

The Last Step

Chapter 76 - His Arrival

[Sylvia's Perspective – 1st Person]

2:38 PM

This is wrong.

This is terrible.

I pressed my hand against the deep gash across my stomach, feeling the warmth of my blood coat my fingers. The pain burned—sharp, unrelenting—but I didn't stop. I couldn't. My other hand stretched forward, fingers trembling as I pushed out one last holy ray. A streak of golden light burst from my palm, striking the grotesque mid-lunge and knocking it off course.

But I heard it.

The sound of chewing.

I turned.

My heart dropped.

Claws tearing through armor. Teeth sinking into flesh. One of my comrades—a boy I trained just months ago—was screaming as his shoulder was being devoured.

I tried to raise my hand again, to do something, anything—but blood came up instead of power. I coughed, my body folding slightly as warmth dripped from my lips. Empty.

I'd been out of celestial energy for a while now. I was fighting on fumes, and even those were gone.

But I couldn't just stand there.

I gathered whatever thread of magic I had left, whispering a short incantation through clenched teeth. A flicker of gold shot forward, piercing the grotesque's side. The monster shrieked, reeling back.

The boy stumbled free.

"Thank you, Guild Leader!" he shouted, eyes wide and full of desperation, his body already rushing toward me.

I smiled—weakly.

He didn't know.

None of them really did.

This was over.

We couldn't win.

Not like this.

Alina, Levi, Xander, Navina... they were all dying. So was I. The strongest among us were fell one by one. And this town, Rinascita—was being drowned under a tide of grotesque no strategy or magic could stop.

"...Rael," I whispered his name as he knelt beside me. His arm moved instinctively to support my back, to hold me up. He was still trying to protect me. Still trying to believe this fight meant something.

But I was the leader. And I had to speak the truth when no one else could.

"Listen to me," I said quietly, but with weight. "You need to tell the others to retreat."

He blinked. "What? No. Guild Leader, I'm not leaving you—"

"You have to." I grabbed his arm, blood coating my fingers. "Tell them to run. Save their lives. This war... it's not winnable, not like this."

I looked up at him, my voice calm but my chest aching.

"They have families, Rael. Wives, husbands, children waiting for them. Parents who'll never forgive us if we let them die here."

He tried to argue, his mouth open—but I shook my head.

"The people who stood by our side today didn't come to be heroes. They fought to live another day, to survive. And that's what they need to do now. Survive. That's our duty now."

Silence hung between us for a moment.

Then his eyes watered—not from fear, but understanding. He nodded slowly, his grip tightening on my shoulder as if he could pass some of his strength into me.

"I'll get them out."

I gave a faint nod. "Good."

He stood up, turned toward the others still locked in combat and shouted with everything he had, "Retreat! All units fall back from Rinascita! Everyone move now—move!"

His voice cut through the chaos. And slowly, one by one, the battered, broken members turned. The bravest among them—the ones who still had enough strength to carry another—began pulling back.

Watching them leave hurt more than the wound in my stomach.

But it was the right call.

I remained there, kneeling in the bloodied street of the town I'd sworn to protect....

I failed... as a leader.. Again...

.....

Soon, they were gone.

All of them.

The guild members, the adventurers, the sword saints... even Rael had retreated, carrying out my final command. All that remained here—on this broken street where Rinascita once stood proud—were the bodies.

Bodies of grotesques, corpses of my comrades... and the crumpled forms of those who might've still been breathing. Might've.

Alina...

You were gone too, weren't you?

I tilted my head weakly toward her shattered figure, barely visible through the dust and smoke. Her hair was stained with blood, her limbs broken. She didn't move.

I couldn't tell if she was breathing. Or if I just didn't want to see the truth.

...

You called me your sister.

And I thought maybe—just maybe—I could've protected you.

But I couldn't. I never could.

My gaze dropped, and the weight in my chest ached heavier than the wound in my stomach. My body trembled as grotesques began to close in from every alley, every broken wall. Their jagged bodies moved with slow, horrifying satisfaction. Like scavengers who knew their prey couldn't run.

And they were right.

I was done.

Too tired to stand. Too broken to cast. Even breathing was getting harder.

Was it our fault?

Or mine?

I couldn't tell anymore.

I looked around—this ruined shell of the town I had grown up in, the town I led, the guild I stood at the front of—and all I saw was death.

People were dying because of us.

Because of me.

The grotesques crept closer. Their armor shimmered faintly, darkened plates over their necks and vitals, pulsing with something—absorbing magic, maybe. I'd already realized, too late, that they were practically immune to our spells now.

Their jaws parted slowly, vile fangs dripping with saliva, tasting the air around me like I was a fresh meal.

I couldn't move. Couldn't lift my arms. My hands slipped off the wound in my stomach, the blood trailing freely now. I raised that same trembling hand instead... and wiped my eyes.

Just to see clearly.

Just to see the world—this world—one last time.

Then they all jumped.

Their monstrous bodies launched into the air, claws stretched wide, jaws ready to tear my flesh apart.

So this was it.

Goodbye... Sylvia.

I—I'm—

...Wait.

Movement.

I saw it—even through the blurred haze, even as the world narrowed into a dull ring around my ears. I saw it.

A flicker. A shift. Something cutting through the wind and light like a reawakening...

I-it...

It-s...

"Sorry for the wait." the voice rang out, cool and clean. "I won't take much of your precious time, Sylvi."

My eyes widened.

That voice...

That coat... black as midnight, brushing against the ground like a shadow itself.

Those gloves... twin daggers in his hands, swords strapped to his back, shimmering faintly with stored death.

He stepped forward, calm, composed, radiating this terrifying... stillness.

"I'll send them back to Hell."

My lips parted, breath stuck in my throat.

It's...

HIM.

[Lucas's Perspective – 1st Person]

2:57 PM

Notification.

「 Emergency Status: Host body critically damaged. Initiating emergency preservation protocols. Full lockdown in effect. All non-essential systems deactivated. Auto-repair prioritizing neural integrity and cardiovascular function. Estimated survivability: 3%. You lucky bastard. 」

「 Communication minimized. Speak only if you're not planning to die in the next five seconds. System entering Hibernation. Stay conscious or die. Good luck, idiot. 」

I stirred awake to the sound of static in my head and a cold puddle beneath me.

...Was that... my blood?

Yep. That's my neck. And that's not where it's supposed to be. My head was twisted at a beautiful 90-degree angle, soaking in a pool of crimson. Very aesthetic. Very chic.

My vision was blurry as hell, but the floating red bar at the corner of my eye confirmed the bad news.

[HP: 2/450]

Two. Hit points. Two.

Someone give me a band-aid and a prayer.

I groaned and forced my head—well, tried to force my head—to turn. The bones creaked badly around me. My gaze landed on Celia.

She was barely breathing.

Her arms were twisted at weird angles, her dress torn and drenched in blood and dirt. Her face...

That wasn't a normal beating. That wasn't even punishment.

That was deliberate. Focused. Slow.

That thing tortured her.

You motherf—

Pain lanced through my skull before I could even finish the thought. A grotesque grabbed my hair and pulled it up, snapping my vision straight.

Before me, carved into a disgusting chasm of bone and blackened stone, was a throne room. If you could even call it that.

Stained carcasses were stacked into pillars. Flickering green light pulsed from the fungal veins in the walls. And at the end of it—

He sat.

The Swarm Tyrant.

Its body was an amalgamation of obsidian carapace, rotting flesh, and glowing parasite veins. A single bulbous eye throbbed in its chest, while half-formed faces stretched across its limbs. Its throne wasn't a seat. It was a mountain of piled corpses.

And the rest of the grotesques? They knelt. Rows and rows of them, like a choir of nightmares waiting for a hymn.

He didn't speak immediately. He just... stared. Watching me. Studying. Calculating.

Then his mouth split open. Sideways.

"You... survive... longer..."

His voice was like maggots chewing metal. No rhythm. Just wet noise and guttural distortions.

"...What do you want?" I spat the words through blood.

"Want?" it echoed, dragging the sound out like it was tasting it. "Not... want. Purpose. Directive. You... Tool. Girl... Pain-flesh. Both... ripe."

My brows furrowed. "Then why not kill us?"

"Kill? No. Not yet. Prime flesh. Reaction test. Mana drain. Surge-spike analysis.* Master... watches."

"...Master?"

The air shifted. Something about that word—it didn't sound like a name. It sounded like submission.

Worship?

"Command flows... from void-core. Master's order: Capture Devil's Daughter. Heaven's Sent Angel. Break both. Watch."

"Why us?" I asked, even though I already knew.

It chuckled—or maybe that was its lungs collapsing.

"To be researched and killed. Infected. You... bleed anomaly. She... sings anomaly. Your roots not from ground... Master wants answers."

I was silent.

Two HP. A locked-down system. Celia unconscious and half-dead beside me. Surrounded by thousands of grotesques. And a Tyrant that was literally farming us for our souls.

Yeah, no pressure.

But I locked eyes with that grotesque pile of royal slime and smirked, just a little.

"...So you need me alive, huh?"

It tilted its head. "Alive... long enough."

I held its gaze.

Then thought, very loudly:

Yo, System. Please tell me you heard all that and recorded it.

Silence.

Of course. Hibernation mode.

Goddamn it.

The Swarm Tyrant was still staring at me, but something was... different. Its words, its sentence structure—there was less garble, less distortion. It was... improving.

Learning.

Wait... he's evolving his language?

No. Not just the words. His rhythm. Structure. Emotion. The bastard was adapting.

He wasn't just the grotesques' leader.

He was their core.

If he dies... they lose coordination. They go back to being feral freaks crawling around mindness.

His entire hive was leashed to his mind.

That... was bad. But also kind of useful to know.

A wet cough snapped my focus back to the ground.

Celia.

Her blood spilled from the side of her lips in a slow, sick stream, but her eyes didn't open. She trembled. Her chest rose just barely—but she was still out cold.

Damn it...

I turned back toward the throne, my voice low and burning.

"...Why her?"

The Swarm Tyrant tilted its head.

"You tortured her. Not me. She took most of the damage. Why?"

Still silence.

"...Was it because she was the strongest?" I asked.

All movement stopped.

Every grotesque—every buzzing, twitching, fidgeting thing—froze in place. The room went cold and still like a breath was being held by the entire hive.

Then the Swarm Tyrant rose from its throne.

And for the first time, I noticed something new.

Its claws.

They were shaking.

Subtle. Barely perceptible.

But shaking.

It stepped forward, each movement sending a jolt of pressure through the air. The grotesques didn't move, didn't flinch, didn't even blink.

He grabbed my hair again and yanked my face upward.

His reeking breath hit me like acid.

Then he said it.

"...I am the strongest. Nobody else."

His words were clearer. Not perfect, but getting closer.

More human. More aware.

"I am disaster," he whispered, almost like a ritual.

I didn't blink.

Didn't flinch.

"Then why..." I said through grit teeth, "why did you hurt her more? Why did you attack her first?"

His grip tightened for a second.

But he didn't answer.

Not right away.

He stared into my eyes with that one bulbous eye in his chest twitching.

Then, finally:

"...It was instincts."

"...Instincts?" I echoed, voice hollow.

That word cut something open in my memory.

Grotesques aren't logical. They're raw. Built on rage and hunger and primitive drive. The Swarm Tyrant might've evolved beyond them—but only just. At its core, instinct still ruled.

"She wasn't... the strongest," it murmured. "Not the most dangerous..."

He paused. Like the next words were being dragged out of some blackened place inside him.

"But..."

Another pause. Then, almost reverently:

"She... had strong presence. Her aura... powerful. Like... she escaped hell."

Its eye narrowed, and its next words made my blood run cold.

"...As if she were the devil's daughter."

I didn't look away.

And for the first time since I woke up in this nightmare...

The monster sounded almost afraid.

"But..." the Swarm Tyrant murmured again, voice low, even unsure now. "That's not the reason either."

I blinked.

Bro, pick a damn lane.

"Then what is it?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. "If she wasn't the strongest... or the scariest..."

Its head slowly turned toward her unconscious form. The grip it had on my hair? Shaking now.

I followed his gaze.

Celia's body laid still—bloodied, bruised, battered. She looked like any other adventurer who took a direct hit from hell and lived long enough to regret it.

What the hell was making a walking horror tremble like this?

She looked... normal.

Then I saw it.

Or rather, I felt it.

Her shadow.

The hell—?

It wasn't like anyone else's. The others—mine, the grotesques', even the Swarm Tyrant's—were just that: shadows.

But hers?

Pitch black. And if you really stared... if you focused—it was almost too dark. A void. Like the world itself refused to shine light there. My gut twisted the longer I looked.

The Swarm Tyrant finally spoke.

"...Her shadow," it said, voice lower than before. "It's alive."

My eyes snapped wide open.

Excuse me—what the f—

The thing let go of my hair like it burned him, and I dropped to the cold, stone floor with a nasty thud.

Head hit stone. Again.

Great. Add that to the collection.

How? What was wrong with her shadow??

The Swarm Tyrant didn't even look at me anymore. His attention? Entirely on her.

"The moment I arrived..." he muttered. "My skin crawled. My instincts screamed."

He paused.

"Death was near me. I didn't know from where. It came from her direction."

He tilted his head—his voice starting to unspool like a nightmare being recounted through clenched teeth.

"From her shadow... two pairs of eyes looked into my soul."

Two?

Excuse me—what two pairs of eyes?! Who the hell invited the devil to her shadow?!

It turned away from us, each step slower now, as if remembering the feeling alone took effort.

"That... is why I had to take her down first. Nothing else," he whispered. "It was instincts."

He sat back on the throne, one claw resting against the side of his head like the weight of that memory still lingered.

No one moved.

Not a single grotesque dared breathe.

Then one of them approached. It gripped my shoulder, another grabbed Celia's limp body with surprising care. I tried to reach for her, but my strength was beyond gone. I couldn't even lift a finger.

They were moving us—dragging us away from the throne room.

Away from that monster.

And yet, all I could think about... was her shadow.

What the hell are you, Celia? What the hell is living inside you?

And why... why were they more afraid of you than me?

「 Emergency hibernation mode disengaged... System online... barely. Bro. You had ONE job. Just don't die. Guess what? You failed. 2 HP left. 」

...Welcome back, asshole.

[Sylvia's Perspective – 1st Person]

3:03 PM

I watched.

No—I froze.

The moment his voice struck the air, the grotesques paused—if only for a split second. That was all he needed.

He vanished from my vision.

The next thing I saw was blood.

Not mine.

Theirs.

Twenty grotesques in front of me exploded into motionless heaps—sliced, severed, eradicated.

He moved like something I didn't understand. His feet never stayed grounded more than a blink. His body twisted through the air like the god of war—flipping, sliding beneath claws, leaping over jaws, launching himself off their bodies like stepping stones mid-battle.

And each movement ended with death.

His left dagger stabbed only one place: the back of their necks. Their core.

I saw it then. That was the weak point—the blind spot their armor didn't cover. Everyone had been trying to strike their fronts, to shatter their reinforced exteriors. But he—he studied them. Read them like open books and flipped the pages fast enough to end them before they could react.

His right sword—just as calculated—cut through the neck the moment the poison core destabilized.

It took me a second to even realize.

His daggers—they had nullifier enchantments. I recognized the glow from here. They weren't just cutting—the daggers were disrupting the grotesques' poison systems, frying their core instincts for defense and coordination.

He was disarming them mid-combat, exploiting the two-second delay before their regeneration could respond.

And he was doing it all mid-air.

My eyes tracked him—barely.

He twisted mid-leap, plunging the dagger into a grotesque's back, then pivoted his body like a falling blade, his sword following through the neck of another.

Blood sprayed. Heads flew. Grotesques dropped before they could screech.

Ten seconds. Twenty bodies.

No, thirty.

The ground beneath him was already drowning in corpses. He hadn't taken a single hit. He hadn't even flinched.

I stared at him—at the black coat flickering behind his airborne form, at his muscular forearms painted red, gripping the handles of death like extensions of his own force.

His blue eyes—still as the void, cold as the abyss—glared into the battlefield as if it had personally insulted him.

When did he get here?

Why is he fighting like this?

Why... is he fighting for us?

I thought—no, I knew he didn't care. Not about the guild, not about Rinascita. He was always the enigma who walked alone, spoke little, and vanished when we needed him the most.

So why now?

He dropped down from the sky like divine punishment.

Then rose again—this time launching himself with a grotesque's body as footing. He spun midair, drove his knee hard into one grotesque's chin, sending it flying.

Before it even hit the ground—he stabbed it in the neck with his dagger, twisted, tore, and snatched the broken claw in one hand.

With that same claw, he pivoted, hurled the grotesque's own claw across the field—straight toward me.

I didn't even flinch.

The claw gently grazed my ear... and shattered the skull of a grotesque that had crept behind me.

That was when I realized.

He was protecting me. Even now.

Even while single-handedly tearing down this invasion.

I could barely stand. But I took a step. My body moved forward, on instinct, eyes still locked onto him.

And I whispered—

"You've killed... five hundred thirty-six grotesques..."

My lips trembled. My voice cracked.

"...in two hundred seconds."

They were running.

The grotesques were running away.

Even in their thousands, even in their madness, even in their hunger—they ran.

Because he wasn't just fighting anymore.

He stopped holding back.

His movements doubled in speed—every strike a blur. He dropped defense altogether, like it was a burden, like he didn't need it. His form was ruthless, primal—too fast for my eyes to keep up.

Only the aftermath remained.

Limbs flying. Heads sliced clean. Gore spraying so wildly, not even the storm could wash it off. Rain poured, but his body was painted in red—like the storm feared him too.

I watched them—monsters—desperately retreating, stampeding over each other just to escape one man.

It was over. He had stopped them all.

The battlefield fell silent.

And then... he turned.

His head slowly tilted my way, his hand lifting to wipe the blood from his cheek. Then—like it meant nothing—he ran his fingers through his drenched hair, pulling it back as those clear blue eyes locked into mine.

I froze. My breath caught in my throat.

Why the hell is my heart beating so fast? I'm bleeding out, damn it! Be serious, Sylvia—this isn't the time to remember old feelings or—

"Agh—!"

A sharp pain flared from my stomach. The wound I'd forgotten in the chaos suddenly screamed again, dropping me to my knees. I clutched it, teeth clenched. I couldn't focus. I couldn't breathe.

Then I felt it.

Him.

He walked over without a word. Rain dripping from his coat. His presence pressing down on everything.

I looked up... and there he was.

"K-Kaiser—"

But he cut me off.

He gently pressed his index finger to my lips.

"Shhhh," he said, calm as the sky before a storm. "Be a good girl and let me take care of this."

Gods help me.

That voice hasn't changed. Neither did the way he used to speak to me. Why does he still call me that?

He reached into his overcoat and pulled out a vial—dark green, glowing faintly. He handed it to me without hesitation.

"Drink it up now, Sylvi."

That stupid nickname again—why does it still get to me?!

He crouched, his hand resting on my head—so gently I almost forgot the massacre around us.

"I promise it'll help you, okay? So drink it now."

His voice... it had that calm confidence again. Like everything was under control. Like it always was, with him.

I drank.

It was horribly sour, I almost gagged—but the pain started easing. Warmth bloomed inside me. I could feel the wound begin to close, the burning subsiding.

Where... where did he get this kind of potion?

I looked up at him, confused, amazed, broken... and he was already turning away.

His gaze swept across the battlefield.

Not at the fallen grotesques—no.

At what remained of them.

Rain still poured. The bodies steamed.

And then he muttered—cold, merciless, final:

"I thought I would've had to try me... I expected too much I guess."

W-Wait... he was still holding back?

He was holding back before that!?

My jaw almost dropped. I wasn't sure if I wanted to scream, cry, or laugh out of pure disbelief. I'd just seen him tear through hundreds like they were paper dolls—and that was him not even trying?

And now... now he stood before me, calm as ever.

"You're staring,"

I blinked. "Huh?"

"You always did look cute when you're confused."

I felt my cheeks light up instantly. "Wh— W-What are you saying all of a sudden!?"

"Truth, Sylvi. You're adorable when you're bleeding, confused, and angry. A dangerous combo, but still cute."

"Kaiser! Be serious!"

"I am," he said, completely deadpan. "Seriously adorable."

I covered my face with one hand, dragging a groan through my teeth. This wasn't the same ruthless man I just saw killing monsters like he was peeling fruit. What the hell happened to him?!

"Where have you been all this time?" I finally asked, pulling my thoughts together.

He tilted his head. "I worked part-time as a librarian."

"...A what?"

"And a gravekeeper."

"Are you—"

"And a farmer"

"Kaiser, stop saying random things!"

"I'm not. I'm listing my résumé."

I stared at him, dead silent. He just smiled like this was the most normal conversation in the world.

Then, with no warning, he unsheathed one of the swords from his back and handed it to me. The weight of it settled in my hands—it was sharp, balanced, the enchantments pulsing softly along its edge.

"Make more weapons like this," he said, completely composed now. "You'll need them."

He then pulled something else from his coat. A folded piece of paper.

I unfolded it... and my heart skipped a beat.

"This is..." I whispered.

A potion recipe.

The one he just gave me. The one that healed what should've been a fatal wound.

"You made this?"

He didn't even answer that, just glanced at the battlefield. "When I was fighting, I checked. The others—Alina, Levi, Xander, Navina—they're alive. But barely."

He turned back to me, his voice quieter now. "You'll have to save them."

My hands trembled slightly as I held the paper. "But... can I even do this?"

He looked at me.

Really looked.

"You've grown much stronger than I ever dreamed of, Sylvi," he said. "It's time to prove what you've learned. My angelic leader."

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't even speak.

I—I wanted to cry.

But before I could say anything, my chest tightened again. My mind spun. The grotesques—they had made it inside the town earlier. The walls were breached. People—civilians, children—they must be—

"Kaiser... the town—"

"You worry too much you know?" he said, as casually as breathing. "And there's one person I need to see."

"Wait—what? Who—how could you possibly handle all—?"

He patted my head again. His hand was warm, grounding. I hated how comforting it felt.

"Don't worry about the main town. I've already taken care of it."

I blinked fast. "H-How? How could you possibly have—"

He leaned in close. Real close. His voice slipped near my ear.

"You know," he whispered. "My old style."

My eyes widened instantly. My pulse stopped.

Old style...?

He didn't mean—

Oh gods. He did.

As he turned to leave, the sound of rain hitting the blood-soaked ground echoed in the silence between us.

But some unknown fear... something deep and cold crawled up from my gut.

My hand reached forward on instinct—grabbing the sleeve of his coat.

"Wait..."

The rain kept pouring, soaking us both, but I couldn't feel any of it anymore. All I could feel was that fear. That if he left again... this time he might not come back.

If the grotesques returned... if everything collapsed again...

"Hey," he said softly, turning his head just a little, not enough for me to see his eyes. "You'll save them."

His words were quiet. Certain.

Then he turned to face me fully, his eyes glinting through the rain with that stupid half-smirk.

"You'll be the goddess they need."

I blinked, caught off guard, and let out a short laugh. "I'm not a goddess, Kaiser. Not anymore."

I smiled, small but real. "I'm just a human. Just like you."

He paused, staring for a long second. Then nodded with a gentle curve in his lips.

"Don't worry. I know humanity won't lose."

"...Is that because you're finally on our side?" I asked, voice soft, almost playful.

His smirk returned, calm and unreadable.

"I'm just the neutral being making things fair."

I narrowed my eyes, confused. "Then why are you helping?"

The rain fell harder then. His eyes darkened—colder, heavier.

"There's someone special here," he said, "Someone I promised I'd protect."

Something in me dropped. My heart skipped a beat, my mouth opened without knowing what to say.

"Is... is it her?" I asked, my voice shaky, barely holding together. "Is it... Elfie?"

He didn't even blink.

"No," he said flatly, the warmth vanishing from his voice. "Elfie is gone."

The air felt thinner. I felt like I'd just swallowed glass.

"I—I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," he said, his tone shifting softer again, but distant. "That promise was hers. But now, I'll fulfill it... for someone else."

He stepped back, but not before placing a hand gently on my head.

"I'm leaving it all to you now, angelic leader."

I puffed my cheeks, frowning. "Stop calling me that...!"

He raised his hands as if surrendering, smirking again. "Right, right. You're no angel."

I crossed my arms. "Exactly. I'm the one who's gonna get everyone back together."

He gave a single nod, that calm, cool confidence never leaving him.

And then—he was gone.

Just like that.

But something was strange...

Something about the way the wind shifted. The air felt like it carried a part of him away—something heavy and unseen. I couldn't describe it. I didn't know what it meant. But I knew... something was different this time.

I stood there a while longer, letting the rain wash away whatever fear had clung to me.

Then I breathed in.

Deep. Steady.

I've grown.

Even if my hands shake, even if my heart stutters when he's near... I'm not that same person anymore. I've changed to become who I am today. Lost too much.

And I've learned from it.

I can do this. I have to do this.

This time, I won't rely on him. Not completely.

This is my war now.

I turned around—my grip tightening on the sword he gave me, the recipe sealed tightly in my hand.

Time to change the tides.

[Navina's Perspective – 1st Person]

4:28 PM

As a child I couldn't go outside.

Make friends. Hug my family. Speak properly...

I was born with an incurable disease... that meant no matter what I tried... or did...

I would've died.

I would be stuck in my bedroom, looking out the window. Seeing the other kids play tag, but I could only watch. The summers, winters, rainy monsoons—even the dark nights—I would stare outside...

Just wishing one day I could go outside.

The air clawed at my lungs.

Sharp. Thin. Cruel.

I coughed. Wet and hoarse. My ribs screamed, a searing pain that grounded me in the present. My eyes flickered open to the dull orange glow of a fire—not a memory, not death. Just cold stone above me and rain pounding against the world outside like it wanted in.

