uno reversed your existence. 」

I glared. "You've got cameras in your eyeballs, don't you?"

"I simply pay attention," he said, deadpan.

At that moment, the bartender came over, slamming down two mugs of something frothy and questionable.

"On the house," he grunted, before waddling off.

I grabbed mine, but Azrael just stared at his with a faint tilt of the head.

"We're sitting across each other," he said blankly. "Alone. Late night. Two drinks. The man by the counter is probably assuming we're on a date."

I paused mid-sip.

"...Bro."

He just stared.

I slowly tilted my mug and poured half of it on the wooden floor.

"Respectfully," I muttered.

「 That was the most romantic gesture I've ever seen. 10/10. 」

I rubbed my temples. "You need social training, man. You ever been hugged?"

"No. Have you ever thought before speaking?"

I blinked.

"...Okay, that was a solid roast."

I turned to System. Yo, tag in. Roast him.

「 On it. Lucas.exe loading... I'll speak for you. 」

「 Hey Azrael, nice personality you got there. Shame it came free with the emotionless NPC starter pack. 」

Azrael blinked, then narrowed his eyes. "What... is an 'NPC'?"

I stiffened.

Oh crap.

Shit. That's an Earth thing.\* I quickly changed the topic, slamming my mug down like it owed me rent.

"Anyway—back to business."

Azrael raised a brow.

"We raid that nest together. Full throttle. You cover the logical deathtrap strategies, I handle the crowd control. We'll wipe it clean."

He sipped his drink, still unreadable. "And?"

"And..." I leaned forward, "I was also looking for a party. To hunt something way nastier than Grotesques."

"And what is that?" he asked.

"The Leviathan."

He didn't even blink. "And you want me involved. What's in it for me?"

I smirked. "I can give you something in return."

He leaned forward slowly. "I want three things. One—access to the internal schematics of your reasoning skills capabilities. Two—your drink. You poured it, I want it. And three..."

He paused dramatically.

**"...a duck."**

I blinked.

"...What?"

**"A duck."**

I just stared.

「 Man said duck like it's a currency. 」

"You're joking," I muttered.

"I've never joked in my life."

I rubbed my eyes. "Okay. I'm gonna pretend I understood that."

And then—

A voice cut in behind us.

"Well well, looks like you boys are planning a little suicide run."

Azrael and I both turned at the same time.

And I nearly dropped my mug.

A woman.

Not just any woman—she was stunning. And when I say stunning, I mean the kind of "I've-waited-my-whole-life-to-see-this" level of stunning. Her age was tough to place, but I'd guess she was somewhere between 19 and 20. She had that graceful, mature beauty that only people with too much confidence and too little humility could pull off.

Her eyes were a striking shade of blue—clear, vibrant, and filled with a quiet intensity. They were the kind of eyes that seemed to hold your attention without even trying. And then there was her hair: long, flowing, and platinum blonde, catching the light like strands of spun silver. It shimmered softly, adding an almost unreal glow to her already impossible presence.

I blinked, shaking my head. Right, magical world. Of course.

But the beauty didn't stop there—her smile. It was so sweet, so inviting, it almost made me forget that I'm supposed to be a bitter, sarcastic hero or whatever.

Then, with a voice that could melt stone, she spoke.

**"Hello," she said, her voice like honey dripping from a golden comb, "My name is Navina. I'm the Sword Saint of Reflex."**

She smiled again, a small, almost flirtatious tug at the corners of her lips. "I'd like to join you two, to go to the nest of Grotesques."

Her voice was like music, soft and seductive, but I didn't miss the underlying seriousness behind her words.

Oh boy.

I turned back to the table, my thoughts shifting faster than a dying man. Seems like I've found the third suicidal member of my party.

I could almost hear the System snort in my head.

「 Oh, great. A beautiful, dangerous woman with an obvious death wish. What could go wrong? 」

I sighed and glanced over at Azrael, who had still not so much as moved a muscle or cracked a single emotion. He was sipping his drink like it was the most normal thing in the world. Poker face still in full swing.

I shook my head, deadpan. "Suicidal sword saint girl, NPC, and lastly... me."

Then I felt the System's presence, like an overenthusiastic guide telling me too much.

「 Don't forget about your masterful AI, me. I'm the real MVP. 」

I could feel my soul being drained from my body in real time.

My life is ass, I thought, internally cringing at how everything seemed to spiral into more chaos than I could handle.

Navina just stood there, her smile never faltering.

"Would you like to discuss the details of the raid, Lucas?" she asked, her tone still sweet, still hypnotic.

I tried to focus. Focus, Lucas. She's not here for your existential crisis. She's here to get herself killed with you.

I ran my fingers through my hair, still processing everything. What is this, some sort of party of doom?

And then, before I could say anything, Azrael leaned back, breaking the silence with one sentence that almost made me choke on my own spit.

"I assume you both plan on dying together."

Navina turned to him, her eyes narrowing slightly, but the smile never left. "I see you're the cold one in this group. A pleasure."

"I don't enjoy pleasantries," Azrael responded without skipping a beat, taking another sip of his drink. "But I suppose we will all die soon enough."

My life. I felt my inner monologue descend into the void.

Navina turned back to me, her eyes sparkling with what could only be described as mischief. "So, can I join, Lucas?"

"Sure," I muttered, resigned to this death march of doom. "We can go raid the nest of Grotesques... and maybe not die."

System chimed in, almost too excited for the impending disaster.

「 Ooooh, I smell a good ol' suicide mission. I'll be guiding this disaster. Don't worry, Lucas. I got your back... as always. 」

I stared blankly ahead, wondering just how much I had to suffer before some semblance of sanity would show up in my life again.

Azrael didn't seem phased, as always, and Navina was still smiling like a kitten who'd just found a new toy.

I sighed deeply, the weight of impending death weighing heavily on my shoulders.

Well, at least they're good looking. I guess that's a perk... right?

Wait no that Azrael guy sucks, total mood dropper.

The world wasn't going to make sense anytime soon. I could feel it.

And honestly? I couldn't care less.

**Time to burn their nest.**

-----

But something else was waiting while Lucas was there casually with his new party.

**The Swarm Tyrant.**

The deepest, darkest layer of the Grotesque nest was a place of decay, where shadows clung to the walls like the whispers of ancient, forgotten horrors. In the center of this cavernous expanse sat the Swarm Tyrant, a grotesque being of terrifying size, its form an amalgamation of muscle and jagged bone.

Its eyes, glowing with an eerie, unnatural light, scanned the cavern as its massive, clawed hands rested on the armrests of its throne. The Tyrant's mind was linked to the swarm, directing their movements through waves of thought that reverberated through the very air.

It was in this darkness that the Grotesque approached, its hulking body shifting uneasily as it neared the throne. This one was different from the others—its eyes, though warped, carried a glint of intelligence. It had witnessed the destruction of a large portion of their ranks.

The Grotesque knelt before the Swarm Tyrant, its voice dripping with obedient subservience. Its words were broken, its tone reverent yet filled with dread.

"Master... 26 of our brethren... fallen," it rasped.

The Swarm Tyrant's glowing eyes narrowed, its mind immediately processing the gravity of the news. Its voice, deep and menacing, reverberated through the cavern.

"Who dares... disrupt my swarm?"



The Grotesque's form stiffened, and it spoke again, the words slow and deliberate, almost fearful. "Not... not a monster... A human... A human laid the traps..."

The Swarm Tyrant's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean by 'traps'? Speak clearly, fool!"

The Grotesque's voice trembled, but it continued, its tone shifting to something more desperate, more terrified. "The human... laid traps near Levinton... designed with knowledge... of our biology. Traps that were impossible to avoid—instant death. They... they used the very essence of our being against us. They knew our weaknesses."

