

The World 351

Chapter 351: Winter Vacation (6)

Leon's POV

I woke up in the dead of night with Titania pressed against me, her head resting on my arm like a makeshift pillow. I carefully shifted her head from my arm, placing it gently onto a soft pillow, and then slid out of bed, still completely naked. I grabbed my smartphone from the nightstand and dialed a number.

"..."

I waited in the darkness for the call to connect, but eventually, it just ended with no response. She didn't pick up.

"I guess reaching her isn't going to be easy, huh?"

I'd been trying to call Professor Rose all day, but she wasn't answering. Maybe the sting of discovering my sexual relationships with Irene and Gabrielle was still too raw for her.

I slipped on my bathrobe and walked out of the room, heading to the one next door. I knocked in a rhythmic pattern, making sure they'd know it was me at the door.

The door opened to reveal a woman dressed entirely in black.

"Good evening, Master," she greeted. From her voice, I could tell it was Sandra. She knelt before me.

Inside the room, there were nine other women. Ten in total. Six of them were dressed in the same black attire as Sandra. One was wearing elven armor, and the other three were completely naked, save for leaves strategically covering their private areas.

"Good evening, Master," the others said, taking a knee, except for the elven woman. She stared at me with a scowl, clearly not my biggest fan.

"Have you learned anything from them yet?" I asked.

I glanced over to the side of the room where five men were bound tightly by green vines, their bodies ensnared by the Dryads. I'd instructed them not to drain any more life force from any men, as they were essentially sucking semen out of them, even if indirectly.

I made it clear that if they did, I wouldn't forgive them and wouldn't allow them to drain my life force, which they'd regret deeply because mine was unique and irreplaceable. I did permit them to draw nutrients from their bodies, though, which was why the men looked so gaunt but were still alive.

Sandra replied, "Nothing. They won't say a word."

"I guess they're really devoted to the Eclipse if they won't spill anything," I said.

"Do you want us to dispose of them?" Sandra asked, her voice steady.

"Not yet," I replied. "Let me have a closer look." I stepped forward, closing the distance, and stared intently into their eyes.

"Not looking too hot, are you?" I said to the man who had tried to grab Titania's ass earlier. "This is what you get for aligning yourself with the wrong people and committing unforgivable acts." My gaze shifted to the Eclipse symbol tattooed on his wrist. "So, you're part of the Eclipse cult, huh? Care to explain why you're kidnapping women and what your ultimate goal is?"

I promise I'll let you go if you tell me."

"Keh, no chance, kiddo," he sneered with a twisted grin. "I'm not afraid of death. I'm sure our Lord will save us, and His will shall be realized sooner or later. It's you who's in the wrong, disobeying His will and daring to defy Him further. But let me tell you something—you can't. You can't fight what's inevitable.

You might think you have the upper hand, but there's no way you can stand against Him."

His confidence in his Lord was chilling, even as he faced sacrifice with such unwavering devotion. Sesillian had clearly brainwashed him effectively.

"Not far from now, our preparations will be finished. Soon, He will be reborn and envelop this world once again," he declared. "And you won't be able to do a damn thing about it! Hahahaha!"

He burst into maniacal laughter, but Lixis tightened the vines around his throat, choking him into a breathless silence.

After a fit of violent coughing, he glared at me with a chilling menace. "Lord Xyroskhaal will plunge this world back into darkness, and you'll see how futile your efforts are!" he snarled. "In the shadows, we find truth, and in the darkness, we are reborn. The world will bow to our will for we are the harbingers of the Eclipse, where light meets its end and our power begins."

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Their voices grew louder and more desperate with each repetition. Blood began to seep from their eyes, streaming down their cheeks, and suddenly, their heads exploded in a gruesome display. I shielded myself with Guardian to avoid being splattered by the gory remains.

After that, I deactivated Guardian and surveyed the aftermath. Their heads were completely blown off, leaving nothing but empty neck stumps. The explosion had been so violent that their heads had disintegrated.

I snapped a photo of the gruesome scene and sent it to Professor Rose. I also took a close-up of the Eclipse tattoo on their wrists. No matter how much she might want to ignore me, there was no way she could overlook this. As soon as I sent the images, my phone rang. It was a call from her.

Chapter 352: The Village Of Rakkan (1)

I walked back to the academy with Titania, leading her to her dormitory.

"Bye, Leon," she said, giving me a shy smile. "Um, see you later."

"Yeah, I'll see you." I replied. With a final wave of her hand, she turned and walked toward her dormitory, her smile lingering. I watched her until she disappeared inside.

After that, I headed to the academy gates and made my way to the parking lot. There, I spotted Professor Rose leaning against her car, clad in a thick trench coat.

"Hello," I said as I approached. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Yes," she replied with a curt nod, her eyes narrowing with a piercing, no-nonsense glare. "Now get in." She pointed toward her car, the command clear in her tone.

I slid into the backseat of Professor Rose's car, but she stopped me with a sharp command.

"Up front," she ordered, her voice clipped and impatient.

I moved to the front seat, feeling the weight of her disapproval. Her eyes were a storm of irritation, and it was clear she was far from pleased. I wondered why she wanted me up front with her. Just last night, she'd been dodging my calls. Maybe the gravity of the situation made it impossible for her to keep her distance.

Professor Rose slid into the driver's seat, the car's engine roared to life, and we were off. She said nothing, her focus on the road ahead.

The silence in the car was suffocating, an almost tangible weight pressing down on us. The only sounds were the low growl of the engine and the rhythmic thud of the tires against the pavement.

"Looks like your assumption was spot on," I said, breaking the thick silence hanging between us. "The Eclipse really was behind those kidnappings, huh?"

She didn't respond, her eyes locked on the road, her expression cold and unreadable.

"The men I interrogated were tight-lipped," I went on, "They were so fanatically loyal to the Eclipse that even under duress, they wouldn't reveal a thing about their leader. It must be some seriously potent hypnosis that's got them like this."

Even when they were inches from death, they didn't crack. I offered them a lifeline, a way out, but they kept their mouths shut like they were under some unbreakable spell. It showed just how deeply Sesillian had drilled his influence into them, turning them into silent puppets. And to make them that loyal, even to the point of dying, was no small feat. That man...

terrifyingly evil for someone who gets railed by men in the ass.

"I do remember them chanting something," I said, trying to cut through the thick silence between us. "I'm going to tell you what it was—it might help in tracking them down."

Despite my effort, she remained silent, her attention seemingly elsewhere or perhaps deliberately ignoring me.

