

The Last Step

#Chapter 81: The Sky Falls - Swarm Tyrant - Read The Last Step Chapter 81: The Sky Falls - Swarm Tyrant

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Levi's Perspective:

First Person | War Day | North Side of Rinascita

Today was the day.

The sun was shining like it gave a damn. Which meant someone had to.

I bounced on my heels, shaking off the stiffness in my legs. The warmth hit my face, a little too soft for the kind of morning this was. The kind of morning where you either carve your name into history, or you become one of the names people whisper with pity.

I wasn't planning on being whispered about.

I'd failed once. Against the Tyrant. That oversized, bone-crushing bastard shattered my legs like toothpicks, made me feel weak for the first time in years. I still feel the echoes of that pain. Every step since then has been a reminder. A punishment.

But pain is a good teacher. And I'm a fast learner.

I let out a long breath, looking up at the cloudless sky. "You're watching, right?" I murmured. "Emma..."

I didn't finish the sentence.

I didn't need to.

"Yo." A lazy hand slapped my shoulder. Xander. Still carrying that look like he just woke up from a ten-year nap. "You good?"

I smirked. "Better than ever."

"Sure," he said, voice as dry as my humor. "Just don't get folded again."

"Don't worry," I cracked my neck, stretching my arms, "this time I'm folding him."

Alina was already unsheathing her blade, her calm presence steadying the tension like always. She didn't need to say much. Her silence was sharp enough to cut through fear.

We were stationed on the north side of Rinascita, right where the grass had died days ago from the grotesques' advance. The air here didn't carry breeze. It carried our past failures.

Further back, I could hear Zain's voice shouting orders. Classic guild leader energy. Trying to rally the hearts of people who still hadn't seen how close death can dance.

Sylvia, too—commanding from the other side, her voice carrying across the battlefield with that noble calm of hers. "This is it! Your actions here will decide your future, don't run away now!"

A bit dramatic, but fine. She had a crowd to control.

I looked forward. And there they were.

The grotesques.

Slow at first, crawling from the treeline, their numbers spreading like a rot. But that wasn't what got me.

It was the thing behind them.

No.

Not the same thing.

The Swarm Tyrant.

It was... different.

Bigger. More composed. Like it had evolved again. A scream erupted from its maw—a sickening, high-pitched blast that didn't just hit your ears. It rattled your bones. Froze your breath.

I clenched my teeth as the world seemed to blur for a second.

"What the hell is this pressure?" I muttered. Even my lungs felt heavier.

"Don't let it intimidate you," Alina said, sword lifted, voice unwavering. "This time, we're prepared."

She was right.

We had Adonis and his knights holding the main lines. The guilds spread thin across the city, maintaining the perimeter. Every Sword Saint that mattered was on this team. Xander, Alina... and me.

And the plan?

Simple.

Split and conquer. Adonis would handle the ground war—kill the masses, keep Rinascita standing. We'd go for the Tyrant. Take its head.

Because this war isn't just about winning.

It's about proving who we are.

Xander cracked his neck beside me. "He looks stronger. You think he trained or something?"

"Yeah," I said, stepping forward. "He trained... to die better."

They chuckled—nervously. Even Alina's lip twitched slightly.

"Alright then," I whispered to myself, eyes locked on the creature that haunted my nightmares. "You broke me once. But this time?"

I grinned, pulling my blade from its sheath, the sound of metal echoing with finality.

"I'm breaking you."

My legs buzzed with lightning. My mind was still, focused.

I wasn't the same man I was that night.

And this time...

I'd win.

Time to make history remember the name—

Levi.

The strongest saint of all time.

The air stank of rot and smoke.

Grotesques surged like a black tide, screaming and gnashing, clawing over each other to reach the walls of Rinascita. But for once, it wasn't chaos. It was a massacre.

And we were the ones doing the butchering.

Adonis was... terrifying.

I've seen plenty of strong people. Hell, I am one. But watching him move through the grotesques was like watching a god in motion—clean, supreme carnage.

One breath—he was standing still.

The next—seven grotesques fell in a single blink.

His blade barely made a sound, almost like the air refused to scream in his presence. Every slash cut through their mutated bodies and struck the core dead center, as if the sword was pulled by gravity. It wasn't brute strength.

It was refined annihilation.

He spun through a charging horde, foot barely grazing the ground, and cleaved a grotesque straight in half mid-air. The next two tried to flank him—he simply twisted his wrist, parried the left one's claw with his shoulder plate, and drove his sword backward through the other's chest. Both dropped. Gone. Forgotten.

All within seconds.

Those new weapons... yeah, they worked. Specially designed to resonate with the grotesques' cores, just like Avelric said. When they landed, the grotesques didn't just die—they shattered. Cores crumbled into powder.

A man screamed nearby—he'd been pushed out of formation, one of the grotesques lunging for him from behind.

Before the man could even turn around, Adonis blurred past him like a shadow.

One hand grabbed the man by the collar and tossed him aside—clean, efficient, no wasted motion.

The grotesque lunged.

Adonis turned, slicing clean through its skull and core in a single upward strike.

The beast dropped. The man panted on the ground, staring up in disbelief.

"Stay behind the line," Adonis muttered, voice flat as iron, before vanishing back into the fight.

Zain was calling out formations, voice booming like thunder, and to his credit, people were listening. His commands were clear, focused—he sounded like a man who actually knew the battlefield, he learned that he has to be active unlike last time.

Sylvia too. Calm, sharp. Rallying groups. Repositioning injured members behind makeshift barriers, shouting magical defenses and reinforcement signals across the field. That noble command of hers came in handy. Her presence alone kept half the backline from breaking formation.

But still somehow she didn't look impressed from Adonis... almost as if she had seen something far greater than to be impressed from him.

A flash of light exploded near the east flank—one grotesque slammed into a group of younger guild members, sending a man crashing onto the stones. Blood pooled beneath him, and he was barely conscious.

Just as another grotesque leapt forward to finish the job—

"Oh no you don't."

Sophia slid in, hand glowing as she caught the guy with one hand and tossed him behind her, casting a fast burst of healing magic across his chest. His bleeding stopped instantly. The grotesque charged her, but before it could reach—

Arius dropped in from above, cleaving straight through it with a twin slash.

"Sophia, you can patch him up later. Focus on the big guys!" he shouted, spinning his swords.

Sophia rolled her eyes, flicking a blood-smeared strand of hair back. "You know me, Arius. I multitask."

They both smirked, then bolted into the fray—cutting through grotesques together like it was choreography.

Yeah... this time, we weren't losing.

But then, the battlefield went still.

A pressure—heavy, unnatural—sank into my chest like lead. I turned forward.

And there it was.

The Swarm Tyrant.

Its enormous body stood still while the grotesques threw themselves at death. It hadn't moved an inch this whole time... and now I knew why.

It was observing.

And then it spoke.

Its voice... gods, its voice wasn't sound. It was corrosion made audible. Like a hundred minds screaming from the depths of a corpse.

"You three... are the only threats left."

It stared directly at us. Me, Alina, Xander.

"I'll kill all of you first... then devour the rest slowly. Their screams will be my victory."

The ground cracked beneath it as it stepped forward.

Alina exhaled. "Then savor this moment until you die."

Xander shrugged, eyes glowing faintly. "Tch. I skipped breakfast. You're paying for that."

I stepped forward, blade raised, heart steady.

"Big mistake... thinking we're the same as last time."

The Swarm Tyrant roared, and the earth quaked.

And just like that—The final round began.

Its wings opened—huge, jagged, black-veined like some demonic moth—and a sharp gust of wind blasted through the terrain. The Swarm Tyrant launched itself toward us, faster than last time.

It didn't lunge.

It vanished.

"Above!" I shouted.

Its claws slammed down from the sky, the shockwave forcing us all back. I skidded, twisting mid-air, barely managing to land without breaking a leg. Alina struck her sword up and blocked, her arms trembling as her heels cracked into the stone. Xander sidestepped entirely, that lazy smirk still on his face, as if he was late to a morning lecture.

Tyrant didn't give us a second—it dove again, wings slicing the air, its entire body glowing with eerie green veins. Poison.

Alina called out, "Don't let it scratch you! The toxin's concentrated in its claws and wings!"

Yeah, no thanks.

It came for me this time. A direct swipe of its claw, bladed and shining with wet venom—I ducked, twisted under its arm, and shot a lightning bolt point-blank into its ribs. It staggered... then hissed and retaliated with a wide wing sweep.

The winds tore up trees. Earth cracked. Poison dust scattered in the air.

We kept our distance, moving in and out, cutting when we could—but it was relentless, smart, adaptive. Nothing like the brute we fought last time.

Xander dashed in with a faint, his sword glowing with crimson. "I'll go in. Keep it distracted."

"Don't rush!" Alina shouted.

But he did. Rushing forward, making himself wide open.

The Tyrant reacted instantly—its claw raised, venom ready to tear him in half.

Too fast.

Too stupid.

...Or maybe not.

Xander twisted mid-dash, flipped, and kicked his sword upward—not into the tyrant, but into the air—then spun, caught it in reverse grip, and slammed it into the beast's knee from below. Metal cracked bone.

Its leg gave out with a crunch.

Xander's eyes lit up. "Heh. These blades really were built well."

His palm ignited with fire magic.

He grabbed the blade still stuck in the Tyrant's knee—and lit it up. The flames roared red.

"Let's see you walk after this—!"

Then came Alina.

Without hesitation, she struck her sword downward into the flames, her lightning surging into the core of the fire. The entire blaze erupted, turning blue.

Lightning and fire—normally a bad mix. Too volatile. Too hard to control.

But the Queen of Technique made it art.

The Swarm Tyrant roared in pain, part of its leg exploding from the temperature shift.

I backed away and muttered, "Xander and Alina... they actually did it. They learned. They're covering for each other now."

That's new.

The Tyrant stumbled back, its muscles twitching, skin bubbling—and like before, its skin started healing, flesh crawling over burned wounds. Cores dimmed then flared back to life.

Nope.

Not again.

I dropped into a crouch. Activated everything.

Godspeed.

A veil of snow and magic blurred around me—and I disappeared.

Then reappeared right behind it.

My foot crashed into its back with everything I had. Boom. The Tyrant soared forward like a cannonball.

"Catch!" I yelled.

Xander groaned. "What a hassle."

He flicked his wrist. Two spheres of magic—fire and water—floated beside him.

Normally? They cancel each other out. Opposing elements.

But he didn't fuse them.

He clashed them.

The steam explosion was blinding. The moment the tyrant entered it—screeching, eyes wide—Xander stepped through the mist like a damn ghost, stabbing both swords straight into its eyes.

One.

Two.

Blood sprayed.

"Should've worn goggles," Xander muttered.

The Swarm Tyrant roared, reeling, its burnt flesh peeling off, stumbling back—sightless now, face mangled, entire body steaming from our combo.

It hissed, its voice like gravel and death.

"Pesky humans... DIE—!"

Its eyes, or what remained of them, started healing again—bit by bit.

Ah, hell.

Now it's angry.

The damn thing roared so loud it shook the trees—and that's when it happened.

Its claws grew longer, thicker, dripping with more concentrated venom, and its wings... they expanded. At least double in size. No way it was the same creature as before. This thing evolved mid-fight.

"It just got faster," I muttered.

Much faster.

It vanished. Blinked out of sight.

But we were ready.

Last night, we planned everything.

We weren't just going to wing it like before. We sat down—me, Alina, and Xander—and we did something we'd never done: strategize.

Alina's weakness was handling too many incoming attacks at once. Her style was precise, refined, meant for duels. So Xander volunteered to deal with multi-angle assaults, covering her back.

Xander's flaw? His reaction time. Too slow for sudden directional shifts.

That's where I came in.

And me? My Godspeed drains my defenses. I'm pure offense in that state, meaning one good hit and I'm splattered.

So Alina? She covers me.

With her superior water elemental control, she manipulates moisture and currents in the air to slow the world down just enough for me to dodge.

We weren't just fighting alone anymore. We were a team.

The Tyrant came in like death incarnate. Wings flared, claws forward, screeching for blood.

Xander spun, deflecting the wing-edge with his sword just as it went for Alina.

Alina ducked, slicing upward to knock its talon off trajectory before it hit me.

I blitzed forward, grabbed Xander by the collar, and dragged him back before the poison-filled wing spike pierced his leg.

Three saints.

One rhythm.

Then Alina's eyes narrowed.

"Prepare," she muttered.

Suddenly, the earth below rumbled.

She slammed her foot down and twisted her sword.

Wind and Earth.

The dirt cracked, and then lifted—twisting into a full-on tornado of stone and air. A spiraling prison of elemental fury.

The Swarm Tyrant got sucked right in.

"That should slow it down!" she yelled.

But then we saw it—Xander was caught in it, too.

Alina flinched. "Xander—"

"This is so much fun," he said, voice calm.

What?

Inside the chaos, his grin widened.

"This reminds me of the time I fought that bandaged guy in Levinton... the one protecting that Celia girl. His movement was perfect. I lost that fight, and I hated it."

He raised his blade. It shimmered.

"But it made me realize... how fun this really is."

His aura snapped.

Black, silver-edged. Grim. Cold.

The aura of a reaper.

He moved like death itself.

Wind blades formed around him, controlled by his mana. As if his sword commanded the storm. The Swarm Tyrant roared, slashing, spinning, but every direction it turned, a cut answered it.

Xander flew around it. Cut. Shifted. Vanished. Appeared. Cut again.

He twirled inside the tornado like a living scythe.

"I want to try," he said.

And then he aimed for the neck.

But just before the final strike, the tornado changed color.

A sickening purple.

Toxins.

The Tyrant released its venom into the whirlwind, corrupting it, and Xander gasped.

The poison seeped in, coating the air, his eyes dulled, and he started to fall—

"No, you don't," Alina said.

She launched upward like a bolt of lightning, blade humming with power—

Alina went up—eyes sharp, breath heavy—and without a second thought, she inhaled the toxins right beside Xander.

The poison should've crippled her. But instead... her eyes flared, bright like twin stars on the verge of collapse, and she whispered something beneath her breath I couldn't hear.

Then I saw it.

She didn't just strike—she summoned the wrath of the elements themselves.

Air wrapped first, spinning around her blade like an elegant ribbon, slicing the atmosphere.

Water flooded into the spiral, coating the air like a cyclone of silver.

Earth grounded it, giving weight and mass to the vortex, jagged stones clinging to the water.

Fire flared next, a controlled burn that danced across the rotating mass, turning water into steam—blinding heat pulsing from it.

Then came lightning, crackling inside like a beating heart, accelerating everything—supercharging it into raw destruction.

And lastly...

Light.

A radiant glow that fused it all, crystallizing the swirl into a comet of divine beauty and death.

She didn't even scream.

She launched it forward, and it carved straight into the Swarm Tyrant's chest. Right where Xander had torn open its armor.

That bastard dropped like a meteor. The whole tornado collapsed with it, crashing down in a burst of shockwave and flame.

I stood frozen, just watching.

Alina had used this technique once before—during our duel back in Sylvaris. Back then it was wild, uncontrolled. She acted on instinct.

But now...

She knew exactly what she was doing.

Xander had broken its body.

Alina had pierced its core.

And both of them—screaming my name—collapsed midair, their bodies giving in to the poison they inhaled for this one shot.

They sacrificed themselves...

For me.

"DO IT NOW LEVI!" They both screamed.

I clenched my fists.

I can do it.

I activated Godspeed. My body flickered into motion, every cell igniting like lightning.

I raced toward the Swarm Tyrant.

But it turned its head. Just for a moment. And stared at them—at Xander and Alina—with a gaze so filled with murderous intent it froze me.

My speed wasn't enough.

It stood again. Wings cracked. Poison dripping. It started flying—trying to escape.

I pushed harder, muscles screaming, feet tearing up the ground behind me.

No... it can't be happening...

I can't be slower... not now...

As I ran, the world twisted.

Around me—chaos. Guild members clashing with grotesques, Zain screaming orders, Sylvia covering the wounded. Adonis cutting down everything in his path.

But none of it mattered.

My legs...

They felt like they were bound by chains made from my own fear.

And then—out of nowhere—a shadow slid across the edges of my vision.

It whispered.

"Your parents are dead because of your fears. You're not worthy of being a Sword Saint."

SHUT UP! I screamed in my mind.

But the fear clawed in.

The Tyrant gained more distance. The world slowed. My breath caught.

"You failed again."

That voice...

It wasn't the monster's.

It was mine.

I staggered. My feet dragged. Everything screamed for me to stop.

And then—Darkness.

A deeper shadow appeared, engulfing even the whisper. A silence followed so absolute it felt like I'd left the battlefield entirely.

Two void-black eyes stared at me.

Empty.

"You're still setting limits to your own potential."

And then—

The world blurred—And I remembered my past.

(Flashback – Levi's Perspective)

Years ago, when the world still bowed under my feet and my name hadn't tasted the sting of defeat—I was the champion.

Tournament after tournament, solo duels, duos, guild circuits—didn't matter.

I always won.

Because I was the strongest.

That day, the sun blazed above like a crown made for me. My boots crushed the road eastward, dust swirling with every step I took beside my then-teammate.

Kaiser Everhart.

Quiet. Plain. Always with that worn coat draped over him.

We were heading east—where more challengers awaited. More fools who'd raise their swords with hope, only to be reminded of what despair looked like from the other end of my blade.

But then...

He stopped.

"You should head back west, Levi," he said.

I paused. Blinked.

"...Huh? Why would I do such a thing?"

His blue eyes didn't flinch. Didn't even meet me with warmth. "You have to return to your last remaining family member, Levi. Your sister—Emma."

I scoffed. "Don't start again, Kaiser. And especially don't butt into my matters."

But he didn't back off like usual.

His eyes turned colder. Sharper. "You're running from her. From what you did. From the truth."

That did it.

I stepped forward and grabbed him by the collar, fury boiling in my throat. "Shut your mouth. I've never failed. Why would I run—"

But he cut me off.

"I know you're the reason she lost her parents. The reason your village was slaughtered."

That voice...

It wasn't just cold.

It was merciless.

He slapped my hand away with a strength I hadn't seen in him before—clean, precise, effortless.

He straightened his coat and looked me dead in the eye. "I don't want to waste time with someone too much of a coward to face his own blood. I'm leaving your party."

...What?

This E-rank nobody... telling me—Levi, Sword Saint Prodigy—to sit down?

That was it.

I drew my sword, pointing it straight to his throat. "You should be grateful, Kaiser. I let an E-rank like you ride in my shadow. And let me remind you—you've never beaten me. Not once. So know your place."

But this time...

He didn't act afraid.

Didn't flinch.

He looked at the blade, then at me, like he was already seeing the end.

"Then how about a one-on-one?" he said. "You versus me."

"...What?" I muttered.

"If you win, I'll do anything you say," he continued. "But if I win... you'll go back. You'll face her."

The nerve on this guy.

"You've built some confidence to speak back, Kaiser. I'll give you that," I said, smirking. "But remember... you're the weakest adventurer of all time. You can't even use magic."

He pulled his coat tighter and stepped into stance.

"...Then its on."

The Duel

I wasn't expecting much.

I mean, let's be real—I had Godspeed. The moment this duel started, I was already behind him.

And so, with a breath and a grin, I disappeared in a flash.

Fast—clean—lethal.

I aimed for his neck, the fight-ending slash. Quick and flawless.

But he raised a dagger.

Clang.

Right on time. Right on target.

...Right where I aimed.

I skid back, blinking.

"...Pretty good."

What the hell?

This was the guy who trailed behind me for a year, getting bruised just walking too fast. The guy who never spoke unless I let him. He was nothing more than a sidekick.

So why was he fighting back now?

I clicked my tongue, surging forward again. Faster this time.

But again—he stood still.

Every strike... blocked.

His dagger danced in minimal, perfect motions—his eyes dull, unmoved. Not a single emotion broke his face.

He looked...

Disappointed.

"Don't you dare look down on me!" I shouted.

I infused fire through my blade—slicing arcs of flame through the air toward him. He had no magic. No way he could counter this.

But then—he jumped.

Not away. Toward me.

Midair—he twisted through the fire slashes like a dancer in a deadly waltz. Before I could track it, his hand grabbed mine—twisted it, and SLAM—

An elbow to my jaw sent the world spinning.

He landed a few feet away before I could recover, calmly brushing ash off his coat.

I staggered back, heat crawling up my spine. "How the hell did you just do that?!"

No response.

Just those damned unreadable eyes.

"You'll pay for that," I snapped, lunging forward. My blade roared to life with a burst of speed and flame as I aimed dead for his throat—

—only to cut through an afterimage.

"What—?!"

Suddenly, behind me—

No. This wasn't right.

Who the hell was this?

This guy never once blocked my attacks. Never stood toe-to-toe with me. He used to sit behind me in inns and count coins. I carried our missions. I carried him.

So how...

How was he keeping up?

I turned my head—And there he was.

Anticipating my moves...

His steps mirrored mine. His pace, equal. His movement...

Unnatural.

Like he didn't just react—he predicted.

And his words cut deeper than any blade.

"You're nothing special," he said. "Just someone born with fast legs, thinking you can run from your past."

"You're nothing but trash."

"SHUT UP!"

I screamed and swung my blade at him again—only to carve another illusion. Another false image.

And then—I felt it.

A cold hand gripped the back of my head.

"What—"

BOOM.

My skull slammed into the dirt. The shock blasted through my spine like lightning. My eyes rolled. Vision shattered.

I couldn't breathe.

The last thing I saw—Weren't his blue eyes.

They were black.

Void black.

"You're not even worthy of fighting me," he whispered.

"Much less unlocking a seal."

My vision blurred. My limbs went limp.

His final words, low and cruel—

"Keep your end of the deal, loser."

And then—Darkness.

...

A Few Hours Later

The sky was crying.

I don't know how long I'd been lying there, but when I opened my eyes, all I saw was gray. Clouds spilling everything they held. And every drop that hit my skin felt like it knew me... like it knew what I had done.

The rain soaked through my clothes. My back pressed against the cold ground. Arms limp. Sword nowhere in sight. I didn't move.

I just... stared.

Up at that sky like it had all the answers I'd been running from.

The world was quiet—only the patter of rain and the soft rustling of wind through trees. But inside, I couldn't shut out the noise. My mind wouldn't stop.

"You're nothing but trash."

His voice echoed again. I grit my teeth.

I'd never lost before. Never.

Not once since the day I started walking alone. I rose through towns, guilds, arenas. I crushed every opponent. I was untouchable.

I was Levi, the one who couldn't lose.

But today...

I didn't just lose.

I was humiliated.

"Kaiser must've cheated..." I muttered under my breath, the rain clinging to my lashes.

"There's no way. He had to have used some kind of illusion trick... something..."

But my voice cracked.

And I stopped lying to myself.

"...No."

I swallowed the bitterness.

"To grow... I have to accept it."

I clenched my jaw as I turned my head slightly to the side, the mud sticking to my cheek.

"He was right."

My voice was barely above a whisper.

"I've been running away... since the beginning."

That memory—my village. The screaming. The grotesques tearing through everything I loved. I ran. I ran like a damn coward.

And they died.

Mom... Dad...

Because I thought I was strong. I thought I could take on anything, so I ran ahead, left them behind.

And all that strength?

It meant nothing when it mattered most.

Emma...

The only one who survived. My little sister. The one I left behind because I couldn't bear to see her face.

She would hate me.

The moment she looked at me again, I'd see it in her eyes—everything I did wrong. Every failure. Every time I should've been there but wasn't.

I lifted one arm and covered my eyes, trying to keep the tears from slipping out. The rain made it easy to pretend they weren't there.

"Kaiser was right..."

My voice trembled.

"Our parents died because I was arrogant. Because I thought I was the strongest..."

"But I ran... I ran out of fear. And I let them die."

I lay there, letting it all hit me.

The storm inside me was louder than the one above.