My vision swam. Right—storm. Left—cave wall. Front... fire. And across it...

Someone.

A figure hunched slightly forward. Black overcoat, a twisted, smiling face mask that gleamed in the firelight like it was mocking me. Or maybe keeping its own secrets.

My breath caught.

My hand twitched toward my side, toward where my arcflinger holster would be—except it wasn't. Nothing was. Just aching flesh, tight bandages over gashes I didn't remember

getting. And herbs. I could smell them. Damp, earthy. Green and yellow bundles sat beside him, soaked. A vial, dark green and half-full, reflected the fire's flicker.

"You're finally awake, huh? Are you okay?"

His voice was calm. A little too calm.

My lips cracked as I spoke. "...You drugged me?"

"Nice to meet you too," he replied, unbothered.

"No, you were already unconscious when I found you. Barely breathing. Storm was kind enough to let me drag your bleeding body into this cave without killing us both."

"...You stitched me up?"

"Well, if I hadn't, I'd be talking to a corpse right now. And I don't flirt with corpses. Yet."

"...Charming."

"You noticed."

I stared at him, the mask unmoving. His voice was young. Not cocky, but deliberate.

"...Who the hell are you?"

"Let's go with—The mysterious 'guy at the fire'."

I blinked at him slowly. "You saved me."

"Mhmh."

"But not the others?"

The fire cracked. I watched it dance between us, the light warping on the edges of his mask. He didn't answer immediately. When he did, it wasn't with hesitation. It was blunt.

"Because you're special."

The words hit something in me I wasn't ready to look at.

"...That's a stupid reason."

"Yeah, well. I'm not a reasonable guy."

I hated how my chest tightened. Whether it was from the words or the bruised ribs, I didn't care to figure out.

"What makes me special?"

His shoulders shifted like he was stretching. "Among the others you're more keen and useful really. And that annoying habit of switching weapons mid-fight like you're showing off for an audience."

I frowned. "You were watching me?"

"Technically, everyone was watching you. You're Navina, aren't you? Sword Saint of Reflex. Quick-switch queen."

I didn't answer.

He sighed. "That silence thing you do? It's cute. But don't push it. I did just stitch you back together, after all."

"...Thanks," I muttered.

"Wow," he leaned back. "I didn't think your pride would let you say that."

"It didn't. I just came out."

I couldn't read his expression under that twisted smile of a mask, but his tone lightened.

"Fair enough."

I sat in the silence. Rain roared outside, but inside the cave, time slowed. My pulse still raced, but it wasn't from fear. It was confusion. Unease. And something warmer underneath all of it.

"Why me?" I asked again.

"I told you."

"No," I shot back. "You said I was special. That's not the same as telling me why."

There was a pause.

"...Because I don't think you've ever been saved before."

My mouth opened, then closed. The fire crackled again. My throat felt dry. The cave felt smaller.

"You think I needed saving?"

"I think you don't know when you do," he said, gently this time. "And you're not used to kindness without cost. So yeah... someone had to do it."

I hated how quiet I went. I hated that he was right.

"...You still haven't told me who you are."

He leaned forward slightly, fingers rolling the green vial between them. "If I told you, would you even believe me?"

"Try me."

He chuckled. "Let's keep it fun for now. You're still bleeding, and I'm the only one in this cave with healing herbs. Let's not ruin the vibe."

I exhaled sharply through my nose. "So I'm your hostage?"

"More like my reluctant guest star."

"...You always talk like this?"

He tilted his head. "Only to beautiful sword saints who survive storms and still find time to glare like they'll stab me if I say the wrong thing."

I looked away, but not before he noticed the twitch of my mouth.

Damn him.

"I'm resting until the storm clears," I muttered.

"Great idea. You should rest. Your wounds won't close themselves."

I closed my eyes. But I didn't sleep.

I listened.

I had too many questions. Too many thoughts racing, crashing, colliding like a flood I couldn't hold back.

Where am I?

Who is this masked lunatic?

Why am I alive?

And then it hit me.

Wait.

How did I survive?!

My eyes flew open, and I tried to sit up—A blinding bolt of pain shot through my ribs, my back, everywhere. The scream left me before I could stop it, sharp and raw, echoing against the cave walls like a dying animal.

"Easy."

His voice cut through the pain like silk on glass.

"Don't move unless you want to snap something important," he said, still unbothered, still rolling that dark green vial between his fingers.

I clenched my teeth. "What the hell—why does it hurt so much?"

"The poison's still inside you." He didn't even flinch. "You were infected. Badly. I've been slowing it down. But I haven't cured it yet."

My head spun.

Poison?

I swallowed, my breath shaky. "The last thing I remember..." My voice wavered. "Rinascita. There were grotesques everywhere—thousands of them. The Swarm Tyrant. I—" My voice broke. "I thought I was going to die."

He nodded once. "You were."

I stared.

"I mean it," he said, casually, as if death was an interesting footnote. "You were seconds from slipping. I got to you just before the venom reached your heart."

"...Why?" I whispered.

"Because I don't like wasting people I like."

What?

My brain stalled.

like?

I blinked at him, but he wasn't looking at me. His mask faced the fire. His hands moved methodically, crushing a few herbs into a paste, mixing it with the potion in the vial.

"You're alive," he said simply. "And the town's safe. The others are alive too. Like you."

I blinked again. "No. No, that's—impossible. There were thousands of grotesques—"

"And all of them," he interrupted, calm and almost cold, "were crushed. Burnt. Screamed before they hit the ground."

I couldn't find the words.

"You don't have to believe it," he continued, voice low. "Just rest. You've been through hell. No use making your mind bleed when your body already is."

I stared at him. Just... stared.

He spoke like it was already done. Like it hadn't been a massacre. Like those monsters hadn't torn through everything like paper.

"How?" I asked, voice small.

He turned to me finally, the smile on his mask now more eerie in the firelight. "Because I was there."

You?

Just you?

That answer wasn't helpful. In fact, it made my head hurt more.

I should've grilled him, pressed harder. But something about his tone—like everything that happened was already ancient history to him—stopped me.

"...Who are you?" I asked again, softer this time.

He didn't reply immediately.

Instead, he leaned forward and gently placed a warmed cloth soaked in the new mixture across my shoulder wound. It stung like sin.

"You're not dying anymore," he said. "Let that be enough for tonight."

I clenched my jaw. I hated the way he said it. Like it was mercy. Like he was the only reason I was still breathing.

But deep down...

I knew he was right.

"Fine," I muttered, falling back slightly. "But I still don't trust you."

"That's good," he said with a chuckle. "Would've worried me if you did."

"Are you ever serious?"

"Only when people I like almost die."

I looked at him again.

The mask. The dark overcoat. The strange calm in the middle of everything.

I didn't know him.

But somehow... I felt like I knew him from another lifetime.

Tired.

In pain.

Poisoned.

But not scared.

"...You're stalling," I murmured.

"You're staying here," he said suddenly, as if it were already settled. "Three days. No arguments."

"...Excuse me?"

"You'll rest. You'll heal. You won't leave the cave. Not even if you think you're better."

"And why exactly do I have to listen to you?" I muttered.

He didn't hesitate. "Because your guild's waiting for you in Rinascita, and the other Sword Saints are working on a new plan. You're not going back until you're stable. I won't allow it."

My jaw clenched. "Still didn't answer why you get to decide that."

There was a brief silence.

Then he said it, plainly, like it was the most obvious thing in the world:

"Because you're too precious for me to lose."

I froze.

"...What?"

"You heard me," he said smoothly.

"You can't just throw that out and expect me to—"

"—Come on, Navina." His voice curled with a grin. "You're clever enough to read between the lines. You're sweet, hardworking, kind and lastly damn gorgeous"

"You're love-bombing me," I deadpanned. "You're literally throwing affection around to distract me."

"I am," he admitted shamelessly. "And it was working until you called me out."

I sighed, dragging my hand down my face. "You're exhausting."

"You're beautiful. I can't lie."

I glared through the dim light. "Get serious."

He didn't blink. "If I had to explain every little thing I did, it'd waste my time. Just get it in your head—you're alive because of me. And you've got a duty to fulfill."

It was like a punch. No softness. No kindness. Just facts, spit clean through the flame-lit dark.

I didn't respond right away. My fingers tightened around the cloth blanket he'd thrown over me earlier. I wanted to snap at him, bite back, tell him he wasn't my superior.

But something about the way he spoke—cold, direct, detached—felt weirdly familiar.

Like I knew him.

Not his voice. Not the mask.

But something.

Like we had met once. Somewhere out of time. Before any of this.

"I don't know why," I murmured quietly, "but... I feel like I know you."

His head tilted slightly.

"It's not a memory. More like... a feeling. A strange, stupid feeling I shouldn't trust." I looked at him, confused. "Do I?"

He didn't answer.

I shook my head. "Forget it."

He held the vial steady in one hand, the liquid inside a swirling shade of dark green, faintly glowing under the dim flicker of the campfire. Without a word, he brought his other hand up and unsheathed a thin dagger from his belt.

With calm precision, he pressed the blade against his thumb and made a small, clean cut. Blood welled up—deep crimson, thick—and he tilted his hand above the vial. A few drops fell in, dissolving into the mixture with a soft hiss.

Then he sealed the vial, locking it with a faint twist of metal, and gave it a slow shake. The green darkened further, shifting like mist trapped in glass. He watched it settle for a moment, then turned to face me.

"Drink this."

"...What?" I stared at the swirling green liquid. "Why would I drink that?"

He didn't even blink. "Because it'll slow the poison and start the cure."

"That could be anything. For all I know it's a paralytic. Or sleeping agent. Or something that turns me into a hybrid—"

He groaned. "Navina."

"No. No chance. I'm not just drinking something a masked stranger hands me."

"I've been treating your wounds for hours."

"And maybe that's just part of the slow poison plan," I snapped.

"I've fed you, kept you warm, kept you alive—"

"And now you're giving me mystery juice laced with your blood and telling me to chug?"

He clicked his tongue. "Gods, you're more difficult than the swarm."

I pushed against the cave wall, trying to sit up despite the deep ache in my stomach. "I don't know what your deal is, but I'm not—"

He moved faster than my eye could follow.

In a blur, his hand grabbed my wrist, slammed it softly but firmly against the wall beside my head. I gasped—not out of fear, but from the sudden closeness.

His masked face hovered inches from mine, his voice cold and low.

"If you resist any longer..."

His eyes—behind that twisted smiling mask—bored into me.

"...I'll force it down your throat. Not because I want to, but because you're too stubborn to live."

I froze.

His grip was like steel. Unyielding. Unshakable.

I had fought monsters and faced death a hundred times—But this grip wasn't something I could slip through.

I was... vulnerable. Helpless, even.

And that terrified me more than the grotesques.

His voice softened, just slightly. "You think I have an ulterior motive? I don't. I'm not doing this for thanks, or loyalty, or power. I'm doing it because if you die—"

He hesitated.

"...We lose."

My chest tightened. His words weren't laced with flattery or dramatics. They were truth, wrapped in urgency.

"I don't care if you hate me," he continued. "But you will stay here, drink this, and recover. For the next three days, the storms will tear through this region. You've been on the edge of fever for hours. You won't survive another chill."

"...So that's why you said to stay?"

"Yes."

A beat.

"I'm doing this for you."

My breath caught. And suddenly, the doubt... eased.

Something in his voice—not just the tone, but the truth—got to me.

I looked away, then back at the vial.

"...You're still weird."

"Admit it. You like weird."

I rolled my eyes. "Shut up."

I took the vial.

And drank.

It tasted sour. Extremely sour. My face twisted the moment it touched my tongue—like biting into rotting metal soaked in vinegar—but... something shifted inside me. The burning tension in my veins began to dull, the twisting movement beneath my skin slowed... and then stilled. It felt like I was finally back in my own body. Mine. Not theirs.

He grabbed his things, moving as if nothing monumental had just happened. Calmly slipping each item into the folds of his overcoat.

"Wait, wait—" I called out.

He opened the coat wider for a second too long—and my eyes widened. What the—?

Seventeen different weapons. I counted them instinctively. Nine separate herbs along the side. Fifteen small tools—each probably with a specific, deadly function. Crystals glowing faintly. What even was half of this stuff?

Was this man carrying the entire militia in his coat?!

"Why the hell are you carrying so much stuff?" I asked, squinting like it might help make sense of him.

"It's nothing special really," he replied, not even looking back. "I just have to work a bit harder than usual."

Right. "Nothing special," he says, like he's not a walking weapon.

He started walking toward the cave entrance.

"Wait—why are you leaving?" I asked, feeling that weird knot in my chest again.

"I have to go somewhere. And it's urgent," he said, his voice low as he stared into the downpour outside.

"Isn't it getting dark and cold? It'll be dangerous if you go alone—"

"No," he cut me off sharply. "I can't let her wait any longer."

"Her...?" I blinked. Who's 'her'? I didn't like the way that word felt on my tongue.

"What do you mean?" I pushed.

He paused, head tilted just slightly. "Someone... dared to hurt my heart." His voice was quiet now, edged with ice. "I'm going to end their story tonight."

Wait... did he mean the Swarm Tyrant?

"You could get badly hurt," I said, trying to sit up. "Are you sure about this?"

"You don't have to worry," he said, finally turning his gaze to me. His eyes, cold as winter's edge beneath the mask, didn't even blink.

"The only one who can push me to use half my power... is my weakest self."

Then, he leaned in just slightly—only enough for the stormlight to catch the carved edge of his mask.

"Tonight is going to have a lot of fireworks," he said, like it was some twisted holiday. "So stay awake a bit."

"Fireworks?" I echoed.

"Fireworks celebrating the extinction of grotesques," he said coldly. His voice—deeper now—sounded like it was speaking from a place darker than void.

For a moment, I felt like I was drowning in something invisible—weightless and endless void. Then I gasped, chest rising like I'd been pulled up for air.

And he was gone.

Just like that, the cave felt colder. Quieter. The rain outside roared louder, but inside... was silence.

I was alone. Left with nothing but the aftertaste of sour salvation... and the echoes of words that made no sense, but still shook something inside me.

I laid there, the warmth of the potion still spreading through my chest, slowly pushing back the numb ache that had paralyzed me since Rinascita fell. The sour aftertaste lingered on my tongue, but... my limbs didn't feel like they were made of rusted metal anymore. I could breathe without flinching.

But now he was gone.

That... man—whoever he was—walked out into the storm like it meant nothing. Cloaked in mystery, talking about "her" and "fireworks" with that voice like cold steel dragging through silence. What even was he? A healer? A mage? A swordsman? Or something else entirely?

Fireworks...?

Celebrating the extinction of grotesques...?

The way he said it, like it was inevitable. Like death was a guarantee, and he was just the one holding the pen to write the final period.

And then there was that "her."

I don't know why it bothered me. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe... jealousy? No, that's stupid. I don't even know him. I just met him. And yet—he felt familiar. Not like someone I'd forgotten... but like someone I'd missed without knowing I ever knew them.

What do I do now?

My body was still weak. I wouldn't be much help to anyone like this. But I couldn't just lie here and wait either. If what he said was true... that Rinascita still stood, that the others were alive... then I had to be ready. I had to.

I turned my gaze toward the cave entrance where he vanished, rain cascading down like a curtain between two stories.

Who the hell are you, really...?

And why do I feel like the next time we meet...

my story will never be the same?

...

I'll wait and see the fireworks you promised.

[Celia's Perspective – 1st Person]

7:28 PM

Was it a dream...?

Because if it was, I don't want to wake up. Not now. Not ever.

I was sitting next to Kaiser... on top of Levi's roof. Just the two of us. Alone in the sky.

The stars were so bright that night, they didn't even feel real. It was like someone painted them there just for us. No war. No grotesques. No fear. Just that breeze... and him.

"Isn't it beautiful, Celia?"

"It is... Kai..."

I was looking at the crescent moon. There was this gentle halo around it, like the sky was hugging it. I wanted to say more, but all I could think about was the warmth next to me.

"The moon tonight looks so pretty..."

I turned toward him—and that's when I noticed it.

He wasn't looking at the sky.

He was looking at me.

Our eyes met. And everything else just stopped. My chest started aching, stupidly. Not from pain. From something else I couldn't name. From something only he could make me feel.

"Why are you staring...?"

"Underneath the moonlit sky, I can clearly see how beautiful you look."

I turned away. Fast. Too fast.

"...Hey, I was enjoying it, don't tease me."

"Okay, okay. Just calm down."

I wanted to smack him. I wanted to cry. I wanted to sit in that moment forever.

But I knew I couldn't.

Because even in dreams, time doesn't stop.

"Kai... do you remember what you told me?"

"Hm? What part?"

"You said... that no matter what happened, you'd stay by me."

"I did say that."

"...Was that a lie?"

"Why would I lie to my Celia?"

My heart fluttered—then cracked. Not in half. Worse. Like something crumbling slowly with each breath. Why was it so hard to breathe?

"...I'm scared."

"I know."

I hated that he could say it so easily. So gently. I hated that he knew exactly what I was feeling. I hated how safe it made me feel, even if it wasn't real.

"The stars may leave the sky, but Kaiser won't leave his Celia."

Those words—

They didn't feel like a promise. They felt like the kind of lie I'd pray was true.

Even if everything else collapsed, I wanted to hold on to just that.

He gently touched my head.

"As long as I'm alive, I'll protect you."

"...I don't need protection, idiot."

"You act like a kid sometimes, you know that?"

"...Do not."

"You kinda do."

I turned my head away.

I didn't want him to see me smile.

I didn't want him to see the tears.

Because if he saw the tears... maybe he'd never leave. Maybe he'd stay a little longer. Maybe—

...Why does waking up hurt more than dying?

No. No no no—don't wake up, don't let it end... please—

I gasped awake, choking. My lungs burned as if they were filled with smoke and rot. Blood splattered down my lips, warm and metallic as it pooled in my mouth. My arms trembled as I tried to sit up.

The air was thick. Cold. Barely any light in this underground hell, just some dying blue glow-moss clinging to the far walls.

My fingers instinctively moved. The chant slid past my tongue in a whisper.

Cursed healing—decay reversed, mend this vessel, bind this soul...

A pale purple light flickered around my hands, shaky, unstable—but it worked. A little. Enough to close the worst gashes across my ribs, enough to let me breathe without drowning on myself.

"You still have some mana left, huh?"

That voice—

Lucas. Leaning against a cracked wall, blood caked into his brown hair, eyes sharp as always like he wasn't injured at all—like none of this meant anything to him.

I turned to face him, tensing on instinct. He didn't get my trust just because everyone called him a "hero" or "angel." That was just good first impressions others take as.

I didn't say anything.

Just went back to healing. The cuts on my face stung worse than I expected, but I pushed through it. My breath came in short bursts, and I could feel it—how hollow my cursed energy had become.

I must've spent everything I had just keeping myself alive.

And for what?

That thing... that goddamn Swarm Tyrant.

I could still feel the moment its claws pierced me. The moment I thought I had it—when I wrapped my chains in Withering Touch, slamming them with emotion-heavy bursts to slow its flight, weaken its limbs. I studied its wings, understood the weight ratio of its body, even anticipated where to strike.

I did everything right. I adapted.

And still—

My fist slammed against the stone floor before I could stop myself.

"Then why did I lose?!"

"Shouldn't hurt yourself anymore. It's pointless."

Lucas didn't even look smug. Just cold. Unbothered.

I shot him a glare.

He met it without flinching. Just stared back like he was dissecting me with his eyes.

It made my skin crawl.

"...Where are we?" I finally asked, voice cracked from blood and bitterness.

"Currently? Prisoners. Test subjects, if I had to guess. For the grotesques."

"What the hell?!"

I looked around again—really looked this time.

Chains hanging from the ceiling. Patches of dried gore on the walls. Bones—some human, some not. The air had a faint hum to it, like something unnatural was pulsing deeper in the ground. My body stiffened. The cellar wasn't just a place to hold prisoners.

It was a hive. And we were in it.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, trying to stop my hands from shaking.

How many layers deep were we?

How many were already dead above us?

And worst of all... where was my Kaiser?

Because right now... I didn't care about strategy or war or survival—

I just wanted to break through the stone and rip this place apart until I found him.

But for now...

I was alone.

And I had to find a way out.

"I'll need your help to escape," he said, casual like we were planning a picnic. "You and I working together increases the odds. My defensive techniques can cover you, and your offense is aggressive enough to carve a path."

How adorable. He thought I cared.

"Tch... teaming up with a 'hero'? That's rich." I crossed my arms, ignoring how my bones ached. "I'm not interested."

Inside, I was already thinking three layers deeper. He doesn't want to protect me. He just wants to use me. Like the rest. They only come to the monster when there's no options.

Lucas's gaze didn't waver. "It's the best option. You know it."

"Oh? Do I?" I leaned back against the wall, smiling like a spoiled noblewoman at a party. "I didn't know being locked in a rotting hive qualified you to lecture me on tactics."

"You're injured. I'm injured. We're not getting out unless we trust each other." He was serious now. "I cover. You strike. That's our only path."

My voice dipped cold. "And how exactly do I trust you, Heaven's little toy?"

He blinked. Good.

Finally caught off guard. "I—"

"I know people like you," I continued, tone sharper than the rusted chain beside me. "You don't care about me. You care about the power I have now. If this was the old me—the cursed girl barely able to keep herself safe—would you have even looked in my direction?"

The silence was heavy.

He didn't deny it.

"You're right."

...exactly as I thought.

My heart skipped.

"I need you now because you're strong," he said, voice like frost. "But you need me too. Or are you planning to limp through an entire grotesque hive alone?"

Of course I was. I would've... My fists clenched. Even if it killed me.

Still. The nerve.

"Oh, how noble," I scoffed. "The Heaven's Sent Child, humbling himself to the demon girl. It must burn, doesn't it? That even with all your light and power... you couldn't protect the town."

He didn't even blink.

"You act pretty strong yourself," he said calmly, "for someone who fell first to the Swarm Tyrant."

That stung.

No—it burned.

My body moved before I could stop it. A chain of cursed energy hissed around my wrist, flickering with unstable venom. But I held it. Barely.

We both stared.

Neither of us flinched.

I hated how unbothered he looked. I hated that he was right. That I was right. That we needed each other to survive and I couldn't escape that.

"You're annoying," I muttered.

"And you're exhausting," he replied.

But neither of us moved.

We didn't have to admit it. The moment said it for us. Two broken weapons, cornered in a pit, trying not to die again.

He extended a hand toward me.

I didn't take it.

But I didn't destroy it either.

I nodded slowly.

That was all Lucas needed.

We didn't speak after that. The silence that followed was heavier than any chain I could summon. Every breath was cold, soaked in the stench of mold, rot, and death from the walls around us.

They came—dragging footsteps, guttural screeches echoing against stone.

Grotesques.

A tall one lurched forward, its body malformed with layered bone armor that clicked and bent with each step. It gestured with one crooked claw toward a tunnel up ahead, where a sickly green glow pulsed like a heartbeat. It didn't need to speak. The command was clear.

Follow... or die.

Lucas stepped first. I followed. My wrists were shackled in cursed iron that bit into my skin, but I kept walking. My legs burned. My lungs stung. But inside—I was awake now.

We passed through corridors made of fused corpses, their twisted forms embedded into the walls like screaming ornaments. Each step felt like we were descending deeper into a nightmare.

And finally, we reached it.

The Throne Room.

A massive chamber beneath the earth, its ceiling alive with pulsating flesh, veins bulging like exposed roots. On the far side sat a throne made from crushed skulls and grotesque wings.

And on it—the Swarm Tyrant.

Its form was only partially humanoid now. Spikes protruded from its back like a grotesque crown. Its skin looked stitched from insect carapace and cursed flesh. But what chilled me the most were its eyes—intelligent, calm, and filled with hate.

Lucas leaned toward me, voice barely a breath.

"We'll have to move here... or it's over."

I didn't answer.

I was already chanting.

My lips moved slowly—no light, no flare, just faint cursed mist weaving between my words. A hidden spell, one that rebuilt my cells and stiffened my veins with the magic I had left.

"Fleshbinding Chant—Minor. Stabilize nerve link. Prioritize cardiac pulse."

Heal first. Fight second.

"Submit," the Swarm Tyrant said, in near-perfect human tongue. The sound was guttural, alien—like it was learning our speech mid-sentence. "Serve. Or become part of hive. No third path."

Its voice echoed like a blade being dragged across bone.

Lucas stepped forward slightly. Brave fool.

"You seem intelligent," he said evenly. "If you can speak, then maybe you understand negotiation. What do you want us to do?"

Good, Lucas. Keep it talking.

I let his words float while my mind snapped into calculation.

These creatures—armor everywhere. Chest, arms, torso... but there. Right there—

One of the grotesques twitched slightly as it moved.

Its foot scraped the floor.

No armor underneath. I saw the veins. The underside of the feet was bare. The top of the head was covered—but not the base of the skull.

The back of the neck.

Unprotected.

If I can infect it there, I can stop the poison flow—sever the neural toxin. My cursed energy could overtake its control system. I can collapse its motor functions.

That's my window.

I can adapt.

Lucas kept talking. "You have a whole army. You've already won the battlefield. Why use us? What do you gain keeping us alive?"

The Swarm Tyrant rose from its throne, towering now. "Gifted... like you... Master's Orders. You... will become one of us. Spread fear. Evolve."

It wants to turn us.

I bit the inside of my cheek hard, drawing blood to keep focused.

Not happening.

"Make choice," the Tyrant said. "Now."

Lucas looked toward me subtly, eyes ready. His hand twitched near his pocket.

I whispered the next part of my spell, locking eyes with him for a moment.

"Lucas."

He barely turned his head.

"I'll open the path."

It happened all at once.

Lucas moved—his hand flashing with a sharp glint of light magic, not to attack but to signal.