"Are you listening, Professor Rose?" I asked.

In response, she slammed on the brakes, the car screeching sharply as it jolted to a stop. She turned to face me, her eyes burning with fierce anger.

"Leon," she demanded, her voice seething with intensity, "What am I to you?"

Her question was charged with such raw fury that it demanded a response. But I was struck dumb, unable to answer. My relationship with Rose was a complex, tangled mess—was it right to call us partners, lovers, or just teacher and student?

It was already a mess since she thought she was having an affair with a man who already had a girlfriend, but things spiraled further when she found out I was involved with other women—women she knew, some as friends, others as acquaintances. To her, it must've seemed like I was just collecting women like trophies in my personal harem.

"You really can't answer, can you?" she hissed, her voice shaky with frustration. "If you don't tell me what's actually going on, I swear I might lose it. I really might lose it. I mean, I can't believe I just fucked you, knowing you have a girlfriend, and now I find out you're fucking other women too? And not just any women—Gabrielle and Irene!"

She thought my relationship with Titania was untouchable. No way I'd risk cheating on her, not when she was a princess and future queen. If I ever crossed that line, execution would be a real threat. That's why she said we'd be putting ourselves in danger if we ever slept together. But now we had.

All we could do was keep it a secret so she wouldn't face the fallout and just deal with the guilt of having been with a man already in a relationship.

"Answer me, Leon..." she demanded, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "Did you really sleep with them? Do you really have relationships with both of them? I never got a clear answer from you. Irene and Gabrielle didn't say anything, but the way they looked at me confirmed it. I want to hear it from you."

She fixed me with a steely, unyielding gaze.

I nodded in response.

"Say something," she insisted, her eyes growing colder. She wanted more than just a nod; she needed me to confirm it with my own words. But I remained silent. "I said say it!" she shouted, pulling her arm back and then thrusting it towards my face.

I activated my Guardian to block the incoming attack. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Wha...? The Guardian? Why do you have that...? And... what? I thought you were skillless, Leon?" she stammered, staring at her hand that had just tried to punch me, before locking eyes with me again.

I ignored her question, my voice steady as I admitted, "I'm in a sexual relationship with both Professor Irene and Professor Gabrielle."

Her eyes shot wide open, the realization hitting her like a punch to the gut. "So you really are..." she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Then, the man driving Irene crazy... was you."

"Yeah, it was me. But I didn't mean to ignore her. I was just keeping my promise," I said calmly, watching her expression shift between anger and hurt.

She looked at me with disbelief, and then a bitter chuckle escaped her lips.

"Hehehehe... I can't believe this..." she said as she continued driving. "I really thought you were my Prince Charming, Leon. But I was wrong. You're nothing but a scum."

Scum. Yeah, I was that. Akane had told me the same thing before. That I was scum. I slept with plenty of women back in my old world too. When Akane found out, she said I was a scum.

I didn't really understand what she meant back then. And even now... I probably still don't.

Chapter 353: The Village Of Rakkan (2)

I stared out the window at the passing scenery. Rose kept her eyes on the road while she drove. The tension and awkwardness between us had disappeared. Maybe it was because we had already laid our feelings bare.

That had to be it.

The landscape was pure countryside now—endless stretches of farmland reaching out to the horizon. We were at the farthest edge of the kingdom, in the secluded village of Rakkan. Only 90 people lived here, and they were so cut off from the world that anyone from the modernized Leonamon would see them as nothing but country bumpkins.

"We're here," Rose announced as she parked the car in front of a house that looked like an inn. There wasn't any parking lot, so we just left the car at the front, where it stood out in the quiet, rural stillness.

We stepped into the cozy, dimly lit inn, where an elderly woman appeared to be in charge. Her presence was warm, but her eyes were sharp and discerning.

"We want to rent," Rose stated firmly.

"That'll be 10 gold for three nights," the old lady replied, her voice creaky but clear.

Rose handed over 20 gold coins, more than required.

"Two rooms," Rose added.

"Alright..." the old woman said, her gaze shifting as she handed us two brass keys. Rose took one with a nod, and I took the other, then I followed her up the narrow staircase.

"Isn't it more efficient and cheaper to just rent one room?" I asked. I knew it was a pretty obvious question, but I asked anyway.

"It's because I don't want to share a room with you," Rose replied bluntly.

I figured that would be her answer. She clearly didn't want to be near me, or even in the same vicinity.

"With that said, I hope you're ready for a muddy field trip. See you tomorrow," she said before disappearing into her room. I was left standing alone in the hallway for a while before I finally headed into my own room.

It happened in the afternoon. I was lying on my back, casually reading something in my room when I felt a presence outside. At first, I thought it was just someone passing by, but after a while, that presence lingered—it hadn't gone away.

Curiosity finally got the better of me, and I dragged myself up to check the window. That's when I saw her—a woman dressed in a simple brown tunic. But her arms... they were metal. No, it wasn't just armor. Whatever she was wearing under that tunic looked like it didn't belong to this world—some sort of mechanical suit, probably?

I decided to confront her. I stepped out of the inn, the chill of the afternoon air brushing against my skin, and walked over to where the car was parked. The woman was hunched over, peering intently through the car's window as if searching for something inside. I reached out and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

"Eeeek!" The woman let out a startled shriek, spinning around with a swift, aggressive motion. She attempted to strike me, but I quickly deflected her attack using Guardian. In an instant, she brandished a gun that looked like it belonged in a sci-fi movie—sleek, metallic, and futuristic. Could she be from the future? Nah, that seemed too absurd.

"Why are you attacking me when you're the one poking around someone's car?" I demanded.

"Car? This thing is called a car here? How strange..." she said, her voice laced with disbelief. "Why the hell is a car in this world?"

That revelation struck me. So she wasn't from this world? Her confusion made that clear. But what world was she from? I couldn't just assume it was Earth—after all, other planets could have cars too. Besides, she looked way too out of place to belong to Earth.

"This is your car?" she asked, her eyes still wide with curiosity.

"No, it belongs to my Professor," I told her.

"Can I meet your Professor to ask a few questions? Or maybe you could answer them yourself?" she proposed, her gun still tightly gripped.

"I can," I said. "But first, why don't you lower that gun?"

"I can't. I don't fully trust you," she said.

"Then no answers," I replied, turning to walk away.

"W-Wait! Alright, I'll put it down, but you need to promise me you won't attack. You might not realize this, but I'm quite strong. I'm one of the leaders of a group of Slayers, after all," she said, flashing a self-assured smirk. "I don't want to accidentally kill someone who's not Infected and is just an ordinary being from this world who hasn't been infected.

