

[Adam POV]

I sat atop the ship's sail pole, which had carried us for the past three weeks, alone with my thoughts as I gazed out at the ever-approaching port, watching as the capital slowly came into view, which seemed so close yet so far away.

I was tired.

I hadn't slept in a few days.

It wasn't anyone's fault though.

Gildarts and I were the only ones capable of defending the ship in the unlikely case anyone tried to attack it, so we barely had any time to rest.

Not only that, we were also the only ones capable of powering the ship with our magic, for more than obvious reasons.

Thankfully, our long trip was finally coming to an end.

With each passing second, the wind grew stronger around me, rippling through my clothes, until I could hardly feel my own presence, as the first rays of gentle dawn pierced the darkness, announcing the start of a new day.

As we grew ever closer to our destination, I could feel the palpable excitement from those above, their faces filled with hope and anticipation, at the thrill of freedom that was in the air.

It was almost as if they hadn't allowed themselves to believe they were actually free until the port had come into view.

I didn't blame them though.

If anything, I might be one of the few people in the world that was able to understand them.

I sympathized with them.

"Kid, get ready, we are arriving!" Gildarts shouted, his frame filling the doorway as he peered outside the captain's room, gazing at me.

Nodding without a word, I jumped down from above, and waited, until we finally arrived at the port, where I began to lower the ship's gangplank carefully, in preparation for our landing, watching as the locals began to gather around the docks, their gazes filled with concern, hearing their murmurs of caution at the sight of our ship approaching.

Which was totally understandable, seeing the telltale markings around the ship painted a clear picture; that its

prior owners did not have altruistic goals in mind, instead, signified with shocking clarity that its original owners trafficked in human cargo.

So it was no surprise they stared at us with such trepidation.

Nevertheless, after a brief talk with the port's authorities, we were welcomed with open arms, getting help from the magic council to unload the victims of the slave trade, some of which were too injured to even move, before taking them to the authorities for processing.

As we began to unload the survivors of the Tower from the ship, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of satisfaction at the sight of their faces, filled with hope.

They had been through so much.

I made sure to personally greet each one of them, offering them words of encouragement and reassurance that they were finally safe from harm, and that this was their chance for a new beginning.

It was a small gesture, but I knew that for them, it made all the difference in the world.

I knew that for me at least, it had.

As the last of the survivors were being escorted away, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I turned around to see Gildarts, his normally stern expression softening as he looked at me.

"All things considered, you did good, kid," Gildarts said, his voice gruff but filled with a hint of pride.

I quipped playfully, "Really? Where was that attitude when you punched me? Or kicked me? That's child's abuse, dad."

Gildarts' brows twitched at this, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "I can do it again, if you want, brat."

"What now?" I muttered in a hollow tone, letting out a sigh as I turned to gaze at Gildarts.

Gildarts' gaze lingered on the horizon for a moment before he turned back to me. "Now? We go back home," he said in a soft but determined tone.

With nothing more to do in the Capital, we moved to the train station and bought four tickets to Magnolia.

No one spoke as we waited for our train.

It was a rare moment of quiet for us, especially with all that had happened over the past few days, all and all were exhausted, and while our reasons to be exhausted differed, we all wanted a moment of tranquility.

As we waited, Gildarts sat next to me, his broad shoulders slumped over and his gaze fixed on his lap, as Erza and Rob shared a bench in front of us.

Erza's eyes rested on me brightly, as a hint of a smile danced on her lips. The way she fixed her gaze on me left me feeling like I was the only one in the entire place, her admiration for me was palpable, but in a different manner to Lilia's.

I don't know why, but it felt different somehow.

Seeing Erza gaze at me, Rob grinned, the corners of his lips reaching up to his eyes as he gestured towards the little girl, who shifted her weight, avoiding his gaze. "Don't be shy," he said in a teasing voice. "Ask him."

Ask me what?

Erza's cheeks flushed pink, and she took a deep breath before finally meeting Rob's eyes. "Is it true you fought the entire Tower in order to escape the first time?" She slowly raised her gaze, staring at me intently.

I shook my head ruefully, a wry smile tugging at my lips. "Not exactly, I fought one person only, the leader of the cult, and... Well, long story short, he got the better of me. His last attack sent me flying into the sea, heavily injured, so I assume he thought I was done for. Fortunately for me, a fishing ship found me drifting in the sea before it was too late."

Erza shifted her feet nervously and twirled a strand crimson of hair between her fingers, her eyes glinting in awe as she leaned in, almost whispering, "I heard rumors say you cut one of his arms off..."

I chuckled. "I did."

After arriving at Magnolia Town, we made our way to the guild, where I was quickly ushered upstairs to Makarov's office on the second floor of the guild.

The old man was seated behind a large mahogany desk, his face a mask of gravity, that made me feel the full weight of his displeasure as he rose to meet me.

"What were you thinking?" Makarov sighed, his voice grave, filled with anger, sadness, and disappointment. "Do you have any idea how dangerous your actions were? I know you're

strong, but what if you found someone stronger than you, what if you were captured again? You left without telling anyone where to find you! You left to fight a war that was ours as much as it was yours!"

His words struck me like a physical blow, because he was right, and I knew it, I couldn't refute his words, or try to worm my way out of this, he was simply right. I had gone alone because I didn't want anyone to intervene because I didn't want to deal with what others would think because I didn't want anyone to judge my methods like Ur had done.

That being said, I didn't regret it.

I guess you could say there were two sides to me when it came to this matter.

One was glad I had gone alone, and the other knew the old man had every right to be mad.

Makarov stood above his desk, hands clasped behind him. His voice was solemn, but his brows were furrowed with a hint of sadness. "Until further notice, you are demoted from your rank and will enter a probation period. All missions must be personally approved by me."

"I understand," I nodded, already expecting something like this to happen. "I accept the consequences for my actions."

Makarov sighed, putting a hand on my shoulder. "This is not a punishment," he said. "This is a lesson. You can't ignore your family, and your friends for the sake of revenge, you must rely on those who rely on you, you must trust them." He paused, and his voice softened. "Son, you have a lot of potential, so much that I can't even begin to imagine how far you'll go, but might does not make right."

At this, I put on a comforting smile and tilted my head. "Don't worry, I won't make the same mistake again," I offered gently.

He paused, letting out a long tired sigh. "Your probation period will last for six months. That should give you enough time to reflect on your actions and what you've done wrong. It should also be enough time to interact with others, maybe make a few friends."

"I understand," I nodded.

As I walked out of Makarov's office, I couldn't help but feel a pang of regret dancing in the back of my mind, not for my actions but for how they had hurt others when there was no need for it, I had let my anger and thirst for revenge cloud my judgment, allowing them to justify my actions.

At the very least, I owed Ur and Lilia an apology.

That being said, I wouldn't dwell on the past more than absolutely necessary, after all, if there was something I had learned from this was that... dwelling in the past was a very bad idea.

Instead, from now on, I would try focusing on the future and how I could use this experience to become a better version of myself.

Needless to say, this didn't mean I wouldn't get my dues with Brain, because I would, he was living on borrowed time, this just meant that I wouldn't let revenge be the first priority in my life.

"I need to sleep," I sighed.