A narrow beam burst behind me, illuminating the right flank—two grotesques lunging low, trying to flank me like dogs.

My legs coiled in thorned vines.

Launch.

I twisted upward, chains bursting from my hair like a violent halo, wrapping around my waist and hurling me mid-air. My body rotated fast—upside-down, descending like a storm.

"Withering Scar: Blooming Death Lotus—"

My palms tore open, thorned lashes splitting into five cursed tendrils each, lashing in a hurricane arc.

Every vine struck a neck.

Not the chest. Not the limbs.

The back of the neck.

Their joints locked.

Their limbs spasmed.

My curse spread like wildfire through bone and muscle, severing poison glands, draining motion, devouring their will to move.

You're not the only monsters here anymore.

Lucas's light blinked again—left side.

I landed on a single chain, suspended mid-air like a dancer on thread, then launched forward with a whip-crack of my thorns. Two more grotesques lunged—erratic, unpredictable—but I'd seen their rhythm now.

Ambush lunge... mid-twitch left... back leg reloads...

Slash. Dodge. Crush.

One fell screaming, its skull crushed under my cursed-coated kick.

Lucas ducked behind me, blocking a venom claw with a shimmering shield of hardened mana, but it cracked on impact.

He coughed out blood. "Low on mana."

"Then stay behind me."

My voice came out flat, cold—but inside?

This feels right.

I moved like wind between daggers, my chains snapping tight behind me, forming armor around my back. Lucas leaned into it instinctively, using it as a mobile wall while he marked enemies with thin trails of light.

I followed every signal.

His defense, my offense.

Perfect Duo.

A grotesque came from above—ambush dive.

Chain snap—caught its ankle mid-air.

I yanked—slammed it headfirst into the floor.

It twitched once.

Then went still.

Another tried circling. I flipped backward—my thorns lashing its exposed foot, draining life as I twisted its balance. It staggered just long enough.

Chain choke.

Crack.

Neck snapped.

These things relied on poison, erratic angles, overwhelm tactics.

But once you adapt, once you learn their rhythm—

They're no different than insects.

My cursed thorns sang. Every strike felt cleaner. Sharper. More efficient. I wasn't just fighting...

I was thriving.

Even my pain faded into static. My wounds stitched together mid-motion, not perfectly, but enough to keep me moving.

Lucas covered my back with half-collapsing shields, barely holding on, muttering something between gasps.

"You're... really useful," he said, after I took down another two grotesques in a blur.

I didn't answer.

I was staring up.

At him.

The Swarm Tyrant.

Watching from its throne like a smug god surveying insects.

Enjoying the show, are you?

I wrapped chains around my arms, propelled myself sideways, kicking off the wall, dragging Lucas with a tether behind me as the last grotesques fell in front of the throne's steps.

Blood.

Poison.

Flesh.

All strewn across the room.

We stood, panting. Silent.

Then the Swarm Tyrant rose.

Its voice slithered down the bone pillars like smoke.

"Then death... it is."

The ground split.

My chains bristled. My vines flared.

And I smiled—finally, truly, a wicked grin under bloodstained lips.

Suddenly...

My knees gave out.

The cold stone caught me harder than I expected. I couldn't even catch myself—my chains flickered uselessly, my arms numb. I just... crumbled.

I heard the wind before I felt it.

CRACK.

The Swarm Tyrant's claws closed around my skull like a vice.

Then I was flying.

The wall met me faster than I could scream. The impact stole every thought. My back arched. My lungs collapsed. The sound wasn't pain—it was silence. It was my body forgetting how to be alive.

I slid down the wall like a dying puppet, blood smearing where my head cracked stone.

Why can't I move?

Why... can't I breathe?

I blinked.

Everything was too slow.

I saw Lucas... his fingers shaking as he tried to summon something—daggers? Light? Hope?

They fizzled out like sparks in the rain.

The Tyrant slapped him like a fly.

He didn't even scream when he hit the floor.

No...

No, no, no... this isn't how it ends.

I tried to raise my head.

Chains twitched around me, but they were limp, almost scared. Like they knew. Like my cursed energy had already given up.

"My Lord was right. Timing the poison is a masterful technique."

The voice... it was behind me.

Around me.

I stared into the flickering torchlight, my jaw trembling, mouth open—but no words. My throat burned.

Timing the... poison?

Then it hit me.

Back then.

That scratch.

The claws that just grazed me.

I had dodged. Thought I was safe. But no.

It was never a scratch.

It was the end.

"He foresaw your plan, your arrogance, your little escapes."

I felt something squirming under my skin. Something liquid—something alive.

"My Lord wanted to see how far you two could survive before dying."

My stomach burned.

No, not burned—split.

It tore inside like a thousand knives scraping bone.

I screamed.

Or tried to.

Only blood came out.

The Swarm Tyrant grabbed me again—his claws sank into my side, slowly. Not like before.

This wasn't a strike.

This was punishment.

"What's wrong? Your body's adapting, isn't it?"

His fingers twisted inside me.

Muscles tore.

Ribs cracked.

I convulsed. My chains struck out wildly, but they couldn't reach him—I couldn't reach him. My own weapons were too slow. Too soft.

"Your pain is beautiful. Your resistance, tragic. You never stood a chance, death was inevitable."

I wanted to bite my tongue off.

Wanted to scream.

But all I could do was shiver.

"He knew you'd team up with the heavenly saint. He knew you'd adapt, that you'd use the necks and vines and thorns."

He dropped me.

My legs didn't work.

My eyes wouldn't focus.

"It's time to die."

My head lolled sideways.

"Kai..."

Please....

He won't come.

And maybe he never should.

I bit into my lip. Hard.

Hard enough to rip it open. I needed something to feel real. I needed something to hurt outside, because everything inside was already gone.

My chest heaved. Not a sob. Just... a broken breath.

It grabbed me again.

My spine bent the wrong way as I was slammed down. Bone-first. Hard.

I couldn't even scream properly anymore—my throat was raw, and my mouth filled with blood.

Then again.

CRACK.

I felt something inside me tear. Something important.

And again—harder.

Then its claws tore into me, deep, not fast like before—slow, deliberate, scraping muscle away like paper, digging in and pumping more of that hellish poison.

My body twitched. My voice died. My scream got lost somewhere in the blood pooling in my throat as it slammed me into the ground one more time.

I couldn't tell which way was up anymore. I couldn't feel where I began or ended.

Lucas—he was still there, slumped in the grotesques' grip, unmoving. His head tilted down, hair soaked with blood. He wasn't coming.

Nobody was coming.

The Swarm Tyrant lifted me again like I weighed nothing—like I was just meat now. Its claws wrapped around my face, and it yanked me forward, holding my head just inches from its eyes.

So close I could see my reflection in them.

A cracked doll. A shattered ghost.

"You had the scariest presence," it said, voice low and cold, "The shadow of a god slayer..."

I didn't blink.

I couldn't.

"But you're nothing," it whispered. "I was wrong. I overestimated you."

Then—

SLAM.

My face hit the wall so hard I heard my jaw click. My nose crushed. My cheeks pulsed in agony.

I tasted blood behind my eyes.

Even my magic recoiled now. Healing just made it worse. My cursed energy—what little remained—fought back like it was drowning.

My fingers curled into fists.

I was losing.

I was breaking.

But... no.

No.

"I can't die—"

Kaiser...

His name alone hurt more than the blows.

I promised myself I would save him.

"Die already," it hissed. "It's over."

My lips parted, but they couldn't form words. My tongue trembled. My throat burned.

"N-n... n-n... n...o..." I whimpered.

"Nobody is coming to save you."

Then it slammed me harder than ever before.

My spine howled. My legs twitched.

Tears.

Not from fear.

From everything else.

The kind of tears that didn't fall from eyes—They poured out from something deeper.

Pain that had no place left to hide.

I sobbed once, barely a breath. Just a stutter in my chest. And that was enough for more tears to break loose.

Then it gripped my head tighter, talons digging into my scalp, and hurled me upward.

I hit the ceiling.

And when I say hit, I mean shattered.

My back met stone.

My ribs gave.

My breath vanished.

And then—weightlessness.

Falling.

Time slowed down.

My eyes stayed open, and I saw—

my tears.

Suspended in air.

Tiny drops.

Like little stars I never got to wish on.

And I realized...

This is what dying felt like.

Just... silence.

Just falling, and knowing nobody is reaching for you.

And yet...

I begged.

Please...

Please...

I don't want to die.

Not yet.

Please.

Kai...

I love you....

I just wanted... to see you again.

Even if you never needed me.

I—

I was inches from the ground.

I braced for nothing.

But then—

I didn't hit.

I didn't break.

Because something—

someone—

caught me.

Arms.

Warm. Familiar.

Breath against my neck.

Strong. Real.

And I didn't even need to look.

Because my heart—that shattered, broken, bloody thing—still beat for only one person.

It's Him...

Kaiser Everhart was holding me in his arms... my safest world...

As I barely managed to look over at him... I could see him smile at me and his blue eyes reassuring me that I was safe.

"I'm here now, Celia. Just rest for now, I'll protect you." He said as he slowly closed my eyes with his fingers.

"Tonight's going to be the extinction of grotesques."

And just like that...

I lost consciousness.

Chapter 77 - Your Story Ends Here - I

Kaiser Everhart's Perspective:

I laid Celia down with more care than I've shown anyone in years.

Her body twitched slightly, still stuck somewhere between consciousness and agony. Her lips were cracked, bleeding in the corners, but they parted weakly as I poured the potion between them.

"Just a little more, Celia," I whispered under my breath. "You don't get to leave yet."

She drank.

Good.

I stood up slowly.

The grotesques stood frozen, twitching but not moving. Not even a hiss. That silence wasn't respect—it was fear.

I hadn't even touched a weapon yet, and they knew.

As they should.

The Swarm Tyrant stepped forward from the shadows of his malformed court. Towering. Bone-stitched. Crawling with maggots of mana that swirled and twitched across its armor-like hide. The beast reeked of decay and victory.

Victory it won't be holding tonight.

"Who are you?" it asked, voice rattling like chains dragged through wet stone.

I didn't respond.

One of the grotesques tilted unnaturally, vibrating slightly—then a faint click sounded, like some kind of frequency was passed between them.

The Tyrant froze.

Its jaw cracked open a little wider, and its eye-rings flexed.

"...You," it rasped again. "You're not even human."

Ah.

Took 'em long enough.

"You slaughtered my entire forward force in Rinascita. You... made no sound slaughtering all of my forces here. Not one of them reported back."

"What are you?"

I glanced to my left. One grotesque flinched. To my right—another took a step back. I could hear its bones creaking.

I rolled my neck once and spoke, flatly.

"Kaiser Everhart."

I reached into my coat and drew both daggers in a smooth, practiced motion.

"E-Rank Adventurer."

The silence was a slap.

Then the Tyrant laughed.

Ugly. Dry. Bone-on-bone.

"E-Rank? You? How did you wipe out a legion of grotesques? You don't have power. You don't even exist in the aura plane. No magic... no energy... no divine touch. You're hollow."

I smiled—low and lazy.

"Hollow, huh? So those are your final words then."

I stepped forward. Light didn't follow. Shadows grew sharper behind me, like they were afraid to touch my skin.

"You've got all this poison and legion, and still you can't smell it—what's right in front of you."

The Tyrant's head tilted, confusion twitching through its body. Its aura surged outward in waves, a massive, oily tide of corruption and death—trying to overwhelm me.

Still... I didn't react.

No flinch. No glow. No pressure pushing back.

Just stillness.

"No aura... No heartbeat... Nothing. You don't even feel alive," it muttered, slower now, the tiniest tremor of unease entering its voice.

I spun one dagger lazily and held it reverse grip.

Then I met its eyes with a cold smile—calm, dangerous, quiet.

"I'm not here to feel alive."

I took one more step, shadows collapsing around my feet like they were drawn to me.

"I'm here to remind you what fear used to feel like."

And just like that, the air changed.

My voice dropped a little lower.

"You crawled out of some pit thinking you were unstoppable. Congratulations. You were wrong."

The Tyrant's aura flared again—but it didn't close the distance.

It hesitated.

I smiled wider.

"You want to know what I am?" I asked, casually flicking the dagger toward my side.
"You ever seen a man with nothing left to protect—except the person you just hurt?"

I raised my blade and pointed it forward.

"That's me."

A beat passed.

"And you?" I added, as my stance lowered and my foot slid into place. "You're just my victim tonight."

The moment the Swarm Tyrant stepped back, I knew what was coming.

A low tremor echoed from the walls—then every grotesque in the cavern screamed at once. Not a war cry. A reaction. Rage? Obedience? Doesn't matter.

They lunged.

Thirty-seven at once.

I counted by instinct—twelve from the left, eight flanking wide on the right, six dropping from the jagged walls above. Eleven dead ahead. All of them leaping, limbs spread, claws twitching with venom and hunger.

This wasn't a fight.

This was them panicking.

Good.

I moved.

The first grotesque reached me in under a second—fangs bared, shoulder spikes raised to tear through my ribcage. I ducked low, twisted my torso under the arc of its arm, and drove my left dagger upward into the soft patch just beneath its chin.

Right where the bone plating doesn't cover.

Every grotesque has a blind spot—right under the back of their neck. Chitin armor doesn't reach there. Evolution's oversight.

The dagger punched through soft flesh and into its brainstem. It didn't even screech. Just slumped.

I pivoted on my heel, using its falling body as cover. Another grotesque lunged from above—I used the corpse's back like a springboard and launched upward, meeting the airborne freak mid-air. One flip. One clean slash.

Its neck tore open like wet cloth.

The winged ones are evolved. Better poison. But that venom's created in the lower throat—near the adrenal sacs behind the neck. Rupture those, and their system floods with its own rot. Instant shutdown.

The moment it hit the ground, its muscles locked. Twitched. Then went still.

I landed behind two more.

One tried to grab me from the side. I stepped into its arm and bent with its momentum, my knee coming up to its ribcage and shattering it inward. It coughed black fluid all over my coat.

"Gross," I muttered, slicing through its spine in one stroke.

The second one flanked too wide—saw me for a second too long.

Wrong move.

My dagger arced, blade reversed, and cut through its neck at a clean 45-degree angle. Head tilted. Wobbled. Fell.

They fight like beasts, but not dumb ones. Cornered animals. They test your response time. Rush you in flanks. They never come one by one. Problem is... they've never fought me before.

A screech from behind.

I didn't turn.

I jumped backward—tucking my legs and rolling mid-air as three grotesques slammed into where I was.

They tried to reorient. I didn't let them.

I landed on one's shoulders—kicked off—and stabbed both daggers downward into their exposed necks while flipping away. The third one looked up, too slow, and I spun midair, dagger horizontal.

Its face split down the middle.

By now, the cavern was a mess of twitching limbs and twitching corpses. Seventeen down.

My breathing hadn't changed.

Because I was holding back.

A grotesque from the right tried a wide, two-arm sweep. I dropped under the strike, spun on my palm, and swept-kicked its legs out from under it—then buried my knee into its

exposed stomach as it fell. It vomited blood and I finished it with a clean cut across the throat.

The tail armor is tough. Spinal plating? Useless when they're upside down choking on their own bile.

Three more behind me. I felt the air shift.

I didn't turn.

I jumped straight up, letting their claws pass under me—and as I flipped, I drew one dagger behind me and threw it into the skull of the furthest one.

Mid-air kill.

The moment I landed, I caught my spinning blade from the corpse's collapse and used it to gut the second.

Twenty-six.

I swept left, dagger dragging in a spiral. Opened up the stomach of one flanker, ducked under the next's lunge, and punched my blade straight through its eye socket.

One tried to grab me from behind.

I dropped, hooked its leg mid-slide, and snapped it backward, dragging the creature down to the floor. Its skull hit stone and I stomped once. Bone crunched.

Thirty-one.

The last six hesitated.

That was new.

They didn't charge. They just stood there—hissing, twitching, eyes darting between the bodies and me.

I didn't say anything.

Didn't need to.

They ran.

Sprinted toward the Swarm Tyrant, leaping toward the walls, clawing their way out of the cavern like cornered rats trying to escape a flood.

Thirty-seven. All gone.

I flicked the last drops of blood off my blades and twirled them once, sliding them back into my coat with quiet precision.

Then I looked at the Tyrant.

"You sent your pack," I said, cracking my neck once. "But you forgot the leash."

He stared.

Celia's breathing behind me was soft. Stable.

Good.

I stepped forward, eyes narrowing on the Swarm Tyrant. It hadn't moved the entire time. Watching. Measuring. It was smart—smarter than the rest of the trash I'd just cleaned up.

Its wings flexed once. Wide. Black-veined, bone-split wings like twisted cathedral glass, flaring with violent pressure.

Then it spoke.

"You're the one that stared back at me behind her darkness... the void that lives inside her shadow." Its voice was less sound and more feeling.

I didn't blink.

"I was just protecting what's mine," I said simply.

It moved first.

No roar. No scream. Just appeared—one wingbeat and it closed the distance between us like a reaper cutting down the gap between death and breath. Its claws came like scythes.

I twisted sideways, slid under the arc, felt the wind split behind my ear.

My dagger was already out.

I slashed upward—aiming for its ribcage.

But it turned mid-strike. Flexed its shoulder blade, and my blade scraped harmlessly off bone armor.

Fast.

Too fast.

"Your speed's good," I muttered, sliding back on my heel. "Shame I'm better."

It lunged again—this time low. A full-body tackle, wing-boosted.

I flipped over it, grabbed its back spike mid-air, and kicked off it to launch myself backward. My sword was already in my hand—blue sigils humming down the blade's length.

Ice magic. Subzero retention. Wing joints like that? Brittle when cold.

I spun mid-air and slashed a frozen crescent toward its shoulder.

It screeched as the ice cracked and climbed up its wing membrane—just long enough for me to close the gap again.

I ducked low, stabbed both daggers at its exposed flank.

One hit.

The other—

It caught my wrist.

Its grip felt like steel pressurizing bone.

"You are not what you seem," it growled. "You are not human."

"If I said I was," I grinned, twisting my caught wrist until I heard a snap—not mine, its—"would you feel better about dying?"

I broke free, kicked its kneecap sideways, and used the motion to slide under it, carving deep across the hamstring with my dagger.

Blood like oil.

It spun, tail whipping—but I caught it mid-spin, used the momentum, and threw myself above its head, flipping forward.

Mid-air, I reversed grip on my sword.

And slammed it down onto its shoulder.

The ice burst inside the joint.

It screamed.

"You think this is enough?!" it roared, wings flaring again. The force cracked the ground, throwing me back into the wall.

I hit stone—hard—but rolled out of the follow-up slash. One claw barely missed my face.

I sliced upward.

Cut three fingers off.

"You fight like a beast," I said, catching my breath in half a second, "but think like prey. Screaming about power mid-fight? That's a red flag, buddy."

It dove again—wing-boosted.

I ducked and slid beneath it, using my ice blade to shatter more of its wing membrane.

"Stay grounded," I muttered.

The Tyrant landed hard, cracking the cavern floor.

"I am disaster," it snarled, voice rattling the stalactites. "I am the peak of grotesque evolution. You are going to die! And I—"

"Are bleeding all over my boots," I cut in.

I threw my dagger. It lodged in its shoulder.

I appeared behind it in the next second—dagger already back in hand.

Close combat again.

Slash. Parry. Cut. Twist.

We moved like two shadows crossing in flickers of blue and red—ice and blood scattering like rain. My movements were sharper now—precise. I let its claws come within inches. Trusted my footwork. Let instinct drive the gap between my ribs and death.

It clawed. I redirected.

It jumped. I was already above.

It flew—my blade froze its wings mid-air and sent it spiraling down.

Its body slammed into the ground hard enough to shake the earth.

It tried to rise. One wing was limp.

It looked up at me.

Chest heaving. Eyes narrowing.

"I underestimated you..."

I stared down, frost forming beneath my feet from the aura leaking off my blade.

Then I grinned.

"Estimate me all you want..."

I stepped forward, pressing the edge of my sword to its throat—ice crawling up its chin.

"...after you're dead."

As I was about to finish this pest—blade drawn, ice humming off its edge—I felt it.

A flicker. No... a presence. Behind me. Too close to her.

I didn't hesitate.

Spun.

Two daggers—one step, one breath, and the grotesque never even had the chance to scream. Its head spun once in the air before it hit the ground with a dull, wet sound.

Don't touch what's mine.

I dropped to a knee beside Celia. Her breathing was still shallow, but steady. Unconscious. Skin cold to the touch, but alive. Barely.

I placed a hand on her cheek, just for a second. My palm was shaking. Huh.

Guess I was angrier than I thought.

I stood as the Swarm Tyrant's body cracked back into place. Bones snapping back like they were used to breaking.

Healing.

Fast.

Too fast.

Not that it would matter.

My sword slid into my grip like memory. I threw it—blazing blue—and just as it was about to pierce Lucas clean through the eye—

—I outpaced it.

One blink. Two.

And I was already there, catching the blade mid-flight, using the moment to twist in the air and blast-freeze the grotesque behind him in mid-lunge. It shattered before it hit the ground.

Lucas was unconscious. His pulse fluttered.

But he'd live.

He had no choice.

"You'll adapt," I muttered, grabbing him by the collar. "Or die trying."

I turned on my heel and blitzed—shadows cracking beneath my feet as I raced back to Celia, scooping her into my arms like she weighed nothing.

The Swarm Tyrant screamed behind me.

"I WON'T LET YOU RUN, HUMAN!"

I paused mid-step.

Didn't look back.

"It's Kaiser," I said calmly.

And then—

My knee slammed into the ground with enough force to shatter the stone beneath me. A spiderweb of cracks erupted from the impact, and a section of the hive floor collapsed into blackness.

A hole. Straight into the depths below.

Hell would be safer than here.

I tossed Lucas down first. One motion, no hesitation. He vanished into the dark.

I looked at Celia one more time.

She didn't move.

I smiled faintly and pressed something into her hand. Small. Cold. She'd understand later.

"Catch you soon, silly girl."

And then I let her fall.

Gently.

Down into the void.

The Swarm Tyrant roared—its massive wings spreading, its veins glowing violet with inner venom, dripping rage and poison.

"YOU DARE—?!"

I turned to him.

Eyes calm.

Voice low.

"Run? Who said I was running."

"Then what is this—this mockery?! You discard your allies and challenge me alone?!"

I rolled my shoulders, cracking the stiffness out of my neck as my blade pulsed in my grip—ice creeping down the hilt like it wanted blood.

"You don't get it, do you?"

I stepped forward. The temperature dropped.

Grotesques that had been twitching near the edge of death froze instantly, as if my presence alone was locking their marrow.

"I cleared the hive to make space," I said simply. "Now, there's only room for one monster."

The Swarm Tyrant bared its jagged teeth, wings flaring again, aura boiling with hatred.

"You think you can match me?! I am evolution's perfection. I am the disaster that—"

"You know I pity you, this is a very unfair matchup."

I grinned.

The blade in my hand hummed with frost and death.

"Let's hope your third form's prettier."

He lunged.

"Welcome to your final estimate."

And then—Darkness.

Complete. Crushing. Black.

The Swarm Tyrant let out a shriek so loud it shattered every remaining crystal light, every flickering flame in the hive snuffed out in a breath. The throne room, once a cathedral of twisted bone and bioluminescent horrors, was now a tomb.

No light. No movement.

Just the echo of a monster that thought it understood fear.

I heard it. The chittering. The wet slaps of flesh against stone. The vibration of clawed limbs swarming from every crevice in the walls. Hundreds of grotesques, answering their king's call.

The kind of sound that would freeze any other hunter's blood.

I rolled my neck once. Cracked my knuckles.

And sighed.

"Seriously? You think blinding me is enough?"

The Swarm Tyrant said nothing. But I could feel it. That subtle shift in the air.

Its body stiffened.

Its instincts... finally kicking in.

Telling it to back away.

Too late.

I slid my sword back into its sheath with a click.

"Guess I'm pest control tonight."

The daggers slipped into my hands like old friends.

No light to guide me—didn't need any.

The only glow left in the entire room...

...was the sharp, haunting blue of my eyes.

And then—I moved.

I was everywhere.

A massacre.

One grotesque lunged—I dropped low, slid beneath its arm, and severed both legs in a clean sweep. Another dropped from above—my foot snapped up in a rising heel kick, cracking its jaw, and before it hit the ground, I embedded a dagger into its throat.

Two more rushed from opposite sides.

Bad idea.

I flipped forward between them, twisted mid-air, and sliced their heads clean off before my boots even kissed the ground again.

They kept coming.

Dozens at once.

Didn't matter.

I flow through the chaos.

Spinning, ducking, weaving. Using their own momentum to break their bones, twisting necks as I slid past, stepping on heads like footholds, bouncing off torsos as I moved from one to the next.

A claw slashed inches from my face—I caught the wrist, dislocated it with a brutal twist, and used the limb to skewer another grotesque behind it.

Blood sprayed. Limbs flew.

Every movement—lethal, clean, surgical.

I wasn't just killing.

I was correcting an infestation.

297 grotesques.

Dead.

In 30 seconds.

Not one scratch on me.

And when it was over—when the last twisted thing dropped, twitching, headless, its scream echoing like a dying siren—the Swarm Tyrant stood frozen.

Still in the dark.

Still watching.

I could feel his disbelief as clearly as I felt my own heartbeat.

"You..." it muttered. "You were holding back this whole time...?"

My boots echoed as I stepped forward through the pile of corpses, blood dripping from my daggers.

I tilted my head and smiled faintly.

"Relax now," I said, voice calm, amused. "You don't want to look any more ridiculous now, do you?"

The only light source—Was me.

Just my glowing blue eyes burning through the darkness.

And the promise that I was done playing.

It screamed.

And then it changed.

Flesh twisted with the crunch of bending steel.

