

The Last Step

#Chapter 71: Heartbreak Part 4 (Final) - Read The Last Step Chapter 71: Heartbreak Part 4 (Final)

Chapter 71 - Heartbreak Part 4 (Final)

----- All Mine -----

11:39 PM - Unknown Forest, underneath the stars.

Slowly, his eyes fluttered open, lashes twitching as consciousness returned to him. My hands were already on his shoulder—right where they belonged.

His eyes blinked up at me, sleepy, confused... beautiful.

"Uhh... nice angle...?" Kaiser muttered, his voice low.

"You're awake... Kai," I whispered, smiling down at him.

"...Kai?" he echoed.

"I'll call you that from now on, okay? Always." I reached down, cupping his cheek, the warmth of his skin tingling against my palm. "Only me."

He chuckled faintly. "Yeah, yeah..."

Then he tried to move. Sit up.

No.

No, no, no.

I pressed him back down to my lap, my hand on his chest, the other threading through his hair because he was mine.

"Stay... on my lap forever." My voice didn't ask. It commanded. Sweetly. Murderously.

His eyes flicked up to mine. "Celia... your eyes..."

They were glowing. A darker red than before. Like the early night before the murderous bloodmoon. I could feel it. I could feel my pupils dilate with every breath he took, every twitch of his fingers.

This. This was what being alive felt like.

"You love me, right?" I asked. My voice was soft—almost fragile. Almost.

"Huh?" Kaiser blinked.

"Say. Yes." I leaned closer, my breath brushing his skin, my nose nearly touching his.

He went quiet. His brow furrowed, his lips curling.

"...What's wrong with you all of a sudden, Celia—?"

"Don't you see?" I whispered, still smiling. "It's how much you love me. That's why I act this way."

He smirked.

"Oh? Trying to tease me now for all the flirting I did today?"

"Yes." I nodded slowly.

"Then try me," he said as he lay back down on my lap.

I leaned over, eyes locked with his, so close he could feel every syllable.

"I love you so much..." I whispered, voice trembling with sincerity, "I'd carve your chest open, slide my hands into your ribs, and feel your heart beat against my palms—just to know it's really mine."

The smile never left my lips. Not even as his expression froze.

Yes, love... I'd do that. I'd keep it in a jar next to my pillow.

"I see... that's how it is, huh?" he muttered.

"Don't fall in love with people like me," he said with that cocky, neutral grin. "Trust me... I'm a natural heartbreaker."

"Then break me. Choke me until I can't breathe," I whispered back. "Let me tell you I love you until my throat bleeds."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Do you really want your heart shattered that easily?"

I leaned in, brushing his ear with my lips.

"My heart's always been yours to break."

His eyes widened.

"Okay... are you even teasing?" he asked, his voice a bit shaky now.

"Am I?" I said back, voice airy, innocent, terrifying.

I pulled him closer, my nails brushing down his neck to his collarbone.

"It's okay to love me," I whispered, desperate and delicate. "Please love me. Please."

"Careful, Celia..." he muttered. "If the other girls hear about this—"

"They won't be alive to see tomorrow when I'm done." I cut him off with a smile. "They won't be an issue. Just you and me."

I cradled his face like it was made of glass.

"You're not allowed to see them anymore," I said, possessively. "You're mine."

I leaned closer to him.

"I'll provide for you. I'll do everything. Just stay in my arms forever."

I brushed his lips with my thumb.

"You won't ever be going out without me."

He stared at me, wide-eyed now. Silent.

"Celia..." he said at last, serious now. "What's wrong?"

"I'm cursed," I whispered, leaning closer, our foreheads pressed together. "Cursed to love you forever."

I tilted my head, smiling as my hand slipped down his chest again.

"You're mine. Mine alone."

Kaiser tried to sit up again.

He still doesn't get it, does he?

He still thinks I'll let him go.

No.

A chain slithered out from behind me, fast and cold, latching around his wrist in a tight grip. My power. My love.

He froze.

"You. Can't. Leave. Me," I said, murder in my voice, tightening my arms around him as if letting go would kill me.

"What are you doing?!" he shouted, startled.

Oh, Kai... Poor thing. You're confused.

"You like attention, don't you?" I purred, tilting my head. "I'll give it to you. I'll give you all of my attention."

"W-What?!"

He looked so adorable like that. Helpless. Tied down. Mine.

"I'm allowed to be obsessed with you," I said, my voice quivering with manic sincerity. "I'm yours. Only."

I leaned down more, lowering my lips to his cheek, then to his ear.

"I will strip away all that you know... all that you love... until you have nobody but me."

I said it sweetly.

Murderously.

And I meant every word.

I could feel his body tense—maybe in fear, maybe in disbelief, maybe because he knew deep down that no one would ever love him like I do. Not like this.

"Celia—!"

"Shut up and kiss me," I whispered, and before he could speak again—

I kissed him.

I kissed him hard.

His lips were warm. Softer than I imagined. A little surprised at first... but he didn't pull away.

I held his face with both hands, fingers trembling, heart clawing through my ribs.

This—this was all I ever wanted.

This was the only thing I've ever needed.

All of him. His lips. His breath. His eyes. His smile. His thoughts. His soul.

Mine.

He was mine.

Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to love in ways the world would never understand.

I would ruin everything just to preserve this moment.

I'd burn the entire world to keep him in my lap like this.

As the kiss slowly broke and I pulled away, my lips still brushed his—soft, lingering, desperate.

My heart felt like it was about to shatter in my chest from how fast it was beating.

The chain around his wrist dissolved into flickers of light.

My fingers trembled as I let go of his face.

His beautiful face.

My vision blurred for a moment—and when I blinked again, my eyes no longer burned that deep, dangerous crimson. The lighter red hue returned, delicate and fragile like rose petals.

...My mouth fell open slightly as I realized what I'd just done.

Oh no.

I—

I really just...?!

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

I screamed and threw both hands over my face, blushing harder than I ever had in my entire life.

I wanted to die.

No. I wanted to run.

No—wait—I wanted to pull him in again and never let go.

...WHY AM I LIKE THIS?!

----- **Split Personalities** -----

12:02 AM - Unknown Forest, underneath the stars.

We sat in silence, the moonlight touching both our backs.

He didn't look at me.

I didn't dare look at him.

My heart was still pounding.

My cheeks were still on fire.

My lips... still remembered the kiss.

What... what was that?

That wasn't me.

I mean—it was me, but... it didn't feel like me.

I—I love him, yes, more than anything—but I'm not like that. I'm not... obsessive. I'm not crazy.

Am I?

When he went unconscious... something took over. My thoughts weren't my own. I didn't feel like myself. It was like... like something else wore my skin. Spoke through my voice.

And kissed him like I did it.

I turned, just slightly, to glance at him. To check if he was okay.

But his back was still turned to me.

My stomach twisted.

Why did I kiss him? Why did I say those things?

I covered my face with both hands and growled softly to myself.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid...!"

What if he hates me now?

What if I scared him?

What if I ruined everything?

What if...

...he leaves me?

My only happiness... gone?

No, no, no— I can't take that. I can't lose him.

My vision trembled.

The red in my eyes deepened, darker, twisted with desperation.

Maybe—maybe I should chain him again. Just for a little. Just until he understands. Just until he forgives—

NO. WHAT AM I THINKING?!

I shook my head violently and pressed my palms to my cheeks, trying to cool the heat in my face.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Why am I like this?

"Celia?" his voice broke the silence like a knife through cloth. "Can we speak now?"

I flinched.

My head whipped around, startled.

He turned toward me at last.

I thought—maybe—just maybe—his face would be a little red.

Blushing, flustered, anything!

But his expression was neutral.

Calm.

Unbothered.

My stomach sank.

Why am I always the weird one?! Why do I have to blush just looking at him?! Why do I fall apart the moment he says my name?!

"I-I... I'm s-sorry—! I didn't mean to— I wasn't trying to—"

I swallowed hard.

"I... something was wrong, okay?! I didn't mean to k-kiss you like that! I-I mean I wanted to, but not like... like that!"

My hands curled into fists in my lap.

"I—I think something was controlling me! N-not like possession but... like, I don't know—my thoughts weren't normal! And I-I would never tie you up unless you wanted me to, I swear—!"

He didn't say anything yet.

I stared at the ground.

"I'm sorry..."

My voice cracked.

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

My eyes burned, vision wobbling as the tears came uninvited.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

The tears rolled down my cheeks now, warm and fast.

"Please... don't leave me..."

My voice dropped to a whisper.

"Please..."

"P-Please, Kaiser... don't go... don't hate me, I—I can't—" I hiccuped through a sob, my throat tightening.

"I didn't mean to be like that, I didn't mean to scare you, I swear I didn't—!"

He stayed still, watching.

My voice trembled harder, so did my fingers, clutching the fabric of my dress like I could tear the guilt out of it.

"I-I don't know what came over me, I just—when I saw you unconscious, and when you smiled at me, I—I just lost it, I couldn't— I just wanted to keep you close, that's all, just close forever..."

I looked up, tears streaming down my cheeks, face burning with shame and fear.

"You're the only thing that makes me feel alive! Do you get that?! I d-don't care about anything else...! If you leave me now I— I don't know what I'll do..."

My knees touched his as I leaned in closer. "I'm not asking you to forgive me—no, no—I just... please just don't hate me, not you, not you..."

I sobbed into my hand, wiping at my face even as the tears kept falling.

"I'll do anything... anything you want... j-just... just say the word and I'll do it, I'll make it up to you, I'll prove it to you..."

I reached toward him slowly, hesitantly, trembling. "I'll never hurt you again. I promise. I promise... just don't look at me like I'm disgusting... please..."

My voice dropped, breathless.

"Please..."

Suddenly, I felt his hand on my head—gentle, warm. He patted me once, then brushed a tear from my cheek with his thumb. My breath caught.

"Aren't you being a bit melodramatic, Celia?" he said with a teasing smirk.

I shook my head, still sniffing. "I-I still forced it... and I don't know if you'll even want to be close with me anymore..."

Kaiser just laughed under his breath. "Pay attention, sweetheart. I'm here for you. Always."

My heart slammed against my ribs. Thud. Thud. Loud and helpless.

He wasn't mad.

"You're... not angry with me?" I asked, my voice barely holding together.

Kaiser's gaze softened, his smirk turning into something gentler. "If I were able to love someone... I'd want it to be you."

My lips trembled. "Y-You're truly not mad with me?"

He looked back at me and winked. "I can't really be mad at you... I've liked you since I met you."

My chest exploded with warmth...

For a moment I smiled... as tears of happiness flowed down.

I launched forward, throwing my arms around him and burying my face in his neck. I held on so tightly I felt like I could melt into him, like I'd never let go again.

"Celia—! You trying to strangle me now?" he chuckled.

"I'm hugging you. Forever," I mumbled against him.

"Forever's a bit much, y'know. I do need to breathe."

"Nope. You'll live." I tightened my arms.

"Are you planning to kill me again?"

"If it means I can stay like this... maybe."

"Oh, you're dangerous."

"You've known that since the day you met me," I whispered, grinning.

"Unfortunately, I find it kind of cute."

"Unfortunately?" I pulled back just enough to glare playfully at him, still clinging tight.

He grinned. "Yeah. Dangerous girls tend to break hearts."

I blushed. "Then I'll just have to protect yours."

He tapped my forehead with his finger. "Then don't squeeze it out of my chest first."

I giggled and hugged tighter.

"I'm not letting go."

He sighed dramatically. "Guess I live here now."

After a bit... we looked at the stars together, just like the first day we met...

The sky was endless again. Soft, scattered, quiet. The same moonlight that once touched us both still lingered, bathing us in its gentle silver. I glanced over at him. Kaiser... He was leaning back slightly, arms behind his head, eyes half-lidded and calm. God, even like this he looked—

No. Don't say it.

But if I could stay like this forever... just like this... it'd be enough. Even if he never said he loved me, even if he never held my hand again. If he just let me stay next to him for the rest of my life, that would be the happiest I'd ever be.

The happiest day of my life... might already be now.

"Hey," Kaiser said.

"Mm?"

"I think I figured it out."

"Huh? Figured what out?"

"...Why you were acting like that earlier."

I blinked. My smile twitched. "W-What do you mean?"

"You might have split personalities."

"Split what now?!"

He chuckled lightly. "Listen. Right now you're you—normal, cute, adorably awkward, and honestly nicer."

I puffed my cheeks. "Nicer? What's that supposed to mean?"

"But the other side..." he continued, ignoring me. "She's... different. She's sadistically in love with me. Obsessive. Possessive."

I froze.

He doesn't know I already love him normally. Let him think that... That'll be more fun. More satisfying... when I make him fall completely.

"And I don't blame you for any of it," Kaiser said. "I think that side—your darker half—was the one talking and taking control earlier. The one who acted out. Not the Celia sitting with me now."

I looked down slowly, then touched my chest, right over my heart.

"...Whenever I can't remember something... whenever I feel like something just took over... it must've been her. I don't know what's happening in those moments but... I feel happy. Like... warm. Like something I want... is close."

He patted my head gently. "Then maybe try being calmer. That way... she won't come out and kiss me next time."

My face immediately flushed. "D-Don't bring that up again!"

He smirked, eyes dancing with mischief. "Ah yes. My free kiss. Haven't had one of those in a while."

My smile dropped. My entire body stilled.

"...You had some before?"

He blinked, his teasing grin still up.

My face slowly lowered, shadowed by my bangs.

...My eyes turning dark red.

Kaiser immediately caught on and quickly pulled me into his arms, hugging me tightly.

"I'm joking! Relax, relax—" he said hurriedly.

My eyes blinked wide, and for a moment... I felt it. That twist again. That sickeningly sweet heat rising in my chest, that eerie clarity, that voice in my mind whispering to just chain him again, to never let him go.

But his arms around me...

They grounded me.

I took a shaky breath, trying to find my balance.

"...Thanks," I muttered, my voice still a little shaky. My head leaned against his chest, calming again.

"Phew, that was close. You really do tap into that suddenly," he said, a small chuckle in his voice.

"...It wasn't sudden," I replied.

"Huh?" he looked down at me.

"You said... you had kisses before."

"Uhh—! I never said that!"

"Then what did you mean by 'Haven't had one of those in a while'?! EXPLAIN." My voice came out lower... darker. My eyes narrowed accusingly.

Kaiser paused. "Ugh... is this your other personality?"

"It's ME!" I snapped, tightening my grip on his sleeve.

"Ughhh this is tough to think through—can't we just go back to Levinton? I'm tired..."

"You didn't answer!!" I barked back, glaring.

Kaiser tried to scoot away, but I grabbed his arm tightly, almost desperately now.

"Tell me..." I whispered. "I was your first... right?"

He sighed—then suddenly, with no warning, scooped me up into his arms like a feather, holding me against his chest.

"You're just tired right now," he muttered. "So relax as I take you home."

I pouted. I didn't want to let it go, but... I didn't argue either. I didn't speak. My fingers gently held onto his shirt as he carried me through the cool night.

Jealousy still burned in my chest.

He had someone before... maybe. Maybe not. But while it was my first... he smiled like he had done it before. It felt unfair. I should've been his one...

Still, his arms were warm.

His steps were steady.

And somehow... I felt safe.

The wind whispered around us. My eyes grew heavier.

"Hey, Celia?" he asked quietly.

"Mmm... I'm sleepy..." I murmured, nuzzling lightly into him.

"Even if you weren't my first time..." he said softly, "You'll be my forever."

As he slowly strokes my hair to make me fall asleep on his arms.

...He did it again.

He melted my heart.

Over and over today... he kept finding ways to break through every wall I had. To make me fall more. To make it impossible to not want to be his, wholly, endlessly.

As I felt sleep crawl into me, my mind whispered the truth I couldn't say out loud—

...I'll always stay with you, Kaiser. Even if time ends. Even if eternity burns to dust. I'll never leave you.

Because I love you.

Because I've always loved you.

...

The Void Stopped Staring back at me.

----- **Back To The Present** -----

Slowly... my eyes opened.

Everything hurt. My body screamed in silence.

The ground beneath me was cold and damp, painted red with blood—my blood, still drying from earlier. I stared at it, empty, like the mess belonged to someone else.

Why...?

Why wouldn't I just die?

Why couldn't I have just gone with him?

My hands trembled as I pressed them weakly to the floor. I wanted to vanish—no, I wanted to follow him. Hell or heaven, or whatever lies between—I'd go anywhere if it meant being with him again.

My heart ached in a way I couldn't describe. It wasn't just grief.

It was guilt.

I should've told him. I should've confessed sooner, held him tighter, never let him walk into danger alone.

Why did I wait?

Why did I play pretend with my feelings like they were some game?

A sob slipped from my throat, sharp and broken, and I slapped myself with what strength I had.

"Stupid... idiot..."

I curled forward, crying again—but nothing came. My eyes were dry. I had no tears left to cry for him anymore. I'd run out somewhere between losing him and losing myself.

And then... I saw it.

A glint.

A flash of silver on the cracked, blood-stained.

My fingers reached for it slowly, as if my body moved on its own.

The star-shaped trinket.

The words engraved were still clear, even with dried blood on the edge.

—**"Forever Yours."**

My breath hitched.

The note.

The woman who gave it to me... she said if anything ever happened to him—if he ever died or was hurt beyond saving—a letter would reach me instantly. It was supposed to be triggered the moment his soul left the plane.

But nothing came.

No message. No sign. No goodbye.

Does that mean...

Is he still alive?

A spark flared deep inside my chest, blinding and desperate.

He has to be.

My Kaiser... my love... He wouldn't die.

He promised to stay with me.

Because he has me.

And I—I'll save him.

I'll bring him back.

No matter what it takes.

Even if I have to destroy everything between us and eternity.

He'll come back. And when he does, I'll never let him go again. I'll keep him close, so close he can't breathe without thinking of me. I'll wrap myself around every corner of his life—because he belongs with me.

Forever.

He'll see. I'll make him see.

We'll be happy again.

We'll make our own ending.

My fingers curled tighter around the trinket.

And then—It hit me.

The pull.

The voices.

"Ahahahah.."

