

The Last Step

#Chapter 61: Mother to the Void - Read The Last Step

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- Asura Empire Palace

Varyn's boots made a soft, deliberate sound against the stone floor as he took each step toward the woman.

The cold gleam of his sword reflected the harsh light of the room. He did not hesitate, nor did he show any sign of mercy. The weight of the emperor's orders was all that filled his mind, pushing aside any remnant of compassion.

The orders were: Kill my son. Kaiser.

He stopped just before the Lady in Waiting, Cartethyia, whose arms were tightly wrapped around the child—Kaiser. Her back was pressed against the cold stone wall, but she didn't dare move, too afraid to let go of him, too afraid to let him get hurt.

The sword hovered near her, but she looked up at Varyn, her voice trembling as she begged, "Please, Knight Varyn... he's just a child. He's harmless—he deserves to be loved, not—" Her voice broke, but she didn't stop. "He deserves to live."

Varyn's gaze was unreadable as he stared at her, a man torn between duty and conscience, but the duty won. "The emperor's orders," he said, his voice as cold as the steel in his hand. "There is no room for mercy. His life ends today, just as it was decreed."

Cartethyia shook her head, trying to steady herself, but her hands clenched tighter around Kaiser as though she could shield him from the world. "Please, Knight Varyn. You know it's wrong. He's just a child, he hasn't done anything... nothing to deserve this." She trembled, her tears falling in tiny rivulets, each one a silent plea for mercy.

"You can't just—" Her breath hitched as she pressed the child closer to her chest, as though willing him to hide in her arms, away from the blade that would cut his life short.

Varyn's face remained hard, unreadable. He stood before her, poised to strike, and yet for a brief moment, his eyes faltered. He caught sight of the vulnerability in her gaze, the raw emotion that twisted her features. The sword wavered, hovering just above the child's fragile form. He almost—almost—couldn't do it.

But then he heard the voice of the emperor.

"What is this treachery?" Noctherion's voice rang out, full of authority, carrying across the room like thunder. "You defy your loyalty to the Empress, Lady Cartethyia. You would let my son live? You would let him live while his existence is a disgrace to the bloodline?"

Cartethyia flinched at the sound of his voice, her resolve cracking. "It's... it's not like that, Your Majesty. He's just a child, a child who... who hasn't even had the chance to—"

"Silence!" Noctherion's voice sliced through her words, cold and unrelenting. "You cannot defy the will of the empire. Your position has always been as a servant to the Empress. You know your place."

Her body trembled with fear, but she stood her ground, her grip tightening around Kaiser as if she could protect him by sheer will alone. Her eyes, filled with sorrow, looked up at the emperor, though she didn't dare speak again.

Varyn's expression never softened, though a flicker of something—something fleeting—shifted in his gaze. As he stood there, sword raised, something in him was wrestling.

Empress Rosaline watched the exchange with a faint, almost amused smile. Her arms cradled Rose, her daughter in her care, a perfect picture of a motherly embrace. "My, my, Cartethyia," she said, her voice laced with a sharp, biting edge.

"It seems you still have a soft spot for children, even after your own husband left you because of your inability to bear one." She leaned in slightly, as if the words themselves were a poison meant to sting, to wound deeper than any wound.

"You've always been so attached to what you can't have, haven't you?"

The words hit Cartethyia like a slap. She staggered back, her knees weak as though the world had just dropped from beneath her. Her breath came in shallow gasps, but her arms—her arms still held Kaiser tight, her sole source of purpose.

The tears, hot and heavy, continued to fall. She whispered, her voice barely audible, "He deserves more than this. He deserves love. He deserves a chance to live."

Her heart shattered, each piece falling away with every word she spoke, but she held on to Kaiser as though he was the last tether to her humanity. As if, by holding him, she could protect him from the cruelty of the world she had found herself trapped in.

Varyn, standing there, sword held steady in the air, looked at her, then down at the child she was shielding. He should strike. He should fulfill the emperor's order. And yet... He paused.

Cartethyia's back pressed against the wall as she bent over, sobbing quietly, but she kept one arm wrapped tightly around Kaiser, the other clutching her chest as if her very soul was being torn from her. She turned her body slightly, to shield him, to protect him from what was coming.

Varyn's sword lowered just enough for the blade to touch the stone floor with a soft thud. He didn't speak, but his hesitation was clear. He was fighting something within himself, something he didn't understand or have the strength to overcome. The look in Cartethyia's eyes—her unwavering devotion—made him question everything.

Before he could make another move, the Emperor spoke again. "Varyn, do what is necessary. There is no place for weakness. She is a servant, nothing more."

----- Part 2

Varyn raised his blade without a word. It gleamed in the dim palace chamber as he brought it down—not to kill, but to make her break down and give him up.

His sword hit her back, making a severe wound. A shallow but cruel cut tore across her arm as well. Cartethyia gasped sharply, the pain rattling through her—but she didn't cry out. She only bent forward, curling her body further over the small child in her arms.

Another slash came, lower this time. Blood streaked her back.

Still, she didn't let go.

Her voice broke from her throat, raw and trembling.

"P-please... stop..."

Her fingers clutched Kaiser tighter, as if her very bones might shield him.

"He's not a monster... he's not worthless..."

Varyn said nothing. His expression remained composed—noble, cold, distant. The sword rose again.

A third cut. Her knees buckled from the force of it, and she hit the floor with a thud, her body quivering. But even on her knees, she never loosened her embrace.

"He's... he's just a boy...!" she screamed suddenly, sobbing. "A child... helpless... he doesn't even know the world yet—why must he suffer for it?"

"Orders," Varyn finally replied, voice low and steady. "Given by His Majesty."

Cartethyia's eyes lifted, blood in the whites, tears pouring freely.

"He's your emperor," she said, her tone ragged. "Not your god."

Another cut. She cried out again, her shoulders lurching from the pain. The force of the strike had nearly loosened her grip, but she only held on harder, breath catching in her throat.

"Children... aren't meant to be perfect," she whimpered. "They're meant to be loved for who they are..."

Varyn looked down at her, sword still drawn, a flicker of hesitation forming.

"I—I couldn't bear children..." she confessed, voice cracking, almost a whisper. "They told me... I'd never hear a child cry in my arms... never feed one... or hold one close when it's cold..."

She wept into Kaiser's soft blanket, the child now squirming faintly yet still expressionless, unaware of the danger above him.

"I thought I'd come to terms with it... learned to live quietly in service, watching other women raise their own—but then... then I held him..."

Her arms trembled from exhaustion and pain, her dress soaked with blood at the back, but her eyes burned with something fiercer than pain.

"And for the first time, I thought... maybe this is what it means to love a child like a mother... without reason... without gain..."

Another swing—this one landed deep across her upper back. She shrieked, breath seizing in her chest.

She was breaking. Her body screamed for her to give up. But her voice—her voice kept rising, desperate, pleading.

"Please... he doesn't even cry much... he just looks around, like he's always thinking... even though he doesn't understand anything yet... he deserves to grow... to smile... to be told he is loved."

Her arms curled tighter, wrapping around Kaiser as if she could bury him inside her heart.

"I would've raised him," she sobbed. "Gifted or not. Strong or not. Even if he never looked at me like a real mother... I would've given everything... because someone has to..."

Varyn stood frozen.

"This is not my will," he said slowly, as if trying to believe it himself. "It is not my place to question the emperor's judgment."

"Then you are not a knight," Cartethyia hissed through tears, "You are a monster."

Her words struck deeper than the cuts he had inflicted.

"I'm just doing my duty."

"No... you're running from your humanity."

Silence followed. Only her ragged breathing and Kaiser's faint coos remained.

Varyn raised his sword once more.

But then—

"That's enough." Noctherion's voice cut through the chamber like thunder.

Varyn paused mid-swing, stiffening. His eyes slowly turned to the emperor.

"She's stained the floor with her defiance," Noctherion said coolly. "There is no dignity left in this act. Let it be."

Varyn lowered his blade, chest rising.

The empress, still seated beside her daughter Rose, chuckled softly.

"How pitiful," she said, stroking Rose's hair. "So desperate to be a mother... you'd rather be cut down than let go of a child you were never meant to have."

She turned her gaze, icy and smug.

"Cartethyia Everhart... my ever-loyal lady in waiting."

Cartethyia flinched as if the name itself struck her.

Her lips quivered, and tears rolled anew, not from pain—but from something far deeper.

Shame. Loss. Helplessness.

But she still held Kaiser.

Not once did she let go.

----- Part 3

Emperor Noctherion turned his gaze toward the Empress, his voice quiet, yet weighty.

"...What do you mean by that, Rosaline?"

Empress Rosaline gave a soft, almost mocking smile as she looked down at the child in her lap—Rose, quietly sleeping in her arms.

"A few years ago," she began, brushing a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, "your loyal little servant there was married off. To Lord Monsieur, one of Asura's highest-ranking knights... and a supreme mage."

Her words were smooth, but her tone was laced with venom.

"It was an arranged marriage. Of course. She had noble roots—though not as high as mine," she added with a chuckle. "But enough to make the union look appropriate."

Noctherion's brows lifted ever so slightly. His tone remained flat, unreadable.

"So... during the years I was away. Building the Decaying Ascension Program..."

Rosaline nodded slowly. "Yes. While you were turning children into monsters... she was living a quiet, useless life. And still, even then—she failed."

She glanced down at Cartethyia, who knelt bloodied, trembling, clinging to the baby the empress refused to acknowledge.

Rosaline's eyes narrowed.

"You must understand," she said, coolly, "it's not personal. I simply cannot allow that child's face—that thing—to be shown to the world with the title of 'my son.'"

Cartethyia flinched as the words sliced sharper than any sword.

"His abilities are worse than a servant's child. I won't let someone like that bear the name of Valentine. I won't tolerate it."

Before she could continue, Noctherion raised his hand slightly.

"You forget your place, Cartethyia," he said, voice like stone. "You are a lady-in-waiting. Nothing more."

Cartethyia froze, her breath catching in her throat.

"You hold no authority. You do not speak over us," Noctherion continued, his tone dispassionate. "We are his parents. Not you. You're a nobody."

The words crushed her heart, but she didn't loosen her hold on Kaiser.

"We already have an heir," he said, glancing at the infant girl in Rosaline's arms. "Rose Valentine. She will rule Asura. Not him."

He didn't even glance at the boy.

"He has no gifts. No future. No purpose. I refuse to stand in front of the Empire and explain why my son cannot use magic... or why he is nothing."

"I do not wish to be questioned," he finished, "for someone worthless."

Cartethyia stepped back shakily, blood staining her dress and hair, her breathing uneven. Her black eyes—wide and frightened—remained fixed on the emperor.

Then the Empress spoke again, her voice colder now.

"Cartethyia," she said with fake sympathy. "Your husband left you, didn't he?"

Cartethyia's lips parted, but no sound came.

Rosaline tilted her head, smiling.

"When was it? Two years ago?"

"...Yes," Cartethyia whispered, shaking, eyes filling with tears again.

"Oh, don't look so surprised," Rosaline said smoothly. "It was bound to happen. You're infertile. A woman who can't bear children has no value to a noble. And certainly not to Lord Monsieur."

The name hit her like a blow. Cartethyia's knees almost gave out.

"He remarried, didn't he?" Rosaline asked knowingly. "Another noblewoman. Prettier. Wealthier. More... fertile."

Cartethyia shut her eyes tightly. Her hands clenched around Kaiser.

"He has a son now," Rosaline added with a cruel smile. "A strong boy. Already showing promise. Isn't that... lovely?"

Cartethyia shook her head faintly, unable to breathe.

Rosaline stepped closer.

"You? Here? Bleeding on the floor. Clutching a child who isn't yours. A boy who can't use magic. Who's hated by his own mother."

Her voice darkened.

"You were never beautiful, Cartethyia. You were never special. Just another noble girl with a noble name nobody cared about. Of course he left. Who wouldn't?"

"I... I... I d-don't..." Cartethyia stammered, her voice barely audible, lost in sobs.

Rosaline leaned in.

"You are not a mother," she whispered. "You are not a wife. You're a broken thing, clinging to a broken child, hoping it will make you feel whole."

Cartethyia bit her lip hard to stop from screaming. Blood pooled in her mouth. But she didn't speak.

Noctherion said nothing. He stood like a statue, unmoved, his golden eyes dull with disinterest.

Rosaline straightened, sighing.

"This little scene is pitiful. A woman who couldn't have a child... desperately fighting for one she was never meant to raise."

She looked at Cartethyia again.

"But I suppose that's all you'll ever be... the shadow behind someone else's child."

Cartethyia collapsed fully to her knees, still holding Kaiser. She didn't speak. She couldn't. Only the sound of her broken breathing filled the silent chamber.

The emperor didn't look at her. Neither did the empress.

Only the child in her arms stirred, reaching up with tiny fingers... brushing against her bloodied cheek, as if trying to understand why she was crying.

And still, she held him.

----- Part 4

Then suddenly, Kaiser's tiny hand moved up again, brushing her cheek with his palm—soft, slow. He wiped her tears away, a strange gesture from a child who shouldn't understand sorrow.

Cartethya, still trembling, tried to cover his face with her hand. She didn't want them to see him—not like this.

But he grabbed her finger.

And his grip... it was too strong. Far too strong for a newborn. Her eyes widened as her hand froze, held in place by a baby who should've barely known how to grasp.

The room stilled.

The Emperor and Empress both turned their eyes to the child in silence.

Varyn, the silent swordsman standing to the side, lowered his blade and slid it into its sheath with a faint click, now fully aware something was off. His eyes narrowed.

Then Kaiser moved.

His head lifted slowly.

And his eyes... opened.

No fear. No cries. No trembling lips or childlike confusion.

Just pure, vacant expression.

A perfect, emotionless mask.

His once light blue eyes began to shift. Slowly. From the outer rims inward—fading into a deep, devouring black. The white of his eyes was the last to go, consumed entirely in the endless abyss of void.

A breath hitched in Varyn's throat. He took a small step back without meaning to, whispering under his breath:

"...How did his eyes change...?"

Rosaline clutched Rose tighter, her smile gone, a quiet unease creeping into her voice.

"What... is he?"

Even her voice didn't carry the confidence it usually did.

Emperor Noctherion, however, didn't flinch. His gaze remained locked on Kaiser's face. Then, slowly, his lips parted.

"...He's warning us."

"What?" Rosaline snapped.

The Emperor didn't blink.

"He's giving us a silent warning," he said calmly. "That we will be next. One by one. That look in his eyes... it's not of a child. It's a message."

Kaiser's gaze slowly scanned across the room. To Rosaline. To Noctherion. Then... finally... to Varyn.

No words were spoken.

But the meaning was clear.

Cartethyia winced, crying out as another wave of pain surged through her wounds. She clutched the boy to her chest, but he didn't react. Not even to her voice. Blood dripped from her lip, staining her chin—but Kaiser's void-black eyes didn't waver.

Emperor Noctherion's gaze darkened, voice low, like someone reciting a memory from long ago.

"In ancient records... there were mentions of a forgotten omen. Void-black eyes. Not from birth. Not from bloodline. A transformation."

He looked at Rosaline.

"They called it... the 'Merciless Gaze.'"

The empress tilted her head, disturbed. "...So?"

Noctherion's tone sharpened.

"They appear only in those born to walk the path of ruin. Eyes that see no worth in mercy, in gods, or empires. Eyes of a being that will erase all that once hurt them... without mercy."

Varyn stared at the child.

Kaiser stared back.

And in that stare... there was something unnatural.

Not a threat.

A promise.

"You see it too, don't you?" Noctherion said, still watching his guard. "That child's eyes just told you... you'll be first."

Varyn's fingers twitched.

He looked away.

Then—suddenly—Rosaline laughed.

A small laugh at first, almost mocking. Then louder. She shook her head and held Rose close to her chest like a mother holding onto sanity.

"You're all insane," she scoffed. "It's a baby. A weak, magicless nothing. I've killed monsters that cried before they died—and this one? He can't even walk."

Varyn, though chuckling nervously, didn't speak. His hand remained resting near his hilt. Just in case.

"And you," Rosaline turned toward Noctherion, her tone sardonic, "you're telling me you're scared of a child? You, the emperor?"

Noctherion didn't answer.

But he didn't deny it either.

Then a silence fell again.

Only broken by Cartethyia's heavy breathing. Her bloody hands shaking as she held Kaiser close. His eyes slowly began to dim back to their soft blue... the void receding.

His face? Still expressionless.

Not peaceful.

Just blank.

Rosaline looked at Cartethyia. Then to Noctherion.

"...Maybe," she said at last, "we don't discard him."

Noctherion turned slightly.

"What?"

She smirked again.

"We'll let him be a test subject. Perfect subject to be discarded after use, once he is done his work."

"We use him. And her. To make the Decaying Ascension Program stronger for Rose to attend once he has failed, and died from the trauma there."

She pointed at Cartethyia.

"She still loves him. That's clear. So we'll use her loyalty... to make sure he never forgets who holds the leash."

Her voice became silk, but sharp as a dagger.

"When the time comes, if that void inside him ever awakens again—we'll already have a chain around his neck."

A silence fell again.

Noctherion didn't respond. He simply stared at the child.

The boy who would one day bring ruin to them all.

But for now... he slept in the arms of the broken lady Cartethyia.

And the empire kept its secrets.

For now.

The empress then signaled Varyn to take his leave.

The chamber dimmed as Varyn turned silently toward the exit. He glanced at Cartethyia one last time. Her pale face, drenched in sweat and blood. Her breathing shallow. Her arms wrapped tightly around the child.

With a flick of his wrist, Varyn murmured a quiet healing incantation—just enough to stop the bleeding, enough to keep her alive.

Cartethyia felt the warmth spread through her, a brief relief from the tearing pain. She whispered out, "Thank you..." but he was already gone.

The Empress stepped forward slowly, heels echoing through the stone room like a slow, cruel countdown. Her eyes glinted—not with pity, but curiosity, like a child staring at a broken toy.

She crouched before Cartethyia. Her voice was smooth. Cold.

"You really don't know... do you?" she whispered, brushing aside a blood-matted lock of hair from Cartethyia's face. "What it is we're preparing him for."

Cartethyia looked up, eyes hollow but still burning with maternal resolve.

The Empress smiled cruelly.

"It's called Decaying Ascension."

Cartethyia flinched.

"A program," the Empress continued, "reserved for only the most promising children. Gifted ones. Their minds... infused with celestial, cursed, and elemental magic until their very souls warp. Their identities stripped down to fragments. Do you understand, dear Cartethyia?" Her voice dropped into a whisper, like a secret laced with poison.

"We take children. We break them. We reconstruct them. Over and over. Until their minds surpass the limits of human limits... until they can cast spells never written, create magic never imagined... until they become weapons."

Her smile widened.

"The perfect sorcerers for a perfect empire. Asura's true vanguard. Not mages... gods of destruction in flesh."

Cartethyia shook her head, trembling. "No..." she gasped, "N-No, please... that's... that's wrong... they're children—they deserve to live, to have futures, families, dreams—"

"Dreams?" the Empress scoffed, tilting her head. "You would know, wouldn't you?"

Cartethyia froze.

"You dreamed of having a child for so long," the Empress said mockingly. "And yet... you were cursed. Infertile. Worthless as a woman and still paraded as nobility."

She stood again, brushing dust from her gown. "How sad. You only got this one by accident. And yet you clutch him like he's yours."

Cartethyia went silent. Her lips quivered.

She knew it was true. Every word.

The years of praying, begging—only to be told again and again that her womb would remain barren.

The nights she cried alone.

The mornings she woke with empty arms.

Her chest heaved, but she said nothing.

Then—Kaiser shifted.

His tiny hand reached up, softly touching her cheek. Warm. Steady.

Then, with inhuman strength for a newborn, he wrapped his fingers around her index finger, holding it tightly. His eyes rose—cold, unreadable void—and locked with the Empress.

Not crying. Not afraid.

Just watching.

A silent warning.

The last one.

The Emperor, who had been silent this whole time, finally spoke. His gaze shifted to Rosaline.

"...Are you sure?" he asked. "You want to use him? He has no magic. He never will. He can't wield it and will be inefficient for the magical training."

The Empress laughed lightly, dismissing the concern with a wave of her hand.

"He doesn't need to. He'll be useful for something else."

She turned toward Cartethyia again.

"We're testing a new system—the Mind-Link Simulation."

Cartethyia's head snapped up. "What... what do you mean?" she whispered, voice cracking.

"A mental network," the Empress replied, grinning. "Where children are hooked into eternal dream loops. Infinite battlefields and scenes. Their minds flooded with artificial

magic, pain, death, rebirth—again and again. No food. No rest. Just perfect, torturous repetition.

"And my little boy?" she added with a cruel sweetness, "He'll be our first long-term subject. The lamb to test how long a child can last... before their mind breaks."

Cartethyia's scream tore from her throat.

"No—! He's just a baby!"

But her voice broke.

Her body too weak.

Her arms could only tighten around him.

Kaiser's face never changed.

Still blank.

Still watching.

Still holding her finger.

Empress Rosaline stepped forward again, eyes gleaming with cruel satisfaction. She stared down at Cartethyia, whose pale, broken body still tried to protect the small boy nestled in her arms.

And then, she laughed.

Low. Sharp.

Like knives dragging against silk.

"A woman like you... clinging to a child that isn't even yours," she sneered. "Do you think bleeding and crying will make you a mother?"

She tilted her head.

"You were born useless. A noblewoman with a cursed womb. How pitiful. Your husband left you. Went to someone who could actually give him an heir. And now you're sitting here pretending like this one's yours. Pretending like fate didn't spit in your face."

The words sliced deeper than any blade.

Cartethyia didn't reply.

She couldn't.

Her lips trembled, and her chest shook as she tried to hold back the sobs rising in her throat.

Her voice came out cracked. Raw.

"I know..." she whispered, "...I know I wasn't chosen... I know my body couldn't give me what I cried for..."

She looked down at Kaiser, brushing his hair gently. "But when I hold him... when I see him look at me like this... it's the first time... it's the first time I've ever felt like I was enough... to be a mother."

Her tears slid down her cheeks as she added, "Why must children be made to suffer just because the world wants power...? Why can't they be loved for simply being alive...?"

Rosaline rolled her eyes with a smirk.

"How pathetic," she muttered under her breath. "Emotions... sentimentality... the delusions of weak women."

But in her mind, the cruelty was purpose.

"Compassion creates weakness. Love makes people hesitate. But a child forged in agony... he'll never waver."

"Kaiser will become what no mage, no god, has ever been. And if this broken woman can soften his mind just enough to keep it from shattering before it's ready—so be it. Afterall, he'll die sooner or later."

"W...what... what do you mean...?" she whispered, holding Kaiser tighter, as if her embrace could shield him from the truth.

Rosaline tilted her head, ever the queen playing with her pawn.

"The Decayed Ascension," she began sweetly, "has been running for three years now. And in all that time..."

Her smirk widened, her voice turning sharp.

"Not. A single. Child. Has lived."

Cartethyia's eyes widened. Her breath hitched. It felt like the walls of her chest collapsed inwards.

"N-No..." she muttered, shaking her head, the tears returning. "T-That's not... not possible..."

But Rosaline kept going, her words slicing like shards of glass.

"Two hundred and thirty-eight children. All above the age of five. All full of magic, potential, gifts and hopes."

"Burned alive from the inside. Brains melted from simulation overload. Hearts stopped mid-spell. They were too weak."

She shrugged.

"And now your precious little Kaiser? Just another lamb tossed into the fire."

Cartethyia gasped, a broken sob escaping her throat.

"Y-You're wrong... this is... this is madness! They were children! Innocent children!"

Rosaline chuckled.

"No one innocent survives in Asura, Cartethyia. Only the useful do."

"You call it cruel. I call it necessary. The world is built by those willing to sacrifice others to shape it." Her gaze sharpened.

"And you—who couldn't even make a child of your own—should be grateful we let you play pretend with mine."

Cartethyia sobbed again, her voice cracking beyond recognition.

"He's not a t-tool... he's not a lamb... h-he's... he's just a baby..."

She clutched Kaiser tighter as if her arms alone could hold his fate at bay.

But Rosaline's tone remained steel.

"And soon... he'll either be forged into a weapon—" She leaned in, her voice venomous.

"—or buried like the rest."

Rosaline crouched low again, her smile wicked.

"You're clinging to a fantasy, Cartethyia. That this child is yours."

Cartethyia's arms tightened instinctively.

She didn't respond.

Kaiser, without words, reached up again and gently wiped more tears from her eyes.

He didn't cry.

He didn't smile.

But he understood.

The Emperor, Noctherion, stood still, watching in silence. His gaze flicked from Rosaline to Cartethyia to the boy.

Rosaline stood and sighed, amused.

"Well, it seems he's grown fond of you." She turned and spoke with authority,

"You'll raise him, Cartethyia. Feed him. Hold him. Soothe him when he screams in those artificial nightmares we force into his mind."

Cartethyia slowly looked up, eyes wide with disbelief.

Rosaline's voice was smooth like venom. "You'll be the mother he'll never really have. Just another tool... another means of ensuring he doesn't die too early."

But Cartethyia didn't care. Her voice, still weak, still stuttering, cracked into something softer.

"My... my child...?" she breathed, almost afraid to say it.

Noctherion finally spoke again, his tone unreadable. "Are you sure, Rosaline?"

Rosaline smirked, turning toward him.

"I'm sure," she said. Then looked back down.

"From today onward, he's no child of mine. No son of Palace Valentine. No prince of Asura."

She paused.

"Let the world know this: He is yours now, Cartethyia. Yours alone."

She leaned forward with a mock whisper.

"His name... will be Kaiser Everhart."

Cartethyia gasped. Her tears flowed freely now, but her lips formed a fragile, trembling smile.

Her fingers shook as she pulled the child closer, her voice shattering with emotion.

"My... my Kaiser Everhart," she whispered. And then, gently... lovingly... She kissed him on the forehead.

"My son."

Nochterion exhaled, a faint smirk forming on his face. "If you think this is right, Empress Rosaline... I won't refuse."

He then called upon one of his loyal knights using magic and speaks with authority.

"Prepare her. Send them both to Celestine. She will accompany him into the Decayed Ascension Layer."

Rosaline gave a final cruel smile.

"As you wish."

----- Part 5

A mother who could never bear a child of her own... yet cradled one as if he were born from her very soul.

She was Cartethyia Everhart—not by blood, not by title, but by heart alone. Her arms, though weakened by injury and sorrow, held tight the small boy who had never known warmth, never known love, and now rested quietly in her trembling embrace.

Kaiser, the child destined to be shattered and discarded, found peace in the arms of the woman the world had cast aside.

The carriage rocked gently over uneven ground, the curtains pulled to shield them from the eyes of an empire that had turned its back on them both. The land of Asura faded behind them, swallowed by dust and silence, as they made their way toward Celestine—toward the abyss that awaited them both.

Cartethyia stared down at him, her eyes swollen from the countless tears that no longer fell. She brushed aside the dark strands of his hair and pressed her lips to his forehead again and again, whispering in a voice that cracked with each word:

"My child... my Kaiser... I love you so much."

She had nothing left. No husband—he had abandoned her for another. No family—they had disowned her for her infertility, treating her like a worthless being. The world had ridiculed her, humiliated her, and left her utterly alone.

Alone... until now.

Now, she had him.

Even if the world tore at her limbs, even if Celestine's Decay layer became her hell, even if she had to crawl through blood and agony—she would not lose him. She would give everything—her dignity, her life, her heart—just to keep holding him in her arms.

Because finally, after years of being empty, she had someone to call her own.

Someone to whisper the word she'd waited her whole life to hear:

"Mama."

She was the only light in the void's creation. The mother to the child that fate itself had cursed.

Cartethyia....

The Mother of the Void.

And Asura—so cruel, so blind—had made a grave mistake by hurting her.

For in eighteen years, the quiet boy in her arms, the one marked for death and buried beneath the weight of decay, would rise.