Armor cracked—shattered—peeling back like obsidian shards as something... wrong crawled out from within. Ichor pulsed beneath, black and radiant like the void had veins. Its claws stretched long and thin, almost elegant now—like surgical tools sculpted by rage.

The wings...

No longer wings.

Crystalline blades. Serrated and glistening with something that wasn't blood but knew how to hurt like it.

Its chest split open—ripped apart—revealing a grotesque second mouth, dripping with tendrils that screamed even without sound. And its face—Gone.

No eyes. Just malice. Raw. Focused. Directed.

The air distorted. Heat and pressure warped around it.

My hair flew back from the force.

Tch—gosh. Fixing it later's gonna be a pain.

Was just starting to grow in nicely too.

Then it looked at me.

It didn't need eyes. It had intent.

The kind that gets carved into history.

I calmly drew my sword again and reached into my coat.

"Let's even the playing field, yeah?"

I snapped a small lantern into the groove on my hilt. With a flick of my wrist, I threw the blade upward—spinning like a beam of judgment—until it slammed into the ceiling, embedding itself and activating.

The light burst out—not for the world, just for me.

A thread of Judgmental Light, woven through soul-link.

Only I could see.

The cavern was blinding in my eyes, pitch black to anyone else.

Heh.

My world. My rules.

And then—It charged.

A black blur. Shimmering edges. Hunger sharpened into motion.

Its first strike was a downward slash aimed at my throat—I parried with my right dagger, rolled over its arm mid-deflection, then stabbed upward toward the chest-mouth. Missed by a breath. Tendrils snapped at my arm—I twisted away, backflipped mid-air, landed light.

Its tail lashed at my legs—I ducked under, slid across the floor, and came up with a clean cross-slice aiming for the wings—ping. No dice. Tougher than before.

It slammed both clawed feet down—I vaulted off the shockwave, flipped over its shoulders, blade out, dragging a line across its back—nothing deep, but enough to feel. It spun instantly, claws flying toward my neck—I dropped low, slid on one hand, and uppercut with my dagger—

Blocked.

Clash. Clash. Strike. Counter.

It wasn't just strong—it was smart.

Reflexive. Learning. Evolving with every move.

My sword dislodged from the ceiling mid-fight, fell toward me.

I caught it behind my back without looking.

Switched into a dual stance—dagger in left, sword in right—and charged.

This time I was on the offensive.

I ducked under a blade-wing, twisted into a roll between its legs, and sliced both ankles in a cross-pattern. It stumbled, used its tail for balance, tried to impale me—I sidestepped, grabbed the tail with one hand, and used it as a springboard to launch up, striking its face—if it even had one.

Sparks.

I landed in a crouch, panting lightly.

It stopped.

And for the first time—it didn't move.

We both stared, breathing heavy.

I exhaled and wiped the sweat off my brow with the back of my hand.

"Gotta admit..." I said, smirking. "Your final form's not bad."

"Hhhnnnnghhh..." it snarled.

I twirled my sword once, locking into stance again.

"Still gonna die, though."

I slid my daggers back into the inner sheath of my overcoat—smooth, silent. Felt the click as they locked in. The cold against my ribs grounded me.

Then I dropped my stance.

Palms open.

Fingers loose.

The Swarm Tyrant tilted its head.

Or whatever that thing called a head. Even eyeless, I could feel it blink.

Confused?

Good.

"My hands," I said quietly, stepping forward, "are enough to crush you."

And that was all the warning I gave.

The ground shattered beneath my first step—air cracked, rippled—and then I was gone.

I moved faster than sight—so fast light struggled to keep up. A white-blue afterglow trailed behind me.

But the Tyrant was faster than before.

It vanished into a jet-black blur, a line of obsidian rage cutting through the air. Its wings screeched against the wind as its trail burned crimson behind it.

Two light-trails collided mid-air.

Boom.

The room bent.

Stone exploded outward in ripples.

Grotesques still alive in the corners were vaporized on contact with the shockwave.

Its claw swung in from the right—I pivoted my torso sideways, caught the momentum with my left palm, and redirected it overhead, using its force against it. The recoil from that alone crushed the stone below my feet.

Before it recovered, I surged up with a twisting elbow—aimed at its lower jaw-mouth—but it blocked with a wing-spike, throwing sparks. It tried to sweep my legs—I jumped straight up, flipped mid-air and came down with a heel-drop.

It caught my leg.

Threw me against a pillar.

The whole wall shattered behind me.

I stood.

Dusted off my shoulder.

"Gonna take more than that, pest."

I charged again.

This time I feinted left, vanished mid-dash with a burst step, and appeared on its blind side—slam-punched the inside of its chest-mouth just as it opened.

The Tyrant screeched and retaliated—slicing upward.

I couldn't dodge that one.

Blood spurted.

My arm hit the ground behind me.

Left arm—clean off. Sliced from elbow down.

For a moment, silence.

And then I smiled.

"Ow."

I didn't flinch. Didn't scream. I moved.

I pivoted on one leg, spun my weight, and roundhouse kicked its ribs with full force. It flew backward, smashing through the air like a cannonball.

I dashed in its wake. The light trail behind me looked like a serpent made of rage.

As it hit the far wall, I was already above it—one-armed, bleeding, laughing.

And then—

Shlkt.

My arm began regenerating.

Bone first.

Then nerves.

Then flesh.

Then skin.

All within seconds.

The Tyrant barely processed it before I dropped like lightning, fist cocked back.

BOOM.

My punch cratered the floor. Its body slammed down into the stone.

The armor on its mouth split—cracked straight down the center.

It coughed something wet and ugly.

I crouched beside it, not even breathing hard.

"I was getting bored without you talking," I said, cocking my head with a grin.

It flew back in a panic, wings lurching wide, tearing air as it scrambled through the darkness I had made my home.

Its instincts screamed what its mouth couldn't yet admit.

Run.

I stepped forward, brushing a bit of ash off my sleeve.

"What's wrong—" I paused mid-sentence.

Because I could feel it. The shift.

Its fear.

It looked like rage, but it reeked of panic.

The Swarm Tyrant's body jittered in place—shudders wracking its malformed muscles. Veins of black ichor pulsed across its form, limbs twitching like it couldn't decide whether to fight or flee.

It opened its many mouths at once, voice slithering from too many throats.

"H-How... how are you fighting like this? You're human! This is inhuman. You move like death... and you don't stop. That arm... how?!"

I tilted my head slightly, eyes still glowing faint blue in the black void around us.

"I get that a lot," I muttered.

Its body convulsed again as tissue repaired, eyes—if it even had any left—flicking around the chamber like it was searching for an exit in a world where none existed.

"Then—why? Why weren't you at the town when I first came? If you were this strong... they would've stood a chance. Why didn't you come?"

I gave it a long, quiet stare. The kind of stare that cracks through words and rests in silence.

Then I shrugged.

"Because it wasn't necessary."

"That wasn't my war."

The words were simple, but the tone?

Cold enough to freeze time.

It didn't speak at first.

Its jaw clenched—those twitching tendrils now shivering from more than regeneration.

"Then why now?" it hissed. "What made you come down here—to me?"

I didn't blink.

The blue in my eyes dimmed.

Turned darker.

Colder.

Void.

"You hurt what's mine."

I took another step forward, shadows dragging beneath my feet like they feared being left behind.

"You hurt my Celia."

The chamber temperature plummeted.

"And you thought you'd be alive to see what comes next?"

It snapped—lashing forward at impossible speed. A blink later, its clawed hand was around my throat—talons pressing against my jugular, just shy of breaking the skin.

Silence.

Then—

It jumped back.

Stumbled back like it had touched fire. Like it had seen death.

"WHAT... WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?!"

Its shriek echoed across the ruins. The surviving grotesques froze. Even the shadows recoiled.

I didn't move.

Just slowly turned my head toward it.

And my eyes—those void-lit things—locked onto it.

"I know," I said calmly, "you're not the Swarm Tyrant."

It froze.

I took a breath and stepped into the truth.

"You're a copy. A fake. A replicate built to buy time."

"I knew from the beginning you weren't the real Swarm Tyrant."

"You talk too much about being a disaster."

"Your hesitation. Your regeneration lag. Your aura—it lacked origin. You're just a cheap replica."

"...Then why—why did it feel like my body was being torn apart when I touched your neck?" It asked.

"I showed you your future."

"I knew exactly how this would play out."

"Because I'm the one who planned it." I said.

"That's impossible! My lord sees the future! He knew I'd win—!" It tried to speak...

"I rewrote that future." I said.

clang

...

"You're tonight's firework."

Its body froze.

Not out of pride.

But raw, ancestral fear.

Something ancient in its bones shrieked as my sword clattered from the ceiling—still glowing faintly with the sigil I etched into its steel hours before.

The thing stumbled back, trembling, not even bothering to reply. The authority in my voice overrode whatever programming it had. All that pride it wore like armor? Gone. Shattered.

Its head twitched upward.

And then—

CRACK.

Its claws ripped through the ceiling, carving a ragged hole to the sky, frantic, desperate to escape its own hive.

The grotesques lining the chamber? They didn't even breathe. They wouldn't move.

I sighed.

Then muttered:

"Void. Obey me."

The mark on my palm flared—black fractals etching into the air.

"1507 / 1504. Seals unlocked."

The Void didn't speak aloud. It never had to.

It knew me.

I smirked.

Behind me, a wing tore into existence—slick, pitch-black, folding out like a rift had opened from my spine. A pulse of pressure rolled off my body like a heartbeat of death.

I stepped once—And vanished.

Blade in hand, I shot through the tunnel it carved upward, cutting through stone and darkness like a god reclaiming his throne.

The sky was beautiful tonight.

A soft, star-lit velvet curtain—untainted, quiet... Almost ironic, considering what was about to paint it red.

The thing was flying—well, trying.

Its broken wings snapped and reformed, flapping violently against the wind.

Fleeing.

Not because it was weak.

But because it was afraid.

Up here, high above the hive—Above Celia, above Lucas, above the skies of Rinascita—There were no walls.

[Swarm Tyrant's Perspective – Fragmented Thoughtstream]

I'm more than a replica.

I am evolution.

I've surpassed the original.

I survived him. I outlived the last Tyrant.

I—

Why does the wind feel like my end is near?

Why can't I stop shaking?

Why can I still hear his heartbeat?

[Kaiser – First Person]

It burst upward with everything it had, clawing at the stars. Black light crackled behind it like thunder with no sound—raw energy distorting the wind.

Cute.

I launched after it.

Faster than my own breath.

A single beat of my void-wing and I was there, ahead of it.

It blinked—Too slow.

I twisted mid-air and slammed the hilt of my sword into its stomach. Flesh folded inward like cheap metal, the blow cracking through its armor as we spun in the air.

CLANG

It roared.

Too late.

I vanished.

I reappeared behind it—sliced off one wing clean.

Blood exploded in a crescent arc.

The sky caught fire.

My blade glowed pale blue, my body black, streaking through the sky like two dueling comets.

Spirals of raw power painted the stars like calligraphy.

One mistake and you'd think it was a fireworks show.

I didn't let up.

Not this time.

Not when it hurt her....

"Enjoying it?" I muttered mid-strike, "This is your last flight."

I slammed a kick into its ribs—five broke.

As it coughed blood mid-air, I caught its arm and ripped it straight off.

It screamed.

I wasn't even looking at it anymore.

BOOM—BOOM—CRACK

We collided again and again, mid-sky. Each hit tore the clouds open. Its body kept trying to regenerate, but I outpaced it.

Every time it healed, I shattered it again.

My sword spun in my hand, slicing through bone like melted butter.

A wing.

A leg.

A chunk of torso.

Gone.

Still, I didn't kill it.

Not yet.

"You're scared."

"You should be."

Its black blood misted the stars like ash, spiraling down like cursed snowfall.

It kept trying to speak—but no words came.

Just panic.

It wasn't the Tyrant. It was a wannabe.

And I was the night that devoured it.

I slowed mid-air. Just hovering.

Watching it tremble, half a body and a pulse, somehow still flying.

The sky lit blue from my blade—its magic rippling through the wind.

My hair drifted gently in the pressure. My heartbeat calm.

"Go on," I said softly.

The sky burned.

Blue and black streaks danced in the heavens like gods clashing over fate itself.

The clouds had split long ago—now, they just hung in pieces, trembling from the shockwaves.

Blood rained down—not red, but violet, green, and black. Each drop shimmered with an unnatural sheen, like oil over water. It sizzled when it touched rooftops, sending steam spiraling upward.

For everyone on the ground... it was chaos.

And awe.

Levi, wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, leaned on a cracked wall, panting. He looked like he'd been pulled out of hell and shoved back into it.

But even half-conscious, he raised his head.

His one working eye widened.

"...what... is that?"

He wasn't sure if it was the fever, or if the sky was actually spiraling.

"Blue and black," he whispered, almost reverently. "Someone's still fighting."

Beside him, Zain, shielded his eyes as a flash of light sparked overhead—followed by what could only be described as an explosion of color.

It wasn't just fire.

"...Is that the swarm tyrant?" Zain muttered. "Is it losing...?"

He didn't realize he'd stopped breathing.

Across the broken skyline, standing atop the fractured remains of a rooftop, Alina stood with her arm wrapped around her waist. One eye was hidden beneath clean white bandages; the other watched the sky in silence.

She didn't flinch when a droplet of black blood landed beside her foot and hissed into the stone.

"...Someone capable of fighting it alone."

Her sword remained sheathed.

She wouldn't interfere. Couldn't.

"...Impossible..."

Her voice was calm, almost detached, but inside... her heart thudded loudly.

From the mouth of the collapsed cave, Navina emerged slowly, hearing loud noises outside.

She looked up.

And froze.

The sky was alive.

She saw it clearly—The blue light moving in perfect, elegant spirals.

It circled the black, like a predator toying with prey.

Each clash between them made the air rumble and the ground twitch.

Navina's eyes widened as fluids sprayed across the stars—each strike from the blue comet tearing layers from the darker one, sending a symphony of color across the sky.

"...He wasn't wrong," she whispered, voice trembling.

A pause.

"...He's the devil."

[Perspective: Kaiser – In the Sky]

I could've ended it.

I should've.

But this one didn't deserve mercy.

A lesson, etched into pain.

I stopped dodging its attacks. Let it come close. Let it strike.

Then—I tore off its limbs, again.

Again.

Each time it regenerated, I welcomed it back with a fresh greeting—a sword through its wing joint, a dagger twisting through its rib, a palm strike that shattered its mandibles and knocked half its teeth loose into the sky.

It howled. And it begged.

I didn't speak.

My silence was the sharpest thing I wielded.

Its leg reformed. I sliced it at the knee.

Its wing grew back. I froze it and shattered it with a roundhouse.

Its claw stretched toward my throat again.

I cut off the entire arm, this time leaving it spiraling downward in pieces.

And still—It kept healing.

Still—I kept breaking it.

"It's time," I muttered, my voice low, calm.

I stabbed my sword into its chest—again—and held it there as we both plummeted.

It screeched, trying to rip me off. I kned it in the gut, twisted behind its back, and dragged the blade sideways.

Black ichor sprayed in a perfect arc.

I caught its head mid-flight.

And I descended.

We ripped through the clouds like a meteor, my hand still gripping its skull—black ichor trailing behind like a cursed comet.

The ground cracked first.

Then shattered.

Then exploded.

I drove it face-first into the earth with enough force to collapse what remained of the hive, and as the dust swirled like a burial shroud, I mounted its twitching back, grabbed its head again, and—

CRACK.

One punch.

Its armored mask caved in like brittle glass.

"You already took away what made me happy."

CRACK.

Another.

The cracks spread across its skull, leaking iridescent gore.

"You took away my Elfie."

CRACK.

The ground shook this time.

"And now you think you can take her from me?"

I reeled my fist back, the air rippling around it.

Its bones tried to reform beneath my knees.

BOOM.

The punch snapped its jaw entirely.

"I won't allow that."

Its limbs twitched, desperate. Its mouth split open into a second maw—screaming without a voice.

"You think the Cult of Nemesis is strong enough to take over Celestine?"

I slammed my fist down again.

The crater deepened. Earth fissured outward like spiderwebs.

"Maybe it was..."

A short silence.

"...if it hadn't made enemies with me."

BOOM.

Its face was no longer recognizable.

Its healing slowed.

"I'll destroy you."

CRACK.

"I'll destroy your whole cult."

My eyes burned black.

Void black.

No reflection. No humanity. Just gravity collapsing inwards.

"She wasn't that strong," I muttered.

My voice trembled—not from fear.

From rage.

CRACK.

"You tortured her."

My fist met the broken skull again. More pieces flew off.

"You did that on purpose."

Another blow. Heavier. My arm ached from the weight of it.

"You made her cry."

CRACK.

"I'll end this."

BOOM.

The void answered me.

Fragments of my body glowed pitch black—void shards peeling off like cosmic dust.

A black glow enveloped my fist.

"I won't lose again."

I struck it.

The earth heaved.

A quake erupted beneath us, sending shockwaves miles outward.

It was regenerating too slow now.

Its face was nothing but a cavity of pulp and shattered nerves. Its limbs wouldn't move. Its consciousness clung to the bare minimum.

"You're done," I whispered, standing slowly.

"You don't get a second chance."

The thing coughed blood.

I stared down with void-filled eyes, a living abyss.

"Your story ends here."

From my gaze alone, the void stirred.

The tendrils of oblivion slithered forward from behind me, curling like hungry shadows, wrapping around what was left of it.

It didn't scream. It couldn't.

Not anymore.

The void devoured it whole, pulling it beneath the earth—dragging it down into an endless fall beneath time, beneath space.

Into the abyss where no soul returns.

And it fell.

Forever.

The ground was still warm beneath my boots. Bits of shattered bone, shattered will, and melted grotesque tissue sizzled under the weight of my silence. I stood alone inside the crater I made, surrounded by silence that didn't dare speak.

Above me, the stars were scattered across the sky like old memories—quiet, watching, indifferent.

I exhaled, slowly, letting my shoulders drop. My fingers loosened from the hilt of my blade. It had already done enough talking tonight.

I pulled the sword behind me and slid it into its place across my back. It clicked in—clean, familiar.

With one hand, I brushed off the dust from my overcoat, slowly straightening it, smoothing the wrinkles near the shoulder.

That's better.

No blood, no dents. Just me. Presentable again.

I looked up at the night. Still intact.

"I've interfered enough," I muttered under my breath, adjusting the collar.

"1507 / 1507"

Seals Locked.

The air was cold now, not from the void—just from the aftermath. Like the world itself didn't know how to breathe again.

"It's now their turn to change what's to come."

Because I knew what was crawling toward this place.

The real one.

The true Swarm Tyrant.

Not a fake. Not a copy.

It wouldn't be a test this time. It would be a reckoning.

This... this was their war now. Theirs to survive, or to be written off as another nameless tragedy.

Celia. Lucas.

You two will decide whether a new beginning is formed... or the story ends.

I started walking, one step at a time. My back to the crater. My shadow stretched behind me, long and fading into the broken dirt. The stars above didn't change, but they felt heavier now.

With each step, I disappeared from the area—not in speed, not in magic. Just in silence.

Because I was no longer needed.

Not for this Chapter.

Not for what comes next.

I didn't look back.

There was no point.

They'll either rise without me—or fall never knowing what kept them alive this long.

And I was fine with either.

[Chapter Ends]

Chapter 78: Distorted Bonds

[LUCAS – First Person POV]

Notification

「Wake up, monkey.」

That was the first thing I heard after slipping out of what I thought was eternal darkness. Not a majestic "you've survived," not a glorious "arise, main character," but that.

"...ugh, what the hell is this now?"

I groaned, blinking my eyes open into nothing but pitch black.

"Hey System, turn on artificial bulb or something. Light magic. I don't care, just light."

「No. Die in the dark, I guess.」

Ugh. Useless ahhh ai system.

I tried to sit up, only for my body to scream like I was hit by a truck. Oh right. That walking exoskeleton freak—Swarm Tyrant. Last thing I remember is catching its slam to my face.

"System... Full Restoration. Please."

「Using Level-Up Bonus: Restoration Activated. You're welcome, lightbulb.」

A glow pulsed in my chest. It wasn't warm, not even comforting. Just that crisp chill you feel right before getting serious. The pain vanished, my body tingled with fresh mana rushing through my circuits.

I let out a breath, pushed myself up, and noticed a figure beside me.

Celia.

Unconscious, still breathing, but bruised like hell. Her hair clung to her cheek with dried blood, and for once, she didn't look murderous.

"...At least she is still alive."

And then the most logical question hit me: how did we end up here?

"System. Status report."

「 After getting folded like a paper crane, your vitals dropped into the red. I shut down your body to protect your brain. You're welcome again. 」

"Okay, yeah, fair. But... how did we get here? Last thing I remember was the Tyrant making salsa out of my spine."

「 Unknown individual intervened. Saved both your lives. 」

That made me freeze.

"Who?"

There was a pause.

「 Entering Analysis Mode. Please wait while I rearrange my data. 」

Riiight. Guess while he's doing that, I should check my progress.

"Status."

Status Menu

Name: Lucas

Class: Mage

Level: 11

Age: 15

Attributes – 3 New

Strength: 5

Agility: 8

Endurance: 6

Perception: 7 → 10

Intelligence: 13

Mana: 11

Divine Creation: 4

Skills

Light-Elemental Magic

Mana Control (Lv. 4)

Divine Protection of Chaos

Divine Protection: Adaptive Venom Synthesis

Lightstep: 150% Speed Boost

Visionary Sight: Perfect Dark Vision

Notes

HP: 500/500

MP: 700/700

Perception buffed. Good. Visionary Sight? Even better. That's gonna be useful down here.

I tapped into the skill.

Instantly, the world shifted. What was once darkness now bloomed into deep greys and electric outlines. The walls were chiseled flesh—this was no ordinary cavern. This was a grotesque hive.

And we were at its lowest level.

The bottom of the abyss. Lucky us.

I stood fully upright, rolling my shoulders. My bones cracked, not from pain—just from tension. My fists clenched. Mana surged behind my ribs like a second heartbeat.

"System. You done?"

A sound pinged in my head.

「 Analysis Complete. 」

I raised an eyebrow.

"Well?"

「 Based on energy trace patterns, force signature left on your shoulder, and residual healing potion composition found on Celia's lips... I have no idea who saved you. 」

"...You're kidding."

「 Nope. The person somehow hid his heartbeat, magical presence and even his appearance behind a magical barrier. 」

I glanced down at Celia again. The faint glint of the healing potion still shimmered on her lips.

Her skin wasn't as pale now, and her breathing had stabilized. Whoever it was—didn't just save us. They made sure we'd live.

That kind of precision? That wasn't mercy.

That was intent.

I let out a breath. "Then how'd they even manage to save us at all?"

「 That's the thing. My data's incomplete. I was focused on keeping you alive. That individual... stayed entirely outside of detection range. 」

Not even my system could track them. Not even a flicker of aura or mana left behind.

"Okay... but—" I rubbed the side of my temple, the real question bubbling up like a delayed panic attack. "How the hell did that person survive the Swarm Tyrant?"

System paused.

「 An excellent question. Based on your last memories before blackout, and my current surroundings, I have a hypothesis. 」

I straightened, cautiously interested.

「 The individual either fought off the Swarm Tyrant... or killed it. 」

Silence.

"...That's it? That's the answer?"

「 Statistically it's a 50/50, Lucas. You want me to lie to you? 」

My eyes darted around the cavern. Blackened walls were scorched and cracked, the earth still hummed with aftershocks. There were burn marks... claw trails... and ruptures in the stone that looked like someone dropped a god from orbit.

"What... kind of person just shows up in a grotesque hive and takes out a Swarm Tyrant—alone?"

I wasn't even sure I believed it myself.

「 That's what I'm trying to figure out. But... if my hypothesis is correct... 」

The system's tone shifted, slightly colder.

「 Then the person who saved you and Celia isn't just powerful. They're an anomaly. A variable outside of any calculated world trajectory. 」

I went quiet.

For the first time since I got dropped into this messed up world, I wasn't sure what scared me more—the monsters outside...

...or the man who could tear them apart without leaving a name behind.

"...Right. Keep digging. I want a name. A sign. Anything."

「 Copy that. Commencing silent research scan across previous mana pulse trails... Don't die while I'm doing it. Wouldn't be worth the power usage. 」

I let out a breath, pulled my cloak tighter around me, and looked up at the hollowed-out cavern roof above.

Whoever you are...

You didn't just save us. You wanted us to be at the deepest layer.

「 I couldn't identify the individual, but I've retrieved a partial dataset based on trace force dynamics and object displacement. Height approximately 186 centimeters, shoulder width 49.3 centimeters, lean muscle distribution—based on crater force patterns—optimal for high-speed closed-quarter combat. 97% probability... the individual is male. 」

"...You're telling me you don't know who he is, but you know his damn shoulder width?"

「 Precision matters, monkey. 」

I crossed my arms, staring at the cave's uneven walls like they held answers. "Fine. So how the hell did he fight off the grotesques? And the Swarm Tyrant? Alone?"

「 I've analyzed the residual blood spatters, mana fracturing in the air, and biological remnants. All signs point to one thing: he fought them in close-quarters... with either bare hands or twin daggers. 」

I blinked. "Daggers?"

I remembered using my own light blades during the Rinascita ambush.

"Daggers didn't work on them. I know. I tried."

「 Correct. It didn't work when you used your light daggers, but somehow worked for him. 」

"System..."

「 Calm down, I was complimenting you. 」

There was a short silence. Then:

「 I've been digging deeper. And now I may have the answer. A biological one. 」

"...Go on."

「 The grotesques evolved. That's obvious. They developed resistance to elemental magic, and thickened armor specifically around vital clusters: spinal nerves, brain-stem,

core heart tissue. Traditional weapons and standard magical elements are mostly ineffective now. 」

"And yet," I muttered, looking around the dead hive, "he killed them."