A laugh, not mine, echoing faintly in the back of my skull.

My personalities... they were bleeding into one another again. The cracks were showing.

She was coming back.

The version of me I had locked away behind smiles and soft words.

"...Hey," I whispered into the silence, not to anyone outside... but to her.

"...You still there?" I asked.

A breath—cold, sharp—danced in my chest.

The answer came not with words but with certainty.

"...I need your help."

Silence.

"...Let's bring him back."

And then—her voice.

Velvet. Icy. Mine, but not.

"Let's go get what's ours."

I smiled.

A slow, eerie grin stretching across my lips as I pulled myself to my knees.

I raised both hands.

One still mine. Gentle. Scabbed with love.

The other? The darker side.

I finally knew her name.

"Obsession," I whispered.

She didn't flinch. She didn't answer.

She just completed the shape with me—our two hands forming a perfect heart.

My cracked self, and my obsessive self. My love, and my madness.

Together.

We vowed.

"To bring him back."

"To take back what is ours."

Kaiser... I'm coming for you.

And She was too..

We Love You.

Chapter 72 - The Grotesque War Begins

4/12/2017 – 12:48 PM

The Grotesque War...

Location: Rinascita, Celestine.

- South of Rinascita -

At the southern rear of Rinascita—just before the edge of the Mythical Wilds, where fairies whispered in the air and monsters stalked through twisted trees—the warriors of Requiem stood ready.

Cloaks flared in the wind. Armor gleamed under the gray clouds. Blades hummed with purpose.

At the front, Alina, the Sword Saint of Technique, held the Fallen King's sword in her right hand. Her stance was quiet, perfect, and lethal. Not far behind her stood Sylvia, hands crackling with Celestial magic, her expression locked in calm focus.

Alina's sharp gaze flicked toward the tree line.

Subtle movement. A rustle. A twitch of shadow.

They were coming.

Sylvia glanced at the sky for just a moment—then breathed deep.

This is it, she thought. Time to prove I've grown from my past.

Alina narrowed her eyes at the approaching grotesque. Just one for now, but more were sure to follow. She tightened her grip.

It's time, Master. I'll show them what humanity is truly capable of. I haven't forgotten my promise—and I won't let this town fall. Not while I still stand.

- West of Rinascita -

To the west of Rinascita, over a hundred members of Valhalla stood clad in black, their formation V-shaped and made for offense. Sharp. Calculated. Brutal.

At the tip of the spear, Aaron stepped forward.

He held two black blades, one in each hand. A crooked grin played on his lips as the first wave of grotesques—hundreds of them—staggered closer through the dusk.

He tilted his head. Whispered.

"Let the slaughter commence."

- Northwest of Rinascita -

In the northwest, Xander stood tall, his swords at his sides, surrounded by the Eternal Overseer Guild.

Grotesques rushed toward them, dozens strong and gaining speed. Xander rolled his neck, patting the back of his head like he was just waking up from a nap. His expression? Boredom layered over lethal calm.

His guild—cloaked in red—watched with experienced, hardened eyes. They were ready.

Xander exhaled. Then a thought came to his mind.

So... that memory's already been forgotten. Then maybe—just maybe—I'll try again. This time, to ensure my people... and my friends... survive.

He raised one sword toward the horizon and shouted:

"All Overseers—CHARGE!"

His aura exploded into white light. Behind him, a ghostly figure emerged—black and white, silent and grim. A reaper. Its scythe raised over the battlefield, ready to cut down anything that got too close.

- East of Rinascita -

To the east, the Crimson Eclipse Guild stood, hearts pounding but spirits locked in.

Anxious. But trained.

Navina stepped forward, boots crunching into frost-bitten soil. Her voice rang out clear and strong.

"Listen well! Today may be our first battle—but it will not be our last. Tomorrow still waits for us, and I swear—we will see it together. Fear is natural, but remember this: we fight not just to survive, but to be remembered. So raise your blades, steel your hearts—who among you will carve their name into history and stand for Celestine?"

Roars. Cheers. Magic flared to life.

Weapons, staves, and steel were raised to the sky.

Navina's icy Arcflingers summoned into her hands, glowing blue with elemental frost. Her sword hung behind her back—silent but ready.

Beside her, Lucas stepped forward with calm precision. Two daggers of light formed in his grip as mirrors appeared behind him, floating, reflecting the battle's coming bloodshed.

The Heavenly Sorcerer wasn't holding back.

And just behind them—Azrael.

Still.

Expression blank. Hands by his side. But something in his skin, something deep within, warned him:

Something... felt.. very wrong.

- North of Rinascita -

And finally, at the North—Rinascita's true frontlines—stood the Celestial Apex Guild with its members and mercenaries.

Where the grotesques would strike hardest.

Where everything would be decided.

Levi's Perspective:

I cracked my neck, then my knuckles. My jacket fluttered behind me like I was some kind of damn hero, which, let's be real—I kind of am.

The Celestial Apex Guild lined up behind me. Swords drawn. Spells humming. Heartbeats pounding so loud I could practically hear them.

"Alright, listen up!" I called out, slamming the heel of my boot into the ground with a grin. "You all wanna live through this? Then stay behind me while I fight in the front."

Some of them blinked. Others didn't even flinch.

I pointed my thumb over my shoulder at Zain, who stood cool and composed. "He gives the orders. You follow them. No backtalk. No second-guessing. I'll be at the front carving a path so wide you'll forget we were in war."

I smirked, spinning my sword once before slinging it back in place.

That's when one kid—hell, he couldn't have been older than seventeen—muttered behind me. "Will you... will you really be back? What if it gets too much?"

I paused. Turned slightly. Looked him right in the eyes.

"Oh, kid," I said with a lazy grin. "I'm not just gonna come back. I'm gonna win. The grotesques? They'll be the ones praying I never showed up in the first place."

They chuckled nervously. I didn't.

Because I meant every word.

—

Zain walked up beside me. He didn't need to say anything. I felt the weight in his eyes.

"Don't lose yourself in the chaos, Levi. We need you sharp. You're the strongest among us." He looked ahead at the war-torn horizon. "Make this count. Win it for us."

I rolled my eyes. "You getting sentimental on me, old friend?"

He smiled faintly. "Just trying to keep you alive."

"Relax," I said, giving him a sideways glance and a grin. "This is just the prelude, Zain. The opening act before my reign begins. So sit tight from the front row and watch me."

He gave me a single nod. The kind you give someone when you know they might not come back, but you're still proud of them anyway.

I gripped the hilt of my sword tighter, letting the weight of the metal settle in my palm like it was the only thing keeping me grounded.

I hated this part.

Not the silence before the fight—nah, I could handle that. I hated what came crawling up from the back of my mind when everything got too still.

I closed my eyes for a second too long.

And there it was.

That one regret and failure of my life.

My village burning, grotesques swarming through like wildfire. My father's screamed as he tried to hold the line with a broken axe. My mother screaming my name from behind the house.

And me?

I ran away.

Fast. Coward-fast because I was scared...

They told us to retreat, but let's not kid ourselves—I wasn't thinking about tactics. I was scared. My legs moved before my pride could catch up. And I left them behind.

Emma saw it.

God... Emma.

She was only around twelve and still managed to stand her ground better than I did. Her face—I'll never forget it. Dirt and tears smeared across her cheeks, her arms wrapped around our parent's body like she could shield them from the end.

But what gutted me most wasn't her screams.

It was her hurt.

The way she stared at me as I turned and ran—like she didn't even recognize me anymore.

I remember that look more than anything.

I bit my lip hard, pushing back whatever was threatening to rise in my throat.

This fight wasn't about titles. Wasn't about glory. This was personal.

I didn't just want to protect Rinascita.

I had to.

I owed it to them. To the ones I left behind. To Emma, whose tears I didn't wipe away. To the boy I used to be—so I could finally tell him, It's okay, you're not running anymore.

"I swear," I whispered, drawing my sword with a sharp, clean slide. "Never again. Never again will I leave someone behind and hide because of fear."

My stance shifted naturally—lower, tighter. This wasn't for the audience watching or my ego. This was for the promise I made to myself.

Then I felt it.

Something thick in the air—like trauma wrapped in silk. It chilled and burned at the same time.

I turned.

And damn near paused, because of course it'd be her.

Celia.

She stepped forward like it was the ending all things. Like the grotesques had signed their deaths off the moment she arrived.

The curses in the air twisted, sharp and foul, awaiting to be used. The ground darkened under her feet. Even the grotesques from the long distance froze.

She didn't say a word.

Didn't have to.

Her eyes told the story—deep, red, and gleaming with something so dark it almost looked beautiful. Not the usual crimson glow. No—this was deeper. Angrier. Something had snapped within her.

I caught the marks on her fingers—slight injuries, just visible beneath the flicker of her magic. She glanced down, murmured something too low for anyone else to catch, and they vanished. Just like that.

The guild behind me went dead quiet.

Zain, steady as always, took a deep breath. His hand hovered near his weapon.

And me?

My smirk returned, sharper now. Less playful.

Because Celia wasn't smiling.

And neither was I.

She didn't speak right away.

Just stood there—still, unreadable, like the world would break if she moved too fast.

I broke the silence first, of course.

"Yo, fashionably late or just dramatically homicidal today?"

Celia tilted her head slightly, eyes glowing with something that probably could set the forest behind us on fire if she looked a bit harder. She didn't smirk. Didn't scoff. Just replied, coldly.

"I was busy preparing to ensure their species never breathes again in my presence."

...Okay, damn.

I whistled low, tapping my sword to my shoulder. "You could've just said you slept in."

Still nothing playful from her unlike her usual self. And somehow, that was more terrifying than any grotesque screech I had heard today.

I took a small step toward her, not out of bravery or anything. Just curiosity.

"Are you sure you'll be fine?"

Celia's gaze lingered on mine for half a beat longer than usual. "You?"

I gave her my classic, award-winning grin. "I'm not dying today. That's the plan. That, and carrying everyone else on my back."

She blinked once. "Good. They can all hide behind your back while I tear the rest of these things apart."

...I nearly choked.

"Pfft—okay, queen. But don't expect me to save you when you bite off more than you can chew again."

Her voice dropped, sharp and final. "I don't need anyone saving me again."

I looked at her carefully. The same girl who used to follow after Kaiser, always smiling and laughing around him had this murderous look in her eyes now.

I grinned—out of instinct mostly. "And if Kaiser was here, you wouldn't want to be saved by him either?"

I regretted it the second it left my mouth.

Her lips parted. Then closed. Then curled, just slightly, into a smile that wasn't really a smile. "Oh, I'll get my love back. Nothing will stop me."

That was... unsettling. Even for her. The red eyes gleamed darker than ever as if someone else had said those words.

She turned, hair slicing through the air like her chains, stepping toward the grotesques flooding the hills. Her voice was low, almost whispered, but every word hit hard.

"You better not get in my way, Levi."

I smirked, stepping forward beside her, hand resting near my blade's hilt.

"The feeling's mutual. Don't slow me down."

Her chains unraveled beside her like they were thirsty—alive, hungry for the slaughter.

I cracked my neck once, letting my speed flow through my body like a current of lightning.

And together, we stared down the endless wave ahead.

This was personal.

The Eternal Swarm.

High above the world, on the edge of a shadowed mountain, someone sat alone.

He wore black from head to toe—boots, cloak, gloves. Even his hair was dark, unmoving in the cold wind. A smooth, expressionless mask hid his face—two hollow eye holes, and a smile carved too wide to be human.

He sat at the edge, legs dangling over the drop, staring straight at the grotesque horde gathering near Rinascita.

He didn't move.

Didn't speak for a moment.

Then, calmly, a voice rang out—flat, emotionless.

"I hereby forbid any God or Higher being to interfere with my world."

No sound followed. But the sky reacted.

"I stand as the Void. And the moment you dare lift your heads in pride against it, your end begins."

He shifted slightly. The land behind him didn't darken—it vanished. Not shadow, but absence. As if the world had been deleted.

The mountain, the trees, the ground—gone for a second.

Then it all returned.

Untouched.

He exhaled, slow and steady.

"Humanity... savor this moment."

His hands rested on his lap.

"Because for once—and only once—I'm on your side."

Down below, the grotesques screeched. A flood of monsters. But they didn't move closer.

They felt it too—the air thickening, their instincts clawing at them to flee.

The existence of something... That shouldn't exist.

As if the void itself had eyes—and now it was staring back.

His voice came again, colder than before.

"I didn't avoid war because I was afraid."

Pause.

"I avoided it... because she had taught me to be kind."

The wind stilled. Even the air seemed to wait.

"And for a time... I was."

He leaned forward, slowly. The cliff beneath him cracked—not from weight, but from pressure.

"I have many enemies... but my equals are none. Anyone who's ever challenged my authority no longer exists."

Below, the first horn of the grotesque swarm roared across Rinascita.

"Your story ended the moment you met me."

The sky dimmed.

The earth trembled.

And so it began.

Humanity versus Grotesques.

The Void watched over humanity.

The Grotesque War:

The earth trembled beneath the swarm.

From the southern ridges, where the broken trees formed a jagged silhouette against the overcast sky, they came—the grotesques. Not in lines. Not in order. In clumps. In packs. Twitching, lurching forward on all fours before snapping upright with unnatural pops of their spines, their grotesque screeches echoed across the battlefield like rusted blades dragging over stone.

The frontlines of Requiem were already soaked in sweat and blood. The smell of iron and ash tainted the wind.

"Hold the line!" barked a swordsman, sweat clinging to his jawline. His blade shook, just a little.

The grotesques didn't wait for formation. They lunged.

A C-Rank dagger wielder ducked under the first claw, slashing instinctively at its midsection—but the blade skidded across the grotesque's armor-like spine. Another grotesque twisted mid-air and crashed into a shieldbearer, its elbow bending backwards to impale the man's side. Screams broke through the air, wild and short.

"Don't break—!"

Too late. A few panicked. One of the spearmen dropped his weapon and turned. Another tried to cover him but was tackled. A flash of venom-coated claws tore through his thigh. The grotesque's twitching mouth pulled into a warped grin.

But then—

"Wind. Arc. Three-Step Flow."

Alina's voice cut through the chaos like silver through smoke.

In one fluid motion, she stepped in—graceful and precise—her blade dragging behind her. The first grotesque leapt at her. She didn't dodge. She turned, spinning low with her heel dragging through the mud.

A horizontal arc of wind cracked outward—shaped, not wild. It split the monster in half before it could land.

Before the halves hit the dirt, she was already moving.

"Water Rise. Conduit Surge. Blade Bind!"

Her sword glowed blue. The air around her legs shimmered with moisture pulled from the ground. Water spiraled upward into her blade, then snapped—the sword's edge coated in a vibrating, conductive stream.

Another grotesque—this one with wing-stubs flaring behind its back—dove from above.

She didn't look up. Just pivoted.

The blade move through the air.

A vertical cut. Electric blue.

The grotesque twitched midair. Jolted. Seized. Collapsed.

Steam hissed from the corpse.

Alina exhaled once. "Four down."

But even she missed one.

Two grotesques slipped low beneath her last slash—moving like cockroaches in shadow. Their legs bent backward, lurching into the gaps left open by the last volley. They skittered past Alina—straight toward the backline.

A young mage—barely C-Rank—froze, clutching his staff. "Th-they got through—!"

The grotesques were almost on him.

But then—

The air turned still.

And then—sacred.

"O Light Divine, descend as starlight—"

Sylvia's voice was quiet, like a prayer carried on wind.

"Pierce through shadow. Judgement: Triarcan Lance!"

Three lines of golden light bloomed in the sky above her—precise, silent, and deadly.

With a chime, the spears of light descended.

CRACK—CRACK—CRACK.

The three grotesques convulsed mid-charge, each impaled through their cores by celestial spears. They twitched violently, then screeched—that same metallic, broken scream—and fell still, smoke rising from their wounds.

Sylvia lowered her hand, a faint radiance still humming at her fingertips.

The mages behind her looked stunned. One of them let out a breath he didn't know he'd held. "She... she saved us..."

"Eyes forward," Sylvia said, her voice calm but firm. "They're not done."

She was right.

The grotesques didn't care about casualties. Another set charged, this one with bulging torsos and hunched backs—evolved strains. One jumped unnaturally high, then crashed into a shield line.

The formation broke.

"Fall back—!"

"No!" came a voice—sharp, certain.

Alina.

She reappeared—sliding into the broken formation. Her blade trailed electricity again.
"Focus. Breathe. Let me handle the furry."

Then: "Storm Spiral. Breathless. Precision Lock."

Her feet glided across mud—unnaturally steady. A twist, a step, and—

Slice. Through a grotesque's forearm.

Pivot. Upward cut across the neck of another.

Final twist—wind burst.

A shockwave rippled outward, slamming the remaining ones back.

"Keep standing," Alina muttered. "We're not done yet."

Behind her, Sylvia lifted her hand again. Golden rings formed in the air.

"Then let's finish this side. For Requiem."

The two women stood back-to-back—a storm and a star.

Meanwhile,

---- Northern Front – The Bloodborne Proxy ----

They poured out from the mist in twitching bursts, claws glinting under the faint sunlight. Screeches climbed over one another, building into a chorus of metal and madness.

The ground was already littered with half-crushed bodies and twitching limbs. Blood soaked the earth.

And in the center of it—

Aaron stood still.

A black greatsword rested over his shoulder, its edge already coated in grotesque blood. His cloak fluttered gently as a breeze passed, tugging at the crimson-insignia of Valhalla—a symbol long since soaked in blood and pride.

A grotesque lunged at him from behind.

He didn't turn.

He spun the sword in a wide arc—without looking—and split the creature down the center. Its body crumpled, halved and twitching.

Aaron finally exhaled. "...Too slow."

Another grotesque launched from the left—this one airborne, limbs coiled like springs.

Aaron didn't step back. He stepped forward.

The ground cracked beneath his boots as he leapt—faster than the eye could follow.

CRUNCH.

The grotesque's head was gone, shattered by a single upward kick.

"That all you've got?" he muttered. His voice was a low, gravel-dragging drawl.