The Swarm Tyrant's mind reeled. It knew its own grotesques were formidable, difficult to defeat in numbers, but the idea that a human—mere flesh and blood—had crafted such calculated, deadly traps was beyond comprehension.

"A human..." the Tyrant muttered, its voice a low growl. "A human capable of such traps... Impossible."

The Grotesque shuddered, its body twitching as it recalled the nightmare it had witnessed. "Yes... the human knew our weaknesses... used sound... direction, temperature... pheromone confusion. Our senses were hijacked—no room for escape. And the worst... they were designed to be undetectable, invisible until it was too late."

The Swarm Tyrant's clawed hands tightened into fists, its rage palpable. "What human... did this?"

The Grotesque shook its head, its voice now almost a whisper. "The one with the blue eyes. The one we killed... he spoke the truth, master. The borders of Levinton are surrounded by traps, but it is not there we should focus our efforts. The human... the traps... they are not the end. There is another... another place, a town... Rinascita. We must turn our focus there."

The Swarm Tyrant's thoughts churned. The human with blue eyes—the one they had killed not long ago—had been right all along. The creature had spoken of a greater threat lying ahead, of traps and dangers they had underestimated. The Tyrant now realized that killing him had been a monumental mistake. The human could have been a valuable asset, a source of information.

"It seems... I have made an error," the Tyrant muttered, a hint of regret in its voice. "That human could have been useful. Too much information was lost."

It raised its head, its dark, glowing eyes blazing with newfound focus. "Prepare the others. We march to Rinascita."

The Grotesque bowed its head before leaving to carry out its orders. The Swarm Tyrant remained seated, its mind now focused on the human, the one who had laid out the

traps that took down twenty-six of its kind. No one had ever been able to calculate their weaknesses so precisely.

No one had ever been so dangerous.

The Tyrant clenched its fists, fury and admiration mingling. "This human... I will deal with him soon enough."

**It leaned forward, its voice cold and full of contempt. "The Devil's Successor. That is what he will be known as. And I will be the one to end him."**

**The scene shifts.**

**4/10/2017 - 10:32 AM**

The morning sky over Levinton was bright and clear, the sun shining down on the rolling hills and dense forests. Birds chirped in the trees, their songs filling the air with the sounds of life. Three figures walked together on the dirt path leading into the forest—Sophia, Isaac, and...

Arius...

Sophia's pace was steady, her sharp eyes scanning their surroundings with practiced ease. Isaac, ever the talkative one, kept up with her step for step, his voice carrying on the breeze as he made idle conversation. But Arius... Arius was different.

There was something about him, something that set him apart from the rest. His expression was calm, but there was a quiet intensity to him that never left his face. And despite the mundane walk they were taking toward the training grounds, there was an unmistakable tension in the air

Something dark lingered around Arius—an aura of mystery, of danger.

Isaac glanced at Arius, noticing the subtle changes in his demeanor. He'd known he wasn't like the others, but today, something about him seemed different. Was he really human?

"Arius..." Isaac said, his voice low. "What's going on with you today? You're... not yourself."

Arius didn't respond right away. Instead, his gaze lingered ahead, focusing on the distant silhouette of the training grounds where Celia usually practiced. His expression remained unreadable.

Sophia's heart skipped a beat as she caught a glimpse of his eyes—those icy, unblinking blue eyes that seemed to pierce right through her.

## **Was he the Devil's Successor?**

Because what happened next... only confirmed it.

### **Chapter 60 - I'll Be The Monster**

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

**4/10/2017 - 10:41 AM**

Just another morning of training, and today was no different—apart from last night, of course.

Yeah, I think I went a little too far.

Challenging Evelina? That was so me. And it turned into a seven-hour stalemate. Seven! My legs were jelly, and I don't even remember how I fell asleep in a dream. But still... it was necessary. I needed that fight. Not just to get stronger, but to remind myself why I started pushing so hard in the first place.

#### **I made a promise—to myself and to him.**

The sun was shining over Levinton today, gentle and warm, like it was trying to apologize for how rough yesterday was. I was at my usual spot by the river. It's quiet here. Peaceful. No noise, no pressure. Just the sound of the flowing water and the feel of my heartbeat pounding through my limbs as I moved through my routine.

I wiped the sweat off my brow, letting out a small breath as I pushed through another set. My body still ached, but I liked it. That soreness? That's proof I'm growing. Every little pain, every drop of sweat... it's me slowly becoming someone who won't break so easily.

I stretched my arms back when I caught movement from the corner of my eye.

"Hm?"

Three people. One of them, I recognized instantly—Arius.

Oh great.

He looked the same as always—casually confident, a little too smug. There was always something off about his smile though. Too polished. Too perfect. The kind that makes you want to smile back... but also step two feet away.

Beside him were two people I didn't recognize. A man and a woman. They were dressed like travelers or maybe adventurers. I narrowed my eyes slightly, my body still in motion as I watched them.

I turned fully and tilted my head. "Arius?" I called, brushing a strand of hair away from my cheek. "Who're your friends?"

He approached with a calm smile. "Celia," he said, like he'd been rehearsing the name all morning.

"You're up early," he added, eyes scanning the area before settling back on me. "Hardworking as ever. Not everyone would be out here this soon in the morning."

I gave a small nod, adjusting my sleeve. "Couldn't really sleep in. Habit, I guess."

His smile didn't falter. "Discipline like that tends to stand out. It says a lot."

I glanced at him, unsure how to take that. "I just don't like sitting still too long."

"Understandable," he replied smoothly. "You seem like someone who moves forward no matter what."

There was something in the way he said it. Not flirty. Not exactly warm either. Just... well-placed.

I gave a short laugh. "I met you yesterday. You already analyzing me?"

"Observation is part of who I am," he said, a trace of amusement behind his calm eyes. "Plus I do like looking at beauty time to time such as you."

I raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Just met his gaze for a second longer before looking away.

He smiled before gesturing casually to the two behind him. "These are my friends. Met them last night during a lovely... dramatic turn of events."

The man looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here, and the girl had this stiff, polite expression like she was trying really hard not to say what was on her mind.

Arius continued, "This is Isaac Velgrin. And the one next to him is Sophia."

I stepped forward with a smile, wiping my hands clean on my tunic. "I'm Celia. It's nice to meet you both."

...Nothing.

They just stared. Eyes slightly wide, lips parted, but no words.

I knew that look.

I hated that look.

They don't like me because I had similar looks to the queen of curses from 500 years... right?

There was something about me—something left over from her. That damned resemblance. That quiet voice in people's heads whispering, Isn't she the one? The Queen of Curses. The girl who destroyed celestine. The reason people sleep with their eyes open.

But I'm not her.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and kept my smile up. Even if it hurt.

Arius noticed the tension, of course. And like clockwork, he stepped in—voice smooth, calm, reassuring. The kind that wraps around your mind before you realize it.

"No need to worry," he said, exhaling a thin stream of smoke. "Celia's no queen of curses, no threat. Unless you hurt someone she loves, then..." He tilted his head, eyes flicking to me for just a second. "Well, let's not imagine that version. Celia's probably the kindest person I know."

There it is again.

...I still don't know if that's a compliment or a trap.

The two exchanged glances—hesitant, but eventually they nodded.

The man was first. He cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Isaac Velgrin. D-Rank Adventurer. Uh... it's good to meet you."

Then the girl. "Sophia. I'm A-Rank," she said shortly, her tone clipped but not rude. Just... careful.

I smiled again, softer this time. "It really is nice to meet you both."

Isaac's shoulders dropped just a bit after the introductions. His eyes flicked between me and Arius, and he gave this small, nervous smile like he was standing on a frozen lake and wasn't sure if it was about to crack.