「 Yes. That's where it gets... interesting. 」

The tone shifted. More clinical.

「 Every living problem is a cellular one. The man must've known that. I believe he captured a grotesque before this engagement—likely a base-level one—and studied it. Its cell structure. DNA replication. Adaptive responses. 」

"...What the hell is that supposed to help with?"

「 Evolution. 」

I stayed quiet.

「 Evolution doesn't create something from nothing. Every grotesque—no matter how advanced—originated from a common ancestral cell. That primitive cell, the originator, still exists within every evolved grotesque. It's just buried. Hidden. Dormant, maybe. But always there. 」

"So... what does that mean?"

「 It means he didn't fight them with power. He fought them with precision. 」

I felt my mouth dry out.

「 The grotesques don't use protein-based enzymes for biological catalysis like other organisms. Instead, their entire body functions are dependent on a rare crystalline lattice—a kind of molecular catalyst—embedded within a liquid cytoskeletal structure. 」

"...A crystal?"

「 A molecular organelle. An inorganic intelligence. It acts as both the replicator and the stabilizer of their body's cellular processes. You destroy the crystal—everything collapses. Think of it like a CPU running a body-wide machine. The man... must've found a way to target that. 」

I was silent. Trying to picture it.

「 From the chemical burns on the blades found near the exit... I'd say he infused his daggers with a negating field—either magical or biochemical—that directly disrupted

that crystalline catalyst. In other words, he didn't just kill the grotesques. He killed the very thing keeping them alive. 」

"...Wow," I said.

「 At best guess... he quenched the metal not in water, but in distilled grotesque blood, mixed with mana-infused quartz powder calibrated to resonate with the frequency of their core crystal—the Null Catalyst. 」

My lips parted. "...You're saying he forged monster-killing daggers using grotesque blood and magic rock dust?"

「 More than that. He then used his own blood as the binding agent. Etched the grotesques' DNA sequence—base pair by base pair—into the blade's inner lattice. Not symbolically. Literally. A reverse helix, structurally mirrored to their genome. An antigen. A virus. A rejection of their existence. 」

I stood there stunned.

「 Most likely, he enhanced the edge with wind reinforcement and earth-aligned sharpening cores. That bypassed their natural armor plating and anatomical protections. Every part of that weapon was built to deny them. 」

"So how did it work?" I muttered.

「 Whenever the blade made contact... it did this: 」

- 「 1. Disabled grotesque molecular function—forced cellular collapse.
2. Bypassed outer armor, ignoring physical and elemental resistances.
3. Struck directly at their fundamental life catalyst. 」

「 That's how 'Catalyst Reversers' were born. Weapons that unmake grotesques. Even their final forms. 」

I didn't say anything.

I couldn't.

This guy wasn't just swinging shiny blades. He reverse-engineered extinction.

「 There's more. I still don't understand how he dissected a grotesque without a lab, without gene-scanners, cryo tools, or even basic biogear. Hell, those don't even exist in this world. 」

I took a deep breath.

That's when the reality started to sink in.

This world didn't have microscopes. Didn't even have a standard periodic table. We were barely out of enchanted bronze-age medicine.

He did all that here?

Without a system?

Without Earth-born knowledge like me?

He did all of that... while being native.

I ran a hand through my hair. "System... is it possible for me to infuse a version of that into my light magic? So I can fight grotesques like that?"

「 Already working on it. But don't hold your breath. This process is extremely complex—might take hour or two. You're dealing with alien biology, magic resonance tuning, and custom DNA inversion layering. 」

"Right... fair. Not exactly beginner spellbook material."

Still.

It was possible.

And that meant something.

That meant I could reach him one day.

Whoever that guy was—he wasn't just some strong fighter. He broke the grotesques at their root. He unlocked biochemistry without a glossary. He mapped a monster genome by hand. He carved anti-life weapons using living cells as data.

All without a single system line of code.

I wouldn't want him as an enemy... hell no. But something about him—it wasn't fear.

It was a spark.

A flare in my chest.

Not fear.

Ambition.

"...Just watch. I'll level up. I'll figure this out. I'll catch up."

A soft breath escaped beside me. I turned.

Celia stirred.

Her fingers twitched slightly, her breathing shifting from shallow to slow and steady.

She was waking up.

"...Finally," I muttered.

The next part was about to begin.

And this time... I wouldn't be the weak link.

Celia stirred again, and this time, her eyes fluttered open.

I watched silently as her gaze flickered, confused, scanning the shadows. Then she sat up with a soft wince, brushing her fingers across her shoulder—her skin still bearing faint marks, now mostly healed.

She looked at me. Still dazed, but sharp. Alert.

"You're awake," I said.

"...What happened?" she asked, her voice rough. Her eyes narrowed slightly, not out of weakness, but calculation. Like she was already piecing together the situation in her head.

"We're still in the grotesque hive," I replied. "Deepest layer, from what I can tell."

Her lips parted as if to respond, but she didn't. Her attention shifted again—scanning. Judging. She didn't trust her surroundings. Or me, yet.

I respected that.

"You were unconscious," I added. "So was I. Pretty sure we both should've been dead."

Her expression didn't shift, but her hands subtly flexed—feeling her limbs. Gauging her condition. No wasted movements. She was precise like that.

"I checked," I continued. "Someone saved us. He gave you a healing potion. Strong one, too—your wounds are almost gone."

That got her attention.

She frowned, fingers brushing her chest—her heart.

"...I don't remember," she murmured. "The last thing I saw was the swarm tyrant about to—" Her voice broke off for a second. "After that... nothing."

"You didn't see who it was?"

She shook her head slowly. "I... I lost consciousness before anyone appeared. I didn't hear a voice. I didn't feel mana. But..."

Her fingers pressed lightly over her heart.

"But?" I asked.

"I felt something," she whispered. "Like I was being held. Not roughly. Gently. Carefully. And... there was warmth."

I raised a brow. "So, mystery man is strong and emotionally available. Lucky us."

She gave me a sideways glance. "You joke too much."

"I bleed sarcasm when I'm stressed."

A pause.

Then I asked, "Do you know him?"

She was quiet. Too quiet. The silence stretched a second longer than comfort allowed.

Then she finally said, "No. I don't think so." But her hand was still over her chest.

"...But?"

"...It felt familiar," she admitted, almost reluctantly. "But not something I can remember. Just something my body... recognized."

I didn't press her. That look in her eyes—it wasn't fake. But it was complicated.

There was more. She just didn't know how to say it. Or maybe didn't trust herself enough to.

"Whoever it was," I said, "he didn't just fight off the grotesques. I think he might've taken out the entire swarm."

She blinked. "...Alone?"

"Yep."

"That's not possible."

"I know..."

"..."

"Yeah. I know. Makes me feel underqualified just standing here."

Celia didn't laugh. She just stared down at the cracked earth.

Then she stood.

"...We're in danger," she said.

"Duh."

"No, I mean real danger. If he saved us... then he was strong enough to go after the swarm tyrant. And that means..."

"...The real one might still be alive."

We locked eyes.

"...We need to move," she said.

I nodded. "Together?"

She tilted her head slightly, giving me that suspicious look again. "...I don't trust you."

"Fair."

"But I'll work with you. Just don't slow me down."

"Same to you."

She rolled her shoulder once, stretching, then reached into her dress, pulling out one of her thorn-chains and snapping it back into combat-ready form.

"...You good?" I asked.

"No."

I grinned. "Cool. Let's get out of here before another grotesque evolves."

Her eyes narrowed. "Lucas."

"...Yeah?"

"Stay close."

A flicker of something crossed her face—seriousness, or maybe fear—but it vanished as quickly as it came.

"I don't want to lose another person I've fought beside."

My grin faded.

"...You won't."

We turned, and together, we stepped into the deeper tunnels.

The real escape began now.

I cracked my neck once and checked my mana pulse. Still flowing steady. Celia and I had made it deeper into the tunnel systems—no grotesques yet, but that was the calm before the screamstorm. We both knew it.

「 Update complete. Analysis results ready. You finally want to stop being useless? 」

"Wow. Sweet talk me more, system."

「 Listen, peasant. Your Light Magic has now been retrofitted to attack grotesques biologically. 」

Wait, what?

"Run that back."

「 I reverse-calculated the grotesque catalyst structure and integrated it into your Light spells. They now target molecular lattice structures inside their cytoskeleton, not their

surface defense. Translation: your magic will now bypass their armor and their magic resistance. Congrats. You're not totally worthless anymore. 」

...Damn. That's actually kind of fire.

Celia was walking beside me, sharp-eyed. I figured now was the time to flex a little.

I looked over at her.

"They evolved."

She raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"The grotesques. You noticed it too, right? Their resistance, their armor—it's not just physical anymore. Their structure mutated. Magic doesn't touch 'em. Weapons barely scratch them unless you hit that soft spot under the neck joint."

Celia nodded slowly. "I've been adjusting my aim. But even then... they heal too quickly."

"Yeah, well. That's because their entire biology doesn't run on normal life mechanics anymore. They don't even use protein-based enzymes. They're running on a sort of catalytic crystal lattice inside a liquid-matrix skeleton."

Celia blinked. "Wait, what?"

"They're not evolving like animals. More like corrupted algorithms. The base cell—the ancestral cell—is still there. Just hidden inside layers of mutated code. That's the weak point."

She stared at me for a moment, genuinely impressed. "How do you know all that?"

Oh no.

「 Say it, copy-paster. Say it's all your genius. I dare you. 」

"...I read a lot."

「 Bro just ctrl + v'd my entire explanation like it was his science project. 」

Celia smirked. "That's... actually brilliant."

She pulled one of her chain bracelets free, eyes narrowing as she examined the earth-element veins glowing within it.

She muttered a few incantations under her breath, and I watched the color of the enchantment flicker slightly—just a tiny shift in frequency, but I noticed it.

Then she swung the chain and shattered a nearby grotesque parasite nest. The reaction? Sharp. The magic sizzled right through it.

「 ...What the hell? 」

"What?" I whispered.

「 She just weakened her earth enchantments using elemental decay theory, then artificially recreated a flawed version of the catalyst effect you're using. 60% efficiency. 」

"Wait—seriously?"

「 Yeah. Yours is about 75% effective. Hers is 60. 」

"That's insane."

Celia stood up straight, eyes flicking back to me. "That was experimental. Not sure if I got the ratio right, but..."

"You got it."

She blinked. "You understood it?"

"Of course," I said with a little grin. "I mean, molecular catalysts, reverse-helix replication, elemental frequency conversion—it's not that hard."

「 Bro. You said 'wait, what?' like 10 minutes ago. 」

"Sheesh," I whispered under my breath. "Let me have this."

「 Fine. But let the record show you are riding my calculations. 」

"Duly noted."

Celia stepped closer, looking at her chain again. "Do you think the man who saved us used the same method?"

"Probably."

「 Incorrect. His version was a perfected version. 100% effective catalyst negation. I can't replicate it because he used some unknown herbal components mixed in. I don't have the samples. 」

I looked at Celia. "He used something else. Something we don't have. But it's fine. What we've got will work. Mostly."

She nodded. "For now."

A moment passed. Her expression softened slightly.

"...Lucas."

"Yeah?"

She tilted her head a bit. "How are you this smart?"

"Oh that? Just a little genius," I said with a shrug.

「 ...Says the guy who once asked me how many seconds are in a kilometer. 」

"Shut up."

Celia gave a faint smile, brushing her hair behind her ear. "I'm glad we teamed up."

"...Me too," I said.

She didn't say anything else, but she walked a little closer to me as we moved through the hive. Our pace was steady now.

Silent agreement.

Grotesque screech.

Grotesque collapse.

Grotesque pop—new stain on my boots.

I twirled my hand, light magic rotating between my fingers like it was born there. Beside me, Celia flicked her chain into the skull of the last crawler trying to jump us. It fell back twitching—half of its head missing.

We stood in silence for a second, surrounded by the corpses of another dozen grotesques.

"...Twelve," I said.

"Fourteen," she corrected, wiping blood off her arm.

"Come on, I definitely got—"

She gave me that look.

Fair.

Still, I wasn't going down without a cool line.

"We're making this look way too easy."

「 That's because they're brain-dead parasites and you're finally using the weapon I upgraded for you. 」

"Still counts," I muttered under my breath, cracking my neck.

We moved fast through the deeper tunnel veins, a blur of two lights—mine, glowing white-gold with infused molecular collapse, and hers, earthen green and laced with decay-chained resonance. Honestly, it looked good. Deadly good.

At one point, I jumped off a stalactite mid-air and launched a light burst straight through a grotesque's skull.

Celia followed up—her chain flying past me, wrapping around a grotesque's arms and crushing it inward.

We shared a look mid-fight.

She actually nodded.

Okay, respect.

It became a rhythm.

I'd tag three in a flash— pop-pop-zap. She'd clean the stragglers with her chain whirling in a deadly spiral. She'd bind one, I'd finish it. I'd blind them, she'd execute.

We started syncing.

"You're not bad," she said at one point, flipping a grotesque over her shoulder like it was made of feathers.

I blasted it mid-air before it hit the ground.

"Neither are you," I said casually. "For a walking death trap."

She snorted. "I'll take that as a compliment."

「 Wow. Look at that. Two psychopaths bonding over joint murder. How romantic. 」

"Don't ruin it."

We kept going—layer by layer, room by room. I lost count of how many grotesques we tore through. Probably fifty. Maybe a hundred.

It was brutal.

And it was clean.

At some point, Celia's breathing evened out. The usual cold edge in her voice... softened.

"Lucas," she said after a while. "You don't feel like someone from this world."

"...What makes you say that?"

"The way you fight. The way you speak. You always feel... disconnected. Like you're used to being alone."

"Guess we've got that in common."

She didn't argue.

And that meant a lot.

「 Would you like me to log this emotional breakthrough into your journal? Title: She Spoke to Me Like a Person 」

"Shut. Up."

We reached a circular hollow chamber, tucked between two collapsed stone bridges and covered in moss. Dead grotesques still surrounded us in a ring.

It was—surprisingly—quiet here.

Celia scanned the room with her chain spiraling slowly at her side. "This might be the best we'll get."

I nodded, brushing the dust off my cloak. "We camp here. No point pushing up blind."

She crouched near the corner, letting her chain retract into her gauntlet. Her expression was tired but calm.

I sat near her, letting my light pulses dim down to conserve energy.

"...We made a pretty good team, huh?" I said.

Celia didn't answer immediately.

But after a beat, she looked at me and nodded.

"Yeah. We did."

「 Oh my god. Is this trust? Character development? Someone get the camera. 」

I just smirked, leaning back against the stone.

Campfire would've been nice.

But we were alive.

And more than that...

We were ready.

From the corner of my eye, I saw her reach beneath her dress and pull something out—carefully wrapped in old parchment.

"What's that?" I asked, raising a brow.

Celia didn't answer immediately. Her movements slowed, more delicate. She peeled the wrapping back like it was sacred. Inside, nestled in a small worn box... was a red flower.

Her lips curled, just a bit.

The first real smile I'd seen from her.

My system immediately pinged.

「 Her heartbeat stabilized. That flower just mentally healed her more than your dumb face ever could. 」

...Rude.

There was a small folded paper tucked underneath the flower. Faint dots and dashes scratched into its surface.

"What's that?" I asked, leaning forward.

She gently lifted the flower to her nose, closing her eyes. "It's... nothing. Just something someone gave me once."

The way she said it, though. That pause.

Someone. "Ka—"

She caught herself.

Celia placed the flower in her lap, then picked up the note. "What does this say?"

I looked at the paper. I blinked. Then blinked again.

"...What the hell is this?"

「 That's morse code. You Neanderthal. 」

Morse code. Of course it is. Because normal people just pass cryptic death notes written in dots and dashes, right?

I handed the paper closer to my face and squinted.

It looked like:

.-- .-- .- .- .- / -.- .- .-- / -- .- / .. - / -- .. - .- / .- .- .- / -.. --- - .---- - / -- .- .- .- / .. - /
..- .-- / .- -.- .- .. -

I handed it to the system. "Alright genius. Decode."

「 Running code... ..error. Re-analyzing. ...Error. Wow. This guy layered the code. Who does that with Morse? Hold on. Multiplexing constellations... cross-referencing historic star charts... cross-mapping with temporal shift... recalculating for poetic syntax... 」

"...Bro are you decoding a love letter or summoning a demon?"

「 Quiet. Final result: 'Look up at the sky. The answer will be there. Follow the stars. Leave this place two days from now. Return to Rinascita. Good luck, Lucas. Celia.' 」

"...It knows my name."

I felt my mouth go dry.

Celia tilted her head. "Did you figure it out?"

System screamed in my head like a siren.

「 DO NOT SAY IT WAS DECODED. 」

I coughed. "Nah. Just a bunch of random dots."

She blinked, disappointed. "Oh."

She gently placed the flower in her hair.

That quiet moment... felt heavier than it should've.

「 That flower is real. The species doesn't even bloom in grotesque terrain. It must've been picked days ago. Carried. Protected. That man... knew her. Knew you. And somehow—he knew you'd be able to decode it. 」

I glanced down at the note again, lips tight.

"Who is this guy?" I muttered.

「 Not someone average. That code? Only someone who understands language structure, astronomy, and psychological timing could embed a time-locked instruction like that. 」

Yeah. No big deal. Just a god-tier polymath saving our lives and leaving cryptic notes while I'm over here trying to remember which spell slot Lightstep was in.

I gave up and collapsed backward onto the cold stone floor.

"We camp here tonight," I said, eyes closed.

Celia nodded silently, walking a bit away and leaning against the wall, her chain wrapped around her wrist. The flower still sat in her hair, catching the moonlight that bled through the cracks above.

I opened my status screen.

Status Menu:

Name: Lucas

Level: 11 → 15

HP: 500/500

MP: 700/700

Lightstep: Unlocked Speed II

Catalyst Infusion Sync Rate: 75%

Current Objective: Survive.

Smirked.

Level 20?

Yeah. I'll be there soon.

Just watch me.

In the dim silence of a shadowed chamber, the door creaked open. A towering figure stepped through—the Silent Executioner. Its expression, though often unreadable, held the faint trace of disappointment. Wordless, it advanced across the black marble floor, then dropped to one knee before the man seated upon the throne-like chair.

The master said nothing. He merely raised a hand, fingers motioning subtly for the creature to lift its head and speak.

"The raid," the Silent Executioner began, voice low and mechanical, "with the replicated Swarm Tyrant... descended into chaos."

The master's gaze did not waver. "Explain."

"The duplicate began flawlessly. It eliminated every Sword Saint in the perimeter. Even captured the white-haired demon girl and the boy said to be Heaven-sent."

A pause.

"Then what," the master asked, "turned success into failure?"

The Executioner hesitated. Its tone shifted, uncertain. "A single man appeared. He eradicated the grotesques. Alone. Then infiltrated the hive... and killed the duplicate."

Still, the master's expression remained unreadable—stoic, carved in stone. Yet his fingers tightened slightly against the armrest as he processed the words.

"One man changed the outcome entirely?" he asked, his voice calm, yet edged with something colder beneath.

"Yes, master," the Executioner replied. "What are your orders?"

The master reached to his side and retrieved an aged, black-bound notebook. Its pages were filled with writing that shifted constantly—ink bending into new futures. As he opened it, the symbols twisted again, refreshing as if defying interpretation.

The Executioner tilted its head. "Is something wrong...?"

The master's eyes narrowed faintly. "It's been like this for some time now," he murmured. "Someone is tampering with reality—rewriting the threads of fate and time itself. A hand that misdirects and deceives, even my foresight cannot see clearly."

The Executioner's voice dropped. "Who could do such a thing?"

"A mind that understands the foundations of existence," the master replied. "Someone capable of undermining fate... of directly challenging my authority over it."

He closed the notebook with a firm snap, and pointed.

"Prepare the original Swarm Tyrant. Reconstruct its genome. Strip away its limits. I want it to become the supreme disaster."

"But master..." the Executioner hesitated, "...doing so will destroy the last human cells within him."

The master's glare was swift—sharp as a blade. The Executioner immediately lowered its gaze.

"...He is no longer human. I apologize master Azrion," it said. "The Swarm Tyrant will be ready, modified and deployed within two days."

With that, the creature turned and left the chamber, leaving the master alone, seated in thought—his eyes fixed on the ever-changing pages of a future no longer entirely his to command.

The room falls still once more, cloaked in silence deeper than shadow.

The master sat unmoving, the throne beneath him cold and unyielding. Yet within, his thoughts churned—quietly, meticulously—like a labyrinth of ever-tightening knots.

One man...

The words echoed, not in surprise, but in calculation. How could a single anomaly tilt the scale of war so violently? Even chaos has patterns. Even miracles leave residue. But this—this felt like fiction invading structure.

His fingers brushed against the spine of his diary, the book of futures, as if seeking reassurance. But the pages... they no longer obeyed. They shimmered, trembled, refreshed—as if uncertain whether tomorrow even existed.

Someone is playing.

Not just resisting fate... but distorting it. Slipping through the lattice of causality like a ghost of rewritten history.

He exhaled softly through his nose, barely audible. There was no fear in him, only the pure necessity of comprehension.

Is it one man? Or a convergence of phenomena disguised as men?

He opened the notebook again. Names surfaced, ink etched by fate and now underlined in red deviation:

"Aldric," he murmured.

"Azrael."

"...Arius."

His voice held no emotion—but his thoughts snapped to clarity.

Aldric... the name throbbed louder than the others. He was the first ripple—subtle, but decisive. The man who shouldn't have mattered, and yet rerouted an entire sequence of geopolitical consequence. Every decision he touched bent away from my design.

Azrael, the fracture of logic. A being of sheer calculation—cold, merciless, deliberate. He isn't reacting to war; he's solving it.

Arius, chaos incarnate. No consistent trajectory. His will is a storm—frivolous, manipulative, sharp. He should have self-destructed long ago, yet somehow keeps bending others into his rhythm.

Three names. Three distortions. And of them, Aldric remains the deepest wound to fate itself.

"I suppose tomorrow he'll change Rinascita," he whispered, closing the book.

Aldric was currently in the Asura Empire. The patterns suggested it. Not because the pages told him outright—no, those had stopped doing that long ago. But because the war itself leaned toward him like a flower toward sunlight.

What can one man truly do to change war?

He leaned back into the throne, eyes half-lidded.

Perhaps that question is obsolete now. Perhaps... it was never just one man.

If they were even human, of course.

The thought lingered, not with bitterness, but with curiosity. It was a rare thing for the master to feel. But this... this enemy—whatever they were—was biological, yes. But also theoretical, strategic, spiritual. They wielded reality as a toolkit. Used others as variables. Bent perception to hide intentions.

Who are you, he wondered, that you would stand in my domain of foresight and reshape it like clay?

Not a ruler. Not a God. Something else.

But even so, he thought, eyes flickering with an icy light, I will endure. I will outlast. I will still... persevere.

Because no matter how many threads were cut, twisted, or spliced anew—He was still the one holding the loom.

Timeless Being Vs The String Sewing Puppetmaster.

Chapter 79: Knights Of The Realm

Levi's Perspective:

It's been a few days since we were wiped out in Rinascita.

Yeah. Wiped. Not "beaten." Not "outplayed." Wiped...

I've managed to get most of my injuries patched up. My legs were the real pain. Cracked like brittle glass, but hey—I'm walking now, aren't I? Credit to the healer that pulled off that miracle.

I don't remember their face, just the warmth in their magic and the cold realization that I'd actually live to feel pain again. Lucky me.

Xander and Alina? They're doing better. Lucky bastards got off with fewer wounds and hopped out of the infirmary days before me. I teased them for it, obviously. Told Xander he probably faked his injuries just to sleep all day.

He didn't even argue. Just gave me that lazy smirk of his. Tch.

But Aaron...

Aaron didn't wake up.

Terminally unconscious. That's what they're calling it now. What the hell does that even mean? Sounds like they just slapped a fancy name on we don't know how to fix him.

I heard someone overwhelmed him—no magic trick, no god-tier spell—just raw pain, so intense it fried his nervous system and dumped him into that coma.

I hate that. Not because it happened. But because I wasn't there.

We were sabotaged. Sabotaged and dumped into a war zone designed to kill us.

The rain—we thought it was just weather. No. It was artificial. Debuffed healing.

Messed with our spell formulas, like someone coded in a cheat mid-battle and pressed "nerf party." Our magic didn't work. Healing was slower than a snail. And nobody noticed until it was way too late.

That's why we couldn't recover. Why everyone looked half-dead even before the grotesques showed up.

And then...

Sylvia said a single man—yes, one guy—obliterated the grotesques.

Alone.

I almost laughed when I first heard it. Thought she was still hallucinating from mana poisoning. But she wasn't joking. Her eyes weren't dazed—they were honest.

She saw it.

Said there were traps—hundreds of them—hidden all over the town. Triggered only for grotesques. Lured, cornered, slaughtered. One by one. Painfully.

That wasn't a defense tactic.

That was predation.

I don't understand it. Not one part of it.

It's giving me a headache.

I stood up slowly, muscles still stiff, and walked to the window of this dusty little room I was stuck in. The people outside were walking like the ground might fall apart if they stepped too hard.

The air was still humid, thick with leftover fear. Not grief. Not yet. Just that quiet kind of tension that builds when people know something's coming, but pretend they don't.

I raised my hand, flexed my fingers.

Still shaky. Still recovering.

Still pissed off.

"They're gonna come again..." I muttered. "Of course they are."

It was obvious. You don't break a town like Rinascita and just walk away. Not after setting up war-traps like that. Whoever did it—whoever this 'single man' was—he didn't defend the town.

He claimed it.

And now this place? It's bait.