From behind, a Valhalla recruit shouted, "We're getting surrounded! Requesting—!"

SLASH.

Aaron cleaved a grotesque in half mid-sentence. Then turned to the recruit who had screamed.

Too late.

A grotesque—one of the winged strains—descended like a shadow and tore into him, splitting armor and bone in one rending strike.

The boy gurgled, dying.

Aaron watched it happen.

Unblinking.

"Tch... Weak," he muttered. "Should've died earlier."

Then he walked forward, dragging his sword like it was weightless, into the heart of the grotesque swarm.

And laughed.

---- Northwest Front – Frozen Precision ----

The air was colder here.

Ice spread in geometric veins across the battlefield, cutting trenches into the dirt and snapping through the roots of trees.

Grotesques snarled, clawing at the ice with frustration as it formed up around them, boxing them in. Walls of jagged frost—not random, but perfect angles. A trap disguised as terrain.

At the center of it all stood a tall figure in pale armor, arms crossed casually. A faint yawn escaped him as he surveyed the chaos.

Xander. Sword Saint of Mastery.

"...You guys are too noisy," he muttered. "If you keep flailing like that, they're gonna break formation before they even die. That's boring."

A fire mage beside him shouted, "They're pushing through the right—if we lose that block, they'll get behind us—!"

"Yeah, yeah." Xander scratched his head.

Then casually raised his hand.

"Frostbind Grid."

The ground to their right erupted. Sheets of razor-sharp ice lanced upward in a flawless formation—triangular prisms that shifted and locked the grotesques into a freezing puzzle. Their twisted limbs slammed against the new walls, screeching as ice burned into their chitin.

"Now," Xander said, turning slightly to his guild. "Fire through the seams. Don't mess it up."

Three mages moved quickly, launching coordinated flame spells through the small cracks in the prism. The grotesques howled, boiling from inside their cages.

Still, they kept coming.

Two broke free on the far flank, charging at a pair of twin swordsmen.

Xander sighed.

"Fine, I'll work a bit."

He blurred forward—not fast like a flash, but precise, his steps barely audible over the cracking ice. He ducked a claw, weaved beneath a backhand, and stuck his sword through a grotesque's chest with mechanical efficiency. Then turned and shattered the other one's kneecap with a low kick.

The sword spun once in his hand, reversed—

SHLICK.

Straight through the jaw and out the skull.

He pulled it free, flicking off the blood.

"Relax. I'm here now."

More grotesques began circling from the top ridge.

A younger guild member screamed as he was tackled—guts spilling in the snow. Another tried to save him but was caught mid-swing and torn to pieces.

Cries echoed down the slope.

"Xander! They're breaching the upper ridge!"

He looked up lazily. Then exhaled.

"...So annoying."

He raised both hands.

"Absolute Ring: Frost Sovereign."

A dome of frost erupted outward from his body—blue-white and brilliant, snapping into the air like a wave. It expanded up the ridge and froze everything in a wide radius—including the grotesques, who twitched as their limbs locked in place, one by one.

His guild stared.

Frozen grotesques cracked where they stood. The ice snapped inward—collapsing like broken glass into the monsters' bodies.

Then silence.

Xander lowered his arms, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Can someone write this down? That was, like, five formations worth of effort. I want credit for that later when my sister asks for my contributions."

Back up north, Aaron crushed a grotesque beneath his heel, blood spraying his legs. He didn't notice. Another two recruits lay dead behind him.

He didn't notice that either.

He dragged his sword from another corpse and grinned.

"...Not bad. Still not enough to make me feel alive."

And somewhere far off in the center of it all—the Swarm Tyrant hadn't moved yet.

It was only just beginning.

---- Northeast Front – Crimson Eclipse Encampment ----

Smoke curled through the air as shadows twitched against the blood-tinted sky. The ground trembled with the vibrations of chitin claws and stomping feet. Grotesques—sleek, insectoid nightmares—poured in from the ridges, some gliding low with ragged wings, others bounding erratically between corpses.

"Form the arc line! Keep the distance tight!" Navina's voice sliced through the chaos—sharp, clear, and full of life.

Her blonde hair shimmered like firelight as she dashed across the frontline, eyes scanning, calculating. Her sword gleamed with water-etched light, and in her left hand, an elegant construct of frost and steel materialized—a hand-melded arcflinger pulsing with cold magic.

The moment a grotesque lunged—fangs bared, claws outstretched—she fired.

Thup—CRACK!

A bolt of freezing air blasted its upper torso, crystallizing its limbs. Before the ice fully formed, she was already twirling—her body low, dodging a diving insectoid as another arcflinger formed in her left hand, this one burning red.

Thup—FWOOM!

A fire-infused projectile collided with the frozen grotesque's chest—shattering it into glimmering shards mid-screech.

In two seconds, two grotesques fell. In ten seconds, five more.

"Don't break formation! You handle the ones I leave crippled—do not get greedy!" she called, dashing past her squad, elegance woven into speed. Her cape fluttered behind her like trailing starlight.

One member shouted, "Captain! Behind you—!"

A grotesque blurred into motion, diving from above.

Navina's body reacted before her mind did. Sword whipped upward, slicing through chitin like wet parchment. A recoil flashed in her left hand, and bang—an arcflinger of storm-light burst into life, wind and lightning coalescing.

The second shot? Right between the grotesque's clustered eyes.

That made eight. She didn't slow.

Lucas stood a dozen meters behind, light flowing around him like liquid mirrors. His fingers moved precisely, drawing shimmering panels of magic that twisted at impossible angles. Light compressed at the edges—reflected, refracted, bent into deadly lines.

Zzzzap!

A spear of pure sunlight snapped across the battlefield and struck a grotesque mid-flight, bursting its thorax open like a melon.

He turned to his system-imbued interface and muttered, "Mirrors set. Adjust output, 12%. Focus beam through hex-prism."

The light shifted—dense and tight like a railgun of starlight. He aimed it forward, just as two grotesques leapt toward a pair of retreating mages.

"Hold on—!"

He extended both palms and said,

"Aurora Ward: Divine Prism."

A radiant forcefield shimmered into place, forming just in time to absorb the impact. The grotesques bounced off with a shriek, stunned for half a breath too long.

Lucas didn't hesitate.

A light dart shaped like a dagger spun from his wrist and buried itself into the softer underside of one's jaw.

The second?

He raised a palm and focused light through three angled mirrors.

"Refract. Split. Fire."

Zzzt-zzzt-zzzt!

Three pinpoint beams of light hit all three of the grotesque's knee joints. It collapsed in a twitching heap.

The two rescued mages gasped. One stammered, "You—You saved us!"

Lucas didn't turn. "Then don't die yet. Fall back and follow Navina's orders. She's the heartbeat of this front."

Back near the line, Navina spun like a dancer—sword flashing, gun smoking. Her reflexes were almost unnatural.

A grotesque skittered toward her, its wings buzzing.

Bang—switch—bang—switch—stab—bang!

One arcflinger turned to steam as a second one formed, each shaped differently—ice, wind, fire, then lightning. Each one fired once before being discarded like a flower petal mid-battle.

Seventeen grotesques fell.

Each kill was a note in a melody only she could hear. And as her sword carved through the air again—elegantly intercepting a poisoned fang—she whispered, "You twitch too slow, sweetheart."

Her guild moved like a synchronized tide behind her, their morale unwavering.

Lucas finished syncing his mirrors once more, muttering to himself, "They only look terrifying in numbers... but their movement loops are predictable. Sharp lunge, left feint, high drop, then snap."

He drew a triangle of floating mirrors around himself and stared at the charging trio coming for him.

"Reflect... redirect... blind."

A flash of light burst outward in a perfect 63-degree arc, aimed to hit their weak, shadowed eye sockets.

As the grotesques staggered mid-charge, he clenched a fist.

"Now burn."

A wall of white flame surged from below, cooking the three mid-step.

He didn't look back.

From above, the northeast sky lit up in overlapping colors—frost, fire, light, and wind dancing as arcflingers fired, mirrored rays sliced, and sword saints fought like myths.

But even as grotesques fell in heaps and their screeches tore the air, more crawled from the ridgelines.

And further beyond... something deeper stirred.

[Levi – Northern Front of Rinascita | First Person POV]

I was moving too fast for the ground to matter.

The soil cracked every time I dashed through it, and the grotesques? They didn't even get the chance to scream. One second they were crawling out of their hive pit like they owned the place, the next—snikt—I was already halfway through the next dozen.

God-Speed wasn't just fast. It was goddamn unfair.

Burning magic traced behind me like thunder after lightning. I didn't look back—no need. The bodies split where I cut. Some exploded, some crumbled. All fell.

"Levi! Left ridge! Formation Delta—Spear Split!" Zain's voice echoed through the north wind, sharp and commanding like always.

I didn't reply. I just vanished into the mist of ash and shadow.

Let the genius call the plays. I'll do the butchering.

My sword hummed in my hand—itching for more. I ghosted through a crowd of grotesques trying to flank our rear, my presence flickering in and out like a broken nightmare. I reappeared behind them, crouched low.

They turned.

Too late.

One breath. Eight slashes.

The air cracked with sound as I rose, slicing upward like an executioner.

Black blood rained.

Two of our mages were about to get mauled. I blinked past them, rammed my elbow into the grotesque's jaw mid-charge, and cleaved it in half before its brain even registered movement. The second one I just kicked into the abyss.

"Watch your backs, rookies," I muttered, flicking blood off my blade. "I ain't your babysitter, but I'm too pretty to bury you."

They looked flabbergasted, calmly.

I moved again—faster, faster.

Every grotesque I struck down only seemed to call ten more. The hive was spewing them out like a faucet from hell. They kept crawling, biting, screeching. And I kept flowing through them as the hunter.

But then—I stopped.

Eight grotesques closed in. Bigger. Armored. Smarter. Their formation was tight, almost military.

Cute.

I cracked my neck and whispered, "Alright. Let's play, ugly."

One step forward—

In a heartbeat, eight heads fell.

The bodies twitched, confused.

I stood in the center of them—my blade still humming, eyes already forward.

Because that's when I saw her.

Celia.

The quiet girl. The one who used to flinch at loud noises and smile at flowers.

She was no flower now.

She was the goddamn nightmare.

Her white hair was soaked in blood and sweat, her red eyes glowing with something... murderous. Not rage. No, Celia wasn't mad. She was focused. Like a queen dishing out judgment to worms.

Chains slithered behind her—alive, cursed, hungry. They moved like they had minds of their own, whipping around her like shadows. One grotesque lunged—

Snap.

The chain coiled around its throat mid-air, and yanked.

Its head didn't come off.

Its entire spine did.

She didn't stop. Not even a pause.

Her vines—black, thorned, corrupted—spread out from her feet. Every swing of her hand tore through five, six, ten grotesques. The thorns weren't just ripping—they were withering. I could feel the life drain from every beast that touched her.

One grotesque tried flanking her.

Big mistake.

She kicked, and a vine shot out from her thigh—spiked and spinning. It tore through the thing's eye, bursting out its back like a cursed bloom.

Her eyes were glowing with something darker now—sadness? Pain? Regret?

No.

Obsession.

She was drowning in it. Drowning and using it to fuel every cursed chain and every thorned vine. Her magic reeked of negative emotion—fear, doubt, anger, heartbreak.

She was weaponizing her own misery.

I just stood there watching as she danced through the grotesques like some villainess out of a nightmare. No wasted movement. No hesitation. Every mistake they made, she memorized—and punished with brutal elegance seconds later. She adapted mid-battle, like she rewrote her own code with every second that passed.

One of the grotesques managed to scrape her shoulder.

I saw her wince.

She didn't fall back.

She grabbed the grotesque by its wrist—and it screamed as its arm rotted off in seconds from her withering touch. She stared into its eyes like she was staring at herself. Then—

Snap.

The chain crushed its skull like a rotting fruit.

...

Zain's voice cracked through the fight again. "Squads Echo and Theta, push past the third trench! Celia's creating a breach!"

No shit she was.

She had already dropped over a hundred grotesques—alone.

And she was still going.

I exhaled, wiping some sweat from my brow.

The sky was bleeding.

The land was shaking.

And somehow, in the middle of it, the girl who once clung to Kaiser's arm like the world was too big... had become something else entirely.

I tightened my grip on my sword, unable to pull my eyes away from her as she advanced, merciless and cold.

What the hell happened to that innocent girl?

How did she go from crying over him...

...to slaughtering monsters like she was born for it?

I didn't know the answer.

But damn...

She lives up to her title.

Queen of Curses.

- A few minutes pass...

The kill count wasn't just rising—it was stacking like a sin list.

One hundred. One-fifty. One-seventy—We weren't fighting anymore. We were just one sidedly slaughtering their species.

Celia moved beside me like a haunting melody, her chains ripping, vines flailing, blood spattering across her pale face like war paint. The grotesques lunged, screamed, fused into larger forms—but she didn't flinch. Neither did I.

I twisted into a blink, appearing behind a ten-foot grotesque with tusks. Its jaw split open, roaring fire into the sky.

I shoved my sword upward through its neck.

"Nice one," Celia said, breath calm, tone like she was sipping tea while tearing out spines.

"You're not bad yourself," I replied, ducking under a barrage of claws, slicing a triple-kill through kneecaps. "Didn't think the girl who once cried over small injuries would go all out war against a species."

"I've been adapting."

"Understatement of the century."

Her vines stabbed three grotesques mid-leap and pulled them in like fishing hooks before the chains crushed their skulls in a single synchronized snap.

I backflipped through a mob, spun mid-air, and tossed my sword—

Shunk.

It split through five grotesques like a hot needle through wax. Celia caught it mid-spin and threw it back without blinking. I snatched it from the air.

"Ohhh we're doing sword toss now?"

"Do try to keep up, assistant."

I blinked.

"...Assistant?"

"Yes. You're quite good. Sharp timing, strong instincts—very sidekick material."

"You did not just call me a sidekick."

"To Kaiser," she said with a straight face, vines still slithering. "With that style? You'd make a good second-string to his hands."

"Oh we're insulting style now? Chains and creepy-ass eyes—yeah, very fashionable."

"I wasn't aiming for fashion or being flashy." She licked blood from her cheek slowly. "I was aiming for their extinction."

A grotesque behemoth rose—twenty feet tall, layered in bone armor. It roared, shaking the trees.

We didn't even blink.

Celia whispered something I couldn't hear and her thorns exploded from the ground, impaling it from all directions. I rushed in, zipped up its back and carved a cross-slash through the base of its neck. Its head dropped like a fruit, rolling past our feet.

That was kill two-hundred.

And we weren't even breathing hard.

A strange quiet hit the air for a moment. The frontlines behind us were miles away now. We were so deep into grotesque territory, the sky was practically black.

I glanced at her as we slowed just enough to breathe.

"...Hey."

She turned, her red eyes glowing.

"...Weren't you devastated that he was gone?"

She didn't respond right away.

But then—her voice lowered.

Not soft.

Not broken.

Icy.

"Gone?" she repeated, almost like a laugh.

Her eyes darkened into a deeper shade—almost black-red, glowing like blood behind stained glass.

"Nobody can take my love away."

I blinked. My grip on the sword tightened.

Her voice dripped like venom. **"Death isn't enough to take him away from me."**

"Celia—"

"I'll fight—even if it means turning on my own kind. I'll break every weakness, tear through these insects, and kill anyone in my way." Her eyes didn't waver. "Because they took him from me. He's mine... And I will bring him back."

Silence stretched. The corpses around us didn't move. The wind didn't dare blow.

My heartbeat kicked up.

She's serious.

I saw the way her hands trembled—not from fear, but from something deeper. She wasn't crying. She wasn't even breaking.

She was locked in.

Locked in a delusion so deep it might not even be delusion anymore.

"I... I saw his body, Celia. I saw him dead."

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Then your eyes lied to you."

I felt it in my bones.

That weight. That certainty.

She wasn't bargaining. She wasn't grieving.

She had decided. Reality didn't matter anymore. If the world said Kaiser was dead—

She would burn the world.

She was calling him love now? Without feeling flustered or anything, as if I was with a completely different person now...

I swallowed, heart heavy.

"Are you... seeing things? Celia, are you sure you're not—"

Then it happened.

BOOOOM.

The sky ripped open behind us.

Colors exploded. Red. Black. Gold. And beneath it—Valhalla's Sigil, tearing across the clouds like a cracked flame.

We both snapped our heads back toward the front.

I knew those colors.

I knew what they meant.

Celia's breath caught. I stared at the sky, frozen.

No. No no no—

The red mixed into it... that only meant one thing.

Valhalla.

Blood of Valhalla.

"That means..." I whispered, stepping forward, breath catching.

I clenched my jaw.

"All seventy-three of the Valhalla members... including Aaron..."

"...were wiped out."

...

[This war was never theirs to win. The Void already wrote the ending.]

Chapter 73 - The Masked Killer

- West of Rinascita -

1:27 PM — 10 Minutes Before Valhalla Wipeout

Aaron's Perspective:

These grotesques were too damn predictable.

Same savage growl. Same rabid charge. Same pathetic lunge like some broken puppet stuck on repeat.

I sliced through two of them at once—clean, diagonal cut, no resistance. Their heads popped off like overripe fruit. Didn't even feel it. My arms were already in motion toward the next.

Valhalla's "members" stayed in the back, swinging wildly like frightened kids. Some of them screaming like toddlers.

Disgusting.

I wasn't their bodyguard. I wasn't their savior. I wasn't their damn babysitter.

If you're too weak to survive here, then rot. That's the only lesson worth learning in this world.

One of the D-rank losers got his head chomped off right as I looked over. I smirked.

Nature did its job. One less insect crawling around beneath me.

I launched forward, my right foot twisting in mid-air, smashing the grotesque that ate him in the stomach with a roundhouse kick. Its body crumpled mid-air, slamming into a tree.

Before it hit the ground, I slashed it from hip to shoulder, bisecting it diagonally.

"S-Sir Aaron! Please help us—"

Pathetic.

"Fight for your own life," I cut him off without even turning to look. "I told you your roles. Now it's your duty to live or die. Not mine."