So stay where you are and don't come any closer."

I was left puzzled by the term "Slayers" but kept my distance as she lowered the gun with a deliberate, slow motion.

"Now, tell me something..." she said, her tone shifting to curiosity. "Do you know who's behind the manufacturing of these vehicles?"

I knew exactly who she was talking about. In fact, she was speaking to him right now. There was no need to divulge that, however, but I see no reason not to provide the name of the company to her either.

"It's Leonamon," I said.

"Leonamon. Alright, that's saved in my database," she said, her tone clicking with finality. "Do you know where I can find it?"

"There are many branches of Leonamon," I explained. "But the closest one is in Holy City, over that way," I said, gesturing with a pointed motion. "Leonamon produces a wide range of products, so don't get mixed up. If you're specifically looking for the car manufacturer, just ask for directions once you're there. Leonamon is so widespread, you shouldn't have any trouble finding it."

"Okay. Everything you've mentioned is now saved in my database," she said, her voice measured and cool. "Thanks. Uh, we probably won't cross paths again, so asking for names seems a bit pointless, but just in case, what's yours?"

"Leon," I answered. "Just Leon."

"Oh, alright. Just Leon," she said, her fingers tapping away at her arm as she noted it down. "I've saved that as well. My name is Alekseev. Scarlet Alekseev. If you ever find yourself in a tight spot and need somewhere to lay low, head to the village of Velase and mention my name.

They'll make sure you're hidden. Well then, I'll be on my way."

She started walking away, her figure slowly fading as she moved into the distance.

"Scarlet Alekseev, huh? That does sound like a name from Earth," I muttered to myself.

Chapter 354 - The Village Of Rakkan (3)

The landscape stretched out in an endless sea of green. Crops were planted in neat rows, thriving under good agricultural management—anyone could see that. I trailed behind Rose as she walked down the narrow path, leading us to a lone house standing out against the backdrop of trees. It was a perfect spot for a countryside home. Honestly, I could see myself living here.

As we neared the entrance, a dog barked at us from the yard, no gate to keep it back. But all it took was one fierce glare from Rose, and the dog instantly went silent, tucking its tail between its legs. Not even a dog dared challenge her authority.

When we reached the front door, Rose knocked firmly.

"Oh?" A voice called from inside. "Rose? Is that you?"

"Yes, sister, it's me," Rose answered.

Sister? I had no clue she had one. Then again, we never talked long enough for me to know if she had siblings.

"Oh, Rose! It's been so long!" a voice called from inside, and soon after, a woman who looked to be in her thirties stepped out, a baby nestled against her chest. Her face was soft, motherly, but tired, as if she hadn't had a break in months.

Rose's expression darkened. "What kind of husband leaves his wife and child alone in a house stuck in the middle of nowhere?"

"Philip's just trying to bring in more for us," her sister replied, her voice calm, though there was a hint of defensiveness. "Besides, it's safe here. You don't need to worry."

"Tsk." Rose clicked her tongue. It was obvious she and her sister's husband didn't get along at all.

"Why'd you come by?" her sister asked.

"Well, I had some work to handle around here, so since I was already in the neighborhood, I thought I might as well drop by and visit."

Her sister's lips curved into a warm smile, a glimmer of appreciation in her eyes. "Aww, it's sweet of you to think of me," she said, her voice soft and inviting. "Anyway, why don't you come in?"

"Nah, I just wanted to swing by and say hello. We're actually heading out now," she replied, her tone brisk as she turned to leave.

"Oh..." Her sister's expression faltered, the smile fading as her gaze shifted to me. Her eyes widened with surprise and interest. "Oh? Well, well, who's this young man, Rose?"

"He's just someone coming with me. That's all there is to it," she said.

As she was about to leave, I spoke up.

"Is it okay if I stay for a bit?" I asked the lady.

Rose glanced back at me, clearly surprised.

"Of course, you're more than welcome," she said, her smile bright and genuine.

I stepped into the house with Professor Rose. The place was a charming wooden house that could easily be mistaken for a cozy cabin. Shelves lined with books filled nearly every wall. It was clear that this woman, like Rose, was a true bookworm.

"Wait a moment. I'll make us some tea," the woman said with a warm smile before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Thank you," I responded, my voice soft as I watched her go.

As soon as she was out of sight, Rose yanked me by the collar and shoved me against the wall with a violent thrust. Her eyes blazed with unrestrained anger, the fury in them almost palpable.

"What the hell are you up to, Leon?"

"Didn't you notice it already?" I asked, my voice steady despite the tension. Beneath her clothes, I could see the marks of severe abuse—signs that went beyond a simple beating. Bruises and welts marred her body, clearly the work of someone who knew how to inflict pain where it could be easily hidden.

It was likely her husband who did this, hitting her in places concealed by her clothes, leaving her in a state of almost unbearable suffering.

Her grip on my collar faltered, her fingers trembling slightly. "How did you notice that?"

"I've got a sharp eye for details. I can sense when something's wrong with someone's body just from the way they move. When I spot an irregularity in their gait or how they carry themselves, I activate my Perfect Eyesight to cut through the surface and see what's really going on."

"P-Perfect Eyesight? So, you're not completely skillless after all."

"I'm not. You saw it yesterday, didn't you? I activated a Guardian right in front of you."

She'd already seen that I wasn't as skillless as I seemed, so there was no point in hiding it any longer.

"But how do you have two skills?" she asked.

"That's not what's really important right now," I said urgently. "Your sister is on the brink of collapse, and—"

Before I could finish, a heavy thud echoed through the house, the kind of sound that comes from someone hitting the floor hard.

"Grace!"

Rose bolted toward the kitchen, and I raced after her. We found the woman sprawled on the floor, unconscious. Thankfully, the baby wasn't with her when she fell.

"Grace!" Rose rushed to her sister's side, desperately shaking her. Grace remained unresponsive, her body limp. Rose hastily lifted her clothes, revealing a horrifying sight—bruises splattered across her body in dark, bluish hues, a brutal mark of the violence she had endured.

With magic being so prevalent, healing her with a spell would be straightforward. However, I couldn't just heal her yet. Healing magic could mend physical injuries, but it was powerless against mental trauma. This woman was probably deeply in love with the man who abused her, going so far as to conceal the bruises to avoid detection.

If I healed her while she was unconscious, she might wake up believing it was all just a bad dream, unable to confront the truth of her husband's brutality.