Sophia, on the other hand, stood with the same poised posture—arms crossed, gaze quietly sharp, like she was dissecting me with her eyes. Not cruel. Just... cautious.

I didn't blame them.

When people stare at you like you're the devil with a smiley face drawn on it... it's kind of hard to take offense.

The silence hung between us awkwardly. A little breeze passed by. Somewhere in the distance, a bird chirped like it was mocking us for how weird this was getting.

I turned toward the river and sat on a nearby stone, patting the spot next to me. "You guys can relax. I don't bite."

Isaac blinked. "Wait—so, you're not gonna curse us for standing weird or something?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Do I look like I do that?"

He stared at me a second too long, then suddenly laughed, rubbing the back of his head. "No! I mean—no, you don't! It's just... you know... rumors. You glare and the wind stops. You walk into a town and everyone leaves. That sort of thing."

I smirked. "Wow, I sound really cool in those rumors. I should start charging for appearances."

Isaac chuckled nervously. "Yeah, you'd probably break the market."

Arius, who had sat on a nearby tree root like some king lounging in his crooked throne, finally flicked the ash from his cigarette and spoke casually, "Oh, speaking of appearances—Isaac and I stalked you a few days ago."

...

I blinked.

"You what?"

Sophia turned sharply toward him, brows raised so high they almost left her face. "Arius—are you serious?"

Isaac was already mid-panicked wave. "N-No! Wait, okay yes—but not in a creepy way! It was his idea! He said it was, uh, for research. Observation. Totally professional."

I stared, mouth slightly open.

"Research?"

"Yeah!" Isaac grinned, the kind that screams I'm totally lying but I need to save myself. "You see, you were training at the cliffside a few nights ago, and Arius was like 'Hey,

let's spy on her for a bit' and I was like, 'Bro that's wrong,' but then he said something about gathering data and I just kinda... went along?"

Arius gave a lazy shrug. "You looked beautiful under moonlight. I couldn't resist."

"Stop talking," Sophia muttered to him, hand over her face.

But I...

I laughed.

Like, actually laughed.

"Oh my god," I said between giggles. "You two are such idiots."

Isaac blinked. "Wait—wait, you're not mad?"

I shook my head, wiping a tear. "Nah. If I got mad every time someone spied on me, I'd probably die from high blood pressure."

Sophia let out a quiet breath and finally sat down nearby, her arms still crossed, but her stance less... cautious.

"You don't act like I expected," she said finally.

I tilted my head. "What were you expecting?"

"A serious threatening person." Her tone was flat, but not rude. "You're calm. Normal, even."

I smiled at that. "Trust me, I've had enough disasters to last a lifetime. I don't need to be one."

Sophia didn't smile exactly, but her eyes softened just a touch. "Good. The world's got enough of those."

Isaac sat down too, crossing his legs like a kid at story time. "So, uh... you always train near the river?"

"Yup," I nodded. "It's quiet. Peaceful. I like hearing the water when I'm tired. It's kinda comforting."

"That's... actually really nice." Isaac glanced at the water, then back at me. "I thought you'd be training in hell or somewhere with the devil. Y'know, like one of those dramatic stories from 500 years ago."

I grinned. "Too hot. And dramatic people are exhausting."

Sophia looked up at that, raising an eyebrow. "That's rich coming from someone who apparently glows under moonlight and makes the wind stop when she glares."

"Okay, that one might be true," I smirked. "But the wind started it."

Even Sophia chuckled at that—quiet, barely-there, but genuine.

Arius stood and walked past us slowly, cigarette between his fingers, giving us all a side glance. "You three look good together."

Sophia turned her head. "We just met."

"And yet," Arius said with that familiar sly grin, "you're already sitting next to each other, laughing. That's got to count for something."

I blinked at him, then looked at the two beside me.

Huh.

I didn't even notice how close we'd gotten.

I looked back to Sophia. "You really thought I was that scary?"

Sophia hesitated, but then nodded. "Yeah. But I think I get it now."

"Get what?"

She looked me in the eyes. "You're not the monster they talk about... you're just someone trying to live."

That hit harder than I thought it would.

I nodded, quietly. "Yeah... that's all I want."

Isaac smiled, leaning back on his hands. "Same here, honestly. Just wanna get through this mess of a world without screwing up too bad."

"And you're doing a great job," I teased.

"Thanks," he grinned. "That means a lot coming from the moonlight goddess of the river according to Arius."

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. "Stop giving me weird titles!"



Arius just smirked, smoke curling from his lips.

Sophia was quiet for a long moment. The earlier laughter had faded. Her posture straightened again—not rigid, but thoughtful, like she was lining up pieces in her mind. I didn't miss the glance she gave Isaac and Arius.

Then she looked at me. "I wanted to speak to you about something, Celia..."

I blinked, caught off guard by the shift.

So much for small talk.

Still, I nodded. "Go ahead."

Her voice lowered, but stayed steady. "Last night, I overheard Isaac and Arius talking... Arius mentioned Kaiser's name. That you knew him."

I didn't move. The mention of his name dropped like a weight in my chest.

Even now, it still carried that much weight.

Sophia's eyes watched me closely. "Is that true?"

I let the silence sit before I answered.

"Yes. I know him," I said. "I am his friend."

For the first time, Sophia's mask cracked a little—eyes widening, lips parting slightly like she didn't believe what she heard.

"Kaiser... called you his friend?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but the moment shattered as I noticed the two EARS not far behind us, watching with very subtle interest.

Arius leaned slightly closer like he was tuning into a gossip. Isaac had his hand on his chin, like this was the most interesting show he'd seen all month.

I narrowed my eyes at them. "Seriously?"

Arius gave a half-smile. "We're all ears."

I sighed. "This is personal. I'll speak with her alone."

Sophia nodded silently.

Isaac groaned and nudged Arius. "Give it up, man."

Arius exhaled dramatically, like a kid being told to leave the theater before the climax. "Fine. Let the princesses gossip in peace."

I ignored that and started walking along the riverbank. Sophia followed.

The sound of water brushing against the stones was steady and quiet, like a heartbeat for the earth. We walked for a few seconds in silence before I spoke again.

"I meant it. I really was his friend."

Sophia looked ahead, eyes narrowed slightly as if she was watching something that wasn't there. "I don't think you were lying. It's just..." She hesitated. "Hearing that Kaiser has a friend—it's hard to believe."

"...Why?" I asked, my voice soft but edged with curiosity.

She paused, then turned slightly to glance at me. "Because I know him. And that version of him... doesn't seem like someone who calls people his 'friends'."

That stopped me. I looked at her properly now. "You knew Kaiser?"

Sophia nodded slowly. "We went to the same academy. Solerenne Academy of Sorcery. In the Asura Empire."

I stopped walking. "You're kidding."

She didn't smile. "I'm not."

That hit me harder than I expected.

Kaiser never told me. Not once. Not even in passing. No stories. No pride in being part of the most prestigious school on the continent.

I should've known... but he kept it from me.

Why?

Why would he hide something like that?

Sophia kept walking, her tone now quieter, but still clear. "I knew him there for three years. Long enough to understand how he was."

I caught up to her and glanced sideways. "What was your relationship with him?"

She stopped walking again.

There was a small breeze. Nothing dramatic. Just stillness—and something unsaid hanging between us.

Sophia turned to me, her gaze distant. "My relationship with him... wasn't anything normal."

That phrasing made me blink. "...Not normal? How?"

She hesitated, looking down for a moment.

"I promised Kaiser I wouldn't tell anyone," she said quietly.

I stared at her.

A pause.

I pouted. Really? I was this close to hearing something juicy and that guy had to ruin it.

In my head, I was already cursing him.