He would return for her—not as a child, but as something far more terrifying.

He would come not alone—but alongside legends in the making.

The Queen of Curses—Celia Valestone.

The Heavenly Sorcerer—Lucas Reinhardt.

And at the center of it all...

The Self-Engineered Weapon—the man forged in pain, sharpened by love, reborn in the name she gave him—

Kaiser Everhart.

Their journey would be known not as a revenge, nor a war.

It would be known as the story written in blood, tears, and eternity.

Their Last Step.

Chapter 62 - Heartless Forever

Lucas's Perspective:

4/10/2017 - 9:15 AM

Location: Outskirts of Hollowpine Forest, Early Morning

Ah yes. My new crew.

Emotionless NPC. Reflexive Sword Saint. And me—Lucas, the last-minute main character with a bad luck problem and a system with a God complex.

Last night, in the bar, I pitched the idea of calling us TEAM ACE. Thought it was slick, short, easy to slap on some merchandise later.

Navina said no.

Azrael... stared. Blank. Cold. Basically a walking "Access Denied" screen.

That was until my dear system, ever the comedic genius, hijacked my mouth and said:

"Suicide Squad."

Yeah. I choked on my drink mid-laugh. Almost died. Which would've been ironic.

Navina chuckled. Azrael blinked once. And just like that—Suicide Squad was born.

Stupid system.

「 You're welcome. The name suits your survival rate. Which is zero if I go on break. 」

Anyway. That brings us to today.

Clear skies. Birds chirping. The scent of forest dew in the air. And three potentially dangerous individuals walking toward an open field, probably about to beat the life out of each other. For training. Friendship. Or just... fun?

I walked ahead, Navina beside me, her steps light and almost soundless. She walked like a breeze—graceful, unbothered, like the world wasn't fast enough to catch her.

She looked my way with that sharp grin of hers. The kind that made you feel like she already knew what you were going to say next.

Behind us, Azrael followed. Silent. Unmoving expression. Same dead stare as always.

I glanced back. Still there. Still walking like someone who spawned in five minutes ago and hadn't loaded a soul yet due to ping delay.

I leaned toward Navina a bit and said casually, "He blinked. That's new."

Navina tilted her head, amusement twinkling in her blue eyes. "Did he? Be careful. That might've been his way of smiling."

I snorted. "If that's his smile, I don't wanna see his anger."

She laughed softly. It wasn't fake. It wasn't showy. Just... free. "You're funny," she said, brushing some loose strands of blond hair behind her ear. "Lucas, right? From the Asura noble line?"

"Yeah." I rolled my shoulders. "Not a fan of the house parties and butler drama, so I ran off. You know how it is."

"Oh, I do." She smirked. "I was born a noble in Celestine. But I never stayed in the courts. I grew up on the eastside—near the cliffs, where the wind hits harder and the nobles don't bother looking."

She didn't say it in a sad way. More like a brag. And damn, did it sound cool.

"I like it better that way," she continued. "No silk puppets. Just people who can stab and smile at the same time. Like me."

I whistled. "Stab and smile. Sword Saint of Reflex and sass."

She shot me a sideways glance. "Well, I do switch fast."

"Is that a threat or a pickup line?"

Navina grinned again, showing just a little tooth. "Why not both?"

Oh, this girl was dangerous.

「 She's out of your league, bro. Stay in your stats. 」

Behind us, I checked again. Yep. Azrael. Still there.

Still walking like his soul clocked out and left him on autopilot.

Navina followed my glance and asked, "Is he always like that?"

"Yup," I said. "He's like one of those cutscene characters. You can't skip 'em, but they don't say anything either."

"Do you think he sleeps standing up?"

"I think he is half-dead when no one's looking."

She chuckled again. "I actually tried speaking to him last night. Asked him if he wanted tea."

"What'd he say?"

"He didn't. Just stared. I think he was analyzing the tea's moral alignment."

"...Neutral Good?"

"Chaotic Decaf."

We both laughed as we finally reached the grassy clearing. The forest behind us hummed, and the cave we were destined to enter loomed a few miles forward, dark and waiting.

I stretched a little, cracked my neck, feeling the magic circulate. It buzzed through me like a hum, all smooth thanks to the AI system. Didn't even need to focus on controlling it.

「 You're welcome, again. Without me, you'd be using that mana to light a campfire. Poorly. 」

I ignored him.

Navina pulled her sword out, twirled it once like she was showing off, but not really. Just muscle memory. Her style was fluid, efficient, and terrifyingly fast.

She looked at me, smile soft but eyes sharp. "So? You gonna show me what the 'Ace of Asura' can do?"

I gave her a grin. "Only if you promise not to cry when I win."

"Oh, sweetheart." Her eyes narrowed. "I switch faster than most people move. If you win, I'll kiss Azrael."

"Now that—" I pointed back at our NPC, still blankly staring into the void—"is the most horrifying threat I've ever heard."

Navina just smirked again.

Gods help me, I think I actually like this team.

Even if we're called Suicide Squad.

The field was silent.

Well, as silent as a bunch of birds screeching, leaves rustling, and Azrael walking behind us like a bootleg mannequin could get. But to me, it was perfect.

Navina stood opposite me, brushing her hair behind her ear like she was posing for a magazine cover instead of a spar. Elegant, calm, and smiling like she didn't plan to break at least three of my ribs.

I cracked my neck, rolled my shoulders, and stretched my fingers.

「Initiating spar protocols. Chance of you getting bodied: 52%. Chance of you crying after: 96%.」

Thanks, System. Very motivating.

Navina took a single step forward. Her right hand gripped her sword. Her left? Already shimmering, particles swirling as she formed that... whatever she was gonna.

Reflex Queen versus Light. Let's go.

I moved first.

A single flash—light exploded around me as mirrors blinked into existence midair. One above, two flanking me, angled just right. I twisted my hand and shot a beam—not at her directly, but at the upper mirror. It bounced, refracted, split, and—

FWOOSH.

She sidestepped the incoming bolt before it had even launched.

Oh yeah. Sword Saint of Reflex. Forgot for a second.

But this wasn't just about hitting her. This was about reading her.

I stepped forward. Fast.

She met me with a sword swing—graceful, precise, like she choreographed it in her sleep. I ducked under, sliding forward with momentum, letting a burst of wind magic push me faster underneath her stance.

She twirled—instinct, grace—and hopped back just a step.

Good.

I slammed my heel down. Five mirrors exploded into place around her. She narrowed her eyes.

"Cornering me already?" she teased.

"Not cornering," I replied, hands glowing. "Just shining a light on how much of a menace you are."

The beams fired—five streaks of pure light bounced and converged from all angles.

She twisted. Twirled. A blur of movement so fast it looked like she split into afterimages. Her sword flicked, deflecting one beam, while her other hand summoned that thing again. A glacio-built barrel, sleek and almost translucent, appeared mid-spin.

With a flick—shhk!

A sharp ice projectile shot straight at me.

「Duck, dumbass.」

I rolled sideways just in time, ice grazing the edge of my coat. Still cold as hell. Still not dead. All good.

"You can do that while moving?!" I called, genuinely curious.

She grinned, forming another gun in her hand. "I can do it while drinking tea."

She was switching elemental weapons mid-motion—almost dancing, really. One second she was up close, dodging beams with pirouettes, the next she was snapping her wrist and firing bolts of ice and frost.

But I noticed it.

The slightest hesitation when switching—between forming the projectiles and aiming. Not even half a second. But to me?

That was enough.

I rushed her again.

My hands burned gold as I formed two mirrored daggers—short, sharp, and bursting with kinetic light energy. She twitched at my sudden burst in speed—maybe surprised I'd closed the gap so fast. Or maybe she was just toying with me.

I slashed down, crossing the blades in an arc. She ducked, stepped left, countered with a rising kick that almost knocked the air out of me, but I twisted and landed a light-empowered punch straight into her side.

She grunted.

A real hit.

Her boots skidded against the grass as she slid back, flipping mid-motion and summoning another gun. Water this time.

"You're tricky," she muttered.

"You're a walking target miss," I shot back.

I didn't give her time to aim.

I created six more mirrors in a dome around us. Her eyes widened.

The mirrors pulsed—every one charging light beams. She dashed to break out, sword cleaving through one—only to find it regenerating behind her. My system synced the reflections, stacking power. The air began to heat.

「Beam Matrix: 87% charged. You better finish this or I'm calling the coroner.」

"Noted!"

She looked around, gauging escape. But I saw it—her feet adjusting, her center low. She was prepping for a burst dash.

I smiled.

And fired.

Twelve beams of raw refracted light shot toward her from all angles—like a golden cage of death—

And she—

She moved.

Faster than before. Reflex snapping in. Her body curved, ducked, twisted between the light as if she predicted every beam's angle before they fired.

But—

One clipped her shoulder.

A faint burn. Her ice-gun shattered.

She landed, breath heavier than before.

I stood there, panting.

She looked at her arm, then up at me with a smirk.

"Alright," she said. "Your turn to dodge, Lightbulb."

I wiped a bit of dust off my shoulder, twirling one of my light daggers between my fingers with a smug grin.

"At this rate," I teased, "you're gonna lose... and you'll have to kiss Azrael."

Navina froze mid-step.

Her head snapped toward me so fast I thought she might dislocate something. "It was a joke!" she barked, cheeks dusted pink. "Don't you dare make it weird!"

I shrugged, laughing under my breath as I stretched my hand out, summoning fresh mirrors into the air. "Too late," I said, playful. "We're all thinking about it now. Especially Azrael."

Behind me, Azrael just stood there, motionless as ever, but I swore if you stared hard enough, his left eyebrow twitched. Probably calculating the social consequences.

I rotated my wrist, light weaving into a soft glow as I patched my body up with healing magic. Even if I wasn't hurt much, it felt... nice. Like fixing cracks before they became earthquakes.

Navina exhaled deeply, rolling her shoulders back.

"Enough jokes," she said, her voice cooling, smoothing into something sharper. "It's time to lock in."

She placed her sword down into the ground with care, like laying a sleeping child to rest. The wind brushed her hair up, light caught on her outline like she belonged to another world entirely.

And then—

Instead of forming tiny projectiles like before, she flexed her fingers outward, conjuring two glowing shapes into existence.

At first, I didn't get it.

But then they fully materialized.

And I blinked.

"...Wait... are those—?" My words got stuck halfway out.

They looked like long-barreled muskets, except sleeker, designed from flowing elemental magic instead of iron and wood. In her left hand, a larger barrel crackling with raw ice energy; in her right, a sleeker, shorter one humming with condensed fire particles.

No way.

No freaking way.

Navina tilted her head slightly, smirking at my dumbfounded expression.

"These," she said proudly, "are Arcflingers. Weapons designed to channel pure elemental surges at high velocity."

I just stood there, my mouth probably halfway to the floor.

"...They're guns," I muttered under my breath.

「Analyzing: 99.99% probability Navina just invented an entire warfare concept centuries too early.」

In desperation, I whispered inside my mind:

System, how the hell did she come up with guns before guns existed?!

「Talent. Cope harder.」

I wanted to scream. But instead, I just tightened my grip, summoning six more mirrors in a wide circular array around me, preparing for hell.

And hell arrived.

The moment the battle resumed, it was like watching the world break.

Navina blurred forward—not charging, not sprinting—but moving with this inhuman flow, almost teleporting between spaces.

Her presence expanded outward like a crashing tide. The environment shifted around her. The grass flattened, the air itself whined under the pressure of her steps.

BAM!

The first Arcflinger—ice variant—fired.

A bullet of compressed frost tore through the air, whistling past my ear. I ducked instinctively, heart hammering.

Before I could even blink—

SWITCH.

Another Arcflinger materialized in her left hand, faster than sight.

BOOM!

A molten burst of fire exploded near my left flank.

She wasn't firing, then reloading.

She was firing, dropping the weapon into magical particles mid-shot, summoning a fresh weapon in her hand, and shooting again—all in a single, seamless, horrifying chain of motion.

「Warning: Navina's quick-switching exceeds standard human reaction limits. Estimated: 4 switches per second. Tactical presence: Lethal.」

Yeah, no kidding.

She wasn't just switching elements—she was weaving them into the very air.

Ice froze the ground wherever the shots landed. Fire scorched the terrain into cracked black scars. Water bullets turned the battlefield muddy and treacherous, then seconds later, earth-based shots would turn it to spikes.

She was the storm.

Every step she took sent ripples through the ground. Every flick of her hand birthed a new death-dealing Arcflinger.

It wasn't just deadly—it was beautiful.

Her coat fluttered behind her like a banner. Her hair moved in synchrony with the wind she created. Her movements, so fast, left faint glowing trails across the air.

Navina, The Flow of Reflex.

Or

The Suicidal Playstyle.

I barely survived the first few seconds, mirrors flaring to life one after another, trying to deflect the onslaught. Light magic stretched and twisted around me like a desperate shield.

My heart raced.

My mouth stretched into a grin.

This was going to be fun.

The fight had become chaos incarnate.

Light curved around me like an elegant spiderweb—twelve mirrors orbiting at breakneck speeds, each one glowing, pulsing, bending space as I angled them mid-air with micro-adjustments. My eyes twitched from mirror to mirror, already processing dozens of future reflections and bounce points. It was like juggling stars.

Across from me, Navina's hands blurred.

One. Two. Four. Eight.

She was quick-switching eight times per second now—elemental Arcflingers blinking in and out of reality like flickering ghosts, each one firing in perfect rhythm.

Water. Fire. Ice. Earth. Electricity. Wind. Light. Darkness.

It was like she was playing the piano with the battlefield itself.

BOOM!

A shot of compressed wind smashed into my barrier.

CRACK!

A frozen blast collided with a mirror, which redirected it back—only for her to counter with a heat-round that melted it mid-flight.

"You're really not holding back anymore," I muttered, lips curved in a smile.

Navina's voice rang clear through the elemental storm, elegant and proud.

"You teased me about kissing Azrael. This is your punishment."

"Was it that traumatic?"

"Yes."

"...Understandable."

She extended her arms wide, a glowing elemental circle forming behind her—a dazzling multicolored magic array that absorbed every element she had fired so far. It whirled like a vortex, sucking the elemental chaos into itself.

Then—

WHOOMPH.

A massive shield—no, a wall of swirling multi-elemental magic—rose before her. Fire traced its edges. Ice cracked across its surface. Electricity veined its core. Water flowed like a heartbeat. Earth anchored its base. Wind howled across its form. And at its center, pure light and darkness spiraled in equilibrium.

"Now that's cheating," I gasped.

Navina smirked behind the shield, wind whipping through her hair. "I call it elegance."

I raised both hands and snapped my fingers.

The twelve mirrors exploded outward like comets, forming an interlocking spiral as beams of light lanced through them, bending, splitting, converging.

"Then let me ruin that elegance."

Light bullets ricocheted across the field, bending around corners and slicing through angles that shouldn't even exist. She dodged like she was dancing, each movement perfectly in sync with my attacks.

Until suddenly—we clashed.

I surged forward, daggers of hard-light in hand, slashing in rapid succession. She dropped both Arcflingers, and her sword was already in her hand.

Steel met photon.

Her blade hit mine in sparks and speed.

I twisted. She parried. She spun. I blinked behind her.

Her elbow cracked into my ribs before I could land the next strike.

"Sloppy," she said.

"Hot," I replied mid-cough.

"Focus!" she shouted, spinning her sword to deflect my next flurry.

I stepped on a mirror below me, using its launch to flip over her—tossing both light daggers down from the sky.

But she vanished, replaced by smoke and blur.

Then—

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM

She was back at range, quick-switching again, faster than before. Eight times per second turned into a blur. My mirrors were struggling now, light beams countered before they were even fully fired.

"You're insane!" I shouted over the roar.

"You're catching up!" she answered, smiling so brightly you'd forget she was trying to kill me.

Back and forth. Close combat.

Range. Slash. Fire. Slash. Light. Ice. Lightning. Shield. Deflect. Water. Mirror. Explosion. Ground crack.

The arena we made wasn't a field anymore. It was a symphony of destruction.

And in the final crescendo—

We both vanished.

I dashed forward with blinding light speed. She countered with a spiral of wind-enhanced footwork.

Her sword plunged toward my heart as well as her Arcflingers aimed at me.

My mirrored dagger curved in toward hers.

In the span of one breath—the air stopped.

SHINK.

A ice bullet to my chest.

A light beam to hers.

We froze, inches apart.

Then—

She broke the silence.

"...Ouch."

I blinked. "...Yeah. That... probably counts as a draw, right?"

Navina's legs gave out first. She dropped to the ground on her back, arms sprawled wide, panting.

I followed a second later, falling beside her and staring up at the sky.

Wind swept across us gently. A few wisps of steam curled off our bodies as we both used healing magic while resting.

Then—

We both laughed.

But the kind of laugh you let out when you've tasted everything you've got and it was still worth it.

"That..." she gasped.

"...was amazing," I finished for her.

She turned her head to look at me, eyes shining.

"Let's do it again sometime."

"Next time... you're kissing Azrael."

She groaned, covering her face with one hand.

"You're the worst."

"And you're the most terrifyingly suicidal lunatic I've ever met."

Her lips quirked.

"...Flattered."

----- Part 2

Sitting on a half-snapped tree with ash in my lungs, bark in my hair, and my shirt sliced in seven different places—I had never felt cooler in my life.

Navina plopped down next to me, her sword stabbed lazily into the ground, still humming with faint elemental residues like it was mildly annoyed the fight was over. Her breathing was slow, collected—like someone who'd just taken a casual jog instead of, you know, trying to stab my heart.

I leaned back, arms resting on the ruined bark. "So," I said between gulps of air, "you almost killed me. How's your evening going?"

She turned her head, lips curled. "Better now. You didn't die."

"Flattering."

"You were faster than last time," she added, brushing strands of hair from her cheek. "Those mirror tricks... I nearly lost my balance twice."

"Twice?" I scoffed. "I counted five."

"You were too busy dodging my eighth elemental switch to notice."

「 System Note: She's not wrong. You looked like a blind chicken mid-roll. 」

Shut up.

Navina chuckled, ruffling her hair slightly. A few curled strands dangled forward like they'd lost a war with physics. I tilted my head.

"Your hair's... kinda wrecked. Looks like it tried to fight me too."

She blinked, then gave a soft laugh. "I suppose it did."

Digging into her coat pocket, she pulled out a small, really old wooden comb. Worn edges. Tiny cracks. The kind of thing you'd find in a memory box, not a battle pouch.

I raised a brow. "If you don't mind me asking... why the antique? Thought you were rich. Like buy-a-city level rich."

She gave a short breath. "If this is about last night, don't mind it."

Ah, last night.

"When you said you'd buy the bar just to have a private chat with me and Azrael?" I smirked. "The whole place froze. That was some 'I own the place' energy."

Navina grinned. "I could've bought it."

"But you didn't?"

She shrugged, still combing through the loose curls. "Didn't feel important. I just wanted to talk."

I exhaled, laughing. "You say that like buying buildings is your hobby."

"It used to be," she teased.

"...You're terrifying."

We both let the silence take over for a moment, the wind brushing through scorched leaves around us. I glanced sideways again.

"So back to the comb," I said. "Still looks like something found in ancient abandon cities."

Navina paused, fingers gently sliding through her hair. "...A close friend gave it to me. Long time ago. During childhood."

I didn't speak right away. "Oh."

"His name was Aeris," she said, voice softer now. "He was younger than me. Sweet. Caring. One of the few people who didn't ask for anything or lie to me."

"Sounds like a good kid." I leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Where is he now?"

She didn't look at me, her eyes on the comb. "We only met once."

That made me pause.

"...Only once?"

"Mm." Her voice dipped slightly. "During a... sad time. He helped me when I was alone. That's all."

I caught the hesitation. The way her voice didn't crack, but chose not to. She didn't want to go there.

So I didn't push.

"Well, who knows," I said, stretching my legs. "Maybe you'll meet him again someday."

Navina hugged her knees lightly, hiding her mouth behind them. "...Maybe. It'll be nice then."

And just barely—barely—I saw it.

A blush.

My eyes narrowed with the accuracy of a hawk.

"...Oh my gods," I whispered. "Is that a blush? Are you blushing? You're into him!"

She flinched. "W-What?! No! I was a child!"

"Childhood crush detected."

「 Alert: Heartbeat spiked. Subject: Navina. Emotional fluctuation registered. Lucas.exe initiating TEASE MODE. 」

I cracked up. "Navina likes Aeris~"

"I don't! It's not like that!" Her ears were turning red now.

"Oh no. The queen of quick-switch has a soft side. This is adorable."

"Lucas." She glared with zero heat behind it. "I will unalive you."

"Please, I'm too hot to die."

She threw the comb at me.

I caught it. Barely.

"...Okay, maybe I deserved that one."

Navina crossed her arms, nose in the air. "You ruined it."

"You blushed. That's a historic event."

She shook her head, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like "moron."

And then—

Crunch.

Footsteps.

We both turned at the exact same time.

Azrael walked through the burning treeline like a murder ghost. Poker face. Crystal eyes. Torn sleeves. Still somehow spotless.

He looked at the two of us—me with comb in hand, Navina with puffy cheeks and glowing ears—and blinked.

"...Am I interrupting something?"

I held up the comb. "It's not what it looks like."

He glanced at Navina. Then at me.

"...You're both idiots."

「 Welcome back, emotionless king. 10/10 timing, would roast again. 」

Before I could get another word in, a fat raindrop slapped the side of my face. Then another. Then it was like someone dumped a whole lake on us.

"Ah, seriously?" I muttered.

Without saying anything, all three of us darted towards a cave nearby. It wasn't deep, but it was enough to not drown.

We stumbled inside, dripping wet and cold.

I whispered inside my head, Yo, system, little help?

「 Deploying wind magic: low-intensity. Activating Dry Mode™. 」

A soft gust swirled around us, drying my clothes and hair quickly. Navina leaned against the cave wall, arms wrapped around herself. She was still shaking a little.

I frowned. "Hey, you good?"

She shook her head quickly, brushing her hair behind her ear. "I'm fine."

Outside, the rain only got angrier, hammering the ground.

System, check her real quick.

「 Body temperature normal. No physical signs of illness. Diagnosis: Drama queen potential... 78%. 」

I sighed in relief. But then Navina coughed, a small, broken sound, and looked... frail. Her usual sparkle dulled.

I stepped closer. "Navina, seriously. What's wrong?"

Again, she shook her head. "I'm okay... really."

System, dude?

「 Still fine. No illness detected. 」

Then, without warning, Azrael sat down right next to her, like a silent ghost.

He grabbed her hand — firm, steady. Not asking. Just doing.

Navina looked up at him, wide-eyed.

I sat there, mouth half open like an idiot, wondering if I'd missed some weird telepathic exchange.

Uh, system? Explain?

「 Observation: No visible threat. Hypothesis: Navina is perhaps suffering from psychological trauma triggered by environmental factors such as the rain and cave context. Azrael detected it through her frail microexpressions and distress holding herself together. Acting as the warmth, connecting to her by the hands he is calming her down. Conclusion: Azrael is horrifyingly good at reading human weakness very quickly.」

...Holy hell. That's terrifying.

Navina opened her mouth, but only a tiny sound came out, almost a whimper.

Azrael stared at her hand, cold and unreadable.

"You'll be fine," he said, voice low, deep, steady as a heartbeat. "You're just cold."

Navina tried to pull her hand back. "I'm not a kid, you know. I don't need to—"

"Your hands are cold," Azrael said, like it was law. "I will not let go until they warm."

Navina glared half-heartedly, cheeks slightly pink. She tugged again. His grip didn't budge.

Their eyes locked. His empty broken eyes. Her guarded blue ones.

For a second, just a second, something changed in her.

A flicker of something old.

A memory:

A stormy night. A dark cave.

A boy—black hair, black eyes—kneeling beside her, shivering but still holding her hand tightly.

Her breath hitched. She blinked fast, like she could chase the memory away.

"I... umm..."

Azrael didn't flinch. He just shifted his hold slightly, wrapping both hands around hers, blank as always maintaining a poker face and neutral voice.

"I will not let go," he said. "Until you calm down."

Navina looked down at their joined hands, hesitating. Her body tensed like she was about to argue.

Then... finally... she gave a tiny, almost invisible nod.

Azrael stayed there, silent, steady as the world kept falling apart outside.

Navina leaned a little into the wall, closing her eyes, still holding onto him.

Her body slowly stopped trembling.

I watched it all unfold, sitting awkwardly nearby, feeling like a side character at a therapy session.

「 You are, in fact, a side character at this moment. Deal with it. 」

I grunted internally.

Outside, the storm raged.

----- Part 3

Lucas yawned loudly, rubbing the back of his neck.

["System, block all sound. I need to take a nap until the rain clears," he grumbled.]

「 Acknowledged. Activating Silent Bear Mode. 」

Snorting at the stupid name, Lucas flopped onto a dry part of the cave floor, folding his arms behind his head.

"Wake me up if a monster tries to raid us," he muttered before promptly knocking himself out, quietly falling asleep.

Navina's Perspective:

I sat there quietly, my hand still in Azrael's grasp.

The rain outside didn't stop. The hollow, cold sound of it hitting the rocks echoed in the cave.

I glanced at our hands. His grip was firm, unmoving. Like a frozen statue that decided to warm someone up out of sheer... coldness.

"My hands are warm now," I said softly.

Azrael loosened his hold.

The cold bit back into my skin instantly, like the air had been waiting.

Without a word, he clasped my hand again, poker-faced as ever.

I blinked up at him.

"You know... you're kind of bad at pretending you don't care," I said, smiling a little.

"Why hide your emotions so much?"

His eyes, fractured and glassy like frozen rivers, didn't even flicker.

"Don't pry."

I huffed. "Come on. It's not like you'll shatter into pieces just because you smile once."

He didn't even blink. "I'm holding your hand because I need you alive for the grotesque hive eradication," he said flatly.

"...Ah. Of course. Just business."

The words felt heavier than I thought they would. I looked away, pretending I didn't care either. "Right. Mutual goals and all," I muttered under my breath.

He nodded, completely unaffected.

Still, he kept holding my hand.

Azrael's voice broke the gentle rhythm of the rain.

"...The old comb you're carrying. Is it from an old friend?"

I blinked at him, surprised.

My fingers instinctively brushed the little pouch at my side. I hadn't even mentioned it to him at all.

"...How'd you know?"

His face, as always, remained unreadable. "You smiled when you spoke of it. Brief. Not for me. The item is old, yet well-kept. That suggests attachment. Emotional. Not utility-based. Therefore, a gift. From someone special."

I raised a brow, leaning in a bit, intrigued. "Could've been anyone. What made you assume it was a friend?"

Without looking at me, Azrael's grip on my hand subtly tightened.

"If your parents or family gave it to you, the emotional weight would have surfaced differently—softer, more nostalgic. Yours was... sharper. Guarded. That suggests a wound. I hypothesize the comb is the final token from someone who once helped you—before disappearing. Likely via abandonment... or betrayal."

I stared at him in silence.

How the hell did he just pull that entire truth out of me with no more than a smile and a comb...?

Then I burst out laughing, voice echoing slightly against the cave walls. "Gods, you're terrifying. Like, in a scary genius way. Emotionless genius, even."

Azrael didn't blink.

"I see," he said flatly. Then added after a second, "I won't pry either, Navina. You can relax."

His tone didn't change, but something in the way he said my name lingered longer than necessary. He realized my laugh was just there to distract him, and he immediately caught it and didn't pry further.

The rain outside kept falling, dripping steadily like nature's own heartbeat.

He was still holding my hand. Firm. Not affectionate. Just... consistent.

He's so weird.

Azrael... He's like a mirror of Aeris that cracked and froze over.

Aeris used to hold my hand like this once. But he smiled when he did it. He laughed too easily, talked too much. Azrael's the complete opposite. No smiles. No expression. Just veins that look like frost creeping under his skin, and eyes that seem like they're holding back entire traumatic pasts.