This was a severe case of domestic violence. I hadn't encountered much of this before; my parents had rarely fought when I was growing up. The first time I witnessed something like this was with Akane, who was being beaten by her drunk father.

Chapter 355 - The Village Of Rakkan (4)

We laid her down on the bed. She just slept there peacefully, while I took care of her daughter. It was my first time holding a baby, and I was a bit awkward at it. The little girl didn't cry, though. Instead, she smiled up at me, and I couldn't help but smile back.

While I was busy with that, Rose suddenly burst through the door and headed outside.

"Take care of them for me, Leon," Rose said, her voice firm.

"What are you planning to do? Going after her husband?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"What else am I supposed to do? That bastard's going to pay for what he's done," she replied through gritted teeth.

She really had a thing against douchebags, huh? Probably applied to me too.

"Aren't you rushing things a bit?"

"How can I not be when I see someone suffering because of a fucker like him?" she growled.

"It's not certain that her husband is the one to blame, you know?" I pointed out. "And maybe you should consider her feelings before you dive in headfirst."

"Leon, you think someone like that deserves any consideration?" Rose's voice was like a whip crack. "He puts his hands on a woman and just disappears, who knows what the hell he's doing. I can't stand that kind of shit," she snapped, her eyes blazing. "Or what? You think he deserves to enjoy his life while his wife is suffering?"

"I'm not saying that," I countered. "What I mean is, we don't need to get involved in things that aren't our business. When I say consider, I'm talking about her feelings, not her husband's. What if she doesn't want us sticking our noses in her business? Do you think she'd be grateful if you did something to her husband, even if she didn't want it?"

Rose froze for a moment, her anger palpable as she processed my words. Then she stormed over to me, grabbing me by the collar with a vice-like grip. Her eyes were intense, filled with a fierce resolve.

"Are you telling me to ignore something that's clearly unjust? To just turn a blind eye? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"I don't mean that," I said.

As we argued, the baby in my arms suddenly began to cry. Rose's grip on my collar loosened.

"Stay here, Rose," I said firmly. "You're not going to get anything by chasing after her husband. You'll just end up exhausting yourself. Why don't you take care of Grace while I handle Hana?" I suggested.

Rose's teeth clenched so tightly I thought they might bleed from the pressure. Her eyes burned with a fierce glare, as if she was about to unleash more of her anger.

"Leon, I can't make sense of you," she said, her voice heavy with confusion and anger. "When I didn't know who Irene's mysterious man was, I was certain he was a scumbag, no doubt about it. I'd never even seen him, but based on his actions and what he did to Irene, I was sure he was a total piece of shit. Then I found out you were that scumbag. At first, I couldn't believe it.

You're so different—kind and you even saved me. I thought my initial impression was wrong, that maybe you weren't a scumbag after all."

She was saying that despite meeting me and sharing moments together, she had hoped I wasn't the scumbag I seemed. But if her initial impression was wrong, it meant she doubted her current feelings too.

"But thinking back to that night on the cliff, I can't ignore the gut feeling that you played with my emotions to get me into sleeping with you. You knew I was starting to fall for you and used that to your advantage. I mean, under no circumstances would I sleep with a man who's already in a relationship with another woman."

She was right. The reason I could read a woman's feelings wasn't because I cared about them—it was because I knew exactly how to manipulate those emotions to get what I wanted. I wasn't understanding them out of empathy or connection; it was purely tactical. The Goddess of Succubus's Heir skill let me sense what I needed to say or do to push them, to bend them into submission.

I'd been twisting their desires and vulnerabilities, bending them to my will. She wasn't wrong when she said I was just manipulating the circumstances, setting the stage for them to fall for me—fall right into my trap.

"When I realized that," she continued, "I knew how right I'd been all along. You're a scum. No, you're worse than I thought. More fucking scummy than I gave you credit for."

With that, she turned on her heel, walking away toward Grace, leaving me standing there.

For a moment, I was rooted in place, staring at the floor. Maybe... maybe my past self and who I am now weren't as different as I'd tried to believe. Maybe after all these years, I was still the same asshole who played with people's feelings for his own gain. I thought I understood women, but now I wondered if I was just fooling myself.

"Yeah, right..." I muttered under my breath, the words dripping with bitter realization. "I manipulated Akane back then, didn't I? I knew she had feelings for me, and I used that. Did I ever apologize for that? Have I even acknowledged it?"

The memories flashed through my mind, like shards of glass cutting into my conscience. Back then, I hadn't really understood her, had I? I only saw the surface, too blind or too selfish to dive deeper into what she was truly feeling. Maybe I was never capable of understanding her—not the real her.

"...You've become a scum."

Her words echoed in my mind, harsh and unforgiving, just like they had that day. She had seen right through me, called me out for what I truly was—a fucking scumbag. She wasn't wrong. I was nothing more than a manipulative asshole, using people's feelings to get what I wanted. No righteousness, no integrity, just a man who knew how to twist emotions in his favor.

I had played the game too well, and now the consequences were like a noose tightening around my throat.

I should have apologized—back then, when it mattered. Instead, I left things unresolved, hoping that my saving her would somehow make up for the shit I'd done. But deep down, I wondered if it was enough. I hoped, after everything, that she managed to find peace, even if I never could.

Chapter 356: The Village Of Rakkan (5)

Grace woke up after a while, but by then, it was already nighttime.

"What happened to me?" she asked, struggling to lift herself up.

Rose gently helped her into a sitting position and said, "You suddenly collapsed. You've been out for hours."

"I'm sorry," Grace said with a faint smile, "I must have been exhausted from taking care of Hana."

Rose remained silent for a moment before asking, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Grace seemed to understand what Rose was getting at but played dumb. "What are you talking about?"

Rose rolled up her sleeve to reveal a bruise. "Why didn't you tell me about the bastard who did this to you?" Rose's voice was a low growl, full of unrestrained fury. It was the kind of anger you didn't want anyone to witness. But Rose let it all out.

"Because I don't want to burden someone as busy as you, Rose," Grace said, her smile serene despite the ache she felt. The strength in her ability to smile through pain was remarkable. "I didn't want to add to your already heavy load. I don't have that right."

Rose's eyes flashed with intensity. "You have every right to tell me," she said firmly. "You're like a sister to me. Sure, we're not blood-related, but after all those years living in my family's house, you're the one who looked after me."