Damn you, Kaiser. You could've been an academy heartthrob, a secret prince, or a criminal student mastermind and you made her swear silence?

I let out a breath. "He always does this. Hides things. Keeps people at a distance."

Sophia looked at me again. This time... softer.

"You sound like you care about him."

I did.

But I didn't say that out loud.

Instead, I kicked a pebble into the river. "He is my friend. And as his friend I also care about him.."

Silence settled between us again. Not heavy. Not hostile.

Just the kind of silence between two people starting to understand one another.

And for now... that was enough.

I let out a small sigh, brushing my hair back behind my ear.

"...So what do you want to know about Kai?"

The words left my lips casually. But the moment they did, Sophia froze. Her eyes slightly widened, like she just heard something impossible.

"K-Kai?" she stuttered. "Did you just... call him that?"

I blinked, confused by the sudden reaction. "Yeah... is that a problem?"

Sophia quickly shook her head. "No. Nothing like that. It's just... Kaiser only ever let one person call him that. Elfie—I mean, Elfina."

...Elfina?

That name didn't sit right with me.

I didn't know her, and yet hearing her name wrapped around his like that—it scratched something sharp in my chest.

Elfina.

Who was she to him?

And why did she get to call him something that soft?

Wait... if he let her call him Kai, then—

Did he have a name for her too?

A part of me didn't like the thought of it.

No—scratch that. A part of me hated it.

I tilted my head, still keeping my tone calm, maybe too calm. "And what did Kai call her?"

Sophia smiled a little at the memory. "He called her Elfie. All the time. They were best friends, really close."

I nodded... slowly.

Best friends.

Right.

So close that he gave her a cute nickname.

My smile stayed up, but it felt fake even to me. I made sure she didn't notice.

"That's... sweet," I said, tilting my head ever so slightly. "Best friends, huh?"

My tone was still gentle, but laced with a thread of something else. Something I wasn't entirely proud of.

I imagined Elfie, whoever she was, laughing beside him, standing too close, maybe grabbing his arm—

My hand tightened into a small fist by my side.

He never called me something like that.

Sophia didn't seem to notice the jealousy behind my eyes as she continued.

"In those three years, he never really trusted anyone. Maybe he smiled, laughed, talked... but if it came to choosing himself over others, he wouldn't hesitate to use them."

I looked at her. "He'd also use Elfie?"

She shook her head. "No. He only ever cared about her. The rest of us were just... classmates. Background noise, honestly."

That struck deeper than I expected.

He cared about her that much?

I swallowed the lump that was forming. "Why? What made her different?"

Sophia walked a few steps forward, voice softening as if she was remembering someone far away. "Because they were childhood friends. They arrived at Solerenne together. They had history, memories. That kind of bond... I don't think anyone else stood a chance."

My stomach twisted.

So that's why. She had years on him. A past I couldn't touch.

I followed beside her, silent.

Then, after a long moment, I asked—voice lower than before.

"...Where is this Elfie now?"

I didn't mean for it to sound so bitter. But I couldn't help it.

Sophia stopped walking.

"...She died," she said quietly. "In the Asura Crisis. Two years ago."

I froze.

I'd built her up in my head—this girl from Kaiser's past that I'd have to watch out for, maybe compete with. But now...

"She's... gone?"

Sophia nodded once, the weight of it written across her face. "She didn't make it."

I felt a strange pang in my chest—part guilt, part shock.

"I'm... sorry," I murmured.

But before I could say anything more, Sophia cut in, voice cold now, serious.

"With her... we found Kaiser's body."

My eyes widened slightly. "What?"

"He was supposed to be dead. That day. We saw his remains. We buried him."

Her gaze hardened. "And yet now... I hear you know him."

There was silence.

She stared into the river like it held answers.

"He deceived us all. Faked his death. Two years ago."

My mind stopped for a second, the words echoing in a hollow space inside me.

He faked his death?

So... that's what he was hiding from me. From everyone.

He left his entire past behind. Buried it, just like they buried him. Elfie... the academy... everything.

A part of me was angry. Another was confused.

But what dug deepest was the quiet ache of not knowing. Of not being allowed to know.

Why did you hide all this from me, Kai...?

Did you think I'd never find out?

Or didn't trust me enough?

Sophia remained quiet for a moment, her eyes tracing the wind as if she were watching something only she could see.

Then, without looking at me, she asked,

"...When did you meet him?"

I blinked. "It's... almost been two months now."

Sophia's head turned sharply. Her eyes widened—shock clear on her face.

"Two... months?"

Her voice barely registered above a whisper, like that number alone didn't make sense to her. Then her gaze turned sharp again. Serious. Curious.

"...And how has he been?" she asked, tilting her head. "How does he act with you?"

The question caught me off guard. I hesitated for a second, unsure what she meant—then answered truthfully.

"...He never got angry," I said slowly. "He's funny. Kind. Always sweet to me. Even if he's weak at fighting or low-ranked... he's always trying to protect me."

Sophia's face froze.

Not in disbelief...

But almost in pity.

Like she was looking at someone hopelessly mistaken.

"...Are you sure?" she asked quietly. "He acts that way? Towards you?"

I nodded. "Yes. Every time."

There was silence between us again, a tension growing thicker with each breath.

Then Sophia lowered her head slightly and murmured, "I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

"It's not that I don't believe you," she said softly, but her tone was heavy now, like something painful had been cracked open. "It's just hard to imagine that Kaiser. That side of him..."

"...Why?" I asked, brows furrowed. "Why is it so hard? He is like that. Kaiser's a nice person."

She looked up at me again, but this time, her eyes weren't soft.

They were dead serious.

Cold. Haunted.

"No," she said. "He's not."

Her voice was steady.

"I've seen his dark side."

My breath caught.

"...Dark side?"

Sophia stepped closer, the light behind her vanishing in her shadow. Her voice was hushed but heavy.

"The Kaiser I knew... would only ever be that kind to one person. Elfie. For her, he'd do anything. Sacrifice anything. But the rest of us...?" She narrowed her eyes. "We were pawns. Nothing more. Tools, sacrifices, distractions. And if we got in the way..."

I felt a chill crawl up my back.

"...You're wrong," I said, almost reflexively. "Kaiser isn't like that. He—"

But Sophia cut me off.

Her voice dropped into something far darker.

"There was a group," she said. "Back then... in the Academy. A student led them—A-Ranked. He had eleven followers. Strong. Smart. Influential. They ruled our entire class."



I listened, silent now. My throat dry.

"...And?"

Sophia's eyes darkened. "They bullied others. Controlled everything. But until the very last exam of the year, they never touched Elfie. Maybe Kaiser... yes. But never her."

My heart skipped. "Then...?"

Sophia's voice was hollow now, her words dipped in a quiet rage.

"It was during our finals. A mock survival exam held on a secluded island. Testing magic, tactics, everything. Students from other grades too."

She paused, eyes locking onto mine.

"...That's when they made a mistake."

My breath caught again.

"They thought it was clever," she whispered. "Targeting Elfie. Hurting her. Breaking her spirit in front of everyone."

I swallowed. The air felt too still.

"...Did Kaiser do anything?"

Sophia's eyes didn't blink.

"Do anything?"

Her voice was laced with something sharp now.

She took a single step forward.

"No. Kaiser didn't do something."

She exhaled.

"He ended everything."

I felt my breath hitch, heart pounding like a distant war drum.

Sophia's voice turned even colder—her tone now dipped in a seething disgust.

"All twelve of them," she muttered, "including their so-called leader... Milo."

She almost spat the name out.

"Human shit, he was. A tyrant. Thought he was untouchable. He deserved what happened to him. Every last bit of it."

My throat tightened.

"...What did Kaiser do to them?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Sophia looked at me with a heavy stillness. Her expression unreadable. But her eyes... they held too much.