"...I'll return home," I whispered. "I'll answer to her."

The thought scared me more than any monster ever had.

But if I kept running, I'd never grow stronger.

And Kaiser...

I exhaled slowly, letting my arm drop from my face, staring at the gray above.

"Why were you holding back for the past year?"

"What kind of monster are you really...?"

I closed my eyes as the rain kept falling.

"Next time we meet..."

"You'll answer me."

"You two-faced bastard."

A Few Days Later – Levi's Perspective:

The sun was setting.

Golden light spilled across the quiet neighborhood as I stood in front of a small wooden house with cracked edges and a familiar scent clinging to the air. Home.

My boots felt heavier than ever. Each step here had been a war against myself.

And now that I was finally here...

I couldn't move.

I stood at her door. My sister's. Emma's.

The last piece of my family.

The one I abandoned.

The wooden planks creaked slightly beneath me as I slowly raised my hand. My knuckles hovered above the door. Just... inches away.

She'll close it again.

That's what I kept telling myself. Over and over.

She'll slam it in your face like she should. You deserve it. You left her alone. You ran.

I closed my eyes and finally knocked.

Once.

Twice.

Then silence.

I could hear my heartbeat. It felt louder than the knock itself.

And then—The door opened.

I didn't look right away. I couldn't. My hand dropped slowly to my side, and I kept my eyes closed, bracing for a scream, or a slap, or worse—her silence.

But I heard... a sound.

A soft, shuddered breath. Like someone had been holding it in for years.

I opened my eyes.

And I saw her.

Emma.

Tears rolled freely down her cheeks, and her lips trembled as she stared at me like she couldn't believe I was real. She hadn't changed that much. Still had our mother's eyes. Still had that same softness in her face.

And I—I was nothing like the brother she once knew.

"Levi..." she whispered, voice cracked, raw.

Her small hands suddenly clenched into fists as she stumbled forward and began hitting me, weakly, over and over on the chest. I didn't move.

"Where were you?!"

Her voice broke with each word, fists falling like rain.

"Where were you, Levi?! Why did you leave me?!"

I lowered my head, letting the pain dig in, letting her tears soak into my shirt.

"I was scared..." I whispered.

She kept hitting.

"You left me alone! I waited every day—I waited for you to come back!"

Each word was a dagger.

"You said you'd stay with me me, you promised! And then... you left me when I needed you the most!"

I knelt down slowly, letting my knees hit the porch.

"I'm sorry, Emma..." My voice cracked, and my hands trembled. "I should've come back... I should've never left you alone."

Her fists slowed.

"I hated you," she whispered.

I froze.

"I hated you every single day for leaving. Every time I cried, every time I got scared, I told myself you didn't care. That you forgot about me."

Her voice quivered. "But I still waited."

I looked up at her, my eyes burning.

"You're not mad at me?"

"I missed you more than I ever hated you..." she said, her voice breaking completely as she collapsed into my arms, clutching me tightly. "Don't leave me again, brother. Please... just stay. I don't want to be alone anymore."

I held her. I held her so tightly, I thought I'd break.

"I'm so sorry..." I whispered into her hair. "I should've protected you. I should've been your shield. I let you suffer alone."

"You're here now," she murmured. "Just... don't go."

"I won't." I placed my forehead against hers, my voice low. "I won't run anymore."

A long silence stretched between us.

"I want to get stronger," I said. "Strong enough that nothing in this world can ever touch you again. Strong enough to destroy anything that ever tries to take you away."

She nodded through her tears, still holding onto me.

"Then... I'll wait. But this time, don't make me wait alone."

I smiled, broken and guilty.

"I won't. Never again."

That day, I didn't feel like a sword saint.

I just felt like her brother again.

And for the first time in years—That was enough.

Present – Levi's Perspective:

The chains around my body, cold and binding, wrapped around my chest like the guilt I'd carried all these years. Fear had always been there. Mocking me. Telling me I'd fail again. That I'd lose. That I'd run.

But not this time.

"No."

My voice cut through the dark.

My eyes snapped open — glowing a furious, violent purple — and lightning surged through my veins like purpose reborn.

"I will not limit my potential anymore!!"

The bindings cracked — then shattered — beneath the weight of my resolve.

Flashes of Emma's tears came back to me. Her voice. Her pain. Her trembling hands against my chest.

"Don't leave me again."

"I won't," I whispered, eyes burning.

I will never run away again.

The world slowed down, the roar of battle muted, like I'd pierced through time itself.

I was no longer afraid.

I was gone.

I channeled every fiber of my being — every regret, every failure, every ounce of strength I'd gained — into my god-speed.

The wind screamed around me.

The earth bent from my sheer acceleration.

Purple lightning erupted across my body like divine judgment, crackling and twisting through the sky, and I shot forward like a meteor carved from vengeance.

"YOU LYING PIECE OF SHIT!" I shouted, storming forward with the fury of a thousand storms.

"I CAN DO BETTER. I WILL DO BETTER!!"

The Swarm Tyrant, still attempting to flee, turned its monstrous head for a moment — and I was already there.

WITH THE SPEED I HAVE...

I reached it.

WITH THE SPEED I HAVE...

I CAN KILL YOU.

RIGHT HERE.

RIGHT NOW!

I gripped both of my star-forged blades in hand.

And with God-Speed Supremacy pushed beyond its absolute limits — I didn't strike.
I shredded.

Each movement, faster than sound. Faster than logic.

I sliced millions of times per second, roaring with everything I had—

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!!"

The impact fractured the very air.

The sky cracked. The clouds were torn apart.

A quake rippled outward — the shockwaves of my fury expanding like a storm trying to erase the world.

The swarm tyrant's body convulsed under the pressure.

Pieces of it exploded. Its roars were lost in the violence of my will.

And then—Boom.

The explosion came.

A violent, blinding flash of purple light and flame, swallowing me whole.

But I didn't care.

This wasn't for glory.

This was proof.

That I kept my promise.

As the smoke cleared and the wind picked up, I stood among the ashes.

The sky settled. Silence returned.

The Swarm Tyrant laid crippled, torn apart. Its armor obliterated, body twitching, defeated.

I looked down at it, blood dripping from my face.

Know this world.

This is me.

This is Levi Ashton.

The Strongest Sword Saint Alive.

The battlefield fell silent for a moment... then erupted into roars of celebration.

From the guild's side of the field, cheers echoed loud enough to shake the air. The grotesques were still pouring in, but it no longer mattered—because the Swarm Tyrant was dead.

Even Adonis, the ever-cold and composed Knight of the Realm, allowed a faint smile to touch his lips. Standing tall, soaked in blood and glory, he looked toward the crumbling corpse Levi had left in his wake.

"Exceptional," Adonis muttered to himself. "So he was holding back before... No. This is his first step. To knowing his true potential."

Nearby, Avelric jumped up, practically glowing. "He did it! He defeated it! HAHAAH— THAT'S OUR SAINT!!"

His fists pumped into the air with joy, the other guild members slapping each other on the backs, shouting their relief and triumph. Their morale, once nearly shattered, reignited like a bonfire.

Farther off, in the edge of the devastation, Xander lay half-sprawled on the dirt, his breathing uneven. Alina knelt beside him, her palm glowing faintly with healing magic, both of them drained.

"The saint really did it," Xander muttered with a faint smirk, watching the smoking battlefield with half-lidded eyes.

"Yeah," Alina whispered, exhausted but smiling—her voice soft like the wind after a storm.

From the outer perimeter, Zain, still commanding the reinforcements, raised his sword into the air.

"NOW THAT THE TYRANT IS DEAD—WE CLEAR THE GROTESQUES AND IT'S OVER!! PUSH THEM BACK!!"

The army surged forward once more, blades sharper, wills stronger.

Sylvia, standing tall atop the stone barrier, repeated the orders alongside Zain, her voice unwavering.

But her eyes... her expression... lacked celebration.

She watched Levi barely standing in the crater below, surrounded by dust and blood, and a shiver ran down her spine.

"Why does it feel wrong...?"

Her thoughts churned as her grip tightened on the sword hanging at her side.

"The first time we fought that thing, it crushed us. We were unprepared. It nearly killed all of us."

But this time?

Everyone had wielded specialized weapons, blades that pierced grotesque cores like paper—weapons Kaiser gave her.

Everyone had taken preventative vaccinations, protecting against the Tyrant's poison... one of the vials Kaiser gave her and she made similar variations of it. The liquid managed to make the body resistant to poison the grotesques released.

Even Alina and Xander had survived thanks to those exact measures.

It wasn't luck.

It was calculated.

Sylvia slowly looked toward the sky, wind tugging at her cloak.

"You planned all of this, didn't you... Kaiser."

Her thoughts trembled on the edge of admiration... and unease.

"But if everything went according to your design—then why does it feel like we walked exactly where someone wanted us to go?"

Then—darkness.

The scene shifts.

Somewhere far, far away from Rinascita... deep within shadows untouched by the sun... a dark throne room breathes.

And something within it... stirs.

The Silent Executioner knelt, its cloak dragging across the obsidian floor.

No sound followed him. Just stillness... and the echo of his words.

"The Swarm Tyrant has fallen, my lord."

Atop his throne of twisted onyx and cold silver, Azrion did not shift. Only the slow curl of his lips betrayed satisfaction.

"Exactly as I had envisioned," he said smoothly. "Now it will be reborn."

Back in Rinascita, the battlefield—just moments ago roaring with celebration—fell quiet.

Levi stood motionless, his bloodied body still catching breath.

Then... he felt it.

The wind changed.

A low, unnatural hum coursed through the ground beneath his feet. And before him, the corpse of the Swarm Tyrant...

twitched.

"What—?" Levi's eyes narrowed, his hands twitching to grab his blades again.

A chilling, foreign pressure descended.

The grotesque's broken body lifted, strings of flesh reconnecting like cords of fate stitching together.

Then—a cocoon of flesh and bone burst outward, wrapping the corpse in layers of glowing organic armor.

Its very presence distorted the air, like reality itself was bending to make room for something unholy.

In the throne room, Azrion's voice echoed,

"Each time it dies... it adapts. It is reborn. That is its gift."

Adonis, standing on a ruined pillar nearby, instantly recognized the mutation.

Without a word, he began chanting—his voice sharp, precise, holy lightning crackling from the heavens.

He extended his hand.

A divine bolt of lightning—capable of piercing through dragons—shot downward toward the cocoon.

It hit.

Nothing happened.

The lightning fizzled, absorbed completely.

Adonis' pupils narrowed. "Impossible..."

Azrion's voice—though far away—felt like it passed through dimensions to speak into reality: "The ultimate disaster. Immune to death."

His pale fingers grazed the edge of the ancient leather-bound tome resting open on his lap—**The Foresight Diary**—its pages whispering truths that had not yet happened.

His eyes scanned the blood-inked lines etched into the parchment.

"Rinascita..." he murmured.

A cruel smile slithered across his lips—slow, knowing, inevitable.

"Celestine is doomed to destruction."

His voice was soft, yet it echoed like a prophecy etched into the marrow of the world.

He traced the line with one fingertip, letting it linger on the next grim passage:

"When the Leviathan awakens, and the Tyrant is reborn, the town of Rinascita shall fall in crimson rain. The sword saints shall fail. The protectors shall perish. No name shall remain unsilenced."

Azrion chuckled under his breath—low and guttural. There was no joy in it. Only the pleasure of **certainty**.

"It's written," he said, eyes glowing faintly violet.

"The Leviathan and the Swarm Tyrant... together they will kill every last soul in Rinascita."

His throne room darkened around him, as if even the shadows bowed in agreement.

"It's over."

He closed the diary slowly, the sound of its cover echoing like a coffin shut. And in that silence, Azrion whispered with finality:

"Let the curtain fall."

The cocoon began to crack.

And then, with a sickening sound, it shattered.

The creature that emerged was no longer the same. Its armor was blackened, ribbed, and fused like obsidian.

Its wings were sharper, larger, its claws longer. Its body pulsed with biological venom and sacrificial rebirth.

But what disturbed everyone most... was the smile.

"The end's near," it said with a slow, guttural laugh—its jaw stretching too wide for any normal creature.

Far away, in a quiet part of a small village—untouched by war and bloodshed—a man sat on a bench beneath a tree.

The sun glinted on his shoulder, casting shadow and light across his figure. His black hair shimmered faintly in the golden light, his face calm, unreadable.

His fingers rested against his chin as he watched a few birds fly past the blue sky.

Blue eyes, thoughtful.

"I'll just have to sew more strings..." he whispered with a smile.

"The dolls will do fine on their own."

His smirk deepened, not of joy... but of control.

A reflection of a mind draped in ink-black calculations.

...

Back on at rinascita, the Swarm Tyrant turned its head.

Its eyes—reborn, refined—locked on Levi.

The tyrant stepped forward, poison dripping from its claws, wings expanding again with a sonic boom.

The war... had only just begun.

Chapter 82: Rinascita's Last Breath - Swarm Tyrant II

Adonis POV — The Pride of Asura

I couldn't believe my eyes.

That grotesque filth—the Swarm Tyrant—revived itself. Not after a minute, not after a breath, but within seconds. I watched as its black, patchworked flesh stitched itself together, its dozens of insectoid eyes glowing an unnatural crimson. The ground still steamed from the impact Levi had struck it with.

Yet there it stood again, whole.

Levi—foolish, brilliant, recklessly was still in the center of the crater, panting with his sword barely upright. That Sword Saint of Godspeed... had pushed beyond his limit. I could see it—his stance wavered, legs trembling, blood spilling from his mouth as he tried to lift his blade once more.

The grotesque hissed, gurgling out through its mutated throat:

"Die, human."

Its voice was broken, crawling and jagged—like dozens of teeth gnashing in rhythm. It blitzed forward, its massive centipede-like form slithering toward him.

I moved.

A flash of gold and silver streaked across the battlefield—my cloak fluttering as my boots cracked the earth beneath.

"Levi."

I caught him just before the Tyrant's fangs pierced the air he once stood in. Flames burned in my wake as I launched us both out of harm's way, skidding through dirt and ash.

I laid Levi against a tree, his chest barely rising. His eyes were shut.

"Hold on. That's an order."

My voice was calm, precise—commander's tone. I called for a healer immediately through the party crystal. "Unit Delta—medic. Get to the northern ridge. Levi is down."

Then I stood. Faced it.

The Swarm Tyrant reared its head, a skeletal clicking echoing from within its throat. Its body pulsed with mutated veins, dripping green acid onto the ground.

"Who... are you?" it spat, as if the words were foreign.

I answered by drawing my sword.

The runes on the hilt flickered with golden light as my mana surged. Wind stirred around me, leaves lifting from the ground, spiraling like a divine cyclone around my form.

"Knights of Asura," I commanded through my soul-synced channel, "protect Rinascita. This one is mine."

My men didn't hesitate. They knew better.

The Tyrant screamed louder, wings stretching wide.

"WHO. ARE. YOU!?"

I smirked.

"A talking disaster... This might actually be interesting."

My sword came down—not to strike, but to unleash.

The sky split.

From the heavens, twelve golden spears descended like wrath itself—Celestial Armament: Dawnfall Lances. They rained upon the Tyrant with majestic fury, each one glowing with divine inscription, sharp enough to pierce dragonhide.

The ground trembled with each impact—booms like thunder, earth exploding skyward.

But it didn't fall.

The Tyrant screamed and charged. I met it halfway.

My blade ignited with Solar Elemental Flame—the rare celestial fire that did not burn with heat, but with judgment. I carved a cross-shaped arc through the air, and the explosion behind it shook the valley.

He didn't die.

He bled. I saw that much. But his carapace rippled... shimmered. A second later, the cracks I made sealed.

Adaptation.

It had already adjusted to Levi's speed strikes, and now it was responding to me.

"So it nullifies damage that threatens its core." My voice was quiet, focused, studying. I circled him. "A grotesque that adapts in real-time... no—this isn't a monster. It's a calamity."

I launched forward again, this time unleashing a Celestial Sigil: Chains of the Upper Realm. Golden chains sprouted from my sword's edge, binding the grotesque in radiant binds that scorched its limbs.

It screeched—this time in agony.

Lightning surged from my left hand, pure elemental wrath coursing through my arm as I added a dual incantation. Tempest Execution—a vertical slash of raw thunder, meant to tear through hydra-scale.

I carved through the Tyrant's left side. Acid and ichor exploded.

And then... I saw it.

Mid-recovery, it smiled—as if recognizing a new strategy.

Its head twitched—then launched five poisonous fangs from its mouth, not at me... but toward the rear lines.

"Tch."

Dirty.

Five green streaks spiraled toward a group of guild fighters. I recognized their banner—Celestial Apex, barely ranked.

I dropped my stance and moved. Not because I had to. But because I must.

"A knight does not let the innocent die behind him."

I whispered the verse of a forgotten Celestial God—a command from the heavens.

Wings burst from my back, made of pure starlight.

Time slowed.

In a flash of divine light, I caught all five fangs midair—a shield of aurora-ward shattering in my grasp. The impact forced me back twenty paces, boots carving trenches into the soil.

The young guild members gawked, saved. Alive.

I didn't look at them.

I turned back to the Tyrant, whose rage grew wild with sound.

"You play dirty to survive."

I flicked the broken fang from my hand. Blood dripped down my glove.

"Good. Then I won't hold back anymore."

The sky trembled once more.

The grotesque's grin twisted as it lunged again—legs clicking, wings buzzing in a distorted frequency that made the trees tremble. But I wasn't there anymore.

I was above it.

The wings of starlight behind me flared, and I spun midair—my sword glowing white-gold, tracing a celestial rune mid-swing.

"Ardent Circle: Pride's Eclipse."

A perfect arc of holy flame swept down like a blade forged from divinity itself. It collided with the Swarm Tyrant and drove it into the earth like a fallen star.

The explosion wasn't fire or sound—it was divine silence. A silence that struck the heart like truth.

Dust and shimmering celestial embers hung in the air. For a moment, I stood above it—cloak fluttering, blade burning, golden eyes narrowed.

"You changed your body to protect your core, huh?" I raised my palm to the sky.

"But can you outgrow a God?"

Above me, the heavens trembled.

I felt the heat in my veins—Pride.

It was there, watching me. The God I'd served since I took the Oath of Radiant Steel.

He did not whisper. He did not guide with kindness.

He demanded.

I thrust my sword into the sky.

"Lend me your fury."

Lightning split the clouds. A sigil carved itself into the air—a lion's eye etched in gold, its gaze merciless.

From the heavens, a beam of divine pride fell.

I caught it.

Power surged through my frame—my aura flared into a tempest. My armor glowed with archaic runes, and my blade extended—etched with celestial gold and pulsating with godly resonance.

I pointed it at the rising monster.

"Swarm Tyrant..." I said coldly. "Kneel."

And I struck.

The ground tore asunder as I came down like a judgment made flesh, my sword amplified by divine will. The Tyrant shrieked—a cry that echoed across the valley.

I saw its shell rupture. Its chest cracked open—and I saw the core.

But just before the final blow could land—a scream.

"SIR ADONIS!"

One of the knights from the eastern flank. His voice—raw with panic.

"THE GROTESQUES—THEY'RE CHANGING! THEY'RE STARTING TO—TO RESIST OUR BLADES!"

Time froze.

What?

I turned my head. Across the fields, dozens of grotesques had begun swarming the city's ridge. Their movements—more coordinated. Their limbs—reinforced. I saw one take a knight's full strike and keep moving. Another caught a fireball and absorbed it.

And then it hit me.

I looked back at the Swarm Tyrant's cracked chest—its core pulsing in tandem with the others... not beating for itself... but for all.

"They're linked," I whispered.

"This... this thing is their source. Their core.. their hive. If it adapts..."

I turned my gaze across the battlefield—hundreds of grotesques evolving second by second. Wings mutating. Eyes growing. Resistance building.

"They all evolve."

I stepped back. My blade wavered for the first time.

This wasn't just a beast. This was the future of a species.

A future shaped to devour us all.

I looked at the city—Rinascita's protective wards flickering.

My knights...

The guild members, some barely out of apprenticeship...

I couldn't win.

A surge of mana behind me. I turned—A young girl screamed as seventeen grotesques descended upon her, blades and jaws bared.

I moved faster than my pride.

"RADIANT VEIL: RING OF FINAL SALVATION."

I swung my sword in a perfect circle—a shockwave of celestial force exploded outward.

Seventeen grotesques slashed through, each one impaled by threads of divine magic—a lattice of burning lines that held them midair, frozen in exorcism.

They withered into dust.

But not before I felt it.

Even these lesser grotesques... were starting to resist. My blade didn't cut clean—it strained. It cracked one's shell and had to burn the rest away.

I stood in the center of the wreckage—breathing, heavy.

"They are all getting stronger..." I whispered.

The pride in my chest didn't vanish. But it shifted.

For the first time in years, I lowered my sword.

I stared up at the sky.

"I can't save everyone... while fighting a calamity."

I turned away from the Tyrant—who was already beginning to regenerate.

Sylvia's POV — The Southern Wall

Somehow, they were growing.

These grotesques... they weren't like the last ones we fought. Zain and I had taken charge of the southern flank, and even with all our preparation, all our spells, and all the strategy we hammered into our members... it was slowly becoming too much.

I stood in a field of corpses. Human. Grotesque. Both.

The sky above us was clouded in smoke and ash, the air thick with the scent of rot and scorched earth. I felt the familiar weight of magic building behind my ribs. I refused to fall here.

Zain's voice echoed behind me—shouting commands, his blade slicing through another grotesque as flames roared from its edge. He never lost his composure. I admired that about him. It was comforting, in its own way.

But just as I spun to aid him, I caught the glimpse of a grotesque—jagged limbs and bulbous eyes—lunging right for me. Too close.

Too fast.

I froze.

And then—shink.

A dagger flew past me, slicing the grotesque's head clean in half. Its body hit the ground with a wet thud. The throw had been impossibly clean—practiced.

"Are you okay, miss?" came a voice behind me.

I turned—and stopped breathing for a second.

Those eyes. Blue like winter rivers. That hair—unruly but familiar. Like someone I once knew. No... someone I couldn't forget.

Before I could speak—

"Arius!" I heard Sophia's voice from behind him. "Where did you go?"

Arius.

So that was his name?

He turned briefly, calling to her, "Sophia, come here—we need more people defending this side."

My thoughts were spinning. My body wanted to fight, but my heart had latched onto something else entirely.

"Why do you look so similar to him?" I asked, not even realizing the words had left my mouth.

He looked at me then. And smiled—not mockingly. Just soft. Familiar.

"We can talk once it's all over," he said. "For now, you have people to protect."

My fingers tightened around my wrist.

He was right.

There were too many people depending on me to lose focus now. I turned back toward the battlefield, casting my gaze over the field of fighters and guild members we were trying to hold together.

One of them—a young woman I knew from the eastern patrol—rushed up to me.

"Sylvia!" she called, panting. "The grotesques—they're resisting lightning magic now!"

"Resisting?" I asked, shocked.

"Yeah. My spells—they're not even stunning them anymore!"

Before I could respond, Arius spoke from just behind me, calmly, like he already knew. "Levi used lightning magic against the Swarm Tyrant. If that creature's their source, it's possible the rest are adapting to counter what nearly killed it."

I turned to question him—but he was already walking away, heading toward a man screaming for help across the field.

How did he know that?

No time to think.

More grotesques poured from the ridge. My team was being pushed back. I heard Zain yell from the far side, sparks and fire crackling around him. I ran to meet him—dodging a grotesque that slammed into a tree beside me.

"Zain!" I shouted, meeting him as his flaming blade cleaved through two of the monsters.

He didn't look tired. He looked angry.

"Where's our backup?" he growled, his second blade bursting into flame. "They said the west was secure!"

"I don't think it is anymore," I answered, releasing a wave of Celestial Chains—golden bindings that wrapped around the grotesque charging me, holding it in place midair just long enough for Zain to slice through it.