Grace's gaze softened as she spoke. "I'm just a maid," she said quietly. "Your family assigned me to take care of you when you were just a child. But I've always thought of you as my little sister. Without any family of my own, having you around fills my heart with warmth. But that's exactly why I can't burden you with this."

Hmm... So they weren't really related by blood after all. But then again, families come in many forms.

"Besides, I don't think Philip is as bad as you're making him out to be," Grace said, her voice soft but steady, as if she was trying to convince herself as much as Rose. "Sure, sometimes he gets rough with me, like this..." She touched the bruise, wincing slightly, "...but it's never to the point of trying to kill me.

I mean, a father wouldn't go so far as to kill the woman he married and fathered a daughter with, right? He's not a bad guy. I wouldn't have married him if he was. Although... I kinda wish he'd stop following along with whatever people he's hanging out with. He changed when he joined that group."

Rose's eyes went wide, a flicker of realization crossing her face before she slowly turned toward me.

"Do you know what group he got involved with?" I asked, my voice low but tense.

Grace's expression darkened, her shoulders sagging. "I have no idea," she said, shaking her head. "But I think that's what changed him. He started talking about things I couldn't make sense of, and sometimes he'd wake up in the middle of the night, muttering things... things I couldn't understand."

"Does it sound like... 'In the shadows, we find truth, and in the darkness, we are reborn. The world will bow to our will, for we are the harbingers of the Eclipse, where light meets its end and our power begins'?" I asked. Those were the exact words the members of the Eclipse whispered just before their heads exploded.

Grace frowned, her expression troubled. "That does sound like it, though I can't be completely sure. Why? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing at all," I replied, though my words were far from the truth.

There was everything wrong. Her husband wasn't just in some shady group—he'd been brainwashed, swallowed by a criminal cult that specialized in kidnapping women. Worse yet, it was too late to save him. Anyone who got close or dared to speak their secrets had their heads blown off, the organization made sure of that. Her husband was already far too gone, and there was no way out for him.

I locked eyes with Rose. She knew exactly what I was thinking—hell, she was investigating this same shit too. We didn't even need to say it, but it hung heavy between us.

Later that night, after Grace had finally drifted off to sleep, I turned to Rose. "Her husband's probably with the Eclipse," I said, my voice low, cutting through the silence. "Everything she said points to it. There's not much left to figure out."

Rose pulled the cigarette from her lips, her eyes narrowing as she blew out a long stream of smoke. It curled in the air like the weight of the truth sinking in. "Then we wait for him to come back," she muttered, her tone cold and steady, "see if it's real."

"You serious?" I shot back, not convinced. "His head could explode the second we push him. You want to make her a widow like that?"

Her jaw tightened, the edge of her cigarette burning between her fingers. "I'd rather that than let her suffer at the hands of some scum like him." She paused, her voice lowering into a growl. "I don't give a fuck what it takes, even if she hates me for the rest of her life. I'm not standing by and watching the woman who raised me go through that kind of hell."

And it looked like she was determined to do just that. I could almost feel the rage enveloping her in a quiet storm. I was sure that his husband, Philip, I heard his name was, would be going to be in a lot of hell.

That night, I slipped out of my room, the floor creaking softly under my weight as I moved through the dim hallway. I reached Grace's room and carefully pushed the door open, peering inside. She was asleep, her face pale against the pillow, looking so fragile. Her daughter, Hana, was tucked in the small crib beside her, sleeping soundly, blissfully unaware of the storm swirling around her life.

"She won't do anything stupid... not with us here, right?" I muttered under my breath, eyes darting from Grace to her child. "Maybe she's holding back because she's got Hana now. Maybe being a mother's enough to keep her grounded."

But I knew it was bullshit. Everything about her screams lie. She loved that bastard once, but that was long gone. The marks on her skin were proof of that. He hurt her, but she stayed because, at some point, love had blinded her. Not anymore, though.

Now, whatever was left of that love had rotted away. She'd never love him again.

What Rose didn't catch—but I did—was the hollow emptiness in Grace's eyes. That wasn't the look of a woman in denial, it was the look of someone who'd spiraled so far down into despair that she was begging for a way out. Every little movement, the way she walked, the way she carried herself—it all screamed of a broken woman on the edge. And the way she walked?

That wasn't the only thing that was wrong with her. Something else lurked beneath the surface, something darker.

As I was leaving the house, something caught my eye—a rope. My chest tightened. I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but knowing the hell Grace was living through, it wasn't hard to guess what that rope could mean. It wasn't a matter of if anymore—it was when. I needed to get rid of that rope and make sure she stayed far away from anything sharp. This was going to spiral if I didn't step in fast.

Once I stepped outside, I called out, "Morthea?"

In response, vines unfurled from a nearby tree, slithering down its trunk before a woman emerged halfway from its bark. Only her upper body was visible, the rest still fused with the tree. The dog nearby barked like crazy, but I quickly quieted it by activating the Guardian around him. He stopped almost instantly.

"Seen anything unusual?" I asked her, my voice low.

"Yes, Master," Morthea replied, her voice as soft as the wind. "I've sensed many different life forces... from several men, all lingering around her."

I clenched my fists. "I see."

The ugly truth hit me like a punch to the gut. Her husband... that piece of shit. He hadn't just hurt her; he'd let other men use her. What a sick, twisted, pathetic fucking cuck.

Chapter 357: Grace And Rose (1)

I hadn't told Rose anything about this yet. I knew her well enough to be sure she'd act impulsively and hunt Philip down. But if she did, something would definitely happen to Grace. What Grace needed right now was someone she trusted. If I left her to her own devices, she'd probably try something reckless. That's exactly why I hadn't said anything.

Yet, anyway.

For now, all I could do was wait.

The night came and went, but Philip still hadn't returned home. I'd been talking to Sandra over the phone, asking her to dig into Philip's whereabouts. She told me he wasn't spotted anywhere near Rakkan, which only meant one thing—he was probably out of Rakkan. Most likely at the cult's base.

"Morning, Leon," Grace said softly as she stepped out onto the balcony and spotted me sitting there. Her warm smile did little to hide the exhaustion beneath it. "Did you sleep okay? Sorry if the bed wasn't comfortable. We're not exactly rolling in cash to afford softer beds," she added, her chuckle tinged with a hint of embarrassment.

"It's fine," I said, giving her a reassuring smile. "Honestly, I slept like a baby."

"Thank goodness," she breathed out, the tension in her shoulders melting away. Her gaze shifted toward the front yard, landing on Rose, who was chopping wood logs with ease.