"In their final moment, when they hurt Elfie... Kaiser didn't hold back," she said, slowly. "He ensured they were no longer part of the academy."

I froze.

"...H-How?" I asked.

But Sophia's gaze hardened.

"I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone," she said. "So I'm sorry, Celia."

My heart dropped. But then she continued.

"But I will tell you this..."

She took a slow breath—her tone laced with something dark and heavy.

"The next day... all twelve of them—including Milo—didn't even look human anymore."

I stood frozen in place.

"Beaten," she whispered. "Crushed. Their bodies mangled to the point they were left in an unknown state of coma. Not dead. Not alive. Just... barely breathing."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Their families," she continued, "didn't even speak out. Some tried, but... they hesitated. Like someone had gotten to them first. Like they were blackmailed into keeping their mouths shut."

A pause.

"Just one day after Elfie was hurt," she said with a low voice, "all twelve of them were suspended... for a year. Due to 'inhuman levels of injuries.' Most of them—deathbeds, Celia."

My breath hitched.

My body felt cold.

"...Is that... really true?"

Sophia looked at me, emotionless.

"That's why," she said. "That's why I'm having such a hard time believing Kaiser would protect you."

She took a step closer, her voice like a knife.

"He's known you for just two months. Two. So either he's deceiving you... or pretending. Because the Kaiser I knew never did anything without a reason."

I didn't respond.

I couldn't.

The air felt too heavy, but...

My memories—they came rushing back. His words. His warmth. His eyes when he looked at me—not like a pawn, not like a tool—but like someone he cared about. Like I wasn't just another tool for him.

He laughed with me. He listened to me.

He protected me.

And then I raised my head—and with a small smile, I spoke.

"I believe you, Sophia..."

Her eyes narrowed.

"...But the Kaiser I know—he's my friend. And I believe him... with my heart."

"...Your heart?" she asked, voice low.

I nodded—softly, warmly.

"Kaiser himself... he called me that. He said I was his heart."

My voice didn't shake this time. "So I trust him. I really do. I don't think he's lying to me... or pretending. I think..." I looked at the sky. "He sees me as someone close. And that's enough."

Sophia stared at me.

She didn't speak.

She didn't even blink for a moment.

She looked... speechless.

Like I'd just said something that cracked the ground she stood on.

We continued walking. In silence, now. The tension still hung between us, but it had shifted—like I had said something she didn't know how to reply to.

Eventually, we turned back, heading toward where Isaac and Arius were waiting.

But before we got there, she suddenly stopped.

"...Back to why I was here," she said quietly. "I wanted to meet him."

I turned toward her.

"...Can you ask him to meet me, please?" Her voice was softer now. "I just want to see him. Once."

My face fell.

"...Kaiser's not here."

She blinked. "Then where can I meet him?"

My hands curled into fists.

My tone lowered.

"...Kaiser is currently captured. By the grotesques."

Sophia's eyes widened.

I looked away, anger tightening in my chest.

"I'll save him," I said firmly. "Just wait, Sophia."

I turned back to her, fire in my voice now.

"Then you can meet him."

Sophia's hands trembled. Her eyes wide in disbelief as if the ground beneath her had just crumbled.

"That's impossible," she said, almost yelling.

Her voice cracked.

"How can bugs—I mean, grotesques—capture someone like HIM?!"

I stayed silent for a moment. Then, quietly, I spoke.

"Kaiser might be stronger than most people, yeah. But..." I looked down. "He told me... he couldn't use magic. And that he was only E-ranked. So... maybe that's why he—"

"Bullshit."

Her voice cut through mine like a blade.

I looked up, stunned.

She looked furious—like she didn't believe a word I just said.

"Kaiser being captured by lowly pests is impossible!"

Her voice echoed in the quiet path between the trees.

I stared, speechless from her sudden outburst.

But then, Sophia exhaled and took a step back, her shoulders slumping a little.

"I... I'm sorry for reacting like that," she muttered. "It's just... everything you've told me up till now—it feels impossible. Like you're describing someone else. Not the Kaiser I knew."

I gave her a small nod.

"It's okay. But it's true," I said softly. "Kai... he's captured. It happened weeks ago. When he was near the outskirts of Levinton. At night."

Sophia was silent. Processing.

Then she looked at me again, more serious now.

"...Where exactly?"

I told her. The area. The time. The only details I knew. She listened carefully, her brows furrowed like she was trying to piece it together.

After a pause, she looked at me again—this time with something... deeper in her eyes.

"Then... let me help you," she said. "To bring him back."

I blinked, caught off-guard.

"...You want to help?"

She nodded.

"Why?" I asked, narrowing my eyes slightly. "Why risk your life for him?"

Sophia looked away for a moment, her expression distant. Her voice came softer now... but still certain.

"...He saved my life, Celia."

My heart skipped.

"He did things even my parents wouldn't do for me," she continued, her voice almost... hollow. "Protected me... stood up for me... gave me a life I could live."

She looked back at me.

"So yeah. I owe him. I'm indebted to him. And if helping you brings him back—I'll do whatever it takes."

I stared at her for a moment.

She was serious.

No trace of lies.

I nodded slowly.

"...Alright. If you think it's fine, then... I'll let you help."

A beat passed.

Then Sophia grinned, breaking the tension.

She lifted her hand, palm open.

"Then it's a deal," she said. "Team Heart, right?"

I chuckled under my breath.

"...Sure."

And I lifted my hand to meet hers.

**— Smack!** □□

That high-five echoed like a silent promise.

We continued forward.

And soon, the trees cleared...

Arius and Isaac were just ahead—sitting near the edge of a grassy slope, quietly chatting.

They looked up as we approached.

We reached the clearing, and the quiet murmur of Arius and Isaac's conversation faded as they noticed us.

Sophia stepped ahead of me, arms crossed, and her usual smug smirk already back on her face.

"I'm done talking," she said, loud enough for both to hear. "And, by the way..." she tilted her head toward me, "Celia and I are now a team."

Isaac blinked, confused.

Sophia grinned with pride. "Team Hearts. We're gonna take down the grotesques and bring them extinction! No matter what."

Isaac just gave a small nod, calm as always.

But Arius?

He frowned—no, he pouted.

Looking right at me.

"Wait... why not invite me?" he said with a soft whine, lips puffed like a child left out of a game.

I blinked, caught completely off-guard.

"Eh? W-Wait, it wasn't even my plan!" I stammered, waving my hands. "We just... did it on the fly, since our goals aligned..."

Arius didn't budge. His pout turned into something softer—too soft.

Then, with his usual cheerful tone, he said,

"Well, I did bring Sophia here, didn't I? I'm basically the reason you two had the chance to speak even."

Sophia turned to look at him with a raised brow.

He kept going, subtly—smoothly.

"And besides... taking out grotesques? That's not really a two-person job, right? Wouldn't it be smarter to have more people?"

He tilted his head innocently.

"That's just what I heard, anyway."

He gave a playful smile, then looked at Isaac, who was already nodding slightly in the background.

"And I mean..." Arius went on, "I'm pretty likable, aren't I?"

He leaned a little closer with a teasing wink. "Hard to hate me and good asset to any team."

I sighed, already feeling my guard slipping.

Then came the final strike.

"I'm also probably the most strategic one here after You. Think of me as your mini-captain," he said, voice still soft but now almost... commanding. "Wouldn't it be great? Us four. Together. A proper team. Isaac's already in, right?"

Isaac looked between us, then nodded again with a small shrug. "Ugh... fine I'm in."

Manipulator.



I blinked as I looked back at Sophia, expecting her to protest, but she just shrugged and said, "He's not wrong. More numbers isn't bad."

Arius looked at me, victorious.