I left him. His begging irritated me more than the grotesques did.

I swung by a low tree branch, twisting and dropping into the center of a swarm, both blades slicing in synchronized arcs—like cutting wet paper. Four grotesques fell in perfect silence.

Still too easy.

No excitement.

No progress.

Training with Scar would've been ten times harder. This? This was a kindergarten playground. A graveyard full of toys waiting to be snapped.

I pivoted, dodging one grotesque's jaw by tilting my head, letting its drool fly past my face. My blade slipped beneath its ribs, up through the neck. I didn't stop to watch it fall. Trash didn't deserve attention.

...Then I remembered the banquet.

How those lowborn sword saints had the nerve to speak to me as if we were equals.

Navina. That little blonde insect was the first one. She actually defended that servant like it meant something. Her face when she stood up to me—it still pisses me off.

She'll pay.

She'll suffer.

I stabbed the grotesque beneath me in the face, again and again, watching the skull cave in. I wasn't seeing its face anymore—I was seeing hers.

Navina, with her smug confidence, her little protector act. Disgusting.

One day, I'll carve that pretty face of hers until she can't even look at herself without vomiting.

Let her wear masks and hoods for the rest of her life.

Let her live in shame while I laugh.

I'll pin her down myself and show her what it means to be lesser.

Another grotesque lunged—its claws wide, mouth open. I side-stepped, grabbed its arm mid-swing, broke it at the elbow with a twist, and jammed my blade into its gut until it hit the spine.

It twitched. I twisted harder.

Then I heard it.

Screams.

Louder. Closer. Different.

It wasn't the grotesques this time.

Valhalla members were dropping like flies behind me.

I turned, annoyed—and paused.

It wasn't a monster.

It was... a person.

Completely black clothing. Mask over his face. Not even his hair visible.

He held a thick steel-silver pipe like it was an extension of his arm—fluid, deadly.

And he was wrecking them.

Not killing—knocking them out with precise, effortless strikes.

A pipe cracked someone's ribs and caved a helmet. Another was dropped with a neck blow, limbs flailing.

One grotesque pounced at him. He slipped low, drew a small dagger—and sliced its legs off. Just like that.

The creature screamed, its body twitching, crippled on the ground.

I blinked.

Oh.

Oh... this is interesting.

He's fast.

Finally.

A real human being.

Not one of those whining weaklings behind me.

Not a pathetic sword saint hiding behind their gifts.

A real challenge.

I smiled.

Looks like I found my warm-up.

Before I peel Navina's face off, I think I'll take my time with this one.

Break him down. Snap every bone.

And when I'm done, I'll rip that mask off and show him exactly who stands at the top.

Me.

Aaron.

Scar's greatest student.

The one destined to lead.

You'll see.

They'll all see.

1:29 PM – 8 Minutes Before Valhalla Wipe Out

Tch.

He was fast. Not faster than me—but fast enough to be annoying.

I rushed him, blades gleaming with gore, blood still dripping from the grotesques I butchered like livestock. He kept knocking out Valhalla members like they were training dummies, hitting their vitals like he had a goddamn manual. Each strike was surgical. Precision in motion.

Good.

He wasn't some fragile little mageling swinging a stick. He knew how to fight. That meant this would be fun.

And I'd get to crush someone worth crushing.

I lunged, slicing from the side—he ducked, tilting down so clean it pissed me off. A flash of movement—gone. Like smoke in wind.

I turned—eyes narrowing. He was already behind another grotesque, severing its arms, slamming the Valhalla idiot behind it to the ground—then punting him out cold like trash.

I couldn't help the grin that crept up.

A killer in a mask. Like me.

But let's be real—he wasn't me.

He wasn't even close.

I jumped in again, swept low toward his legs. He caught it with the bat. I went for the kill—a double-blade slice to both sides of his neck. One got blocked. The other? Should've ended it.

CLANG.

He blocked it—pulled out his dagger mid-motion, like he knew it was coming.

We both jumped back, like wolves in a cage. Circle. Slow steps.

Our eyes locked.

"Got a name, masked boy?" I spat, blades dripping. "Or do you wanna say it as your last words before I kill you?"

"Question that in hell."

That was it.

I was going to carve that tongue out.

I pounced. The clash of metal and movement blurred the edge of the battlefield. Our weapons howled every time they met. I slammed my foot down, magic coursing through my leg. Earth responded like a loyal dog—rising into a wall behind him.

You don't get to run, freak.

I spun—roundhouse aimed at his gut. He blocked with his knee. Solid. Felt like kicking stone. So I went lower—kicked into that same knee.

My shin burned. Bastard braced it well.

And then—he did something slick.

He threw his dagger into the air—what, you panicking now? But no—this was planned. He swung the bat. I caught it. Redirected it like a joke. But he let go of the bat and grabbed my wrist.

A mistake.

I went in to stab him straight through the gut—already imagining the sound of the blade tearing through flesh—

CLINK.

He caught his falling dagger in reverse grip—mid-air—and blocked it.

WHAT?!

Then he twisted my wrist—sharp, clean—kicked my thigh with enough force to jolt my nerves, and used the push to launch himself up, flipping—and brought his heel down toward my skull.

Reflex. I blocked with both arms, but the force still drove me back.

I slid across the dirt, boots digging in. My blades hissed from the friction.

We locked eyes again.

Neither of us moved.

I could see it now—Even the grotesques were keeping back, forming a ring around us like they could sense this wasn't their game.

They were waiting.

For blood.

And they wouldn't get mine.

No one interfered. Not even the cowards in Valhalla—

Of course they didn't.

They knew I didn't need help.

He thought he was good?

No.

He just hadn't tasted what I can really do.

He hasn't seen me serious.

He'll learn.

And when he's gasping on the ground, face cracked and bloody—he'll see who the top of the world really is.

Me.

Aaron.

"Pathetic." the masked freak said.

He let his weapons fall. Just like that. Steel bat, dagger—gone.

"You're too weak," he muttered, stepping forward like this wasn't even a fight. "It's a shame those weapons are wasted on someone like you."

His hands rose—open palms. Not fists. No guard. Just... relaxed fighting stance.

"Oh, now you're dead, cunt."

I lunged. Full speed—blades blurring, legs swinging—I was the weapon.

He slid under the first slash.

His body dipped, shoulder brushing dirt, and he popped up inside my guard, hands brushing the side of my sword with a subtle touch—redirecting it just off-angle.

I spun—other blade flashing in an arc.

He bent back—the edge slicing air an inch above his nose.

Then he twisted around me.

One palm struck the nerve in my forearm—tingle.

A second pushed into my shoulder—redirected my momentum mid-spin.

I was moving—But not where I wanted to go.

I roared and kicked, sharp and low—aiming for his knee.

He stepped around, catching the inside of my thigh with his heel—quick tap, just enough to disrupt the strike—then pivoted.

He slid past my guard, leaned into my chest, and elbowed me straight in the ribs.

Crack.

I snarled and slashed.

He didn't back off.

He weaved. Ducked under. Turned sideways. My sword passed over his shoulder.

He caught my wrist—again—and this time pushed, body twisting in unison like flowing water around a rock.

I nearly stumbled.

He didn't even hit me with strength. It was all position and calculated approaches.

My next kick came in high, aimed for his head.

He spun inward, got under my leg, hand brushing the back of my thigh—redirected it with me instead of against.

As my foot landed—off balance—his palm slapped my chest and pushed back.

Not hard. But timed perfectly.

I stumbled a step.

"You're pissing me off!" I shouted, blades burning in my grip. "Fight like a man! Stop running, you coward!"

I went in again, teeth clenched, swinging both swords from opposite directions like a guillotine.

He slid forward.

Not back.

In.

Head tilted—barely missed my right blade.

Left hand caught my forearm mid-swing and redirected it downward with a sharp arc—using my own force.

Right palm slapped the flat of my other blade and pushed it aside with such finesse it felt disrespectful.

Disarming without disarming.

He moved like he wasn't just avoiding pain—He was rewriting the rules of the fight.

He jumped back, landing light, keeping distance again.

Like this was all just... practice.

That was it.

That was fucking it.

I stood there breathing heavy, fury crawling up my throat.

This guy. This masked loser.

He hadn't even bruised me—But I felt violated.

Every strike he landed wasn't meant to hurt—It was meant to show me I couldn't touch him.

I was a rabid dog, and he was walking me on a leash.

And the worst part?

The grotesques were still watching.

The Valhalla bastards still weren't stepping in.

Everyone here was watching me lose ground.

"You call that fighting?" I barked, pacing forward. "You keep dodging, flipping, running around like a loser! Fight me like a man!"

"...You're too slow."

"What?"

"Too slow," he repeated, flat. "Too clumsy. Too obvious. Every movement you make is an opening I can use to kill you."

My fists tightened around the hilts. "You little—"

"You can't land a hit. Not because I run," he said, "but because your fighting style is awful."

My teeth gritted. "You think you're clever, huh?"

"I don't need to be clever," he replied. "You make this easy."

"You're not even fighting!" I shouted. "Just dodging like a coward! You haven't attacked once! Not even once! You call this garbage dancing a style!?"

"I'm not fighting to kill," he said, voice calm—too calm. "If I was, you'd already be dead."

"Oh, so now it's mercy?!" I sneered. "You're sparing me? Me?!"

"Yes."

"You arrogant piece of—"

"You were born lucky," he interrupted, sharp. "That's all."

I froze.

"What?"

"You didn't earn this strength or style. You were born with it. That's why you rely on brute force to fight. That's why you'll never be able to defeat me."

"I worked day and night to stand where I am today!" I snapped. "Don't you dare act like you're better than me!"

"I am better than you."

"You'll shut that mouth when your jaw's shattered," I growled. "And once I kill you—once I wipe that smugness off your face—I'll keep getting stronger. Stronger and stronger until the rest fall too."

"...What did you say?"

I stepped forward, smirking through the heat in my chest.

"Once I kill you," I said slowly, savoring every word, "the next on my list is Navina. Then one by one, each Sword Saint will drop."

His body stiffened.

Something shifted.

That calm, floating stance he used—Gone.

Now he sank, weight over his front leg. His arms low. His fingers curled tighter. No more softness. No more deflections.

He wasn't defending anymore.

"And you won't change your mind?" he asked, voice quieter.

"No," I spat. "Those insects are dropping once this is done. So stand proud while you're still breathing. You gave me a little trouble."

I raised my hand and wind began coiling around me—fast.

Using the elemental magic of wind will help me gain swiftness. It's time to stop holding back and destroy him.

This was it. This was the moment I won.

But then—

His voice changed.

It wasn't calm anymore.

It wasn't even human.

"Then I'll end this here."

"How dare you even think of touching my dolls..."

His head tilted slightly forward.

Shoulders rolled once—Then still.

"Your story ends here."

In an instant, he moved.

I didn't think.

I moved.

I could hear the wind I summoned still howling around me, wrapping my limbs in speed, in control. I was faster, stronger, sharper—this should've been over.

He was nothing but a coward who finally decided to stop running.

But the second he moved, something was off.

He closed the distance like he wanted blood.

My blade came up—high angle slash, a bait into a second lower sweep.

He didn't flinch.

His left hand slapped my wrist down and the second sword went wide—redirected like it meant nothing. His right palm struck me square in the chest, just under the sternum. My ribs rattled. I stumbled half a step back.

What?

I reset, gritting my teeth. I was still in control. I charged again—switched stance, swapped swords, elemental burst along the edges of my blades, feint left—twist right—kick low—

He ducked under the kick and pivoted under my arms like he was dancing with gravity. His knee came up—fast. Cracked into my side. It hurt. A lot.

I growled and jumped back, adjusting.

He kept walking forward.

"You were only born with talent. Still want to die?" he said.

I didn't answer.

I blitzed forward again, faster this time—unpredictable. I twisted my core mid-slash, flipping the blade into reverse grip and aiming for his throat. I combined my movement with a burst of flame at his legs to lock him in.

This was genius-level close combat. Nothing he could see coming.

But he did.

He jumped over the flame mid-spin, used my own momentum to roll behind me, and slammed his heel against the back of my knee.

I buckled.

Pain flared up my leg as I dropped down on one knee—and then it hit me.

That wasn't a lucky move.

He wanted me to come in.

He baited me. He used my attack to control the field.

I tried to push up—his elbow crashed into the side of my head, making my vision flicker.

I swung my blade from the ground, wild. Sloppy. Desperate.

He knocked it clean from my hand with a sharp upward palm. It flew into the air and clattered somewhere far.

I didn't even see his next punch.

All I felt was my jaw being shoved to the left by force.

He didn't stop. He rushed me—blow after blow, short-range, close-quarters. His foot stomped my other knee in before I could adjust, and a snap shot up my spine. I howled.

This can't be happening.

I reached for my other sword—finally grabbed it—only for him to kick my forearm. It went limp. Useless. The sword slipped away. I couldn't close my fingers.

He spun and took me down to the ground with a brutal jujutsu sweep, mounted my chest, locked my arms with his knees, and stared down at me.

I was trapped. Completely.

I couldn't believe it.

This wasn't Scar. This wasn't a Sword Saint.

This was a nobody.

Then came the fist.

The first punch shook my skull.

The second cracked something.

The third made my vision blur like glass underwater.

Each one hit harder. More violent. More exact. It wasn't just pain—it was death.

He was deforming my face with every hit.

My brain couldn't keep up. My thoughts were collapsing.

I used to think fighting Scar showed me what fear was.

But this?

This showed me what death felt like.

Another hit. I felt my cheekbone split.

Another. My nose shattered.

I screamed, but it wasn't even a sound anymore. Just blood and spit.

My thoughts were unraveling—I was supposed to kill him. I was supposed to wipe them all. Navina, Alina, all of them. I was meant to rise.

I saw it so clearly.

But now I was here—under him, helpless, dying in fists. And suddenly...

I knew.

This nobody fought better than anyone I had ever faced. Even Scar.

My body stopped resisting. My thoughts started fading.

And the last thing I realized before the darkness took me—

I never stood a chance.

"Don't ever think of touching my dolls again." He said as I collapsed unconscious...

After Aaron collapsed, his broken body thudding against the dirt like discarded scrap, the masked man didn't speak a word.

No final insult. No dramatic endnote.

He simply stood up—blood smeared across his fists, Aaron's—and turned his focus toward the rest of Valhalla's squad.

They didn't stand a chance.

One by one, they fell. Brutally put to sleep.

And when it was done, with the bodies of the once-feared squad littered like trash across the ground, the masked man raised a single hand to the sky.

A flare of dark light erupted—a crooked, jagged signal—ripping across the clouds.

A silent message: Valhalla Squad – Eliminated.

The grotesques paused for a moment, eyes scanning the unconscious and mangled bodies. They tilted their heads, confused. None of them twitched. No signs of life. But no signs of death either. Limbs twisted. Blood congealed. Faces unrecognizable.

Yet, in the grotesques' single-minded obsession, none of that mattered.

Rinascita was near.

And so, without a sound, they moved on. Storming past the wreckage of bodies once praised as humans.

And among them, Aaron's body remained.

His face—swollen, crushed, broken beyond recognition—was uglier than any grotesque. A grotesque of ambition itself.

The price he paid for daring to threaten what the masked man held dear.

A cruel punishment, not out of justice, but possession.

He touched what wasn't his.

And for that...

He was destroyed.

- North of Rinascita -

1:40 PM — After Valhalla Wipeout

Celia's Perspective:

The air was thick with blood again. Warm. Sticky. Familiar. The grotesques didn't scream, they just... gurgled. Sputtered as they collapsed in pieces under me.

Their heads dropped first—thunk, thunk—then their bodies gave in. I didn't even blink. I stepped on the last one's skull with a satisfying crunch, bits of bone and brain matter spraying out beneath my heel.

They kept coming.

I kept killing.

"Valhalla's squad just got wiped," Levi said behind me, panting as he cleaved through a creature lunging from the left. "All of them. Gone."

I tilted my head.

"Hm."

I sliced horizontally, my blade singing as it tore through another grotesque's neck.

"Then they didn't have it in them to live. That's all."

Levi paused—stared at me like I'd just told him his mother meant nothing. "Celia, what the hell—?"

"They weren't strong enough. They died. End of story."

I flicked the blood off my chains. It arced into the dirt, black and steaming. "It's not like we needed them."

"But that squad was guarding the west entrance to Rinascita! The grotesques will flood the—!"

"So?" I turned slowly, my voice flat. Another grotesque lunged toward me—I didn't even look at it. My chains snapped midair, impaling it in five places. The body dropped twitching.

I stepped over it.

"I don't see why we should care for strangers," I added, dragging the edge of my heel across its half-moving face. A wet squelch followed. "Let them die."

Levi moved closer, teeth gritted. "You're not... you're not acting like yourself."

"Old Celia died the moment Kaiser was taken away from me," I said. "This is me now."

He flinched. For a second, the battlefield seemed quieter. His sword trembled just slightly in his grip.

"She would've cared," he said. "The old Celia would've—"

"—been weak. Stupid. Emotional. And in love with a fantasy."

I summoned my chains again—four grotesques came from above, and I skewered them midair. Their bodies dangled like torn puppets. I didn't even look up.

Levi's expression twisted. "We need to regroup. That side of Rinascita's exposed. If we don't reinforce it, people will die."

"The moment you leave you guild dies." I turned to face him, slowly. "If they were really worth anything, they would survive. I have no intentions of helping them even for a second."

He took a step back. "You... can't mean that."

"I do."

My eyes didn't flinch. "Or would you rather go play hero and watch your precious friends get torn apart while you're gone?"

"You can't be serious," he whispered.

I tilted my head, smiling sweetly now—one of those fake, saccharine ones I used to wear before I bled someone out.

"You made promises, didn't you?" I said, voice soft now, nearly a whisper. "You said you'd carry them. Protect them. Be their pillar."

My eyes narrowed. "Are you really going to abandon them now?"

Levi didn't answer.

"Go on then, run off," I said. "Let the little children here die while you chase after something you're too late to save. That's what you're good at, isn't it? Pretending to be a hero when all you've ever been was a coward."

He looked furious. But he didn't move.