Even his face... it's not exactly bad, but it's plain. Average. But the way he talks?

Straight up scary.

Still... he's holding my hand the same way Aeris did.

I frowned to myself, unconsciously pouting.

I wish it was him... not this guy.

Azrael glanced at me, completely deadpan. "Regretting that your emotional support doesn't have prettier cheekbones?"

I snapped my head toward him, startled—then laughed. "You sarcastic statue."

"You're the one pouting like a child," he replied, still not showing even a flicker of amusement.

I shook my head, a smile tugging at my lips despite myself.

"Gods, how are you like this?"

He blinked slowly.

"Genetic misfortune."

I giggled, biting my lip to hide it. The way he said things so seriously made it worse.

Then we just sat there like that.

The cave quiet, the storm outside shielding us from the world. His hand still around mine—cold but warming by the second.

I leaned a little closer, not enough to break the moment, but just enough to feel his presence beside me.

"...Thank you," I whispered.

He didn't answer, but he didn't let go either.

The rain didn't let up.

It poured and poured without mercy, drowning the world in cold silver.

Day slipped into night without warning, and the world outside the cave blurred into a wall of mist and sound.

Somewhere in the haze of exhaustion, I had fallen asleep.

When I woke up, it was still raining.

The sky outside was a deep navy, the kind that almost swallowed the stars whole, leaving only the storm clouds whispering across the heavens.

I sat up slowly, shivering a little.

Lucas was still curled up on the far side of the cave, completely knocked out, his chest rising and falling in a deep, peaceful rhythm. Not even the storm could wake him.

I smiled a little. Typical.

Turning my head, I saw him.

Azrael.

Still sitting exactly where he was hours ago.

Still holding my hand.

His fingers were wrapped around mine, steady. Protective. His body unmoving, his cold blue-veined face turned toward the mouth of the cave, unblinking—like a silent sentinel keeping watch over us.

He hadn't moved all this time.

He hadn't even blinked.

It hit me harder than it should have.

"...You're still here," I whispered, my voice rough with sleep.

His eyes flickered toward me for a second, then returned to the outside.

"You needed rest," he said simply. "So I ensured you had it."

I squeezed his hand gently, feeling something warm and raw crack open inside my chest.

"...You really are something else."

He didn't answer.

For a long moment, it was just the rain speaking for both of us.

I coughed a little, my throat dry. Then, without looking at him, I spoke—voice low, almost fragile.

"...You were right, Azrael. I'm scared of... stormy rains. And cold nights."

I closed my eyes briefly, ashamed.

"Old fears... they don't really go away. They just sleep inside you."

He said nothing, but his hand tightened slightly, anchoring me.

"...Thank you," I whispered, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. "For holding my hand. I'll... I'll let go once the rain stops."

Azrael shook his head slowly.

"I am in no hurry."

The words were so simple. So solid.

I nearly cried again.

There was a long silence. Then, Azrael spoke—quietly, almost like confessing a secret to the night.

"...I don't smile," he said.

I turned to him, frowning softly.

"Why?"

He didn't look at me. His voice was level, like he was reporting weather.

"Because I can't."

He paused, then continued. "Since the moment I entered this world... I never knew what emotions were supposed to feel like. I saw others laugh, cry, rage—but my face never moved. My heart never... stirred."

The rain blurred everything for a moment, like the sky was crying for him.

"I wanted to feel," Azrael said, almost to himself. "I wanted to live. But I could only imitate. Never experience."

I swallowed hard.

"...You're not alone," I whispered.

He looked at me now, really looked—and for once, there was something behind those fractured eyes. Something cracked and terribly human.

"I was born ill," I said softly, smiling a little sadly. "From the moment I opened my eyes, I was told I wouldn't make it. That I wouldn't laugh, run, or smile like other kids. I was... sad. All the time. I didn't know what real happiness was."

Azrael's hand never let go of mine.

"Then... how are you here?" he asked.

I smiled gently and placed my free hand over my heart.

"Because someone saved me," I said, voice trembling just a little. "When everyone else gave up... he didn't. He stayed. And took care of me until I recovered fully."

I laughed a little, watery and soft. "And because of him, I smiled. For the first time, I truly smiled with it being forced."

Azrael stared at me like he was memorizing every word.

"So," he said slowly, "you learned how happiness feels."

I nodded, my heart aching with memories and gratitude.

Then, smiling up at him—bright, small, but real—I said...

"And you will too. One day, you'll smile, Azrael. I know you will."

He stared at me. No change in expression. No softening. No tears. Still the usual same poker face and emotionless expression.

But in the way he squeezed my hand—just a little tighter—

I could feel it.

Hope.

The rain kept falling, but inside our little cave, it was almost warm.

Azrael looked back out into the night, voice calm but carrying something fragile underneath.

"One of my wishes," he said, "has always been to live... truly live. To be human. To feel what it's like... to smile for the first time."

I smiled again, this time brighter, stronger.

"You'll get there," I said softly. "You just have to keep trying."

He nodded once, that same unbreakable calm, but the way he did it—it wasn't cold.

I leaned against his side gently, resting my head just barely against his arm, feeling him stiffen for a second—then slowly relax.

And like that... we weren't just strangers anymore.

And as the rain whispered against the earth, two people who had forgotten how to smile sat together—

waiting for a dawn they both still dared to believe in.

----- Part 4

The rain continued its endless lullaby outside the cave, a soft, miserable sound against the earth.

We sat there for a long time.

Neither of us said anything.

Not because there was nothing to say—

but because some feelings are too heavy for words to carry.

Azrael still held my hand, loose now, like he was giving me the choice to hold on or let go.

I didn't.

I kept holding.

Somewhere in the cold hush, Azrael spoke, his voice so low it almost disappeared into the rain.

"...I hope you meet that friend again someday, Navina."

For the first time since I met him, his tone wasn't completely neutral.

There was a faint crack in the neutrality. A tremor of something almost human underneath.

I felt my chest tighten painfully.

I looked down at our hands, then up at the storm outside.

My throat burned, but I forced the words out.

"...Thank you, Azrael," I whispered, trying to steady my voice. "I wish for that too because..."

My voice faltered. My hand curled a little tighter around his.

"Because I regret it," I said finally, a breathless, breaking confession.

"I regret not telling him... that day."

Azrael didn't move.

He just listened.

It made it harder somehow.

It made it real.

"I—" I began, my voice shaking, "I was so scared... I wanted to tell him. To ask him to stay with me. To be my friend, to be by my side forever. But—"

I swallowed hard. "But I didn't. I froze at that moment and didn't say anything. I let him leave."

The rain blurred against the night outside, just like my vision.

"Was it because... because I was too scared he'd say no?"

"Was I afraid... he'd break out friendship if I had asked? That even if I asked, it wouldn't matter?"

I shut my eyes tight, feeling the tears spill down my cheeks.

"Or maybe... maybe deep down I thought I didn't deserve someone like him staying..."

The words cracked and broke as they left me, bleeding into the space between us.

I couldn't bear to look at Azrael. I was afraid to see indifference on his face.

Afraid to see the truth reflected back at me—that I was just a coward who lost someone precious because I never reached out when it mattered.

But all Azrael did was tighten his fingers around mine.

Firm.

Steady.

Unmoving.

A silent promise: I hear you.

Then, after a moment, his voice came again, soft and steady like the rain.

"If you had the chance..." he said slowly, "would you go back and tell him that?"

I nodded without thinking, the answer bursting from the locked places of my heart.

"If I could go back..." My voice cracked. "I'd tell him in a heartbeat. No hesitation or fear."

I curled my fingers tighter into the fabric of my clothes, as if that would hold back the years of regret.

"Eight years..." I whispered, my throat burning. "For eight years I've lived with that regret."

Azrael was quiet for a long time.

Then, finally, he spoke — his voice calm, but weighted differently now. Not cold. Just... heavy.

"Maybe, Navina..." he said quietly, "you two weren't meant to be friends forever."

My heart lurched.

I turned to him, startled, hurt leaking into my voice before I could stop it.

"What do you mean?" I asked, the words shaking, barely more than a breath.

Azrael didn't flinch.

His gaze stayed on the dark, fading rain outside the cave.

"Everything in this world," he said, slowly, "happens for the best. Even when we hate it. Even when we think we would've been happier otherwise."

I pulled my hand away from him, anger rising to choke the sadness in my throat. I scooted a little farther from him, the chill of the cave biting harder now.

"What do you know about that?" I snapped, the ache behind my words sharper than any sword.

"You don't know how it feels. You don't know what it's like—" I blinked rapidly, trying to force back the tears.

"I would've been happy," I said fiercely, voice breaking, "if we stayed together. That's all I ever wanted."

Azrael was quiet again.

But when he spoke, there was no cruelty, no malice.

Only... a bitter kind of truth.

"He was the reason you became who you are today," Azrael said. "The reason you fought so hard. Became a Sword Saint respected and loved by everyone."

I clenched my fists so tightly they hurt.

"That doesn't matter," I whispered, shaking my head, the tears finally slipping free.

"None of it matters."

Another tear slid down my cheek, warm against my cold skin.

"You don't understand, Azrael..." I said, voice breaking completely now.

"You don't know what it feels like... to be sick your whole life. To lie in bed every night, coughing and gasping, wondering if you'd still be breathing when morning came."

I wiped at my tears angrily. "To cry so quietly because no one came to check if you were okay."

I let go of his hand completely, curling into myself.

"In another world..." I murmured, staring blankly at the cave wall, "I must have said it." A broken smile ghosted across my lips, bitter and small.

"I must have told him... I wanted to stay with him and be friends forever. And we were happy together. At least... I would have been happy."

Azrael shifted slightly beside me. The faintest movement.

Then his voice came again, low and steady.

"The gods... or something even above them... must have seen what you couldn't," he said.

"An ending far worse than any sadness or tragedy you've ever lived through."

I turned my head slightly, staring at him, the anger dimming into confused hurt.

"...What do you mean by that?" I asked quietly, barely breathing.

Azrael looked straight ahead, his cold, fractured eyes seeing things I couldn't.

"When the time comes," he said softly, "we all understand the value of sacrifice."

I didn't answer.

I couldn't.

I just curled up tighter, pulling my legs to my chest, staring at the cave wall without seeing it. The rain outside had faded to a soft mist, the sound of it distant now, like a memory I couldn't hold onto.

I lay back against the hard stone floor, the cold seeping into my bones.

I closed my eyes.

Sacrifice?

Something worse than sadness?

What did he mean?

Was there truly some kind of ending... so cruel... that even my regrets were a mercy compared to it?

Was this—this world where I lived with regrets, with scars, with empty spaces in my heart—

Was this really the happiest world that could have existed for me?

The thought broke something in me.

As I drifted closer to sleep, I wondered...

The thought broke something in me.

As I drifted closer to sleep, I wondered...

When I was sitting close to him earlier,

I couldn't...

I just couldn't even hear his heart beating.

Was I imagining things? Or did it really not beat at all?

As if he wasn't even alive. As if he was just... existing. A thing pretending to be human.

Was he truly a person...

or a monster in disguise?

As I drifted closer to sleep, I wondered...

Why did I tell him all this?

Why Azrael?

Why not Lucas?

Why not someone — normal — someone from my family even?

Somehow...

Without even smiling.

Without even changing his expression.

Without even speaking much...

He narrowed into my heart.

Pulled apart the walls I thought were unbreakable.

Held me in place with nothing but his presence.

He reached in— like that old memory I tried to bury — the one I swore no one would ever see.

Drew out confessions I never wanted to say aloud. Words that felt like scars when they touched the air.

Was he...

Was he trying to make me open up?

Was it pity?

Or was it all just another move?

Another calculation in that endless mind?

Was he comforting me... only to trap me?

I squeezed my eyes shut.

No...

That can't be true.

It can't.

Or else... I don't know anymore.

I shifted slightly, turning my head just enough —
just enough to steal a glimpse at him one last time before sleep dragged me away.
Azrael sat perfectly still by the entrance of the cave.
Like a monster.
Like a god who had long abandoned mankind.
His face was emotionless.
Not blank — no, not even that.
It was dead.
Those broken, cold eyes stared out into the dark forest — reflecting nothing.
Feeling nothing.
Only the endless night staring back at him.
I watched him for a long, long moment.
Breathing slow.
Feeling my own heart beat — because his wouldn't.
And then, barely loud enough for anyone to hear — for even myself to hear — I
muttered under my breath, like a prayer no god would answer:

"...Heartless."

And finally...

finally,

I fell asleep.

----- Part 5 (FINAL)

Azrael's Perspective:

Lucas would not awaken until morning.

Navina, exhausted from the emotional flooding I orchestrated, had also fallen asleep.

Exactly as I calculated.

I rose to my feet, moving silently across the cave.

The artificial rain I had created just ended.

What remained were the remnants of my design: layered moisture, embedding into the soil, and microscopic traces of thermal coldness too complex to be detected by any standard magecraft or sensory skill.

I observed the results without emotion.

All according to protocol.

Creating the rain itself was a trivial task.

Elemental manipulation on a microclimatic scale — even children could perform it with enough discipline.

The true complexity came from the thermal layering:

I engineered the rain droplets so that each particle carried a dual-phase structure — the outermost molecular layer remained at ambient temperature, while the internal structure contained compressed cold energy bound by friction-activated barriers.

Upon skin contact, the outer layer neutralized any detection attempts, while the internal structure, bound by an atomic delaying sequence, would seep into the dermis, embedding cold pressure that would manifest only after sufficient saturation.

No mark.

No pain.

No measurable anomaly under conventional diagnostics.

A perfect invisible blade, sinking through without resistance.

It was not enough to manipulate weather.

I had to manipulate the perception of weather.

The body would register rain — nothing else.

The mind would ignore the subtle drain until psychological fatigue set in hours later.

By the time Lucas or Navina awoke, the cold would have already altered their metabolic rates, lowered mental resilience, and weakened any subconscious defenses against suggestion.

Making them... easy to manipulate and confess.

Soft engineering of the human organism.

Without a single spell directly touching their conscious mind.

Undetectable.

Untraceable.

Inevitably effective.

I turned slightly, glancing at Navina's sleeping form.

Her hand, curled lightly against her chest.

Tear-stained cheeks.

Faint shivers.

Good.

On entry to the cave, I had performed one final augmentation.

A minor, incidental "mistake" — a casual touch against her hand.

To an observer, nothing more than accidental contact.

In reality, it was the activation of a secondary sequence.

I had pre-coded my skin's surface with a microscopic lattice of energy patterns, each tuned to emit cold atomic signatures on skin-to-skin contact.

The moment I brushed against her, the transfer began: subdermal cold-patterns infiltrating through direct atomic binding, locking into her nerve pathways.

It would trigger dormant emotional memories associated with isolation, loss, and abandonment — pushing her into confession, vulnerability, dependency.

The brain interprets cold touch as a threat when unshielded.

I merely aligned that primal reaction to a specific emotional framework.

A predictable outcome.

An engineered breakdown.

If there had been even a 0.1% chance of resistance, I would not have executed the operation.

But with Navina's prior emotional and physical fatigue, biological history of sickness, and unresolved psychological guilt—

Success was inevitable.

I took a slow breath, purely for the biological requirement, and watched the two sleeping figures.

Lucas.

Navina.

Lucas...

There was something unnatural about him.

His eyes didn't need to move to observe.

His awareness operated on a level beyond standard visual confirmation.

Possibilities branched around him like shifting mirrors — a rare phenomenon typically reserved for high-order conceptual wielders or forbidden existences.

A man whose mind functioned not in sequences, but in simultaneous layers of prediction and realization.

A card.

A potential tool.

A number.

I would not make the mistake of underestimating him. His thinking was near God level in omni-presence.

The rain was only the first act. More layers would unfold before they ever realized they were drowning.

This way, even if Lucas possessed that omnipresent form of observation — that fractured mirror sight I glimpsed in him — he would detect nothing.

Because the rain was not merely elemental.

It was biological. The cold seeped into the body's chemical pathways at a level even mana sensory could not perceive.

I wove the water's atomic structures with non-magic physics — pure manipulations of pressure, temperature, molecular spin, and hydrogen bonding at a quantum threshold undetectable by any standard magic perception.

Each droplet, once absorbed by the skin, layered itself between dermal cells, blending with natural electrolytes and blood flow.

Not an invader. A ghost wearing the skin of the body's own signals.

If Lucas activated any passive or active perception skills, they would return false positives.

To his mind, there was nothing but harmless rainfall.

Harmless temperature.

Harmless environment.

He could see a thousand possibilities.

None of them would matter.

I erased myself from his conclusions before he could think of them.

Next, there was Lucas's psychology.

A simpler problem.

Based on prior observation patterns and personality extrapolation, I deduced him to be the silent-attention seeker type — the breed of man who craves validation internally but punishes himself externally through isolation.

A simple sequence was enough: If ignored, he withdraws. If the spotlight moves elsewhere, he removes himself from competition.

So I engineered the conversation earlier —

pulling Navina's focus, drawing her guilt, twisting it into dependency onto me.

Lucas, seeing no immediate attention toward himself, made the logical conclusion to rest.

Good.

The rain outside justified inaction.

The grotesque hive raid was temporarily impossible.

Town was distant and unreachable in these conditions.

All parameters satisfied.

He withdrew.

He slept.

Leaving me free to harvest information.

After all, that is what they are to me.

All of them.

Not family.

Not friends.

Not human beings.

Prey.

Gullible, breathing prey, suspended on invisible strings, waiting to be killed at the hour I deem appropriate.

Navina's confession was more valuable than gold.

Her past, her traumas, her weaknesses — all now known to me, compartmentalized, and added to my internal calculations.

No longer an unknown variable.

Merely another card on the table.

The Queen of Spades.

Fitting.

Broken but still able to kill.

Sleeping beside her: The Ace of Spades.

Lucas.

The king remains unidentified, but it matters little.

When the deck is stacked by my hand, every card falls the same.

I rose without noise and stepped outside the cave.

The air was sharp with the aftermath of the rain. Above me, the moon split the clouds, indifferent, uncaring —

perfect.

Tomorrow, the other cards would arrive.

Arius, you truly think you're enough to stop me with those weak cards?

Especially the Hearts.

The naive.

The emotional.

The liabilities.

They must be sacrificed first. I'll get rid of them one by one, each before I begin.

Before the Aces can do what I intend them to do, the Hearts must be traumatized.

Before the real stage can be built from their corpses.

I stared up at the void between the stars.

My heart not beating at all.

There was no hesitation.

No regret.

At the end of the day, no matter what mask I wore...

no matter how well I mimicked human sentiment...

no matter how close I stood beside them...

I would never belong to their world.

I would never become human.

I am nothing but—

a...

Heartless Manipulator.

Chapter 63 - When Monster and Devil Cross Paths

Celia's Perspective

4/11/2017 - 10:52 AM

Just like Levi had mentioned, we were leaving early in the morning toward Rinascita. Not that I didn't expect it... but still, I can't help feeling a little bitter.

Especially when I found out he and the other Sword Saints got to ride in a luxurious VIP carriage — polished wood, velvet seats, and probably someone fanning them with feathers. Meanwhile, here I was... crammed into a shaky wagon that creaked every time it hit a pebble.

I shifted my gaze around lazily.

Arius was slumped across from me, out cold, arms folded like he was guarding some imaginary treasure.

Issac was leaning against the side, drooling slightly — gross.

Sophia, sitting next to me, had her cheek pressed against the window frame, smiling dreamily at the passing fields.

I sighed, glaring mentally at Levi.

Oh sure, "you're tougher than you look, Celia," he said. "You can handle it," he said. May your next tea be poisoned, Levi. Mildly. Just enough to panic you.

The sun was shining down on endless rolling hills, patches of wildflowers tossing in the breeze like little flags of color.

The view outside Levinton really was something else.

"Pretty, huh?" Sophia's voice chimed beside me, a little sing-songy.

I nodded, letting my body lean a little against the side of the wagon. "Yeah... it's been a while since I've been this far from the city."

Her head turned toward me, messy strands of her dark hair falling in front of her face. "Really? You look like you belong in a storybook. Like one of those princesses that sneak out of the castle for 'adventure' and immediately gets mugged."

I let out a snort, trying to stifle it into a polite cough.

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind next time I'm getting kidnapped for the third time."

Sophia grinned, the sun catching the mischievous glint in her eyes. "Hey, you've got the look. The world just knows you're abductable and... dangerous."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" I teased, arching an eyebrow.

Sophia shrugged dramatically. "Take it as a compliment! You're abductably adorable."

I covered my mouth with my hand to stop myself from laughing.

Abductably adorable. Great. Adding that to my collection of things to never repeat out loud.

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, just watching the scenery roll by. The fields outside of Levinton were so vibrant, untouched. Fresh.

"It's much more natural compared to Asura... I can't lie." Sophia muttered, enjoying the view.

I caught Sophia smiling faintly at the landscape, something softer in her expression.

"Asura's beauty feels... fake, doesn't it?" I said quietly, more to myself.

She nodded almost immediately, her smile drooping a little. "Yeah. It's the fountains and gardens that get replanted every month to look perfect. It's not alive like this." Her fingers absentmindedly traced the wooden frame of the window. "It's like... they built it to distract you. So you don't notice how ugly everything else is."

I didn't say anything. I just watched her for a moment, the breeze tousling her hair.

There were pieces of Sophia that even she didn't realize she was showing sometimes.

I smiled lightly. "I see. You're from Asura so you'd know."

"I like this better," she whispered, before immediately ruining the touching moment by gasping dramatically. "Wait — are we, like, bonding right now? Oh no. I didn't prepare my emotional speech. Hold on, let me cry on cue."

I rolled my eyes, nudging her with my elbow. "Please, spare me."

Sophia gave a little giggle, turning her gaze back outside.

But the wagon hit a slight bump, and she lurched forward awkwardly, smacking her forehead against the window with a loud thunk.

"Ow—!" she yelped, clutching her forehead like she'd been mortally wounded.

I tried. I tried not to laugh.

But the squeak she made was so ridiculous I practically folded over, laughing into my sleeve.

Sophia groaned theatrically. "I'm going to have a forehead dent now. A permanent one. They're going to call me Denty."

"Tragic," I said, wiping a tear from the corner of my eye. "I'll make sure your tombstone says 'Here Lies Denty, Struck Down By A Window.'"

"You're so mean to me," she whimpered, before immediately touching her denty spot.

"Hey, speaking of mean... why are those two asleep?" I said, looking at Arius and Issac.

They looked like corpses. Peaceful, but corpses.

Sophia leaned in like she was telling me a great secret. "Apparently Zain held some huge mercenary meeting last night. Real serious stuff. Went until like, two in the morning. Those two barely made it back before they collapsed."

I blinked. "So that's why Arius was muttering about grotesques and Levi in his sleep."

She nodded solemnly. "Yup. They're running on negative brain cells right now."

A slow, mischievous grin tugged at my lips.

And judging by the way Sophia's eyes lit up, she knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Oh no," she whispered excitedly. "You're plotting."

"Maybe," I said sweetly. "You in?"

"Always."

We leaned in close like two villains conspiring over world domination.

After a quick whispered huddle, we nodded at each other.

Sophia reached into her small pouch and pulled out a tiny feather she kept for cleaning arrows.

I gently plucked it from her fingers, then reached toward Arius's nose. Carefully. Gently.

The feather barely brushed his nostrils.

At first, nothing.

Then... a twitch.

Another twitch.

A half-snort.

And then —

"AACHHOOO!"

Arius jolted awake so hard he punched himself in the chest. He looked around wildly like he was ready to fight a grotesque.

Issac, startled by the noise, flailed in his sleep, punched the side of the wagon, then groaned miserably and curled up like a shrimp.

I clapped a hand over my mouth to muffle my laughter.

Sophia turned bright red trying not to wheeze.

Arius, still half-asleep, stared at us with betrayal in his eyes.

Issac just muttered something about "Zain's chickens" and went back to snoring.

Sophia leaned over and whispered to me, "Worth it."

I nodded, wiping another tear of laughter away.

It was worth it.

Maybe the ride to Rinascita wasn't so bad after all.

Arius stirred, blinking slowly like some old man being forced awake from his nap.

He groaned lowly, stretching his arms over his head and slumping forward. His messy hair stuck out at weird angles, and for a second, I thought about saying something snarky. But then I remembered we technically woke him up in a pretty... questionable way.

He blinked again, looking at me, then Sophia, then the suspiciously shifted wagon seats where Isaac was still slumped half-off, mouth wide open.

A slow, knowing smile pulled at his lips.

"Do I even want to ask?"

Sophia immediately threw her hands up defensively, eyes wide. "Nope! You absolutely don't! We're just innocent passengers who respect our fellow sleepy teammates."

I nodded sagely beside her. "Respect to the dead. And by dead, I mean Isaac's dignity."

Arius stared at us, completely deadpan. Then exhaled one of those deep, suffering sighs only a man surrounded by idiots could produce.

"...Forget it," he said, slumping back lazily against the side of the wagon.

But there was something in the way he said it—too easy, too smooth.

I narrowed my eyes slightly.

That was Arius-speak for 'I'm plotting revenge and you won't even realize until it's too late.'

He casually tapped the window frame, staring out at the green blur of fields passing by.

"You know..." he started, voice low, almost nostalgic. "Scenery like this reminds me of a place once. Outside the southern front... long before you two were even old to be adventurers."

I squinted suspiciously. "You're like, two years older than me."

"Details." He waved it off like I was some peasant interrupting his royal storytelling.

"Anyway. We were stationed at a place called Verrit Hollow. A marshland. Pretty on the surface, until the rains came."

Sophia leaned in slightly, genuinely curious.

"And...?"

"And that's when they came out."

I felt a tiny shiver run down my back despite myself.

"...They?"

Arius's eyes gleamed wickedly, like a cat finally spotting cornered prey.

"Gromwalkers. Insects. Thirty legs. Huge as your head," he said, making an exaggerated circle with his fingers. "Ugly. Gray-green. Dripping this foul, sticky stuff. We lost two men the first night just from heart attacks."

Sophia's mouth dropped open. "You're lying."

I wanted to believe that too.

I really wanted to believe that too.

But Arius was... convincing. Too convincing.

He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice like he was sharing a war secret.

"They don't bite. No... they crawl inside armor. Into places you can't scratch. They'll sit there for hours... laying eggs... moving slightly... just under your skin."

Sophia visibly paled.

I swallowed, feeling my whole body crawl at the thought.

"And worst part," Arius added with a serious grimace, "they only come out... when the sun's at its brightest. Around—" he glanced lazily at the wagon window, "—now."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

Sophia grabbed the edge of her coat instinctively, pulling it tighter.

"T-that's so specific it has to be fake," she muttered, but I caught the way she glanced nervously down at her lap.

"I'm serious," Arius said, voice smooth as honey but carrying that perfectly placed hint of dread. "Sometimes they hide under wagon wheels. Sometimes inside cushions. Sometimes..."

He let his voice drop off meaningfully.

"...right under your seat."

My heart dropped.

Very, very slowly, I lifted my foot and peeked under the bench.

Nothing.

But my mind had already betrayed me — I felt something crawl against my ankle that definitely wasn't there.

Nope. Nope nope nope.

I straightened stiffly, pretending like I wasn't fighting the overwhelming urge to scream.

"So, hypothetically speaking," I said slowly, "if one was here... what do we do?"

Arius tilted his head thoughtfully, enjoying himself way too much.

"Oh, nothing much. Just... stay very, very still. And hope it doesn't like the smell of fear."

Sophia, brave soul she was, immediately squeaked, clutched my arm, and hissed in my ear, "I can smell my own fear. It's happening. We're gonna die."

I clutched her back, equally frozen.

Maybe if we sacrificed Isaac, it would spare us.

Then Arius made a soft clicking sound with his tongue and whispered, "There it goes..." while staring directly under our seats.

"COCKROACH!!!!"

We lasted exactly two seconds.