He grunted. "We're getting boxed in."

"I know. They're changing, somehow. A member told me—they're resisting lightning magic now."

"What?! That's what I've been using as a finisher!"

"Levi used it on the Tyrant," I added, panting between spells. "Arius said that. Maybe the connection runs deeper than we thought."

Zain glanced sideways at me. "Arius?"

"I... I'll explain later."

Another grotesque lunged. Zain stepped forward, blades twirling, and let out a blast of heat that incinerated its path. The air shimmered from the force of it.

"Then we change how we fight," he said firmly. "You cover the sky. I'll take the ground."

I nodded, raising my hand as the celestial light formed above me.

"Sanctified Wrath: Starlight Comet."

The sky lit up as a spear of pure heavenly energy slammed into the ground, crushing a grotesque swarm trying to flank us.

But even as I fought... my heart lingered on that name.

Arius.

Why did it feel like he wasn't a stranger at all?

Sophia's POV — Broken Choices and Celestial Light

This is so wrong.

This is so, so wrong.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

I jumped over a grotesque's shredded corpse—ugh, ew, ew—and then a human one. My foot actually slipped for a second on blood, and I almost face-planted into the mud. Would've been funny if it didn't hurt so much inside.

Gods, why does this feel like the Asura crisis all over again? The screaming, the blood, the panic. The people running with no clue where safety even is.

And yet... I'm still the same.

Still useless.

Still the girl standing in the middle of a nightmare with trembling hands and magic that isn't enough.

"Why... again...?" I whispered, biting my lip, almost tasting tears in the back of my throat.

Then I saw him.

And my heart stopped.

No way.

Two grotesques had cornered someone, and I recognized that stupid stubborn hair and that ridiculous stance like he was always trying to act tougher than he actually was.

Isaac.

And the grotesques were already in mid-lunge.

I hesitated.

Because my brain wasn't stupid. It remembered everything.

It remembered Arius stepping in and yelling at Isaac days ago, calling him a monster for what he did to his wife—his pregnant wife. The bruises. And how Isaac ran like a coward when he was confronted.

And now he was here... probably trying to redeem himself. Or maybe not. Maybe he was just trying to survive like the rest of us.

Should I save him?

No... right?

He deserved it. Right?

But then the grotesques inched closer, and something inside me twisted and snapped like a cracked bone.

And I remembered her voice.

"Sophia, don't care what others think is right. Do what you believe is right."

My throat clenched.

I raised my hand—my fingers trembling—and channeled every bit of celestial light I could pull from the broken sky.

"Starfall Mercy."

A golden beam crashed down in front of the grotesques, slamming into them with righteous force. They screeched as their bodies exploded into dust and light.

But I was too late.

Isaac had already been hit—his shoulder gored, a black line of poison crawling up his skin. His body hit the ground hard, face twisting in pain.

I knelt beside him.

"Isaac! Are you okay?" I asked, voice breaking.

My hands pressed to his wound, warmth gathering in my palms.

He coughed—gross, messy, a little dramatic honestly. But it was real.

"It's... nothing," he forced out. "I can still fight."

I looked at him and... no.

No, he can't.

I could see it—the poison. It was spreading too fast. We didn't have a cure, and I knew it.

"Shut up," I muttered, voice softer than I expected. "You're coughing blood, dummy..."

I focused, channeling Celestial Healing Light, golden threads forming under his skin, trying to purify the toxin.

Isaac blinked up at me, dazed.

"...Why are you helping me?" he whispered. "Someone like me?"

I smiled—tired, a little bitter, a little sad.

"We all have our reasons, Isaac."

"I don't know what made you become the way you are. I'm not saying it was okay... but..." My voice cracked.

I pressed my palms harder against his wound, sweat running down my back from the effort.

"...in the past, I was just as weak as you are now. And he..."

"He?"

Don't say it. Don't.

No.

Now wasn't the time to remember him.

That day. That hand reaching out. That warm smile when I was at my lowest.

No.

I bit my lip and said nothing, instead pouring more magic into Isaac's wound—but it wasn't working. The threads dissolved. The poison refused to leave.

My magic—my best—wasn't enough.

Isaac's breathing slowed.

"No... no, no no—don't you dare die now," I whispered. "I saved you, so you don't get to just... just die, idiot!"

And then—Footsteps.

Isaac blinked past me, his eyes widening, voice suddenly hollow.

"...You..."

I turned around. And my heart felt like it curled in on itself.

Arius.

His silence wasn't cold.

It was heavy.

"...Why were you fighting?" Arius finally asked.

Isaac coughed, a thick, wet sound, and tried to laugh. "Why do you care?"

"You owe me an answer," Arius said. His voice was quiet. Firm. "You owe her one too."

I swallowed hard.

Isaac's breath rattled as he spoke. "If I survive this... if I get the guild reward for helping defend the city..."

His voice cracked again, and blood touched the edge of his lips.

"I was gonna buy a small ranch. Just outside the border. Somewhere quiet."

He looked up at Arius, eyes flickering, fading.

"And then... then I was gonna visit her. Apologize. Maybe bring flowers or something dumb like that."

"...Ask for her forgiveness."

I felt something twist inside me.

"You think a ranch makes up for what you did?" Arius asked. Not angry. Just... tired.

Isaac blinked slow. "No. But maybe it buys me a chance to say the things I couldn't back then."

He turned to me, just barely.

"I know I can't fix it. I know that."

"Stop talking," I said. My hands were glowing again, pushing more and more magic into him. "You're making it worse."

But Arius stepped closer. "Then why, Isaac?" His voice dropped lower. "Why'd you hurt her in the first place?"

Isaac was quiet for a long moment. Then...

"...Because I was scared."

A breath caught in my throat.

"I didn't want to be married. I didn't want a kid. I didn't want to stay in that town with all those liars."

He coughed again. More blood. His body shook.

"I was forced into it. Her father wanted me to 'make a man of myself.' They arranged the whole thing. I didn't even get to say no."

I watched Arius' expression. I couldn't read it. He was just... listening.

"I hated waking up every day knowing I wasn't ready. Knowing I'd disappoint her. That I'd disappoint the baby. That I wasn't enough."

His voice cracked. "So I made myself the monster before anyone else could call me one."

Tears ran down Isaac's cheeks.

"I hit her once. Then I hated myself. Then I ran."

I couldn't speak.

He looked at Arius again, eyes filled with something deeper than guilt. Something raw.

"I don't deserve her. I just want to tell her that. That I'm sorry. That I know I failed her before I even tried."

The silence afterward felt too loud.

Then—A screech.

A horrible, guttural, echoing shriek from the trees behind us. The ground vibrated. The air thickened.

Arius slowly turned his head.

"...Good," he said.

And then the Swarm Tyrant stepped into the clearing.

"MOVE! IT'S ABOUT TO ATTACK!" Adonis's voice roared through the battlefield like thunder cracking the sky.

I managed to quickly move away.

But then I saw it.

Arius.

Not running.

Just... standing. With his daggers drawn, back arched like he was born to fight monsters.

The Swarm Tyrant's eyes locked on Isaac, twitching with hunger. Its claws rose.

Arius stepped forward.

"You owe me one for this, Isaac," he muttered, tone dry.

Isaac didn't even answer. He just stared at him with the same wide-eyed shock I felt in my own chest.

And me?

I wanted to stand. I wanted to cast something. Anything.

But my legs were shaking. My mana was drained. My heart was pounding in my ears.

I tried to speak, but only a little squeak came out. Then Arius looked over his shoulder and gave me a small, lopsided smile.

"You're still the same, Sophia."

Still the same...?

What does that even mean?

Before I could figure it out, Arius pushed forward, his dagger moving with precision. He deflected the Tyrant's swipe with one dagger and spun back to cover both me and Isaac.

I tried to lift my arm.

"Just a spell, c'mon Sophia, c'mon—" I whispered.

But my body was shaking. I had already spent everything I had. Every drop of light I could pull from the sky was gone. My vision blurred.

I was empty.

The Swarm Tyrant screeched, its limbs slicing through the air like saws of death. One strike nearly clipped Arius—but he dodged, barely, flipping back with a breath to spare.

Then—Adonis arrived.

"ENOUGH!" he shouted, closing in like a meteor, his sword flaming with righteous fury.

But just as he was about to strike, the Swarm Tyrant turned—and unleashed a wave of mid-air poisoned blade strikes.

Not at us.

At Adonis.

Dozens of black slashes rained down. Celestial defenses cracked. Dust and flame exploded into the sky.

Adonis was forced to block, pulled into a defensive flurry—distracted.

And that's when the Tyrant turned back to us.

Me.

Isaac.

Arius.

It raised both of its claws. I couldn't even scream. My mouth opened, but no sound came. My heart froze.

And then—Arius whispered.

"Not now."

He stepped forward, right between us and death.

His daggers crossed. His stance wide.

And then it struck.

Its claws went straight through his chest.

The sick, crunching sound was something I don't think I'll ever stop hearing. I couldn't look away—even though every part of me screamed to.

Poison veins burst around the wound, spreading like ink across his ribs. His face twisted—not in pain, but in focus.

He didn't fall yet.

He just looked back at us—me—and smiled, stupidly, softly.

And collapsed.

"Arius...?"

Adonis roared. The kind of scream that didn't sound human anymore.

He launched at the Swarm Tyrant, each swing of his blade carving the sky itself. Celestial magic erupted like divine explosions—heavenly light raining down in rage.

But none of that mattered to me.

I just dropped beside Arius, barely able to catch him before his head hit the ground.

His blood was warm. Too warm.

I pressed my hands against the wound, even though I knew it was too deep.

I tried to pour magic I didn't have left into him anyway.

"Don't you dare," I whispered. "You don't get to do this."

He didn't answer. His eyes fluttered.

And suddenly my chest hurt.

Like something was breaking open.

Like I had felt this before. Not the blood. Not the fear.

The pain.

This ache in my ribs. This raw, cold, twisting emptiness.

It was familiar.

"...Why does this feel like it's happening again?" I whispered, not even realizing I said it out loud.

I didn't know if I meant the past or now.

Maybe both.

But either way...

I wasn't ready to lose him.

His blood was everywhere.

My hands were shaking as I tried to stop it, tried to push what little magic I had left into Arius's wound, but it just kept pouring out—like his body didn't care how hard I was trying. Like it had already decided to leave me.

"Please..." I whispered, my voice barely a breath. "Don't do this..."

And then... he moved.

Slowly, his trembling hand reached into the inside of his coat. Fingers barely functioning. I watched, confused, as he pulled out a small, glass vial of green liquid—tucked deep in his overcoat, like something secret.

He clutched it in his bloodied hand... and began to crawl.

"Arius...?" I blinked, confused. "What are you doing? You need to lie down—"

But he didn't answer.

He dragged himself toward Isaac, leaving a trail of crimson across the grass. I followed beside him, almost fumbling over my own robes to support his weight. He was burning up—his body cold and hot all at once. I could feel the poison eating through him.

"Say something," I begged. "Please... what are you doing?"

No answer.

Just the sound of his breathing, harsh and uneven.

When he finally reached Isaac, who was barely conscious, he didn't hesitate.

He lifted a weak, trembling hand—And slapped him.

A sharp sound. A cruel sound. It cut through the silence.

Isaac jolted weakly, his body reacting out of shock.

And Arius whispered, through blood and breath:

"I promised your wife... you'd return safely back to her."

My eyes widened.

What...?

And then he tilted the vial to Isaac's lips and poured it in. The green liquid shimmered faintly in the dying light.

Isaac coughed—but then, suddenly... his color returned.

The veins on his neck faded from black to normal. His breathing steadied. His skin stopped shaking.

He was healing. Fast. Like... miraculously.

And Arius—He sagged.

Collapsed harder than before. His body curled in slightly like the pain finally took him.

"You're a bad man, Isaac," he murmured.

"Maybe you deserve to die instead of me..."

His breath rattled again.

"...But you have someone to return to."

His eyes fluttered... the blue in them dulling just slightly.

"Which I will never have."

And his head dropped.

Right there.

Right in front of me.

"No..." I whispered. My voice cracked.

I dropped to my knees, grabbing his arm.

"No, Arius... please... you can't—"

Tears hit my cheeks before I realized they were mine. My fingers shook as I gripped his shoulders.

"You can't die, Arius!" I sobbed. "You idiot! You sarcastic, smug, stupid idiot! You're supposed to live!"

Isaac's voice—weak and trembling—spoke beside me.

"...A-Arius..."

He stared at the man who just saved his life with a kind of horror.

The kind that only comes when you realize your second chance cost someone else their last.

But I—I knew this feeling.

This magic.

That vial.

That healing.

My breath caught. My vision blurred.

At the Asura Academy.

When I was dying silently from inside.

Without any cures.. without any help from anyone. He helped me.

That cure.

It was him.

He made it again.

To save someone else.

I looked at him—and I finally saw him.

The man who lied.

Who vanished after saving me.

Who never told me the truth.

"...You lied to me again," I whispered.

Arius stirred faintly.

And with what little life he had left, he smiled softly. Just for me.

"I'm sorry for lying to you again... Sophia."

And then...

He was still.

Gone forever...

I held his body like it would change something. Like maybe if I just held on hard enough... he'd come back.

But he didn't.

He was cold.

Still.

And... silent.

Tears streamed down my face, spilling without permission. My voice cracked as I leaned closer, whispering through the sobs I tried so hard to hold back.

"So you disguised yourself all along...?" My fingers curled into his coat, knuckles white.

"You lied that you didn't know who you were. Lied like it meant nothing. Like I wouldn't remember." I looked at him—at the peacefulness on his face that only made it worse.

"Why...?" The words felt like ash in my throat.

"Why didn't you just tell me the truth... even once?"

I couldn't breathe. My chest burned. My heart felt like it was folding in on itself.

"Why..." I whispered again, biting back a sob.

"...why did you lie to me again?"

My hands trembled as they held his jacket tighter. The tears didn't stop, no matter how much I tried to blink them back.

Then the name slipped from my lips. Quiet. Barely a breath.

"...Kaiser... why'd you do this to me again?"

My voice broke completely.

"Why'd you make me cry... again?"

A soft groan behind me. Isaac. He was slipping into unconsciousness—his body still slowly healing, the potion working through him.

But I didn't look back.

I couldn't. Because I was afraid if I let go of Arius now... I'd lose the last piece of who I used to be.

Footsteps.

I didn't turn. I didn't need to.

"Sophia?!"

Sylvia. Her voice was close, worried.

"Are you okay?! What happened—?"

But I couldn't speak.

My voice... just didn't come out.

She stepped closer. I heard her gasp softly.

Then silence.

I knew the moment she saw him.

She didn't say anything right away—just stood there, still, unmoving.

And I finally found my voice again—fragile and distant.

"...He lied to us again."

Sylvia blinked. "He...?"

Confusion in her voice.

But then—Realization.

I didn't need to look up to know it was written all over her face.

She stared at him.

At Arius.

And everything finally made sense.

Adonis's POV — Pride Beneath the Heavens

I ran like a man possessed.

The Swarm Tyrant had vanished into the smoke ahead, and I could feel it through the air—the pull of something ravenous, devouring not just bodies... but strength, magic, knowledge. It wasn't feeding to survive.

It was evolving.

I burst through a fallen barricade of broken spears and half-burnt wood, only to see what I feared: the Tyrant feasting on the bodies of the wounded.

Gnawing.

Devouring.

Evolving.

Its grotesque body twitched and expanded with every bite, absorbing their traits, their techniques, their mana structures.

Even in the heart of chaos, it was calculating. Improving.

I gritted my teeth.

I couldn't go all out on it. Not here. Not now. Not while civilians were still screaming.

Not while people still needed saving.

My knights—bless their unwavering discipline—held firm on the western end, but fourteen against thousands of grotesques was never going to be enough.

And everywhere I looked—guild members were falling, overrun by these mutated, slithering beasts. Creatures once vulnerable to our blades now shrugged them off like dull twigs.

I couldn't ignore that.

My pride wouldn't let me.

I slashed at the Tyrant with a storm-forged blade of lightning, following it with a wave of celestial flame. The mix of elemental and heavenly magic blasted a crater into the earth, sending the beast reeling backward.

"Divine Cross Slash—Heaven's Judgement!" I roared, and my blade struck true, carving glowing white lines into its chitin armor.

But it didn't fall.

It didn't feel pain.

It laughed.

And I didn't have the luxury to finish it off—because behind me, a mother's scream tore through the air, and I turned.

Grotesques had broken through the southern barrier.

The defense was gone.

They were in Rinascita.

I growled. "Damn it—!"

I leapt over the battlefield, cutting down grotesques as I went, slicing through their mutated limbs with furious precision. My blade moved like divine wind—pure, without flaw. But it wasn't enough.

They were in the town square.

They were in the homes.

A grotesque lunged at a crying child, cornered against the shattered stone wall of a bakery. I didn't think—I moved. Celestial propulsion launched me through the square. My shoulder collided with the beast, shattering it against the ground.

"Run!" I told the boy, but he didn't move—he was frozen.

And then I saw it—The Swarm Tyrant, perched atop a half-crushed building, its eyes locked on the child.

It opened its mouth—And spat a jagged spear of poison toward him.

I stepped in front of it.

No hesitation.

The projectile buried itself into my forearm with a sickening snap and sear. I felt the venom crawl under my skin like black fire, burning through muscle and magic.

But I didn't fall.

I clenched my jaw, letting the pain course through me.

"...You will not take him," I muttered.

My knees dipped, but I remained standing. And then I saw them.

My knights.

Rushing toward me through the fog of war.

"Captain!" one of them called out. "Are you—?!"

"I'm fine," I answered.

I wasn't.

But the blessing of the God of Pride coursed through me still—its celestial shield numbing the spread. For now.

"The poison won't reach my heart just yet," I said, voice tight. "But I don't have much time."

I looked around me.

The grotesques had reached the center.

People were dying.

Not adventurers. Not knights.

Families.

The square was no longer a battleground—it was a slaughterhouse.

The bakery I passed through earlier—burning, flames licking up the wooden walls as smoke covered the windows. A woman pounded against the glass from the inside, trying to get to her son. Before I could move—

The building collapsed.

Her scream was buried beneath the rubble.

Her son stood outside. Screaming for her.

Screaming like his lungs would tear.

And I couldn't move fast enough.

To my left, grotesques had overrun the guild defensive line.

Guild members were sobbing as they tried to hold them back, but their swords bent, their magic fizzled.

One cried out, "I can't hurt it! Why won't my sword work?!"

Another was on the ground, blood pouring from his side as he begged for someone—anyone—to find his brother.

Zain...

I saw him.

Surrounded.

His flames were weak, more smoke than fire, his breathing ragged as he spun in place, slashing wildly.

"Stay away!" he screamed, but his voice cracked with something that wasn't anger.

It was fear.

A grotesque caught his ankle and dragged him down, and I watched him cry out, not in pain—but in rage.

Rage at himself. At this. At how helpless we had become.

There were only three guilds present—each powerful in their own right. But even combined, we were barely a 120.

Some were already dead.

The rest? Cornered. Dying slowly.

Thousands of grotesques surrounded us, their bodies shifting, growing stronger by the second. They had adapted biologically. We hadn't.

And with the Sword Saints down—no strategy, no morale, no amount of leadership could change what was coming.

Not anymore.

Grotesques poured into the homes now. I heard the wooden door of a tailor's shop splinter and a child's voice shriek inside.

A mother stood on the doorstep, shielding her daughter with her body.

"Run," she whispered, voice breaking.

But the child didn't run.

She clung to her, crying, as the grotesques descended like wolves.

One leapt.

I blinked—And they were gone.

All that remained was blood.

...

I looked around—my knights scattered, trying to hold the flanks, but they were too few.

14 knights against an ocean of evolved grotesques.

The dead outnumbered the living. And the Swarm Tyrant hadn't even begun to use its full power yet.

If we lost here—if Rinascita fell—The Swarm Tyrant would continue.

It would march to the heart of Celestine.

Devouring the knowledge of mages, knights, saints...

And then turn that knowledge into evolution for itself.

This was not just a city we would lose...

This was the barrier between the grotesques and the rest of the world.

And we were losing.

I gripped my sword tighter, blood dripping down my arm, poison pulsing through my veins. My vision blurred.

"Captain—!" One of my knights reached me, panting, blood across his cheek. "The north wall is gone! They've breached the defenses! The healer wards are falling!"

I didn't answer.

My legs trembled—not from pain, but from the decision I didn't want to make.

I could kill the Swarm Tyrant.

I knew I could.

But it would take everything.

All of me.

And while I was locked in battle—Rinascita would burn.

The people would die.

Children. Families. All of them.

And when the fire faded, all that would remain was ash and a legend that Adonis fought valiantly... but failed to save anyone.

A failed knight of honor...

I shut my eyes.

The God of Pride stirred.

Then... a whisper.

"The Heaven's Gift has arrived."

My eyes snapped open.

And in the distance—

Through the clouds and fire—A single beam of light pierced the sky.

Descending.

I could feel it—the moment the air changed.

Just as another grotesque surged toward a wounded mother shielding her child, a mirror-like barrier blinked into existence, catching the monster mid-lunge. It didn't stop there.

A second mirror formed above, then a third—each refracting light, bending it into beams so bright and precise they seared through the grotesques like divine lances. The beasts shrieked, their mutated bodies unable to adapt to whatever kind of magic this was.

I turned my head toward the sky.

And from the golden path of the sun itself...

A cloaked boy descended.

Light pooled around him—not raw and chaotic like a child's power, but refined, calculated. Beautiful in its ruthlessness. His coat fluttered as he stepped forward, wiping blood from his palms like the battle hadn't even started for him.

"Just on time," he said, wiping blood off his wrist with a flick, like this battle was merely an inconvenience.

He didn't even look at me. His eyes were locked forward—only on killing.

The Swarm Tyrant noticed too.

Its chitinous head twisted, locked onto the boy like a beast feeling challenged.

With a screech that cracked glass, it fired blades of poisonous bone—straight toward Lucas.

I moved to intervene—But I didn't need to.

He calmly raised a single hand. "Barrier."

A wall of radiant gold materialized between him and the attack, shattering the poison on impact. Then, he snapped his fingers.

Light scattered.

Dozens more barriers emerged across the battlefield—shielding civilians, children, and bleeding soldiers in domes of safety.

My heart stuttered in my chest.

"...Incredible."

I knew that face. That presence.

Lucas.

The prodigy whose name had reached Asura long before he ever stood before me.

Empress Rose had once warned me: "If you ever come across a boy in Celestine whose magic feels beyond a heaven's gift... do not underestimate him."

And she was right.

He was beyond gifted.

She was right.

He wasn't gifted. He was chosen.

And yet—Before I could even process what I'd just seen—Another voice struck the air.

"Missed me, you shitty pest?"

The Swarm Tyrant turned—But it was already too late.

Chains erupted from the ground, thick and dark like shadows wrapped in firelight. They spiraled through the air with a serpentine hiss, then coiled tightly around the monster's limbs and neck.

"It's time to be burned alive."

The chains ignited—hellfire licking up their length—and in one tremendous motion, they whipped the Swarm Tyrant into the stone, cracking the earth beneath it.

The battlefield froze for half a breath.

And then I saw her.

Amid the ash and sparks, her hair a curtain of silver flame—Her crimson eyes gleaming through the smoke—

Her presence radiating both sorrow and unrepentant destruction—

Celia.

The Cursed Girl.

The one the Empress had sent me to kill.

I stared at her from across the battlefield, sword still drawn.

And for the first time in this entire war, I didn't know whether to raise my blade—Or lower it.

"She's... helping?" one of my knights muttered behind me.

Another stepped forward, eyes flicking between Lucas and Celia, both holding back the Swarm Tyrant with overwhelming force.

"We should leave the Tyrant to them. The civilians are dying. We can still save the people."

I said nothing.

My grip on my sword tightened.