Rose's body was a sight to behold—muscular, but not in a way that was too much. She had that perfect balance between strength and femininity—sexy and lean. The way her muscles flexed as she swung the axe, sweat glistening on her skin under the morning sun, was near hypnotizing. She was only wearing a tight black sleeveless shirt, and it clung to her body in all the right places.

Watching her like that was almost enough to make my mind wander, but I had to be careful. If I stared too long, she'd catch me—and that glare of hers could cut deeper than any blade.

"When did you meet Rose?" Grace's voice broke through my thoughts, snapping me back to the present.

"At the academy," I said simply.

"Heh~" Grace looked at me with a sly grin, like she found something amusing. "You know, I never thought Rose would go for someone younger," she teased. "I always figured she'd be into someone her age or maybe even older. She was all about Prince Charming back when she was a kid, after all," she added with a nostalgic smile.

"We're not exactly in a relationship, Miss Grace," I replied.

"I know," she replied with a nonchalant shrug, but the grin didn't leave her face. "Still, it's not exactly hard to see there's something going on between you two."

Well, there was something there, but it wasn't something I was ready to admit out loud.

"Anyway, are you two heading out today?" Grace asked, changing the subject, though the playful glint in her eyes remained.

"Yeah," I told her.

Rose and I had planned to leave today, but I couldn't risk leaving Grace here alone. She might try to do something drastic, like attempt suicide if we left her behind. I couldn't exactly tell Rose that I wanted to stick around until Philip came back, because I knew she'd get suspicious.

So, instead of explaining anything, I figured the best option was to ask Morthea to stay here until Philip returned.

"You can stay a little while longer," Grace said, her voice soft.

"I don't want to impose," I replied. It was all I could think to say in that moment.

Breakfast was... well, underwhelming. The food was plain, like something thrown together last minute, and I didn't have to ask to know Rose was the one who cooked it. Her whole vibe didn't exactly scream "domestic goddess." She had that tough, brass exterior, and the mess in the kitchen just confirmed it. She wasn't the type of woman to worry about stuff like cooking, and honestly, her food showed it.

Still, there was something endearing about it—about her. Seeing someone as strong and no-nonsense as Rose fumble through something as basic as making breakfast was kind of a turn-on in a weird way. It was rare to see someone so rough around the edges be this clumsy, and I couldn't help but find it a little sexy.

After breakfast, I figured I should handle the dishes. As I stood at the sink, washing the plates, Rose came up beside me. She didn't look at me, just stayed close enough to speak in a low whisper.

"Her husband's a member, isn't he?" she asked, her voice barely above a murmur. The tension in her words was hard to miss.

"We don't know that for sure yet," I replied, keeping my eyes on the plates. "Grace said she wasn't sure if the phrase she heard him say was the same one the Eclipse members use. It's just a possibility right now."

"But the probability's high, though," she added, her tone firm.

"Yeah, I mean... it is," I admitted, letting out a small sigh.

The odds that Philip was tied to the Eclipse were high. His strange behavior alone raised enough red flags. But I couldn't confirm anything yet. I hadn't even met the guy in person, so I had no real way of knowing for sure.

I mean, those friends of Philip that Grace mentioned might just be part of a completely different group. But the way Philip disturbingly offered his wife to so many men was a clear, unsettling clue.

"Is it okay to just leave her here?" Rose asked.

"Probably not," I admitted, scrubbing a plate with more force than necessary. "But we can't make progress on the investigation if we stay put. We've got only a month of winter vacation, and given the time we need for the investigation, sticking around here won't get us anywhere."

"Yeah, it's tough to stay here when we're racing against time to dig up something on Eclipse," Rose said. "So what's our move?"

This seemed like the perfect moment for me to ensure Grace's safety. If I suggested Rose stay behind, it would guarantee Grace wasn't alone.

"How about I head to the next village by myself?" I suggested, trying to sound casual. "And you stay here to keep an eye on Grace?"

Chapter 358: Grace And Rose (2)

"I can't let you go there alone, Leon," Rose said after a pause, her eyes locking onto mine. That hesitation was my chance, and I could almost see the conflict in her. Her heart wavered, and for a split second, I knew she might lean toward picking Grace over me. That's exactly what I was banking on. "I told you before, didn't I? I don't want you doing anything dangerous."

"But it's not exactly smart for both of us to stay here, is it? Unless we go together, but we can't leave Grace here alone, can we?"

Leaving Grace here, with no one around, was a risk that could blow up in our faces. And there was no way we could leave her with Philip either. That was a dangerous move, which meant Rose had to stay.

"I need to go," I said. "You need to stay, Rose. You took down a dragon all by yourself. I'm damn sure if I leave Grace with you, she'll be safe."

Besides, there was another reason I couldn't stay here. I'd noticed something about Grace—she was terrified of me. No, more specifically, she was terrified of men in general. Given what she'd been through, that fear made sense. That's why I didn't want to hang around. My presence was only making things worse for her.

"Leon," Rose said, her voice soft but steady. "You're going to be alright, right?" She was finally convinced she needed to handle everything with Grace and Philip. But now, she was asking if I'd be okay heading to a place where women often got kidnapped—alone.

This was one of those moments where she wanted to keep her distance because deep down, she knew I was a scumbag, always playing around with different women. But even though she knew it in her head, her heart still couldn't let go of her feelings for me. I wasn't planning on manipulating her emotions to get what I wanted, but if the opportunity came up, I wasn't above taking advantage of it.

"I'll be alright," I told her, meeting her gaze head-on.

Rose decided to stay at Grace's place, leaving me to head to the next village to investigate.

"Looks like this is the way I need to go, huh?" I muttered to myself as I glanced in the direction I was headed. Before setting off, I looked back and saw that Morthea was still there. I'd assign her to stay behind, just in case something came up that even Rose couldn't handle. Morthea would be more than enough to take care of things. She was a powerful Dryad, after all.

Rose's POV

Leon had left the house, heading to the next village, while I stayed behind at Grace's place. I was sitting on the balcony when Grace came out, holding a cup of tea, and handed it to me.

"Are you sure you want to stay here and not go with him? You had plans, didn't you?" she asked, her tone light but curious.

"Don't worry about it," I replied, taking a sip of the tea. It was a bit tepid, but still really good. "Thanks," I said, giving her a smile.

"Don't mention it," she replied, her lips curling into that warm smile I'd come to know so well. It was the same smile she'd given me when I was a child—back when she was the only one who truly cared for me. I didn't care if she was just a maid back then, doing her job. To me, she was my sister.