"AAAAAHHHH—!!"

Sophia and I shrieked at the same time, bolting out of the wagon so fast I think I actually fly.

The moment my feet hit the ground, I spun wildly in place, shaking my dress, my sleeves, everything. Sophia was flailing like she was trying to kill a ghost hanging off her.

And through it all, from inside the wagon, we heard the deep, unfiltered sound of Arius absolutely losing it.

He was laughing so hard he was wheezing, clutching his stomach, half-doubled over like he'd just witnessed the second coming of comedy itself.

"You should've seen your faces!" he managed between gasps, wiping tears from his eyes.

I glared at him, chest heaving, cheeks burning hot.

"You—You absolute garbage human being!"

Sophia pointed an accusing finger, face bright red.

"Traitor!"

"Hey," Arius chuckled, wiping a fake tear dramatically, "consider this your payment for waking me up with your little stunt. I'm a man of fair trades and gender equality."

I folded my arms, stomping back to the wagon with what I hoped was the dignity of a queen who definitely hadn't been duped by a fake bug story.

"You're lucky I don't stab you in your smug face."

Arius leaned casually against the doorframe, grinning lazily.

I growled under my breath, but somehow...

Somehow, despite the humiliation, the terror, and the utter betrayal... I found myself smiling.

Maybe it was the way Sophia was still checking her sleeves.

Maybe it was the way Arius's laughter, for once, sounded genuinely free.

Or maybe, just maybe...

"That story was true, you know," Arius said, flicking some imaginary dust off his sleeve with a casual grin. His voice dripped with that fake sincerity he loved pulling on us.

"Thirty-two legs. Spiny. Glossy. It exists, Celia. Sophia. It's called the... Shadelurker Roach."

Sophia paused mid-sleeve inspection and stared at him like he had grown another head.

I crossed my arms. "You just made that name up. You called it Gromwalkers like 5 minutes ago."

"No," Arius said, dead serious, resting his elbow on his knee. "I didn't lie. Not earlier, and not now. Would I ever lie to the two of you? What I said earlier was just a bluffing name."

We both glared at him.

Silence filled the wagon, only the rhythmic squeak of the wheels and the soft plodding of the horses filling the gap. The driver, poor soul, blissfully unaware of the madness brewing in the back.

Then Arius leaned forward, his voice dropping to a lethal whisper.

"There's a cockroach among us."

I blinked.

Sophia blinked.

Arius grinned wider, shadows playing over his face.

"No... actually, two," he added, low and grave, almost tender in the way someone might speak before sentencing you to death. His gaze flicked toward Isaac, still snoring like a rock, drool half pooling at the corner of his mouth.

Sophia and I tilted our heads sloooowly toward each other in the same cursed realization—

"COCKROACH ON YOUR LAP!!" Arius screamed at the top of his lungs.

Sophia and I SHRIEKED so loud the wagon shuddered.

"GET IT OFF GET IT OFF GET IT OFF!!" Sophia cried, flailing her arms like she was fighting an invisible person.

I felt something brush my thigh and just about ascended to another plane.

"OH NO, OH GODS, OH NOOOOO!!" I howled, slapping at my skirt.

Sophia threw her entire jacket across the wagon, hitting Isaac square in the face.

Isaac grunted in his sleep, mumbled something about "five more minutes," and turned over.

"IT'S IN MY SLEEVE!!" Sophia shrieked, frantically trying to shake her arm out, smacking her own face and then Isaac's again for good measure.

Isaac's eyes snapped open, utterly dazed, just in time to catch another slap across his jaw.

Meanwhile, a SECOND roach flew—no, dived—straight into my hair.

"IT'S MAKING A NEST!!!" Arius yelled gleefully from the corner.

"GET IT OFF GET IT OFF!!" I squealed, twisting and spinning like a drunk ballerina, clawing at my hair like it owed me money.

Sophia, in full panic mode, ran circles around the cramped wagon, screaming bloody murder, sleeves flailing, one boot missing.

And then... Isaac.

Isaac, still half-asleep, stood up like a solemn chosen one on wobbly legs, looked at us in absolute disappointment, and said in the COLDEST voice I'd ever heard:

"Cockroach Queens."

Deadpan.

Completely serious.

Sophia and I froze, turned to stare at him with murder in our eyes.

The wagon creaked ominously under the tension.

We were this close to declaring war.

Finally—finally—the two devilish cockroaches, as if sensing their job here was done, flew out the back of the wagon and disappeared into the horizon, leaving behind two emotionally scarred girls and two grown men HOWLING with laughter.

Arius wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

Isaac actually leaned against the side of the wagon, wheezing.

I wiped my sweaty forehead and glared at them. "How the hell... HOW THE HELL were there cockroaches even here?! We're in the middle of nowhere!!"

Sophia looked equally traumatized. "Yeah!! Where did they even come from?!"

Arius, in the most mockingly sweet tone ever, said,

"Oh, I brought them."

We both gagged. "YOU WHAT?!"

Arius smirked, lazy and victorious. "I slipped them into Isaac's pocket when he was asleep. Just to prank you two in the morning, which I did."

Isaac's eyes widened. "WHEN?!"

Arius shrugged. "It was last night during our slumber. You're not exactly hard to rob."

Sophia and I just stared at him, disgust written all over our faces.

"That's... that's—"

"That's VILE!!" Sophia snapped.

"DISGUSTING!" I shouted, still scratching at phantom sensations on my scalp.

"And genius," Arius added, folding his arms behind his head smugly. "Don't forget genius."

The three of us exchanged a glance. A silent, sacred agreement was formed in that moment.

Team up.

Destroy him.

Arius blinked. "Wait. Wait wait wait, let's not—"

Too late.

Sophia lunged first, pinning one of his arms.

I tackled his other side, grabbing his collar.

Isaac, still looking half-dazed, shrugged and casually was ready to do a beating.

"BETRAYAL!" Arius yelled, struggling like a worm. "I OFFERED YOU ENTERTAINMENT AND THIS IS HOW YOU REPAY ME?!"

Sophia punched his arm. I shoved his head. Isaac just sat there, humming a song as we were beating him.

Maybe it was insane. Maybe it was stupid.

But as the wagon rattled down the road and our laughter echoed into the wilds, I couldn't help but think—

This was nice.

Really, really nice.

"IT WAS JUST A PRANKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK!!!"

----- Part 2

Lucas's Perspective:

4/11/2017 - 2:32 PM

Location: Tavern for lunch.

I can't believe I fell asleep for twelve hours straight last night.

Man, I am a total lazyback.

My forehead was still glued to the wooden table of the tavern, arms lazily folded like some abandoned scarecrow. Across from me, Navina sat with a plate of untouched lunch and a very forced smile—like she was reconsidering all her life choices at once.

Honestly, same.

「Reminder: Sleeping through two meals, wasting a perfectly good day, and still looking like a dead body isn't exactly peak hero behavior.」

...Appreciate the encouragement, System. Really feeling the love.

I peeled my cheek off the table with a dramatic groan, blinking up at the empty space where my food should've been. Nope. Nothing. Just the same suspiciously sticky tavern air and a couple of drunk mercenaries arguing about who cheated in a card game.

When I finally looked at Navina properly, I noticed it—

That subtle, strained look. The way her finger tapped the side of her cup, faster than usual. Not like her usual calmness she shows.

Something was up.

"Hey," I muttered, straightening up and running a hand through my embarrassingly messy hair, "you good? You look like you're very stressed about something."

Navina smiled, but it was that polished kind. "I'm fine," she said, voice lilting like a feather, "Why? Are you worried about me, dear Lucas?"

There it was—the classic Navina quickswitch: deflect with humor, tease, pretend nothing's wrong. I smirked.

"Yeah, I'm worried," I said, waving lazily at the room. "Mostly worried you're gonna snap and throw someone through a window."

She chuckled, setting her cup down with a soft clink.

"For someone who just woke up from a twelve-hour coma, you're surprisingly observant."

"Talent," I shrugged. "That, and the last time you wore that exact expression, a guy ended up 'accidentally' tripping face-first into a fountain when we were on our way to the field yesterday."

"Accidents happen," Navina said innocently, flicking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

┌ Analysis: 87% chance she did that on purpose. 13% chance fountain was simply unlucky.┐

Glad to see I'm not the only one keeping score.

"But if you must know," Navina leaned in slightly, lowering her voice to a near-whisper, "there's been... rumors."

Oh boy.

She scanned the room, making sure nobody was eavesdropping, before continuing.

"Word is, someone's been spreading tales about a new cursed artifact surfacing near the border towns. Apparently, it turns its wielder into a mindless beast if they hold it too long."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And get this," she added, "someone claimed they saw a whole caravan of traders disappear overnight. No blood, no screams. Just... gone. Like they were swallowed whole."

Damn.

"Right," I said, resting my chin on my hand. "And here I was worried about missing lunch."

Navina smirked.

"But that's not even the worst of it," she said. Her tone shifted, slightly heavier. "You remember the Dark Killer?"

The name alone made the tavern's background noise seem a little... quieter. I've heard about him a little since arriving here in Rinascita.

"The guy who used cursed magic to kidnap people?" I asked. "Tortured them and dumped the bodies in the streets at midnight?"

She nodded. "Last week... he went missing. No one's seen or heard anything since."

Lovely. Nothing gets the appetite going like public executions and vanishing serial killers.

"And because of that charming gentleman," Navina continued, swirling her drink idly, "people around Rinascita are growing... less patient with cursed magic wielders."

"Yeah, I noticed." I said, scratching my cheek. "Makes sense though. Trauma's a hell of a motivator. Especially since cursed magic's got that shiny representative, The Queen of Curses herself."

Navina gave a small, approving nod. "In Celestine especially, it's bad. They already hated cursed magic before, but now... it's dangerous to even be suspected of it."

I leaned back in my chair, letting the information sink in.

"So basically," I said, "if you so much as sneeze and someone thinks it sounded cursed, congratulations—you're getting a complimentary torch-and-grave made in your honor."

Navina snorted.

「 Correction: They will burn you faster than you can say 'not it'.」

Thanks for the mental image, System. Really makes me wanna eat now.

"That's not even exaggerating," Navina said, half-smiling, half-serious. "People are on edge. Even harmless rumors are enough to start fights."

"And the Dark Killer's still missing?" I asked.

"Still missing," Navina confirmed. "No sightings, no hints. It's like he just... vanished."

I let out a long, low breath.

Great. Sleep-deprived, traumatized townsfolk, cursed magic discrimination, and a missing psychopath who liked late-night corpse delivery.

What a time to be alive.

My food finally arrived—a slab of bread, some thin stew, and a questionable-looking vegetable that probably had a life once.

As the server placed the plates down, Navina grinned at me.

"Eat up," she said sweetly. "You'll need energy if you plan on not dying today. The treat is on me ofcourse."

I stared at the suspicious vegetable.

Bro, if death's coming, this thing's gonna beat it to me.

「 Warning: Attempting to ingest that 'vegetable' may be considered self-harm.」

...

Yeah, maybe just the bread.

I continued eating, carefully dodging the vegetable of death lying in my soup like it was plotting my murder. Bro, that thing looked like if I touched it, I'd gain a new disease not even the priests could cleanse.

Navina, across from me, had the royal treatment. Juicy steak, seasoned bread, some rich-looking soup that smelled like an actual meal. Meanwhile, here I was, fighting a half-cooked broth and a brick someone dared to call bread.

Man, being broke was a personality trait at this point.

As I heroically bit into the bread of despair, the tavern door creaked open.

A cold wind blew in.

And so did the human embodiment of a horror movie — Azrael.

His steps were soundless, his face locked in that same murderously neutral pokerface like he was calculating exactly how much oxygen he should waste standing here. The tavern chatter dropped a notch when he passed by. Even the guy playing a lute in the corner stopped mid-chord like he forgot how music worked.

Azrael reached our table and pulled out a chair. No words. No greeting. Just vibes.

「 New Objective: Survive Lunch Without Getting Emotionally Crushed By Azrael 」

Thanks, system. Very reassuring.

I leaned back, stabbing a piece of bread so hard it broke in half. "Where've you been all day, rock?" I asked, casual as ever.

Azrael lowered himself onto the chair, his posture perfect, his stare straight through my soul. "Engaging in a more meaningful interaction than this."

He tilted his chin slightly at my sad excuse for food. "I was conversing with the local animals. They appeared more evolved than what you are attempting to eat."

...Did this dude just say animals are more civilized than my lunch?

I huffed dramatically. "Hey, this is premium peasant cuisine, alright? Takes years to master the art of... surviving it."

Azrael, without missing a beat, replied in that dead serious, slightly sardonic tone, "It is impressive how you continuously manage to disappoint basic biological standards."

Bro.

Bro.

I opened my mouth to defend my honor — but caught Navina subtly shifting her chair a few inches away from Azrael. She hadn't stopped eating, but her movements were tighter, her smiles thinner.

Raising an eyebrow at her, I tapped my fork lightly against my bowl and asked, voice low and easy, "All good?"

Navina gave a small nod, flashing that mirthful grin she wore when pretending everything was fine. "Nothing to worry about," she said lightly, waving a hand.

Yeah, because scooting away from someone like they're a danger is totally casual behavior.

Azrael just sat there, utterly indifferent, observing us with those unblinking eyes.

I smiled at Navina, trying to cheer her up. "Don't worry, he's harmless. Like a rock. An emotionless, soul-stealing rock."

Navina chuckled a little, her shoulders loosening just a bit.

Azrael, deadpan, replied, "Comparing me to a geological formation is generous. Rocks at least provide shelter."

...Bro. He really one-upped me while looking like he was trying to file my existence into a database.

I grinned. "See? He even does motivational speaking now. Very versatile rock."

Navina finally laughed properly, the tension bleeding off her frame. She shook her head and pushed her plate a little closer to me, probably feeling guilty for my food tragedy.

Azrael, ever the observer, tilted his head slightly. "Is something wrong?"

Navina stiffened — just for a split second. Then she took a breath, smoothed her expression, and answered with a perfect, confident smile. "Nothing's wrong. Just... tired."

Yeah, sure.

I might be dense sometimes, but even I could feel the forced lie under her words.

Navina wasn't just nervous because Azrael had that emotionless poker face...

Something else happened.

Something last night — when I was busy sleeping twelve straight hours.

I stabbed my sad soup again, mind working.

What could've made her lose her normal casual eloquent persona so quickly?

As I shoveled another miserable spoonful of soup into my mouth, some dude suddenly kicked the tavern door open like he owned the place.

"Brother! You won't believe it!" he yelled across the room. "There's a fight breakin' out near the carriages—! The Sword Saints showed up... but they brought someone cursed!"

...Cursed?

Azrael, still looking like the world's most depressing statue, tilted his head slightly.

"I suggest we check it out."

Man of many words, huh?

Navina and I exchanged a glance, shrugged, and stood up. No way we were missing this free drama.

Following the commotion, we slipped through the growing crowd until we reached the carriage spot. My eyes widened the second I saw her.

There, standing against a small mob of furious townspeople, was a girl—white hair like fresh snow, red eyes glowing like fire, dressed in a simple white outfit. She couldn't have been much older than me, if at all.

And man... she looked exactly like the one person this world probably hated the most.

Navina stiffened next to me, her confident vibe flickering just slightly. Even she recognized it—the resemblance to the Queen of Curses. The white hair. The eyes. Everything.

Great. Public victim speedrun any% about to start.

The crowd surrounded her, faces twisted with suspicion, fear... and straight-up hate.

The girl placed a hand over her chest, voice steady—at least at first.

"My name's... Celia. I'm here to protect the town from the grotesques. I am not a killer or here to hurt you!"

One woman, her eyes bloodshot from anger—or maybe grief—screamed from the front, pointing a shaking finger at her.

"It's her! She must be the Dark Killer! You killed my son... my one and only boy!"

Another man, burly and drunk-looking, staggered forward.

"You're a demon wearing human skin! First, you kill, then you lie!"

"Get out of our town!" another shrieked, throwing a rock that barely missed her feet.

Celia flinched but stayed standing. Her hand trembled against her chest, but she didn't lower it.

"I'm not... I'm not her..." she said, voice a little thinner now.

Another woman spoke—this one quieter, more cutting.

"My brother was found dead near the streets a week ago... White hair. Red eyes. It was you. It had to be you."

Celia's lips parted. She shook her head, desperately, silently at first.

"I didn't—!" she gasped, voice cracking. "I didn't do anything! I'm not the one who—!"

The people didn't listen.

Someone in the back muttered, "Just kill her before she brings more curses!"

Another voice: "We shall hang her before she curses our families!"

I felt my hands ball into fists at my sides.

I swear, if I hear one more medieval braincell shout "hang her," I'm gonna personally introduce their faces to the ground.

Navina leaned closer, tense. Even Azrael... well, he stood there like a gothic statue, but the air around him felt heavier but he was looking at someone else, not her...

Celia swallowed hard, trying to stand straight. But the more they accused, the smaller she looked.

The hurt showed now—flashes of betrayal in those red eyes, her arms hugging herself slightly like she was trying to keep the pieces of herself from shattering.

She opened her mouth again, voice barely a whisper...

"I just... wanted to help..."

As the people kept hurling their words like knives, I stepped forward, ready to put an end to this crap.

Who cared if she looked like the Queen of Curses?

I wasn't about to stand there like a bystander and watch a girl get ripped apart because everyone suddenly accused her as a monster without any proof.

One guy grabbed a rock off the dirt road, followed by another, and then another. The air shifted—thick, ugly.

She didn't even run.

Instead, the girl—Celia, she had said—just raised her arms over her head, shrinking into herself like she expected it. Like she thought she deserved it.

My teeth clenched.

Nah.

Not happening.

I pushed off my back foot, stepping forward—but someone beat me to it.

A hand shot out, catching the incoming rock mid-air before it hit her face like it was nothing.

The crowd gasped. I stopped dead, blinking.

Standing there was a man I hadn't noticed before.

Black overcoat fluttering in the breeze.

Black hair.

Sharp, almost cruel blue eyes.

Strong posture like he owned the ground he stood on.

Bro... why the hell did he look like... him?

A strange, cold feeling slid down my spine.

For a second, a stupid, impossible thought crossed my mind.

But then Celia spoke, voice small but alive with recognition.

"Arius...?"

...Arius.

Not who I thought.

I let out a slow breath.

Alright, mystery guy. Noted.

The crowd, of course, didn't care. They weren't impressed by the rock-catching Olympic performance.

Instead, they started barking like dogs, turning their hatred on him.

"Why're you protecting that monster!?"

"You're with her, aren't you?!"

"Maybe you're cursed too!"

Arius didn't even flinch.

He placed a hand gently on Celia's shoulder, guiding her behind him, shielding her from the incoming hatred with his own body.

Then he cleared his throat, about to speak.

I glanced sideways.

Navina was watching like it was her favorite drama series. Way too invested. Girl was almost sparkling with curiosity.

But when I looked at Azrael—

Something shifted.

His usual cold, deadpan stare... wasn't deadpan anymore.

No.

There was a glint in his fractured eyes now. A darkness that felt older. Hungrier.

He looked at Arius like he wasn't sure whether to analyze him... or destroy him.

「 You want me to lock in and load? 」

The System's message blinked into my vision, half-serious, half-joking.

「 Say the word, hero. I'll handle the spellwork. You just stand there and look pretty. Like always. 」

I gave a mental snort but didn't react outwardly.

If a fight broke out, I wasn't going to hesitate.

I let the thought rise and settle into my chest, heavy but clear:

If protecting an innocent girl meant burning this town to the ground...

Then so be it.

Because I wasn't going to be ignorant and careless like before...

I muttered under my breath, voice steady and low, almost lost in the murmuring crowd:

"I won't let someone innocent suffer... even if it means they will."

Navina glanced at me, sensing something, but I kept my eyes forward—locked on Arius, locked on the trembling girl behind him.

I'll see what happens next.

----- Part 3

Celia's Perspective:

I thought... I was over being sad or hurt over people seeing me like this...

But why... why am I clinging back to those awful memories again?

Memories I tried so hard to bury deep inside, telling myself I had gotten stronger, that I had moved on.

I thought I had. I really did.

Yet standing here... seeing the glares, the anger, the disgust in their eyes...

It's just dragging it all back up, like an old wound someone kept picking at, never letting it heal.

I shift a little closer to Arius, almost without thinking.

Even after everything—after all the growing, all the steps I told myself I took forward—my feet still want to run.

My hands still tremble. My heart still aches.

Why me...?

Their words kept crashing down on me, each one like a stone hurled at my heart, and even though Arius looked ready to say something to stop them, my mind was just... drowning.

I wasn't really hearing them anymore.

I was somewhere else. Somewhere colder.

Smaller.

Before I even noticed, I had gripped the sleeve of Arius's overcoat, my fingers curling tightly into the fabric.

I could feel myself almost hiding behind him.

How pathetic... even now.

Last time...

The last time it was like this... it was in Levinton.

When I was with Kaiser, and Zain blocked our path, trying to humiliate me in front of everyone.

I-I... I was so scared. So useless.

But Kaiser... he...

My breath caught in my throat. My eyes burned.

Kaiser stood there like nothing in the world could ever stop him.

Even when the whole town seemed ready to turn against him, he didn't flinch. Not even once.

He stood in front of me like a knight I didn't deserve.

I remember... I still remember the way he spoke to Zain.

Not loud.

Not angry.

Just... calm. Calm in a way that made your heart freeze.

"The next time you put your hands on me," he said, voice steady, deadly, "you won't have hands left to regret it."

I clutched tighter at Arius's coat, my nails digging into the thick fabric as my heart trembled inside my chest.

And when Zain threatened him with the guild's power...

"The only mistake here is thinking you can stand in my way."

No hesitation. No fear.

He meant every word.

Every single one.

He was so protective of me back then...

So fearless, even when I was too weak to stand on my own.

And now...

Now that he's gone...

I can't even protect myself.

I feel my eyes sting again, the air thick and heavy around me.

I lift my head, just a little, glancing up at Arius.

He was about to speak...

And I... I could only hope whatever strength Kaiser saw in me back then still lived somewhere inside me.

Somewhere... even if it was buried deep, trembling and scared.

Then it happened...

Arius stepped forward, his eyes scanning the crowd like a predator sizing up his prey. The tension was thick in the air, the murmurs of unease and distrust whispering in the background.

With an almost effortless smirk, he began speaking, his tone smooth, carefully measured.

"You know, I've always admired the clarity with which people like you hold onto their convictions," Arius began, his voice warm and sincere.

"But it's funny, isn't it? How quickly things can change when the story shifts. When you're given a little extra information, or when the world you thought you knew turns out to have been... not quite what you imagined." His smile deepened, and the crowd stilled, hanging onto his every word.

"What are you saying boy?! Are you trying to persuade us into thinking she's not a threat?" A man spoke up to him.

"I won't lie to you, I understand your fears. People like her"—he gestured subtly toward me—"they've always been seen as monsters. That's a hard image to shake off. But

imagine this—what if she's not the monster you've been told she is? What if you've been misled?"

He let that hang in the air, the silence almost suffocating as the crowd processed his words. Arius didn't wait for them to speak, his gaze shifting from face to face.

His eyes locked with a man at the front—a known skeptic—and with a small, teasing grin, Arius continued.

"You know, it's easy to hate what you don't understand. It's easy to point fingers when you've never walked a mile in someone else's shoes. But I've walked beside her for a while. I've seen the person she is—the real person, not the fabricated image the world wants you to see."

A few of the townspeople shifted uncomfortably, some of them murmuring to each other in quiet tones, but none dared interrupt.

Arius noticed this and subtly raised an eyebrow. "Look, I get it. Your trust has been shattered before 500 years ago. You've been burned by your own. People are quick to judge, quick to pick sides when it's convenient. But what happens when you stop, really stop, and think about it?" He leaned forward, the charisma oozing from every word.

"What happens when you choose to question the history you've been fed? When you see beyond the hatred, beyond the fear, and consider that maybe, just maybe, she's not the enemy?"

The crowd was visibly unsettled. Some were starting to nod, their doubts starting to slip maybe.

His eyes flicked back to me briefly, a brief flash of something colder running through him. "And if it costs me everything to make sure the truth comes out... so be it. I don't care about the price. I care about the truth."

The murmurs in the crowd were quieter now. More uncertain. They were starting to listen, starting to wonder.

He stood tall, his gaze now sweeping over everyone, his smile still in place. "So, what will it be? Will you hold on to the old story, the one that serves only fear in the past 500 years? Or will you stand with me—and with her—and make a stand for what's right?"

A murmur rippled through the crowd, some voices skeptical, others intrigued. The one man Arius had locked eyes with earlier spoke up, his voice hesitant but edged with doubt.

"I-I don't know... You're asking us to trust a curse wielder, someone who—"

Arius cut him off smoothly, his smile widening just slightly. "Trust? No. I'm asking you to think to yourself. To question what you've been told. Is she truly a threat, or is she simply the scapegoat for people who are too afraid to face their own ignorance?"

He let the question hang in the air. Silence followed.

A woman spoke up from the back, her voice trembling.

"I... I don't know. It's just..." She faltered, unsure of herself. "But what if—what if she's dangerous? What if...?"

"Ah, the fear again," Arius interrupted gently, his tone still coaxing, but now tinged with a subtle edge. "You're afraid of something you don't fully understand. How many times has that been the case in history? People feared the unknown, and in their fear, they hurt each other. Just like 500 years ago, just like you're clinging to currently."

The crowd was now noticeably quieter. Some were looking at each other, unsure but no longer certain in their previous anger. Arius had shifted their perspective, if only for a moment, making them reconsider what they thought they knew.

He nodded slowly, as if giving them time to process, though inside, his mind was already planning his next move.

"I'll leave you to think about it," he said finally, his voice lighter, almost apologetic. "Just remember, the choice is yours. You always have the power to choose. Don't let anyone take that from you."

I watched it unfold, my heart racing in my chest. He was incredible. The way he manipulated them without them even realizing it... It was almost like a strategist—slow, deliberate, and always one step ahead.

I hated how easily they fell for it. How easily he made them question everything.

But... was he right?

Was I just the monster they'd all been taught to fear? Or could I be something else? Something better?

I couldn't help but think—maybe he had his own reasons for protecting me.

"Do you really think I would stand by a cursed wielder, if she were guilty of what you claim?"

The woman stood in front of us, the same one as before who accused me of killing her son. Her hands trembling as she held onto her grief.

Her voice cracked with the weight of her pain. "My son... He was killed by that Dark Killer... And you, you're telling me this girl has no part in it? She's just like that woman, that Queen of Curses. I can see it in her eyes!"

Arius tilted his head, his smile widening. "I understand your pain. I really do." His voice softened, dripping with false empathy. "But I assure you, Celia has nothing to do with your loss. She just arrived here at Rinascita. The real enemy is out there, hiding in the dark."

The woman's eyes were wide, her hands shaking. "But—"

"Listen to me," Arius interrupted, his tone suddenly firm, cutting through her hesitation. "What you think you see, it's not the truth. The truth is, you're forcing that belief at her because it's easier than facing the real monster."

"But if you let that fear fester, if you let it control you, it will consume you. And that's exactly what he wants. The killer. He is counting on your fear."

I could see the crack in her resolve, the flicker of doubt. Arius was doing it again. The woman's voice wavered, her grip loosening as if she was starting to question herself.

One of the men, older than the woman, spoke up, his voice shaky. "But... what if she's using her power for something else? She's dangerous, no matter how you put it."

Arius didn't flinch, not for a second. "Is she? Because, from what I know, Celia has more control over herself than anyone here. It's funny, isn't it? How you all seem to think that someone with the potential for destruction is automatically a threat."

"But who gets to decide what makes someone dangerous?" His gaze swept over the group. "Who decides who lives and who dies? How can you judge someone as an imperfect human being?"

Their eyes darted around, unease spreading like a sickness. Some looked away, some stiffened.

I could feel the weight of their stares on me, but I kept quiet.