I stared at him for a few seconds... then sighed.

"You're such a kid," I said, rubbing my temples.

"Still got in though~" he said, smirking.

Then, Arius stepped forward and raised his hand in the middle of the group.

"Alright, let's do the team thing. Hands in, come on."

Isaac slowly reached his hand out, placing it under Arius'.

Sophia followed right after, no hesitation, resting hers on top with a firm grip.

I stood there, staring at their pile of hands.

A second passed.

Then another.

"...Really?" I whispered.

They all looked at me.

And somehow, despite myself... I smiled.

"...Fine."

I stepped forward and placed my hand on top.

And together—

"Team Hearts!" we cheered, lifting our hands into the air in unison.

I looked at each of their faces—so full of determination, warmth, and trust.

And I smiled again.

Maybe... for the first time in my life...

I had people who trusted me enough to fight by my side. Apart from Kaiser... People who believed in me.

I silently swore—no matter what it takes...

I'll save you, Kaiser.

-----

Though they had only just formed—a new team, or rather, a new card in play—the Team of Hearts was not the one holding that card. Someone else was. And while that unseen hand clutched the heart, the Swarm surged forward, relentless and ravenous.

The scene shifted.

A dark, hollow throne room stretched endlessly in shadow. Torches flickered against obsidian walls, their flames failing to warm the air. At the heart of the chamber stood a throne carved of something that resembled bone, yet pulsed faintly like it still lived. Kneeling before it was not a man, not even a creature—a presence, cold and monstrous, bound by silence and steel. It was his voice that spoke.

The same voice whispered in the nightmares of the Cult of Nemesis.

It was the Silent Executioner.

"My Lord... I bring news of the Swarm."

From the shadows, unmoving yet unmistakably suffocating, a pair of cold, intelligent eyes peered through the dark. The figure on the throne didn't speak. He didn't need to.

Still kneeling, the Silent Executioner continued, his voice razor-thin, laced with quiet reverence and restrained menace.

"My Lord, the Grotesques... they're shifting. Adapting. Their attention now turns to Rinascita. If I may be so bold... with your infinite knowledge, I beg for enlightenment—why?"

The dark figure remained still. Slowly, he opened a thick, ancient tome resting beside his throne. A diary? No—it was a Book of Fate. The pages turned themselves, inscriptions etching across the parchment in real time—words not written, but revealed. Futures yet to unfold.

Then... he turned the pages backward. And the writings changed. History rewrote itself, unraveling a preordained tapestry. A future once set now bent to an unknown will.

His voice echoed—a chilling, low resonance, like the world itself trembled to hear it.

"It seems... someone has tampered with the Swarm. A human... one with the audacity to challenge my dominion over fate."

The Executioner's head remained bowed.

"That cannot be, my Lord. None surpass you. This must be... an error."

But the lord gave no such comfort. No denial. No acceptance. Only truth.

**"Levinton was meant to fall. It didn't.**

**That cursed girl was marked to die. She didn't.**

**And now... the Hive near Rinascita shifts—bends—before its time.**

**The Heavenly Sorcerer has likely joined the fray."**

Though surprised, the Silent Executioner masked it well. His voice remained cold.

"How is that possible, my Lord?"

Silence.

Then came the answer, carved from dread.

"There is a man... or perhaps something far worse. **The Devil's Successor.**"

"One who manipulates mortals, monsters, and gods alike. How cruel must a being be to use people like pawns—to twist fate with such precision?"

The Executioner dared another question.

"To defy fate itself... to stand against you, my Lord... does he not fear death?"

A soft, bitter laugh. Then words dipped in ice.

"Men do not fear death. Death is but the void we came from—the stillness before breath. What terrifies them is the pain of dying. The unraveling of self."

A pause. Then, as if deciphering something deeper:

"But this one... he may no longer be alive. No longer human. He's present on all four fronts—impossibly omnipresent.

Perhaps what we face now... is no man at all."

The Executioner said nothing. He understood the weight of what had just been spoken.

Then the order came—calm, decisive, final.

**"Signal the Swarm Tyrant. Rinascita must fall within the week."**

Without a word, the Silent Executioner bowed low, his chains clinking softly as he rose and vanished into the blackness.

And as the throne room grew still once more, one question echoed silently between the ancient walls and the whispers of fate:

Who was this being—dead yet alive, savior yet shadow—who ensured humanity's survival?

A hero?

A villain?

Or simply... something beyond the need for such titles?

**Celia's Perspective: Nighttime | Her Room in Levi's House.**

**4/10/2017 - 9:28 PM**

Ughhh... today was very interesting, I can't lie.

I flopped onto my bed like a dying fish, limbs limp, eyes half-dead. My body was sore from training, and my brain was fried from talking to three people with wildly different energy levels.

Arius left first. He said he had to go "set traps," though with how dramatically he said it, you'd think he was going on some secret spy mission. Probably just setting up string and bells like a child playing. Whatever. I let him have his moment.

Then Sophia and Isaac got some kind of call from the guild. Sounded serious. They didn't say much before rushing off. Maybe it had to do with the grotesques. If that's the case... then something's definitely moving in the shadows again.

My eyes trailed to the wooden ceiling of my room, and the quiet night buzzed with faint cricket songs outside the window.

I rolled over on my side and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

The silence didn't last though.

Because my brain had other plans.

"...He was in the academy before this, huh?" I mumbled into the pillow.

Sophia mentioned it so casually, like it wasn't world-shattering news.

Kaiser... in the academy?

I blinked, letting that settle in my tired head.

Two years. She said he came to Celestine two years ago.

But wait, Kaiser told me he'd been here for over five years. That's what he said, right? I remember that... very clearly. It's not something you forget when the person you admire casually drops it like it's nothing.

So... did he lie?

Or was it one of those... technical truths?

Maybe he meant that he's been in Celestine for that long, just not in this part of it. I mean... cities are big. He could've just moved districts or something.

Still... it bothers me a little.

I turned again in bed, groaning softly.

Ugh, why am I like this? Overthinking things in the middle of the night. Like a walking anxiety with hair.

"Kaiser already apologized to you, idiot," I whispered to myself.

Get a grip, Celia.

You know he's always been secretive. He told you he didn't trust people easily. He only opened up to you when he had no other choice... and even then, he kept walls up.

That's just how he is. Not because he's hiding something... but because the world taught him to.

Still... the fact that he lied stings. Even if it's small. It feels like there's always something just out of reach with him, like trying to hold fog in your hands. You think you have it, then poof.

And yet...

I smiled faintly.

He's also the friend who looked me dead in the eyes when I was crying and told me I was stronger than I knew. The friend who stood between me and that monstrous noctis graspers and Kiel, Ronan without flinching, even though he couldn't use magic.

He's the friend who calls me "adorably loud" when I'm angry and actually listens when I speak.

Yeah. So what if he bent the truth?

He's Kaiser.

My Kaiser.

And I'd rather have him with a thousand secrets than lose him altogether.

"...I miss you," I whispered.

My fingers curled into the blanket.

"I'm coming to get you. Even if I have to burn the whole grotesque hive down myself."

Dark? Maybe.

Overdramatic? A little.

But no one touches what's mine.

I'll get stronger. I am getting stronger. I've got Sophia, Isaac... and even Arius now. I'm not alone anymore.

He better be ready.

Because next time I see him?

I'm going to punch him for lying...

Then hug him so tight he can't lie ever again.

Click.

That was the door.

My ears perked up.

I was still in my pajamas—fluffy pink ones with tiny stars, thank you very much emma for gifting me yours—and halfway into a yawn when I heard heavy steps downstairs.

I slipped out of my room, my feet silent on the wooden floor. The hallway light flickered for a second. Of course it did—perfect dramatic timing.