"They're all going to die when you leave. Stay here and fight like you should, that's your goal." I said.

Grotesques came again. I twirled. Blood bloomed in the air as my thorns and chains danced—elegant, mechanical, merciless. Bodies collapsed behind me like dominoes.

"So Levi, what's your answer? Save your own guild or strangers?"

When the last one dropped, Levi finally exhaled.

"...Fine," he said. "...Fine. We stay."

I smiled again, but this time it was different—twisted. Almost... tender.

Someone else will handle the other side. They'll either survive, or they won't. That's life.

I leapt midair, flicked my hand—and four grotesques exploded as my chains spun like razors.

Then I floated down beside Levi, brushing his cheek mid-motion.

Pat.

"You're a good boy," I whispered.

His eyes widened. For the first time since I'd met him... he looked afraid of me.

And that was good. That was right.

Because I wasn't Celia anymore.

I was Kaiser's good girl.

And I'd tear the world apart just to see him in my arms again.

Others can drop dead, kill themselves, whatever really. I only want him and him...

I wonder who'll play hero to save those helpless people.

- East of Rinascita -

1:46 PM — After Valhalla Wipeout

Lucas's Perspective:

Ahh. A few new levels.

I flexed my fingers. A small pulse of Light Magic arced off my palm.

"I feel stronger already," I muttered.

Then I paused.

Wait. Why did that feel... off?

My boots crunched over grotesque flesh—charred, slashed, and halfway melted thanks to system cleaning up anything that got too close to me. I hadn't even needed to cast a spell for the last five minutes. They were weak.

Too weak.

Awfully weaker than before.

Something's not right.

「 You finally noticed? Congrats, Einstein. These grotesques are significantly weaker than the one you fought near the forest last week. At this point, you might as well be grinding tutorial mobs. 」

My brow twitched.

"Don't roast me while I'm thinking."

But he had a point. These things were cannon fodder. Half their attacks weren't even reaching me before being atomized by Light Aura auto-barriers the system maintained around me.

Then I saw it.

A message in the sky. Burning crimson. Faint particles etched into the clouds.

[Valhalla Squad: WIPED]

What?

「 ...Huh. That's unexpected. I had them in the top 5 bets to survive. Guess I'm down fifty imaginary system coins. 」

"Navina!" I called out.

She twisted mid-swing, her twin arcflingers melting a grotesque into ash before she turned to me.

"What?!"

I pointed to the sky.

Her eyes followed.

She froze.

Her breath hitched.

"No... no way," she whispered. Her whole face paled, like the color had been ripped out by the news.

I clenched my jaw as another grotesque jumped. The system wiped it before it touched the air around me. But I wasn't thinking about that.

My heart was pounding—and not because of the fight.

I looked beyond the barrier, toward the town.

Rinascita was open now. The grotesques would flood in. Homes. Families. Children.

Innocent people are going to die.

I stared ahead, light erupting around me with each step. The system was auto-cleaving grotesques using light that entered my radius, but I barely noticed the slaughter.

It felt... empty.

All these people. They had no power. No magic. Just lives. Simple ones.

Someone's dad might not come back tonight. Someone's daughter might never get to see tomorrow.

All because we were supposed to have the East covered.

All because Valhalla died at the West.

Was this a trap?

Had it all been a trap from the start?

A flicker in the corner of my eye made me look left.

Azrael.

His face remained completely neutral, poker as always but...

He was running west.

And for the first time... he wasn't calm.

His movement was clipped, stiff.

「 ...There's a surge in his neural response patterns. He's feeling anxious. 」

My eyes widened.

"Azrael? Anxious?"

「 Which means something even you might understand... Something bad has happened beyond our normal eyes. 」

Shit.

If even he was on edge, this was worse than I thought.

I turned quickly. "Navina!"

She turned, breathing heavily, blood splattered across her cheek.

"I need you to take care of the east side with your guild. I'm heading west. I have to make sure Rinascita doesn't fall."

Her brows drew tight. "Alone?! Lucas, that's suicide! You'll be going straight into the horde—!"

"Azrael's already on his way." I offered a half-grin. "And I'm not dying. Promise."

"But—"

"Hey."

She looked at me.

I straightened, light swirling behind my back like twin wings of gold dust.

"Throughout the vastness of the skies... I alone am the divine one," I said, smirking. "I'll return—unharmd and unescaped. Don't worry."

She blinked. Slowly... then finally nodded. Hesitant. Quiet.

"...Take care," she said.

I gave a single nod.

Then—

「 Activating skill: Lightstep: Full Drive. Speed increased by 150%. Aura suppression applied. Path cleared. 」

Boom.

My body surged forward, the world blurring past me as I ran across the blood-soaked fields. The grotesques weren't even dots in my periphery—they were already dead.

I reached the outer shell of where Valhalla's squad had last been seen.

Only to feel it.

Drip.

A raindrop.

Then another.

Thunder rolled in the distance.

I looked up.

"...No way."

The sky was darkening. Clouds too thick. Too unnatural.

「 Lucas. It's impossible, but... it appears someone is artificially inducing a storm. 」

"What?"

「 Atmospheric mana manipulation. Someone's forcing a thunderstorm. Right over Rinascita. 」

Everything clicked at once.

Weaker grotesques... Valhalla squad wiped... now a thunderstorm at the exact point we planned to converge for final reinforcement?

"Someone's fighting against us," I muttered. "There's a mastermind."

My stomach twisted.

Could it be—

No.

Kaiser's missing. If he wanted this place gone, he wouldn't have to pull strings. He's too powerful for games like this. He could walk through the front gates and erase Rinascita.

So then who?

「 The storm. The bait grotesques. The deaths. The location. Someone knew you'd pick protecting the people over staying with Navina. 」

I stopped running.

My hands clenched.

"...They split us up."

They knew I'd leave if the town was in danger.

My eyes widened.

Someone wanted me away from Navina's side.

They forced me to choose—lives of strangers, or my friends.

「 So? Where are you going to go now? 」

The thunder rumbled harder now.

A few cold drops landed on my head.

I stared into the west, past the storm clouds, past the howling grotesques, past the blood.

"...I'll fight for the people," I said.

"They deserve to live, even if I don't know their names."

「 Sacrificing your friends for the lives of strangers... that's the Lucas I love to see. 」

"Don't call it a sacrifice," I muttered. "Navina's not some damsel. She's strong. She'll survive."

「 ...Fair. Oh—by the way, that giant grotesque charging you from the right? Not imaginary. 」

I smiled.

Light exploded from my palm.

"Let's make this quick, then. People are waiting."

And as thunder cracked across the sky, I prayed silently—Don't let her die before I come back.

As Lucas vanished into the storm, a new terror stepped onto the field.

The Swarm Tyrant.

A grotesque unlike the others—neither frenzied nor mindless. Towering above even the largest of its kin, its form was a writhing fusion of obsidian chitin and glistening black feathers, six wings unfurling behind its back like blades ready to slice the sky in half. Its voice was not a sound, but a vibration—thick and guttural, echoing straight into the minds of every grotesque nearby.

They bowed.

Creatures that had once snarled and screeched now knelt like loyal beasts before a king.

From beneath its wings, several grotesques emerged—evolved types, marked with jagged glowing runes etched into their skulls and limbs. Intelligence danced behind their monstrous gazes. These weren't fodder. These were commanders.

One of them crawled forward, its claws dragging long furrows into the ground, eyes glowing like twin coals. Its mandibles clicked reverently.

"𐄂𐄃𐄅𐄆... Tyrant... your swarm awakens," it rasped in a voice that sounded like bone scraping metal. "Where shall the purge begin?"

The Swarm Tyrant raised its head, golden irises narrowing beneath its plated crown. Its wings expanded further, blocking the sun behind a veil of shadow.

"We begin with the South," it declared. Its voice carried across the field like thunder.

"The Sword Saint of Technique dies first."

The air seemed to still.

And then—

Wings.

Dozens. Hundreds.

Every grotesque in the area—evolved, sharpened, ready—unfurled their wings in unison, a sweeping sound like a thousand blades unsheathing. Their forms blurred in the sky, fanning out behind the Tyrant like a black hurricane.

They had been waiting.

And now, the real war would begin.

Elsewhere, a different storm raged.

Celia.

She moved to kill, each chain aimed to crush the grotesques from inside and outside using her hatred, fuel by her negative emotions and cruel sense of justice. This wasn't even about saving other people... it was about...

Obsession.

She didn't fight for the innocent. She didn't defend the helpless. Celia fought for her heart.

For Kaiser.

Her presence here was not acts of heroism—they were declarations of selfish, desperate love. The grotesques in her way weren't enemies. They were obstacles between her and what she needed.

She tore through them with the precision of a killer, and the savagery of a monster.

To the others, she might've looked like a savior.

But there was no empathy in her red eyes. No warmth in her hands.

Only the desire to slaughter. And fight for her own needs instead of others.

.....

Far to the east, Lucas ran with the wind, light trailing behind him like the remnants of a falling star. The storm crackled overhead, and his eyes never wavered from the burning horizon where East was.

He could've left them for his own safety or needs.

But he didn't.

He ran toward the town.

Because someone had to.

Even if he didn't wear a cape or call himself a hero—he was the one the world needed now. A man who cared. Who chose to fight for the lives of people who couldn't fight for themselves.

He didn't need recognition.

He only needed to make sure the people lived.

.....

Above it all, the Swarm Tyrant watched from his perch atop a shattered spire, his wings crackling with lightning as the storm obeyed his command.

Rinascita would fall.

Not because it was weak...

But because the end had finally begun.

.....

From the storm above, silence fell.

In that breathless pause—guild members bled, people cried, grotesques clawed forward, and saints fought on.

Everyone fought for something.

Some for love. Some for power. Some just to live another second.

But high above, past the thunder and rain—

Eyes opened for a single moment.

Blue. Hollow. Endless.

The Void looked down.

And in its gaze, they were all the same.

Alina's promise. Navina's sacrifice. Xander's patience. Levi's doubt. Aaron's ego.

Celia's obsession. Lucas's hope.

Even the grotesques' hunger..

All tangled. All small. All beneath it.

It didn't care who suffered or why they fought.

It only knew one truth: Someone soon was going to touch what was his.

And now, the Void was watching.

Nothing would survive its return.

- To Be Continued: Swarm Tyrant

Chapter 74 - Swarm Tyrant's Arrival

Lucas's Perspective:

I finally reached the west.

Yeah, great. storm, blood, and a pile of grotesques lining up like it's some deadbody cosplay. Oh, and there he was—Azrael. Of course, cold as ever, dead eyes locked onto a single figure at the center of the chaos.

A masked man. Was he the one somehow keeping the grotesques from entering the town?

"Yo—" I didn't even get to finish my sentence.

Azrael vanished from my peripheral.

A blink later, he was already there, blitzing in with those twin daggers like a goddamn ghost. No warning. No hesitation. Just pure lethal motion. But the masked man?

He turned.

No panic, no magic. Just a wrist flick—and he caught the blade's arc with the edge of a broken plank, then spun and redirected the second dagger using nothing but a handful of sand.

Sand. Bro.

「 You might wanna focus, hero boy. Your side's starting to stink of grotesques. 」

Oh right.

I raised my palm, the air fracturing into shimmering mirrors of hard light. One pulse, one shot—ping. A beam fired, bounced through the mirrors like a pinball of divine death, burning through grotesques left and right.

I gotta use minimal mana. Gotta optimize.

「 Tactical ricochet: Efficient and Fast. Almost like you planned it. 」

I smirked. "Almost."

Behind me, Azrael's daggers danced like whispers. He slashed low, flipped into a kick, then darted back in from the side, blades curving like silver crescents. Each movement was calculated, flawless.

But the masked guy? Man fought like the ground itself was part of him. He spun dirt into dust clouds, kicked a dislodged crate for cover, and somehow—somehow—turned a broken bottle into a deflection tool mid-air. No spells. Just skill.

「 He's using different martial styles... minor acrobatics... and trash. That's finesse. 」

"Who the hell fights like that with trash?"

「 We've seen it before. Two years ago. 」

I stopped mid-aim. "...You mean him?"

「 The original. His was better...final. 」

I didn't answer. My hands were glowing, but my blood was ice. There was only one guy who fought like the world had insulted him personally.

And this guy... he wasn't him. But he was trying.

The fight kept going. No injuries. Just momentum and skill and sheer lunacy. Azrael's movements—predictive. He fought like he already knew what would happen. And the masked man? He adapted, frame by frame, move by move.

A genius versus another genius. Two monsters fighting on the edge of perfection.

No Victory.

「 You seeing this, Lucas? Even if they're flawless... his was still more. 」

"...Yeah."

The light around my fingers pulsed hotter.

The west was crawling.

Grotesques were pouring through the forest line like a plague with wings, screeching and scraping through the mud. My first beam missed—bounced wrong off the mirror.

Second one hit a tree. Clean shot... if my target had bark.

Third grazed one grotesque's shoulder. Burned it, sure, but not enough.

I drew in a breath and flicked my fingers. A horizontal wave of water magic surged from my side, arcing behind me in a semi-transparent curtain. It hummed as my light magic filled it from within—glowing veins of pure white pulsing inside the blue wall like living lightning.

A grotesque flapped too close.

「 Light travels differently in water, genius. Refraction. Look it up sometime. 」

"...Right." I exhaled through clenched teeth. "Physics. Forgot you cared."

「 I don't. But your aim sucks. Calculating new trajectory. 」

The moment its wing grazed the veil, a single pulse of light zipped through the water and pierced straight through its chest. Clean. Dead. Gone.

"Now we're cooking."

「 Adjusting angle of incidence... optimizing bounce. Congratulations, you've got a lethal converging sniper. 」

My boots slid across the wet ground as I pivoted, firing another condensed beam into a mirror. It hit one grotesque in the chest, ricocheted through the water, and snapped through three more in a blink. Each one dropped with a hiss and a hole in their body.

Behind me—Azrael and the masked man fought through death.

Azrael's daggers came down like a guillotine.

The masked man leaned, barely, and raised a rock. Blade skimmed past. Missed.

He spun low, kicked sand up into Azrael's eyes.

Azrael turned his head mid-motion, unreadable, letting the sand pass like air.

Their limbs were a blur. A dagger whistled past the masked man's throat—he bent backward, caught himself on one palm, and spun a wild haymaker with his other. Azrael slid under it, eyes cold, and tried to gut him.

Blocked with a cracked board.

So far in their fight, both managed to defend each other's strikes flawlessly. Almost as if they were of the same being; just fighting each other... was this a coincidence they were so alike?

Then the masked man broke form. Turned, fast—ran.

Azrael didn't even blink. He was already after him, silent as death, daggers gleaming in the stormlight.

And me?

I had a job.

I raised my hand, more light surging through my barrier, beams slicing through grotesques trying to breach the town. Their shrieks echoed through the wet air, mixing with the roar of the storm now crashing down around us. Wind howled. Trees bent. Lightning stabbed the sky.

The storm was here now. Not just near.

Everything was soaked in black and blue. Thunder cracking so loud it rattled my ribs.

I gritted my teeth and pushed forward, keeping my barrier between them and the town, every step burning mana—but I couldn't let up. Not with people behind me.

I just hoped the others were okay.

Then—

My beam hit something that didn't fall.

I blinked.

What stood there wasn't a grotesque.

It was... thicker. Taller. Breathing heavier. Black chitin armor strapped across its limbs, chest, back, and neck like it had learned. Like it had adapted.

Its eyes were the same though.

Hollow. Hungry.

And now... smarter.

"...Oh, hell no."

My fingers lit up again.

「 Good news. You're going to need a lot more mirrors. 」

From all sides, they came.

The evolved grotesques, no longer mindless beasts, flooded in with terrifying order. Their bodies were larger, stronger—black armored plates shielding their vital spots, their movements sharper, more disciplined.

It was clear now.

Something... or someone... was controlling them.

South Rinascita

"Sylvia!" Alina shouted over the chaos, slashing through one grotesque—but another leapt straight past her and tackled a Requiem mage to the ground.

"I think we'll have to head back to the rear!" Sylvia yelled, panting, almost tripping as she saved another member with a flash of her celestial magic. "There's too many!"

Alina turned—and froze.

One of her comrades, someone she'd fought beside for years, was screaming... before being dragged into a pile of grotesques and torn apart. Her hands trembled. Her eyes darkened with helpless rage.

"Everyone!" Alina shouted. "Retreat to the rear of Rinascita! Now!"

But not all made it. Some were already too far ahead. Screams echoed behind her—men and women begging for help that would never come.

She turned back, ready to run to them—but Sylvia grabbed her arm.

"Alina—please!"

Her jaw clenched. She didn't want to. But she turned. Protected those she could. And they ran.

Moments later, silence fell on the southern battlefield.

The Swarm Tyrant stepped through the storm.

Towering, vile, and slow, it marched over the remains. One wounded man tried to crawl away, whispering prayers.

Crunch.

The Tyrant's foot crushed his skull as if stepping on a pebble.

And then it kept marching—straight toward Rinascita.

----- West and East -----

The situation wasn't any better there.

Xander had already pulled his guild members back, sweat dripping down his face, his sword arm heavy. His attacks weren't working. The grotesques just didn't die easily anymore. Their armor deflected steel, and they brushed off magic like it was dust.

But Navina...

She was still at the front.

The thunder cracked loud above her, and her hands were shaking—not from the cold, but from something deeper.

The rain struck her face like needles. Her body felt numb.

Her thoughts were somewhere else—somewhere long ago.

A stormy forest. A small, frail girl slowly walking, coughing, barely breathing. Cold, always cold. She couldn't breathe back then either.

She couldn't breathe now.

Navina collapsed to her knees, gasping. Her vision swam. Her guild screamed around her. Fire, blood, mud—everything blended together.

"Miss, Navina!!" someone shouted, rushing toward her.

One of her elite members caught her before she could hit the ground.

But the Crimson Eclipse was crumbling. Dozens dead. Knights crushed. Mages shredded. The evolved grotesques tore through their formation without pause.

Navina's eyes were wide, her lips trembling. She tried to speak. Failed.