The man who had spoken earlier gritted his teeth, his face hardening. "So you expect us to just forget everything? To trust her, just like that?"

Arius met his gaze without flinching. "I don't expect anything. I simply ask you to look past your fear and see the truth. That Celia is just arrived here to fight the grotesques, to protect all of you."

"But if you want to live in the past, in the darkness of your own hatred and pain... then I can't stop you."

There was silence for a moment. Others were still hesitant, but Arius was already looking for his next move.

The woman blinked, her lips trembling. "I... I just wanted my son back..."

Arius leaned forward, his voice low, almost threatening now. "And I want to see this town free of the real killer as well. Not innocent people being consumed by their grief and blaming an innocent girl." His words were precise, calculated.

"But I can't do that if you're too blinded by your hatred to see who's really pulling the strings, the one who caused this."

I felt the shift. They were no longer just angry, or scared. They were thinking. The crowd was slowly coming around to his side, but I could tell it wasn't over yet.

A man in the back spoke up, his voice firm. "What makes you so sure she's innocent? How do we know you're not just defending her for your own gain?"

Arius' eyes flickered. There it was—the suspicion.

"Why would I defend her if I didn't believe she was innocent? If I thought she was guilty, I would have no reason to defend her..."

"But I stand here today, knowing that the true enemy is out there, hiding in the town. And I won't let anyone mislead you into thinking Celia is anything but a victim in this situation!"

His gaze locked with the man's, holding it with an unyielding intensity. "What you need to understand is that you are being used. By the real monster. We can argue all day about what she is, but when the truth comes out, I promise you, you'll regret not listening now."

I could feel the air grow colder. The silence stretched long before another voice spoke.

"You're saying we should just follow your lead? And trust a girl like her who looks like The Queen of Curses?!" The man's tone was more accusatory now.

Arius' smile returned, but it was darker this time. "Follow my lead? No. I'm not asking you to follow anyone." He stepped closer, his presence commanding.

"I'm asking you to think for yourselves. I'm giving you the facts. And if you still choose to distrust her, to let your emotions guide your actions... then so be it."

The tension was thick. Some had already begun to nod, others still hesitant, but Arius was winning them over one by one.

I couldn't help but feel a chill crawl up my spine.

Was he always good in controlling people, and mass manipulation...?

He was too good at it...

Then, without missing a beat, Arius' voice grew even more intense, lowering as if he were speaking to the depths of Hell itself.

"And if you continue to fight me, if you continue to doubt me and her..."

His gaze swept over them, the threat hanging in the air. "You'll have to answer to someone much worse than me."

The crowd grew louder, murmurs spreading like wildfire. What did he mean by "someone worse"? The questions flooded in.

I barely caught any of them. My head was spinning, trying to make sense of everything.

Just as Arius opened his mouth to speak, a sudden presence cut through the chaos.

A woman. She moved through the crowd with an air of absolute control, like a predator surrounded by prey. She had striking purple hair that fell around her shoulders, her eyes glowing the same violet hue.

I didn't recognize her. But there was something about her... something cold that made the hairs on my neck stand up.

She stepped between Arius and the crowd, her stance firm, unshakable.

"My name is Alina," she said, her voice flat and devoid of any warmth. "To put it bluntly, I'm one of the invited Sword Saints to defend this poor town. Specifically, the Sword Saint of Technique."

Her words slammed into the crowd, silencing them in an instant. The atmosphere shifted. The anger, the accusations, the fear—all of it disappeared beneath the weight of her presence. I could feel my pulse quicken, uncertainty gnawing at me.

She wasn't someone you could easily dismiss.

The people hesitated, unsure of how to respond, but Alina's voice sliced through the hesitation.

"Anyone who dares stand against her," she gestured toward me, "becomes my enemy."

Her words weren't a cold direct threat.

I was starting to understand the kind of person Alina was. And I wasn't sure I liked it.

A man stepped forward, his face twisted with anger. "How can you defend someone like her?!"

"I don't hesitate to silence insects like you," she said, her tone hardening with every word. "Risking your future for pride? Worthless."

The man faltered, the anger draining from his face. The crowd grew uneasy, and I could feel every eye on us now.

Alina's eyes swept over them all, calculating, ruthless. "You're not even worth my time. Go on, shoo away like the dogs you are."

There was a strange finality in her command. They didn't argue. They scattered, vanishing into the background like ghosts.

And then, just like that, Alina grabbed my hand. She pulled me through the crowd with the same unyielding force, like I was someone who needed to save?

"Where... where are you taking me?" I asked, struggling to keep up with her pace.

"To provide answers and questions," Alina replied, her voice as cold as the steel of her sword. No warmth. No explanation. Just the order.

I glanced back at Arius, hoping for some kind of reassurance, but he was already shrugging, hands raised in mock surrender.

"Well, this was fun," he said with a playful grin, his sarcasm thick enough to cut.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But before I could decide, I called out to him, "Arius! Wait!"

He stopped in his tracks, giving me a look over his shoulder. A moment passed before I offered him a small, genuine smile.

"Thank you, Arius!"

He nodded, a simple gesture, but it felt like more. His bow, however, was theatrically exaggerated, almost like he was playing a part in some grand performance. Typical.

As Alina continued to drag me away, I couldn't help but think. Arius... he managed to quiet the crowd. He defended me, without a second thought, without thinking about himself.

It left me with a strange sense of gratitude—silent, but real. He didn't have to do that.

But now, all I could focus on was Alina. The Sword Saint of Technique. I didn't know what she wanted from me, but I had a sinking feeling it wasn't going to be pleasant.

And it didn't help that I was remembering the nightmare of facing Xander, the Sword Saint of Mastery. The pain. The overwhelming power. The battle that had left me shaken and broken. The Sword Saints were no joke.

Whatever comes next... I'm not ready for it.

----- Part 4

Lucas's Perspective:

So much for being a protagonist, bro just randomly arrived and magically made the crowd stop throwing rocks. What type of plot armor was that??!

The moment the words left my mind, I could almost hear the System's sarcastic reply echoing in the back of my head.

「 Oh, sure, because "plot armor" is totally a legitimate theory. Maybe you should write that down in your "Great Theories of the Universe" book.」

I rolled my eyes and sighed, still trying to process what had just happened. The crowd was silent now, they all left like dogs. Like they all simultaneously realized the laws of the universe had shifted.

One moment, they were ready to mob Celia, the next, they were cowering from some random guy with an aura of sheer influence. And then a sword saint, who could probably cut a demon in half with one swing, appeared and started making death threats like it was nothing.

What a day, huh?

I glanced over at Navina, who looked just as perplexed as I felt. The confusion was practically radiating off her. She had that same "what just happened?" look on her face.

Seriously, I couldn't blame her. The whole thing had been so chaotic, like watching a weird play you didn't sign up for. Arguing, threatening, then suddenly peace? I barely had time to process the change.

The System picked up on my distracted thoughts.

「 What's wrong, Lucas? You seem... distracted.」

I turned to the side, half-squinting at the spot where Arius had just stood. "The way he spoke," I said, scratching the back of my neck, "it was too persuasive, man. Too...

connecting. It didn't sit right with me. Could you analyze that? I mean, it's like he had everyone eating out of the palm of his hand."

「Analyzing...」 the System replied, and I could feel its tone shift. It was about to break down the psychology, which always made me feel like I was in a lecture with a super smart friend who never failed to roast me.

「Okay, Lucas, buckle up. I'm about to dive into what we call 'mass manipulation.' It's not just charisma, it's an art form. Arius is a master of psychological influence, which honestly, feels a little... dangerous for someone who isn't even trying to hide it. Let's break it down.」

The System then gave me the five points of analysis, each point more unnerving than the last.

Empathy Mastery: Arius uses empathy like a weapon. He connects with people's emotions so naturally, they don't even know they're being manipulated. It's not fake, either; he truly feels their pain and then uses that understanding to control their reactions. Rating: 9/10

Psychological Framing: When he spoke, it wasn't just about what he said. It was how he framed everything around him, positioning himself as both the protector and the person with authority. That makes everyone else feel powerless in comparison, which is a golden psychological trick. Rating: 9.5/10

Subtle Coercion: He didn't tell people what to do outright. He used subtle coercion, making the crowd feel like the only logical option was to stop and listen. His words almost made you feel bad for not following him. Classic guilt-trip manipulation. Rating: 9/10

The Illusion of Free Will: Arius gives off the illusion that people are making their own decisions when they're actually following his cues. This is dark psychology on a grand scale, bro. It's like... he's turning them into puppets without them realizing it. Rating: 10/10

Adapting to Situations: What's scary is how quickly he adapted to the crowd's shifting emotions. It wasn't like he had a preset script; he felt the room, then adjusted accordingly. It's spontaneous manipulation, something that could easily get under your skin. Rating: 9/10

I blinked, absorbing all of that. My head was buzzing from the mental overload.

Okay, so this dude is basically a mass-manipulation machine. It's like he's running an entire crowd's emotions through a filter and getting exactly the results he wants. That's messed up, man. Like, too messed up.

「 Yeah, but you know what's weirder?」 the System's voice took on a darker tone.

「 His method of connecting is almost the same as Azrael's... just on a larger scale. Azrael does it on a personal level—deep emotional bonds, quick psychological connections. But Arius? He uses the same principles, just with an entire group. It's all about the manipulation of perception. And believe me, both of them? They're not people to underestimate.」

The mention of Azrael made me shiver. That guy could look at someone and figure them out in seconds. He'd done it to Navina in that cave, during the rain. It was almost like he had her entire mind mapped out the moment he locked eyes with her.

Now that I thought about it, the way Azrael connected with her so quickly was insane.

"I remember yesterday," I said, glancing at Navina, "when Azrael figured out everything about her in an instant. I mean, it felt planned, but it was more like... reactionary, you know? It was like he already knew what to say before she even said anything." I frowned.

"If Arius is pulling off the same trick, but on a bigger scale, then yeah, that's even more dangerous. It's not just a couple of people he's messing with. He's messing with everyone."

「 Exactly, Lucas. And that's the real danger. Arius isn't just a charming guy; he's a walking, talking psychological weapon. And unlike Azrael, he adapts, rather than plans. He's not someone to take lightly.」

I let out a heavy sigh, rubbing my forehead. "Yeah, okay, they're both nerds. I get it. I'm trying to survive out here and you are giving me a psychology lesson. Great, cool, awesome."

Navina, who had been watching me the whole time with a slightly concerned expression, spoke up. "Are you okay, Lucas? You look like you're about to pass out from speaking to yourself."

I gave her a half-smile, trying to look casual. "I'm good. Just... trying to figure out how I ended up stuck in a world full of mind games and emotionally intelligent maniacs."

She gave me an odd look, but didn't press the issue. I didn't blame her; she probably had no idea what I was talking about.

"Just another day in paradise, huh?" I said, with a shrug, trying to lighten the mood.

Navina smiled, a bit of concern still lingering in her eyes as she spoke. "Should we head back to the tavern?"

I nodded, just about to respond when something caught my eye—something that made my heart stop for a split second.

A woman. A familiar face in the crowd. Brown hair, green eyes, a presence that I hadn't seen in what felt like forever.

It was Sophia.

My classmate from the Asura Magic Academy.

She was in my class during the 3rd Year...

What was she doing here?

I couldn't help but stare. I had heard rumors she had a high-ranking position near the royal palace. She shouldn't be here in celestine, especially in Rinascita. Not casually walking by a fountain, with a big smile on her face like everything was normal.

Navina noticed the change in my expression, her eyes following mine as she asked, "Is something wrong, Lucas?"

I didn't even hear her. My mind was racing.

Sophia? Why was she here? What was going on?

Sophia walked up to a nearby ice cream stall, paid for a cone, and turned back toward the crowd. I watched her laugh and lick the ice cream, carefree.

Navina, clearly seeing the shift in my mood, raised an eyebrow. "Ooh, crushing on someone already?" she teased.

I barely even acknowledged her joke, my expression hardening. I wasn't in the mood for that kind of banter anymore. This wasn't some casual meeting.

"I'm sorry, Navina," I said, trying to keep my tone steady, though the urgency was creeping in. "I have to go somewhere. Let's meet later, alright?"

Navina gave me a surprised look, but she nodded. "Alright, then. I'll catch you later, Lucas."

Without another word, I turned and walked away, my eyes locked on Sophia. The crowd seemed to blur as I moved toward her, a fountain bubbling in the center of the square. The air was cool, and the light from the late afternoon sun bounced off the stone paths, casting long shadows. My footsteps echoed against the cobblestone, matching the rhythm of my thoughts.

Sophia had to have answers. She had been there—she knew what happened during the Asura crisis. She saw everything. She was there when everything changed. And I needed to know exactly who was responsible for all of it.

More than that, I needed to know one thing, one crucial thing. If the person I thought was dead—was actually dead. Because if he wasn't, this world was in far more danger than anyone realized.

I stopped a few feet away from her, my gaze locking on her figure as she continued to enjoy her ice cream, blissfully unaware of the storm approaching her.

"Hello, Sophia," I said bluntly, my voice guarded.

Her eyes widened, and she froze for a second. She looked at me, stuttering. "L-Lucas?! What are you doing here?"

The surprise on her face was exactly what I expected. She had always been like this—clumsy, a little nervous. But I wasn't here for small talk.

Not now.

I kept my expression neutral, though there was a sense of urgency creeping into my voice. "You're in Rinascita, and that's not exactly where you should be, given your... position. What's going on?"

Sophia tried to act casual, but her nervous fidgeting was betraying her. "Uh, well, you know, I just... I wanted some peace, so I thought I'd come out for a bit. The weather's nice, and... I mean, who doesn't like ice cream?" She took another bite, her gaze drifting away from me, clearly avoiding eye contact.

I wasn't buying it. "Cut the crap, Sophia. You've been involved in this since the beginning. The Asura crisis? You were there. You know what happened, and I need answers."

She stiffened at my bluntness, her hand shaking slightly as she held the ice cream cone. "I... I can't talk about it, Lucas. It's complicated, okay?"

I wasn't in the mood for her games. "Why the hell are you hiding everything with lies and excuses? Why not just tell me the truth?"

Sophia's face shifted, her gaze dropping to her ice cream. "I... I can't," she whispered, almost inaudible. "I can't tell you anything."

I let out a frustrated breath, running my fingers through my hair. "What did I even expect?" I muttered under my breath. "Of course they must've forced you to keep quiet."

Or maybe he himself ensured you wouldn't talk." I couldn't help the bitterness that seeped into my tone.

Sophia's eyes widened, her mouth opening slightly in shock. "Y-You can't be serious, Lucas..."

My gaze hardened. I stepped closer to her, forcing her to meet my eyes.

"Is he alive, Sophia?" I asked directly, the question hanging in the air like a weight.

Sophia's face went pale. She shifted her weight nervously, looking around like she wanted to escape. "I... I can't answer that, Lucas. Please, I... I can't."

I didn't let up, my voice sharp. "You're dodging the question, just like everything else. Why won't you just tell me?"

Sophia took a step back, almost defensively. "You saw his name in the dead list, Lucas. Why are you asking me about this?"

I wasn't satisfied with that answer. "Someone like him... he can't die like that. It doesn't fit. It doesn't make sense." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Sophia went quiet, looking almost guilty. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out at first. Then, in a barely audible whisper, she said, "I can't answer anything you ask me, Lucas. I'm sorry."

I wasn't going to let her off the hook. My voice dropped to a colder tone, a dangerous edge creeping in.

"Oh, you will now, Sophia. Even if I have to use force."

Sophia's eyes widened, her grip tightening on her ice cream. "You can't be serious, Lucas..."

I gave her a look that could freeze fire. "I expected nothing but lies and excuses from you, after all. Knowing who you used to be with."

Sophia's face paled, and she stammered, "Be with...?"

I didn't let her twist around it. "I know what happened during year two. Don't take me for ignorant, just because I don't give off that vibe."

Her eyes went wide, and she opened her mouth as if to speak but stopped herself. I could see the panic creeping into her expression.

But I wasn't done.

"I know... that... you're Kaiser's ex-girlfriend. The one he used in year two."

Sophia's face went blank for a moment, the ice cream trembling in her hand. She wasn't surprised that I knew; she was shocked that I'd just laid it out there so bluntly.

It was time to get answers...

----- Part 5

Meanwhile, Arius stepped into the dark alley, the shadows swallowing him whole as he moved forward with a smirk playing on his lips.

"What a coincidence, dear Azrael," Arius said, his tone laced with mocking amusement. "Didn't expect to find you here."

Azrael stood motionless, his expression as unreadable as ever. "I suppose you already anticipated my current location. Clever."

Arius chuckled darkly, his eyes gleaming with a predatory light. "Oh, indeed. After all, we share the same mind and blood."

Azrael's voice was cold, devoid of any emotion. "Don't attach me to your schemes. I never saw you as family. Not for a second. Not you, not Aldric. Not anyone."

Arius tilted his head slightly, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Oh, dear brother? Not even father?"

Azrael's eyes, ever stoic, seemed to narrow just a fraction. "He was a special case. Apart from everyone being prey, he was the only hunter capable of stopping a predator like me."

Arius's smile faltered, a trace of something darker flashing in his eyes. "Still clinging to that twisted mindset? Sacrificing everyone to win?"

Azrael's voice dropped lower, like a blade sliding through the air. "You speak quite fondly of that, considering how you view people like me."

Arius raised an eyebrow, his charm a thin veil over his calculating mind. "Oh, don't stoop to my level. I don't see people as prey."

Azrael's voice was sharper now, the threat unmistakable. "You see them as marionettes, like father."

Arius's smirk returned, though there was a flicker of something darker in his eyes. "Oh, don't assume anything, dear younger brother. I'm just his oldest son. Nothing to worry about."

Azrael's voice cut through the silence like ice. "You're here to prove you're the true heir. The successor."

Arius paused for a moment, his amusement turning into a twisted curiosity. "Oh? What makes you think that?"

Azrael's gaze never wavered, his tone as cold as ever. "What makes you ask that, knowing your circumstances?"

Arius's smile only grew wider, though there was an edge to it now. "Nothing really. I'm just a conundrum about this accusation."

Azrael's voice dropped again, colder, more threatening. "Spare me the false ignorance."

Arius shrugged casually. "You must be here to prove it, then, if you accuse me of it. Just like Aldric is."

Azrael's eyes narrowed, the danger in his words clear. "Don't compare me to Aldric."

Arius's eyes glinted with a touch of cruelty. "Why shouldn't I, dear younger brother? You two are rather similar. One is half emotionless, the other remains with a complete poker face."

Azrael's lips curled into a faint, cold smile. "Coming from the mastermind."

Arius's smile was almost innocent. "What do you mean, dear brother?"

Azrael's words were low, almost a whisper, yet they carried an undeniable threat. "I'm going to crush you, Arius. And then it'll be Aldric. I know you're here to prove to father you're his true heir."

Arius mockingly raised his hands in surrender. "I really don't care about a dying man's wish, Azrael. Unlike you and Aldric. I'm just here to enjoy my life. My future awaits me."

Azrael's voice dropped to an icy whisper. "Then why are you here?"

Arius's smirk widened, his eyes gleaming with an unsettling playfulness. "Just helping out friends."

Azrael's gaze never wavered, and his voice became even colder. "You mean puppets? Pawns?"

Arius raised a finger, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Coming from you? I saw your little group of three, sir. Team of Spades. Or rather, Ace. Or even 'suicide squad' now?"

Azrael's eyes darkened. "You speak a lot for being part of the Team of Hearts, Arius."

The two locked eyes, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife, each knowing the other's words were weapons, each waiting for the other to make the next move.

Azrael's voice sliced through the air, a cold statement dripping with menace. "Your team is going to be executed and completely destroyed."

Arius's smirk didn't waver, and he leaned back casually. "Hey, show some empathy, brother. They're people too! :)" The mocking tone dripped with a hint of irony, like he found humor in the grim reality.

Azrael's eyes narrowed slightly, the tension thick between them. "So much for being average, Arius. You're holding back. Do you truly think copying father will make you the victor?"

Arius chuckled softly, exhaling a cloud of smoke, his eyes gleaming with an unreadable depth. "It's nothing, dear brother. I'm just being myself. Not holding back." His voice held a biting edge, the playful teasing masking something more calculated.

Azrael didn't flinch.

"I see." His voice was cold, dissecting every word Arius said as if it was a strategic move in an intricate game.

"As for the team... I have no reason to try. It's not my war to win. I don't care about being the heir." Arius said.

"Oh, is that so? You're not trying, huh?" Azrael said with a poker expression. "Then why are you still here, Arius? If it's not your war, why are you so involved?"

"Just enjoying my life." Arius said mockingly.

Azrael's face remained an emotionless mask, but there was something in his eyes that sharpened. "You're quite the liar, Arius. Just watch as I ensure your team dies horribly." His words were cold, calculated, like a promise made with the certainty of a God's will.

Arius leaned back, chuckling darkly, exhaling another plume of smoke. "Go ahead, then. It's not like I'm trying or anything. I'm just here because I have to be." His casual tone was a stark contrast to the fire of his words, almost daring Azrael to try.

Azrael's gaze grew colder. "Do you really think I'm buying that, Arius?" His voice was like ice scraping against stone, a clear challenge. "You never do anything unless it serves you. So tell me, what's your real play? What are you hiding?"

Arius's eyes glinted, ever the master of deception. "Ah, Azrael, you never fail to keep me on my toes. But tell me—how are you so sure you know everything about me? Are you so sure of your assumptions, or are you projecting your own desires onto me?"

Azrael tilted his head slightly, his gaze unblinking. "You try to keep things hidden, but your every action reveals more than you intend. Your unpredictability... it's a mask, isn't it? But for what? To hide the true depths of your desperation?"

Arius's smirk faltered for a split second before returning, more dangerous now. "Desperation? No, my dear brother, it's called survival. We all have our roles to play, and I'm just doing mine. But you..." His voice dropped, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "You're playing a much bigger game than you're willing to admit."

Azrael's voice was smooth, the chilling undertone of threat ever-present. "I've already decided what my role is, Arius. And your game... is nothing more than a distraction. A futile attempt to win an unwinnable war."

Arius's smile grew wider, his gaze never leaving Azrael. "Is that so? Well, let's see, dear brother. I suppose we'll find out soon enough, won't we?"

The silence between them deepened, a tense standoff of manipulation and mental warfare, both of them locked in a battle of wills that neither was willing to lose.

Azrael's voice cut through the silence, sharp and heavy. "You're a devil, Arius. Always fighting under the shadows. Mastermind puppeteer, having every thread wrapped around your fingers."

Arius grinned lazily, smoke curling from his lips. "Coming from you, the flawless human being. Perfect logical reasoning. Perfect in every calculation. Perfect even when you sacrifice everyone around you for one hollow victory."

Azrael's gaze didn't waver. "You call me flawless, yet you won't accept a plan with even a one percent risk of failure. Your perfection is nothing but cowardice hidden behind layers of control."

Arius laughed lowly, a sound that felt more mocking than amused. "Maybe. But at least I don't treat existence like a chessboard to bleed dry. You're not human, Azrael. You're a false human, a cold monster pretending to have purpose."

Azrael stepped closer, his voice dropping even lower. "And you... you're no better. You'll torture the world just to win a game nobody else is playing. Every breath you take is a manipulation, every smile a noose tightening around someone's neck."

Arius flicked the ash from his cigarette with a casual, almost bored motion. "Better a devil with strings than a monster with none. At least I make the pieces dance before they die."

Azrael's stare sharpened. "And when they slip out of your control, you burn everything to ashes."

Arius shrugged, unapologetic. "Collateral damage. Not everyone deserves to survive, dear brother."

Azrael's lips curved into a faint, lethal smirk. "Neither do you."

For a moment, neither spoke. The air between them buzzed with a tension darker than death itself.

Azrael finally broke the silence, voice like a blade sliding across bone. "We'll see, devil."

Arius exhaled slowly, his smirk fading into a cold, thin line. "Yes, my dear Azrael. Or... monster."

As they departed to their own sides, the battle was beginning.

Arius Vs Azrael.

Chapter 64 - A Hero Born From Regret - Lucas Reinhardt

Celia's Perspective:

4/11/2017 - 2:57 PM

Location: Outside of Rinascita taken away by Alina...

Ugh... this Sword Saint's grip is insane.

I swear, my wrist's still tingling from how tight she held me. And the way she dragged me—like a mother pulling her rebellious child. Except I wasn't being rebellious.

I literally just got here!

We walked straight through Rinascita, past the marble-paved main plaza where the fountains glowed under twilight like magic crystals.

Food stalls buzzed with the scent of sweetbread and spices... and here I was, being pulled through all of it by a woman in a literal banquet dress and a sword longer than my life regrets.

And no, I didn't resist because I was scared. I just didn't want to cause a scene. That's growth. Right?

Plus she did stand up for me earlier, so I can at least hear her out.

She didn't say a word the whole time. Eventually, we stopped at the edge of town—quiet hills and wild grass, with a view of Rinascita's gilded rooftops behind us.

Then... she let go of my hand.

Finally.

I rubbed my wrist, narrowed my eyes, and opened my mouth—probably to say something like What she had to do with me?—but she turned to me, her gaze piercing straight into mine.

Cold. Like she could read every word I hadn't said yet.

"I need to know," she said, voice as dry as cracked glass, "Do you know Master Aether?"

I blinked.

"...Huh?"

"Answer the question."

Okaayyy, so no small talk then.

I straightened slightly, crossing my arms. "I don't know anyone named Aether."

Her face didn't flinch. Not even a twitch of doubt. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," I said, trying not to sound defensive, "I mean, it's a memorable name. If I'd met someone called Aether, I'd remember."

She stared a few seconds longer, expression unreadable. Like she was trying to calculate the weight of my honesty. I tilted my head slightly and gave her my best confused-puppy look. I wasn't faking it. I was confused.

Why was some sword-carrying, banquet-dress-wearing stranger grilling me about a man I've never heard of?

"Then I was mistaken," she finally said, turning her gaze to the horizon. "Disappointing."

Disappointing? Okay, ouch.

I frowned. "Mind telling me what this is about? You kinda kidnapped me in the middle of a very bad situation I was in."

Her eyes returned to mine. "I didn't kidnap you. I escorted you to safety."

"Uh-huh," I said, brushing dirt off my sleeve. "Next time, maybe ask before dragging someone out of town? Crazy idea, I know."

No reaction. She just kept studying me like I was a liability. Then, almost reluctantly, she added, "I only approached you because I thought you might require assistance."

I blinked again. "You mean you're helping me?"

"I don't help people. I act according to what benefits me."

"Right," I muttered, "Silly me, thinking you might've just been being nice."

"I'm not nice."

That, I got loud and clear.

Still... the way she was speaking didn't feel entirely honest. Not dishonest, exactly, just... filtered. Like she was deliberately keeping things vague.

I squinted a little. "So what do you want from me?"

She paused. I swear, for half a second, her lips almost formed a small smile.

Then it vanished.

"Nothing. I miscalculated," she said coolly. "But you should be careful. This city isn't kind to people who wander into it unprotected. Just like earlier when they all grouped up against you."

Oh? So she was trying to protect me.

I stepped forward slightly, planting my hands on my hips. "Well, I now know how bad it can get, especially with those people. But thanks... I guess. Even if you're doing it for your own reasons."

She gave me the faintest nod. "Good. Then I won't have to waste time."

...I couldn't tell if that was a compliment or an insult.

Still, something about her was off. Not just the whole emotionally-constipated act—but the way her voice trembled, just barely, when she'd mentioned "Master Aether." Like there was an emotional crack in her voice, even if it froze over again instantly.

But I wasn't going to poke the ice just yet.

Not unless I wanted frostbite.

"Well," Alina, said suddenly, turning on her heel, "I have a banquet to attend today. Apparently hosted by the most influential Noble of Rinascita. You should return before you get lost."

Just like that, she began walking away, heels crunching over the gravel path like nothing had happened. Like she hadn't just dragged me into a weird interrogation session for someone I didn't even know.