"Look who finally remembered they had a house to come back to," Emma's voice rang out, all playful and smug like usual.

I peeked from the staircase.

Levi.

Of course it was Levi.

That overly confident menace stood there in a black cloak like he just walked out of a fashion magazine for swordsmen. His hair was a mess, his smirk even messier.

"Oh? Didn't realize my absence was that painful for you, Emma. Miss me that much?" he shot back with that cocky tone.

Emma rolled her eyes so hard I almost heard them hit the back of her skull. "Please, the plants were more talkative while you were gone."

Levi chuckled, stretching his arms as if he hadn't just disappeared for a whole week. "Well, I'm back. And don't worry, I didn't bring chaos—this time."

"Oh really?" Emma said, hands on hips. "Then explain why Zain screamed, and I quote, 'Xander turned my beloved rooster into Dinner'?"

I blinked. I couldn't tell if this was going to be tragic or hilarious.

Levi held up a finger, deadly serious. "Okay. So listen. Zain left his rooster unattended. Xander thought it was just a random farm chicken. He was starving. One thing led to another... boom. Dinner."

I had to cover my mouth not to laugh.

Emma gasped. "**HE ATE ZAIN'S ROOSTER?!** That thing was his emotional support bird, Levi!"

"I know," Levi shrugged. "He cried while chewing after finding out. Said it was both the worst and best meal of his life."

Emma collapsed onto the couch dramatically. "I am so telling this at his wedding."

Levi looked way too proud of the chaos.

I decided that was my cue to show up.

"Hey, rooster killer," I called out, stepping down the last stair with a yawn and half a glare. "Back from your villain arc, or just passing through?"

Levi turned with a grin. "Ah, princess Celia. Awake and gracing us with your royal presence."

I scoffed, arms folded. "Please. If I were a princess, you'd be the royal mailman who keeps losing the letters."

Emma snorted. "She's got you there."

Levi winked. "Only if those letters were love letters from you, Celia."

"Yeah," I said flatly. "Return to sender."

We all gathered at the dining table, Levi stretching like he owned the place—which he did—but still.

"I'm heading out again tomorrow," he said casually, plucking a grape from the bowl like it owed him money.

Emma raised an eyebrow. "Where now? Another dinner party with Zain's poultry?"

He ignored the jab. "We're all going to Rinascita."

I paused mid-drink. "What? But—wait—the grotesques—"

"They've changed their plan, the grotesques are not going to attack Levinton anymore." Levi said sharply, all playfulness gone. His tone shifted, serious and cold. "They're not circling aimlessly anymore. They're targeting Rinascita."

My fingers tightened around the cup.

"As for us," he continued, "a noble from Rinascita requested all guilds for help. Promised to pay handsomely. I'm not going for the gold though."

Emma raised a brow. "Of course not. You're too noble for that."

Levi grinned. "Nah. I've got my own reasons."

"Egotistical reasons," Emma muttered under her breath.



I glanced at her and smiled sweetly. "Sharing blood with Levi must suck, huh, Emma?"

Emma sighed dramatically. "It's a full-time job."

Levi laughed, leaning back in his chair. "That's exactly what Kaiser said. Said the same thing—'Emma, sharing blood with that guy must be a curse.'"

My heart did a little jump at the mention of his name.

"Wow, Celia," Levi smirked. "You even copied his insults now? You really like him, huh?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Says the man who copied his entire haircut and forgot the personality."

"Ouch."

Emma clapped once. "That's going in my burn book."

We laughed. All three of us.

Just for a moment, it felt... warm.

Like maybe we were real friends.

Maybe.

But...

Even if these two are only pretending to be my friends...

I'll pretend too.

I've heard them talk when they thought I wasn't around. Heard the way they said they're only nice to me because I knew Kaiser. That without him, I'm just some polite guest overstaying her welcome.

And maybe they're right.

But that's fine. We can all pretend.

After all, people only show the side of themselves they want the world to see.

Levi with his charm and confidence.

Emma with her jokes and fake warmth.

And me?

I'm showing the side I want, too.

Sweet. Supportive. Harmless little Celia.

But behind it?

I'm not harmless.

I'm not stupid.

And I'm not leaving.

Not until I bring him back.

Levi tapped his fingers on the wood lazily. "Emma, you're staying home. As always."

Emma gasped like someone just slapped a cupcake out of her hand. "Excuse me? The disrespect."

"You heard me," Levi smirked. "Guard duty. Plus, someone has to feed the emotional support chicken spirit Zain's been summoning lately."

Emma crossed her arms and pouted. "Fine, I'll stay. But only because the last time I went on a mission, someone—" she shot Levi a look, "—set my boots on fire for 'morale boost.'"

"Hey," Levi said defensively. "You looked cold."

Emma rolled her eyes. "So? Who's going then?"

Levi leaned back, counting on his fingers. "Me. Xander. Alina. Zain. And the entire Celestial Apex."

My eyebrows lifted slightly. All of them?

Emma tilted her head. "That many? For Rinascita?"

Levi's expression shifted slightly, eyes narrowing. "Grotesques aren't just roaming anymore. They're moving with intent."

I leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

He exhaled. "That's the thing. We don't know. But it's like they're chasing something... or someone's guiding them."

Emma's lips parted. "You think they're being controlled?"

Levi shrugged. "Maybe. Wouldn't be the first time someone tried to weaponize monsters. Who knows?"

The conversation dipped into silence for a moment, tension creeping in with the thought.

Then Levi said it.

"Oh, and—the noble from Rinascita mentioned something else. Said someone reported a grotesque hive."

I blinked. "Hive? What do you mean?"

He nodded, face more serious now. "A network of cave systems. Deep, ancient tunnels grotesques build as their base—a nest. It's where they breed, gather, multiply."

Emma's jaw dropped. "So, like... their home?"

Levi nodded. "Exactly. And get this—apparently a team of three volunteered to go in and destroy it completely."

Emma and I both stared.

"Three?" we said in unison.

Levi smirked. "Yep. Just three. Apparently, the leader's some heavenly sorcerer. Their squad calls themselves Team Ace. Or Suicide Squad. Honestly, who names these things?"

Emma burst into laughter. "Suicide Squad?! What are they, edgy kids?"

"Could be," Levi shrugged. "If they show up in matching trench coats and start quoting poetry, I'm leaving."

I scoffed. "Of course you'd mock them. Jealous your own squad name isn't as dramatic?"

Levi leaned toward me, that familiar teasing grin growing. "There it is. That classic Kaiser sarcasm. What was it? 'Jealous your squad name isn't as dramatic'—man, you even copy his tone."

Emma gasped. "Oh my gods, she does!"

"Do not!" I pouted, cheeks heating up.

"Oh, you so do," Levi chuckled. "Next she'll be folding her arms and walking away in slow motion."

"I don't do that," I said firmly.

Emma and Levi exchanged knowing grins.

I looked away, pouting harder.

But then—

Levi's voice dropped a level.

"There's a chance..."

He paused. My ears tuned in like radar.

"There's a chance Kaiser's in that nest too."

Everything stopped.

"The scouts said some people from Rinascita were abducted. Some taken alive. No one's confirmed names... but..."

My heart skipped a beat.

My fingers trembled slightly on the table. I clenched them into a fist.

That wasn't enough to stop it.

The blood in my body felt like fire. My heartbeat echoed louder in my ears. I couldn't breathe for a second.

He could be there.

My Kaiser.

My voice was cold now. So cold it silenced them both instantly.

"...Are you sure?"

Levi looked up at me.

He saw it.

That shift.

His face grew cautious, then nodded slowly. "I am."

And then I stood up.

Everything about me changed. My soft presence, my sweet voice—it all vanished.

I was no longer just Celia.