The Empress's words echoed in my mind like thunder: If you see the cursed girl, kill her.

Orders are my highest priority.

I took one step forward—And then, a voice filled my soul.

"Let those two defeat the Swarm Tyrant."

"Save the people, Adonis."

My God.

The God of Pride.

Even in the face of such power, his voice was calm.

Because pride was not always in conquest.

Sometimes, it was in restraint.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

"...Very well," I said quietly, turning from the battlefield. "We'll do what must be done."

I looked once more at the girl with burning chains in her hands and the boy of light and precision beside her.

"I'll kill her after this is over," I muttered under my breath.

My knights gave Celia a sharp glare as they turned. One even scoffed under his breath, disgust curling his lip.

But none of us stayed.

We split off, swords drawn, shields raised.

Running toward the screams.

Toward the people.

Toward the lives we still had a chance to save.

And we left the Calamity...

To the Devil's Daughter and Heaven's Blessing.

Chapter 83: Celestine's Hero

Swarm Tyrant's Perspective:

Who... is this woman?

I flapped my wings, tearing wind and blood through the air, pulling myself back—away. Away from her.

But her eyes... Those red eyes.

They weren't like the others.

Hateful.

Her stare burned into my spine. And then—

Thorns.

Thorns erupted from the ground like the fingers of a dying god, wrapping around my leg mid-flight.

They *pulled* me. And she—She flew straight at me, boots glinting with a dark shimmer.

"Hrk—?!"

Her foot **slammed** into my chest with brutal precision.

My body spiraled backward. Bones cracked. Wings shuddered.

I snarled, *immediately triggering regeneration protocols*—cells rapidly rebuilding from the point of impact.

But—

...Nothing happened.

What?

I stared at my chest. Tissue refused to knit. The bleeding **worsened**.

What did she—?

"Once I kill your regeneration," she said, floating midair, her snowy-white hair flowing like it belonged to the wind.

"You're nothing but a trash insect to be crushed."

I let out a distorted screech, trying to break the thorns, but she was already moving—**Fast. Too fast.**

Her chains lashed at me from above—**cursed steel** engraved with negative emotions I didn't understand.

Hate.Grief.**Love twisted into wrath.**

I blocked them with hardened armor—but she **switched tactics**. Thorns curved from below, catching the edges of my torso. They weren't just sharp—they were **draining me**, weakening every inch of my body they touched.

I grew stronger with every second. My body evolved in real-time. Scales thickened. Joints moved faster.

I adapted.

I should've overwhelmed her.

But she was evolving too.

Not biologically—mentally.

Her magic patterns changed mid-attack. She never cast the same sequence twice. She'd wrap me in emotion-cursed chains, and when I developed resistance, she'd flood me with thorns soaked in withering decay.

When I adapted to the thorns, she **tore them off herself** and used her **own blood** to fuel the next attack.

Madness.

This girl...She doesn't stop to think. She becomes **whatever she has to be** to break me.

She—

No. She slipped. Just now.

Now!

I exploded forward—blades drawn from bone, claws sharpened by the absorption of three hundred human techniques.

Speed beyond human sight.I aimed for her neck.

I could already see it—Her head dropping from her shoulders.The last flicker of defiance gone from her eyes.

And then—

SHZZZMMM—!

A **beam of light** tore through the air, colliding with my neck.

AGGHHH—!!

I reeled back, body spasming from the sheer force of it. Smoke and light clashed against my bones.

That boy. **The one of light.**

Celia's lips curled into a smile.

"Squish, squish."

Chains erupted again—this time wrapping around her legs as she lifted herself high above me like a monster.

And before I could flap my wings—Before I could recover—She **stomped** on my head midair, riding the momentum of the beam, sending my body **hurtling** toward the earth.

I crashed into the crater like a meteor.

Everything. Hurt.

Above me, I heard the lightborn boy speak, calm as ever.

"Just as we planned." Said Lucas.

Celia landed beside him, chains dragging behind her, thorns blooming in her shadow.

She didn't even look at me.

"It's time the calamity faces death."

What... am I?

This body. This strength. These minds I've devoured. These spells I've changed my body against.

Memories of a life. Childhood. Friends. Laughter and hatred... warmth and betrayal.

I feel it all. **But I do not understand.**

I remember it. The one who stood over my last corpse, glowing eyes around it.

The Silent Executioner.

It just whispered: **"You're not human. You never were."**

Why does that echo so loud in me? Why does that hurt more than death?

I was born from pain. From the rot of mankind. And yet... **I want to be more.**

But they won't let me.

They **burn me**. They **rip me apart**. They call me calamity. Disaster. Monster.

If that's all I am—**THEN I WILL BE IT.**

The battlefield cracked.

I let go of reason. Let go of form. **My body tore itself open—then rebuilt itself stronger.**

Faster.

Dark wings expanded, now laced with pulsating veins of cursed energy.

My claws glowed with poison that mocked magic. My regeneration evolved past any limitations.

I screamed—and the **sky screamed with me.**

They charged.

Celia first, flying across the air with her chains in full motion, thorns blooming behind her like a cursed storm.

Lucas followed, mirrors of light snapping into place around him, forming a divine geometry of pure order.

She slashed. He aimed.

She twisted her chains around my leg—He fired a beam directly down the gap she made. I dodged midair—but a thorn lanced up from beneath, stabbing through my side.

"You're getting slower, pest." Celia taunted, flipping over my head and dragging me downward.

I fought back, slashing through the sky, claws splitting wind apart—Lucas slid under, a **barrier shattering my strike mid-swing**, giving Celia the window to land a curse-marked blow to my temple.

We fought through the air. Through the broken rooftops. Down the main avenue where humans once ran.

Now it was only us.

A mirror of sun burst from his side—A burning thorn erupted from hers.

When I adapted to fire—Lucas switched to light compression, blades made of condensed light.

When I evolved to resist light—Celia dipped her chain in her own blood, chanting an ancient curse that made my bones **ache**.

But I was still faster. Still **stronger**.

I caught Lucas mid-step, my claw slicing through his barrier just enough—Poison dripped from my arm as I slashed for his heart.

Finally.

Finally—

And then—**Nothing**.

A golden shield shimmered around him.

"Got em."

Divine Protection: Poison Nullification

My claw touched it—And all I felt was **hollow**.

My vision trembled..

I was losing consciousness.

Why?

Why?!

"Die."

I heard her voice behind me.

Celia.

She grabbed my neck with her bare hand, her chain still wrapped around my shoulder. I twisted—tried to fight—but she was already moving.

She **slammed** me into the ground with a scream of rage. Stone exploded around my skull.

And then—Her foot came down.**Once.**

Straight into my face.

My vision went white.

Lucas's voice followed, calm and final:

"As long as she and I fight together... you'll never defeat us."

The pressure faded from my neck. I opened my broken eyes.

Celia stood over me. Her foot hovering.

But she didn't press again.

She stared at me. Not with fury. Not with pity.

Something in between.

Then she turned, her voice low and bitter.

"...Pathetic."

Celia's Perspective:

I stared down at the monster—no, the pathetic thing beneath my boot.

It wasn't the same anymore.

Not the towering, grotesque calamity that once wiped out hundreds and tore the sky in half. Now it was just... squirming. Dying.

Breathing only because I allowed it to. A crawling, gasping insect with barely a spine to look me in the eye.

"I lost to you once," I whispered, my voice hollow, "and I don't lose twice."

But it didn't matter.

None of it did.

I had already won.

Withering Touch—my thorns had done what they were meant to. Needle after needle, tiny touches over time, slipping decay into its strongest trait. I corrupted its regeneration, killed it from within.

I should've smiled. I should've felt pride.

But all I felt was this strange silence in my chest. Like something important had gone missing and no one had noticed except me.

Still, I crouched beside it, forcing my voice into calm.

"I have a question before I kill you."

It tried to regenerate again—panicked, desperate. But my boot crashed into its jaw, searing Withering decay into its already fractured skull. It shrieked.

Good.

"You'll answer me," I whispered. "Because you're not getting another chance."

But before I could say more—A flicker. Something fell from the sky, soft, slow... like a leaf.

No, not a leaf.

A piece of paper.

I blinked, watching it spiral downward. The air around it was quiet, far too quiet for this battlefield. Even the Swarm Tyrant seemed to pause. Like fate held its breath.

I saw it.

The name.

"Kaiser."

Written in blood...

The strokes, firm and angled. That slight mark he always left at the end of his "r."

I stepped forward slowly. Hands trembling. Fingers brushing the edge of the paper as it settled into my palms.

"Where... did this come from...?"

My voice cracked.

Lucas looked up, scanning the skies, then spoke gently. "I believe it was attached to the Swarm Tyrant's inner armor. When you kicked it down, it must've come loose."

No.

No, no, no—That can't be.

I dropped to my knees before I could stop myself, the edges of the paper cutting into my fingers.

This meant...

Kaiser... was gone.

Forever.

"N-No... it... it has to be... wrong," I stuttered, the words falling apart in my throat like glass. "The letter... the star trinket... it—if fate really let it fall here—then..."

Then these were his *last words*. And he was... He was...

"What happened to the ones you took?" I asked, voice hoarse, breath caught. My vision was already a blur and I hadn't even realized I was crying.

The Swarm Tyrant's broken head lifted just slightly. It hissed, twitching, before rasping out the truth.

"All the humans... were killed."

No.

Please, please...

I bit down on my lip until it bled. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even think. Still—I needed to know.

"Was there... someone with black hair? Blue eyes...?"

Lucas looked at me then, really looked. I saw it—his surprise, deep and sharp, buried in that unshaken face.

Even he didn't expect that question from me.

But the Swarm Tyrant did not hesitate.

It met my eyes with the twisted joy of a monster who had remembered the pain it caused.

"Yes," it said. "I remember one. I killed him myself. Choked him. Crushed his ribs. He screamed—then I snapped his neck."

I didn't feel rage.

I didn't feel anything.

My legs gave out. Just like that.

No sounds. No screams. No light. No Lucas. No grotesques. Just a moment frozen in time where everything inside me began to collapse.

Piece.

By piece.

By piece.

And there was no one here to stop it.

Lucas – Perspective

「Warning: Emotional resonance scan complete. Hatred—gone. Disgust—gone. Vengeance—evaporated. Remaining signal: heartbreak.」

...System? You good?

I glanced to the side and froze.

Celia was on her knees, shaking. Shoulders trembling like her whole body forgot how to breathe. She clutched some bloodstained paper like it was the only thing keeping her soul from falling apart.

"Celia?!" I called out.

No answer.

Just another sob—louder this time. Heart-splitting.

Gods... what the hell happened?

「Update: Subject Celia's cursed energy has fully dissipated. System warns: maintain distance. Emotional magic state now inactive.」

Wait—what?

I turned just as the air snapped behind me.

Reflexes kicked in.

"System, dodge—!"

「Activating Divine Protection: Lightstep II. Speed increased 175%. You're welcome, speed junkie.」

The wind howled as I blinked sideways, barely slipping away from the claw that should've ended me. My boots scraped through cracked stone. The Swarm Tyrant's eyes—those sick, glowing voids—locked back onto me.

And I realized something worse.

Celia's curse was gone.

We had planned this fight down to every thorn. Her Withering Touch, laced with cursed decay, would slowly drop its regeneration and reaction time every time she landed a hit. My light barriers and beams would keep it pressured and pinned while she chipped it away.

But now—

Now all of that was gone.

"System, curse magic—go, go, go!"

「You're adorable. Unfortunately, host's mana is entirely celestial. Cursed magic unavailable. Maybe try being edgy next time.」

I gritted my teeth. "This isn't the time for comedy!"

「And yet you keep living like a stand-up act.」

I scanned the field, breath short. Celia still hadn't moved. She wasn't glowing. Her chains weren't alive like before.

Her eyes... weren't even open anymore. Just red, puffy, full of tears.

She was completely vulnerable.

Then the Swarm Tyrant saw it too.

It didn't hesitate. Didn't roar. Didn't monologue.

It just **moved**.

Faster than a thought. Claws raised. Going straight for her.

"Celia—!" I cast a barrier in front of her.

Crack.

Gone in one hit.

I shot a beam—mirror-fired, focused with max light compression.

Shatter.

It grabbed the beam with its hand—****its freaking hand—****and *broke* it.

「Warning: Enemy has adapted to celestial light. Resistance rising. This is your villain arc moment.」

"Yeah, no sh—!"

I lunged, trying to block again, but I knew I was late.

It reached her.

And Celia... She just whispered, stuttering in a breath that I couldn't hear properly.

"...Kai...ser..."

I clenched my teeth, helpless, as the monster raised its claws for her neck—

Schlick.

The Tyrant's hand fell to the ground.

Gone. Clean slice. A spray of dark blood followed.

What?

I blinked. Its entire wrist was severed.

"Celia?!"

She hadn't moved. Still sobbing. Still staring at nothing.

But one of her chains...It had moved on its own.

「System Update: Subject Celia's emotional state is in total suppression. All external expressions frozen. However, focused grief has triggered subconscious magical retaliation. In short: she's so sad, she's subconsciously going to kill anything that gets around her.」

...That's horrifying. And kind of amazing. But mostly horrifying.

The Swarm Tyrant staggered back, letting out a guttural hiss.

Then it turned its gaze toward me again, a voice finally curling out of its throat.

"You're all alone now, human."

Its arm began to regrow—flesh bubbling, veins snapping back into place in just under **seven seconds**.

Interesting...

900 HP / 1250 MP Lightstep II – Active Poison Nullification – Active Visionary Sight – Locked In System, I hope you're ready, 'cause I'm about to break every bone in this shiny body if you don't keep me alive.

「Considering your odds, I've already planned your funeral playlist.」 ...Cute.

The Swarm Tyrant's severed hand flopped near Celia's boots—but it was already reforming. Skin bubbled. Bone cracked back into place like a grotesque jigsaw.

I didn't wait.

"Light Construct: Multi-Mirror Lens!"

Ten angled panes of light surrounded me, shimmering like glass, all rotating midair. Reflected sunlight split into needles of focused energy—and I let them loose.

Flash! Flash! Flash!

Each beam slammed into the Tyrant from different sides, but it twisted—**literally twisted—**its spine to dodge them, leapt up, and **slammed into the ground** like a comet.

I flew back.

HP: -78 Oh great, the bastard just cracked my ribs through a light barrier.

"System—!"

「Got it. Activating *Celestial Magic: Prism Guard*.」

Light surged around my body like an armor made of broken stars—spinning, refracting, orbiting me like sentient particles. Just in time too.

Because he rushed me again.

Claws first. Then the **jaw**.

It bit toward my shoulder—I blocked with a *Light Dagger*, sparks flying as fangs scraped against the radiant edge. One claw sliced my side—ripped skin—but Prism Guard flared and absorbed most of the venom before it hit bloodstream.

I slid under its leg and launched "**Flash Net**"—a light magic trap that bursts with reflection if touched.

The Tyrant flew up to avoid it.

...It learned. Fast.

「Scan: Biological adaptability detected. Neural adjustments complete. Light frequency resistance rising. Threat Level: Escalating.」

"Of course it is," I muttered, "why wouldn't it?"

It swooped back in, trying to take me in the air.

I kicked off the ground and shouted, "**Celestial Magic: Skyfall Sanctuary!**"

A massive sigil formed overhead—white and blue, like divine snowfall etched in holy script. A shield of *falling constellations* formed, each star pulsing.

BOOM!

He crashed into the celestial barrier—and it held.

...For two seconds.

Then his wing speared straight through it. Damn.

We clashed mid-air, my light dagger meeting his claw. I spun sideways, letting a mirror reflect the sun behind me, blinding him just long enough to slash across his chest.

Direct Hit!

But his body hardened. It shimmered like chitin—**no, evolved skin.**

The next dagger strike... barely cut him.

He was adapting *faster* than before.

「System analysis: Biological armor enhanced against physical and reflective kinetic attacks. User damage output: Halved.」

"Thanks, doc, really helpful!"

He dove again—this time I let him.

"Celestial Magic: Halo Anchor!"

Chains of divine light shot up from the ground, snagging his limbs and dragging him down—but he roared and **snapped them** like threads.

He grabbed me by the chest.

Shit—

I reversed gravity with "Wind Updraft" and spun out, landing awkwardly. My ankle screamed in pain.

HP: -112 Remaining: 710/900

"You're one ugly evolution trash," I spat.

「Observation: You can't keep up forever. Try dying slower.」

I grinned.

Then it **shrieked.**

Not at me.

Outward.

All across the sky and ground—grotesques paused.

Then turned.

Then **charged**.

An army.

"...This just got worse."

And in the middle of it all, the Tyrant stared at me with glowing hunger.

"You're all alone now, human," it hissed again.

Maybe.

But I'd rather die alone than let this monster win.

I cracked my neck, light forming daggers in both hands, eyes burning bright. "Bring it on, pestilence."

Let's see who breaks first.

The sky was bleeding grotesques.

They poured from the from hell. Wings, teeth, claws, venom—and one singular will connecting them all.

The Swarm Tyrant.

And me? I stood in the middle of a battlefield, surrounded. One against hundreds.

No, not hundreds.

Thousands.

「Your odds of survival have dropped to below 4%. Would you like to draft a farewell letter?」

"Shut it."

I didn't need odds. I needed **time**.

They charged.

I spun. "**Celestial Magic: Halo Ring Detonation!**"

A spinning ring of celestial light burst around me, casting a shockwave laced with divine script. The nearest grotesques were shredded apart mid-air—but others adapted, skin hardening, bones cracking back into place.

They learned fast.

But so did I.

"**Earth Spike—Funnel Trap! Water Seal!**" I jammed the terrain into a narrow pit, then flooded it with cursed-soaked water—then instantly froze it.

Three grotesques charged. They fell in and **shattered** into frozen paste.

Six more leapt from above.

"**Reflective Dome: Light Prism Net!**" A sudden lattice of mirrored strands wrapped mid-air like barbed wire. They sliced themselves mid-jump—blood sprayed. Wings torn.

"**Fire Spiral – Into Wind Bloom!!**"

I kicked into a spin, flaming into a vortex, then exploded the outer edge into a wind blast, pushing the flaming bodies into a wave of approaching grotesques.

My legs stung. My back tore. **HP: -84 HP: 626**

I coughed—and kept moving.

The Swarm Tyrant roared. Its claws shimmered with poison. A grotesque corpse hit my side—

HP: -67 HP: 559

"System, now!"

「Initiating: *Celestial Sync* – 92%. Overclocking MP channels. Proceed with caution.」

"Caution's a luxury."

I felt the pull of light, the tug of celestial mana—and **the grit of the earth**. Then something sparked.

A plan.

So stupid. So perfect.

I grinned.

Let's rewrite magic.

I slammed my foot down.

"Elemental Blend: Hollow Core Siphon. Phase One—Bury Light." I sank light mirrors into the ground, reflecting **upward**, surrounding the Tyrant in a bowl of invisible beams.

He didn't even see them. Not yet.

"Phase Two—Celestial Chains: Orbit Form." I summoned chains made of constellations, orbiting around the bowl—marking the kill zone.

Tyrant flew forward, unfazed. Predictable.

"Phase Three—Wind Dilation. Compress. Ignite." The air thickened unnaturally inside the zone. I raised heat with fire, then dropped pressure using wind, destabilizing his flight—

He flinched. I had him.

"Final Phase—Reflective Amplification." All the sunbeams bounced in a circle—**amplified by the mirrored ground.**

The moment he stepped inside—

BOOM.

A full-array light implosion. The Tyrant was hit from **all sides at once**, blinded, burned, blown off balance, and slammed into a celestial net of orbiting stars that **shredded his wings mid-air.**

"Got you, bitch—!"

But then the sky screamed.

Grotesques rained down. Hundreds.

"System—!"

「Too late. Incoming impact in 0.3 seconds.」

HP: -150HP: 409

Claws tore my arm.**HP: -87HP: 322**

A grotesque bit my shoulder—venom splashing. 「Nullified.」 Thanks.

A tail hit my ribs.**HP: -112HP: 210**

I stabbed through its throat with a light dagger, but another slammed my back into the ground.**HP: -89HP: 121**

"Lightstep—Boost to 250% for 3 seconds!" 「Overclocking. Don't die.」

I **blitzed**, spinning like a hurricane—daggers in hand, light swirling, celestial magic bursting as I cleared space around me—

But it was too late.

The Swarm Tyrant rose from the dust, **healed**. Fully.

Claws glowing. Jaw cracked back into shape. Wings reformed. I hit my knees, panting.

"Still... standing..."

HP: 11

Blood spilled from my lips. My vision blurred.

「You're out of time.」

The Swarm Tyrant walked toward me. Each step trembled the earth.

"System... I hope you got one more miracle."

Silence.

I watched the monster grin.

And I couldn't move.

The Swarm Tyrant leapt at me.

"Worthless human."

That voice. That condescension. It broke something.

Time slowed.

And before I could blink, **I wasn't here anymore.**

I was **back there.**

On the floor.

Again.

At my past life... at earth.

My knees scraped against broken glass. My ribs stung. The room smelled like beer and regret.

I was maybe eight...? Nine?

Didn't matter.

"You call this a grade?" My father's voice echoed like thunder. I flinched.

My arms went up by instinct.

Crack.

His belt smacked my back. Then again. Again.

"Stop—! I-I'll do better, please—!"

I begged.

And he didn't stop.

I remember walking to school the next morning like nothing happened. Shirt tucked. Smile fake. No one noticed. Or maybe no one cared.

But they noticed enough to **kick me**, when I dropped my books. To **laugh**, when I cried. To **hurt**, just because they could.

The strong? They always prey on the weak.

And me?

I was born to be eaten alive.

But that wasn't even the worst part.

No.

I remember the day my **mother** looked at me.

Her face had this tired, cold expression. Not hate. Not even anger. Just... like I didn't matter.

"You ruined my life. You shouldn't have been born."

I was five.

I cried in the kitchen. I didn't understand what I did wrong.

That's when she poured it.

Hot water.

My skin bubbled. I screamed, my little voice hoarse with pain. She didn't flinch. She walked away like I was never real to begin with.

That scar on my shoulder?

That wasn't from a monster. That was from the woman who birthed me.

And years later, I stood on the edge of a rooftop.

Done.

The sky was a blur. My body felt weightless.

I wanted to disappear forever.

And then—

「You have been chosen by the heavens.」

A voice. Soft. Almost kind.

「Designation: Sorcerer. Candidate: Lucas. Would you like to accept?」

I was still falling.

I didn't even think. I just whispered—

"...Yes."

I was back to the present as the swarm tyrant leaped forward at me.

The bastard grabbed me by the hair.

Yanked me up like I was a ragdoll. Blood blurred my vision, my limbs were dead weight. The Swarm Tyrant spread its wings wide—gleaming with evolution, power, cruelty. This was it.

My death. Another failed name on a grave no one would visit.

"Fuck... that." I clenched my teeth. "Bullshit."

Why was I the one always losing?

Why the one always bleeding?

Why the one who had to watch others walk away, while I got swallowed by everything they left behind?

"STOP—" I snarled, my voice hoarse. "—BEING—WEAK."

My chest burned. My head screamed. Something deeper than pain stirred. That name they used to call me—worthless. Failure. Burden.

I wasn't that kid anymore.

I wasn't *him*.

"I... am **Lucas Reinhardt**," I breathed, even as the wind screamed past me. "The strongest sorcerer this universe will ever receive."

The Swarm Tyrant flew higher, poison-coated claws glowing, about to cleave me in half mid-air.

"With the power I have—"

「Notification: Combat Skill Sync 100%. Initiating...」

"—with the power I've earned—"

「Notification: Passive Trait Unlocked — *Arcane Mastery: Stage One*.」

"—I can—"

「SYSTEM UPDATE COMPLETE.」

His claws swung down toward me like guillotines—

"I can kill you—" I whispered.

And then—

Ping.

A small mirror flickered open near the edge of the battlefield.