I watched her for a few seconds before calling out.

"Hey! Wait!"

She stopped.

"Are we... gonna talk about whatever that was? Because I'm still wildly confused here."

She didn't turn around.

"You'll figure it out. Eventually."

And then she kept walking. Graceful. Sword on her back gleaming under the sunlight like a warning.

I stood there, alone, under the sky that was slowly painting itself.

"...Okay, cool. Great talk," I muttered. "Definitely not ominous at all."

I sighed.

"Master Aether, huh...?"

Nope. Still didn't ring any bells.

But something told me this wasn't going to be the last time I saw her.

And next time? I'm dragging her.

I sat there and just thought to myself for a while... I wanted to stay away from the town... Not to again be targetted and this time have nobody to help me.

I should've turned back the moment the sun dipped behind the trees.

But I needed space.

I wanted to think. Or maybe feel? I wasn't sure. Everything had been spinning after I arrived here.

Ugh. My head was heavy.

I kicked a pebble and watched it bounce off a tree root. The forest here was quiet — too quiet. The air thick with humidity and something bitter.

Then I heard it.

A click.

No — a series of clicks. Wet, twitchy... unnatural.

My eyes snapped toward the sound. The trees around me were warped, their trunks twisted from old cursed magic residue. The branches high above curled like crooked fingers reaching to hide the sky.

Something was up there.

My heartbeat paused. My breath held.

Then—

CRACK.

It dropped from the tree.

It didn't land — it slammed the ground, skidding toward me in a burst of shredded wing flutter and chitin shriek.

A grotesque.

2 meters tall. Legs like spears, mouth like a nightmare, its fangs twitching with venom so acidic I could smell it.

I took a step back, hands raised, cursed chains coiling loosely around my forearms like silver snakes.

"Okay, pest," I whispered. "Let's not make this weird."

It lunged.

I ducked left. A claw sliced where my neck had been. The wind from it alone hurt.

My chains sprang out instinctively, whipping forward to intercept the second slash. Sparks flew as metal met claw. I felt the tension ripple up my arm — it was fast. Too fast for my first read.

It leapt again, trying to flank me from the side.

I turned and flung my arm out — chains lashed like a whip. But it didn't go through — it bounced off its exoskeleton.

"Tch... Armor-piercing teeth, acid body, erratic movement." I bit my lip. "I hate fighting bugs."

It tried to lunge again — fangs aimed at my chest.

I vaulted backwards, flipping mid-air to land on one knee. The second my foot touched down, I felt it.

Pain.

A sting. It had clipped my thigh — just barely. But it was enough. My muscles screamed as venom flow through the fibers.

I gritted my teeth. "No. Not like this."

Pause. Analyze. Rethink.

My mind pulled old memories... I had to adapt quickly and use negative emotions.

I remembered it... The day I got the news that Kaiser could've been killed by a grotesque..

I imagined it... Its claws soaked in blood. And... Kaiser's back, him being fully in pain. Being dragged by them for torture...

These insects... these pests took him away from me.

That's when the warmth left my heart.

And a different hatred filled it.

Anger.

No.

Disgust.

And jealousy — not of the grotesque, but of the pain it got to give him. I should've been me there protecting him, not standing helpless, crying. They took him from me.

They dared to take what was mine...

My eyes narrowed.

"You like hunting, huh?" I muttered.

The grotesque dashed in again — from above this time, angling downward with fangs wide.

Die.

I raised both arms. Several hains exploded out, coated in violet light — not bright, but burning mixed with elemental Fire Magic.

The thorns erupted down their length like blooming death. My magic surged. Fueled not just by cursed energy — but something deeper.

My hate. My wrath. My hurt.

"You'll regret touching what I cherish."

The grotesque spiraled, diving down in a last-second maneuver to confuse me.

Cute... almost adorable pet like.

In a breath — I twisted my wrist.

SLASH.

One instant. That's all I gave it.

The cursed chains — thorned and fed by negative emotions — sliced clean through the grotesque in mid-air.

Not one cut.

Four.

Its limbs flailed, body separated, sliced into 4 different segments each.

I didn't even blink... all I could feel was pleasure of seeing it dead.

Its upper half dropped beside me, still twitching.

I stared at it.

The acid sizzled against the forest floor, but I didn't step back.

Instead, I looked down at it.

And whispered, almost too softly:

"I've always hated insects... but your race will be the first I burn."

I turned, not giving it another glance.

Because soon I'll burn each one of them alive in my chains...

----- Part 2: Sword Saint's Banquet

Levi's perspective:

4/11/2017 - 3:22 PM

Interesting.

I didn't imagine I'd be pulled into a banquet the moment I reach town, but I ain't complaining. I mean, it's not like I had anything better to do.

I glance around as I step into the grand hall, my boots clicking lightly against the polished marble floors. The place is extravagant, everything bathed in golden hues from the chandeliers hanging above. The second-floor balcony gives a panoramic view of the entire hall, lined with lush plants and elegant columns. I swear, they're trying to make the walls look like they were dipped in gold.

The main banquet begins in 2 hours yet... This was sick!

I'm decked out in my usual: a dark, form-fitting suit with a casual, confident slouch in my stance. The attire doesn't exactly scream "noble," but who cares? I'm here to enjoy myself, not to blend in. My gloves? Polished.

My hair? Slightly messy, as always. I mean, why try to look perfect when you know you're already the most handsome one in the room?

And then, like a walking piece of artwork, Lord Avelric approaches. He's tall, with a regal air about him, his blond hair glistening in the light like it's been combed for hours. His black eyes are sharp, and his aristocratic outfit? Well, it screams power and wealth. Velvet, silk, with golden embroidery. The works.

He extends a hand with an elegant smile, and I look at it for a second before giving him a firm handshake.

"Ah, Levi Ashton," Lord Avelric greets, his voice silky smooth and polite, "A pleasure to have you here. I trust your journey was pleasant?"

I smirk, leaning a bit into the conversation, "A bit more pleasant than being dragged into some fancy banquet, but I guess you could say it was... interesting."

He gives a knowing smile, his posture immaculate. "I understand completely. But given the urgency of the matter, I thought it best to have everyone gathered here."

"Urgency, huh?" I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "You don't exactly sound like someone who enjoys being rushed."

Lord Avelric sighs, looking over at a pair of figures standing nearby: Xander and Zain, both quiet, their expressions as serious as a gloomy forest.

"I fear we do not have much time," he says, his voice lowering, suddenly more serious. "At best, we have a week. The situation is... more grotesque than I care to admit."

I take a glance at Xander and Zain again. "You sure they're up for it?" I ask, my voice light but a little sharper than usual. I mean, I don't know who's more likely to cause trouble—Xander, with his whole "lazy" vibe, or Zain, who's probably here just to see how I lead as a 'leader'.

Lord Avelric nods gravely. "I've invited all the strongest individuals I could reach." He says this like it's a personal victory, but I can tell there's no pride in his voice—just a sense of grim resignation.

"Did you reach out to the Asura Empire?" I ask, keeping my voice casual.

Avelric's smile falters, the corners of his mouth tugging downward, his gaze darkening. "The Asura Empire... They have refused to assist. Neither the Demon King nor his kingdom have extended their aid either."

I chuckle dryly, leaning back slightly. "Yeah, figures. Those guys only care about themselves."

I look at him, a question forming in my head. "What about the elves? Will they help?"

The noble sighs again, more resigned this time. "The Elvian Queen refused to lend a hand, and thus, the Elvian Kingdom will not be coming to our aid."

"Well, that's a shocker," I mutter, before glancing around the room. "Guess it's up to the rest of us then." I shift my gaze to the table where some other notable figures are sitting—guild leaders, mercenaries, all kinds of adventurers.

Avelric gestures to his next point. "I've called all five Sword Saints and their respective guilds, though, except for Scar. He sent a proxy to represent him. A disciple of his, actually."

"Scar, huh?" I smile, letting out a small laugh. "Well, I guess if Scar's not showing up, the least we can do is get his student to stand in. I'm sure the proxy will make up for it."

I spot the proxy then. Tall, serious-looking guy, all stiff posture. He's got this silver hair that's almost as shiny as Avelric's gold décor. His eyes are cold, blue like glaciers, and he seems like he could cut someone down without even blinking. I almost feel bad for the guy. He doesn't even know what he's walking into.

"Alright," I point at the proxy. "What's his name?"

"Aaron," Lord Avelric replies, his voice almost too formal. "Aaron Kage."

I look at the guy one more time, shaking my head. "Well, good luck to him. Hope he's ready for the ride."

The conversation lingers in the air, the weight of what's about to unfold hanging over us. But for now, I'm just here for the show.

So there I am, just standing around, watching all the fancy people mingle, and honestly? I couldn't care less. Lord Avelric's gone off to greet some other arrivals, leaving me to my own devices.

I look over to the corner of the room, and there he is. Xander. The guy's basically turned into a one-man food buffet at this point, lazily munching on a chicken drumstick like it's the only thing worth his time.

I can't help but stroll over, leaning against the table as I watch him take another bite, clearly in no rush to finish.

"Man, you've gotta stop eating like this in public," I say, throwing my hands up. "It's like you're a cave man."

Xander just sighs, barely looking up at me. "Do I really have to? Feels like a waste of energy, honestly."

"Yeah, well, you're making it a waste of my energy, watching you," I retort, eyes narrowing. "Last time, you managed to ruin Zain's day just by cooking his chicken."

"Earlier I saw Zain walking away from from you enraged... What's your excuse this time?"

He lazily chews on his chicken, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "Oh, you know, I just accidentally set the Guild's training schedule to 'disastrous mode'—nothing major." He shrugs. "It's like, he's all into his 'serious lonewolf' persona, and here I am, just vibing, eating my chicken. He doesn't appreciate that."

I blink, processing that for a second. "Wait, what?"

He smirks. "Yeah, I may have swapped their usual workout routine with one that involves doing a hundred push-ups while balancing on one leg... in the middle of a river. So, like, he was extra mad this morning when his guild members were complaining to him for the routine."

This guy is really ruining MY guild for his fun.

I can't help but snort at the image. "That's the most 'Xander' thing I've ever heard. You've got to be the laziest person I've ever met."

He lifts a finger lazily, grinning. "Nah. That would mean I'm trying. Which, like... I don't."

I'm about to make another smart remark when suddenly—out of nowhere—someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn around, and there she is.

Sylvia.

She's standing there with that confident smile, like she was the VIP in the room, her presence just commanding attention. She's dressed in a simple but elegant outfit.

"You've got the same face you always make when you see me," she teases, raising an eyebrow. "Like I'm the last person you want to be stuck with at a banquet."

I tilt my head, a cocky grin creeping onto my face. "Well, you know, I'm not here to make small talk with nobility. I'd much rather have chicken with Xander."

I glance back at Xander, who's too absorbed in his food to care. "But you've got this... graceful beauty, Sylvia. I'll give you that."

She chuckles, that playful glint in her eyes. "Graceful? Oh, Levi, you're making me blush." She rolls her eyes, but it's all playful. "You should really try to make this evening worthwhile, though. I've heard whispers of some very important developments in town."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "Important developments? You mean, like... new political drama?"

Her lips curl into a smile, and she leans in just slightly. "Something like that. But I'm more interested in seeing how you handle the unexpected—I'm sure you've got plenty of tricks up your sleeve. Or are you just here to 'enjoy' the roasted chicken?"

I glance back at Xander. "Well, as long as the food's good, who cares about the rest, right?"

Xander, still in his own little world, suddenly chimes in without looking up from his chicken. "You guys know, if I had the energy, I'd probably run this place better. But... I don't. So, yeah. I'll stick with the chicken."

Sylvia laughs lightly. "You're something else, Xander. Truly."

I shake my head. "Yeah, Xander's got one mode: do the bare minimum and still look like the one who carried. It's a talent."

Just then, Zain—looking like he's been through a tornado—storms over, his face flushed. "Xander! You absolute—!"

Before he can finish his sentence, Xander, without missing a beat, leans back in his chair and takes another bite of his chicken. "Yeah, yeah. You're mad. You need to chill, buddy."

Zain's practically shaking, his fists clenched, but all he does is throw his hands up in defeat. "I'm taking you away from here before you cause any more trouble," he grumbles, grabbing Xander by the shoulder and practically dragging him off.

"Aw, come on, Zain," Xander calls out lazily, his voice still dripping with indifference. "Don't be such a drag. I wasn't even that bad."

I can't help but laugh, shaking my head. "Man, you really do just do whatever you want, huh?"

Sylvia crosses her arms, watching the scene unfold with a small smile. "Xander's... always been a bit unpredictable. But that's what makes him so interesting. If he actually tried, he'd be unstoppable."

I glance at her. "You really think so?"

She looks at me, her gaze sharp but kind. "Absolutely. But I'm not sure if he wants to be unstoppable. And I'm okay with that. Not everyone needs to be perfect."

Her voice softens for a second, almost like she's talking to herself. But I catch it.

Before I can ask, I change the subject. "Speaking of interesting... where's Alina? Haven't seen her yet."

Sylvia sighs, glancing at her watch. "She had to step out for something important. She hasn't arrived yet, but we still have about two hours before the banquet officially starts."

I nod, looking around. "Guess I've got some time to kill, then."

Sylvia gives me a sideways glance, smirking. "Don't get too comfortable. Things are about to get interesting soon. And if you get too distracted with food," she pauses, her eyes glinting with mischief, "I might just have to make you my next target."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh, you'll have to try harder than that. I'm not so easily swayed."

Xander's voice echoes from across the room, muffled but unmistakable. "Hey, Zain, do you think if I eat this chicken raw, I'll get superpowers?"

Sylvia looks at me, laughing softly. "See? That's the Xander I'm talking about."

I smile, leaning back into the banter. "Yeah, I guess you're right. It's the unpredictability that makes him... well, him."

A bit of time passes...

4/11/2017 - 3:45 PM

Sylvia and I kept talking casually, the food getting colder. Every now and then I'd glance over at the crowd mingling, trying to see if anyone interesting had walked in—not that I expected anything surprising.

Xander had already fallen asleep on the table sitting with Zain.

But then... it shifted. The air. The subtle drop in background chatter, the turning heads.

Sylvia was mid-sip when she paused, smiled, and tilted her glass.

"Oh? She finally came."

I turned too.

Navina Caelwyn.

She didn't just walk in. She arrived. Like the concept of eloquence couldn't describe her style. Her heels clicked like punctuation marks to a divine thesis, her blond hair cascading with unnatural flawlessness. And her gown? Let's just say it screamed, yes, I'm the reason mirrors exist.

"Seems like Reflex herself has arrived," I muttered.

Sylvia hummed. "And she sure had her looks and hair done before coming. Took her sweet time making sure people turned to stare."

I leaned against the table, arms folded. "You know, some say she has private vaults in three separate countries. Hidden ones. I'd believe it."

"Not surprising," Sylvia added smoothly. "There's a rumor going around she might be the richest woman in the world. Individually. Without any royal affiliations. Not a queen, not an empress—just pure business and investment."

She grinned slightly. "Makes me wonder if she sleeps on gold bars instead of pillows."

"She probably eats gold flakes for breakfast. You know, just a little mineral snack before business."

Sylvia chuckled, raising her glass to her lips. "And what do you think of her, Levi?"

I didn't even hesitate.

"I think she's hot."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. "Pervert."

I gave a one-shouldered shrug. "You say it like it's a bad thing. If I wanted, I could make her my spouse and own all the wealth in the world."

"You? Spouse?" she said, nearly choking on laughter.

"I don't need money, Sylvia. I'm already the greatest. But, hey, a free luxurious life wouldn't hurt."

Sylvia leaned in, eyes glinting. "Right, and next you'll be saying she fell for you after you saved her from choking on food."

"No," I corrected smugly. "After I saved her from drowning in her own wealth. It was suffocating her with luxury. Only I could rescue her... with my raw, broke energy. Afterall, I'm the strongest sword saint."

She burst out laughing. "Who would ever marry someone like you?"

I grinned. "Maybe I'll aim lower then... you."

Sylvia blinked. "Me? Tch. You'd die in the application stage."

"I'll have you know our child would be named Astral. Astral Ashton—deadly combo."

Sylvia covered her mouth, trying not to laugh too loud. "That will never happen. The world doesn't deserve creations of such level sarcasm and mistake."

I leaned forward on my elbow. "Alright then, oh majestic guild leader... What are your spouse requirements?"

Her smile widened as she set her glass down.

"A man who does everything solo. An unnaturally innate leader. A perfect strategist. He should understand complex economic systems, be a business genius, an undefeated physical combatant, with perfect hand-to-hand combat, sword mastery, magic mastery, charming, loving, respectful, emotionally intelligent, funnier than anyone, and obviously... handsome. A dream lover everyone secretly wants, but only I can have."

I blinked. "You're describing a fantasy."

Sylvia winked. "Someone like that exists. I've met him."

I narrowed my eyes. "Who? Who's this flawless human being?"

She smirked, crossing her arms. "Not you. And I don't think I have to say his name. It'll be our secret."

I exhaled and leaned back. "Yeah like I'd believe someone like that exists."

"Oh, c'mon," Sylvia said, nudging me with her elbow, her smirk barely fading. "Believe me. He does exist."

I scoffed. "Nope. It's just your imagination. Fantasy's running wild again."

She rolled her eyes with dramatic flair. "And yet I run a guild while you run your mouth."

"I run it efficiently with all facts."

We both chuckled.

As the background chatter continued to rise and fall, we grabbed a couple more drinks—something golden and fizzing. Probably absurdly expensive. I didn't ask. I just downed it halfway and felt that warm ember start to rise in my chest.

"C'mon," she said, gesturing with her glass. "Let's get some fresh air. View from the balcony's not bad."

We stepped out onto the second-floor terrace, a perfect overlook of the entire city sparkling under moonlight. The stars were clear tonight—rare for this place. The breeze was crisp, tugging gently at Sylvia's silver strands as she leaned against the marble railing.

"You ever think..." she started, her tone shifting, "what you'd do if everyone was against you? I don't mean like a couple of haters—I mean your whole world. Your status, your family's name... everything's about to be crushed."

I blinked, caught off guard. "What does it have to do with anything?"

"Just answer it," she said, eyes not leaving the skyline.

I sighed and took a sip. "I'd do everything I can to stop them. Doesn't matter who they are. I'd find a way."

"What if they were more powerful than you?" she asked, tilting her head. "What if they were close royals? Ones that can't be bought or bribed. What if their existence was above any law?"

I paused. "How many?"

"Eight," she replied. "Maybe more. Eight or more royals who want you and your family gone. Forever. And behind them? The ruler of the nation itself."

I exhaled. "Damn. That's... that's tough. Real tough."

Her voice softened, almost distant. "I was once in that spot."

I turned to her. She wasn't smirking anymore.

"I was going to quit my studies," she continued, "throw away everything I had built for myself. Just to help my family survive. Even if I had to sell myself... give up everything. Because when life takes everything from you, it doesn't knock—it kicks the door down and rips it out of the frame."

I stared at her, quiet. This wasn't the Sylvia I usually saw—the sharp-tongued guild leader. This was someone else.

"...Then what happened?" I asked. "Did it go okay?"

She turned toward me, expression unreadable.

"Imagine someone who could control royalty," she said, voice low. "Who could bend an empire... pull the strings of multiple Knights of the Round, The Emperor. All without money. Without noble blood. No massive army or cult behind him. Just him. Solo."

"Just to protect that family... and me? Would you believe that?"

My eyes widened. "Wait—are you being serious?"

She nodded once.

"He's the type to win at all costs. Doesn't matter the method. Or the sacrifice."

I didn't say anything. I just leaned back and stared at the sky for a second. Someone like that... That's not human. That's a force of nature. That's not a person, it's a damn storm dressed in skin.

Sylvia glanced at me, then smiled faintly.

"So you see," she said, "someone like that exists, who is the reason I stand here today. And I have my eyes on him. Because any woman with a protector like that... she'd be blessed."

She paused, then added, "And cursed."

"Cursed how?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sylvia turned toward the city again. "Because someone like that... isn't good. Isn't bad. He just is. I'll leave it at that."

I stayed quiet, finishing what was left in my glass. Her story lingered in my mind like a case I couldn't quite solve.

Someone like that... exists?

It didn't sound real. But it didn't sound fake either.

I was about to ask more when—

CRASH!

A loud, shattering sound rang out from behind us. Glass breaking. People gasping.

Sylvia and I spun around instantly.

"Oh no," she muttered, setting her glass down.

As Sylvia and I pushed through the returning murmurs and music of the banquet hall, we immediately noticed the tension in the air. People had gathered near the center, some frozen in place, others whispering. The reason revealed itself quickly:

A waiter—a young guy, probably no older than twenty—was kneeling on the ground, panic in his eyes. At his feet, shards of a broken glass glittered under the chandelier's light, with a trail of expensive liquor dripping down—

Right onto the fine, polished shoes of a man standing above him.

Silver hair. Piercing blue eyes. An aura that reeked of arrogance.

Aaron Kage.

Proxy of Scar. Elite of Valhalla.

And an absolute piece of garbage.

"Useless trash," Aaron spat, before the kid could even finish stammering an apology. SMACK! His hand shot out and slapped the waiter across the face so hard it echoed. "Are you a damn dog? You think mutts like you can just splash me and get away with it?!"

The whole hall went still.

Even Sylvia didn't speak. And that woman always had something to say.

The waiter trembled, eyes wide. "I-I'm sorry, sir, please, I didn't mean—"

"Oh, you didn't mean to?" Aaron interrupted with a twisted smile, crouching just slightly. "Then should I accidentally kick your spine in? Maybe pour boiling wine down your throat and say oops?"

His hand rose again, and he was about to strike when—

"That's enough," said a calm but firm voice.

Navina Caelwyn.

She stepped in, hand raised to stop his strike.

Aaron froze... then slowly turned to her.

SLAP.

He slapped her hand away with casual disrespect.

"Well, if it isn't Navina," he said, smirking. "Didn't expect to see you here, considering the last time we met, you were lying on the ground choking for air after Scar beat you 3-0. Couldn't even breathe right. Embarrassing."

Navina's expression tightened, her hand still raised, not retaliating—but not backing down either.

People started whispering. The tension spiked.

Avelric stepped in next, trying to de-escalate. "Aaron, that's enough. Let's not cause a—"

"Oh, you again," Aaron sneered. "You let your dogs run wild, and now I get my shoes stained like a commoner. Do you train them at all, or do you just hire anyone who can stand upright without drooling?"

The waiter was shaking. Barely holding it together.

Aaron turned back to him. "I'll punish you more. Until you can't breathe either. That'll teach you."

His hand rose again.

I took a step forward. "Stop."

Sylvia followed beside me. "This isn't worth it, Kage. Drop it. You made your point."

Aaron turned, grinning. "Oh wow, Levi Ashton. The self-claimed strongest."

I glared at him. Cold. Calm.

"Didn't Scar wipe the floor with you 10-0? Back then, you couldn't even keep your sword steady."

I rolled my shoulders. "That was two years ago," I said evenly. "I was still learning."

He laughed. Loudly. "Learning? You're always learning when you lose, huh?"

Avelric once again moved in to mediate. "Please, Aaron, there's no need for—"

Aaron waved him off. "Fine. Fine. I'll forgive your little slave. You should thank Levi. His loser presence distracted me long enough to cool off."

That was when another presence joined us.

Xander.

He walked over with that casual, lazy grin of his, hands in his pockets.

"What's going on?" he asked, but his eyes already knew.

He looked straight at me.

And I looked straight at Kage.

The moment Xander stepped beside me, the air shifted.

Not many could read the silence of a room—most people mistook it as awkwardness, discomfort, or tension. But this? This was stillness. Pure, frigid stillness. The kind that said something real was about to happen.

Aaron Kage, hands in his pockets, tilted his head and smirked, his silver hair glinting beneath the chandeliers. His voice was poison dipped in velvet.

"Well, if it isn't the forgotten one... I haven't seen you since that day as well."

Xander blinked slowly, his expression unreadable. "That so?" he replied, giving a nonchalant shrug. "Can't say I remember you."

The insult in that tone? Sharp.

Aaron's grin twitched into something colder.

"Of course you wouldn't," he muttered. "Losers tend to have bad memories. Especially when they're obliterated to what? 5-0."

At that moment, Xander's body shifted.

The lazy curve of his back straightened.

The bored glint in his eye vanished.

And for the first time in months—maybe years—Xander stood with the true bearing of a Sword Saint.

The air grew heavier. The crowd that had circled around them instinctively stepped back, as if their instincts understood something their minds couldn't process.

Xander's voice dropped to a low hum. "You bark a lot," he said. "Just like a good dog—always wagging your tail and praising your owner."

Aaron's icy blue eyes narrowed into knives.

"And you're just another failed prodigy," he snapped. "A name in history books no one reads. I'm not barking—I'm declaring. Declaring that Scar is the King of all Sword Saints. Compared to him, every single person here is irrelevant. That includes you."

Xander's gaze turned into something cruel. Something ancient. "You speak highly of a king who isn't even present," he said, every syllable laced with venom. "Careful. Talk too much, and I might break your jaw, destroy your pride, and make you my servant."

Gasps. Audible ones.

Sylvia's eyes widened. Even Navina stepped slightly forward, hand twitching as if sensing the danger escalating beyond reason.

Aaron didn't flinch.

"Try it," he whispered.

Blue fire flickered around his eyes—his Glacio Flame awakening in the form of sheer murderous pressure. His silver hair lifted slightly with the surge of energy crawling up his spine.

"You think I'm scared of someone who couldn't survive Scar's left hand?" Aaron took a step forward, voice low and sharp. "I'm not your equal. I'm your reminder. The reminder of where you will be mercilessly crushed."

Xander stepped forward as well.

A cold, deathly shadow began to form behind him. A towering, ominous presence—like a reaper with no scythe, only intent.

"You're not even a threat," Xander said softly. "You'll be walking corpse who has forgotten to talk once I'm done."

Aaron's fist clenched, his aura freezing the floor beneath his feet.

"You'll regret that."

Xander smiled, just faintly.

"Regret requires failure. You'll be dead before that emotion kicks in."

Both of them radiated the force of titans ready to collide.

And then—

CREEEEEAAK—

The banquet door opened.

Every head turned.

Footsteps. Calm. Unrushed.

Alina.

Not in a gown.

But in a simple black shirt, walking into a royal banquet like she wasn't a specially invited sword saint.

And yet that wasn't what stunned everyone.

It was Him.

The one walking beside her.

Black overcoat. Silent menace in his step. Jet black hair. Piercing blue eyes that didn't just look at the room—they dissected it.

And a smirk that wasn't arrogance.

Sylvia's eyes narrowed. Navina tensed.

Xander and Aaron both turned their heads slowly, their deadly auras momentarily flickering.

"It can't be... is it... him?"

An Hour earlier...

Lucas's Perspective:

Location: Rinascita Square Fountain

"Yes, I know," I said slowly, my voice low and dangerous. "How Kaiser used you... twisted you for his own gains. And then tossed you aside like trash when Elfina was sad."

Sophia's eyes widened—she took a shaky step back, clutching her ice cream like it was a shield. "L-Lucas... please, don't—"

"Don't what?" I stepped closer. "Don't remind you of how pathetic it all was? How you let him play you while he schemed in the dark?"

She flinched, visibly shaking her head, the sweetness in her features now fractured by something deeper—fear.

"Y-You're wrong! He didn't—he never—"

"You're still protecting him?" I interrupted, my tone cutting like razors. "Even after everything he did to you? After he left you... for her? You're still fighting for a lover that spat on you."

She tried to walk away—trembling, eyes darting around—but I caught her wrist.

"Wait—Lucas!"

I yanked her to the side, dragging her down a narrow alleyway. The faint hum of people faded behind us. My back straightened, my expression void of humor, of mercy.

"System."