Then again.

"I... I'm... s-sor..." she tried, choking on her breath, "...s-sorry..."

And then she closed her eyes.

----- Lucas -----

Slowly, even Lucas had to fall back.

He moved between his conjured mirrors, light bending and slicing through grotesques with precision—but they just kept coming. The evolved ones didn't fall so easily. They were coordinating his mirrors and moving individually to waste more of his mana.

「 Warning. Mana levels critically low. Divine protections on cooldown. You're not immune to poison anymore, genius. Unless you wanna die frothing, I suggest moving. 」

"Tch... Yeah, yeah, I got it," Lucas muttered under his breath, eyes scanning the battlefield. His breathing was ragged, body worn.

He clenched his fists as another grotesque lunged. He barely dodged, light flashing from a mirror to strike it down.

Retreat. It wasn't the word he wanted to accept—but he wasn't stupid.

He turned and ran, covering the path behind him with a cascading wall of water and light.

I won't give up, he thought, gaze hardening as he looked back at the storm-covered battlefield

----- North -----

North of Rinascita, the sky roared above as Levi and Celia stood before a new threat—armored grotesques, larger, heavier, and far more dangerous than anything they'd faced before.

Levi struck first, his blade cutting with Godspeed, vanishing and reappearing in flashes of silver. But when his sword hit the creature's neck, the clang of steel against armor echoed louder than thunder. His hand trembled. The blade hadn't pierced.

"...What...?" Levi muttered, stunned.

He slashed again—shoulders, joints, chest—but each strike met dense plating. The back was even thicker. He didn't risk it.

Backing away, he snapped his fingers and shadows rose around the grotesques, aiming to blind and bind. But they didn't falter. One turned, eyes glowing through the black fog, and lunged—right through his spell.

Its claw was inches from Levi's face when chains shot out and crushed its jaw sideways.

"Fall back if you're too weak," Celia said, her voice sharp and cold.

Levi didn't respond. He couldn't.

Celia stormed ahead, her chains whipping out and wrapping around the grotesques. She tried slicing—but something was off. The usual snap and tear didn't come. Her chains were catching, but not cutting cleanly.

She shifted tactics, eyes sharp. Instead of going for vitals, she focused on unarmored gaps. A few went down—but then twitched, moved, started regenerating.

"Tch..." she clicked her tongue, planting her hand into the ground. A cursed aura spread beneath them, dense and violent, halting the grotesques mid-charge.

Levi's focus returned. He moved beside her, breath steadying.

"They weren't here before. These things... they're too coordinated."

"Something changed. Someone made them this way," Celia replied, her chains rattling.

Her spell held for now, keeping the grotesques from swarming, but it wouldn't last.

Then—screams behind them. Levi turned.

His guild. They were under attack.

"We have to return," he said quickly. "This is too much."

"I'm not leaving. I'm fighting until I kill each one of them," Celia snapped back, voice breaking.

Levi reached out and grabbed her wrist.

"I want to fight and win too," he said quietly. "But this isn't the time to get lost in emotions. We regroup. We find a weakness. Or none of us make it out."

Celia's jaw clenched. She looked at the grotesques with burning fury, then turned her head away, sighing.

"...Only for now."

Levi didn't let go. As Celia vaulted upward with her chains, he vanished in a flash of lightning and shadow.

They arrived just in time to witness the horror.

Zain, barely standing, slashed with desperation against grotesques crawling from all sides. It looked like the end.

Three Celestial Apex members were cornered, screaming. Then—ice burst around them, freezing the grotesques solid. Sophia appeared behind them, casting a healing circle over the injured.

"Get up—we're leaving, now!" she yelled, dragging one to their feet.

Zain's voice boomed across the chaos. "Fall back! Everyone, now!"

Levi stood there, frozen, watching his people collapse and cry and bleed.

Even with him here... it was useless.

Just like last time...

Beside him, Celia's expression darkened, angry, neutral.

And together, they all retreated to the rear... where the rest of the guilds gathered, waiting, shaken, for what came next.

The rear defenses of Rinascita were thin—too thin. A single semicircle of exhausted fighters now stood between the grotesque horde and the heart of the town. The storm still raged above, casting a dark veil over the broken banners and bloodied ground. All of the guilds had fallen back, forming loose lines. Some

collapsed against the walls. Others clutched their weapons with trembling hands, eyes wide and hollow.

Nothing was working.

Swords had dulled. Magic fizzled. Hope bled out like the wounded at their feet.

Levi walked through the mess, passing Requiem, Crimson Eclipse, and scattered remnants of once-proud squads. His eyes scanned the faces—burnt, bloodied, barely breathing. When he reached Navina, he stopped briefly.

She was sitting against the stone, her knees pulled close to her chest, hair soaked and tangled from the storm. Her gaze was blank, fixed on the mud. She was barely conscious, lips parted, breathing shallow. Her sword lay beside her, untouched.

He didn't say anything. She looked... far away.

He turned and continued on, approaching Alina, Xander, and Sylvia as they regrouped near a scorched wagon turned barricade.

Alina's armor was cracked and her blade chipped, but she stood tall.

Sylvia sat on the ground, arms wrapped around her legs, blood on her robes—not her own.

Xander leaned back lazily against the barricade, arms crossed, eyes staring up into the rain. Even he looked tired.

Levi exhaled sharply. "What the hell happened out there?"

Alina shook her head, wiping blood from her cheek. "They came out of nowhere. We thought we were pushing them back... but those armored ones, they—"

"They were waiting," Sylvia muttered, eyes unfocused. "They let the weaker grotesques die first. They hid behind them."

"We walked into it." Levi clenched his jaw. "We didn't even know we were being baited."

Xander laughed weakly. "First time I've seen monsters use tactics. Even when I got serious, my sword barely scrapped one. Guess I'm retiring."

Alina gave him a sharp look. "This isn't the time."

Levi leaned closer. "They're pushing through fast. Once they reach the inner-circle..."

Sylvia swallowed. "We'll have to fight again. There's no one else."

No one replied for a moment. The silence hit harder than the thunder above.

Then, footsteps approached.

Celia walked into the circle, her chains rattling quietly behind her. Her expression was cold—red eyes burning softly beneath soaked snowy white hair.

At the opposite end, Lucas arrived, his coat torn and water dripping from his bangs. His light green eyes took note of everyone around him.

For a moment, their gazes met across the dying light of the rear defense.

Celia's crimson glare. Lucas's serene green.

They didn't speak. Just watched each other. Then looked away.

More footsteps.

Lord Avelric approached, a nobleman's cloak dragging through the mud, his face grave. He looked around the circle—at the wounded, the dying, the broken sword saints.

"I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head slightly. "You weren't meant to bear the full weight. I didn't know the grotesques had... evolved that much and were hiding."

"It's not your fault," Levi replied firmly, shaking his head. "None of us saw it coming. They hid them well. We thought the worst was over."

"They planned this," Lucas added quietly. "They let us waste our energy on the weak ones."

Avelric's expression darkened. He turned slightly, noticing Navina's state. Her eyes were shut now, barely moving.

"She doesn't look well," he said grimly. "None of you do. If they reach us here... what then?"

Silence again. Heavy. Suffocating.

No one had an answer.

And the storm howled louder, as if laughing at their hesitation.

Avelric's voice was low, almost drowned out by the wind. "For now... we've managed to erect a temporary barrier around the town using the remaining town mages. But it won't last. It's thin... unstable. There's only one way in now. One entrance. We'll have to defend it. Together."

The sword saints didn't answer. Some were too tired to raise their heads. Others stared off into the distance—blank eyes, hollowed breath. No one had a plan. Not even Avelric, whose shoulders slumped like a cracked statue.

Then, a voice cut through the air like steel.

"We'll have to start teleporting civilians out," Lucas said.

Everyone looked at him. His green eyes locked onto Avelric's. Cold.

"You should've done it earlier before the war began."

Avelric said nothing. Lucas stepped forward.

"If we fight while they're still here, we'll be shielding bodies. Screams. Blood everywhere. The moment we fall, they die. That's unacceptable."

"A pathetic waste of time," Celia's voice snapped across the space.

She stood still, red eyes locked onto Lucas, her chains silent at her side.

"If we waste time moving ants, we'll lose the chance to strike them when they're still gathered. I can kill them. We can end this. Right now."

"And what if you don't?" Lucas asked, his tone sharper than before. "What if we fail? You're willing to gamble hundreds of lives for your pride?"

"They're strangers," Celia replied. "I don't care if they live or die. They mean nothing to me."

Lucas was caught offguard... realizing what she was like.

Lucas's eyes narrowed. "You really are heartless."

"Say that like it's new," she said with a tilt of her head. "I was called that long before today."

"I thought you were different," he said, voice flat. "But I understand now. Why they call you a monster. It's not just your magic or your appearance—it's what's inside."

Celia smiled faintly. Not hurt. Not offended.

"I am a monster. A heartless killer. That's what they all said, didn't they? I'm just proving them right."

She smiled deeper.

"You're being delusional—risking everyone's lives because you want blood."

"I'll risk whoever I want," Celia said, her voice low and steady, "if it kills my enemies."

Lucas's brows tightened. "You think this is some kind of game? These people aren't numbers! There are families. Children."

"They're too weak to defend themselves," she said flatly. "And I couldn't care less."

"You don't care for anyone, do you? You're really willing to let everyone die just to prove you're not weak?" Lucas stepped closer, his voice now stripped of patience.

Celia didn't answer at first. The silence between them dragged sharp like a blade.

Then, without a blink, she said,

"I don't have to answer a nobody like you."

Lucas chuckled—cold, slow, and razor-thin.

"Nobody, huh? Seems like lowly curses have been dreaming big these days. Begging to die early."

"Hm~ Well now, that's it, huh? At that level, you won't even be a snack for my lowly curses." Celia tilted her head, her lips twitching into a twisted smile.

"Clown boy."

Lucas's smile dropped.

"Oh? Then let's see how your little show ends when the chains are ripped apart."

"Gladly," Celia said, her eyes glowing, red and mad. "I'll bury your mirrors with your broken bones."

Lucas raised a hand, mirrors forming around him—glimmering shards spiraling like predators.

Each one shone with a pulse of light magic and refracted stormlight, the storm howling louder behind them as if the world knew what was coming.

Celia's chains slithered out, wrapped in cursed energy that hissed and cracked against the rain. Her aura darkened, the shadows curling around her feet like a dying scream.

They stood, locked in each other's gaze.

One, a heartless curse.

The other, a heaven's gift.

Then, both at once, their voices overlapped—quiet, final.

"Then die."

As Celia's chains slithered through the air and Lucas's mirrors shimmered with killing intent, the battlefield between them burned with unspoken rage.

Just before they clashed—Levi stepped in, hand stretched, not to fight but to stop her.

"Celia," he said, quiet but firm.

She didn't even look at him. "Don't get in my way, Levi."

But Levi didn't move. His voice dropped to a whisper only she could hear.

"The more you fight the people by your side... the further you'll be from saving Kaiser."

Celia froze.

For a moment, her expression twisted—conflict tearing through her red eyes. Then slowly... the chains fell, clattering against the stone with a hiss.

Across from her, Lucas narrowed his eyes.

He noticed.

His mirrors—still swirling, still bright—flickered once... then vanished into the wind.

Avelric exhaled, tension leaving his shoulders.

And beside him, barely standing on trembling legs, was Navina.

She limped forward, bruised and breathless, but still standing. "L-Lucas..."

He turned to her instantly. "Navina?"

"I-It's not the t-time... to fight... Don't... g-get distracted."

Lucas's brows knit with worry. "You're hurt."

"N-Nothing serious," she whispered. "I... I can still fight..."

But her knees buckled. She wavered, falling forward—and Lucas caught her before she hit the ground. His arms tightened around her, steadying her gently.

He glanced down. Her lips were pale, her skin cold, and her eyes unfocused.

Then—System in his mind:

「 Based on her symptoms—shortness of breath, tremors, cold sweating—she may have a phobia of thunderstorms. Diagnosis: PTSD trigger. 」

Lucas's throat tightened.

The storm.

He left her in it.

He looked down at her, guilt heavy in his chest. "Navina... I'm sorry."

She didn't answer—just clutched his coat tighter, as if trying to breathe through the fear.

On the other side, Celia's fingers trembled at her side. Her eyes were dull now, no longer blood-hungry but deeply haunted. She whispered under her breath, voice like a fragile thread:

"...Kaiser..."

That name grounded her.

Brought her back.

Stopped the obsession from devouring what was left of her sanity.

Everyone was quiet again.

Hurt. Broken. Breathing.

But the peace didn't last.

From the main gate....

A sound.

A roar.

Then a crack—The barrier shattered like glass. And from the wreckage, it emerged.

The Swarm Tyrant.

It was taller, with a twisted insectoid frame—black carapace gleaming like wet stone. Its legs were jagged like spears, each step carving into the earth. Its body was fused with armor, bone, and rotting flesh. Wings buzzed on its back, twitching with unnatural rhythm, and its many eyes glowed a sickly violet, each one staring in a different direction like it could see the past, present, and future all at once.

Its mouth opened—not to roar, but to hiss a language older than nightmares.

And grotesques—evolved ones—followed behind it in a stampede.

This was their true test.

To see if Rinascita would exist.

To see if any of them would live—

To see another day.

Chapter 75 - Rinascita's Ending

The Swarm Tyrant stepped into the battlefield.

Every step it took was heavy—sickening. Like the ground itself hated carrying its weight. Behind it, grotesques poured in. Taller. Uglier. Evolved. No longer beasts—these were executioners.

The moment it appeared, everyone instinctively stepped back.

Even Celia.

Even Lucas.

A wave of murderous pressure rolled out from the creature like invisible claws scraping against their bones.

[SYSTEM WARNING]: Threat level exceeds estimations. Estimated class: S+. Recommend immediate retreat.

Lucas's jaw clenched. His eye twitched. "S+? Just from its presence...?" Doubt cracked through his confidence.

Navina, barely upright, staggered back, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Her fingers twitched toward her arcflinger, but her knees buckled slightly.

Levi exhaled quietly.

Now or never. If he moved fast enough—if he struck first—maybe he could—

Then his instincts screamed.

A vision flashed in his mind—his leg gone, blood gushing, a death he couldn't dodge.

He froze.

His eyes widened. That thing... predicted me?

The rest of the guilds—dozens of them, from Rinascita and beyond—stood paralyzed. Their courage shrank under the shadow of the impossible battle ahead.

And still, the Swarm Tyrant walked.

Its glare alone felt like poison in the air.

It stopped... and then it spoke.

The voice was not human.

It was layered.

As if multiple throats—cracked and warped—spoke in haunting unison, dragging syllables like rusted blades.

"Which among you bears the scent of curse... and the glow of false divinity?"

Silence.

Then shock.

Eyes turned to Celia. Then to Lucas.

They both realized it—at the same time.

It was hunting them.

The Tyrant moved its head slightly, scanning.

One blink.

Two.

And then—it found them.

"There. I see it. The rot... and the radiance. Together."

It moved.

Faster than a thought.

It blitzed straight toward Celia—its claws out, death in motion. She barely reacted in time. Her cursed instincts roared. Chains erupted from her back, slamming into its path just before the strike landed.

Metal clashed with something far beyond flesh. The blow still sent a shockwave tearing through the earth.

But the monster didn't stop.

It grabbed her chains.

"Why swing your cursed threads... at the void that does not bleed?"

With a single wrench of its arm, it hurled Celia into the sky.

Her body spun, limbs flailing, before she stabilized mid-air and chanted—

"Vile curse—twist and—!"

Too late.

It was already there.

Wings unfolded—bat-like and massive. It launched upward and reached her mid-spell.

Celia's eyes widened.

She summoned thorns and chains, coated them in decaying magic—layer after layer. A full storm of cursed energy.

The Swarm Tyrant tore through it.

It didn't slow.

Didn't flinch.

Didn't care.

Its clawed hand closed around her throat.

CRACK.

Celia's body went stiff.

Her skin paled immediately as pressure crushed down on her windpipe. Pain shot through her, neck spasming. She barely got out a word.

"...Kh—!"

It pulled back, and with a monstrous snarl—hurled her straight downward.

She hit the ground like a meteor.

BOOM.

A crater formed instantly. Dust exploded upward. Her chains snapped wildly.

Then—

The grotesques screamed and charged.

Rinascita fell into chaos.

Guild members screamed, some sliced apart in the first clash. Blood sprayed. Screeches filled the stormy sky. Limbs, steel, and magic collided.

And at the center of it—The Tyrant stood still.

Its wings spread.

Its claw dripping.

"This ends here... you all are my prey."

Grotesques screamed.

They leapt on the nearest guild members, claws ripping through steel and flesh. A woman screamed—then gurgled, her throat torn open. A young adventurer tried to run, but was tackled and devoured. Bone snapped. Blood hit the walls.

Lucas and Levi surged forward, their priority shifting—save who you can.

But it was already too late for dozens.

Then—two silver flashes tore through the storm.

Xander and Alina.

They shot in like twin blades of light, a blur of cold fire and measured steps.

"Don't hold back," Alina said sharply, her voice like steel in the wind.

Xander lazily tilted his head, cracking his neck. "Wasn't planning on it... though a nap sounds better."

The Swarm Tyrant turned toward them, and for the first time—paused.

Alina was already there.

Her sword shimmered with an unknown technique—four layers of magic entwined into one strike.

"Piercing Line: Celestial Spiral!"

A streak of golden light erupted, spinning forward in a spiral, precise and fast.

The Swarm Tyrant sidestepped—barely—only to catch Xander's blade from behind.

"Flame Echo: Shift Step."

Xander's sword shifted mid-swing into fire, then ice, then lightning, each hit crashing into the monster's side, cracking some of its scales.

It hissed.

Not in pain.

In amusement.

"You dance... well... MASTER of toys... SLAVE of forms... But this... is not your stage."

Its tail whipped around—Alina ducked, her eyes calculating a counters in an instant.

"Xander—up!"

Xander didn't question. He vanished in a blink.

The Tyrant's claw swiped the air—only to meet nothing.