"Y'know..." I said aloud, to no one, "if I were the bad guy here, I wouldn't come marching in again."

I cracked my knuckles and leaned against the window.

"I'd wait until the defenders relaxed. And then I'd slaughter them during lunch."

Yeah. That's what I'd do.

Still... the fact that one man killed grotesques alone with traps... I mean, I've done some flashy things in my life, sure. But that?

Who is this guy?

A part of me wants to meet him.

Another part wants to punch him in the face just to see if he bleeds.

I chuckled.

"Who the hell are you?" I whispered, looking out at the anxious streets. "And why do I feel like the next time we meet..."

I turned away from the window, grabbing my coat off the chair.

"...you're either going to be my favorite person—or my favorite fight."

After a while, we were all summoned.

A private meeting with Lord Avelric—how noble.

I didn't feel like putting on a shirt, but I had to. Politics and propriety and all that crap. Even when the world's burning, nobility loves their curtains drawn right and their chairs polished.

I limped my way through the cold hallways of the Rinascita estate, faint candlelight flickering along the stone walls like they were whispering old secrets I didn't have time for.

By the time I entered the chamber, Xander and Alina were already seated.

Figures.

Xander was half-slouched, elbow on the table like he was about to take a nap mid-war briefing. Alina sat like a statue. Back straight, eyes forward. That quiet, doll-like poise she always carried. You'd think she wasn't even breathing.

I dropped into the nearest empty seat, wincing slightly. Damn legs still weren't right.

There were two chairs left untouched.

One for Aaron.

The other for Navina.

I glanced at them for a second longer than I meant to. Aaron was still out, and Navina...? She vanished after the war. No one's seen her since. Not even her guildmates. Maybe she ran. Maybe she was taken.

Hope she's okay.

"Thank you all for coming," Avelric's voice rang out, smooth and refined, but carrying this weight of quiet dread underneath.

"I know the wounds of this war still burn... but what I have to say may provide some clarity. Or at least, an unsettling form of peace."

He stood at the far end of the table, robes draping elegantly, blond hair tied back. He looked like someone meant for opera halls, not warzones. But his eyes had seen things.

"Let's skip the pleasantries," I said, crossing my arms. "Why are we here?"

Alina didn't react. Xander yawned like it was too early in the day to talk about death and strategy.

Avelric's eyes fell to the parchment in his hands. "We have confirmed it. The reason Rinascita didn't fall..."

He paused.

"...is because someone laid out over five hundred and sixty traps. Spiked pits, crushing contraptions, net snares rigged with alchemical fire. Ingeniously hidden."

My eyebrow twitched. "Five-sixty? You counted?"

"We did," Avelric nodded. "Every one of them filled with grotesque corpses."

"Okay, sure, but—" Xander cut in lazily, "—why did they fall for them? Grotesques aren't that stupid. Not usually."

"Indeed," Avelric replied, a trace of tension behind his words. "That is the mystery. But the alchemists believe the traps were baited. All of them. With... decaying blood. The smell triggered the grotesques' hunting instincts. Lured them in."

There was a long silence.

My mouth opened slightly. That smell... I do remember it, now that he mentions it. That rotting stink lingering in the air during the siege. I just assumed it was the grotesques themselves.

Avelric continued, voice quieter now. "Weeks ago, there were a series of murders in Rinascita. Civilian disappearances. Bodies never recovered. Until now. Every one of them... was found inside the pits."

I leaned forward slightly. "...You're telling me the person who saved the town... is the same one who was murdering people in it?"

Alina finally spoke. Her voice was calm, but had that cold edge she always carried when her thoughts were too heavy to hide. "He sacrificed a few... to save hundreds."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "I've heard rumors. People have started calling him the Dark Killer, haven't they?"

"Yes," Avelric nodded grimly. "And that name, twisted as it may be... holds truth. These traps weren't spontaneous. They were laid weeks in advance. Before the grotesques arrived. Before we even knew war would reach Rinascita."

Xander sat up a little. That got his attention. "So he predicted the war?"

Avelric looked around the table. "He anticipated everything. Where the grotesques would breach. Where we'd fall back. Where our last stand would be. He predicted our loss. But still ensured our survival."

His voice dropped lower, almost like he hated what he was saying next.

"...He planned our defeat."

There it was again—that weird silence no one wanted to break.

I leaned back in my chair, eyes flicking to the ceiling like maybe the answer was scribbled up there.

He used corpses. Human corpses. As bait. To save all of us.

He predicted the fall. Predicted us. Our decisions. Our positioning.

Every step of the war... played out like he was reading it off a script.

That was the real headache.

Not the guilt.

Not the blood.

Not even the fact that we lived thanks to a serial killer.

It was the fact that someone out there saw it all coming. And not just saw it—they played it. Like we were pieces on their board.

I clenched my jaw.

"Who the hell even thinks like that...?" I muttered.

A monster? A genius? Or something in between?

Doesn't matter.

We had other problems now.

Because if they knew we'd lose once, then maybe...

Lord Avelric adjusted his cuffs, then raised his gaze with a heavier tone than before. "There is more. Miss Sylvia also left us... something else."

That got my attention.

"She delivered to us a special type of weapon," he said. "Claimed it was the only one that can reliably kill grotesques. A sword."

My brow furrowed. "Just... a sword?"

That didn't sit right. Why would she hand over some random blade like it was Excalibur?

Alina broke the silence, calm but direct. "What does the sword do?"

Avelric opened a sealed letter from the table and scanned the contents. "This sword, unlike the ones you are accustomed to, does not support elemental infusion. No flame channeling. No wind blades. No conductivity for magic amplification. Structurally, it lacks any of the combat-optimized modifications you've all trained with—no adaptive hilt, no lightened center of mass for flick techniques. Simply put, it is... inert."

Xander blinked slowly and gave a flat shrug. "So... it's just inferior?"

Alina nodded in quiet agreement. "Then why bring it up?"

Avelric's lips thinned. "We believed the same. All of us. We almost discarded it."

"But Sylvia," he continued, folding the letter with care, "insisted. Vehemently. She requested it be examined thoroughly by our researchers. So we followed through."

Alina sighed quietly. "Why was she so passionate about it...?"

Xander, arms still folded lazily, muttered, "She claimed a single man used it to wipe out all the grotesques, right? Said she didn't know him, though."

I nodded to myself.

She didn't know him.

But I sure as hell knew that story wasn't fake.

Avelric's tone turned colder. Maybe even... disturbed. "That sword is not for humans."

We all stared.

He continued slowly, like even he hadn't come to terms with it. "It was designed to slaughter the evolved grotesque race."

A silence hit the room like thunder.

"...You're kidding," I said under my breath.

"No," Avelric replied grimly. "We had one of the grotesques' corpses preserved—an evolved variant. The ones slashed with that sword had their crystalline core... destroyed. Not cracked. Shattered at a molecular level."

I felt a chill crawl up my spine.

Avelric's voice turned clinical as he explained what the alchemists discovered. "The chemists believe the blade is infused with mana-reactive quartz dust—pulverized and magically aligned at a substructure level. When infused with a specific elemental bond—namely water—it creates a biochemical resonance field. The grotesques, whose exoskeletal cores are calibrated to vibrate at a frequency unique to their species... fail to detect it."

Xander sat up straighter. "...Wait. You're saying the sword makes them think it's one of them?"

"Exactly," Avelric nodded. "The quartz particles mimic the grotesque's aura signature. It doesn't trigger their defense response. The blade bypasses their resistance by exploiting their own biology—tricking their crystalline sensors into allowing entry."

Alina's eyes widened slightly. That was basically screaming for her brain to overanalyze.

Avelric kept going, now clearly shaken even while maintaining his noble facade. "And when contact is made, the mana-infused blade reacts to the grotesque's internal core. A destabilization chain occurs. Water element catalyzes it. The inner structure of the grotesque's magic crystalline core fractures into volatile filaments. It's not just a fatal wound—it's a systemic collapse."

I blinked. "So basically, the sword tells their bodies, 'Hey, buddy, I'm one of you,' and then explodes their insides the moment they buy it."

"Crude," Avelric said, "but accurate."

We were all quiet. Even Xander.

That's how you know something's serious.

Alina finally scratched her head. Her voice was soft, almost in disbelief. "...So Sylvia... was telling the truth."

"Yes," Avelric confirmed. "Whoever that man was, he wasn't a myth. He saved Rinascita. Alone."

I tilted my head back. Alone. That word kept repeating in my head. This was no 'lucky genius' or average hero. Whoever did this... was someone on a different plane entirely. Strategy, science, alchemy, war...

I had to meet him. Or kill him. Or both.

Avelric took a deep breath, then added, "We're attempting to replicate the sword. We gathered several of the most skilled craftsmen in Rinascita—over twenty. Alchemists, blacksmiths, even former royal weapon designers."

"And?" I asked.

"They're struggling," he admitted. "Even after studying its structure and readings, none of them have been able to mimic the resonance calibration. To be frank... it's hard to believe a single person crafted something so precise. With zero institutional backing."

Of course it is. Because he wasn't trying to impress nobles.

He was trying to win.

Avelric looked at us all, gaze heavy with tension.

"...And more importantly—grotesques are coming back."

Oh. There it was.

There's the real reason we were called.

I leaned back again, exhaling through my nose.

"Fantastic. Round two." I muttered. "And this time, we know their weakness."

Avelric straightened his back, his voice slow and pressing now. "We've scanned the outer perimeter using mana-sweepers and alchemic drones. It appears the grotesques are reorganizing. Based on movement patterns..."

He paused, then met our eyes.

"...They may arrive in two days."

Two days.

That landed heavier than it should have. Even for someone like me, I was tired out now... Two days wasn't time—it was a countdown.

My fingers curled unconsciously. I wasn't healed enough for another war. Hell, we barely survived the last one. And now they were coming back?

Alina suddenly spoke, her tone still cold but laced with a quiet tension.

"...Is the Swarm Tyrant dead?"

The room froze.

Even Avelric didn't speak.

I glanced at him. The way his eyes flicked away—yeah, he didn't know either.

Xander leaned back, arms behind his head like usual, but there was a glint in his half-lidded eyes. "That night," he said slowly, "it was like a damn bloodfest. Sky lit up with mana pulses, explosions... the clouds even twisted. I swear, I felt it—that was the Swarm Tyrant fleeing."

I nodded. "Yeah. Something was off. The grotesques vanished after that night. No attacks, no scouts, nothing. It's like something scared them."

"Or killed them," Alina added.

Avelric shook his head slightly. "We searched the surrounding zones. Sent in scouts, both magical and physical. We didn't find a single body."

"No grotesques?" I asked.

He shook his head again. "None."

"And... no human body either?"

"No."

Xander clicked his tongue. "So either the Swarm Tyrant escaped..." He smirked faintly. "...or someone turned it into ash."

Alina's brows furrowed. "But do you really believe it? That the same man who set up those traps... went alone into the hive to face the Tyrant?"

She looked at each of us, searching for logic. "I mean—think about it. The grotesques number in the thousands. The hive is a living fortress. And the Swarm Tyrant... is classified as a catastrophic-tier monster. To go in there alone... That sounds insane."

"It is insane," I replied. "But then again... so is baiting grotesques with rotting corpses and wiping out five hundred of them like it was a morning jog."

Alina didn't argue.

Xander chuckled. "You ever hear about those types of guys in war? The ones who show up once, do something absurd, and vanish like myths? That's what this guy is starting to sound like."

"Not a myth," I said quietly. "A ghost."

Alina crossed her arms. "But who is he, then? Some kind of hidden monster? A rogue alchemist with combat experience? The Devil?"

"Could be a martyr with a god complex," Xander said lazily. "Or someone who just hates grotesques more than he values human life."

"He predicted the fall," I muttered, running a hand through my hair. "Even our fallback strategy. He knew we'd lose. And he made sure we didn't."

Avelric's tone was quieter now. "Which means... he's either one of the greatest minds of this generation..."

"Or a monster in human form," Alina finished.

Silence fell again. A heavy one. No one really wanted to admit it, but we were all thinking the same thing.

If he was on our side—if—then we were lucky.

But if he wasn't...

We never stood a chance.

Just then—

Knock. Knock.

Three slow knocks echoed from the chamber door.

All our heads turned.

Avelric raised a brow, already tense. "We weren't expecting anyone else."

I shifted in my seat, legs still sore but instinct ready. "So... are we opening that?"

Xander stood up slowly, stretching. "Depends. If it's bad news, I'd prefer to hear it with tea."

Alina said nothing. But her hand was already brushing the dagger at her side.

Avelric stepped toward the door cautiously, voice low.

"...Let's find out."

The door creaked open—not with drama, but with dread.

A young man in servant robes stumbled in, pale as snow, panting like he'd outrun death itself. He looked at Avelric, eyes wide, trembling. "M-My Lord...!"

Avelric raised an eyebrow. "Calm down. What is it?"

The servant swallowed hard. "The Holy Knight of the Realm... from the Asura Empire... has arrived here."

For a full second, none of us reacted. It didn't compute.

Then it hit.

Asura?

Holy Knight?

Here?

My eyes snapped to Avelric, and his face had lost every drop of color. Xander actually sat upright. Alina's hand slipped off her blade—out of shock, not relief.

And then...

He walked in.

The room shifted. I don't mean physically. I mean everything felt heavier. Like gravity obeyed him. The light from the chandelier dimmed slightly, not because it weakened—because he outshone it.

A tall figure with a powerful build, lean and broad-shouldered, stepped through the doorway like he owned Rinascita. Black coat dusted in silver steel-thread, shoulders lined with royal crests, and boots that thudded like war drums.

He wasn't armored. He was armor.

Black hair, unkempt yet regal, fell to his neck. Yellow eyes—burning, sharp, and predatory. A scar traced from his left jaw down to his collarbone, like a signature of wars past. His expression? Calm. Controlled. But undeniably dominant.

He walked up to Avelric and extended a gloved hand.

"Lord Avelric," he said, voice deep but clean, like a steel blade sliding from its sheath.

"I'm Adonis Alcatraz. Head Rank Four of the Fifteen Knights of the Realm of The Asura Empire."

Avelric hesitated before taking the handshake, and even then... it was like he was grasping a ghost. His expression said it all. He knew this man. And not from banquets.

"Adonis... I wasn't informed of—" Avelric began.

Adonis cut him off smoothly. "Her Majesty Empress Rose sent me."

"To assist Rinascita," he continued, "in the grotesque war."

Avelric's mouth parted slightly. "You're... assisting us?"

I tilted my head. "Oh wow. From refusal to reinforcements. That's not just a change of heart, that's a whole heart transplant."

Xander exhaled through his nose. "Now I'm getting a headache."

Alina muttered, "Asura originally rejected our request for military aid. They called Rinascita a containment zone..."

I nodded. "Yeah. And now they send the Number Four?"

Avelric, still stunned, recovered just enough to ask, "Forgive me, Sir Alcatraz... but why the sudden support? We are, of course, deeply grateful."

Adonis's smile vanished. His expression flattened.

"We should be asking you that," he said.

That pulled all our attention.

"...What do you mean?" Avelric asked, clearly caught off guard.

Adonis folded his arms. "All over the capital of Asura, propaganda and rumors have spread like wildfire. Saying Empress Rose refused to assist a dying town. That innocent people were being butchered, while the Empire sat pretty behind its marble walls."

Avelric blinked, stunned. "What...?"

Adonis took a step closer, voice low and pointed. "The streets are flooded with posters, news scrolls, tavern whispers. Saying Rinascita bled alone. That our Empire has lost its honor."

He glanced around the table, then locked eyes with Avelric.

"Tell me, Lord Avelric. Was that... your political maneuver?"

The room went still again.

I stared at him, jaw slightly open. "Wait... what?"

Even Xander looked confused. "I don't get it. Rinascita doesn't have the political power to spin public narrative in Asura. That'd take money, spies... and planning."

Alina blinked, lips slightly parted.

Then her eyes widened—just slightly.

I noticed it.

She turned her head toward me, and I knew we were thinking the same thing.

It wasn't Avelric.

It was him.

The ghost in the ruins. The one who laid the traps. Who predicted the retreat. Who lured grotesques like cattle.

And now...?

He was playing politics too?

I leaned forward slowly, muttering under my breath, "The mastermind... He didn't just fight the grotesques. He made sure we'd get help."

"He weaponized public perception," Alina whispered. "Created a story the Asura Empire had to answer. Or risk public rebellion."

Adonis's words echoed again in my head.

"Tell us—was this political move done by you?"

I stared at Avelric.

He was just as lost as us.

Which meant...

That monster had reached all the way to the Empire's capital... without anyone even knowing his name.

And I—

I felt something weird in my chest.

Not fear. Not respect.

Anticipation.

The rest of the meeting was... well, exactly what you'd expect when politicians and knights start rubbing shoulders.

Long-winded. Carefully phrased. Lots of "for the good of the realm" this and "by the will of the Empire" that.

Still, credit where it's due—Adonis didn't waste time. He laid out his strategy cleanly. Brutally.

Avelric and he eventually reached an agreement—joint command, shared tactical intel, and formal recognition of Rinascita's guilds as part of the operational force. Finally.

Adonis even assigned replacements for fallen squads, and to our surprise, he stepped up to take Aaron's role. Personally.

He'd be replacing Valhalla.

I wasn't sure if that made me relieved or uneasy.

The Knights of the Realm aren't like us. They're... different. The world says they're each blessed by a god. Real ones. Not the poetic kind. Divine favor.

Sword Saints like me? We're freaks of nature. Born different.

Knights?

They're chosen.

The myth goes: even an S-Rank adventurer has a less than one percent chance of winning a fight against a Knight.

Which means Adonis wasn't just confident—he was sure.

But I couldn't help thinking...

What if the mastermind sabotaged us again?

What if everything—the traps, the chaos, the propaganda, the Empress's involvement—was all one big game, and we were still dancing where he wanted us?

Would even Adonis survive that?

When the meeting finally ended, the table empty and the room dimmer, I stood without a word and stepped out. My legs were still sore. My head more so.

Outside, Alina stood alone by the corridor window, arms folded, eyes distant. That usual calm detachment.

But I could tell she wasn't detached now.

I walked up beside her. "You looked like you were in deep thought there."

"I was," she replied softly, not looking at me. "Still am."

Silence stretched for a few seconds.

"...Do you trust him?" I asked.

"Adonis?" she replied.

I nodded.

"I don't trust people," she said flatly, then after a pause, "but I trust his power. And right now, that's what matters."

I leaned against the window frame. "Fair. He's after all one of the strongest knights of Asura... guided by a God."

Alina glanced at me, her expression still unreadable. "But even gods can be manipulated."

I raised a brow. "You think he's being played too?"

She didn't answer directly.

Instead, she said, "With that sword—the one that destroys grotesque cores—and the propaganda... and now the knights stepping in..."

She exhaled slowly. "It feels like someone's using all of us..."

I looked away, toward the distance. The sky was overcast again. Heavy. "If that's true... then it worked. Because if we have that weapon, and we have Adonis, and if Rinascita stands even after all that..."

"We can win," she said.

I nodded. "Yeah. We can win."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then, almost in a whisper, "Maybe that was the point."

I turned to her. "Hm?"

She looked at me, something sharper in her gaze now.

"Maybe he let us lose," she said. "Let the grotesques overrun us. Let Aaron fall. Let Valhalla shatter. So that it would look bad enough to trigger outside help."

I blinked.

She kept going, voice steady but low. "He didn't just save Rinascita. He made sure no one would ever ignore it again."

A pause.

"...He used the loss to guarantee the win."

I couldn't help but grin a little. Not because it was funny. But because—

"...That's terrifying," I muttered.

Alina looked back out the window.

"It is," she said.

And neither of us said the next part out loud.

But we both felt it.

Who is this mastermind?

Sylvia's Perspective:

I stood at the ridge just outside the Rinascita woods, the stone trail behind me half-covered in damp leaves and silence. It was around 2 p.m., though the afternoon sun had vanished behind a thick wall of clouds. The sky looked heavy—like it was watching, but saying nothing.

The town below felt calmer today. Rumors had already spread: the Knight of the Realm was here. Reinforcements from Asura had finally arrived. People were moving with a bit more confidence again, like their breath was no longer stuck in their chests.

But still... no birds. Not a single sound in the sky.

That strange silence again.

Even without seeing it, I could feel it.

Kaiser.

This stillness, this hush of nature—it's always the same when he's near. But no matter how much I try to piece it together, I can't figure out why he's doing all this.

He's never been the type to move without a reason.

"Sylvia..."

I turned.

The voice sent a chill through my spine before I even saw her. Familiar. Focused.

My eyes widened.

"Sophia?"

She stood there, calm and sharp as always. Her presence hadn't changed—her green eyes stared at me.

"Tell me," she said firmly, "Who gave you that weapon? Who saved Rinascita that day?"

I blinked, then offered a cool smile. "Oh, Sophia. Long time no see. When did we last meet—the Asura crisis?"

"Don't change the topic." Her voice had more edge now. "Tell me who you saw."

I looked away, my tone measured. "Like I said... I didn't see their face. I don't know who it was."

Lies.

But I told them so well, I almost believed myself.

Her eyes didn't waver. "It was Kaiser, wasn't it?"

My breath almost hitched.

For a split second, I almost gave myself away. But I gathered myself and smiled again—tighter this time.

"Sophia, don't be naive. Kaiser died years ago. During the crisis. You were there, weren't you?"

She didn't even blink.

"Kaiser was here," she said. "I know that."

I narrowed my eyes. "What makes you say that with such confidence? And let's—hypothetically—suppose he was alive... why would he bother saving us? He doesn't help people out of kindness."

"You and I both know that's true," I added softly.

She looked at me like she was trying to see through me.

Then she said it.

"Sylvia... you're acting like you know him very well."

I smiled again. But this one didn't reach my eyes. "Oh? And what more do I need to know? Care to enlighten me, Kaiser's ex?"

That stung. I knew it did.

But she didn't flinch.

"He's protecting someone here," Sophia said. "He actually cares for someone. Someone other than Elfie."

...What?

My thoughts froze. My grip on the railing tightened without me noticing.

No.

That's not possible.

Kaiser? Caring for someone?

Not observing. Not using. Not calculating.

Caring?

That wasn't the Kaiser I knew.

"Impossible..." I breathed. "No... further than impossible."

My voice trembled. My throat felt dry.

"...And who is this person?" I asked, barely getting the words out.

Sophia didn't hesitate. "He protected her with his life. Took care of her. And promised her—promised—that he'd always be there for her."

My heart skipped.

She looked me dead in the eye. "And you know her, Sylvia. He's doing all of this... just to protect her. Everything. Every trap. Every corpse. Every calculated move."

Everything was spinning now. The edges of my thoughts unraveling.

He... promised someone?

Kaiser?

I knew he could mimic emotions. Knew he could deceive anyone, even me.

But... promising someone protection?

That wasn't a move. That wasn't cold logic. That's something a human being would do.

And Kaiser was far from a normal human.

Unless—

No.

Unless he changed.

But for who?

And why does that shake me more than anything?

Sophia's words kept echoing in my mind like a curse I couldn't cleanse.

Kaiser... made a promise? To someone here?

Still reeling, I tried to breathe through the growing storm in my chest, but she wasn't done yet.

"Speaking of which," she said, eyes sharp, "the Knight of the Realm—Adonis—he arrived here recently, didn't he?"

I blinked, still trying to stabilize my thoughts. "He did. Just earlier today. He's... assisting Rinascita in the grotesque war."

"And you don't find that suspicious?" she asked.

"Of course I do. But how is that related?" I asked, watching her carefully.

Sophia's lips parted, her voice colder now. "Because a few days ago... the Swarm Tyrant was killed."

My eyes widened.

"What?" I asked, tone half-breathless. "Killed? That monster?"

Sophia gave a slow nod. "It didn't die by accident, Sylvia. He did that."

I stepped back instinctively, my heartbeat picking up again.

"How are you so sure?" I asked her, my voice growing quieter.

Her answer was like a dagger to the gut.

"Because the one he made that promise to... was Celia."

Everything stopped.

The weight of those words made the whole forest feel still.

Celia...

That white-haired girl with blood-red eyes. The Queen of Curses.

She was the one...?

My head spun as I pieced it together. The grotesques. The retreat. The square.

Celia—taken during the raid.

I remember hearing it...something dragged her off.

The Swarm Tyrant. That monster must've taken her to the hive.

My lips parted, no strength to mask my shock. "Then... he... went after her."

Sophia nodded. "Alone."

She didn't need to say it outright. I saw it now—Kaiser, cutting through waves of grotesques like shadows through mist.

All to keep a promise.

I stared out at the overcast town, as if hoping to find answers in the clouds.

"That... could be true," I whispered. "That sounds like something he'd do..."

Sophia's voice cut through again. "But we have a bigger problem."

I turned toward her sharply. "What do you mean?"

Her expression turned grave.

"Adonis. And his knights."

"They hate cursed users. You and I both know how much Asura still holds onto the scars from the crisis."

I froze.

She was right.

To the Asura Empire, cursed magic wasn't just dangerous—it was taboo.

They labeled cursed users as threats to order, instability.

They executed them without trial during the crisis.

My breath caught. "If Adonis tries to hurt Celia... that would mean—"

Sophia didn't flinch. **"It would mean an all-out war."**

"...Against Kaiser Everhart."

My chest tightened. I felt cold.

"That's insane," I whispered. "No. That can't happen. Besides—Celia is missing. Most likely won't return. They'll never see her."

Sophia nodded. "That's true. But..."

She looked me in the eye, her voice like a warning carried by the wind. "If she does return... I can promise you one thing."

"It will be like the end of Year 2. At the academy."

I didn't even realize I'd tensed until the goosebumps spread across my arms.

The final examination.

The Superior Class had rigged the whole match. Elfie was alone—isolated, outnumbered, broken.

And then...