「 Already sealing all exits. If anyone watches... I'll erase their memories. If they interfere... I'll erase them. 」

The tone was unrecognizably cold. Even the system knew—this wasn't a moment for jokes.

"Good," I said, slamming and pinning Sophia's wrist to the stone wall, her back against it. Her ice cream had dropped, splattered on the cobbled ground like forgotten innocence.

I leaned in, close enough that she saw the gleam in my irises—green, now. Not the usual soft glow. This was something else. A light only wrath could birth.

"Sophia." I said it like a final warning. "I don't want games. I don't want riddles. I want the truth. What did he make you do? What did he do... during the Asura Crisis?"

Her breath hitched. Her lips quivered. "L-Lucas... you're hurting me..."

"I'll hurt you more," I hissed. "I'll make you bleed if I have to. I'm not playing the nice guy today. Not when you're lying for the devil who could've caused it all."

「 Warning: Pulse rate rising. Pupils dilated. She's on the edge of breaking. 」

Good. She should be.

I tightened my grip.

"He used you. You know that, right? He used you for your connections. For your access. For your body, Sophia. You were just another string he used to ensure Elfina's top spot."

"No—no!" she screamed back, tears brimming in her green eyes. "He—he cared! He wasn't like that—!"

"He was exactly like that!" I roared. "He used you like a tool, like a marionet. And when you served your purpose, he didn't even say goodbye. He just... picked Elfina and chose her over you."

Her knees buckled slightly, but I didn't let her fall. She turned her face to the side, refusing to meet my eyes.

"Sophia." My voice lowered, more venomous than ever. "Don't you dare look away. You were there from the start. You know what he did during the crisis. You saw what he became."

She whimpered. "I-I c-can't... I c-can't say anything, Lucas... please..."

"Why? Because you're scared? Because he made you scared?" I pulled her closer. "You think I don't know what he's capable of? I've seen the aftermath of his moves. I've seen the blood. You were his tool, and now you're his liar."

"Y-You're wrong," she whispered, trembling. "He... he was—he had reasons—"

"And now you're another one of them?" I asked. "Just another excuse he can hide behind?"

"Stop... please stop..."

"I expected lies," I said coldly. "Excuses. Maybe a few tears. I didn't expect this pathetic loyalty to someone who dumped you like trash."

"I-It wasn't like that!" she cried out, voice cracking. "You don't understand!"

"No," I said, the words laced with steel, "You don't understand. I know what happened in Year 2. You think I was blind, deaf, and dumb? I know."

Her face paled.

"I know... that you were Kaiser's bullied ex-girlfriend. The one he used. The one he built his plans on. And the one he left behind once Elfie was too sad to handle herself and he had to pick her."

Sophia's mouth opened, but no sound came out. Just small, broken breaths. Her eyes welled with fresh tears. She looked... shattered.

「 Emotional collapse detected. She's seconds away from breaking. 」

I didn't care. Not now.

"Tell me what Kaiser did," I demanded. "Tell me what happened during the Asura Crisis."

Because if he was alive...

This world wasn't ready.

Not again.

Her body trembled in my grip, her shoulders heaving from the weight of suppressed sobs. And then it happened—her voice cracked, broken like glass under boot.

"D-Don't call him that..." she whispered, choking back tears. "P-Please... n-not that..."

I narrowed my eyes. "What?"

"K-Kai..." she hiccupped, her voice trembling with every syllable. "D-Don't call him K-Kaiser... n-not like that..."

I pulled her wrist tighter. "You're not his lover. Only Elfina called him that name. Elfie. Not you."

The moment the word "Elfie" hit her ears, another tear slipped down her cheek. She turned her face away again—like even hearing her name twisted the knife deeper.

And then, through the tightness of her throat, she breathed out—

"Kaiser... d-didn't cause the A-Asura C-Crisis..."

I froze.

My grip loosened.

"What?"

My heart didn't skip a beat—it slammed into my ribs. My eyes locked onto her broken face, her trembling lips, the shame and pain woven into her every gesture.

「 Her body language... vocal pattern... pupil constriction... no signs of deception. She's telling the truth. 」

...What?

I didn't move for a second. I couldn't. My mind raced. My chest clenched.

If he didn't cause it...

"Then who did?" I demanded, stepping back slightly, tension still pulsing through every fiber of me.

Sophia sniffled, rubbing her eyes with the back of her sleeve, her voice still shaky.

"I-I don't know... I swear..."

"Then what do you know?!" I roared, slamming my palm into the wall beside her. The impact cracked the stone, shaking dust down on her shoulders.

She flinched, whimpering.

"H-He wasn't there in the b-beginning... Kaiser... he only came a-a little b-bit before you arrived..."

My heart pounded in my ears. This didn't make sense. This wasn't what I'd been told. Not what I'd seen in the aftermath.

"Then who started it? The monsters? The explosion? The dead bodies?"

Her legs gave out, and she collapsed to the ground, back against the wall, hugging her knees like she was trying to disappear.

"T-There were hundreds of S+ monsters... s-something we've n-never seen before..." she whispered, almost in trance. "Th-they didn't j-just kill... they collected..."

My jaw clenched.

"Collected?"

She nodded, face pale.

"T-Those students who were d-dying or d-dead... they injected them with some l-liquid... and t-took the b-bodies... o-one by one... b-back into the shadows..."

I stared, silent now, watching her crumble before me.

"Elfie was protecting everyone," she said, barely a whisper, "b-but... she..."

My voice dropped into a dangerous growl. "She what?"

Sophia's body shook as she spoke. "S-She was caught up... in a d-duel... with someone..."

I leaned in closer. "Who?"

"I-I've never seen... someone like that... so powerful... s-so twisted... it was like watching a demon out of hell, but worse... cursed magic like n-nothing I've ever f-felt before..."

My skin prickled.

「 Her mind is fragmenting under memory stress. But she's describing something beyond natural classification. 」

"What did he look like?" I asked coldly.

"I-I don't know... no one does... e-everyone's memories from that day... they're all hazy, like someone ripped the pieces apart..."

"How many survived?"

"...S-Seventeen."

Seventeen.

Out of an entire Academy.

Gone.

I clenched my fists, silence thick between us like suffocating smoke.

"Kaiser?" I asked one last time.

Her voice came soft. Hollow.

"H-He saw Elfie... bleeding... dying..."

She paused, her body convulsing from another sob.

"...A-And he lost it."

"Lost it?" I asked, voice low. "What do you mean?"

Sophia didn't answer immediately. Her eyes glazed, her breath shaky. She was still there—but not here. Somewhere back in that burning academy, with corpses, fire, and blood... with them.

"I-I don't remember m-much..." she whispered, barely forming the words. "B-But I c-can picture it... th-the scene..."

She closed her eyes, as if replaying a scar she never wanted to see again.

"K-Kaiser... h-he was holding Elfie in his arms... s-she was so pale... sh-she was p-passing away..." Her voice trembled, her hands squeezing her sleeves tightly.

"I-I didn't hear all the w-words... but I k-know, I f-felt it..." Her lips quivered now, and tears dripped from her chin.

"In her l-last moments... E-Elfie... she t-told Kaiser... th-that she loved h-him... o-only him..."

A sob escaped her throat, and she covered her mouth for a moment before continuing.

"Sh-she told him to... be happy without her... s-said that maybe... m-maybe he'd find someone else to l-love... i-if she w-wasn't the o-one..."

Each word felt like it stabbed her. Not just pain—but guilt. Memory wrapped in helplessness.

I stared at her, unmoving.

"And... then?" I asked, voice like steel.

Her hands dropped, and her eyes stared at the floor, distant and haunted.

"T-The moment her eyes closed... in his arms... I've n-never seen Kaiser like that..." Her voice was smaller than ever.

"His e-expression... it went completely dark..."

"...Dark?" I asked. "How much?"

Sophia's lips trembled—and this time, her tone changed. The fear in her voice lingered, but something else seeped through: dread.

"B-Before I... I f-fell unconscious from the pain and b-blood loss..."

Her tone dipped, eyes wide in pure terror.

"I s-saw his eyes..."

"...His void black eyes..."

I stiffened.

"His l-lifelike blue eyes were gone..." she continued, barely above a whisper. "T-They turned into... into two h-hollow, paradoxical... black holes..."

She hugged herself tighter, rocking slightly.

"It... it didn't even feel human..."

I said nothing.

For the first time in a long while... I didn't have a snark. No insult. No bitterness.

Just silence.

「 System. Confirm. 」

「 Confirmed: Magicless anomalous activity occurred that day from my knowledge. Records show 72 S+ ranked monsters neutralized at once within a two-minute combat window. No energy signatures logged. Cause: UNKNOWN. 」

"...So that's it..." I muttered. My fists clenched.

"That's how seventy-plus corpses of monsters were already rotting when I arrived at the crater..."

My eyes narrowed, staring past Sophia into a memory that wasn't even mine.

"A magicless being... he lost it... and slaughtered seventy S+ ranked monsters..."

I breathed out slowly.

"In anger."

The room went quiet.

Not silent. Quiet. The kind that feels like the calm before a world breaks again.

Sophia finally looked up, her voice meek and broken.

"Why...?" she stuttered. "W-Why did you... want to know s-so b-badly...?"

I turned to her.

My eyes no longer glowing with magic.

Just shadowed.

Dead calm.

"Do you really want to know?" I asked.

She nodded slowly, lips trembling, hands clenched in her lap.

"P-Please..." she whispered. "I-I'll understand... i-if you tell me..."

I got up, my hands barely steady. With a small flick of my fingers, I unraveled the magic sealing the alleyway. The spell dispersed like mist in the morning sun.

"I also faced losses," I said, not looking at her. "My father... he was killed."

My voice was cold. But the words felt like molten lead leaving my throat.

"And... my mother..." I swallowed. "She was the victim of a half-assassination."

Sophia stayed quiet. I could feel her eyes on me, but I didn't meet them.

"She—she has no memories of her past. Not of who she is. Not even of me."

I heard her lightly sniffle, wiping away the remnants of her own pain. But this wasn't about her anymore.

"And... Fia," I said, pausing.

The name hurt more than I wanted to admit.

"My little sister."

My fingers curled tightly, nails biting into my palm.

"She was caught up in it. Protecting my mother from that monster... of a human being." I grit my teeth. "She was crippled. Lost her legs. And he—he took her eyes out like it meant nothing. Took her sight away permanently."

My voice cracked. Just a bit. Just enough to expose the human underneath the mask.

"She would've died... if I hadn't arrived when I did..."

I finally turned my head to look at Sophia. My stare was emotionless, but every word bled from a deeper wound.

"You should know now, Sophia... how much that crisis means to me."

I took one step toward the exit of the alley. The light outside cast a shadow in front of me.

"The person who caused it..." I said coldly, "will suffer a merciless death."

I stepped out.

"Even if I have to kill my old self to make it happen."

I walked away without looking back. Left Sophia to drown in the aftermath of my truth. She had her questions. Let them stew.

I didn't have time for answers.

「 Lucas, are you calm? 」

The system's voice echoed gently in my mind.

"...Not really," I muttered, still walking.

「 You're slipping into the old you again. Reckless. Self-destructive. 」

"...I know," I whispered. "It was a mistake."

「 Remember what you're working for in the present. The miracle cure. The future war against the grotesques. 」

I stopped at the edge of the street, looking up.

Clouds slowly drifted across the sky like they had no idea of the rot in the world below them.

"I'll go back to being me," I finally said.

"...The old me is dead."

Silence. The wind brushed past my face.

"I'll find it," I promised, staring into the clouds like they were listening.

"I'll find that cure... and save you both—Mother... Fia."

This isn't a hero's promise.

No...

This is a son's promise to his mother.

And a brother's vow to the little sister who once smiled at him like he was the whole world...

The sister he failed to protect in the end.

"...Fia," I whispered, my voice trembling beneath the silence of the sky.

"I'm sorry."

I closed my eyes. For just a moment, I let myself break.

"But this will end soon... I swear it."

I looked up again, through the clouds that held the heavens beyond them. Somewhere, I hoped... she could hear me.

"I'll find the cure. I'll save you. And then..." A breath caught in my throat.

"We'll go back to the old days. Just you and me—together this time."

No pain. No lies. No broken promises.

"I won't hurt you again... I'll be the brother you always believed I could be. The one you looked up to. The one who didn't deserve it, but... you still gave it anyway."

A faint smile tugged at my lips. Bitter. Soft. Hopeful.

"I'll be the hero the world needed..."

My hand closed over my heart.

"...And the hero you saw in me—even when I couldn't see him myself."

I took one step forward, my shadow stretching behind me.

"Because you're my reason."

"My reason to walk this path to the heavens..."

A long silence.

"...This path to become—"

A breath.

"...A hero."

Chapter 65 - A Murderous Love

Levi's Perspective:

4/11/2017 - 4:24 PM

I squinted a little, tilted my head, and honestly...

"...huh."

That wasn't who I thought it'd be. Not even close.

He was taller, for sure similar to him. And yeah, he had the same black hair and blue eyes, but this guy? He looked relaxed. Too relaxed. The kind of relaxed that says "I'm here just for the food."

And Alina?

Waltzing into a noble banquet in a black shirt? Girl really said, "Etiquette can catch my dust."

Honestly? Iconic.

I was still piecing it together when Aaron's and Xander's auras flared again. The icy, graveyard pressure of a grudge match brewing in real time.

And right before hell popped off—

Alina's voice cut through.

"This is not your personal home. You are not here to posture or bark. Sit down, shut up, and remember you are invited guests into this town."

Aaron froze mid-step.

Xander stopped too, raising a brow. Zain, of all people, casually pulled him back like a kid grabbing his troublemaker friend.

"Fine, fine," Xander muttered. "I had unfinished lunch anyways."

But Aaron?

Oh, Aaron wasn't done. Not by a long shot. He turned to Alina, that cold glint still burning in his glacio-blue eyes.

"You talk big," Aaron said, his voice like steel dragged through frost. "But don't think for a second you're above me. You've never fought Scar either. Never lost to him... yet. You're just his future victim. Just like my current victim."

Alina didn't even blink.

"If you threaten me again," she said calmly, "I will break both your arms, your legs, and deliver your body to Scar as a gift. Nicely wrapped. With a ribbon."

I choked on a laugh.

God damn. She really said that with her whole heart.

Aaron stepped forward, chest rising like he was about to escalate, but that's when he moved.

Black shirt, black overcoat—still the most chill guy in the room.

The man Alina brought.

He raised a hand and stepped forward, elegant like a noble, but smooth like someone who's matured from conflicts. His voice?

Like poetry artificially made somehow.

"Oh relax, gentlemen," the man said, tone like velvet wrapped around glass. "A banquet should be filled with taste, not tension. Your little contest can wait for another time. Right now... it's just poor manners."

Aaron glared at him.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?"

The man stopped just a few feet from Aaron and bowed slightly. Not low. Just enough to be polite.

"Arius. Mercenary. And part of Levi's team."

I blinked.

Wait—huh?

I hired him? I mean... yeah, that does sound like something I'd do without remembering.

Wait no, Zain was charge of it. Why didn't he tell me the names?

Aaron scoffed.

"So that's what this is? Alina brought a mercenary wearing a normal black shirt herself to a noble banquet? What's next, a homeless person coming to propose us ideas?"

Alina didn't even look his way.

"I'm not the one acting like a barbarian in the banquet. Your manners are embarrassing."

That's when I decided to step in.

Because let's be honest—this was about to turn from funny to funeral.

I sighed and clapped my hands, stepping into the middle.

"Alright, kids, playtime's over."

Aaron and Alina both turned to me, tension still radiating like heat off boiling water.

"We might be from different guilds, different factions, different fashion choices," I added with a smirk, "but we've got one thing in common."

I pointed toward the ceiling, then dramatically turned my finger to the floor.

"We're all here to help Avelric and Rinascita against the Grotesques. That's it. That's the mission. Not ego contests. Not power-staring. And definitely not sword-fights next to others."

Alina... lowered her stance.

Calmly. She didn't need more words. She simply turned slightly, eyes scanning the room again like nothing happened.

But Aaron?

Of course not. That'd be too easy.

He lunged.

Fast. Straight at Alina—an intimidation strike. Enough to scare anyone less than her.

But he didn't make it.

Because Arius moved.

I didn't even see him fully.

One second, Aaron was mid-leap.

The next?

CRACK.

Arius had Aaron's wrist in a lock.

Controlled with one hand like he had enough strength to stop him completely still.

Aaron's eyes widened—not in pain. In realization.

Arius didn't raise his voice.

"I said relax."

...Man. I really do pick the coolest people. Yes, I chose him not Zain. Officially from today.

Alina's Perspective:

Wait... did he just come in the way to block that attack... for me?

That wasn't necessary.

I could've defended myself. I would've. Yet... why couldn't I see it coming? Why didn't I react before he did?

The moment I processed the motion, Arius had already moved. Reflexes sharper than mine? No. That's—no, that's impossible. That shouldn't be possible. He was already in front of me, gripping Aaron's arm like it was just something out of ordinary.

I narrowed my eyes.

"You really want to die today, huh?" Aaron snarled, arrogant as ever.

Arius didn't even blink. Still relaxed, still holding that same polite tone that made everything feel... annoyingly calm.

"Oh, I'm just ensuring no violence occurs," he said. "Especially with my friend involved."

His friend. Hm.

Aaron's arm jerked back, trying to escape Arius's grasp—but he didn't budge. The man's grip was like reinforced steel, unyielding, yet calm. Not even a change in expression. Just standing there like this was all too mundane.

Aaron's eyes narrowed slightly. "Your reflexes are like those of an expert. That grip... it has power. Immense power."

Arius gave a mild shrug. "Oh, you think so?"

Aaron wasn't letting it go, clearly getting curious in the way a combat-obsessed brute does when he can't immediately categorize someone. "Tell me," he said, brushing his shoulder off, "What style of swordplay and physical combat do you specialize in? Are you A-Ranked?"

Arius let go of his grip. Aaron took a half step back, flexing his fingers—testing them. His pride looked bruised.

Arius just sighed, smiling slightly. "Oh, nothing impressive like that. I tend to play chess and write in solitude. It's a little hobby of mine."

Liar. But a beautifully constructed one.

Aaron raised an eyebrow, clearly unsure whether he was being mocked or underestimated. Likely both. But in that pause—

"Lord Aaron," Alveric stepped forward, the nobleman's tone gentle, poised, and commanding all at once. "Would you join me for a moment? We can't afford conflict in a place dedicated to unity. As well as I have scar on the line, he is wating for you in the telecasted phone."

Aaron clicked his tongue, but his pride had already been dented. "Fine," he muttered, shooting Arius one last glare. He turned and walked away with Alveric, who still maintained his grace while essentially escorting a grown man out like an unruly child.

Arius just smirked, completely unfazed.

"Quite the scene," came a familiar voice, slightly amused, slightly annoying.

Navina.

I turned my head slightly—she was leaning against a pillar like she hadn't aged a day since the last time I saw her. Crimson dress, smug confidence, eyes that always looked like she knew something others didn't.

"That was rather close. You're pretty good, Sir Arius," she said.

She called him sir?

"Oh, thank you very much," Arius replied smoothly, bowing his head slightly. "A beautiful young lady like you praising me for such a minor action is truly flattering."

Tch.

"Oh, you flatter me as well." Her tone had that sparkle to it. Teasing. Deliberately charming. I could see the gleam in her eyes as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

And suddenly, I felt... something.

My face was a mask of neutrality. As always. But something inside me twitched. Not pain. Not anger. Just... irritation.

Why? Why was I irritated? It was irrational. He was being polite. She was being playful. It shouldn't matter.

...Right?

I turned away, suppressing that internal emotion. Then I saw her—Sylvia, approaching me with wide eyes and an arched brow that clearly said what the hell are you wearing?

Right. The black shirt. The one Arius had picked for me after HE ruined my dress.

Ughh. That bastard.

I'm going to make him pay for this.

3:47 PM - 1 Hour earlier

Alina's Perspective:

It's a sad world we live in.

I really thought she'd be my lead towards finding Master. But it was all in vain.

Just a dead end. Another one.

Master... you wrote to me in that letter—telling me to protect that girl... to help the people here in Rinascita. But why? What could possibly matter in a town like this? You said something else, too... "enhancing technique." Vague as always. You never did speak plainly. I don't know what you meant by it, but... I'll try. That's all I can do now.

Rinascita was louder than I expected. Not in sound—but in its presence. The streets were carved with memories, people spoke with stories behind their eyes. There was a scent of flowers even in the mess of city life. Bougainvillea vines crawled up the sides of stone houses. Merchants hollered under weathered awnings, and a child ran through

the puddles left behind by last night's rain, his feet slapping into the mud like he didn't care how dirty he got.

I wished I could do that.

The roads leading toward the noble district were uneven and slick with wet earth. Mud clung to the edges of my boots. My dress—it was... impractical. Silky, light violet, embroidered with pale silver.

Alveric had insisted that guests "dress to impress." I don't care for impressions. But I went along with it. Master once said, "In a world of eyes, wear the mask they expect before you strike where they don't."

...Still. This was annoying.

Just as I turned the corner near the edge of the district, it happened.

Someone barreled out from an alleyway—no intent, no malice—just momentum. Fast.

We collided.

It wasn't a tackle, just bad timing. But he was solid. Too solid.

I was pushed back, and my balance failed me for once. My heel slipped in the mud. The world tilted.

I hit the ground. Cold, wet—mud splattered up my back and across my legs. The middle of my dress darkened with thick streaks of brown.

My hands gripped the street instinctively.

I blinked, staring forward.

...What just happened?

Above me, the sun pierced between the rooftops. A silhouette stood there—his frame cutting into the light.

I couldn't see his face.

But I felt rage rise like heat inside me.

I looked down. My dress. It was—

Ruined.

"You've got to be kidding me."

As the sun dimmed behind a cloud, his face came into view.

Black hair, a little messy.

Sharp jaw. Blue eyes. The kind of blue that doesn't belong in a place like this.

And a dark overcoat with the collar slightly turned up, like he hadn't bothered to fix it.

"Whoa—ah, crap. You alright?" he asked, crouching slightly and extending a hand.

Pity?

You push me into the dirt and now you're offering me help?

I slapped his hand away without hesitation. My expression stayed blank. Neutrality is a shield—emotions are distractions. If I don't show them, they can't be used against me.

He blinked and pulled his hand back with a small whistle. "Okay. Message received. Calm down it was a honest mistake."

I stood up without a word. Looked down at the mud stains again. It looked... awful. This isn't salvageable. The banquet's going to be filled with nobles and eyes and whispers.

My fists clenched slightly.

His eyes followed my gaze and then flicked up to meet mine again.

"Damn. I really did a number on that dress." His voice sounded like guilt, but his grin said otherwise. "People are gonna wonder why you're wearing such a thing. They might start gossiping if they think you came in from the fields."

I turned my head slightly. "You're unnecessarily loud."

"And you're unnecessarily quiet," he shot back immediately, hands slipping into his coat pockets.

"Do you always crash into women in alleyways and then insult their clothing?"

"Only on weekends," he smirked. "And whenever bad luck throws me at someone who looks like they're allergic to empathy."

I narrowed my eyes.

He stared at me a moment longer, then tilted his head slightly, stepping closer.

"Hey. Listen. Let me make it up to you. I've got an idea."

"I don't need your help."

He raised a brow. "You sure? Because right now you look like a princess who fell into a pigpen and still expects to be let into the palace."

"I'm not trying to impress anyone."

"Then you shouldn't have worn a dress like that."

His words caught me off-guard. Just slightly. I don't know why.

He gestured with a lazy flick of his fingers toward the alley he came from. "C'mon. I can fix it. Or, at least, make it worse in a way that looks intentional."

I stared at him. "That sounds idiotic."

"It is. But fashionable idiocy is all the hype these days."

I didn't answer.

My core strength wasn't weak. I'm trained to withstand more than that.

And yet—when we collided, he didn't budge. My center lost. His didn't.

He's not normal. Not a civilian.

A fighter? An adventurer maybe? His presence... it was sharp. Buried, but dangerous.

There's strength under that sarcasm. I felt it.

That intrigued me more than I want to admit.

"Fine," I muttered at last.

He smiled. Not a warm one—a knowing one.

"Thought so. The name's Arius, by the way. Professional adventurer, part-time dress-ruiner."

I paused a moment before replying.

"Alina."

He started walking into the alleyway, waving his hand behind him without looking back.

"Nice to meet you, Alina. Let's go ruin fashion norms together."

I followed, silent.

I hated this. But...

For some reason, I didn't stop walking.

We reached the end of the alleyway. It opened into a quiet plaza, the noise of Rinascita softening behind stone walls and blooming ivy. No one was looking at us.

Perfect.

I turned to leave, assuming he'd do the same.

But of course, he didn't.

Arius looked me up and down again, his eyes pausing at the muddy streaks staining my dress.

"Alright," he exhaled, hands on his hips like he just solved a great mystery. "How about this: I'll buy you a nice shirt. Casual. Not a dress. Sorry I am too broke to afford those."

I stared at him, unimpressed.

"No."

"How about a white shirt then?"

"No?"

"How about a green shirt then?"

"No."

"How about two shirts then?"

"Stop talking."

He held up both hands in surrender, but the grin on his face said surrender wasn't in his vocabulary.

"Hey, hey, just saying—you look pretty in that dress. Even with the mud. But I'm thinking... black. You'd look even prettier in something black. Something that says 'don't talk to me, or I'll end your bloodline.' You know, fashion-forward."

I narrowed my eyes. "Flattery won't work on me."

"Wasn't flattery. That was an observation backed by science."

I turned slightly to leave.

Then he clasped his hands together—dramatically.

"Please! I won't be able to sleep tonight knowing I ruined someone else's day!"

I kept walking.

He took a step beside me, then loudly pointed to a man sitting at a nearby bench.

"That guy might start laughing at you."

The man looked up. Confused. Blinked. Said nothing.

Arius pointed at another man across the plaza.

"He might call you the Queen of Mud!"

"...Huh?" the second guy muttered, tilting his head.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Are you done humiliating yourself?"

"I'm trying to save your reputation, actually," he said with mock seriousness. "You can't just show up to a banquet like that."

That caught me.

I turned my head, just slightly. "...How do you know I'm going to a banquet?"

"Uhhh... Lucky guess and that I know you're someone special here!"

He probably knew I was a sword saint or something, or he was invited as well.

He smirked wider, sensing the slip. "That's even better! You'll stand out with a shirt. Everyone else in gowns, and there you are, fashion-revolutionary. The trend-setter."

My fingers twitched.

Is this guy really trying to be a smartass with me?

Should I break his arms or his legs?

...Maybe both. That'd be more satisfying.

"Please," Arius said again, voice softening just a touch. "Let me help. I can't forgive myself unless I do something."

"Why won't you give up?" I finally asked, staring directly at him. "Don't you see I don't care? I'm cold toward you for a reason."

For a second, he went still.

Then came a smile again.

"Ice, you say? You consider yourself cold?" He tilted his head, eyes gently scanning my face. "Is that why you haven't made a single expression since we met? Haven't smiled even once?"

I didn't answer.

He stepped back just slightly, giving me space.

"I see... So that's it. You're not the friendly type. Got it. You don't smile, you don't talk much, and you definitely don't like people getting close."

"Correct," I said flatly. "Now get lost."

But he didn't leave.

"I see," he said again. "You consider yourself cold. But let me tell you something, Alina—ice was once water too."

...What?

Ice was once water too?

What is he trying to say?

He looked away for a moment, then back at me.

"I don't know what happened to make you like this," he said, voice still light, but not mocking. "And I'm not gonna ask. It's not my place. We're strangers. I get that."

He took a breath.

"But just this once—let me help you. I'll leave right after. Just a little balance to even out the damage that I caused."

I should walk away.

He's an idiot. A stranger. His jokes are reckless, his voice too casual. He doesn't know me. He shouldn't want to.

And yet...

Ice was once water too.

Why did that line stick?