Above, Xander dropped like a meteor.

"Sunder Flame: Heaven Cleave."

He slammed down, sword coated in roaring fire.

A blinding explosion.

Dust.

Silence.

Then the Tyrant emerged from the smoke—its arm partially cut, bleeding black.

But grinning.

It didn't move as it was instantly regenerated.

It let them come.

Alina moved in—three-step pattern, blades changing shape mid-strike.

"Reverse Bloom: Mirror Fang!"

Every motion flawless. Beautiful. Cold.

Yet the Tyrant simply caught her sword.

"Predictable."

Its hand crushed the blade—and slammed Alina with its elbow.

She flew back, blood spitting from her lips, crashing into the dirt.

Xander shouted. "Oi!"

His blade met the Tyrant's again—but this time, it moved.

Fast.

Too fast.

One strike to Xander's ribs—bones cracked.

A clawed foot slammed him down—face-first.

Then the Tyrant grabbed his head—and slammed it into the ground.

Once.

Twice.

Blood spread beneath.

"You learn... WELL," it said coldly. "But knowledge means... nothing... if DEATH is your teacher."

Alina tried to rise, coughing blood. "Get... off of him..."

She launched a final technique—"Infinity Bloom: Breaking Lotus!"

But the Tyrant blurred past it and punched her in the stomach with enough force to send her skipping like a stone across the battlefield.

They both collapsed.

Sylvia screamed Alina's name but she was being overwhelmed trying to defend herself and her guild members.

Levi and Lucas stood frozen.

The ground around them burned. Screams echoed from the ruins.

And two of their strongest—Were down.

Dead silence.

Then, a low growl came from the Tyrant as it turned toward the rest.

"NEXT YOU."

The rain was no longer gentle. It howled. Wind ripped through the ruins of Rinascita as if mourning what was about to happen. Lightning cracked the skies open in violent flashes. And beneath that storm, the Swarm Tyrant turned its dead, glistening eyes to her.

Navina.

Her skin crawled. Every instinct she'd ever trained screamed to run.

But she stood.

Soaked, trembling, coughing from the rain that seeped into her bones, she raised her arms. Her fingers flickered. One, two—two arcflingers materialized—one humming with

frost, the other kindled with blistering elementals. Both elemental guns pulsed with raw energy, built from magic, bound by genius design. She switched them within milliseconds. She always did.

Her blue eyes glowed under the storm's fury. Even now, there was no fear in them—only the cold discipline of a warrior who had trained for this.

"...Sword Saint of Reflex," the Swarm Tyrant muttered, its voice like blood sliding over broken glass. "The twitching insect... you will die here."

Navina didn't answer. She couldn't. Her lungs wheezed as she stepped forward, her boots splashing in the shallow pools of blood and rain.

Suddenly—

The Tyrant lunged.

It flew at her from above—sharp limbs first, death incarnate. But the moment it entered range, her instincts exploded. The world slowed.

—Tilt back. Duck right. Shoot.

She flipped backward, left arm raised—an arcflinger of frost firing a blast that barely missed its neck. The ice struck the tree behind it, freezing it instantly.

Again.

Switch. Fire. Switch. Fire.

Left hand, fire arcflinger. Right hand, sword.

Her feet flow over wet ground like lightning bolts in human form. Arcflingers flickered into existence, fired, vanished, and reformed in new elemental forms. Flame exploded against the Tyrant's wing. Water blasted its undercarriage, then wind curved shots around its erratic movements.

It hissed.

Annoyed.

"You flitter... little leaf," it said, voice rising. "Reflexes... reflexes... what are they when your friends... rot?"

Navina clenched her jaw.

Behind her—guild members screamed as grotesques tore them apart. One was impaled. Another pulled under a collapsing building. A girl called for help and was silenced mid-word. Eaten alive by the grotesque.

Navina's eyes burned—but she never looked back.

"Keep... looking at me..." she coughed.

Lightning struck behind her as she launched into the air, her coat flaring as she twisted, shot two blasts mid-air—one freezing part of the Tyrant's leg, the other grazing its wing. The recoil knocked her back. She somersaulted, landed with one knee sliding.

But the Tyrant vanished.

Ambush.

Above.

She twisted to shoot—but it was too close.

The claws came down. She dodged—barely. It grazed her side, slicing cloth and flesh. She bled. But she didn't stop. Two new guns, water and thunder this time, appeared in her hands.

She shot. The water soaked its wings. The thunder cracked—and shocked the wet area, stunning it slightly.

A brilliant move.

But the monster laughed.

"...Reflexes... react to what is seen. But what of poison... felt?"

Its main jaw lunged. She parried it with her sword, rolled—got back—but not fast enough.

The sub-jaw struck from the side—clamping down on her shoulder.

Her scream was swallowed by thunder.

The Tyrant's fangs dug deep. Bone cracked. A green glow pulsed into her veins.

Poison.

Lethal.

Her knees buckled.

Navina gasped, sword trembling. Her gun evaporated. One hand reached up, weakly trying to pull it off.

It stared at her, eyes blinking out of rhythm. "Now... slow forever."

Suddenly, a burst of pure magic ripped through the side—forcing the Tyrant back.

Lucas.

He stood in the rain, hair drenched, teeth clenched. His green eyes glowed with murderous runes, his body radiating pressure.

But it was too late.

Navina collapsed, barely caught by Lucas. Her eyes were dull. Her lips pale.

He stared at her wound. The veins already turning black.

Lucas whispered, "Don't you die here..."

Her lips trembled.

"I-I-I'm... s-s-sorry... L-Lucas... e-everyone..."

The storm raged around them.

And Lucas stood slowly, laying her down. His fists clenched.

His voice cut through the thunder.

"You're next."

His eyes locked on the Tyrant.

---- Lucas's Perspective:

「System: Initiating full restore. Mana reawakening in progress.」

A surge of energy coursed through me, revitalizing my body and sharpening my senses. The weight of previous failures pressed heavily on my shoulders.

If only I had been stronger, perhaps Navina wouldn't have suffered....

The Swarm Tyrant's gaze bore into me, its voice a guttural rasp that resonated with malevolence.

"So, you're the gift of heavens?"

I met its gaze, unwavering. "Final last words."

Without warning, it lunged, a blur of motion. Anticipating its attack, I activated Lightstep skill, propelling myself sideways as its claws sliced through the space I'd just occupied.

「System: Enemy exhibits erratic movement patterns. Suggest adaptive strategy.」

I nodded internally, already formulating a plan. Channeling light magic, I conjured a series of reflective barriers, positioning them strategically around the battlefield.

These mirrors would amplify and redirect my attacks, creating a web of lethal light.

The Tyrant snarled, momentarily disoriented by the sudden proliferation of reflections. Seizing the opportunity, I launched a concentrated beam of light, which ricocheted off the mirrors, striking the creature from multiple angles.

It roared in pain, but its regeneration was swift, wounds closing almost as quickly as they appeared.

「System: Regeneration rate is formidable. Recommend targeting vital points to impede healing.」

Understood.

Switching tactics, I infused my light daggers with elemental magic—fire to cauterize, ice to freeze, and lightning to disrupt. Engaging in close combat, I aimed for joints and tendons, seeking to cripple its mobility.

The Tyrant retaliated with ferocity, its claws and fangs a whirlwind of death. I parried and dodged, each movement calculated, each counterstrike precise.

「System: Mana levels at 70%. Caution advised.」

I couldn't let up. Drawing upon celestial magic, I summoned a radiant spear, hurling it with all my might. It pierced the Tyrant's abdomen, eliciting a guttural scream.

But it wasn't enough.

The creature lunged again, and this time, its claws grazed my side, tearing through flesh. Pain lanced through me, but I gritted my teeth, refusing to yield.

We stood, bloodied and battered, the storm raging around us. The Swarm Tyrant's eyes glowed with fury, and I met its gaze with unwavering determination.

This battle was far from over.

The world blurred around me. The rain hadn't stopped—it was only getting worse. Cold, suffocating. Like the weight on my chest.

Behind me... I heard them.

Screams. Not guild members. Not fighters.

Innocents.

Children wailing. A woman sobbing. A man choking in his last breath as something tore through him.

My hands clenched.

Dammit.

I couldn't turn around. Not now. The Swarm Tyrant stood in front of me—unrelenting, calculating. Every second I gave it was another life lost behind me.

"If only I was stronger..." I muttered, blood and rain dripping from my jaw. "If I just had more destructive power—"

The Tyrant moved.

But not like before.

Its entire rhythm shifted—gone was the erratic, swerving movement, the insect-like darting and lunging. Now it charged. Head-on. Claws ready. No more distractions.

Just violence.

「Warning: Enemy fighting style change detected. Switching to high-aggression melee patterns. Minimal reaction delay. Recommend abandoning reflection-based magic temporarily.」

"Tch—!"

My mirrors weren't positioned in time. One misfire, and I'd roast myself in my own magic. I dismissed the arrays instantly, forming twin daggers of hardlight in my hands. Light surged through me as I reinforced my body, preparing for the close-range onslaught.

The Tyrant struck.

I met it head-on.

Steel met bone. Light against claw. Each blow rang like thunder in the storm, sparks dancing through the darkness. It pressed forward with relentless aggression, forcing me onto the defensive. My daggers parried its claws, my footwork danced between its legs, but its momentum was terrifying.

Suddenly, it jumped.

No—kicked the ground beneath it. A shockwave rippled outward as its weight exploded upward, launching into the air—and then, with its torn wings beating through the wind—

It soared.

My eyes widened.

「Mimicking your maneuver used against Subject: Celia. Predicting downward compression strike. Impact radius: 6 meters. Lethality: 92%.」

"Solutions?!"

「Deploy 3-part evasion: Step 1—Water Elemental Surge. Compress moisture under feet. Step 2—Directional release into horizontal burst. Step 3—Use remaining momentum to spiral out of impact zone. Minimal damage expected.」

I didn't hesitate.

With a quick pivot, I called forth water magic, freezing the rain at my feet into a condensed plate and burst it sideways—launching my body just as the Tyrant slammed down, claws-first.

It missed—barely.

One claw grazed my forearms, tearing through flesh like it was nothing. The pain bit deep, but I grit my teeth, tumbling into the mud and rolling to my feet.

We landed across from each other again—mud, blood, storm, and breath steaming in the air between us.

I could do this. The bastard bled too. I'd seen it—my light had pierced him. It wasn't impossible. Not yet.

I stood taller.

Then—cough.

Thick blood splattered onto my palm. Warm. Viscous. Wrong.

I staggered.

"What...?"

「Analyzing...」

I dropped to one knee, my chest rising fast, lungs burning. The edges of my vision swam.

「Divine Protection: Adaptive Venom Synthesis, currently active. Enemy venom detected. Status: Multiplying. Defensive adaptation ongoing, but unable to purge source before replication completes. Current stat output: 30%. Estimated reduction increasing.」

"Thirty—percent?!"

Another cough. More blood. My body wasn't healing—it was mutating. Trying to keep up. But the venom... the venom evolved faster than my divinity could.

I looked up.

The Swarm Tyrant's eyes were on me again. It started walking.

Each step sent my senses screaming.

I tried to move. Legs protested. Lungs spasmed. I could feel it. The adaptation was working... but not fast enough.

Each breath I took was a countdown.

It lunged.

And then—its head jerked violently to the right.

Something moved.

A blur. Not me.

Someone.

Even the Tyrant seemed momentarily caught off guard. Its torso twisted, legs bracing, wings snapping out for balance as it met the oncoming force—A god-speed figure.

And the storm split.

----- Levi

The wind howled. Rain slammed down in sheets. Thunder cracked like war drums.

And Levi—was gone.

To the human eye, it looked like the wind blinked. One second, he stood near Lucas's battered form. The next—

Clang!

A flash of black steel met the Swarm Tyrant's claws mid-lunge, sparking loud enough to crackle across the battlefield.

Levi's feet skidded in the mud, his dark hair soaked, clinging to his jaw. Shadow wrapped around his legs like smoke, enhancing his momentum. His voice was calm.

"You're slower than I expected."

The Tyrant shrieked—a high, scraping insect wail.

Levi moved again.

God-speed.

It wasn't just fast—it was impossible. His blade flashed through the storm like a streak of obsidian lightning, bending around the beast, through its blind spots, vanishing into the fog and reappearing with every strike.

Shadow magic veiled him—erasing his form for fractions of seconds. Enough to slip past claws. Enough to fade through the gaps in its guard.

The Tyrant struck back with brute force—sweeps and lunges that shook the air—but Levi was faster. His blade bit deep. Once in the jaw. Again near the wing. Then through the thigh.

Clang. Slice. Crack. Repeat.

One minute. Over a thousand strikes.

His breaths grew heavier, his sides torn and bleeding, one shoulder half-dislocated from a mistimed parry—but Levi didn't stop.

He didn't know stop.

"Everyone else has already done their part," Levi muttered, sword raised. "Now it's my turn to burn you."

The Swarm Tyrant hissed, its armor shredded in places—but not where it mattered. Levi's blade had hit home over and over, but it learned. Adapted. It let him strike—but only its hardest plates. It absorbed the damage like a puzzle fitting itself together mid-battle.

Claw met sword. Sword met claw.

A brutal, physical rhythm.

Then—Levi changed position. Slower this time. Intentionally.

It noticed.

And followed.

Exactly as planned.

As the Tyrant lunged forward, Levi let shadow magic wrap his feet, skidding him across the ground to a precise angle. He dropped low, raising his voice just enough.

"Lucas. Now."

----- Lucas's Perspective:

The bastard took the bait.

Even half-poisoned, kneeling in pain, I didn't waste the moment.

My hand lifted weakly. The mirrors had been pre-placed. Angles calculated. The system had done the heavy lifting.

All I had to do was trust it—and pull the trigger.

「 Mirror Array: Complete. Trajectory confirmed. Target locked. Commencing refracted penetration beam. 」

Light split the rain.

A thin beam—no thicker than a hair—passed clean through the Swarm Tyrant's chest.

A second of silence.

Then—detonation.

BOOM.

The light ruptured through its torso in a burst of divine brilliance, snapping chitin and rupturing one of its inner hearts. The creature shrieked, wings faltering, body stumbling—

But before we could breathe—It moved.

Faster than expected. Angrily.

One claw lashed out and grabbed Levi mid-air.

"No—!"

Levi swung—but it was too late.

Crunch.

I heard it.

The sound of bone bending the wrong way. His legs—both—snapped backwards. Not at the knee. Not at the ankle. Clean through the thigh.

His scream—

It wasn't just pain. It was rage. Regret.

The Swarm Tyrant slammed him into the ground, holding him down like a shattered doll. Blood mixed with the rain, pooling under his body. He didn't move.

My vision blurred.

"No. No, no—"

Before I could rush forward—

The Tyrant turned.

Then—without hesitation—grabbed a grotesque from the pile of dead beside it.

And bit into it.

Bone cracked. Flesh tore.

It devoured one of its own kind in full.

I stared in horror.

The wound in its chest began to seal.

Sinew knit. Flesh regenerated. The hole from my mirror shot—the only real damage we'd done—

Gone.

「 ...Regeneration rate restored. Primary wound no longer viable. Recommend retreat. 」

I didn't move.

I couldn't speak.

I just looked at it.

The Swarm Tyrant stood tall again. Wings half-torn, limbs soaked in blood. But alive.

And Levi—

Was not breathing.

They're all down. Every single one of them.

Alina. Xander. Navina. Levi. Everyone.

I stood in the middle of a ruined deathground—guild members scattered like shredded paper, grotesques pouring in through broken gates, Rinascita burning from the inside out.

The Sword Saints were down.

The adventurers were dead.

The people—innocents—screaming, running, dying.

I clenched my fists so hard my nails broke skin.

"This can't—this can't be happening—!"

My throat burned. My legs shook. My body wasn't responding fast enough.

"System!" I screamed out. "Remove the damn poison!"

「 Unable to comply. Venom strain replicating at nonlinear growth. Best compromise: 50% combat functionality. Awaiting command. 」

"Then fucking do it!"

My body jolted as the system released its last overrides, flushing adrenaline through every inch of me. Pain seared up my sides. The world bent—but I moved.

Lightstep.

I vanished—then reappeared right in front of it, blade of light formed mid-motion, aiming straight for its chest.

But—

It dodged.

Effortlessly.

Its arm shot out and grabbed me by the head.

My feet left the ground.

Pressure.

Crushing.

Its clawed fingers wrapped tighter and tighter around my skull, like a vice made of steel and rage. My vision blurred red.

"You're the strongest among the weak," it muttered. Cold. Arrogant. I felt my mana collapsing inside me, reflexes flickering.

「 Health: 28%. Warning: Skull pressure nearing fracture threshold. 」

I screamed inside my mind.

Every part of me boiled with hate.

The Swarm Tyrant leaned in, its breath like acid, its voice venomous and slow.

"I was told the cursed one would be stronger. But I was wrong. She died pretty pathetically. Just like the others."

My heart froze.

Celia?

No... she was gone the moment it attacked. That thing went straight for her—first.

It knew. It knew she was dangerous.

And it left me for last... because it didn't see me as a threat.

"You've only lasted this long because you could defend yourself," it said, voice twisting into disdain. "Your attacks were weak."

It lifted me higher—bones groaning under the strain.

"It's time to die."

The pressure intensified. I felt my skull begin to crack.

And then—BOOM.

A violent explosion detonated in black, the air thick with dark mana and ash. The entire zone around us shattered—a burst of death and frost rushing outward.

The grip around my head vanished.

I dropped.

Rolled. Gasp. My hand dug into the wet dirt, barely staying conscious. Smoke clouded everything.

And then—

From the smoke—Two red eyes.

No whites.

Just pitch-black sclera and crimson pupils, staring like death incarnate.

Chains slithered out from the void. One of them—layered in fire and frost—shot forward in a blink.

It moved inhumanly fast.

Slash.

The Swarm Tyrant's arm dropped to the ground—severed clean through.

I hit the earth hard, panting.

Then I looked up and saw her.

Celia.

Her white hair was drenched in blood. Her clothes torn, her body battered, but standing. Breathing. Alive.