**I was the Queen of Curses.**

And they felt it.

The table creaked under my fingers as my aura seeped into the room like a venomous fog.

"Then I'm coming with you."

Levi straightened up, eyes narrowing. "Celia, no—this is dangerous. You don't understand what's—"

"I don't care."

I took a step closer. Shadows danced at my feet.

"If he's in that nest, I will tear each grotesque down, bone by bone, until there is nothing left."

Emma's breath hitched.

Even Levi leaned back slightly.

I stared at them, the smile gone, my eyes colder than ice.

"You said it's a nest, right? Then I'll burn it to the ground. I'll curse it so no grotesque can crawl out alive. I will get him back. I don't care how many die."

They didn't say anything. Because in that moment—they knew.

I wasn't asking for permission.

I wasn't scared anymore.

I was ready to make the world bleed for him.

And nothing would stop me.

Levi leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms behind his head with a relaxed sigh. "We leave tomorrow morning," he said. "So get up early, princess of curses."

I rolled my eyes but nodded. "Fine."

**He grinned, clearly not done. "Make sure you bring your best behavior, Kaiser's girlfriend~"**

Silence.

I blinked, slowly turning my head to him.

Then—

**I tilted it just slightly, letting that cold aura return. "Good," I said quietly, my voice calm... too calm. "Because I'll get my love back tearing them all apart if necessary."**

Both Levi and Emma's jaws dropped like someone uppercut their souls.

Emma nearly choked on air. "H-Huh?!"

Levi's eyes bugged out. "Did she just—did she actually say—?!"

And I—

I blinked, brain catching up to what my mouth had just casually leaked.

"W-Wait! I didn't mean it like that!" I waved my hands, red instantly flooding my cheeks. "I meant—like—uh, friendly love! Not romantic! It was—it was a metaphor! A poetic expression! Like—like a sibling kinda thing!"

Emma was wheezing at this point. "Ohhh my gods, she said it so seriously. She looked like a villain confessing her eternal love for Kaiser!"

"I—NO! SHUT UP, BOTH OF YOU!" I flailed my arms, face now the exact shade of a strawberry mid-ripe. "That was—That didn't count!!"

"Oh no, it counted," Levi said, smirking like a smug fox. "That was the most romantic declaration I've heard from someone not holding a bouquet."

"I didn't declare anything!"

"I'll get my love back," Emma mocked, dramatically holding a hand to her heart. "He's mine, and I'll set the world on fire to find him—"

"STOPPPP!"

"Should we start preparing the wedding?" Levi said. "I mean, Kaiser Everhart and Celia the Cursed Queen—it's got a dramatic ring to it. I'll even officiate."

"I'M GOING TO CURSE YOU INTO A FROG!"

"Oh my gods, please do, then I'll be the frog of honor at your wedding," Emma howled, tears in her eyes.

I couldn't take it anymore.

"Nope. I'm done. I'm going to bed. Forever."

I bolted up and ran out of the room, hearing their laughter echoing behind me like the worst background music of my life.

"Celiaaaa~ Wait~ Tell us what colors you want for the curtains in the honeymoon suite!" Emma called.

I didn't stop.

I slammed my bedroom door shut behind me, locked it, and threw myself face-first into my bed.

**"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"**

My legs thrashed wildly like I was fighting off invisible embarrassment monsters, smacking the bed over and over.

"Stupid, STUPID CELIA!" I screamed into my pillow. "Why'd you say love?! Of all the words! You could've said 'important person' or 'Kaiser the idiot,' but nooo—your mouth wanted to go full tragic romance!"

I rolled over, covering my face with the pillow and groaning.

"I'm never showing my face again. I'll wear a mask. Forever. Maybe a bag."

Then—

Knock knock.

I froze.

Please be a demon. Please be a grotesque. Please be the end of the world.

**"Celialaa~" Levi's smug voice echoed through the door like an evil curse. "Don't forget to pack tomorrow. We're off to get your hubby~"**

My eyes snapped wide.

**"HE'S NOT MY HUBBY! GET LOST, YOU MENACE!"**

His laugh roared from behind the door, satisfied and loud. Then I heard his footsteps fade as he walked off, still chuckling.

I groaned again, sinking back into the pillow, face blazing red.

"Ughhhhhhhh," I mumbled, "they're never gonna let me live that down..."

A pause.

"...I hate how good that word sounded though."

The room was silent now.

But inside me...

Inside me was a scream so loud it could crack the world.

Kai is really going to be there...

In that nest. Hurt. Alone. Trapped among grotesques like a star swallowed by rot.

My breath caught, throat tightening.

He was always the one protecting me.

When I had no strength.

When I was nothing but a crying little girl clinging to hope like a broken doll—he was there.

He didn't mock me.

He didn't leave me.

He didn't ask me to change.

**He smiled.**

**He stayed.**



**He held me.**

**And called me his heart.**

That man gave me meaning. He gave me my own name.

So now?

Now I give meaning to vengeance.

Whatever Sophia said about him...

Whatever Levi or Emma whisper when they think I'm not listening...

I don't care.

Let them talk. Let them think I'm the fragile one.

I'll be the last thing those grotesques ever see before their skulls split open from the inside.

They took him?

Then I'll take everything from them.

Burn them in their own nest.

Curse them until they crawl.

And when they beg?

I'll smile. Just like he used to smile at me... only colder.

I rose from the bed slowly, my feet hitting the floor like steps of a queen marching to war.

My hand lifted—shaking at first—but then steadying as I opened my palm.

A soft glow.

Then darkness. Sick, crawling, bleeding black energy swirled into my hand. Like smoke from a corpse that hadn't cooled yet.

The cursed sigil on my palm pulsed.

I whispered something—no, something ancient.

A tongue no soul should speak.

**"T'mari ith valekh. En'cor da'ron. Rith senn marol... Kai'reth."**

A cursed incantation.

Forbidden. Rotting with power.

**Words that once were carved into tombs and stitched into dying skin.**

My fingertips trembled. Not from fear.

From excitement.

**"If I say those words... after I kill something..." I whispered, smiling slightly, "I can... ascend them. Turn them into a cursed being. My puppet. My soldier. My slave."**

I clenched my hand, the cursed mark fading back beneath the skin.

**"I don't want to become like her..." I muttered, eyes darkening. "Not like the Queen of Curses from 500 years ago. Not like Evelina."**

"But if it means getting Kaiser back..." My voice lowered, a slow breath leaking between my lips, "Then I'll build an army of corpses and make them march on hell itself."

And then—her name echoed in my mind.

Sophia.

Her stupid little smile. The way she said it—

"He used to call Elfie that adorable nickname. Oh, it was so sweet—like they were in love~"

Love?

Love?

No.

My nails dug into my skin.

Elfie? He called her that?

My breathing grew shaky. Eyes wide. Smile cracking.

He's mine.

He was always mine.

She had no right to that name.

And after I save him?

After I bathe in the blood of his enemies?

After I drag his broken body from that cursed nest, hold him close again?

I'll carve that name out of his memories.

He won't remember Elfie.

He won't need to.

**Because he'll only look at me.**

**Only call me by something sweet.**

**Only hold me when he's tired.**

**Only whisper my name when he sleeps.**

I'll bind him. With love. With pain. With everything I am.

And if anyone tries to take him away again—

I'll rip their soul apart and paint their faces into the wall using their blood.

My hands trembled again. But not with fear.

With need.

**Obsession. Desire. Possession.**

"Kaiser is mine," I whispered with a crooked smile.

I turned to the dark window, my red eyes glowing faintly with cursed light.

And as the night swallowed my reflection, I said it—cold, slow, and filled with venom:

**"I'll ascend them all... just to cherish the only one I love."**

**"Kaiser Everhart."**