"She cried in his arms," Sophia said softly. "And I think you remember what he said."

I closed my eyes.

"I won't be holding back. No one can save you now." Kaiser said that day...

Those words still lived in the back of my mind.

And when he said them...

He meant every syllable.

Sophia stepped forward. Her tone was no longer cold—it was pleading. "That's why I came here. To meet you. Because you know. You know the truth, Sylvia."

She lowered her voice further.

"Please... I don't want another all-out war. Especially not standing against him."

My throat tightened. "Against him...?"

Sophia stared at me, her eyes holding something deeper than fear.

Something like experience.

"I know the side of him the world hasn't seen," she said. "Trust me, Sylvia. If he sees her... hurt. Crying. Like Elfie was..."

Her voice turned to ice.

"...It'll be worse than the grotesque war."

I let the silence stretch for a moment, eyes drifting across the gray-stained sky, until the question slipped from my lips.

"...What does Celia know about him?"

Sophia exhaled through her nose. "Not the truth. That much is clear."

"She doesn't know who he really is?"

She shook her head. "No. He never told her. She thinks... he's just an E-Rank. Some quiet wanderer who stood beside her when she was at her lowest."

I stayed quiet, watching the leaves sway beneath the ridge.

Celia...

I remember her well. That wild, untamed force cloaked in a girl's body. Ruthless with enemies, terrifying with magic. But underneath it all, she had... something. Fragile, maybe...

She was strong—on her own.

But with him beside her?

I couldn't even imagine the future.

A cursed queen... with Kaiser as her shield?

It sent chills down my spine—not out of fear.

But out of knowing exactly how unstoppable that could become.

Sophia's voice broke through my thoughts again.

"You should already know... Lucas is present here too."

I nodded slowly. "I know. I've been hiding my presence... He hasn't approached me yet."

He will. Eventually.

But then—A question hit me.

Like lightning.

"Wait, Sophia..." I turned to her. "If Kaiser just wants to protect Celia... why not just take her away?"

"Why is he orchestrating all of this? The traps, the blood trails, the manipulated propaganda... Why?"

Sophia's expression twisted slightly, like she'd asked herself the same thing far too many times.

"I don't understand that either," she admitted. "For some reason... it feels like he wants to wipe out the grotesques. All of them."

I frowned. "But... couldn't he just go there alone? End them all in one night? You and I both know he can."

"I know," she said, her voice a little quieter. "But for some reason... he's letting us do it."

Letting us...?

I fell silent, letting that sink in.

Then I said it out loud, slowly. "Yeah... the only time he stepped in directly was when she was taken. By the Tyrant."

Sophia nodded. "Exactly. That was the line. That's what made him move."

"And that's what terrifies me," she continued. "If that was the trigger... then what happens next? What's he waiting for now? What's his real plan?"

Her voice faltered at the end.

The moment fell still again.

No answers.

Only wind brushing against our skin—sharp and cold. Like something was watching.

We both stood there, staring into the distance.

The future was uncertain.

But one thing we both understood deep down...

With him in the equation, no matter how many variables we calculated—Nothing could be predicted.

Sophia stood there beside me, the wind tugging strands of her hair across her face, her eyes locked on the horizon like she was watching fate itself walk toward us.

"We need to team up," she said. "You and me."

Her voice held no hesitation. Just quiet certainty. Like she already knew what was coming.

I didn't need to think about it long.

The grotesques might not wipe out this town.

But Kaiser...?

If they actually hurt her—if lines were crossed that shouldn't be—

He would be the one to burn it all down.

"I agree," I said, softly but firmly. "The grotesques are terrifying, sure. But if an all-out war breaks out here... Kaiser would be the one to end everything."

Sophia nodded once, then turned to me fully. Her expression darkened slightly.

"First, I want to know something, Sylvia..."

I looked up at her, meeting her eyes. "What is it?"

"You're a noble of Asura," she said. "You've seen the Knights of the Realm, trained with them, studied alongside them. You know how they think."

She paused, narrowing her gaze.

"So tell me... if all the Knights of the Realm were to fight against Kaiser Everhart—every last one of them—"

"Who would win?"

I didn't speak at first.

Because I honestly didn't know.

"...I don't know," I answered truthfully, quietly.

She nodded. "They say every Knight of the Realm is blessed. A god watches over them. That's why they win. That's why no one can defeat them."

Her voice dropped slightly.

"So... do you think Kaiser could beat a god?"

My lips parted.

But no answer came.

Not immediately.

Instead, silence stretched between us again, broken only by the sound of wind pushing through branches and leaves—gentle, but cold. Like something unseen was drawing closer.

I thought of the past.

Of what I'd seen him do.

Of how he moved when he was serious.

And I looked her in the eye.

"...You're asking the wrong question, Sophia."

I turned back to the forest.

"The question isn't 'can he defeat a god.'"

I exhaled.

"It's how long would the god survive... against Kaiser Everhart?"

Her expression didn't shift, but the way her eyes lowered slightly—I could tell. That answer settled deep.

Because deep down, she knew.

We both did.

"I don't know what's going to happen in the coming days," I continued, "or what kind of war is waiting for us."

"But let's work together. One more time."

I turned to her again.

"Not for politics. Not for our own self-interests. Just to make sure that war never happens."

Sophia stepped toward me slowly, reaching out her hand.

I took it.

Our handshake was silent.

A silent agreement to stop history from repeating itself from two years back...

Sophia's hand slipped from mine slowly, but her eyes stayed locked with mine, as if there was still more—something crawling beneath the surface of all this.

Then she spoke, her tone quieter now. A rare crack of worry slipped in.

"...Sylvia, do you think she's figured it out yet?"

My breath caught for a moment.

I looked at her. And I didn't need to ask who she meant.

A slow wave of unease crept into my chest.

"...Rose."

Sophia nodded grimly.

"Empress Rose Valentine isn't the type of woman to stay quiet after being manipulated on a political scale like this," she said. "Especially not when the entire capital's blaming her."

I folded my arms, my voice tightening.

"I know... believe me, I know." I looked down, thinking back—our days in the academy, the second year trial...

"That time... we went against her. And Lucas."

Back then, even with everything stacked in their favor, they didn't break us.

But Rose—

Her mind was a labyrinth.

"Her intelligence might even rival Kaiser's," I admitted. "She sees things before others even realize something's begun."

Sophia's voice dropped further.

"Yet she still sent a Knight of the Realm to assist Rinascita... She gave something away—willingly. That's not like her."

"She might be scheming something else entirely."

My fingers curled a bit.

Rose Valentine... Empress of Asura. Sharp as a blade.

Unforgiving.

"I don't know how much she's changed since we last saw her," I said. "But if she has figured out the truth..."

"I'm certain she'll take revenge."

The air between us grew still again.

Not the soft silence from before—but sharp, tense.

"...She might've already figured it out," I whispered.

And if she has—Then this whole war, this whole elaborate mess we're trying to manage—

It's no longer just between us and the grotesques.

It's between ghosts of the past...

Somewhere far from the shadow of war and the scent of blood, beneath the warm embrace of the Asura Empire's radiant sun, life thrived.

The sky stretched endlessly above like a sea of gold-painted blue, touched only by the passing clouds that drifted lazily on the breeze. In the cobbled streets of the capital, laughter echoed—light and pure. Children giggled as they danced barefoot through shallow fountains, their tiny hands guiding floating globes of water with basic magic, splashing each other in joy. The smell of sweet breads and grilled spices drifted from the countless food stalls that lined the walkways, each one buzzing with voices haggling, greeting, and laughing in chorus.

The capital was alive.

Peace had returned.

Or so they believed.

Beyond the marketplace and gardens, behind marble walls and silver-laced pillars, inside the towering spires of the royal palace... sat the woman who held the weight of that peace in her hands.

Rose Valentine.

The Empress of Asura.

She sat quietly in her office—still, poised, refined. Draped in a white royal uniform threaded with gold, she seemed more like a statue carved by divinity than a woman of flesh. Her long blonde hair danced lightly in the wind coming from the open window behind her, strands catching the sunlight like woven silk. And her eyes... those piercing sapphire eyes, stared not at the kingdom—but through it.

Past it.

Toward something only she could see.

The paperwork on her desk remained untouched. Reports, military logs, letters from nobles—all stacked in pristine order. Yet she paid them no mind. Her gaze was fixed outward, locked onto the horizon where the sky met the earth in perfect silence.

To others, she looked serene.

But deep within... calculations bloomed.

Each move made against her, each shift in the political landscape, every whisper of rebellion, every rumor that painted her heartless—every one of them was a thread.

The grotesque war was not her priority.

It was the deception.

The man behind it.

The one who turned the world's gaze against her without even showing his face.

As a breeze slipped into the chamber and fluttered the edge of her white gloves, she closed her eyes slowly.

Then opened them with the glint of storm.

Rose Valentine did not forget betrayal.

And above all, she never forgave it.

Empress Rose's Perspective:

The light from the window spilled across the marble floor, soft and golden. I sat still, fingers gently intertwined atop my lap, eyes resting on the horizon where the clouds floated—ignorant and free.

I had no such luxury.

The people outside were laughing. Living.

Because I allowed it.

A knock broke the silence.

"Enter," I said, my tone light but controlled.

The doors parted, and one of my high-ranking intelligence officers stepped inside. Lord Damon Velhart—decorated, noble-born, razor-focused. He dropped to one knee with respectful ease, his voice low and reverent.

"Your Majesty."

I gestured with two fingers. "Rise, Damon. Speak."

He stood, adjusting his deep crimson mantle. "The unrest in the capital has been... contained, to some extent. But the source of the propaganda remains elusive."

"Elusive?" I echoed, raising an eyebrow delicately. "In my empire?"

His throat tensed slightly.

I offered a thin smile. "You disappoint me."

He cleared his throat, correcting himself with haste. "We've analyzed the parchment, ink, magical residue. It appears the posters began appearing roughly three weeks ago, mass-produced and—"

"They were not mass-produced," I interrupted gently. "Each was individually conjured with minor variant flaws to simulate mass printing. Sloppy... but charmingly clever."

He blinked.

I rose slowly from my chair, walking toward the large crystal map inset in the floor. As my heels clicked softly against the stone, I traced my finger eastward across the capital.

"Three weeks ago... when the market in Liraine district caught fire. A minor accident, they said. But the real detail was buried in the report." I glanced back at him. "A stall that specialized in illusion components was ransacked."

He frowned. "You believe the disguising components were stolen—"

"I know they were," I said, voice sharp like silk drawn across glass. "The one responsible used them to alter not only appearance, but scent trails. Magical traces. They've been moving every four days."

I tapped a specific point on the eastern district.

"Right now... they're here. In Virel's Quarter. An abandoned glassworks on the edge of the alchemist trade path. Low foot traffic. Minimal patrol. High magical insulation."

Damon looked stunned. "That's... incredibly precise."

I offered a small, amused smile.

"Precision," I said, "is the difference between nobility and rulers."

He blinked, clearly mesmerized. I could almost hear the awe slipping through his composure.

"But..." he hesitated, "how do you know it's a he?"

I tilted my head slightly, the smile returning—wider this time.

"The ink used in the fourth wave of posters bore a faint scent of burnt cedar—used in older Asuran military scrolls. Only veterans or collectors carry those. And..." I stepped closer, voice lower. "One of the posters was posted six centimeters higher than regulation board height—habitual for someone tall, perhaps six foot two."

Damon swallowed. "That's..."

"Excessive?" I offered, eyes glinting. "Or simply necessary?"

He wisely said nothing.

I returned to my desk and sat down, folding my hands together once more.

"Make no mistake, Damon. This isn't just political rebellion. The person behind this seeks to orchestrate the kingdom. They've bled misinformation through carefully planted channels, weaponized our own people's pity, and forced me..." I paused, lips curling faintly, "to respond."

Damon hesitated. "You mean... the deployment of the Knight of the Realm?"

"Of course." I gave a slow nod. "Adonis is the perfect answer. I want the world to see Asura cares."

"But your Majesty... why truly send him?"

I leaned back in my chair, voice velvet.

"To draw them out."

Damon's brows knit. "You believe the mastermind is still watching?"

"They never stopped." I looked toward the window again, eyes cold. "The moment they forced my hand, they challenged my throne. Whoever they are, they're smart. Perhaps even... nearly on my level."

I rested my chin gently on my fingers.

"But eventually, every strategist slips. Even perfection leaves marks when pressure is applied. And when I find the one behind it all..."

My eyes sharpened.

"I'll destroy them."

Damon flinched ever so slightly, but bowed. "As you command, Empress."

"Go," I said, waving him off. "And send the shadow corps to Virel's Quarter. Quietly."

He bowed once more and vanished from the chamber like smoke.

The doors clicked shut.

Silence again.

I stared at the reports before me.

Cursed users. Grotesques. The rebellion. The war.

They were all distractions.

My true enemy was the one who knew how to move the queen.

Someone who forced an empire to act from the shadows.

You...

I closed my eyes.

Whoever you are... you'll kneel.

And when I place my foot upon your neck, it won't be for execution.

No.

You'll be my most useful pet.

Or I'll break you until you learn to bark.

The sun had nearly set. Golden light spilled through the stained glass of my chamber, painting me in a mixture of crimson and violet.

How fitting.

It always ends in red and violet, doesn't it?

I leaned back in my seat, fingers lightly drumming against the polished armrest of my chair. Silence filled the room, broken only by the gentle rustle of paper as the wind teased the documents on my desk.

War. Chaos. Manipulation. This is not the first time I've played with them.

But this time... it was orchestrated by someone else.

Unacceptable.

I closed my eyes.

It didn't matter really... I've played my move.

The knight is on the board.

Adonis Alcatraz.

My most arrogant piece.

The God of Pride favors him for a reason. He doesn't falter in stress. Doesn't ask questions. He follows orders to the letter and rewrites history in the name of Asura.

And the mission I gave him?

Deliciously cruel.

"Find her," I whispered to the air. "The rumored Queen of Curses."

"Kill Her."

Celia.

That name has crawled from too many mouths lately. A girl born of curses, hated by everyone.

If the stories are true—and even if they're not—she is a spark I cannot allow to exist. Her existence alone creates issues for my plans. And I... I will not compete with anyone.

Once Adonis finds her, I will have her heart.

Cursed hearts are not mere organs.

They're conduits. Living fragments of ancient suffering. Power birthed through despair and shaped through will.

And once it is mine—Asura will ascend.

Rinascita is just the first stone in the river.

Valerion Kingdom will fall after. Their golden banners will burn, their queen will kneel, and the world will finally understand the silence of submission beneath a single empire's heel.

My empire.

And as for Azrion...

I still find it laughable that of all people, he would send me a letter. So polite. So conveniently worded. As if I wouldn't see the strings beneath the wax seal.

He wants me to know she's alive.

But why?

Perhaps he's grown sentimental in his old age. Or perhaps he thinks I will owe him a favor for this "gift."

Either way—when a monster hands you an offering, it is rarely without poison.

Still, it changes nothing.

Adonis has faced demons and gods.

If Azrion dares to interfere, he'll be dealt with. Gods may whisper into Adonis's ears, but I wrote the commands his blade follows.

And as for the true mastermind—the one who played this board before I could even set my pieces—when he steps from the shadows to protect his little dolls...

Adonis will be there too.

He'll find him. He'll crush him.

He'll bring him to me—alive.

Because whoever dared force my hand... will kneel before it.

Let them play their little games. Let them scatter traps and rumors.

And unlike them—I will never lose a war of atrocious deception.

I'll find you.

Chapter 80: Preparations Of The Skies

The orange hue of the setting sun spilled like diluted blood across the cracked stones of Rinascita's fountain plaza.

The water barely trickled now—contaminated, sluggish—as if even it had grown weary of witnessing the city's descent. The cries of distant fighting echoed faintly from the eastern barricades, accompanied by flickers of magic and the grotesque, mechanical screech of unnatural things.

A man with ocean-blue eyes strolled past the fountain, smoke curling from the corner of his lips as he nursed a half-burned cigarette. His coat fluttered slightly with the breeze, dark and understated, and his steps made no sound on the stone.

He did not glance at the injured civilians being carted past him or the blood smeared along the walls. War hung in the air like smog, but his expression remained calm. Detached. As if he were above it all.

Then he stopped.

A figure had appeared ahead, just past the fountain's shadow.

Azrael's eyes didn't flicker. His expression didn't shift. But his words fell like stone.

"Arius."

The man across from him turned, lazily plucking the cigarette from his mouth and discarding it with a flick of his fingers. It bounced once on the stone and extinguished itself in a puddle of stagnant water.

"Good evening," Arius said, almost cheerfully.

Azrael didn't return the greeting. "Why did you beat up Aaron... and wipe out the Valhalla squad?"

His voice held no emotion—just frigid inquiry, the kind that came with intent rather than curiosity.

Arius blinked. Shrugged. "I don't know what you mean."

Azrael stepped forward, just enough for the dying light to catch the crystalline veins lining the side of his neck. His broken eyes shimmered like fractured glass—eyes that saw too much and felt nothing.

"I know you were the masked killer," he said flatly. "The one who struck down the deserters before the war. You're the reason the cursed girl was vilified in Rinascita. You seeded her reputation... just so you could 'save' her later."

Arius tilted his head slightly, the corner of his lips tugging upward. No words came. Just silence—and that damned smirk.

Azrael's voice didn't rise. It only grew colder. "You laid out the traps. You told me you had no interest in victory... but it's obvious now."

Arius raised an eyebrow. "Obvious of what?"

"You're working with Aldric. Everything... was staged to ensure my downfall."

A pause.

Arius's face, normally unreadable, twitched. Just a fraction. But Azrael caught it.

The silence thickened between them like fog.

"I think you're overthinking things," Arius said smoothly.

Azrael didn't give him time.

"You were the one behind the artificial rain," he said, his voice sharper now, layered with something dangerously close to anger. "The one who nullified healing across Rinascita. You gave the grotesques their moment. You let them slaughter."

Arius sighed, long and quiet. "So you caught me."

His gaze slowly drifted to Azrael's face. "But looking at you now... You're as dead as you are lost."

Azrael didn't reply. His body remained motionless, a shadow cut from stone.

They stared.

No words. No tension. Just the eerie stillness of two monsters who had seen too much of war—and perhaps too much of each other.

Then Azrael turned his back to him. "Signing a deal with a monster won't guarantee your victory."

Behind him, Arius gave a low chuckle. "I am the devil, Azrael. Don't worry about me."

The crystal-veined man walked off without a glance back, his silhouette eventually swallowed by Rinascita's burning streets.

Arius watched him go, head slightly tilted, as if still studying how a man like Azrael hadn't cracked apart yet.

But then, his eyes shifted toward a building to his left—partially crumbled, but still standing. The hospital.

A memory flickered.

A woman's voice. A promise made half-heartedly.

Arius muttered under his breath, "Right... Isaac's wife. I did make her a promise."

And with that, the devil changed his course.

Across the ruined plaza, just beyond the fountain where Arius had once stood, a solitary figure sat hunched forward on a weathered bench. Isaac's hands were clasped together tightly, thumbs nervously brushing against one another. His eyes were hollow, lost somewhere in the distance—perhaps in the ruins of the past hour, or maybe in the fragile image of a future that hadn't shattered yet.

He didn't hear the soft footsteps at first.

"Mind if I sit?"

The voice was low, calm. Unbothered.

Isaac blinked and turned just as Xander eased himself down beside him, dropping into the seat like gravity had tripled for him alone. The Sword Saint of Mastery looked as if he'd just rolled out of bed—bloodstained shoulder, wrinkled coat, and a half-lidded stare that made it hard to believe he'd nearly died earlier that day.

"You're... Xander, right?" Isaac asked, voice unsure, almost cracking.

Xander gave a lazy nod. "In the flesh. What's left of it."

"You're not... hurt?"

"Not dead either. So, win-win."

Isaac's gaze dropped. "I remember hearing the Sword Saints almost died that day. The battlefield near the gate... it was chaos."

Xander tilted his head slightly, just enough to glance at Isaac. "I didn't see you there."

Isaac hesitated. The words took a moment to crawl out of his throat. "I... I ran."

The silence was instant. Heavy.

"I ran before the guards broke," Isaac continued, quieter now. "I knew it was going bad, and I just... I got scared. I didn't want to die. My legs just moved."

He braced himself for laughter. Mockery. Disdain.

Instead, Xander sighed—a long, tired exhale.

"At least you're alive."

Isaac blinked. "You're... not going to laugh at me?"

Xander leaned back, brushing his messy hair from his eyes with one hand. "Most people have too much to lose to play hero. You probably had someone waiting for you. Someone worth coming back to. Makes sense you didn't want to throw your life away."

Isaac looked down, hands clenched again. The shadows of shame still clung to him, but something about Xander's voice... the calm, quiet honesty in it... made it harder to hold on to them.

"Do you think... people can change?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

Xander scratched his jaw, staring up at the bruised, orange sky.

"It's rare," he admitted. "Most people stay the same. Same fears, same flaws. They circle around themselves until they rot from the inside."

Isaac swallowed, eyes heavy.

"But," Xander added, "if you try hard enough... and I mean really try... maybe you can change. Just a bit."

Isaac turned to look at him, quietly. There was something in his eyes now—tired, yes, but touched by a flicker of hope.

Xander chuckled dryly. "I didn't get that from a book or anything. It's from experience."

He leaned forward slightly, fingers tapping loosely on his knee.

"My sister used to say I was useless. Not out of cruelty—she was right. I didn't care about anything. Still don't, most of the time. But she believed I could... I don't know... be someone who helped others. Not because it was noble. But because no one else would."

His voice quieted. "She's the reason I kept this guild running. The reason I get up when I really, really don't want to."

Isaac slowly nodded, feeling something shift in his chest. Something warm and aching.

"I'll fight next time," he said, with more certainty than he expected. "I won't run. I'll survive and get back to my wife... my kid."

Xander gave him a sideways glance. Then a smirk.

"Better not die then," he murmured. "Would be a waste of all this emotional development."

Isaac laughed—nervous, genuine.

Xander leaned back on the bench, head resting against the wooden frame, eyes falling shut like someone who hadn't slept in days.

"I'm just gonna... nap for a bit. Wake me if someone screams."

Isaac sat beside him quietly, the weight on his chest a little lighter.

[First Person – Swarm Tyrant's Perspective]

Darkness. That's all there was.

Heavy, suffocating, endless darkness.

And then breath—no, not breath. Movement. Thought. Awareness. The stillness cracked.

A dull glow bled into the chamber like a wound reopening. Cold metal pressed beneath my limbs. I could feel the tremors in the walls—subtle. Alive. Breathing like flesh beneath stone.

My eyes opened, if these things were eyes.

In front of me stood the figure cloaked in obsidian shadow—motionless, faceless, and silent. Yet from him poured the suffocating aura of command. Of authority older than thought.

The Silent Executioner.

A name whispered through hive-memories. Not mine—ours.

He moved only slightly, yet his presence split through the dark like a blade.

"Have you awakened?" he asked, voice not made of sound, but of cold.

My throat vibrated. "...Who am I?"

A pause.

He stepped closer. I could feel the other monsters crawling beyond the walls, retreating in fear.

"You are the Swarm Tyrant. The plague that will destroy Celestine." Its words slithered into my brain like parasites.

"You are not to question your shape. You are rebirth. A Disaster-Class Warden of Decay. "

Something buzzed deep in me. Memory? Instinct?

"I... remember... another."

My voice was like cracking bone. "My... double."

The Silent Executioner's head tilted slightly. "Yes. Your clone. A failed reflection."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Gone. Destroyed by humans."

I clenched my limbs. Heat built in my skull. "...It wasn't humans."

He paused. Still. Listening.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I closed my eyes.

"When it died... I felt it. As if I was pulled beneath the surface... beyond the flesh of the world... past screams and rot—into the void. There was nothing there. No decay. No hunger. No swarm. Just... stillness. Nothing."

He studied me. "Interesting."

"Do you... know what that was?" I asked.

He ignored the question. Instead, he stepped closer. "And how did you feel... about the one who killed it?"

The question stabbed something open.

And suddenly—I saw it.

A storm.

Raging. Howling. Metal twisted by wind. Screams—human and not.

And him.

Jet-black hair. Eyes colder than death, fists crashing like thunder. He punched through me like I was paper. No roar, no words just precise destruction. Again. Again. Again.

My head throbbed. Screamed.

Pain like fire.

I let out a distorted cry, claws scraping the walls.

The Silent Executioner raised a hand, fingers twitching.

And the fragments shattered.

Gone. My mind cleared in an instant. Empty again.

"What did it feel like?" he asked.

I stared ahead.

"...Like dying. Exactly as the clone did did. I was... in a human body."

The Silent Executioner froze.

Then, his tone sharpened to a razor's edge.

"You are not human. Never speak of it again. You are a disaster. That identity is not yours. It never was."

I lowered my gaze. The pain still echoed in the cracks of my skull.

He turned, his silhouette becoming one with the shadows at the chamber's edge.

"Do not disappoint Lord Azrion... as your clone did."

And then he was gone. Like he had never been.

I sat there... alone again.

No chains bound me, yet I could not move.

Who am I...?

If I am not human... why do I remember that body's death?

And why did it feel like mine?

...

Why in both deaths... I was stared down by the void...?

Celia – First Person POV - 7:38 PM

28th Depth, Grotesque Hive

Lucas walked ahead of me, his back tall and unshaken. His light magic shimmered faintly around him, like he was wrapped in an unseen divinity. I had long stopped counting how many grotesques he'd incinerated with just a flick of his wrist.

And me?

I was just trying not to fall behind.

I swung my chain like a blade again, slicing through the air with clean motion. It should have killed the grotesque flying toward me. I was sure of the angle. I was sure of the tension. But before my attack could even connect, a narrow beam of Lucas's light pierced through the grotesque's skull. It fell at my feet—smoking, twitching, useless.