Barely.

But her presence?

That wasn't Celia.

That was something else.

The Queen of Curses had returned—but twisted. Rage incarnate.

Her eyes were void.

Emotionless.

No mercy. No hesitation. No sanity.

Just vengeance.

「 Combat potential restored to 60%. Last regeneration protocol initiated. HP at 250. 」

I didn't care.

I stared at her.

And I understood.

Her attacks weren't just powerful. They were chaotic. Absolute. The kind of destruction I couldn't produce.

But she could.

The devastation I needed...

Was standing right in front of me. And if we worked together... we can win.

The Swarm Tyrant lunged again—those serrated wings slicing through the air like guillotines.

I blinked to the left with Lightstep, mirrors shattering around me mid-air and reforming, scattering beams of compressed light through the storm. Two hit.

Right shoulder. Ribs. Good.

The Tyrant flinched—but only barely. Its regeneration was already working overtime—except the arm. The one Celia severed.

That one wasn't healing.

I twisted around and caught sight of her again.

Chains flooded the battlefield like living serpents, glowing with frost and embers. They slammed toward the Swarm Tyrant, forcing it to keep moving, darting, deflecting, dodging.

She was pushing it.

Hard.

I adjusted my mirror angle, ricocheting another beam from the left.

Strike.

Another hit. Chest. It stumbled again.

This was working—barely.

"Celia!" I shouted through the wind, slashing through a grotesque on my right. "We need to fight together! Work with me!"

No reply.

She didn't even glance at me.

Her chains curled around her body like wings made of damnation. Her movements were almost inhuman now—feral, sharpened by trauma.

"Celia, dammit!" I shouted again, blood dripping from my jaw. "Are you even listening!? Fight by my side!"

No response.

Instead, she charged.

Straight at the Swarm Tyrant.

I almost yelled at her again—What the hell was she thinking!? Close combat?!

Then she jumped, her chain coiled like a whip around her wrist, and she brought it down—

CRACK.

A direct hit to the Tyrant's skull.

Its head snapped sideways with the force.

And just as it reached out to grab her leg—

Slice.

Its other hand dropped to the ground, severed mid-motion.

Chains slithered from the soil like a nest of snakes, a trap she'd laid moments before.

Laced with black rot.

Withering Touch.

It staggered—its movement slowed, faltering. Even its regeneration looked delayed.

「 Analysis: Her combat style is adapting in real-time. Strategic use of chain-traps, environmental manipulation, and reactive curse embedding. Compared to earlier logs, all prior inefficiencies have been resolved. Estimated: Demon-tier adaptability. 」

I blinked, barely parrying a grotesque's claw.

"...So that's her power," I muttered under my breath. "Not just curses. Not just madness. But adaptation itself."

Then—trouble.

A wave of grotesques surged from the right—mindless, clawed abominations.

"Celia, look out!"

She spun, but they were already too close.

She jumped back—one claw swiped across her thigh, another across her arm. She hit the ground hard, skidding through the blood-slicked mud, landing on one knee.

Blood spilled.

Her chains twitched, less fluid.

「 Alert: Celia's physical defense is minimal. Unlike you, she lacks hard internal reinforcement systems. Her survivability depends entirely on high-speed offense. 」

I looked down at my own body—burning, injured, poisoned—but still standing.

Still defending.

She, on the other hand, was—

Pure carnage.

Unrelenting attack, zero armor.

No wonder she burned so bright.

We were...

"Opposites," I muttered.

I launched another mirror shard through a grotesque's head, then glanced at her again—blood on her lips, hatred in her eyes, still rising even with broken ribs.

"The difference between heaven and hell..."

One built to endure.

One built to destroy.

And if we were going to win—

Then the angel and the devil would have to fight as one.

A chain snapped past my shoulder, brushing the wind with fire-laced frost. I blasted a grotesque off its feet and jumped, reorienting my mirrors.

"Celia!" I shouted again, cutting through the storm. "We need to coordinate!"

She didn't answer. Her chains whipped forward, ensnaring the Swarm Tyrant's leg before it could lunge—pulling it to the side and slamming it into the scorched earth with a roar of rage.

She lunged at it again, blades of darkened metal forming from the tips of her chains.

"I said—don't ignore me!" I leapt beside her, parrying one of the Tyrant's claws that nearly tore into her ribs. "You're gonna get yourself killed fighting like that!"

She looked at me finally—her blood-soaked hair whipping across her face, black sclera gleaming.

"Then stay out of my way."

I grabbed her wrist, mid-motion, just before her chain flew again. "Are you insane?! You can't win this alone!"

Her eyes narrowed like daggers.

"I know that." She hissed. "But I don't need you slowing me down."

"Slowing you—?" I blinked in disbelief. "Do you see what we're fighting!? You're bleeding out, your body's shaking, and you think I'm the dead weight!?"

"I'm still moving, aren't I!?" she snapped back. "That thing took everything from me. I'm not stopping until its head is gone."

We both dodged as the Swarm Tyrant's wings slashed down like guillotines. I formed a mirror mid-air and reflected a beam—direct hit. It growled, part of its shoulder burning.

Celia chained its foot again, tugging it off balance.

"Then let me help," I gritted out. "I'm not asking you to stop. Just—fight with me. Like a team."

"A team?" she muttered. "You wanted to kill me."

"What?"

"Just moments earlier we were about to kill each other," her voice was quiet—hurt and bitter even as she fought. "You treated me like I was weak. Like I couldn't make my own decisions."

"Celia—"

"I don't need your protection, Lucas. I need that thing dead. And if you're not helping me do that, get out of my way."

The Swarm Tyrant let out a snarl and lunged—claws raking toward her exposed side.

"Move!" I shouted, blasting forward and reflecting a mirror into its jaw. Celia chained herself backward just in time.

We landed back to back, breath ragged, surrounded by grotesques and stormfire.

I spoke low. "You think I don't see you now? You think I'm blind to what you're doing out here?"

"Then stop trying to save me."

"I'm not. I'm trying to survive with you."

She paused. Just for a heartbeat.

Her chains danced again—coiling around the Tyrant's wounded arm and tearing what was left.

I followed up—mirror shards blitzed in a triangle, hitting the chest, shoulder, and left wing.

It screamed.

The wind screeched. Chains cracked in the storm like thunder given steel. Celia's next strike almost connected—

But the Swarm Tyrant beat its wings once. Just once.

And vanished upward.

I squinted, following the arc as the rain parted around it—no, fled from it. The grotesque storm that swallowed Rinascita bowed to its king like a curtain in reverse. Black lightning danced in its wake as it climbed through the sky, roaring louder than the wind.

Then it screamed.

A piercing, primal howl. The kind that made blood remember what extinction felt like.

My skin broke out in cold sweat. Even Celia flinched, lowering her chains for the first time.

「 Alert: Target undergoing rapid regenerative synthesis. Physical stats increasing beyond original projection. Current threat level... recalibrated. 」

The screen flickered in the corner of my vision.

「 Estimated stat increase: +200%. Objective: Survival. 」

I exhaled once through my nose, slow and measured.

...So we're past the whole 'kill it' plan now.

Above us, flesh twisted. Armor split apart like burned obsidian—exposing veins of radiant black ichor underneath. Its claws grew, longer, refined like surgical blades. Wings sharpened, almost crystalline, shimmering like a mantis made of onyx and hatred. Its chest cracked open into a second mouth full of screaming tendrils. Its face—if you could call it that—had no eyes now.

Only an empty crown of jagged bone and an expression carved by the void itself.

It descended.

No. Landed.

Like a god coming home to hell.

The weight of it crushed the plaza. Cobblestones exploded outward. Grotesques scattered. Buildings cracked at the base. Even the wind buckled, shifting as if the storm bowed again—this time in terror.

I stepped back.

Celia barely managed to stay standing. Her knees trembled. She cast a cursed healing spell over her chest, panting through blood-soaked lips.

A dull spark fizzled and died in her palm.

「 Notification: Ambient mana flow is compromised. Healing attempts will fail. 」

I gritted my teeth. "What?"

「 The rain. It's not natural. Area-wide interference is being caused by a metaphysical inhibitor embedded in the stormfront. Healing spells cannot channel properly. Mana circulation is disrupted— 」

Then the system paused. A second passed.

「 Clarification: This storm was crafted. The rain is suppressing regenerative magic on purpose. Likely cause—external magical force amplifying fatality. 」

Sabotage.

My heart stopped for a beat.

That's why Alina never recovered. That's why Xander went down so fast. That's why Levi's body still hasn't healed.

Even I should've died.

「 You are unaffected due to soul-bound healing override linked to system core. Others do not share this privilege. 」

So whoever planned this... they didn't just unleash a Tyrant.

They made sure no one could stand back up.

The sky crackled.

The Swarm Tyrant took a single step forward, talons sinking into stone like it was wet paper. Its second mouth opened and let out a low, guttural noise. I felt it in my spine more than I heard it.

Celia tried to move. Her body failed. She collapsed to one knee.

The chain in her hand trembled like it wanted to keep fighting even if she couldn't.

Black clouds churned above like boiling ink. Lightning split the sky in jagged arcs that lit the battlefield in sickening flashes. The rain was a downpour now—thick, suffocating, cold as death.

The Swarm Tyrant moved.

No scream this time.

Just motion. Instant. Terrifying.

Celia whipped her chains toward it, faster than I could see—she'd learned, adapted, cornered her mistakes into weapons. But it didn't matter.

The Swarm Tyrant appeared in front of her mid-attack. Not teleported. Not blinked. It moved—faster than her thoughts.

Her chain clattered uselessly to the ground.

Its claw wrapped around her throat.

"CELIA!" I dashed forward, mirrors forming all around me. Five, then ten. Each of them humming with light energy—

The Swarm Tyrant didn't even glance at me.

Its grip tightened around Celia's neck, lifting her off the ground as if she were weightless.

Her boots scraped against the dirt, gasping—

I triggered Lightstep, blinking into melee range, a mirror-blade drawn and aiming directly for the Tyrant's exposed ribs. It wouldn't regenerate fast if I struck that same point—

But I never got close.

「 Warning. Speed threshold exceeded. Incoming—! 」

Too late.

I didn't even see its movement.

All I saw was red.

Pain shot through my entire chest.

I froze mid-air, coughing. Something warm splattered from my mouth—blood. My eyes looked down on instinct.

Its hand.

Its goddamn hand had gone clean through my chest.

Out the other side.

Ribs shattered.

My mirrors flickered and died.

「 Alert: HP critical. Vital organs compromised. Damage Level: Fatal. Emergency regenerative protocol engaged. Divine Protections fully active. Estimated survivability: 2 HP. 」

Even my defenses hadn't been enough.

The Tyrant yanked its arm free from my torso. I dropped to the ground like a doll with cut strings. My knees buckled.

I couldn't breathe.

My vision swam.

"C-Ce...lia..."

I turned just in time to see her.

She'd summoned another chain, forcing it around the Tyrant's leg with all her strength. Her eyes were burning, sclera blackened and bleeding, her entire body trembling.

The Tyrant stared at her. No amusement. No emotion.

It grabbed her by the head—

And slammed her into the ground.

Once.

She screamed.

Twice.

Her arms went limp.

Three.

Her chain shattered.

Four.

Blood sprayed from her scalp. Bones cracked.

I crawled forward. "S-ST—!"

Five.

Six.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't move.

「 HP: 2. Movement disabled. Strength failure across all limbs. No further divine protections available. 」

My fingers clawed against the ground.

Her face—her eyes—still stared back at me.

Bleeding.

Empty.

But alive.

Alive and still resisting, even as tears of blood rolled from her eyes.

She never gave up.

Even while being crushed like a broken doll.

I reached toward her.

My arm dropped uselessly.

And then, everything went silent.

My body hit the dirt. I felt nothing.

The rain.

The wind.

Her screams.

It all faded.

The Tyrant stood above us.

Victorious.

And my vision...Blurred into darkness.

But just before it closed—A memory slammed into me like thunder.

That day.

Years ago.

Back in the academy.

Me and Rose.

We crushed her class—humiliated Elfie.

She cried all her heart out. Completely broken. Betrayed by her own class. Hurt by her own friends.

She hugged him.

Him...

He stood in front of her.

His hand gripped her shoulder, softly brushing her tears away and he said it softly—

"I won't let anyone make you cry again."

His eyes turned black that day.

Pitch black.

Like the end of time itself.

He looked at me. And Rose.

And then I remembered.

The words that made my soul shiver—

"No one can save you now." Kaiser said that day...

Then my body fell.

And everything went black.

The Swarm Tyrant stood in the heart of ruin.

The storm above Rinascita churned endlessly, lightning bathing the broken earth in brief, violent flashes. The blood of heroes soaked the soil. Ash floated like dead snow.

Silence.

It tilted its head upward, wings folded loosely behind its back. A second passed—then a low, guttural sound escaped its throat.

Triumph.

A single gesture.

It raised one clawed hand toward the heavens—and every grotesque on the battlefield stopped. Then moved. As one. Their heads twisted unnaturally in the direction of the city. The command was silent, but absolute.

Erase it.

Burn Rinascita to the ground.

The grotesques charged, swarming toward the town like a tide of shadows.

For a brief second, the Swarm Tyrant's gaze wandered to the battlefield's edge—where a girl with silver-white hair kneeled beside the corpse of her comrades, trembling.

Sylvia.

It side-eyed her.

Weak. Irrelevant.

Not worth a flick of its claw.

It turned its attention back to the goal.

Its clawed hand reached down and grabbed—first Lucas, then Celia—by the hair. Their bodies dangled limply, unconscious, bloodied, broken in ways no mortal body should have survived. They were dolls now. Souvenirs of victory.

The Tyrant looked at them.

And within its mind—one thought slithered through: "Lord called me a copy. A failed imitation. A reflection of my superior."

A pause.

"Lord was wrong."

It grinned—a grotesque, twitching motion of split muscle and cracked chitin.

"I've proved it. I am no copy. I am his equal."

Its wings spread wide—dark, barbed, insectile, and unnatural. The air trembled beneath the force.

With the unconscious forms of Celia and Lucas dangling from its arms, it lifted from the earth with a slow, sinister grace. The crater where they'd fallen smoldered below.

"The cursed one," it thought, glancing at Celia's blood-soaked face, "was annoying. Cost more effort than expected. But she will die soon enough."

It stared at her for a moment longer.

Still bleeding.

Still breathing.

Barely.

"No one will come for her. No one can. Not where we're going."

It flew.

The wind screamed past as the Swarm Tyrant ascended, lightning catching on its wings like veins of fire.

Ahead—an endless swarm gathered.

A hive of grotesques stretching beyond the eye's reach. Towering spires of bone and flesh, moving and breathing as one. A place of madness.

A tomb.

Humans couldn't enter.

Those who did never returned.

It was the layer—their hive.

The Swarm Tyrant hovered above it now. Triumphant.

Victorious.

"I have done as commanded. I have delivered them. I have ended the resistance. I await my Lord's arrival. I... have fulfilled my purpose."

It looked down.

At Rinascita, soon to be ash.

At Celia, unconscious in its claw.

And Lucas, his chest torn open.

Then—

A tremor.

Not of earth.

But of feeling.

A strange shift in the atmosphere—like a breeze slicing through dimensions. It brushed the air for only a second. Cold. Ancient. Personal.

The Swarm Tyrant froze midair.

Its eye twitched.

"...What was that?"

Its vision slowly dropped to the girl in its grip.

Celia.

Blood still leaked from her mouth. Her fingers barely twitched. Eyes closed.

But for just a fraction of a second—there was something.

Something wrong.

Something off.

The Tyrant stared at her.

A tinge of doubt curled through its spine.

It shook its head.

No.

It was over.

It had won.

And so it descended, folding its wings and stepping into the depths of the hive. Grotesques parted for it, bowing, whispering, worshipping in silence.

Inside the hive—The shadows swallowed the last of the light.

And then... silence.

Was it... over?

The world held its breath.

Rain still fell, cold and ceaseless, drenching the earth in mourning. Lightning cracked across the sky, splitting the heavens with a scream that never reached the ground.

And far beyond the chaos—beyond the burning fields and blood-drenched town—he stood.

At the edge of the world.

A lone figure, silhouetted against the shattered horizon atop a jagged mountain ledge. The wind howled, clawing at his black cloak, final warnings that even the storm dared not speak aloud. But he did not move.

He stared ahead.

Down below, like a sea of insects writhing over a corpse, grotesques flooded into Rinascita—thousands of them. Crawling. Devouring. Burning. A nightmare come to life.

It was over.

Wasn't it?

Then—The universe shifted.

Like some forbidden lock turned in the heart of all things, a ripple of absolute gravity passed through the world's very fabric.

A whisper—not heard, but known—swept through existence.

"Obey me! Void."

"1507 / 1505"

Seals Unlocked.

Every particle of mana in the air froze.

Two seals. Not one. Two.

From him.

The Void's Heir.

A pulse of nothingness radiated outward from the mountaintop—black, cold, and ancient. The world dimmed, as if even the rain knew to pause, as if the storm itself bowed its head in reverence.

And from the silence, two void-black eyes opened beneath the pale mask.

No iris. No whites. Just endless black, deeper than death, darker than despair. Eyes that saw beyond time. That looked not just into the world, but through it—into its soul, into its fate.

His fingers reached up. Slowly. Deliberately.

The mask had always been there. But now—he pressed it tight against his face, sealing it as if preparing for war.

And then—

The air split.

Black eminence radiated from his body, rolling off his skin like waves of compressed gravity. Void itself bled into the world, corrupting the light, cracking the clouds above like glass under strain. The mountain beneath him groaned.

And from the depths of that silent abyss, his voice rose. Cold. Perfect. Human... yet not.

"You touched what keeps me human."

The wind stopped.

The shadows held their breath.

His head turned, ever so slightly, toward Rinascita. Toward the town swallowed in flame. Toward the hive where Celia and Lucas bled in silence. Toward them.

"So now, I'll show you what I am without it."

No rage.

No scream.

Just the ending.

Then, a whisper.

"Your story ends here."