A single, unassuming beam of light shot from it—

—struck a wounded grotesque on the ground—

—and killed it. Instantly.

Then—

「Level Up Achieved: LVL 20.」 「Title Unlocked: *Supreme Sorcerer.*」 「System Upgrade Initiated.」 「Wounds... Fully Healed.」 「Divine Protection Generated: *Grotesque Slaughterer.*」

I felt it.

Like heaven crashed into my bloodstream.

Power surged through me like liquid lightning. Every cell exploded with clarity. Pain disappeared. Vision sharpened.

I stood upright. Mid-air.Not falling.Not weak.Not dying.

"It's over," I whispered.

I stopped thinking.

No quips. No fear. No hesitation.

My body moved, and my magic followed.

「Warning: Mana threshold collapsing. Neural stress at 78%.」

"Good." My voice came out quiet. Steady. "Shut up and keep up."

My feet hit the ground and the earth cratered beneath me. I was moving faster than lightstep now—faster than instinct. Faster than the fear that used to rule me.

A grotesque pounced—its jaw wide.

I gripped the air.

"〈Celestial Commandment: Spear of the Falling Warden〉."

A white-hot celestial lance erupted from above and skewered it like meat on a spike.

I didn't stop. I spun and slammed my palm into the ground.

"〈Starbind: Pillars of Judgement〉."

Twelve glowing spears formed a circle, shot upward, and carved through an entire battalion of grotesques—each one turning to ash the second they touched the beams.

The Swarm Tyrant flew overhead—wounds regenerating, wings flapping, adapting again. But this time?

I wasn't just fighting.

I was erasing.

Two grotesques lunged from the sides.

"〈Celestial Art: Veilstep〉."

I blinked between them, appearing above, then drove a glowing dagger through one's spine and swept the other off its feet, crushing its skull with my boot.

「Warning: You are going beyond optimized battle limits. MP usage unsustainable.」

"Don't care."

A grotesque tried to drag a wounded child. I lifted my hand, fingers trembling not from weakness—but from the mana tearing me apart.

"〈Sanctified Torrent〉."

A geyser of golden water exploded beneath them, washing the grotesques into glowing mist. The child blinked, stunned. I didn't stop to comfort her. I couldn't.

I leapt again—slammed into the Swarm Tyrant mid-air.

It roared, claws swiping.

I dodged left, letting it tear through my coat, and drove a burst of celestial energy into its chest.

It shrieked, staggered—

—and healed again.

But not fast enough anymore.

Every time I hit it, it healed slower. Every time it adapted, I changed faster.

Celestial magic obeyed will. And my will?

Unbreakable.

I spun in the air—crashed back into the ground, flipping and skidding across corpses and glass. Then stood, breath shallow.

No light magic. No tricks.

Just me.

And the heavens sharing the blessings through my veins.

I looked at it one last time.

"This is the new me."

I lifted my hands to the sky.

The air... froze.

Above me, five stars blinked into existence. Each point radiated blinding white light. They connected—slowly—like drawing lines on a celestial compass.

A shape formed. A perfect seal.

My eyes burned.

「Warning: Mana level — -5,000. Incoming rupture.」

I didn't care. This was my magic. My story.

"〈Heaven's Singularity〉."

The sky fractured open.

A pillar of pure celestial energy roared downward like a divine judgment—screaming across dimensions. Wind howled. The air turned to light. A hurricane formed around the beam as it slammed into the Swarm Tyrant standing amidst the battlefield.

It looked up—too late.

The world turned white.

The light swallowed the ground.It swallowed Rinascita.It swallowed him.It swallowed me.

I win.

Chapter 84: Ascend- Swarm Tyrant IV (Ending)

Beyond Rinascita —*Deep within the cult of Nemesis.*

Beneath miles of cursed soil, beneath forgotten tombs and black-stone caverns, the cult's sanctuary churned with silence—until it didn't.

The **Silent Executioner**, draped in shadows and stitched flesh, moved up the black stairs of the ancient throne chamber, a trail of twitching eyes slithering behind him. His voice was jagged, crawling with anticipation.

"The Swarm Tyrant has reached its peak, my lord."

Upon the throne of bones, sitting with one leg lazily crossed over the other, was **Azrion**—master of foresight and architect of ruin. His eyes never looked up. His fingers rested against the pages of his **Foresight Diary**, where ink wrote itself in jagged, divine scripture. The words swirled as if struggling against fate.

He spoke as they formed.

"Lucas Reinhardt..." His voice carried both amusement and weight.

"...has gone beyond my expectations. He cast Heaven's Singularity."

Behind him, a dozen eyes turned in perfect unison. The spell had a name feared even by the gods. It required *inhuman* mental clarity, *immeasurable* mana, and *absolute* will.

The Silent Executioner's many mouths chuckled.

"But he did not win."

Azrion finally raised his eyes. They were a pale silver—empty and infinite.

"He couldn't," Azrion said.

"The Swarm Tyrant cannot be defeated. End of the story. No matter how powerful the opposition is, it will always reconstruct. It is eternal."

He gently closed the Foresight Diary. The room darkened.

"Lucas... you can never win alone."

Rinascita – Battlefield

The smoke began to clear.

The skies were ruptured, scorched white with celestial aftermath. The earth had been carved open. Bodies—grotesques twisted in agony—lay in ash and light. At the center of it all, burned in golden flame, stood **Lucas**.

Or rather, what was left of him.

His body landed hard—limbs trembling, armor cracked, coat shredded, eyes glazed. There was no strength left in his legs. The mana had been drained beyond possibility.

System Notification: 「WARNING. Limit surpassed. Mana status: -5,483. You have exceeded all acceptable bounds. Immediate restoration is impossible.」

Lucas couldn't even respond. Not with words.

Because that's when he saw it.

His breath caught in his throat.

From the crater not far away...A **cocoon** formed. Thick, pulsating with grotesque energy. Limbs cracking. Bones stretching. Inside it, **the Swarm Tyrant**, regenerating again—its new body bulging, transforming.

Evolving.

System Alert: 「WARNING: Swarm Tyrant is mutating beyond celestial affinity. All divine-tier spells are predicted to fail.」

Lucas' throat tightened. **"No... no, no no no—"**

He tried to move. Nothing responded.

Cult of Nemesis — Throne Room

Azrion leaned forward, shadows embracing him.

"As long as grotesques remain alive... the Swarm Tyrant cannot die."

The **Silent Executioner** nodded. The swarm's will was not singular. Its **core** was fragmented—split across every grotesque in Rinascita.

"There are 1,372 grotesques still alive," he whispered. **"Too many... and too fast for him to kill alone."**

Azrion's voice was quiet, but final.

"Lucas was blinded by mercy."

His fingers tapped the diary once.

"He centered Heaven's Singularity on himself. A noble instinct... but a fatal one. Had he aimed it across the entire town, all grotesques—and the Swarm Tyrant—would have perished."

"But instead..." His smile turned cruel.

"He spared the innocent people. And in doing so, doomed them."

Rinascita – Present Moment

From the cocoon came the sound of steel tearing open.

Then it rose.

The **Swarm Tyrant**, reborn once more—this time clad in **obsidian armor**, heavy, unbreakable, and immune to all known magical frequencies. Its eyes glowed with unnatural sentience.

Lucas lay helpless, face against blood-soaked dirt, trembling, lips cracked.

"System..." he whispered. **"Heal me."**

Silence.

「Unable to comply. Mana levels insufficient.」

Lucas' fingers curled into a fist.

"Bullshit..."

The Swarm Tyrant **leapt** into the air, wings bursting open.

It dove straight for him, claws raised, eyes wild with vengeance.

Lucas didn't move. Couldn't move.

The last thing he saw—Was death.

But not for him.

Celia's Perspective: *(A few minutes before Lucas cast Heaven's Singularity)*

My chains curled around me... not like weapons anymore. No. They wrapped me like arms would, like they were trying to hold me together because I couldn't.

I didn't tell them to. I didn't even want them to. But they did.

Forming a shell around me.

I don't know if they were protecting me from the monster outside—Or the one inside.

I sat inside the hollow silence. Alone. Tears dripped down my cheeks, soft and slow, like they were being pulled out of me against my will. Like even my sadness had to beg for an escape.

And I just kept whispering it again and again—

"Kaiser... you liar..." My voice cracked. It didn't even sound like mine anymore.

"You said you wouldn't leave me..." I clutched the letter tighter. **"...but you did."**

My fingers trembled. I was hurting the paper. Smudging the blood-written name on it with my tears. But I didn't care. It *hurt*.

This pain... This deep, cold thing inside me... it wasn't heartbreak. It was *abandonment*. It was the feeling of being forgotten. Again.

"Stop crying, Celia..." I told myself. My voice barely escaped my lips.

"You don't have a reason to cry. So why are you crying?" But I already knew the answer. I just didn't want to say it.

Because saying it meant it was real.

My heart knew something my mind refused to believe.

He's gone. The one who touched my head when I was breaking down. The one who *looked* at me, not like I was dangerous, or fragile, or cursed. But like I was just... *Celia*. And that was enough.

"He didn't mean to leave you..." I tried again, my voice barely a whisper. *"He just had to... right?"*

Then I laughed. Soft. Sad. Bitter. What was I saying?

My chains rattled gently, as if they were unsure whether to hug me tighter or let go.

My legs curled to my chest, and I bent forward, pressing my forehead against my knees. I could feel the tears soaking through my stockings.

The paper in my hands crinkled as I held it too tight. Like I was trying to pull him out of it.

I just... **wanted to see you again.**

That was all.

Not to fight. Not to win. Just to see you. To hear your voice, that low serious tone that made everything else shut up.

Because you were the only one who ever... **treated me like I was a person.**

And now... Even that was taken from me.

My breathing was uneven. Chest heaving in tiny spasms, like my lungs were breaking down along with my heart.

Tears kept falling. My hands trembled harder now.

I wanted to tear my skin off. To grab my heart and *squeeze* it until it stopped making me feel.

"I just..." I choked on the words. **"I just wanted to be loved... without begging for it."**

Is that so selfish? Was that too much to ask?

Why... why do people always leave me? Why is the only thing I can keep close... pain?

"Why, Kaiser..." My voice was breaking in pieces. **"Please..."**

I didn't care about anything anymore. Not the grotesques. Not the war. Not myself.

"Stay with me..."

The letter felt heavier now.

With shaking, bruised fingers, I unfolded it. I didn't want to see what was written.

Because if I did... That would mean he really wrote it expecting to *never come back*.

And I couldn't handle that.

My lip quivered as my eyes lowered to the bloodied parchment.

It was his handwriting. Even shaky, rushed... it was undeniably his.

I pressed the paper to my chest.

I *wanted* to die.

Because if he was gone—**Then what was left of me? What's the point of living...?**

(Unfolding Kaiser's letter—his last words to her)

The parchment trembled in my hands. No. My hands were trembling.

Everything... everything about this felt wrong. Like this letter shouldn't exist. Like if I didn't open it, he wouldn't be dead.

But my fingers kept moving.

The paper was stained. His blood... His handwriting... it was messy. Like he wrote it while dying.

Like he was already in pain.

And the first line...

"I'm... sorry Celia."

My lips parted.

"N-No..."

"I couldn't keep my promise to you..."

"Stop..." My throat ached. **"Please stop..."**

"I wanted to be by your side... but I won't be able to fulfill it."

My breath hitched, and I pressed the paper to my lips, as if kissing it would make him come back.

"I don't have much time left."

"N-No... You had time—! You promised me—!"The words came out strangled, choked by sobs that clawed their way out of my chest.

"I don't know what you thought of me... annoying? irresponsible? weak?"

"No... you were my everything."I shook my head rapidly. **"No, no, no—Kaiser—"**

"I didn't know I was making memories with you."

And that broke me.

"No—Those weren't memories..."**"Those moments... they were like a dream to me."**

I could barely see the letter anymore through the blur of tears.

Then came the next line—

"Please don't cry okay? You'll be happier again and find someone better."

A drop—my tear—fell. Right on the word *better*. And it bled.

The ink smudged, then the paper tore. **"NO!"**

"I don't want someone better! I never did—!"I clutched the parchment tighter to my chest, fingers shaking violently.

"I only wanted you... I only ever wanted you, Kaiser..."

Then I kept reading. My eyes stung.

"I've always had a difficult time genuinely smiling... before meeting you I did smile but it was fake... lies to look normal."

A sob erupted from my throat.

"But with you Celia, I was happy."

He was happy?

Then why—why did it hurt so much?

"In my story, you were my favorite Chapter..."

My whole body trembled.

"No... you were the story itself."

"...I-I can't..."I fell forward, the chains clattering around me.

"Kaiser... please... please don't say that..."

Because that made it real.

That made it feel like goodbye.

And then—The letter thinned. The words near the end looked frantic, desperate. Like he ran out of time.

"I know I will soon be killed... There is no escape... I don't even know if this will reach you but I hope so, Celia. Because I have one thing to say..."

My eyes widened.

"W-What... what thing?"

"You're my heart forever... and..."

And...?

"A-And...?"

The paper ended.

"NO."

I flipped it over.Checked the back.Checked the folds.

There was nothing.

"No no no no no—don't stop there—!"

I scrambled on the ground. My palms dug into the dust, the blood, anything, searching.*Searching for him.*

And then—I saw it.

Tiny handwriting. Rushed. Nearly invisible.

"I wrote another one, Celia... my last words to you."

My breath caught.

"The tyrant has it. Please read it... if you ever loved me."

The words blurred again from my tears.

"It is going to kill me soon. So please... kill it for me. And read my final words."

At the bottom—*"(Written with blood)"*

My hands clenched the letter.

My arms went still. Everything... still. Except my blood.

It boiled.

It *boiled*.

I slowly stood up.

The chains uncurled themselves from my body. Like they felt it too. Like they *wanted* this.

My heartbeat wasn't normal anymore. It wasn't sadness.

It was rage.

"Your last words to me..." I whispered.

"...you gave it... to *that* thing?"

The grief didn't fade.

It twisted.

It blackened.

"You... made me cry, Kaiser..." I whispered.

I clenched my fists until my nails broke skin. **"So now I'll make *it* bleed for every tear I shed."**

My voice cracked.

"I will kill it." My head slowly turned toward the battlefield after large ray of light engulfed the area moments ago.

The swarm tyrant's disgusting form. The cocoon. The grotesques. All of it.

"For you."

My chains slithered to life.

"For *your* last words."

"I. Will. Kill. It."

Back to the present.

It was about to rip Lucas in half. That pestering, arrogant, reckless idiot—But I got there first.

My thorns snapped to life, splitting from the ground and coiling around its claws like vipers. The sound they made when cracking through its hardened carapace? *Delicious*.

I rose slowly into the air, my chains dragging behind me like serpents slithering in anticipation of a feast.

Then—snap. My chains shot forward, curved, cracked the air—only for that evolved bastard to bat them away mid-flight with its disgusting arms.

Tch.

It hurled a barrage of poisonous claws at Lucas—one scratch and he'd be rotting in a minute. Idiot still couldn't move.

But my chains moved faster.

They shifted and formed a wide arc barrier in front of him, deflecting the claws into the rubble. The shockwave hissed in the air.

I glanced back, voice cold.

"Find a better corner to hide, loser."

His bloodied face twitched.

"Get lost, witch. I will kill it." he croaked.

Good. He still had a little bite left in him.

Like I cared. He could die or live for all I cared right now. All I wanted...

Was to *kill it*.

My sclera were turning black—pitch black—and my irises burned crimson like the curse in my veins remembered what heartbreak felt like.

That voice...**Obsession.** Whispering again. "**Kill it. Now.**"

Yes.

The Swarm Tyrant sneered.

"Why won't you die already, you heartless human?"

My mouth curved into something grotesque. Not a smile. A promise.

"I might be heartless." I stepped forward.

"But you're already dead."

It screamed and flew into the air—claws elongating, armor plates sliding over its joints like obsidian shields.

And then it *dove*.

A sonic boom cracked through the air as it charged.

I raised my hand.

Boom. A storm of black thorns erupted from the ground—dozens—aiming to impale it mid-flight. It twisted. Dodged. One thorn grazed its wing and it snarled, spiraling toward me.

We collided mid-air.

Its claw scraped my side—I twisted, kicked off its neck, flipped behind it and threw three cursed daggers made of ice.

It blocked two.

The third lodged into its rib. Not deep. But deep enough to make it feel *pain*.

It howled, spinning toward me, its jaw splitting open like a flower made of knives. I fell back—hands forming a glyph in the air—

"Ash Petals."

Thousands of ash-like glowing petals exploded around me—every one of them a cursed projectile laced with my own magic signature. They shot at it from all directions, turning mid-air as it flew.

But the bastard evolved again.

Its body hardened—reflective scales across its arms. The petals shattered on contact. My *Withering Touch* wasn't strong enough anymore.

"Tch..."

It slashed, I ducked. I kicked its leg—it didn't move. I sent thorns from under its feet to wrap around its spine—it flew up.

Every move I made, it evolved faster.

And still—I fought harder.

I moved on instinct.

Every spell, every dodge, every chain whip, every elemental burst—I layered wind magic over my thorns to speed them up, coated them with ice to freeze joints, used earth to destabilize footing and shoot spikes. Fire detonations under its wings.

I made it *bleed*. But it never *stopped*.

We tore through buildings mid-flight. Our attacks collided so hard, it sent shockwaves that shattered the nearby grounds.

I parried its claws with a barrier of cursed vines, then threw my chain up to swing above it. My heel landed on its head.

Crack.

It grunted—then twisted in a full flip and sent me flying into a collapsed tower. Rubble fell all around me.

Blood in my mouth.

I stood again.

My eyes locked with its.

We were even.

No—I was *losing*.

I grit my teeth, wiped the blood.

"I can't kill you alone... can I?" I whispered.

It grinned.

And then it screamed—deep, guttural, monstrous. An alpha call.

The earth trembled.

Grotesques came—hundreds of them. Clawing through walls, skittering through cracks, flying, crawling, mutating.

A tidal wave of corrupted flesh and shrieking agony.

They were answering their king.

My body was shaking from exhaustion. My magic was thinning. My *heart* was burning.

But I stood.

Blood dripping from my hands.

Tears long dried.

I raised my chain again.

"Then come." My voice cracked.

"All of you."

I can't defeat them all.

Not like this.

My chains trembled behind me—not from fear, but fatigue. My magic was thinning. My legs were shaking. And in front of me?

A sea of grotesques. The Swarm Tyrant looming above them all like a king of decay.

If I run in now, I'll end up like Lucas... Bleeding... breathless... useless.

Think, Celia. Think.

What can I do? What action can I take?

Then it hit me.

His voice—*Kaiser's voice*—cut through the panic like glass through skin.

"Kill it for me."

And my breath stopped.

No...

It's not just my *actions* that need to change.

It's *me*.

This version of me can't win.

I looked at my hands. Pale, trembling, blood-drenched. The same hands that reached for him and failed. The same hands that begged for love... that clung to someone already leaving me behind.

Pathetic.

The one who needs to die... is me.

I let the words slice through my heart.

I closed my eyes, and in my mind—

I watched my own blood *pour* out of my chest, my throat, my eyes. Falling to the floor.

Lifeless.

But that blood wasn't just death.

It was a curse. A sacrifice.

My body began to *merge* with every cursed thread of magic I had ever touched—every grudge, every scream, every dying breath I stole from grotesques. It wrapped around me, whispering in tongues too old for the gods to understand.

If killing myself means victory, I'll die a thousand times.

I'll tear myself apart again and again if it means one moment... one final moment... to keep my promise.

To keep his last words from becoming meaningless.

I will be reborn.

And I will *crush* this insect.

I am—

Celia.

The curse in my blood erupted.

My knees bent slightly as the ground cracked under me.

The Queen of Curses.

The grotesques twitched. The Swarm Tyrant tilted its head.

"You're all alone, human," it said, voice clicking with hatred.

"It's over."

I raised my head slowly. My voice colder than the grave I just buried myself in.

"You pride yourself on numbers, huh?"

Its eye twitched. A single muscle beneath its cheek spasmed. Annoyance. Fear.

"I'll make it equal then."

My hand rose.

My entire body glowed—not with light, not with hope—But with *pure, devastating, raw curse energy*. The kind that doesn't bend to logic or mercy. A chaos born from obsession, heartbreak, and love twisted into vengeance.

My mouth opened, and I whispered the words that no mortal should say:

"T'mari ith valekh. En'cor da'ron. Rith senn marol... Kai'reth."

Each syllable made the world *shiver*.

For a moment—Nothing happened.

They all watched. Confused. Waiting.

The grotesques cocked their heads like curious animals. The Swarm Tyrant took a step forward, claws twitching.

And then I whispered the final word

"Ascend."

The earth... began to tremble.

The cracks beneath Rinascita widened—not from destruction, but from *resurrection*.

And then—**They began to crawl up.**

From the dirt. From the blood-soaked soil. From every cursed spot my chains had once pierced through—

Hands.

Twisted. Blackened. Stained with old sins.

Grotesque hands.

But not the kind that stood beside the Swarm Tyrant.

These... were mine.

Demonic Grotesques.

Each one I had personally slaughtered. Each one I had fed my hatred, my grief, and my madness to.

My army.

My beautiful, cursed army of monsters reborn through my will.

The Swarm Tyrant's face... *twitched*. Its beady eyes widened in horror.

The grotesques beside it staggered back, confused, their insect-like shrieks rising in terror as *hundreds*—no, *thousands* of cursed grotesques formed from the abyss and climbed upward. Clawed, hunched, still dripping in ethereal rot and wrapped in cursed sigils.

Their eyes—**All of them stared at me.**

I stood still... watching.

Silent. Drenched in sadness. Yet towering in power.

The Tyrant muttered one word, a hoarse rasp from its throat as if choking on the truth:

"I...Impossible."

And then—**A human hand.**

Not grotesque.

Familiar.

It rose from the cracks near my feet, pushing itself up. Long fingers. Battle-worn knuckles. The scent of burnt cinders.

And then—**Ronan.**

My first soul.

The first one I ever truly killed.

He knelt before me, one hand across his chest, the other dragging a trail of chains behind him—chains forged not from steel, but from *submission*.

His blackened eyes glowed with devotion.

"What shall we do, my Queen?" His voice was deep, twisted by damnation—yet there was pride in it. Obedience.

I smiled softly. Something between cruelty and comfort.

"We will slaughter the grotesques," I whispered. **"I'm leaving that up to you, Ronan."**

He bowed his head. **"As you wish, my Queen."**

His body twisted, flames erupting from his spine as his cursed form awakened. The hellish glow of incineration coiled around his arms, and horns emerged from his skull.

Not the man he once was.

But the King of Flames. My personal devil.

He turned to the grotesques in the distance, his voice cracking like firewood.

"I'll burn them alive."

"**Good**," I replied, my chains rattling behind me like laughter.

And then—**The war began.**

A scream shattered the horizon.

The Grotesque Race...VersusMy Cursed Army.

Flames ignited the sky. Cursed thorns erupted from the ground like blooming roses. My grotesques leapt onto theirs, tearing them apart with the same madness they once died with.

And I—I simply walked forward.

Every step I took, the battlefield *shifted* around me.

I am the Queen of Curses.

And this is my *reign of supremacy*.

The battlefield crackled with hate and flame.

Across the shattered plaza, grotesques clashed—my demonic army ripping through the evolved monsters with merciless efficiency. Their twisted bodies, once mine, now hunted under my command. Their shrieks echoed like praise.

At the center, the **Swarm Tyrant** stood tall—its obsidian armor shimmering, claws dripping with venom, wings stretching wide to block attacks and spread fear.

Beside me, **Ronan, King of Flames**, roared—a torrent of hellfire engulfing grotesques as he roared. His flames carved paths through the enemy horde.

We attacked in sync.