"Anyway, has Hana gone to bed yet?" I asked.

"Yeah, that kid loves her sleep," Grace said with a soft smile, her voice carrying a gentle warmth. "But enough about that... what about you and Leon?"

"What about us?" I responded.

"I'm not blind, you know," she said. "The moment he walked in here with you, I could tell something was up. And the way you can't stop watching him every time he moves... well, that just confirmed it."

"You're reading too much into it," I shot back. "He's a student at the academy, and I'm responsible for looking after him. I'm his professor, that's all there is to it. Nothing for you to confirm."

Grace's smirk deepened, her eyes glinting with mischief. "It seems to me there's more than just a student-professor thing going on. Maybe you're picking up on that Prince Charming energy he's got. I mean, I can see it too, and trust me, it's not impossible you'd notice it as well."

Prince Charming? Leon? I used to imagine him as the perfect Prince Charming who'd come to rescue me in times of distress, sweeping me off my feet. But now, knowing the whole story about him, Gabrielle, and Irene, I couldn't see him that way anymore. All I saw was a scumbag who took pleasure in bedding women. I had fallen into his trap too.

"I don't see him that way," I told her firmly.

"Really?" Grace replied, a hint of disappointment in her voice. "Well, that sucks for him then. He seems like he really cares about you."

I was about to take another sip of my tea when her words hit me. I paused, stunned. "...What?"

"You didn't notice?" she asked, her tone almost incredulous. "It's pretty obvious he's in love with you."

I hadn't noticed at all. When had Leon shown signs of affection for me?

"How did you notice something like that?" I asked, my curiosity piqued.

"I've got a sharp eye for these things," Grace said, her smile playful. "Remember, I'm a romance genre junkie." She leaned closer, her gaze softening. "And I can also see those same signs of affection from you towards him. It's clear to me that you both have feelings for each other."

"No way..." I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

I couldn't deny I once had feelings for him. The key word here is "had," because those feelings had vanished when I learned the truth about him. Maybe I was still holding onto the idea of us being together, but Grace's assertion that Leon had feelings for me was hard to swallow. After everything he did to get me into bed, it was impossible to believe he could genuinely care about me.

"Maybe you still don't see what I'm seeing between the two of you, but I'm convinced your feelings for each other are genuine and not just a lie. I can tell he's done something wrong, but I don't think it was out of malice," Grace said, her voice steady and sincere. "Leon is a good guy."

The weight of Grace's words hit me hard. This was the woman who had been my rock, the one who had always been there to support me. Now she was telling me that the man I had labeled as a scumbag, the one I thought was just a manipulative bastard, was actually a good guy.

Chapter 359: Grace And Rose (3)

I was still reeling from the fact that Leon was in love with me.

It was hard to wrap my head around. Leon had manipulated my feelings to get me into bed, and I let it happen. To make it worse, he was already dating the Princess of the Bethlan Kingdom. He knew that and

still slept with me. And if that wasn't bad enough, he had Gabrielle and Irene wrapped around his finger, fucking them too, even though he had a girlfriend.

While all these thoughts were racing through my mind, my phone buzzed. I stepped outside for a moment to check it. It was a message from my father. I bit my lip as I read it.

"Even after I left his damn house, he's still trying to dictate my fucking future," I muttered, a growl escaping through clenched teeth, my fingers tightening around the phone.

How dare he? After kicking me out and barring me from his house, he was still finding ways to control me, making me do what he wanted. I never wanted to be some agent for the administrators, yet here I was, working for them. This wasn't the life I chose, and now, here he was, pushing me to do something even more ridiculous than before.

He wasn't even ashamed to call it an "order from the Head of the House," like I was still part of that damn family. Screw him!

I deleted his text and headed back to the house. That's when I heard it...

"Huh?" I turned my head, hearing someone speak. There was a guy standing there, looking confused, staring at me like he didn't know what to make of me. His eyes were wide, filled with confusion. I didn't recognize him either.

There were a few other guys with him, watching the exchange.

"Hey, Philip, that ain't your wife, is it?" one of them asked.

"No," the man who had been eyeing me finally growled, his voice low and irritated. "Maybe she's just a visitor. How dare that woman have visitors at a time like this?" His jaw clenched, teeth grinding together as anger flickered in his eyes.

"Does it even matter?" one of the others sneered, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "A broad like that showing up gives us something else to enjoy. Your wife's already too loose for us to get much out of it anyway."

"Yeah, you're right," Philip muttered, his gaze locking onto me, eyes dark and predatory. His lips curled into a twisted smile as his tongue slid across them. "She's got a damn good figure, though. Definitely fuckable." His voice dripped with lust as his eyes roamed over me. "I'm tired of fucking that woman anyway. Maybe a change of flavor will satisfy my appetite today."

They moved in closer, six of them, their footsteps deliberate and heavy. Grins stretched across their faces, filthy intent written in their expressions. I could feel their disgusting stares like hands already on my skin. I knew exactly what they wanted. And I was more than ready to fight—ready to break their penises, crush their balls—but first, I had to deal with him. The bastard Grace married.

"You're Philip?" I asked, my voice cold as steel, eyes narrowing on him.

"Oh, you know me?" Philip's lips curled into a sly grin, his eyes glinting with recognition. "Wait, are you Rose? Grace always talked about you. She'd light up, grinning from ear to ear, going on and on about how the little girl she used to take care of had grown into a full-blown adult, working for herself now."

Damn, I never thought I'd get to see the real Rose in the flesh!" His eyes wandered over me, slowly, lingering on every curve, practically stripping me bare with his gaze.

"You've become a fine woman," he continued, voice low and laced with sleaze. "If I'd paid more attention to what Grace was saying back then, maybe I would've come for you instead."

"Philip!" A voice suddenly cut through, sharp and frantic. I snapped my head toward the entrance and saw Grace standing there.

"Oh, Grace!" Philip's voice oozed mockery, his smirk widening as he leaned slightly forward. "Have I missed you! What's it been, two weeks since I last laid eyes on you? How's little Hana doing? Hope she's holding up just fine!"

"Stay away from Rose! Don't do anything to her!" Grace's voice cracked, laced with panic and fury, her eyes wide with desperation.

Philip's sneer deepened. "What, just like I did with you?" he spat, his words dripping with cruel satisfaction.

That was all I needed. My hand shot out, wrapping around his throat. I lifted him effortlessly, his feet dangling above the ground.

"Ack?!" His eyes bulged as he gasped for breath.

Instantly, the other men whipped out their firearms, barrels aimed at me.