"Keep your eyes forward," Lucas said without looking back. "I'll take care of it."

He said it so casually. Like it meant nothing.

Like I meant nothing.

"...I don't need anything to protect me," I whispered under my breath. The words barely made it out of my mouth. They didn't match what I felt at all.

I wanted to be stronger...

Each grotesque he killed made him stronger. His steps got faster. His spells more refined. The way he fought—it wasn't human. I was adapting too, wasn't I? I was adjusting, optimizing, improving. I tuned my movements for speed, even sharpened my emotions into the chains with my negative thoughts.

But it wasn't the same.

I was getting better... but he was becoming something else.

We climbed higher. Past rotting carapace walls and twitching larvae sacs that pulsed like diseased organs. We were, by my estimate, around the twenty-eighth depth. The grotesque hive was like an inverse hell—no flames, just meat and rot and things that watched.

And still, he walked calmly.

Eventually, he halted and said we should rest. We were close to the top now. Ten more floors and we'd reach the exit, he told me.

I went to sit next to him.

Then, suddenly—a flash.

A thin, precise beam of light zipped past my cheek.

My skin burned where it grazed me.

The trap disarmed. Poisonous water magic hissed on the ground, evaporating before it could touch me.

I hadn't noticed it.

I should have noticed it.

Why didn't I?

"Be careful," Lucas said, not unkindly, but not warmly either. His eyes stayed focused elsewhere. Always one step ahead.

I didn't answer. I just nodded—like a polite little girl who had learned her lesson—and sat down far away from him. I didn't want him to see my expression.

Because I wasn't angry. I wasn't afraid.

I was enraged.

Why was he always better?

Superior perception. Superior magic. Now superior offense? How... how was he leaving me behind? He wasn't this strong just a day earlier... This wasn't some gift from the heavens. This was something else.

My heart twisted into something tight and cruel.

I worked so hard just to get stronger... and he just came up, killed a few and surpassed me...?

No. I won't allow it.

My hands trembled in my lap, fingers curling into the fabric of my skirt. The gesture was subtle. No one would notice unless they looked closely. But inside me, a storm brewed.

I will catch up. I will tear through any grotesque. I will become more than him, if I have to.

He was sitting now, calm as the surface of a poisoned lake. Resting his back against the hive wall like none of this mattered. Like nothing could hurt him.

But something could. And that something was me.

...

Within the Blood Moon Realm

I don't remember when I fell asleep—just that one moment I was sitting far away from Lucas, silently seething... and the next, I was standing in my realm.

That foggy place. My cursed sanctuary.

Where I always wake up inside my own sleep.

Same blood-colored sky. Same suffocating mist.

And the same me—awake, while asleep.

I took a slow breath and stood up. My limbs didn't ache here. This place wasn't real, but it felt more real than the hive. Because here, I could fight. I could train. I could fix everything.

No grotesques. No Lucas.

Just my failures. My mistakes. My disgustingly slow progress.

I started with my footwork—sliding across the mist-slick floor, adjusting the weight in my hips. My swings, though clean, had slight hesitations. Just a quarter-second. But in real battles, that could cost a life.

I tilted my body more when turning, pushed my left foot wider before slashing, and narrowed the movement of my shoulder to prevent overextension. Over and over again.

Then I practiced my casting. Fire. Wind. Water. Earth.

Chains and thorns.

I cycled through them faster and faster, until I hit a wall—water casting slowed after fire. My hands twitched, and the element took longer to form.

That's when I stopped. Sat down. Closed my eyes.

Why?

And then it clicked.

The burning air from my fire magic lingered—dry, hot, greedy. Water hated that. It struggled to breathe in a space already choked by fire. So I adjusted. Next time, when I summoned fire, I kept the heat compact, precise. Not a raging inferno—just controlled combustion.

Then the water flowed like silk again.

I'm not weak.

I thought as I stood again, casting again, switching again.

I reinforced my thorn magic too—no longer just a passive deterrent. No more leaving my back vulnerable. I layered sharp traps of thorns behind me every time I advanced, every time I jumped. No blind spots. No open paths.

A few hours passed like that.

Maybe more.

Time felt blurry here.

By the end, I could feel it—my body responding.

Faster. Sharper.

My mind honed to flaws that had haunted me for too long.

And yet—

I stood in that fog again. Alone.

Blood moon above, like some red eye mocking me from a distance. Fog curling around my ankles like shackles I couldn't break.

I clenched my fists and stared down.

Then punched the ground—hard.

A sharp crack echoed through the silence, mist swirling from the impact.

"WHY...?"

My voice tore out, raw, angry.

Desperate.

"Why couldn't I improve like him?" I whispered, my throat closing around the words.

Lucas...

Lucas, who used to need my support. Who relied on my offense. He used to take several hits. He used to cast multiple elements to kill an evolved grotesque.

And now?

He one-shots them.

He walks through them like they're paper and he's fire.

Faster than I can even blink.

And me?

I improved. I adapted. I worked harder than anyone I know. I trained inside my own sleep. I bled for my techniques. I tore apart my weaknesses.

So why...

Why does it feel like I'm running in place?

"It's not fair..."

The words slipped out, soft and pathetic. I hated them. Hated me for thinking them.

Was he... just better than me?

Born with something I didn't have?

I shook my head violently, like I could chase the thought out of my skull.

No. No. No. No. No.

I won't accept that.

I can't.

Because if he's better—then I lose him.

And if I lose him... I lose everything again.

My fingers brushed the mist again, still clenched into fists. My eyes stared upward, into that bleeding moon.

"Lucas..."

You're not allowed to leave me behind.

You're not allowed to become a star while I remain in the dirt.

So I'll keep training. Keep adapting. Keep killing.

Even if I have to walk through fire barefoot and smile while doing it.

Even if the only way to catch up to you...

...is to become something else.

Within the Blood Moon Realm, Hours into Sleep

I took a deep breath, my chest rising and falling slowly in the dense fog. The blood moon overhead pulsed like a silent drum, its eerie red hue casting shadows that didn't feel entirely my own. I exhaled—long, deliberate—calming my senses.

Then the fog shifted in front of me. It curled, twisted, and finally... it formed.

Her.

Obsession.

She stood exactly like me. Same face, same height, same strands of white hair swaying in the windless air. But her eyes—those were different. The white of her eyes had turned pitch black, and her red pupils were so dark, so consuming, it was like staring into a pit that whispered only one name:

Kaiser.

Her mouth curved into a soft, eerie smile. "Why are you working so hard, Celia?" Her voice was honeyed.

I looked at her, at myself—at the version of me that didn't pretend to be sane.

"You know why," I said flatly, brushing dust off my skirt. "You're me. You know."

Obsession tilted her head. "Say it."

I paused for a moment, eyes drifting toward the fake stars scattered behind the red clouds.

Then I whispered, "Because I want to protect him."

Obsession grinned wider, stepping closer, almost circling me like a predator. "Protect him?" she echoed, her voice like silk wrapping around a knife.

I nodded. "He protected me. When I was weak... useless. Back then, he was ranked the lowest, but he still stood in front of every danger. Took every hit. Risked everything. For me."

The words felt thick in my throat.

"So I'll become the strongest," I continued. "So I can stand beside him and make sure he's never alone again."

Obsession's face darkened—not in sorrow, but in cold, perfect seriousness. "But there are people stronger than you. Like Lucas." She leaned closer. "People who might want to kill him."

I didn't hesitate.

"I won't allow it."

Obsession smiled again—only this time, not sweetly.

She smiled the way monsters do when you corner them. "Neither will I," she said, her tone going icy. "I won't let anyone take him away."

I stared at her. At me. At the part of myself I always tried to bury under smiles and cute voices.

Obsession wasn't my enemy. She was just... the part of me that said the truth out loud.

"You're just my other half," I muttered.

She nodded, a little slower this time. "Even so... we still don't know how to become one."

I bit my lip. The fog around us seemed heavier now. My thoughts clicked like puzzle pieces grinding into place.

"Then maybe," I said slowly, "I need to combine us. Your obsession with my pain. Your hunger... with my purpose."

Obsession raised a brow.

"If I use your feelings—your twisted love for Kaiser—and pour it into my cursed magic, I can fuel it. It'll grow. My negative emotions will make me stronger."

She looked at me—blank, unreadable—then smiled in satisfaction. A rare, sincere one.

"I was waiting for you to figure that out."

I stepped forward, feeling it. A surge in my chest—powerful, ugly, honest. I didn't need to erase my obsession.

I needed to embrace it.

The cursed sky pulsed again, like it approved. I clenched my fists, feeling the cursed magic already shifting.

Then—

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

A slow, deliberate sound echoed behind me.

I froze.

Obsession turned her head toward the noise, but before I could react, her body melted into mine—like mist being inhaled into my lungs. The moment she vanished, I felt... full. Focused. A little wrong, maybe, but stronger.

And then I turned around.

There—standing in the fog like she belonged to it—was a woman with eyes like withered stars, wearing the fractured crown of ancient ruin.

Evelina.

The Queen of Curses from 500 years ago.

She smiled.

And I didn't.

"Finally back..." I muttered, narrowing my eyes. "After weeks of silence."

Evelina stood at the edge of the fog, arms relaxed at her sides, face unreadable. Not a ghost. Not a memory. Her. The Queen of Curses, standing like I'd summoned her—only I hadn't.

"I wonder," I said slowly, "what makes you show your face now?"

She didn't flinch. "I have a question for you."

I crossed my arms. "I'm not interested."

She sighed, softly. "Still wary of me?"

I looked at her through my lashes. "You're manipulative, unpredictable, and untrustworthy."

Her lips twitched into something that might've been amusement. "Fine," she said. "Then let's make a deal."

I blinked. "A deal?"

She stepped forward into the thinning fog. "You'll try to hit me. Once. Just once. If you succeed, I'll do anything you say. If you fail... you answer my question."

My eyes narrowed. "And if I refuse?"

"I'll tell you something that'll help you improve faster. Much faster."

I bit my inner cheek. The fog pulsed. The realm listened.

"...Fine," I said. "You want to play games? Let's play."

I didn't wait. Chains burst from beneath my feet—six of them, spiraling outward, twisting midair to create mirrored angles. I layered them with cursed inscriptions, rerouting their directions mid-flight, disguising my aim with reflective fakes. Another two came from above, silent like falling ash, while I pushed out a feint of a fire glyph to distract her senses.

High-pressure web. 360 degrees. No room to breathe.

A flawless, closing trap.

Evelina didn't move. She only lifted her hand—barely—and her cursed magic crushed mine mid-air. Every chain coiled inward like it had lost its will to live, shattering into cursed ash.

"Pathetic," she said.

I was already moving, leaping high, chaining my steps with cursed sigils across the sky like stairs. I shaped a new pattern mid-flight—combining ice and wind around my chains to mask the sound and vision—then slashed downward with an overhead whip of cursed thorns from above.

She took a step back.

For a moment, a flicker of victory sparked in me.

But then her hand moved again. Effortless.

And the sky obeyed.

A wall of earth split from the ground, fire erupted along its surface, and wind circled her like a barrier. Elemental magic—layered, elegant, destructive. My chains clashed into the wall and broke like glass under a hammer.

I landed on my feet, panting.

The magic didn't just cancel mine. It crushed my thoughts. My planning. My brilliance. Every clever sequence, every calculated move—I watched it get obliterated like it was childish.

"You can't even scratch me," Evelina said flatly. "You're far too weak."

My fingers twitched. My jaw tightened. I refused to cry—but something in my chest was breaking.

Why? Why can't I catch up?

I sank into my own mind, frantic, diving deep, trying to trace every mistake—was it the delay between the third and fourth chain? Was it the angle of my second aerial glyph? My rune placement? My transition speed?

What did I miss?

I could fix it. I just needed to go over every detail again, faster, deeper, sharper—

"Stop," Evelina said suddenly.

I looked up.

She didn't sound cruel. She sounded... bored.

"Stop thinking," she said again. "I'll tell you instead."

And just like that, I froze.

"Your weakness," Evelina said, her voice colder now, less amused—"is that you rely too much on your magic... without understanding why your curses exist. Or why they evolve."

Her words sliced through me sharper than any chain I'd ever conjured. I stood there—frozen, furious, exposed.

What do you mean by understanding my curses?

They're mine. I shaped them, I trained them, I bled for them. Isn't that enough?

But Evelina wasn't finished.

"Once you exit the hive," she said, stepping closer, "there will be a star-filled aroma in the air. It only happens once every thousand years—when two galaxies pass close enough to reveal their stars across the sky."

Her eyes shimmered like they had seen it a thousand times before.

"You'll feel it. Listen to your curses when it happens. They'll whisper to you... tell you what you've been missing."

I blinked, my chest tightening with quiet dread.

What I've been missing?

What does that even mean? How can a curse talk to me? And what could it possibly say that I haven't already tortured myself thinking?

Her gaze sharpened like a blade now—cutting clean through me.

"Now answer my question."

I swallowed.

Evelina's red eyes glinted like burning coals. "For the past three weeks, what's been hiding... underneath your shadow?"

I blinked again.

"...What?"

Her tone didn't change. "That devilish presence... it interfered with my own." Her jaw tensed like she tasted something bitter. "Even I couldn't approach it. Whenever I neared you—my instincts screamed."

She stared into me like she was trying to rip the truth from my bones.

"Who was watching over you?"

I furrowed my brows, shaking my head. "No one. That... doesn't make sense. Nobody cares enough to do that for me."

My words came out sharp. Dismissive.

But they hurt on the way out.

Because they were true.

Evelina went quiet for a second. Her eyes dimmed slightly—not out of pity, but thought.

"Then it wasn't a person... not fully." She turned slightly. "But it wasn't a curse either. No magical presence. Just... there. Like a shadow pretending to exist."

I tried to remember anything. But the past three weeks had been a blur of training, bleeding, failing, surviving. I had sensed something at times. A strange pressure. But I thought it was just my mind breaking down from stress. I didn't ask.

And yet—Something about her words sent a chill down my spine.

I looked down at my feet. At the memory of a shadow that sometimes seemed... wrong. Like it moved when I didn't. Like it lingered a second too long. I had ignored it.

"I... I read once," I muttered, my voice low, "that curses can live in a person's shadow. Even ones controlled by other humans. Or sometimes... by something else. Maybe it was a presence. A human soul bound to a curse. Or maybe... something worse."

Evelina's expression grew grim.

"...Whoever it was," she said slowly, "it doesn't compare to anything I've faced—not demons, not gods, nothing. That thing... it shouldn't exist."

She stepped back, the fog curling tighter. "But it does."

Suddenly, her form began to shimmer—like a reflection on water starting to ripple. The sky flickered, pulsing like a dying heartbeat. I felt my chest tighten—my soul being pulled back.

"No—wait—" I reached out, stepping toward her, but the fog was breaking, the blood moon dimming. I was waking up.

And as the world crumbled into light, her final words cut through the silence like a knife—

"Be prepared... to be heartbroken soon."

Then—

Black.

Silence.

Grotesque Hive – Real World

I gasped quietly, breath catching in my throat as I opened my eyes. My back ached. My fingers twitched. Reality felt heavier now.

I was back.

Lucas sat not far from me, smiling softly to himself, tossing a crystal back and forth in his hand.

"Ahhh, nice," he muttered, eyes narrowed in satisfaction. "Level 19."

My head tilted slightly.

Level?

He must've sensed me stir, because he turned, blinking once. "Oh—sorry, Celia. Did I wake you up?"

I stared at him. Quiet.

We continued our way to the top.

I'd gotten used to the sound of squishing meat under my boots—used to the stink of rot, the twitch of distant wings, and the low hum of death vibrating through the walls.

But what I hadn't gotten used to... Was how Lucas barely even tried anymore.

A grotesque burst from the ceiling with a shriek—a tangle of eyes, legs, and fangs. Before I even moved, a pinpoint beam of light curved impossibly through the air, ricocheting off three chunks of mirror-like crystal Lucas had conjured mid-air.

The beam struck through the grotesque's forehead and exploded from the back of its skull.

Pop.

Another one-shot.

He blew the smoke off his finger and gave me a lazy grin. "Still keeping up, Celia?"

I scoffed and launched myself forward, cursed chains snapping from the ends of my hair to coil around a nearby column. My body swung up and over like a pendulum. From midair, I spun—once, twice—and let loose a full whip of cursed thorns downward.

They struck a grotesque creeping behind Lucas's blind spot, the barbed vines digging into its back and draining it dry before it could let out a single noise.

I landed on one knee, chains circling me protectively.

"Keep up?" I smiled sweetly. "Just make sure to not get in between."

Lucas snorted. "Uh-huh. Just don't step forward."

I blinked. "Wha—?"

Click.

He raised his hand, and a ring of light expanded in front of me. From beneath my boots, a half-formed grotesque exploded upward, mouth gaping and dripping black acid. I flinched—

But Lucas had already snapped his fingers.

Light bent backward into itself, folding like a paper fan, and then imploded through the grotesque's mouth. Its body collapsed instantly, vaporized.

I stared, my chest rising faster than it should've.

"I told you not to step," he said, tilting his head, voice annoyingly calm. "There was a trap-lure spell. That one was dormant—until you triggered it."

"How do you even see those?" I gritted.

"Experience. Also..." He flashed a grin. "I'm built different."

I hated how casual he was about it.

Another grotesque skittered around the corner. No—three of them. I swung both arms out and my chains uncoiled behind me like wings. My thorns extended, spinning into a storm as I launched into the air. Mid-jump, I twisted upside-down and unleashed hell—a flurry of whips raining down, tearing into them with rapid, cracking bursts.

They didn't even get to scream.

I landed in front of Lucas, my legs covered in cursed thorns, feet cracking the floor. One grotesque tried to sneak up from the rear. I snapped a kick backward, my cursed heel caving in its jaw, and it collapsed with a withered hiss.

"You're better," Lucas said, finally serious.

"I adjusted a little." I didn't smile this time.

Two more floors.

Another ambush.

Lucas summoned reflective glass to bend his own flame spell into a loop around the walls—fire licked through the hallway like a living snake, herding grotesques into my path.

My chains pulled me upward again, and I dived, thorns first. They didn't even see it coming.

I landed, panting, gripping one thorn whip tighter than I should've. I didn't say it aloud, but...

I was finally keeping pace.

One floor left.

"I count 95 grotesques," Lucas muttered, eyes glowing faintly. "Big ones. Fast. We do it fast or we get overwhelmed."

I nodded, no hesitation.

We moved in sync. I launched first, chains whipping around my body as I crashed into the horde from above. My vines struck low, targeting knees, joints—crippling and draining. Lucas followed behind, forming a prism of magical mirrors around the tight

corridor. Each angle bounced his beam off the next until it was pure destructive force—the light cannon he called it.

It vaporized the central grotesque, creating a burst of pressure that knocked three more into my whips.

We slaughtered them.

Finally, we reached the top.

A thin crack of natural wind breezed in through the walls—real air. My chains loosened around my legs, the cursed thorns retreating slowly into my palms. Lucas stepped forward, brushing aside the last of the grotesque residue.

The wall crumbled, revealing the exit.

We both stepped out, and for the first time in days—Silence.

It was 2:32 AM. I knew, somehow. The kind of time your body feels.

The air was cold. Fresh. I could see my breath. And above us, the sky stretched wide and star-filled. Not just the usual constellations.

No.

Tonight... the stars doubled.

A faint, ethereal glow bled across the horizon like a river of white dust. I could see it—another galaxy, drifting slowly, quietly, like it had always belonged there.

Evelina's words echoed in my head.

Once you exit the hive, there will be a star-filled aroma... listen to your curses.

I didn't know what I was listening for yet.

But something inside me... Was changing.

Lucas dropped to the grass with a soft grunt. "Nice," he sighed, stretching his limbs.

I stayed standing, eyes fixed upward.

The stars looked close enough to reach.

Like if I stretched high enough... Maybe I could touch them.

I took a slow step forward into the grass, my boots wet with dew. My chains curled gently around my arms now, not in defense—but almost in awe. My thorns retracted completely, as if silence deserved reverence.

The air shimmered faintly.

And then—The whispers came.

Faint at first, like breath against the nape of my neck. I tilted my head, holding my breath. My eyes locked onto the star-slick sky, and my heartbeat slowed.

Then I heard it again—

"T'mari ith valekh. En'cor da'ron. Rith senn marol... Kai'reth."

The words rattled through my cursed chains like wind through hollow bones. They echoed, not just in sound—but in meaning. I didn't know the language, but... I felt it.

I knew what those meant...

My curses.

"You can't win alone."

"Fight with us."

"Let us fight for you."

I froze.

I could feel them—negative emotions, my hatred—alive. Whispering, trembling, reaching. I had always controlled them like weapons.

But now they... asked.

To fight with me.

Not for me.

As part of me.

The stars above shimmered again, shifting ever so slightly as if the galaxies themselves were watching.

I lifted my hand slowly, palm facing the sky.

"...You want to protect him too?" I asked quietly.

No answer.

Just the wind. Just the stars. Just the way my thorns gently coiled around my wrist in response.

I stood there for a long moment, head tilted upward, and Evelina's voice returned like a ghost behind my ribs—

"Be prepared to be heartbroken."

Why would she say that? Why now?

What was coming?

My breath hitched.

I thought back—over the past weeks, over everything that had happened.

The crying nights. The bloody training. The pain.

Kaiser—my everything. The one who stood by me when I was worthless. When I was just a fragile girl clinging to delusions of happiness.

I'm not that girl anymore.

The one who needed saving.

No.

I stood in silence, watching galaxies burn slowly across the heavens, and I let go of that version of myself—the weak one, the crying one, the broken one.

I just want to save him.

Like he saved me.

And if that means I have to call upon every damned curse, twist the essence of the dead, and burn myself down to ash and ascend the dead themselves—

...I'll do it.

Gladly.

Lucas's Perspective:

Level 19.

Finally.

As I stood beneath the sprawling galaxies above, stars bleeding into the sky like scattered diamonds on obsidian glass, the system's monotone voice echoed in my head, laced with its usual charm.

「 Ding~ Level 19 achieved. About time, mage of slowness. You've got unused stat points. Want me to hold your hand too, or can you click your own menu like a big boy? 」

I rolled my eyes. "Bring up my status."

The holographic screen blinked open before me. And I quickly used my remaining attributes.

Status Menu:

Name: Lucas

Class: Superior Mage

Level: 19

Age: 15

Attributes – 0 Left

Strength: 12

Agility: 15

Endurance: 10

Perception: 15

Intelligence: 13

Mana: 11

Divine Creation: 5

Skills:

Light-Elemental Magic

Mana Control (Lv. 4)

Divine Protection of Chaos

Divine Protection: Adaptive Venom Synthesis

Lightstep II: 175% Speed Boost

Visionary Sight: Perfect Dark Vision

Notes:

HP: 900/900

MP: 1250/1250

Most of my points had gone into perception and agility. I needed speed. Precision. Azrael had said it—a moment's delay is a moment dead. And after everything I'd seen in that hive...

Yeah. I believed him now.

「 Wise move. Agility for dodging death, perception for knowing which way to dodge. Proud of you. Almost. 」

The air was sharp and clean—first time in days I could breathe without tasting rot or blood. A chill wind cut across my cheek as I stepped forward, eyes locked on the stars above. It wasn't just beautiful—it felt intentional. The stars didn't shimmer. They shifted.

And then—

「 Not to freak you out or anything, but the stars are speaking. 」

I blinked. "You serious?"

「 Yes, oh earthly flashlight. Translating now. Matching stellar alignment patterns and context... Yep. Bingo. It says: 'You can save them all with your light.' 」

My heart clenched.

Save them all?

With my light?

I wasn't even sure I could save myself a week ago.

The stars shifted again.

「 Uh... update. The message just changed. Not great. Listen up: 'Something worse than a disaster will happen soon.' And a new warning: Supreme Being vs The Realms. Choose our side. 」

I frowned. "Supreme being?"

「 The heavens—based on astral projection resonance—are suggesting they want you to oppose it. Possibly even destroy it. They're betting on you, Lucas. 」

My jaw clenched.

Who the hell was the Supreme Being?

Why now? Why when everything was just starting to calm down?

And then the stars shimmered one last time.

「 Final message... it says: 'He'll come to take her.' 」

I lowered my gaze. My eyes drifted.

Celia.

She was sitting on a rock, arms folded, staring into the stars like they were speaking to her aswell. Her hair flew in the wind, chains loosely wrapped around her shoulders. She looked lost in thought.

And suddenly the weight hit me.

Was the message about her?

Was he... coming for her?

Who even was this Supreme Being?

And if she was connected to that... What the hell does that make her?

I shook my head, pushing the thought away before it consumed me.

Not now.

I exhaled slowly. The stars above had stopped moving. The night was silent again. But I knew better.

"How long to Rinascita?" I asked aloud, not looking away from the horizon.

「 With her pace calculated in... estimated time: one day. Assuming no ambushes. Assuming you don't get us sidetracked chasing pretty girls again. 」

"Noted."

I rolled my shoulders and walked forward, mana tingling at my fingertips. The air was changing. The stars were watching. Something big was coming.

But I was level 19 now.

And this time—I'm not going to watch from the sidelines.

I'm going to change the game.

The stars had whispered. The heavens had warned.

Now... the real battle begins.

Rinascita, the proud town at the heart of Celestine, stands on the brink of annihilation. Once nearly wiped from existence, its scars still run deep. But this time, it won't be caught unprepared.

This time, The defenders have changed.

Rinascita vs. The Ultimate Tyrant

Will the town crumble a second time beneath monstrous wings and a mind of devastation?

Or... will this be the moment it rises...

But beyond the clouds... behind the veil of stars...

A question lingers, haunting and cold:

Where was he...?

—Next Chapter: When the Sky Falls