I flicked my hand—"Dreadvine Coffin!" Black vines erupted from below a group of grotesques, ensnaring them in living thorns. The victims writhed as the vines constricted and pulsed, sapping life and leaving scorched husks.

The vine reached the Swarm Tyrant's leg, tearing armor plating. "**Eat that!**" I hissed. It spat poison at me—my eyes narrowed as dark energy flared.

I used the venom to fuel my next strike: "**Curseheart Echo!**"

A pulse of sickly green magic burst around me. The surrounding grotesques shrieked as their wounds festered and healed in reverse, bleeding out on the spot.

Nearby, Ronan roared.

"Burn!" A flaming fist struck the Tyrant's side. **"Come on, My Queen—let's break it!"**

He lunged, flames ripping the air. I responded with **"Void Thorn Spiral"**, sending dark chains spinning into the battle, cutting into its armor just as Ronan bashed the weakened plates open.

The **Swarm Tyrant** snarled and struck back—its claws cutting through flame, its wings buffeting us with hurricane force.

It grabbed Ronan's arm and winged him downward.

"Your demon is dead, little queen. Your slave is ash!"

Ronan fell into the rubble. I screamed.

"RONAN!" I launched forward, lighting the dark with a torrent of cursed energy.

"Blightflare Oblivion!"

A wave of dark fire streaked across the square, scorching the Tyrant's armor and igniting the ground beneath it. Flaming vines lashed around its legs, scorching its flesh.

I closed in with deadly intent.

"Soulrend Shatter!" My chains exploded into shards of cursed blood magic. They punched through its armor and crushed the plating on its shoulder.

But Ronan lay still—his flame dark, his form broken.

The Tyrant laughed.

"Look! The demon has died—without it, you're nothing."

I stared down. Darkness filled me.

"Oh, he's not dead." I whispered.

I stepped over Ronan's broken form. **"Bind of Rebirth."**

My body pulsed with cursed power. Chains of obsidian light wrapped him, piercing his heart and wing bone, spiraling energy—alive with death.

His form shattered... then reformed. Broken flame rekindled. His eyes opened—redeemed by my curse.

Ronan rose, breathing ash, his armor reforged in hellfire.

He stood.

The Swarm Tyrant's eyes widened in pure terror.

"Impossible—again?!"

Ronan stepped forward, flames brighter than ever.

"As long as my Queen is breathing. I will return by death."

"It's over." I whispered.

Now, the two of them locked on the Tyrant, teamwork unstoppable.

I summoned a vortex of dark energy—hellish, living, *hungry*.

Ronan ignited it with his flames. Together, we pulled the Tyrant into the spiral.

"Let the curse feed on your core."

Darkness and fire warped reality. The Swarm Tyrant screamed. Horrified.

My army surged. Grotesques attacked in waves—now slaughtering with renewed bloodlust.

As the cursed hurricane and flame erupted into a final blow—

"For her."

They smashed into the Swarm Tyrant together, the explosion so bright even the grotesques staggered.

It died—not just destroyed—but *unmade* by our combined might.

But then—its body twitched.

I froze.

The Swarm Tyrant's shredded torso, the one I had torn into pieces with Ronan's hellfire, started *regenerating*. Slowly. Fleshy tendrils slithered back into place, reforming bones, rethreading its lungs.

No. No, no, no—I snapped my hand forward and hurled a devastating cursed spike—charged with rot, hatred, and every ounce of my soul.

It stopped. Mid-air. The curse burned away like paper before reaching its skin.

"What...?"

Behind me, Ronan landed. His voice grim.

"My Queen. That regeneration—it's cursed. No dark magic can undo it now. Only celestial magic can stop that kind of healing."

My fingers clenched. "I... I can't use celestial magic..." I whispered.

The air grew heavier as the Tyrant's body reformed further, its wings crackling, tail regrowing, eyes flaring with hellish glow.

I stared—feeling like a child again.

Lost. Weak.

No. I won't lose again. I won't let it end like this.

Then something clicked.

I looked around the battlefield. My grotesques—my *cursed* grotesques—were overwhelming his evolved ones. Dismembering them. Consuming them. Replacing them.

And I noticed it.

The Swarm Tyrant's regeneration... it was **slowing**.

The more grotesques I killed... the slower it healed.

My eyes widened.

Its regeneration was linked by souls of other grotesques. Thus that's why it managed to live by life threatening attacks and be reborn. It is not strong on its own but rather because of other grotesques.

I understand it now.

"Ronan," I said sharply, my voice cutting like a blade through chaos.

"Go. Kill every grotesque left in Rinascita. **All of them.**"

He didn't ask why.

"As you wish, my Queen."

Ronan vanished in a blink, a trail of embers left in his wake. His murderous intent flared like a nova across the ruined sky.

Elsewhere in Rinascita...

The screams of children echoed in the broken alleyways.

A knight—his armor dented and chest bleeding—held his shield over a terrified child. Four grotesques surrounded him, their claws gleaming.

He would die here.

But before they lunged, the world turned blue.

A wave of cold **hellfire** washed over them—disintegrating two instantly. The others shrieked, only to be pounced on by **eight cursed grotesques**. They tore into the survivors like starving dogs.

The knight gasped.

Behind the fire, Ronan stood, eyes hollow and jaw clenched. Black chains coiled around his wrists, flames running up his back like a cloak.

The knight looked up—still shielding the boy.

"W-What was that?" he muttered.

Another knight approached. One with a white crest and golden trim—**Adonis**.

He saw it too. The cursed monsters. The unnatural flames.

He muttered under his breath, voice hoarse. **"Those are cursed grotesques... bound by her magic. The Queen of Curses has awakened."**

Across Rinascita, the tide turned.

My grotesques flooded the streets like a black sea—moving with eerie unity. They climbed walls, burst through floors, and attacked with venomous rage. Wherever Ronan's flames scorched, the survivors were torn apart by my monsters.

Each grotesque that died... rose again.

Ascended.

Twisted, reborn in my image. Their bodies darker, eyes glowing crimson, mouths whispering curses as they sprinted into battle again.

Near the guild border, the flames reached.

Sylvia stood near the wall with her guild—her heartbeat rapid. She saw them.**The cursed horde.**

But... they weren't attacking them.

The monsters passed right next to her, ignoring her entirely as they charged grotesques in the outskirts.

"They're... they're fighting for us," she whispered.

The other guild members hesitated.

The cursed grotesques burned the enemies alive with black fire. Those who endured were dragged down and consumed. Behind it all—flames, chains, and shadowed eyes guided them.

This wasn't just a battle anymore.

It was a hunt.

And I...

I was their queen.

"You're all alone now," the Tyrant hissed. Its voice slithered past me like acid.

Alone?

I raised my head slowly, shadows swimming under my feet like serpents. "**I am enough.**"

A heartbeat passed. The wind fell silent.

"You took away the only thing..." I stepped forward, thorns rising from my steps, wrapping my limbs like armor.

"...that ever made me happy."

Chains uncoiled from my back like wings, thorns slithering down their edges. My fingertips bled, not from wounds—but from **fury**.

"Now I'll take you..." I whispered coldly, my voice nearly inhuman, "...below **hell**."

The world collapsed in motion.

It charged first, wings snapping open with enough force to shake the sky. I leapt, twisting midair as my chains flared outward—blocking its first claw swipe.

It was fast. Strong. Desperate.

But I was hatred.

I struck its leg with a cursed spear, infused with all the sorrow Kaiser left me with—yet it deflected it with its hardened tail, then swept at me with its claws laced in venom.

Too slow.

I ducked beneath it, twisting like a ribbon, and slammed my palm into its ribs—**Withering Pulse** erupting from the point of impact. Flesh peeled, bone cracked.

It roared.

Then—it did something *vile*.

It grabbed a grotesque's corpse nearby... and **threw it** at me like a projectile.

The body slammed into me midair, trying to knock me off balance. But I caught it. My hand pulsed dark—

"Ascend."

The corpse twitched, then snapped upright—glowing with my sigil. It turned and bit deep into the Tyrant's shoulder.

It *screamed*. I smiled.

"You're holding onto your own kind," I murmured.

But it got worse for him.

Two more grotesques lunged from my army, clamping onto his legs, arms, wings—dragging him down, **biting, ripping**.

"Get em pests"

The Swarm Tyrant roared so loudly the sky itself trembled. A sphere of poison burst from his body—**melting them all**.

Ash.

I shielded my eyes, but I heard it—*his rage*. "**You BITCH!**"

Then came the aerial battle.

We both shot upward—he, with his corrupted wings, and I, using my chains as grappling veins of shadow, *slingshotting* myself through the air.

To the average eye, we were nothing but **streaks**.

Dark and red. **Tyrannical Darkness and Cursed Destiny**.

Claw met chain. Poison met thorn.

I bent backward midair as his tail slashed past my neck—barely an inch. My chains looped around his leg, yanked him into a spiral, then I *teleported* behind him mid-spin with **Curse Blink**.

I drove my knee into his back, flipped, then kicked his skull downward—but he twisted, grabbed my leg, and hurled me through a building below.

I gritted my teeth. Debris exploded around me. But my curse reacted. The moment my blood hit the rubble, it **rose**—a thousand thorns lashing out and dragging me back into the air.

I was bleeding.

I was smiling.

This was what I wanted.

"You should've stayed in your nest," I spat, pulling a shattered tooth of his from my side and **throwing it back** with cursed acceleration.

He deflected it, lunged again—and this time we clashed in midair, grappling, clawing, slashing, and I—

—I saw my reflection in its eye.

Broken. Beautiful. **Unhinged**.

I bit his throat with my cursed fangs, ripped a chunk out, and kicked away midair, chains grabbing the sky itself to hold me.

He fell, coughing black.

But I knew this wasn't over.

Not yet.

The sky burned.

And **I wasn't done.**

We were falling.

Down through the blackened sky, through the ashes of Rinascita, through the ruins of everything I once believed could be saved.

And in that descent—I remembered **everything**.

Kaiser.

His voice.

That smile he gave only me. The way he tilted his head when he knew I was hurting but refused to say it. The way he held my hand without asking.

The day he found me, I had no name.

But he looked at me—not like a monster, not like a tool—and said softly...

"You name... will be Celia."

That moment wasn't just the happiest memory I had—It was my entire **existence**.

And now he was gone.

That was the last thread holding back the thing inside me.

The final piece of humanity.

Snapped.

My eyes darkened completely. A sea of black. My voice became hollow. My skin pulsed with veins of cursed magic. I didn't even feel my heartbeat anymore.

I wasn't Celia the girl.

I was Celia the Curse.

And the **Queen of Curses** was about to make history.

"YOU TOOK HIM FROM ME!!!"

I screamed, thorns and chains bursting from every direction.

The Swarm Tyrant tried to recover, but I was already there.

No warning. Just death.

I slashed my arm into the air.

And then—For the first time in all of history, the **wind screamed** with me.

I merged the element with **curse**—bending wind itself to obey my sorrow, my fury, my hatred. And I sharpened it. Not like a blade. Not like a scythe.

Like a **punishment**.

And I swung.

The cursed wind sliced through the Tyrant's wings like wet paper. He roared, but I was already above him, my eyes glowing red-black.

"DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!!!"

Each scream was paired with a slash of the cursed wind.

Limbs flew off.

Thorns exploded beneath his body, spearing him upward like a broken doll.

It tried to grab me. I disappeared with a cursed blink and appeared *inside* his own shadow.

From behind, I whispered coldly—

"You'll never be forgiven."

I wrapped a curse around my leg, twisted my heel, and slammed it into the back of its skull, shattering part of its mask.

It tumbled across the air—but I chased. A cursed chain looped around the tyrant's neck, the other tightening around his spine.

I pulled.

The air bent with the force.

"KAISER DIED BECAUSE OF YOU!"

I hurled him downward, letting gravity slam his body into the ruins of the plaza.

Stone exploded.

Dust rose.

But I wasn't done.

Not even close.

I raised both hands, whispered a spell no one ever had before:

"Winds of Grief... Sorrow's Limit... Deadly Spiral."

The sky responded. The cursed wind twisted like a typhoon, razored edges cutting into the ground itself as it surrounded him in a circular hell.

And then it collapsed inward.

He howled. His flesh was torn into ribbons, his armored shell split apart.

Piece by piece, limb by limb, I was erasing his body from this world.

"YOU TOOK MY HEART! SO I'LL TAKE YOUR EXISTENCE!"

He couldn't stand. He couldn't breathe.

His voice was mangled and low.

"You... demon..."

"No," I said coldly, floating down—my body still radiating cursed energy so dense it cracked the earth.

"I'm the one he loved."

His entire body had been shredded.

Only a **glowing mass** remained.

Its **core**.

Still pulsing. Still alive.

Untouched by cursed magic.

I stepped forward, panting, my vision blurry—but I didn't stop.

"Why..." I whispered, trembling.

"Why won't you just die...?"

I poured my cursed magic into it. Nothing.

Ripped thorns into it. Nothing.

Even wind... nothing.

It was like it existed **outside** of death itself.

And that—**That broke me again.**

Because even now... Even after I gave up *everything*...

I still hadn't killed it.

I couldn't...

Meanwhile — In the Cult of Nemesis

Far beneath the crust of the world, where no sun dared to reach, a throne of bone and shadow lay untouched by time.

Azrion sat there, unmoving. Fingers laced. Head low. His eyes reading the **Foresight Diary**, whose pages were writing themselves in ink that bled like veins.

He muttered under his breath, voice colder than death itself.

"You can never defeat the Swarm Tyrant alone."

The words written upon the page echoed him exactly, as if mocking Celia's efforts.

"That is the fate sealed for this world."

The letters pulsed on the page.

You are not strong enough, Queen of Curses.

He closed the diary. Slowly. As if the end had already been decided.

Somewhere Far From Rinascita

A distant wind blew.

Dust rolled across the worn stones of an old path—leading into a quiet, long-forgotten village:

Levinton.

A man walked its path. Long overcoat trailing behind him. Head lowered. His footsteps slow... but unwavering.

He stopped just before the old well in the village center.

Blue eyes shimmered beneath dark bangs. A presence ancient... but familiar.

He looked up, past the clouds—towards the unseen chaos raging far away.

And muttered under his breath:

"...She alone has no chance of winning."

The breeze stilled around him.

Then a smirk formed on his lips.

"But who said..."

"...she was alone?"

His blue eyes burned as the future shifted itself.

Back in Rinascita — Falling From the Sky

Celia and the Swarm Tyrant spiraled downward, their cursed auras clashing and twisting the sky into storms.

Wind howled.

Ash scattered.

And just then—A green streak of *pure lightning* split through the sky.

It screamed forward—**cracking the heavens open.**

BOOM!

It arced—curving like a serpent—until it reached **her.**

And in that moment, her eyes widened. Her lips twitched.

A dark, sharp smile returned to her face.

"...Took your time," Celia whispered.

"Sorcerer."

In front of her, in mid-air, a figure appeared—**standing against gravity** as if the sky itself bent to his presence.

White eyes. Lightning running along his skin like it was born there. Blood dripping down one side—but he stood tall.

Lucas Reinhardt.

He raised his head and stared directly at the Swarm Tyrant.

No emotion.

Only intent.

Deep Below — In the Cult

Azrion's hand twitched.

The Foresight Diary violently flipped pages on its own, letters **rewriting, overwriting,** tearing through fate.

"Impossible..." he muttered, watching prophecy tear itself apart. **"This... shouldn't be happening."**

Above Rinascita

System screens bombarded Lucas's vision, flickering endlessly:

「WARNING: Mana Rejection Rate exceeds 4100%」 「WARNING: Core Limit breached」 「WARNING: Heaven's Singularity has already been cast once in under 2

hours」 「WARNING: Beyond Set Limits」 「WARNING: Imminent Body Collapse」 「WARNING: Death Imminent—Proceeding will result in complete mana rupture」

A thousand more overlapped his sight.

And yet—

He didn't blink.

Didn't flinch.

Didn't care.

He clenched his fist.

Looked up at the beast that haunted them all.

And muttered:

"Fuck. Limits."

He raised his hand to the sky. Fingers trembling. Blood soaking into his sleeve.

"All I want right now..."

Light gathered like a collapsing star.

"...is to see it..."

His body cracked from the overload. But he didn't stop.

"...dying under..."

The air ruptured. Sound vanished. All was light and silence.

System screamed:

「CASTING: HEAVEN'S SINGULARITY — OMEGA VARIANT」 「WARNING: Mana threshold -15,000. Proceeding will erase user's soul.」 「This is your last chance to cancel.」

Lucas smiled.

"...my feet."

And then—he unleashed it.

Time Slowed

The storm above Rinascita stopped spinning.

The clouds froze.

Light no longer moved. Sound no longer echoed.

It was as if the world itself paused—holding its breath for what was about to happen.

And in the stillness, a soft **ding** broke through the silence.

System Notification Appeared Before Lucas

「Secret Skill Unlocked: **FATE**」

「Would you like to use it?」

Lucas, barely able to think, looked at the words glowing faintly in the void of his mind.

His breathing was uneven.

His body barely holding together under the weight of the Heaven's Singularity charging overhead.

His lips parted.

"...Yes," he whispered.

Then Time Moved Again

The heavens erupted.

Heaven's Singularity: Omega Variant tore open the sky like judgment incarnate.

White light blazed like divine fire—curling down in spiraling chains of radiant death aimed squarely at the Swarm Tyrant.

And across the sky from it—Another magic formed.

But it wasn't light.

It was **Cursed**.

And it bled with every sin the world had ever cast away.

Celia's final cursed spell surged like a tidal wave of hell.

Her arms spread, black veins glowing up to her fingertips, her chains spiraling around her like wings of a fallen goddess.

Her voice was cold—sharp like knives wrapped in silk.

"Devil's Benediction."

The sky *cracked* as red void magic gathered, a twisting storm of anguish, hatred, obsession, and loss.

Two magics.

One from **above**.

One from **below**.

And the Swarm Tyrant?

Trapped in the center.

Lucas smirked weakly as the world itself began to fracture under the power building.

"...Don't you have something to do, witch?" he said, his voice strained.

Floating beside him, Celia's blood-smeared face turned slightly.

"...You talk too much, sorcerer." Her red eyes locked on the Tyrant with finality.

And then—She raised her hand to the sky.

Chains burst from beneath the town, tearing upward—**grabbing every cursed grotesque** still bound to her will.

They twitched.

Jerked.

Stared at her one final time.

And Celia, voice a whisper of death, gave the order:

"...All of my cursed grotesques."

Her nails dug into her palm until blood dropped like ink.

"Kill yourselves."

Then—

—Silence—

Across Rinascita, every grotesque under her command—**exploded**.

Each cursed body igniting, turning into ash, red flames, and void magic—**ripping through the regeneration cores** spread out across the land.

The Swarm Tyrant's eyes—**wide with shock**.

It turned its head.

And for the first time—its voice trembled.

"...No..."

Its jaw quivered, and the overwhelming bloodlust that had once defined its monstrous form... cracked.

"I've... felt this before..." A hiss of breath left its lungs.

"This is my... death."

The panic of a man.

"I was... human. I... I remember now..."

It clutched its head, claws digging into its own skull as fragmented memories pierced through centuries of grotesque evolution.

"The Asura Academy... of Sorcery..." it muttered, breath ragged. **"I was a student there... I... I was in the same class... with him... and her..."**

Its knees buckled slightly, wings twitching erratically.

"That pink-haired girl... Elfina..."

Its voice grew quieter, as if speaking from within a long-sealed tomb.

"...and that *blue-eyed monster*... the one who killed me... when I hurt her."

Tears—*real tears*—welled in the corners of its grotesque, mutated eyes.

"My name..."

It looked up—meeting Celia's gaze, seeing his death reflected back in those blacked out eyes.

"In my dying moments... I remember..."

A final breath left its shattered body.

"...It's Milo."

It staggered.

It looked down at its chest.

The invisible thread that linked it to the grotesque race—**Was gone.**

Then the sky—**Fell.**

Heaven's Singularity collided with Devil's Benediction.

White light met red void.

Celestial judgment met cursed obliteration.

And in the center—**the Swarm Tyrant screamed.**

Its body was torn apart at an atomic level.

Its armor, evolved from nightmares, shattered into nothing.

Its corrupted soul—**burned** under divine justice and **drowned** in cursed hatred.

When heaven and hell merged—Even monsters were erased.

The explosion that followed wasn't sound.

It was silence.

So loud it broke the clouds apart and sent tremors across continents.

The skies glowed.

The ground shook.

And in the center of the crater that swallowed half of Rinascita—

The Swarm Tyrant was no more.

Not even ash remained.

Just two figures—

Floating in the sky.

One soaked in light.

The other wrapped in chains and red shadow.

Lucas and Celia.

The world was quiet.

Too quiet.

Lucas floated for a moment longer... until the surge of mana backlash hit him like a tidal wave.

He dropped—**not crashing**, but falling *softly* onto one knee. The divine remnants of the Heaven's Singularity shimmered around his burnt coat like fading stardust.

His vision blurred. Limbs felt distant. His heartbeat slowed.

System Notification:

「 WARNING: HP: -200 | MP: -15,000 」

「 Vital Functions: 3% Remaining 」

「 Total Shutdown Protocol Initiated 」

「 You did good... Hero. 」

Lucas let out a low chuckle... and collapsed.

Darkness swallowed him whole.

Celia – The Devil's Queen

I walked slowly, every step like a curse spoken against the world.

Chains scraped the ground beside me. Blood dripped from my lips and fingertips.

And ahead of me, like a decayed memory—was the **shattered skull of the Swarm Tyrant**. Still steaming. Still twitching.

But not dead.

Not yet.

Its mind was gone. Its soul obliterated.

But I didn't care.

I didn't want it to vanish.

I wanted it to **serve me**.

I stood before the grotesque remains, black mist forming a cloak behind me as my eyes glowed red and my chains coiled around like serpents.

"You don't get to die yet," I said.

Meanwhile – The Cult of Nemesis

Azrion stood from his throne, fury burning in his veins.

"Send the Leviathan!" he screamed, his foresight book writing in frantic, cursed ink.

The Silent Executioner raised its hands to command—only to scream back in pain, reeling.

"M-My Lord!" it gasped. **"Something... *something is interfering with the Leviathan's mind!*"**

Azrion's eyes widened.

He turned back to the book.

The pages twisted. Words rewritten. Possibilities shattered and overwritten.

One name pulsed again and again in divine ink:

FATE SKILL.

Azrion's hand trembled.

"...Another one... changed fate..." he whispered. "Not just Lucas... but **him** too..."

Far Away – Levinton

A lone figure in a black overcoat stood before Levi's house.

Blue eyes shimmered under the shadow of his hood.

A smirk played on his lips as he watched the wind swirl toward Rinascita.

He muttered lowly,

"...That's it, Azrion."

He turned, stepping into the fading sunlight.

"I win."

Back to Celia

I knelt before the remains of the monster that once ended lives like insects.

And raised my hands.

The chains around me glowed deep red, my voice whispering ancient curses not heard since the void screamed itself into being.

"Serve me until eternity."

The fragments began to twitch.

Bones crackled.

Flesh weaved itself back together—wrong, twisted, beautifully loyal.

My voice deepened. **"Fulfill my wishes."**

The sky trembled.

Black mist surged from my feet into the tyrant's dying head.

"Ascend."

The Swarm Tyrant rose.

But not as it once was.

This form was **sleeker**, more humanoid in posture but inhuman in essence. Wings sharper than scythes. Its skin armored with black curse-steel, veins glowing red. A crown of thorned horns spiraled from its head like a halo corrupted.

Eyes opened—empty of will. Full of **obedience**.

A voice escaped its new lips, distorted and loyal.

"...What is... my name...?"

I stepped forward, the wind curling around me.

"Your name..." I whispered.

My chains danced behind me.

"...is Crownless."

It bowed its head in reverence.

And the world would never be the same.