I didn't flinch. I didn't care. Their guns meant nothing to me. "What did you do, exactly?" I asked, my voice cold and steady, as if the threat of death was nonexistent. "Tell me now, or I'll snap your fucking neck."

"K-Kh?! What the hell is this kind of strength?!" Philip gasped, his voice strained as he clawed at my hand, desperately trying to free himself from my grip. But he couldn't. He had no idea how strong I really was.

"Tell me..." I growled, squeezing his throat harder, feeling the muscles beneath my fingers tense and strain.

"Y-You guys! Help me!" he wheezed, his eyes wild with fear.

"If any of you even think about pulling those triggers," I warned, not bothering to look at the other men, "I'll snap his neck and then yours, too." My voice was icy, cutting through the tension like a blade. "Now, what did you do?"

Philip let out a strained grunt, his face reddening as my grip tightened, the lack of air making him wince in pain. He was on the verge of suffocating, but I wasn't going to stop—not until I knew what he had done to Grace.

"I-I only shared her!" he finally choked out. "I was just being a good friend!"

Shared. Share? Share what? But I knew. I knew exactly what he meant. He shared her body with these men.

He let them use her.

The realization hit me like a tidal wave, and my vision went black.

Chapter 360: Grace And Rose (4)

I slammed him to the ground in an instant, forcing the air out of his lungs, then drove my heel straight into his crotch.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

I heard a crunch from down there, and it sure as hell sounded like I'd broken something. Good. I didn't care if I did. This asshole didn't deserve to have his dick intact. He didn't deserve to be married to someone like Grace, who had taken care of me when I was a kid. He should just die.

I raised my heel to smash his crotch again, but that's when the other men around me opened fire.

I dodged, moving faster than they could follow, bullets whizzing past me as I dashed toward them. Their eyes widened, the fear sinking in. They didn't stand a chance. I was in front of them before they even

realized it, and with one swift motion, my knee slammed into the first guy's crotch, sending him crumbling.

Before he hit the ground, I spun and kicked the next guy straight in the balls, his legs giving out as he collapsed, clutching himself in agony.

The two of them hit the ground hard, bodies crumpling in an instant. But I wasn't finished. No, they had to pay. Even though they were already writhing, helpless on the floor, I pressed my foot down onto their balls, grinding the soles of my shoes against them.

"GRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"NGGGGGGGH!"

Their cries ripped through the air, mingling with the sickening crunch beneath my heel. I felt the tension give way as something inside snapped. It was satisfying, seeing them squirm beneath me. I wasn't going to let them off easy.

The other three watched in horror, their faces drained of color as they realized what they were witnessing. Fear took hold of them, their bodies trembling like leaves in the wind. I could practically see their thoughts, the instinctive panic kicking in as they squeezed their legs together, trying to protect their dicks from an imagined pain.

Even just watching was enough to make them feel like their own balls were getting crushed.

They bolted, fear driving their every step, but they didn't stand a chance. I was already on them, dodging their desperate gunfire like it was nothing. In seconds, I was right behind them. I grabbed one by the collar and yanked him back, slamming his body into the ground with a hard thud.

"No, no!" he cried out, but it was pointless.

Before he could beg, my foot crushed his crotch, a sickening crunch filling the air as his balls gave way under the force. I didn't even blink as I dashed to the next one, driving my heel into his crotch with the same brutal impact. Another crunch echoed, his body folding in pain.

The last one barely had time to process it before I was on him, smashing his crotch into a mess of blood and shattered bones.

All three hit the ground, their bodies twitching in agony. Dark red stains spread rapidly across the crotch of their pants, blood pooling from where their dicks had once been. Their eyes rolled back, hands instinctively clutching what little was left of their ruined balls, but it didn't matter. It was over.

I stood over Philip, staring down at his pathetic form. His body twitched, and his eyes were rolled so far back that only the whites showed. Without hesitation, I drove my foot into his crotch, again and again. Each kick sent a wet, crunching sound through the air, echoing like the satisfying crack of bones breaking. The sickening noise filled the yard, louder with every impact.

Even the dog in the corner, sensing the brutality, cowered and tucked itself deeper into the shadows. Philip's mouth began to foam, white bubbles gathering at the corners, but I didn't care. I kept going. He deserved this.

"Stop, Rose! Stop!" A sudden voice tore me out of my fury. Grace. Her arms wrapped around me from behind, pulling me away as if she could drag the anger out of me. "Please, don't kill him. Don't let your rage take over.

You don't have to do this," she pleaded, her voice shaking as she clung to me.

"But Grace..." My voice was raw with anger. He had done something unforgivable, something that wasn't just cruel—it was monstrous. And it wasn't just to anyone. It was to his own wife. He deserved to fucking die. He deserved worse than that.

"You don't have to," Grace's voice cracked, and I could feel her sobs as she pressed her body against mine. "Please, Rose... I can't let you kill him."

With that, the haze of rage finally started to lift, allowing me to catch my breath. The raw fury that had consumed me—the image of Philip sharing Grace with other men, letting them use her however they wanted—still burned inside me, but now it was controlled. The fire was still there, but it wasn't blinding me anymore. And it was Grace who'd stopped me.

Grace, the one who should've wanted those bastards dead more than anyone. Grace, of all people.

"Are you finally alright?" Her voice was soft, filled with concern, as she held on to me tightly. She hadn't let go, even after everything.

I took a deep breath, still feeling the rage simmer beneath the surface. "Yeah," I muttered, forcing myself to sound calm. "You can let me go now."

Slowly, almost reluctantly, she loosened her grip and stepped back. I turned to look at her, trying to smile despite the storm still raging in my chest. Even after all the shit she'd been through, she stood strong, unwavering. That's what made her special—her ability to stay tough, even when the world tried to break her. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever be that strong. Could I ever be like her?

"Thank you," I whispered, my voice quieter.

She gave me a warm, reassuring smile.

I crouched down and examined Philip's wrist. My suspicion was confirmed—there it was, a tattoo bearing the symbol of the cult we were investigating. Philip was indeed a member of the Eclipse. I checked the other men, and they had the same mark.

"When did he get this tattoo?" I asked Grace, my voice steady despite the chaos.

"It was when a man came to our home," she replied.

"A man?" I pressed. "Do you remember anything about him?"

"All I know is he was a young man with pure black hair and black eyes. He looked otherworldly, like he didn't belong to this world at all."

Her description didn't match anyone I knew.

"Do you know his name?" I asked.

"James," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "James Moriarty."