I don't need help. I've never needed help. Not since I was a child. I've trained myself to survive, to be strong, to become everything Master molded me to be.

Emotion clouds judgment. Smiles are distractions. Laughter is a luxury.

Those things are for people who can afford to be weak.

So why... did those words feel like they scraped something buried?

Was I really ever... "water"?

Before I guarded myself, before I hardened... was I ever someone who could smile?
Who could laugh?

...Was I happy?

No. That version of me doesn't exist anymore.

But... what if it did?

What if, deep down, under all this frost, something else was waiting?

No. That's dangerous thinking.

Weakness gets people killed.

The mud had dried by now. Brown crusts clung to the edges of my dress like disgrace clings to those who lose battles they should have won. I walked in silence, eyes forward, spine straight, as if posture could undo the shame of looking like a drenched peasant at a noble gathering.

And this smartass still kept on talking.

"...thirty gold for a dress here," he said casually, his voice sliding into the air like silk over glass. "And the nearest boutique with anything half-decent is two districts the other way."

I didn't respond.

"And of course, walking there would take... what? Thirty minutes? Sixty? Not including how long you'd need to find something that suits you. Meanwhile, the banquet's ticking."

Oh yeah... my money was in the carriage and Sylvia was already in the banquet. Even if I didn't accept; where was I going to go to even buy a new dress?

"That's fine," he said warmly. "I'll cover for you and buy it. Honestly, it's not about the money—look at you, already pulling off a ruined dress with those pretty purple eyes. You'll probably make that shirt look expensive."

I turned my head slightly, eyes narrowing.

Flattery. Obvious.

"It may seem selfish but I also want to see you in a pretty shirt." He said a bit too casually.

And yet...

His tone wasn't mocking. It wasn't laced with that usual aristocratic sarcasm or the fake kindness I'd grown used to parsing from years of noble lies. His words were dipped in something warmer, something annoyingly difficult to pin down.

Was he truly trying to console me... or was this manipulation?

Of course, it was manipulation. No one does things for free. No one compliments someone who's clearly not looking her best unless they want something.

And still...

Still, why did the warmth in his voice almost make me want to believe it?

"I don't need compliments. Leave me alone and go away," I said flatly.

But then he reached for my hand.

Instinct screamed. I tensed. My fingers twitched.

Don't touch me.

I was going to pull away—coldly, immediately—but a flicker broke through the walls I had built.

A memory.

My master... smiling. His fingers gently wrapping around my hand when I was younger. When I had failed. When I felt like I wasn't worthy of holding a sword...

He looked at me and said: "Alina, you should smile. A real one. It means you trust someone with your heart, even if just a little."

I never understood that. Trust was a liability. But in that moment—his hand around mine—I wanted to understand it.

That was the last time I ever smiled before he left...

My hand stopped pulling back.

Before I knew it, Arius was gently tugging me along, down the stone path toward the store, his fingers not gripping too tightly. Just... enough.

I walked beside him in silence. I hated how my heart beat louder than my footsteps.

This is irrational. I don't know him. I should've broken his fingers.

Inside the store, I stood stiff like a statue as he spoke with the merchant. I didn't move until a simple black shirt was gently offered to me. Long-sleeved. High collar. Cotton. Soft. Slightly oversized.

"This," he said with that same smirk, "will make you look mysterious. Like a noble's secret daughter."

I took it without a word, went behind the curtain, and changed.

Chaos.

My mind was chaos.

What the hell am I doing?

This is a shirt.

A shirt.

A plain black shirt.

For a banquet.

I pulled it on slowly. The fabric brushed against my skin like betrayal.

I looked into the mirror and genuinely considered punching the glass.

I looked like someone who had given up on appearances. Someone casual. Someone... approachable.

I looked like a woman wearing a shirt to a banquet.

Why did I let this happen?

When I stepped out, Arius didn't say anything at first. He just looked at me.

I avoided his eyes. His presence irritated me. His words disarmed me. His kindness made me suspicious. And worst of all?

I want to kill him so badly...

"I'm the only woman wearing a shirt to a banquet," I whispered under my breath, almost trembling.

He smiled.

Of course he did.

The bastard probably thought this was romantic progress.

But I couldn't ignore the soft warmth of the shirt... or how my master's words still echoed in my skull:

"Smile. It means you trust someone, even if just a little."

Moments after exiting the store.

The wind brushed softly against my face as I stepped back into the street. The shirt moved with me—a little too loose, a little too soft. I felt like I was walking in someone else's skin. The oversized sleeves flopped lightly as I moved, brushing against my knuckles like some ridiculous flag declaring, "I gave in."

Behind me, the devil continued his work.

"You look cute," Arius said with the sweetness of poison.

I didn't look back. "Shut up."

"No, seriously. Adorably deadly. Like if an angel wore black and carried a knife."

"Keep talking and I'll test the knife part."

He laughed. Again. Always laughing. Like my threats were jokes.

"Lovely. You're genuinely... lovely, Alina."

I stopped for a moment, just to glare at him from over my shoulder. "Do you want to be hospitalized today?"

He held up his hands in surrender, a grin stretching across his face. "Alright, alright. Compliments paused. Only admiration from afar now."

"Good."

Five seconds passed.

"...but I still think you're glowing beautifully."

I stopped walking entirely. In my mind, I had already shoved him into a pit. Set it on fire. Buried the ashes. Twice.

He didn't even flinch.

"And you have that distant, mysterious, cold charm. Like an unreadable poem carved into my heart."

"Are you trying to die?" I asked in a calm, professional tone. The kind people use before an execution.

Arius just stepped beside me like I hadn't just threatened grave violence. "Not yet. I still haven't seen you smile."

I turned on my heel and kept walking, faster now. He followed.

"Why are you still following me?" I asked, monotone but sharp. Like the edge of a blade that hasn't drawn blood—yet.

"I figured I'd make sure no one judges you when we get back. Banquets can be brutal," he said with a soft concern. "And besides, I'm coming too."

I stopped. Slowly turned.

"You what?"

"I'll be there. To ensure nobody laughs at you or anything. That's a good idea right?"

"...Get lost."

"Oof. Cold."

"If you don't disappear in the next three seconds, I'm going to actually break your legs."

He raised his hands again in mock-surrender, this time adding a dramatic, exaggerated bow. "No need to escalate, Lady Blackshirt."

I walked. Fast. Silent.

He trailed behind.

"You really don't have to worry. You look good. Good enough. Great, even—"

"No woman should wear a man's shirt to a banquet." My voice was ice. Murderous ice. "It's uncultured. It looks bad. So shut up."

He chuckled. "I don't believe in logic and science."

I stopped again. "What the hell are you talking about now?"

He stepped up beside me, just close enough to be annoying. "They say the sun is the hottest thing in the universe, right?"

"Because it is," I said, rolling my eyes. "It's a thermonuclear—"

"Wrong," he interrupted, snapping his fingers. "The hottest thing in the universe is you, in that black shirt."

...

I blinked.

Then I facepalmed.

"This is actual torment," I muttered. "Hell is real and it's standing behind me."

He laughed again, unbothered by my total lack of amusement.

"I'm not staying near you," I said. "You go your way. I'll go mine. I don't need protection."

"Fair," he said, finally sounding a bit more grounded. "But I'll be at the banquet anyway. Just doing my job. I don't intend to cling to you like a fanboy, alright? You won't even notice I'm there."

That... was reasonable.

I sighed.

He noticed.

"Oh? A sigh! Progress?"

"Fine. You can attend. Just don't come near me."

He gave a smug little salute. "Understood."

"And if you so much as breathe a single word toward me..."

"Yes?"

"I'm breaking your legs."

"Very fair."

I continued walking.

He followed at a slight distance now, hands in his pockets, whistling some infuriating tune.

And despite it all—despite everything in me demanding I regret this entire interaction—I didn't feel... alone.

Maybe that was the worst part.

Maybe that's what scared me most.

WAIT! He was the one that defended Celia earlier before I arrived... was this all coincidence..?

Yeah.. it had to be.

4:47 PM - PRESENT MOMENT

Alina's Perspective:

This was becoming laughable.

Was Arius seriously flirting with her now? The entire damn way here, he wouldn't stop showering me in flattery—"most beautiful girl of the evening," "absolutely hot"—those exact words, unfiltered and absurd. Now? Now he sees another woman and switches like nothing ever happened?

Tch.

I didn't feel anything. Just a twitch of irritation.

Was I missing attention? No. Far from it. I don't need anyone's attention. It serves no purpose. Yet... the constant praise on the way here... now suddenly being given to someone else—

Disgusting. Typical. Just a womanizing prick after all.

"Here," a voice slid through the crowd and into my ear. A glass was held in front of me, delicate fingers still touching its side.

Sylvia.

Her presence had always carried a noble scent—poised, composed, confident. She didn't need to say she was a leader. You just knew.

"Figured you might want something in your hand before you start answering the obvious," she said, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Or is that just reserved for our way back?"

"...I'm not answering anything right now," I replied flatly, taking the glass and sipping, using the moment to mask the tightness around my jaw.

"Oh please," she chuckled, brushing her hair back elegantly. "Word travels fast. I heard some man in an overcoat stopped a group from tormenting a white-haired girl earlier like a leader. Rumor has it he moved managed to silence all of them with just words. Sound familiar?"

My hand paused mid-sip.

So she heard. Of course she did. That overcoat, that movement.

Arius.

I didn't respond.

She smiled wider. "Still surprised you made a friend along the way." The way she said friend was dipped in velvet sarcasm. "I almost thought the world was too small."

I stayed silent, not because I agreed—but because I couldn't deny it either.

Then her eyes narrowed as they skimmed down my attire. "And more importantly... why in all of Celestine are you wearing a black shirt to a banquet?"

I stiffened.

She leaned in, whispering just by my ear, "It's buttoned wrong, too. Not exactly you, Alina."

"...My dress got ruined," I said, eyes darting elsewhere, voice low.

"Oh?" she leaned back with a smirk. "Then you shouldn't have come."

...She was right.

Why did I force myself to come?

I could've skipped this ridiculous event altogether. But... he kept talking the whole way. Arius. Kept dragging my thoughts, forcing me to respond, baiting me into dumb word games and subtle taunts, never letting my mind fall into its usual calculations.

Was that intentional?

Was he distracting me on purpose?

And if so... why?

"Oh no..." Sylvia's voice curled again, lips twitching with amusement. "Did your friend ask you to wear that shirt?"

My eyes narrowed. "It was a last resort. I'll explain later."

"Of course," she said with a light laugh. "I'm just saying, most women don't wear a man's shirt to a noble banquet unless—"

"I said I'll explain later."

She raised her hands in mock surrender. "Very well, Lady of Mystery." She followed my gaze toward them. "Though your friend seems... busy."

Navina was standing just a little too close.

And Arius, smiling with that effortless charm, his tone playful yet formal. It was nauseatingly well-practiced.

Navina: "I must say, you carry yourself with quite the poise, Sir Arius. A gentleman among others."

Arius: "Oh, you flatter me. I assure you, I've done nothing to earn such praise. I simply enjoy elegance when it graces my path."

Navina: "Oh? Then I must be lucky to be standing in your path."

Arius: "And I, cursed to be charmed so easily by wit and beauty of yours."

Every word was dressed in manners, but the subtext was skin-deep and obvious. He was flirting—and she was encouraging it. Hiding it under etiquette. Typical nobles.

That twitch returned.

Not that I felt anything.

Just that it was... irritating.

Sylvia chuckled under her breath again, sipping slowly. "You're watching them like a hunter. I almost feel sorry for her."

I said nothing.

My face stayed blank. My glass, still half-full.

Spinning in a very dangerous direction.

But I was calm.

Because I had to be.

Even if I wanted to tear that smug expression off his face.

Then I heard it...

Navina's voice floated out like warm perfume in winter air. Elegant. Drenched in sweetness.

"Sir Arius, you seem like a very eloquent gentleman," she said with a soft smile that no doubt masked layers of intention. "I also saw you earlier—defending that poor white-haired girl. You spoke so gracefully, and calmed the crowd like it was nothing. You're... something special."

Her words were like silk-dipped traps.

Arius, the bastard, just chuckled, brushing it off with a humble grin. "It was nothing. I just said what made sense. Logically, they were acting like fools. Nothing specially, really."

Navina leaned a little closer. "And earlier... you stopped Aaron from striking Miss Alina. That wasn't just logic. That required razor-sharp reflexes. Even I didn't see it coming."

He waved her off again, eyes narrowed slightly in a coy smile. "It was just a fluke. I moved without thinking and somehow it managed to work.."

She smirked—so delicately—and with that syrup-laced tone asked, "Arius, if you'll allow me... I'd like to invite you to my guild—Crimson Eclipse."

I tilted my head, blinking. Seriously? Now? Was she trying to steal him away?

"Are you sure, Miss Navina?" Arius asked, leaning forward just enough to be playful. "I might disappoint you."

Navina smiled knowingly. "I know talent when I see it. I can give you my telecasting number—you could join as early as tomorrow, sir Arius."

I tensed. She was really doing it. Boldly. Shamelessly. Wasn't that... unfair?

I crossed my arms. Why does this even bother me? I don't care where that womanizer goes. Let him flirt his way into whatever crimson cave he wants.

Then Sylvia leaned close and whispered like a devil in a gown.

"Oh look, Alina," she teased. "Navina's going to steal your friend."

"He's not my friend," I muttered coldly.

But my eyes didn't leave them. I knew what he was going to say. People always went with what benefitted them the most. Always.

Navina asked again, slower this time:

"So, sir Arius... do you want my number?"

He smirked, not with the same fake charm, but a sharper grin....

"Nah. I have my own number. I don't need yours."

...What?

Navina kept smiling, but it stiffened just a bit. "I see. That's unfortunate. Still... I hope we'll still get along."

"Likewise," Arius said, voice cool.

Sylvia immediately leaned in closer again, practically vibrating with mischief. "Alina... did you hear that? That wasn't just a no. That was a rejection. A direct one. From a guild leader, no less. That's not common. That's... bold."

I looked at him again. Why? Why would he turn her down?

Navina was... well, everything a man like him would jump at. Pretty. Popular. Powerful. Rich...

Wasn't she prettier than me? Wasn't that why he ran off the second we arrived?

Stop, Alina. Stupid.

Emotion is an inefficient distraction. I don't think like this. I don't need to think like this. There must be a reason.

...Logically, why was I irritated?

My heart rate was irregular. My breath, caught halfway.

Then the memory crept in like frost forming on a window.

My master.

He used to praise me often. Say I was hardworking, determined. "Sweet."

Back then, only he would say those words. And I—

...I used to smile when he did.

We'd train till I collapsed, and afterward... he'd always get me the same stupid vanilla-strawberry ice cream. He said it was "training for the soul." And we'd sit together on the stairs, eating it under the sun. I smiled. I actually... smiled.

Without realizing, my hand drifted up to my cheek. Warm. Was I—

"Are you blushing for Arius?" Sylvia asked, wide-eyed with a teasing grin.

I turned to her sharply, cold and flat. "Impossible. I'd never do that. Now leave me alone."

She chuckled like a noblewoman sipping victory. I hated that sound.

I turned away, back to the crowd.

Only my master ever made me smile. Only he...

Arius? No. He was a womanizing prick. A man who chased me all the way to the banquet like a persistent pest.

I understand why I felt this way now... I was unconsciously giving master's role to that guy... that was so stupid of me.

Unworthy of being my friend even.

Then suddenly—

"Excuse me, sir!"

Two armored guards stomped in from the grand hall's side, their boots clanking like poorly timed drums. One had a scowl etched permanently on his face. The other looked like he hadn't slept since the last Grotesque attack.

"Do you have an invite to this banquet?" Scowl Guard asked, squinting at Arius like he was a misplaced napkin.

Arius blinked, then chuckled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head nervous.

"Ahaha... yeah, about that—I'm kind of a special case."

Both guards looked at each other. Scoffed.

"Yeah, sure you are." Sleepy Guard rolled his eyes. "Come with us, Mr. Special."

"W-Wait, hold up—Alina brought me here!" Arius shouted as they started pulling him back by the shoulders.

Both guards turned to me with their "really?" faces.

I sipped my drink slowly, tilted my head.

This guy seriously trying to leech off me more now?

Fine.

Let's see how he likes this.

I looked at the guards, cool and detached.

"I don't even know him. Throw him outside like trash."

Arius gasped like I'd stabbed him in the heart. "**Betrayal!!**" he cried as the guards cackled, practically dragging him like a sack of dirty laundry.

I watched. Calm. Cold.

Internally?

HAHAHAHA.

That's what you get for switching up on me—uh, no. For following me here like a parasite.

As the gates closed behind his flailing silhouette, I sighed.

Peace. Blessed, glorious peace.

That guy... he talked with more love bombing than a flirt-obsessed lover. A total flattery monster. If flattery was a crime, he'd be doing life time serving.

Finally, I focused back on my drink. Ah, serenity—wait.

Sir Alveric the noble... no. It's Avelric. Great.

Even my memory was malfunctioning thanks to that ridiculous man.

Avelric now stood at the center of the banquet floor. Polished. Regal..

Aaron reappeared beside him, thankfully with a calmer expression, seems like that talk with scar fixed him.

The hall fell silent as Avelric raised a hand.

"Honored Sword Saints, distinguished guild leaders, and treasured guests of Rinascita—" His voice flowed like music, his tone dipped in years of nobility and wine-soaked diplomacy.

"—Today we gather not only to celebrate your arrival, but to acknowledge your courage. This banquet stands as a beacon of gratitude from Rinascita for your resolve in the face of war."

His eyes swept over us with poetic weight.

"To Sir, Levi and Zain—The Celestial Apex"

To Sir, Xander—Eternal Overseer"

To Lady, Navina—Crimson Eclipse.

To Sir, Aaron as Scar's Proxy—Valhalla.

And to Lady Alina and Lady Sylvia—Requiem."

Sylvia leaned toward me with a smug grin.

I stayed still, not giving her the satisfaction of my reaction.

Avelric continued.

"You are all the finest saints of our time. And soon, you will fight together."

He extended both arms.

"I hereby announce the formation of a sacred alliance: a coalition of all guilds and saints, a union built to protect our lands against the grotesques. We call it... the Celestial Hunt."

A pause.

"Let the Anti-Grotesques Coalition rise and stand strong. Led by all guild leaders, with each of you representing your guilds... we shall endure this crisis, and emerge victorious."

He raised his goblet.

"To the Hunt. To the Alliance. To Victory."

A wave of clinks and cheers erupted.

Voices rang with pride and hope.

I raised my glass quietly and sipped.

Then I looked around.

Faces of everyone here... They were all strong.

This wasn't just a banquet anymore.

It was the calm before war.

The real thing was coming. And I knew it.

The grotesques wouldn't stop.

I had to stop them.

I gripped my glass a little tighter, watching the golden wine ripple.

I can't get emotional. I can't let that flattery freak or anything else cloud my judgment.

I'm a Sword Saint.

I've got one job.

I'll destroy them all.

Every grotesque that dares come near this town will fall.

Just like Master asked of me.

I took a breath. Deep. Silent.

Then I whispered to the wine in my hand, like it could carry my words to the wind.

"I'll do it for you, Master... and when it's over—please..."

"Come visit me again like you promised."

My heart thumped.

One beat louder.

Then another.

I looked down, face calm—

But inside, my chest was anything but.

Because he promised... After it's all over he'll come visit me if I succeeded.

And I will succeed at all costs.

----- **Final**

Celia's Perspective: - A lot of hours have passed.

Location: Forest (Nighttime)

It's been... seven hours.

Seven hours since I killed that grotesque. Since I saw the hatred in their eyes—not the grotesque's, but theirs. The people who tried to get rid of me the moment I entered Rinascita.

I press my knees together, arms hugging my legs, back leaning against a damp tree trunk. The bark scratches a little, but I don't move. It's night now. The sky's dimmed into a deep blue blur, and the air's colder than I thought it'd be.

I'm still here.

Why?

Because I don't want to go back.

If I show my face again... someone might remember what I did. What I had to do and my past. And they'll look at me the way they always do when I try to help—like I'm some kind of ticking thing with blood under my nails.

I only wanted to save them. I only wanted to save him.

But in the end, no matter what I do... they still whisper. Still stare. Still hate me.

They don't see me.

They see a monster that wears a girl's smile.

I lower my head onto my knees. My breath fogs against my arms. It's quiet out here, but not in my head. Never in my head.

It's happening again, isn't it? People distancing themselves. Pretending. Putting on their faces and masks. Everyone's always so careful to show the version of themselves they think will be accepted. But deep down, they're all hiding knives.

A tear slips down. Just one. My eyes don't bother to make a second. Even they're used to this now.

No matter where I go or what I give—at the end of the day, I'll always be the girl they approach when they need something... and discard when they've had enough.

Just like Levi and Emma did. That day.

I should've known better. Since my tenth birthday.

No.

Since the day I was born.

People aren't real. They're liars. They mold themselves to fit in, to use others. And once they get what they want... they show you who they really are.

Today? Arius helped me... sure. But let's be honest, he did it because I was useful. That's all.

Just like Alina who wanted to know something from me.

Is that what I am? Something warm to hold when they're cold? Something to patch up the loneliness with?

Maybe I'm just—

No. I need to think. To breathe.

These past hours I've been alone, not just physically—but deep in the silence of my own mind. Picking it apart. Wondering...

This emotion. This messy, confusing, wonderful, terrifying thing we all whisper about.

Love.

Do I really love Kaiser? Or am I just projecting? Another delusional girl who can't tell the difference between obsession and affection?

...

Heh. That's the kind of thought you don't say out loud. The kind that gets people to stare at you like you're unhinged. But maybe I am. Maybe I always was.

I remember something.

Something I buried. Something I should've buried better.

It was night—like this one. Cold, quiet, cruel. I had just found out my friends lied to me. Said they were busy. But they were all out, playing together without me.

And my parents? They broke their promise. Again. Said we'd go out. Just us. Said they'd make time. I even dressed up and waited. But no one came.

They were all liars.

So I left. Didn't tell anyone. Slipped out into the dark, past the fences, past the gardens. There was a spot near the edge of the woods where I'd go sometimes.

To cry.

But that night, something was... different.

There was a tree there. I don't remember it being there before. Thick. Blackened bark. No leaves. And tied to it—a swing. A single rope swing hanging by rusted chains. It creaked softly in the wind.

Was I dreaming? I don't know. I don't think I ever knew after that.

The ground was soft, but there were footprints. Not mine. Small. Lined with something dark. Blood?

No. It couldn't be. Could it?

But I sat. Of course I did. Where else was I supposed to go to cry?

I climbed onto the swing, the rope rough against my hands. It moved.

On its own.

No one was behind me. But it moved.

And that's when I heard it.

A music box. Faint. Off-tune. Playing some lullaby I didn't know.

The moon had hidden itself. There was no light. Just shadows. Long ones.

I should've run.

But I didn't.

The air was wrong. Heavy. Wet. The scent of iron... like something had died nearby.

And still—I swung.

I let the wind and whatever force behind me guide me. It didn't feel like I was in control.

Like... the me sitting there wasn't me.

Was I ever me?

Or was there always something else inside?

A girl who didn't cry. A girl who never forgave liars. A girl who wasn't an angel?

I remember speaking. My voice was quiet, but it came out shaky.

"Are you... my friend?" I said alone to myself on the swing...

No response.

I clutched the rope tighter.

"...Are you the only one who cares about me?"

And then I heard it.

A whisper. Not from the wind. Not from behind.

From inside.

"Friend...? No, Celia... I am you. The part you left behind. The part you couldn't love."

The swing jolted. I gasped, but couldn't move.

"You are not an angel, Celia. You were never meant to be."

"You're a loving murderer."

"And one day... when the world takes what you cherish..."

"You'll tear it all apart to get it back."

I couldn't scream. My throat locked. My fingers bled from how tight I held the rope.

"You think this is about them? About your parents? Your friends?"

"No. This is about your future. When you meet someone who'll make you happy. Who touches your heart and doesn't flinch."

A shadow curled around the base of the tree. Thin. Long. Like a woman's silhouette but too tall... too twisted.

"You'll kill for him, won't you?"

"You'll smile with blood on your face, and he'll still hold you close."

"Because deep down, he knows..."

"You were made to love like this."

I bit my lip until it bled. My chest rose and fell fast—like my heart wanted out of my ribs.

"Don't fight it. This kindness you wear... it's just lies on the surface."

"Let them call you a monster, Celia."

"But when you kill for love... you'll finally be free."

The music box stopped.

And the swing slowed.

When I looked down... my hands were clean. The blood was gone.

But the voice stayed.

It never left.

Even now... it whispers.

And sometimes...

I whisper back.

I stared at my hands.

My fingers twitched slightly... as if reacting to a memory too distant and too deep to belong to this world. They were trembling. But it wasn't fear.

It was doubt.

"...Why?"

My voice barely came out. Just a whisper to the forest night.

Why...

Why had I never lied to him?

I lied to everyone.

To my parents—I told them I wanted to sleep alone when all I wanted was to isolate myself.

To my friends—I said I was just tired, when in truth, I wanted to cry alone.

To strangers—I smiled, hoping they'd see something loveable in me.

But it was all a performance. A cute little girl who made it easy for them to believe I wasn't dying inside.

Yet with him...

I never had to act.

I never could.

Even when I smiled through my tears... he saw it.

That night... when I was breaking and pretending everything was fine...

He didn't fall for it even for a moment.

He didn't ask me anything. He just held me.

And in that moment...

I didn't cry alone.

"...Kaiser."

I said his name like it was a sin.

And maybe for someone like me—it was.

I smiled. A wide, sweet, innocent little smile.

But inside?

Inside, a monster was laughing.

Because now I understood something terrifying about myself.

Something honest.

"Kill for love,"

That's what that thing said to me. That shadow... the one that swung me as a child under the blood-soaked tree.

"You'll kill for him, won't you?"

Would I?

I clenched my hands tightly into fists. Nails digging into flesh.

Blood threatened to bloom under my skin.

"Yes..."

I whispered.

Because I will.

No matter how I look at it—

I obsessively love him.

He's mine.

I worked every day. Every sleepless night.

To get stronger.

To bring him back.

To be useful enough to stand beside him.

That night—months ago—

When he said he was good with women...

I wanted to chain him to me. Lock him somewhere no one could reach. No one but me.

When he went to comfort Emma...

I wanted to grab her by the throat and rip her voice out for stealing his attention.

And that morning...

When they went out together,

I wanted to follow her and cut her into pieces.

But I didn't.

Because I thought love was gentle. I thought love was selfless.

But no—

My love was selfish.

It was violent.

It wanted.

And maybe... maybe that's okay.

Because I never lied to him.

Even when I smiled, he knew.

Even when I stayed silent, he heard.

Even when I pretended, he saw me.

This...

This wasn't just love.

This was devotion.

A murderer's love.

And what's wrong with being a murderer...

If I get to be happy in the end?

What's wrong with being the villain...

If I'm smiling with him?

I am not an angel.

I never was.

The shadow was right.

I'm a monster dressed in sweet skin and soft red eyes.

A liar who tells the truth only to the one person she loves.

And now...

I accept that.

I accept me.

When I burn the grotesques down to ash...

When I make them crawl like insects under my feet...

When I carve their hive into a throne of bones—

I'll take back what's mine.

I'll get him back.

And I'll keep him.

Forever.

Even if time ends.

Even if I have to cut the world apart just to stop it from taking him again.

Because I want to keep him forever.

Because I love him more than I love anything.

More than I love myself.

More than I care about right or wrong.

I smiled again.

Not the fake one I gave the world.

A real one. Dark. Warm. Unholy.

"...You're mine, Kaiser."

My whisper melted into the night as I never returned back that night... alone to myself in the dark.

Next stop: The Grotesque Hive Raid.

Let them prepare.

Because the girl who used to cry alone on the swing...

Now swings the cause of blood.

And she doesn't miss.