Crownless then handed me the paper, its battered body trembling as it pressed the fragile sheet into my hands. It had carried it all this way, brought it back through the chaos with my cursed magic—rewriting every word by memory.

I held it close, my fingers slick with tears threatening to fall, my breath catching in my throat.

With his last blood, I saw what Kaiser's last words were... he wrote...

Do you like the name I gave you... Celia?

The words blurred beneath my trembling gaze. I clutched the paper tighter as my tears broke free, streaming down my face like a river, soaking the parchment, mixing with the storm pouring from the sky.

"Kaiser..... I love my name."

I screamed. Screamed at the heavens, at the cold rain washing over me, at the cruel fate that stole him away.

He was truly gone. Forever.

My heart shattered into a thousand silent pieces.

"I'm so tired... so tired of all this pain..." "If only I could disappear... maybe then the hurting would stop..."

Everything he was—the way he smiled, the way he saw me as more than just a curse—I remembered it all, sharp and aching.

The warmth of his touch.

"I wanted to hold you... just one more time!"

His quiet strength when I was falling apart.

The stolen moments where I thought maybe, just maybe, I belonged somewhere.

But now... now all I have is this hollow ache and a war won with blood and tears.

I sobbed until my lungs burned, screamed until my voice cracked, until there was nothing left but the cold emptiness inside.

I won the war.

But I lost my heart.

"My reason to live is gone."

Just then I lost consciousness and fell down. Unable to contain this pain any longer and from my exhaustion.

And so begins the tale of the last step.

Chapter 85: The Aftermath

Two Years Ago – Asura Crisis

The capital lay in ruins. Streets were rivers of blood. The sky burned with cursed fire. Screams echoed as monsters—once citizens—transformed into living death. Knights fought everywhere, countless invaded, and panic ruled.

Amid the chaos, one knight stood apart:

Sir Alaric Thornfield—(aged mid-30s, tall and broad-shouldered, ash-brown hair trimmed with early streaks of steel, deep-set gray eyes like storm clouds). His armor bore countless scratches and scorch marks. A jagged brand across his left cheek told him not to hope for glory here. The Scion Crest on his shoulder meant he had devoted himself fully to justice.

He fell asleep in his tent, armor discarded on a cot, and dreams consumed him.

Dream – The Horror Within

He saw a cursed beast—something human, too human—hurting his wife **Elena** and his daughter **Lyra**, seven years old, her hair tied in a perfect braid. He screamed, "*No!*" But he couldn't move. Not a muscle. His hands were bound, his heart seized by dread. He watched them die, his flesh burning with helplessness.

And he woke up.

He rubbed his neck, chest heaving.

His eyes found a small wooden frame on his bedside table—Elena smiling, Lyra hugging him around the neck. His jaw clenched. He whispered, "*I'll never fail you again.*"

Before he could rise, a knock came.

"Sir Thornfield—Captain Adonis requests your company."

He swallowed, donned his armor, and followed the messenger into the throne-like hall where **Knight Of The Realm Adonis** stood, eyes solemn.

Adonis: "Alaric—good. Two years have passed. The 'Queen of Curses' is captured, but she hides her secrets. I need you to lead the interrogation. Find out how she conjures curses."

Alaric bowed deeply. His voice low, solid: "Yes, Captain. This... I'll do it."

Rising Tension Among Knights

One knight—bald, burly, scars etched deep across his scalp—snorted. "**We should kill her now and be done.**"

Adonis leveled a stare. "If we understand her magic, we can fortify not just the capital but all of Asura against future curses. We can't be hasty during our chance.."

Alaric's low voice carried conviction. "She's nothing but a murderer."

But the **vice-captain**, Sir Roderic Vance—lean, sharp-featured, silver hair tied—stepped forward. "And if she doesn't talk? Can I... pressure her?" His tone was icy.

Adonis's jaw tightened. "**We are knights, not monsters, Roderic.**"

Roderic shrugged, blank expression. "She's a monster. She kills innocents. If she resists... what's wrong with hurting her?"

Alaric's heart thudded; Adonis ran a hand through his hair, voice tight. "Don't act impulsively. You'll regret it."

"I won't regret it."

Roderic turned on his heel. "I'll gather the info. Call me when you need knights." With that, he left.

Alaric exchanged a glance with Adonis: silent, worried.

Roderic's Perspective – Thoughts in the Dark

The temporary base is just upstairs. Below, that cursed girl sits broken—but alive. Her screams echo like taunts. If I kill her, I save hundreds. Cursed users only spread pain. They deserve to die. The Queen of Curses—we remove her, we purge the threat entirely.

He reached the bottom of the staircase. Torches lit the hall. *Time to suffer, witch.*

Inside a small cell, a young girl curled on a cracked stone floor—her hair white as snow, red eyes dull with pain and exhaustion. She looked at him with her lifeless eyes.

Roderic allowed himself a cold smile. *This time, I won't hold back at all torturing you.*

He stepped closer, chains rattling.

Location: Underground Rinascita Hospital – Room 12A

The dull hum of medical equipment blended with the soft sound of a lullaby playing faintly through the walls. Nine days had passed since the grotesque war, and most of Rinascita still mourned—but beneath it, life was beginning again.

Issac stood outside a plain wooden door, clutching a velvet pouch in his left hand—the reward from Celestial Apex Guild. Heavy. Not just in weight.

He'd rehearsed this moment over and over.

"I'll just apologize." "She'll understand." "She'll forgive me."

But nothing felt enough.

His knuckles brushed the door. A moment of silence. Then her voice—soft, distant.

"Come in."

He opened the door.

And stopped.

She sat on the bed, wrapped in the pale sheets, her hair unkempt, eyes tired—but burning with clarity. In her arms was a baby, small and quiet, sleeping against her chest. A boy. His son.

Her eyes widened the moment she saw him. She flinched, pulling the baby closer, her body instinctively shifting back against the headboard.

"Wait—please. I'm not here to hurt you."

"...What do you want, Issac."

"I... just want to talk."

"Talk?"

"Please."

The silence stretched, bitter and dry. He stepped in, closing the door gently behind him. For a second, he just stood there.

"...I was a coward."

"...I know."

"I didn't know what to do. You told me you were pregnant and... I froze. I panicked."

"So you left."

"I know. I know I did. And it wasn't because I didn't love you."

"Then why?"

"Because I did love you. So much it terrified me. I kept thinking—I'm not enough. I don't have money. I don't have stability. What kind of man would I be? A failure."

"So you ran?"

"...Yeah."

His voice broke then. His chest heaved, and his hands trembled.

"I thought if I could just get stronger, if I could earn enough... then maybe I'd be worthy. But the truth is, I was just afraid."

"You missed everything."

"I know."

"His first cry. You missed *me*."

"I know."

He fell to his knees, clutching the pouch tighter, placing it gently on the floor.

"I have the reward. It's enough for a home. For everything. But that's not what I came here to give."

"Then what did you come here for?"

Tears finally broke past his eyes. He didn't wipe them.

"To say I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For not being the man I promised I'd be. For letting you cry alone. For letting my own fears steal the moments I should've shared with you. With him."

"His name is Elias."

"Elias..."

He smiled through the tears.

"That's beautiful."

She looked down at the child. Then back at him.

"Why now?"

"Because the world almost ended nine days ago. And while people were dying... all I could think about was how I left you. And how if I died too, I wouldn't have even said sorry."

"So what now?"

"I don't know if you'll ever forgive me. But I'm here. I want to raise him with you. I want to start again. If you'll let me. Even if I have to earn it day by day."

Silence fell again. But it was different now.

The baby stirred. A soft coo echoed in the room.

She looked down. Then back at him. Her lips parted. Her eyes glistened.

"Did Arius force you to come back?"

The words cut through him sharper than anything he faced on the field. His smile faded. His face darkened.

"No." He swallowed. **"I came because I wanted to."**

She shook her head slowly, eyes narrowing as pain flickered again in her expression.

"You're still lying..."

"I know," he said softly. **"I know I have been. But not now. Not this time."** His voice trembled. **"I'm done with that version of me, Liora. I want to change... for you. For him."**

He looked at Elias, whose fingers twitched in his sleep, mouth making soft noises only babies know how to make.

"I want to give it all up—the adventuring, risking my life. I want to stay. Settle down. Be a husband. A father."

Her eyes widened—just slightly. Hope flared across her face, faint like a candlelight against wind.

She looked away for a moment.

"Can I trust you... this once?"

Issac took a slow, careful step forward.

"Just once."

There was silence—calm and unsure.

Then she nodded.

Just once.

Issac smiled for real. The kind of smile that wasn't trying to convince anyone. The kind he hadn't worn in years.

"I won't fail you."

They both stood in the quiet, neither speaking. Elias stirred again. Outside, distant voices echoed from the lower floors of the hospital.

Then Liora broke the silence.

"Was Arius with you?"

Issac blinked. The question caught him off guard.

"Why?"

"He visited me before the war itself. Told me you were fighting for me... that I should give you another chance."

Issac's lips parted slightly. He couldn't speak.

She continued, eyes flickering with the memory.

"He gave me a pouch too. It had so much gold in it. Said if you didn't come back, I should use it to start a new life. Said he'd make sure you returned... and that you'd change."

Issac clenched his jaw, unable to speak. His eyes glistened, voice stuck in his throat.

"I refused it," she whispered. "But he didn't care. Just smiled and walked away. Truly a stubborn man like you."

Her voice cracked near the end.

"Where is he?" She looked up, eyes trembling. **"I want to thank him..."**

Issac stepped closer... and finally forced the words out.

"The reason I'm here today... is because of Arius." He choked back the weight in his throat. **"He saved my life."**

Liora went still.

"No... that means—"

Issac nodded slowly, eyes cast down.

"Arius is gone."

The room fell into silence again.

But this time, it was grief.

Perspective: Rose, Empress of Asura*In the Silence of Power*

The cell stank of sweat, blood, and the same kind of desperation men wear like a second skin when they believe they've outsmarted the crown. I stood above it. Above *him*.

My heels echoed against the cold stone floor as I stepped forward, gazing down at the man my knights had dragged in—slammed to his knees in front of me like a broken marionette. His body was wrapped in filthy bandages, face half-covered. His posture was feigned confidence. I could already tell.

The knight beside me opened his mouth to speak. **"My Empress, this man is responsible for—"**I raised one hand.

A simple gesture.

He obeyed instantly, retreating behind me with the others.

My eyes lingered on the bandaged figure. A pathetic sight, really. Theatrics don't work on me—nor do men with too many layers hiding truths beneath fabric.

I tilted my head slightly. **"What's your name?"**

"Lezriu." The name fell from his lips too quickly. No hesitation. That was the first mistake.

I smiled. Softly. Then pointed my finger.

The cursed energy swirling at my fingertips cracked the air as it lifted him like a puppet and flung him with terrifying speed into the iron wall beside him. Bones cracked. The scent of scorched blood lingered as my celestial beam faded from his chest.

He groaned. But I remained still.

"Don't take me for a fool," I said coolly. **"You're lying."**

He coughed, laughed—maniacally, almost. Such a cliché. **"An empress who's only seventeen... You think I'm going to respect you?"**

I raised my hand again.

He didn't finish the sentence before he slammed back down to the ground, hard enough to crack the stone. His body crumpled.

I crouched ever so slightly, just enough to look directly into the sliver of his eyes. **"Your name."**

This time... silence. Then—

"...Yerinton."

A lie with a different costume.

I glanced at my knight. He understood without a word. Grabbed him by the hair and slammed him again. Blood joined the cracks on the floor.

I straightened my back, sighing. **"Your voice... posture... your tempo. If you're going to lie, at least have the decency to commit to the performance."**

My voice was calm. Elegant. Precise. And colder than the steel shackles he wore.

"Your *true* name. One last time."

He looked up, his grin faltering. Then finally... **"...Aldric."**

"Hmm." I turned slightly, locking eyes with the knight nearest me. **"There it is."**

"Now then, Mr. Aldric—who is your master?"

His bandaged head tilted. **"Huh?"**

"The one who orchestrated everything. The one behind you. I know you're not it."

"You're overthinking it," he said, coughing blood onto the floor. **"I *am* the ringleader."**

I didn't reply. A single glance.

Another strike. Another scream.

"Going to kill me if I don't answer?" he asked, spitting red onto his lap.

"I don't bother sparing insects."

That's when he looked at me—really *looked*. And said:

"Who is truly the insect here, Miss Empress? You? Or me?"

Ah. There it was. That little twitch in my expression, the half-second crack that no one else would notice. But he did. Smart insect. Still doomed.

"I forced you to act," Aldric muttered through his broken teeth. "You helped Rinascita. And I stayed in the shadows, pulling strings like a ghost. And now? The war's won. You followed like a good little puppy. And I? I orchestrated the whole damn thing."

My lips curved slightly upward. Not out of joy—no. Out of amusement.

"You think this was your victory?" I asked softly.

"You're not a conductor, Aldric. You're a discarded pawn who tricked himself into believing he was the king."

I turned away.

"But hey," I added with a laugh of my own,

"If calling it a win helps ease your dying breath, be my guest. We all deserve a comforting illusion in our final moments."

And then I raised my hand one last time.

No more questions.

I raised my finger.

My magic hummed against my skin, vibrating with both divine brilliance and abyssal death. The cursed runes curled in the air like dancing serpents, while celestial script locked into place above my nail like judgment from the stars themselves. A convergence of two impossibilities.

"Shatter," I said.

The magic coalesced into a beam of pure destruction—a harmony of heaven and hell meant for one thing: *erasure*.

It shot forward, ruthless and merciless, toward the center of Aldric's head.

But just before it struck—Something was wrong.

...His heart. I couldn't hear it. There was no pulse.

He wasn't breathing either. No rise of the chest. No dilation in his pupils. No flinch from death. Nothing.

And then—He smiled.

That crooked, eerie, knowing smile. Like someone who had just completed his only purpose. As if his whole existence had been a *performance*—and the curtain had finally closed.

And then—*Boom*.

My spell struck. His head was obliterated in a single flash of twisted divinity, vaporized like it never existed.

The knights stood frozen behind me, blinking away the afterglow. One stepped forward.

"My Empress, shall we discard the body?"

I didn't answer at first.

Instead, I took a slow breath and looked at the remains, narrowing my eyes. **"How did you capture him?"**

"He fell for one of the spatial traps you had laid across the perimeter. It triggered and paralyzed him—then we simply hauled him in."

My fingers twitched slightly. My breath paused. Something inside me had gone very, *very* still.

"...No."

I stepped closer to the corpse, narrowing my eyes. Then summoned a blade of cursed magic—razor-thin and whispering death.

"My Empress—?"

With surgical precision, I *sliced* his chest open. Not for sport. For confirmation.

Cursed energy buzzed against the cavity where a heart *should* have been.

There was nothing.

Just layers of dense clay. Frozen inner structure wrapped in coiled elemental veins. Dirt packed together with inhuman precision. Ice like nerves. No blood. No organs. No soul.

I stepped back.

"So... you weren't human after all." I whispered.

The knights behind me recoiled in discomfort. One even muttered in disgust at the dissection. I didn't bother to reprimand them. I didn't have the energy for useless morality today.

"What... what do you mean, my Empress?"

I turned slowly toward them.

"This wasn't Aldric," I said. **"At least—not truly. He was being controlled."**

"By... who?"

I turned back to the body. My voice dropped to a whisper. **"This is a semi-replica—made with earth and ice elemental magic. Ancient spellcraft. Lost spellcraft. Crafted precisely to resemble a human."**

Their silence told me they understood none of what I said. That was fine.

I wasn't speaking for *them*.

I was speaking for *myself*.

"...Who could pull off such a feat?" I murmured.

I clenched my gloved fist, eyes narrowing.

"Someone who knows me." "Someone who understands how I plan." "Someone who knew how to bait me into this exact conclusion." "Someone who is both shielding Rinascita... and playing against me from behind the curtain."

That level of foresight.

That level of execution.

That level of *audacity*.

No. It couldn't be him. That man was gone. Out of the picture.

Or...

"...Is it?"

My eyes darkened.

The real game had just begun.

Lucas — Perspective

I did a few jumping jacks, shaking the stiffness out of my limbs. Y'know, nothing like a post-apocalyptic warmup to get the blood flowing.

Still in Rinascita. Still surrounded by broken buildings, guilt, and the faint scent of burning wood.

The usual.

The sun peeked through grey clouds above the garden. I'd just wrapped up the last of today's quests.

「 Daily Quests Complete. All objectives fulfilled. Try not to sprain something flexing too hard. 」

Thanks for the support, System. Really feeling the love.

I exhaled and dropped down to the bench, letting my arms rest over the back. My gaze drifted upward. That sky... still the same one I nearly got vaporized under.

Nine days since that whole Swarm Tyrant thing. Apparently, I passed out like a loser and slept through six of them. Guess pushing past negative fifteen thousand mana does that to a guy.

System kept saying something about **"imminent death shutdown protocol"** but who even reads those terms and conditions?

The last couple of days had just been physical recovery. Healing. Walking again. Not bleeding out.

Minor victories.

Now... things were starting to look normal. Well, as normal as a cursed town could get.

People were out, rebuilding shattered walls, painting over scars, putting together whatever was left of their lives. I passed a small vigil of candles near the fountain. Faces crying. A girl clutching a photo.

Yeah. Survivors. I was one of them. I wish I could've done more.

「 Don't start that sentimental crap. You did more than I ever expected, hero. 」

I smiled faintly.

Okay, now *that* was touching. Even the system had dropped the sarcasm—for half a second.

But... my thoughts drifted.

Celia.

The last image in my head before I blacked out—she was walking toward the Swarm Tyrant's corpse.

White hair. That murderous gaze. What the hell happened after that?

If I'd known that might be the last time I'd see her...

I shook my head. No point in playing that game now. She probably left town. Probably doing her own thing.

At least that's what I thought—until I turned the corner.

And saw her.

Sophia.

Her figure was familiar. Sitting by the edge of a cracked staircase, arms hugging her knees, like someone who'd spent too long trying not to cry. Her white dress was dirtied and wrinkled, hair a mess. But her presence... exactly how I remembered it.

My feet paused.

She noticed me instantly—eyes snapping up, pupils narrowing.

"...Lucas."

I didn't answer right away. Just stared. Part of me wanted to walk away. Another part... didn't care enough to.

"I'm not here to argue," I finally said. "You don't have to explain anything. I'm over it."

"Leave town before I get annoyed."

She blinked, stunned. Then slowly stood up.

"I... I can't leave yet."

My brows furrowed slightly. She was standing up to me? That was new.

"What's so important you'd stay in a place like this?" I asked, stepping forward once.

Her hands trembled a little—but she looked up and said it anyway.

"...I have to find my friend."

"...Who?"

"...Celia."

...Huh?

That caught me off guard.

Her?

"You and *Celia* are friends?" I asked, incredulous. "Didn't see that one coming."

"Doesn't matter what you expected," she said, voice suddenly colder. "She's missing."

That word hit different.

"...What?"

"She didn't leave town, Lucas. No one saw her pass through the gates. No guild report. No trails. Nothing."

"She's been missing... for the past nine days." Her voice cracked. "I—I have to find her before..."

She didn't finish the sentence.

"Before what?" I asked flatly, watching Sophia's lips tremble.

She looked away. "...I can't tell you that."

Oh, for f—

I took a step forward, irritation pulsing behind my eyes. "Now that's annoying."

She flinched.

I could see it—something off. Her green eyes... there was fear in them. But it wasn't fear of me.

It was like she was afraid of something else entirely. Something darker.

I stopped. Let her go. I don't know why.

She turned around and walked off down the street, and I didn't follow her. Didn't say anything.

But my gut twisted like someone tied a cursed knot in it.

"...Now where did she go?" I muttered under my breath. "If she's been missing for nine days... that's not just *missing*. That's *suspicious*."

「 Initiating Analysis Protocol. Give me a moment, genius. 」

I sighed and walked forward, letting the broken cobblestones crunch under my boots. The sky above Rinascita was cloudy—just like everything lately. My mind drifted to my stats, my mana control, the cursed energy I couldn't replicate, and the singularity I shouldn't have survived.

It didn't matter right now.

As I passed the old merchant stalls and the repair teams fixing up damaged towers, I saw it.

Avelric's mansion. Still mostly standing, but clearly took a beating during the grotesque war. Big place. Fancy pillars. Overcompensating much?

He might know something. That guy had his hand in every shady deal this side of Celestine.

「 Analysis Complete. 」

Finally.

「 Probability of standard disappearance: 72%. Probability of emotional breakdown leading to self-isolation: 25%. Probability of abduction: 3%. 」

"...Only three?" I asked, raising a brow.

「 But given the subject's behavioral shift post-battle—especially her extreme emotional responses, combat obsession, and the fact that *no one* saw her exit Rinascita—there is circumstantial evidence supporting forced detainment. Or worse. 」

"...That's oddly too specific."

「 I analyze things. That's my entire purpose, sorcerer. Try keeping up. 」

I exhaled. Yeah, alright. If Celia really *was* feeling that kind of loss, it made sense. Maybe she'd lost someone. Maybe... her reason to keep fighting.

Hell, I almost died. Maybe she thought I did.

Either way—I had a lead. And right now, that was better than nothing.

I finally reached the mansion gates.

Two bulky guards stood out front, dressed in dark maroon vests that made them look like they were about to offer me some discount wine.

One of them stepped up, frowning.

"Who are you?" he asked, voice rough and clearly irritated.

"Lucas Reinhardt," I said simply. "I need to speak to Avelric."

The guy looked me up and down, then scoffed.

"Avelric isn't accepting visits from *commoners*."

...Excuse me?

Did this idiot just call me a **commoner**?

"You might not know me, but—"

"Get lost. He's busy right now."

He stepped forward like I was just a fly to swat.

This dude.

「 Permission to ruin his day? 」

"Granted."

The guard's shirt suddenly *ignited* in bright green fire—just a puff, enough to make him scream. And before he could yell, a torrent of water dumped from above like a divine bucket from the heavens, soaking him entirely and knocking him to the ground.

He blinked, gasping, drenched.

I stepped over him.

"I don't need permission to visit people."

And just like that, I walked straight into Avelric's mansion.

Finally reaching the second floor, I found myself standing at the edge of a conversation that made my skin crawl.

A familiar face stood by the window, hands behind his back, posture relaxed but commanding.

Levi.

The *Levi*.

I'd heard the rumors. The Sword Saint who faced the Swarm Tyrant head-on—and won. He wasn't just strong. He was *the kind of strong* that made monsters pray.

And across from him, seated in a high-backed chair near a stack of books and wine no one had touched, was Avelric. The noble. Rich. Elegant. Probably had custom forks for every kind of soup.

"Ah, Lucas Reinhardt," Avelric greeted, his voice smooth and practiced. "I didn't expect your presence here today."

I gave a casual smile, feigning ease. "Just passing through. Thought I'd drop by."

Avelric nodded, ever polite, and gestured toward the velvet-lined seat near Levi. I took it.

Levi didn't even glance at me. He was locked in.

Avelric sipped from an untouched glass and exhaled gently. Then looked directly at Levi.

"I'm sorry, Levi," he said, calm but absolute. "But I can't help you with that."

Levi's eyes narrowed, voice flat but edged. "I need to know. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important."

Silence for a second.

"I have to find her."

Her?

I tilted my head, silent. Levi was too intense for small talk. And something about the way he said it...

Avelric's smile thinned. "It's out of my authority now."

That sounded like a very official way of saying: *I know something, but you're not getting it.*

I leaned in. "Who're we talking about?"

Levi finally turned toward me. His blue eyes didn't blink.

"Her name is Celia."

...

Ah. So even *he* knew her, huh?

Avelric adjusted his sleeve. "I'm afraid I don't know anything about her."

Uh-huh.

「Blatant lies detected. His tone doesn't match his pulse rate. That man's heart just tap-danced like it owes money.」

Huh?

I looked at Avelric again. Closer.

He was good at hiding it—every noble is—but I could see the tight grip on the wineglass, the subtle tension in his jaw.

Yeah... you know something, don't you?

Levi didn't press him, just sank into thought. His lips moved, but no words came out.

I tilted my head again. "So how do you even know her?"

Levi finally spoke. "She was friends with an old friend of mine." His tone softened. "I promised him I'd protect her. Until he returned..."

He stopped. Just like that.

"But that doesn't matter," Levi added. "She's my friend now."

「Heartbeat rising again. Avelric's nervous. He knows more than he's saying.」

I stared at him.

His posture didn't break. His expression stayed calm.

But he was too composed. Too *carefully* composed.

"Funny," I said aloud, almost offhandedly. "You're awfully nervous for someone who claims he doesn't know a thing."

Avelric blinked—slow. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not accusing you," I said, smiling faintly. "But you seem tense. You always tense when people bring up missing girls, or just when it's *this* one?"

Levi didn't say a word, but I felt the shift in his aura. He was listening now. Hard.

The game had changed.

I looked at Avelric, and something inside me clicked.

He knew.

He'd done something.

And I wasn't leaving without answers.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, the heat in my blood rising. I didn't smile this time.

"She was one of the reasons this town even *still exists*, Avelric."

My voice dropped to a cold, cutting murmur. "And *I'm* the one that killed the Swarm Tyrant."

The room froze. No dramatics. No boasting. Just the truth.

"Tell me the truth." I demanded.

So now, I wanted answers.

And I wasn't asking twice.

Avelric went quiet. His throat twitched like he was about to speak, but he didn't.

Then Levi muttered beside me, almost too quiet to catch. "You're lucky he isn't here."

He? There it was again. That mysterious "*he*" tied to Celia. Who the hell was he?

Before I could ask, Avelric finally spoke. "I may know something," he said slowly, "but I cannot help you."

I locked eyes with him. "I didn't ask if you *could*. I told you to speak."

He looked at me—really looked at me—and saw that I wasn't bluffing.

A breath. Then:

"The girl is infested with curses. She's a danger to my town and people. A potential threat to everyone here."

Levi's tone snapped like a whip. "*Nonsense*. She's the reason people here are even alive."

Avelric shook his head calmly. "Yet they fear her. You saw her power. If she loses control, even for a moment, can you guarantee she won't slaughter innocents?"

My mood dropped to the floor. This bastard... this ungrateful *rat*.

"She risked her life to protect your town," I said slowly, each word coated in venom, "and you abandoned her."

"I never asked her to help," Avelric replied flatly.

Levi moved before I could.

He grabbed Avelric by the collar and slammed him against the back of the chair. His voice was trembling—not from fear, but fury.

"*Where is she?*"

Avelric's composure cracked. Just a little. "She's been captured."

Silence.

"There's going to be a trial. In two days," he added.

"By who?" Levi asked, voice hollow and low.

"...The Knights of the Realm. From Asura."

My fists clenched, and Levi's grip tightened.

System notification popped up instantly: 「 WARNING. Based on trajectory and context, Celia life is in *critical danger*. Unable to determine current health condition. Suggest immediate action. 」

This was worse than I thought.

"Why?" I asked, keeping my voice dead calm.

"Why would *they* want her?"

Levi looked shaken. He was putting it together.

"...The Knights of Asura," I said coldly. "They hate curse bearers. Despise them. Hunt them down."

I looked up, the words forming slowly on my tongue.

"She's the *Queen of Curses*, their main target."

Levi's eyes widened in horror.

Avelric adjusted his collar as Levi slowly let go, his voice weaker now.

"I didn't want this," Avelric muttered. "Adonis ordered her capture. Said she was a threat to Rinascita. Forcefully he imprisoned her before someone else died."

"Bullshit," Levi spat.

"I didn't have a choice," Avelric snapped back. "You don't know what Adonis is like. Refusing him means making Rinascita an enemy of *Asura itself*. I'd have to put my title, my city—all of it—on the line."

"You mean," I said, voice sharp and disgusted,

"You'd have to *actually do something for once* that didn't benefit you."

He looked at me, stunned.

"Ungrateful bastard," I muttered, standing up.

Avelric's lip twitched. "You don't understand. Adonis is—"

"Too powerful?" I cut him off. "Too dangerous? Too high-ranking?"

I walked forward, step by step, until I was face to face with him.

"Yeah, we get it. You're scared."

Levi spoke, softer now, like he was finally processing it all. "Why do they want her... really?"

Avelric's voice dropped to a whisper. "Because she's not just a curse bearer."

"Apparently the Empress herself wants her out of the picture. That's what Adonis told me. It wasn't his wish, it was the wish of Asura itself."

I froze.

「Confirmed: If Celia undergoes standard trial under Asura law... chance of execution: 100%.」

Levi stepped back, eyes narrowing, as I clenched my jaw.

They were going to *kill her*.

Because she was too strong.

I exhaled once, quietly. Then looked at Levi.

"We're getting her back."

He nodded silently.

I looked down at Avelric one last time.

"I'm not asking for permission."

Avelric sighed behind us, "You can't visit her. Even I don't know where she's being kept."

My fingers curled slightly. Levi's jaw clenched.

"The Knights of the Realm took her directly," Avelric continued. "Everything's classified under Adonis's command. She'll be transported to the outskirts, where the trial will be held."

"How many knights?" Levi asked, his voice low, dangerous.

"Fifteen or more," Avelric answered. "All from Asura. That includes Adonis... and his personal order."

"Tch." Levi looked away. "So we just wait, huh?"

He turned and walked toward the door. "Fine."

I followed him. Gave Avelric one last glance.

It wasn't angry. Just... disappointing.

You failed to be a human.

As we stepped out into the sunlit corridor, I exhaled slowly. My hands were in my pockets, but my mind was spiraling.

She was really gone. Somewhere underground. Isolated. No sunlight. Probably chained like some wild dog.

Damn it.

「 Hey, Lucas. 」

"What."

「 Why do you even care about her? 」

I blinked.

"...I don't know," I muttered.

I tried to piece the thoughts together, but it wasn't clean logic.

"She fought beside me," I said.

My mind drifted—back to the way her thorns moved in sync with my light. The way she read my motion and adjusted hers.

"We matched." I shrugged slightly. "I've never had someone who could fight like that. Someone who just... *flow with me*."

I looked down at my hands.

"She didn't treat me like some superior. And I'm not the kind of guy who lets people get hurt just because it's not my 'problem' anymore."

「 ...You've changed. 」

"Yeah. Guess I have."

「 Hm. 」

"...What?" I narrowed my eyes. "You got all quiet for a sec. What's with that dramatic silence?"

The system paused.

Then, for once, its voice dropped in tone.

Just cold.

「 This scenario... It feels familiar. 」

"...Familiar?"

I stopped walking.

The breeze drifted by, light and lazy, like it didn't know there was tension trying to strangle my spine.

I asked, quieter this time. "What's relatable to this?"

「 Year Two. Asura Academy. 」

...

I went quiet.

Completely quiet.

My breath hitched. A strange weight spread through my ribs.

"...It's nothing like that."

「 Maybe. 」

The system hesitated—then dropped a little needle into my chest.

「 She didn't seem like the type who'd have people risking their life for her. Still Sophia and Levi caring for her wellbeing and this mysterious "Him". It gives me redflags.」

"Yeah," I whispered. "You're probably right."

There was something up with this...

I lifted my gaze toward the sky—past the towers of Rinascita, past the hanging clouds, past the veil of excuses.

Somewhere out there, she was captured.

And I couldn't ignore that.

"I'll stand by what I believe is right," I muttered.

"Not what people tell me is."

The air around me changed. My footsteps slowed.

My aura responded.

Not a violent surge. Not a dramatic explosion.

Just a quiet... *presence*.

In the corner of my vision, I locked eyes with the skill that hadn't stopped glowing since the battle.

[Fate]

I stared at it.

And I made my decision.

"I'll decide what happens."

Navina — Sword Saint of Reflex

The roads that led out of Rinascita were muddy from the recent rains, the skies still overcast as if mourning all that had happened. Inside a sleek black carriage adorned with the crimson crest of her guild, **Crimson Eclipse**, Navina sat by the window—silent, brooding.

Her reflection stared back at her in the glass. Stern eyes. Pale lips. Her long jet-blond hair was tied in a tight braid, but strands had loosened during the journey. She didn't bother fixing them.

She muttered under her breath.

"...I should've been there."

The swarm tyrant. The grotesques. The war that nearly shattered the eastern stronghold. She'd missed it all. Not by injury. Not by orders.

But because *she'd been drugged*.

Her hand clenched tightly into a fist over her lap, nails digging into the fabric of her gloves.

"That masked bastard..." she hissed softly. "Why did you save me?"

Her voice was quiet, not even a whisper—just a breath.

On the day of the battle, she'd prepared for war. She prepared to leave the cave, burned with the urgency to fight, to *protect* Rinascita... only to collapse hours before the tide rose.

Someone had slipped her something—something that made her sleep, made her miss it all. And she knew exactly who.

"I could've fought," she said bitterly, "I *should've* fought."

Instead, her guild had gone without her. People had died. She'd awoken too late, just in time to see Rinascita soaked in blood and victory. The masked man who'd saved her hadn't left a trace.

"...Why me?" she muttered, staring at the stormy sky. "Why was I worth saving?"

A soft knock at the carriage door.

"Guild leader," one of her knights called respectfully, "we're nearing the town. We'll be back by dusk."

Navina nodded sharply. "Good. Fasten the pace. I want no delays."

"Yes, ma'am."

The guild member left, and Navina turned back to the window, the silver-grey clouds shifting slowly above.

Her thoughts drifted to the man again—*her protector*.

"Who are you?" she asked softly.

"What do you see in me?"

She didn't have answers.

Only questions that ached in her chest.

Xander — Sword Saint of Technique

Meanwhile...

In another carriage several miles away, a man was lying sideways on a luxurious seat, arms behind his head, legs kicked up on a pile of crates he was using as a makeshift pillow.

"Don't wake me unless the world's ending again," **Xander** muttered groggily.

"Sir," his aide said with a hint of panic, "we're arriving soon. Shouldn't you prepare—your sister will—"

"I'm not scared of her," Xander said confidently with his eyes still shut.

Then, after a beat: "Okay, maybe a *little*."

He yawned like a lazy cat, one eye blinking open. His black robe was unbuttoned, exposing the faint tattoo of his guild crest over his collarbone. His sword lay beside him, untouched since the war ended.

"I'm gonna take a two-year vacation after this," he said. "Maybe three. I deserve it."

The aide laughed awkwardly. "You were incredible in the war though, Sir. Everyone's been talking about it."

"I'd rather not be talked about," Xander mumbled. "Being famous is such a hassle..."

He waved his hand as if swatting away the compliment.

"I'm gonna sleep now. Again. If the carriage explodes or something, just tell me after it happens."

The aide nodded and left quietly, leaving Xander to sink deeper into the cushions.

As the road curved and the forests parted to reveal the winding path home, the lazy Sword Saint sighed to himself.

"This whole damn thing... it was a mess," he muttered, eyelids heavy. "But... we made it. Somehow."

He exhaled.

"...Still such a hassle."

Then he smiled faintly.

And fell asleep.

Sylvia – Rinascita, Central Hall

I stood in the central hall of Rinascita, the familiar scent of iron and smoke still lingering from days past. The aftermath of the war hung heavy in the air, like a fog that refused to lift.

Alina was with me—stoic as ever, her hair catching the light from the high glass ceiling. I admired her discipline, her loyalty. But right now, her resolve was a problem.

I told her leaving with the guild, returning to Sylvaris, was the most logical course of action. It was what we'd planned—what we *needed*. Our people needed rest, supplies, a proper recovery. Rinascita had become too volatile.

But she refused. Quietly, firmly.

"I still have something left to do," she said. There was desperation in her voice, though her face didn't show it.

"And why can't I leave?" I asked, folding my arms.

"It's very important I stay."

I exhaled. "Alina—"

"I have to stay. I haven't fulfilled my purpose."

I stared at her. What was she talking about? The battle was over, the threat was gone. Too many things were already on my mind.

Still, I stayed calm. "Your purpose?"

"Do you remember the letter I received back in Sylvaris?" she asked.

"The one you refused to share with me? Of course."

She nodded. "It told me something very specific. That if I followed its instructions... my master would return to me."

"Your master," I repeated, my tone softening. "The one who taught you everything?"

She nodded again. Her expression didn't change, but her voice carried more emotion than I'd heard from her in years. "That's why I have to stay."

I didn't speak right away. I thought back to the encounter with that so-called man—Aldric. Everything about him had felt wrong. His movements were precise, too perfect. His eyes were vacant, dead. A fake body... a puppet.

I'd seen that trick before. At the academy. Used by *him*.

No. I wouldn't be fooled again like I was during the island trial.

Not this time.

I turned back to Alina. "What exactly did your master ask you to do?"

She was silent for a moment.

Then she said it.

"To protect a girl called Celia."

Everything clicked.

Celia.

The girl at the center of every tangled string.

Sophia. Lucas. Arius. Levi.

All connected to her.

Even Sophia told me she was *his* dear friend.

I clenched my jaw. "No... it can't be..."

I looked at Alina. "You'll have to leave this town with the guild."

Her icy gaze met mine. She didn't budge.

I didn't look away. "Alina. I know your master. I know him better than most. And I swear to you—I'll do everything I can to help you meet him again."

She frowned slightly. "How is that possible?"

"Because he's already involved in this. Deeply. And I'm beginning to think he's watching every move we make."

Her eyes narrowed. "He... might not want to see me again."

I stepped forward, voice calm but clear. "Then let *me* be the one to bring him to you. If you stay here and something happens to you, we lose everything. But if you return... you give me the freedom to act in your place."

She didn't speak. Her eyes shimmered faintly.

"I'll find her," I promised. "I'll protect her. For you. But the guild needs a leader—and I need to move alone for now."

There was a long pause.

Then, finally, she lowered her gaze. Her voice was quiet.

"Alright..."

She looked back up at me.

"...But you have to promise me, Sylvia. If he's truly back... if you see him before I do..."

"I'll tell him," I said gently. "I'll tell him you never stopped waiting."

A faint tremor passed through her—almost invisible, but I saw it.

She nodded once.

As the door shut behind Alina, the quiet *click* echoed louder than it should have. The moment she left, the silence fell over me like a collapsing sky.

I dropped into my chair.

My hand hit the edge of the desk, sweeping a few trinkets onto the floor—a pen, a file, a polished stone Arius gave me years ago. I didn't even look at them.

My mind was unraveling.

That man... *he*—he didn't *fail* his disguise that day in Sylvaris. He *let* me catch him. Purposefully. He wanted me to know. He *used* my pride, my personal attachment, to manipulate me into helping Levinton. And I thought I saw through him.

How could I be so blind?

That event sparked everything. The grotesques changing targets, ignoring the guild strongholds and heading straight for Rinascita—it's impossible. Unless it was coordinated. Controlled.

I was never ahead of him.

He used us like *pieces*. Again.

"God damn it—!" I slammed the table so hard the wooden edge cracked under my palm. The throb in my temple flared again. I clutched my head, nails digging into my scalp.

The letter Alina received. It wasn't some mystical coincidence. It was a *fake*. A forged command disguised just well enough to fool her. But it wasn't meant to fool *me*—it was meant to *guide* her. Protect her. Keep her in place.

It was *all him*.

"Why?" I whispered. "Why the hell are you doing this again?"

Then it hit me.

Wait... wait a damn second.

The night when Celia and Lucas vanished after the first attack by grotesques—nobody knew where they went. We assumed they'd slipped away. Disappeared.

But the sky... that night... I remember it. The clouds were blood-colored, and there were bursts of light like fireworks. At the time, we were too overwhelmed to question it. But now—

No.

No, no—*that was the swarm tyrant*.

It *took them*.

And he—*he* made his move to *save her*.

Because it was always about her. Everything. The grotesques. The dolls. The towns. The guild leaders. The missions. *Us*.

He's been orchestrating this—controlling every lever behind the curtain. Using fake bodies, false threats, and twisted truths to pull all the strings.

And I thought we were the ones leading.

I grabbed my head again as the pressure swelled. My vision blurred, my thoughts screaming.

He's been playing this game from the shadows. Not to dominate.

But to *protect* her.

And now...

Now she's *missing*.

Sophia said she was taken. The Knights of the Realm. The most righteous, unyielding force of Asura itself. The ones who would never allow someone like Celia—a *curse-bearer*, the Queen of Curses—to live.

If that's true—

Then it's over.

I couldn't stop the panic rising in my chest. My heartbeat felt like thunder inside my ears. I slammed my hand against my head again, trying to push the thoughts out. Trying to *breathe*.

We were used.

All of us.

But this time... someone made enemies with *him*.

They touched *her*.

It's over. For the Knights.

From the very beginning, he *wanted* to win. He wanted to crush that monster completely. To use every one of us like a weapon, a shield, or a puppet if needed. All for that final moment.

All for her.

And now that she's at risk... now that her life is on the line—

The game is done.

And **he**... *is coming*.

Zain – Their Way Back To Levinton

The night was quiet.

A little *too* quiet, to be honest.

The only sound was the soft creaking of wagon wheels against the dirt road and the faint chirping of insects hiding in the nearby thickets. Moonlight poured across the open path ahead, dusted with patches of forest shadow. Several wagons and two carriages

trailed behind me, loaded with the remaining guild members, resting or recovering. I sat at the front of the second wagon, reins in one hand, sword strapped across my back.

I let out a long, tired sigh. "It's finally over..."

It was a war none of us were prepared for. Rinascita was nearly destroyed. Grotesques roamed freely. Too many townsfolk died... but somehow—*somehow*—we made it out alive. I glanced back at the silhouettes of my comrades lying against the wooden sides of the wagons.

"They earned this rest," I muttered.

Beside me sat Fin, chewing at his roasted meat like it was his last meal on earth.

"Seriously, Fin?" I raised a brow. "Digging into your dinner at 2 a.m.?"

His eyes lit up mid-bite. "Man, I'm starving. We *won*, didn't we? Ain't no time limit on victory meals."

I chuckled faintly. "Yeah, we won..."

But even as I said it, my eyes turned toward the dark road ahead.

Something didn't sit right with me.

"...Do you think Levi really needed to stay in Rinascita?" I asked, almost more to myself than to Fin. "He said he'd come back with Celia..."

Fin chewed slower, glancing at me with mild curiosity. "She's still missing, huh?"

"Yeah. Disappeared right after the battle. No one saw her leave. Honestly... I used to get a weird feeling around her. Something about her presence. But after everything she did..." I sighed. "Can't help but respect her now."

Fin wiped his mouth with the edge of his cloak. "Respect? Well she did take that thing done with Lucas. So I understand why you respect her."

I smirked, then stopped.

Fin tensed suddenly. "Zain. Monster ahead."

I narrowed my eyes, standing up as the cart slowed.

It was hunched near the center of the path—tall, wiry, covered in deep green fur that clung to its ribs like moss. Its arms were grotesquely long, and its mouth dripped a dark liquid I didn't care to identify.

A **D-Ranked** class: *Grove Crawler*.

Ugly, but nothing special.

I stepped down from the wagon quietly, drawing my blade as I channeled mana to my hands.

"Freeze."

A layer of frost crept along the dirt, up the monster's legs, across its chest, and then *locked* it in place mid-snarl. I dashed forward, sword in hand, and slashed its head clean off with one decisive cut.

The thud of the corpse hitting the ground was the only sound.

Fin gave a low whistle. "Told you, traveling at night's risky."

"Yeah." I walked back to the wagon, glancing at the trees lining the road. "But it's the fastest way home. And we've got wounded—we can't afford to drag this out."

My eyes drifted once more to the back.

Six wagons. Two carriages. All full of tired but *surviving* guild members. Some slept. Some whispered softly among themselves. I felt a deep, quiet pride swell in my chest.

They made it.

Then—

"Zain!" Fin called again.

I turned sharply.

He wasn't looking at the monster anymore. His eyes were narrowed on the forest shadows.

"There's someone... approaching."

A figure moved from the dark, slow and steady... too steady.

I instinctively reached for my blade again.

"...Who the hell would be out here at this hour?"

"Who's there?" I asked, voice firm as I stepped forward slightly, hand resting over my sword's hilt.

No response.

The figure kept walking—slow, deliberate steps. No tension. No hesitation.

I narrowed my eyes as moonlight slipped between clouds. His entire body was covered in a long black overcoat, a dark hood over his head, shadowing everything beneath it. I couldn't see his face—only the cold silence in his footsteps.

Fin, sitting beside the wagon, stood up. "Oi—hey, buddy, I asked you a question."

The man didn't even pause.

Just walked right past him, straight toward the road ahead, the one we came from. The one leading toward—

"Rinascita," he muttered, the first words from his mouth. Cold. Emotionless.

Fin stepped in front of him. "You serious? The town's a day behind us. By foot, you're taking two. You planning to get eaten on the way, or...?"

The man didn't stop.

He simply muttered, "Don't get in my way."

He brushed Fin's shoulder lightly as he stepped past.

That's when something snapped in me.

Who the hell did this guy think he was?

I moved forward and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Hey—no one disrespects my member and walks away."

It happened instantly.

No warning.

My heartbeat dropped. Not slowed—*dropped*. Like my blood forgot how to flow.

My vision distorted.

Time... slowed.

The moonlight dimmed. The world bled into grayscale. My breath caught in my throat. My limbs went cold.

Suddenly—I saw it.

Blood.

A vision—my arms, cleanly sliced, falling in slow motion, crimson painting the dirt like ink on parchment. I wasn't *seeing* it.

I was *feeling* it.

A memory?

No—worse.

A Future.

A voice echoed through my mind. Calm. Measured. But colder than anything I'd ever heard in my life.

"The next time you put your hands on me... you won't have hands left to regret it."

I stumbled back two steps, hand trembling.

My body was screaming. *Run. Anything—just don't engage.*

What... *was* that?

"Zain?" Fin called out. "You okay, man?"

I didn't answer.

My chest was rising and falling like I'd just run ten miles. I couldn't breathe right.

Then I noticed it—

The man's fingers had brushed slightly toward the daggers hanging at his waist.

He never drew them. He didn't *need* to.

My instincts had already shown me the outcome.

I would've died right there.

That was no illusion. That was a killing intent so refined, so overwhelming—it *forced* my brain to simulate death just to understand it.

My gaze snapped to him.

And then...

He looked back at me.

And I froze.

Those **eyes**—icy, sharp, blue like a winter storm—but filled with something else entirely.

Hatred? No.

Murder.

There was *no soul* behind those eyes. Only death.

Fin backed up too, now visibly disturbed. "Zain... what the hell is with this guy's eyes...?"

I knew them.

God, I *knew* them.

That day in Levinton... when first saw Celia and I tried to drag her to the guild for questioning... he stood between us. Just an E-rank adventurer back then.

And yet... when I looked at him, I *couldn't* move.

Those were the same eyes.

"...You're alive?" I muttered under my breath.

He didn't answer.

He turned his head forward again, back to the road leading to Rinascita.

Where *she* disappeared on.

And then—he kept walking.

His shadow growing longer under the moonlight, merging with the dark trees and the dirt road, until there was nothing left of him but a silent memory of fear.

The pressure in the air lifted.

I inhaled sharply, the chill finally fading from my arms.

Fin looked at me. "You looked like you saw death."

"...I did," I whispered.

That wasn't normal. That wasn't just a powerful adventurer or some illusion magic.

That was something else.

What I felt when I touched him... wasn't just mana.

It was *pure, condensed **murderous intent***.

And it wasn't aimed at me.

He was walking toward Rinascita.

Toward *her*.

And he wasn't going to stop.

"...This is bad," I muttered.

Fin looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know who that man is anymore... but if anyone stands in his way—" I paused, remembering the vision. The clean-cut murderous gaze.

"They won't be standing for long."