

[Adam C. POV]

After leaving the Strauss siblings in Makarov's hands, I retired to my apartment, having the peace of mind that the old man would do a far better job than me helping them.

He was the heart and soul of our guild.

The father of everyone.

"Maybe I should get some food before going home," I mused out loud.

Maybe a nice steak.

Or some sandwiches... maybe a sub?

That settles it, I'm going to get something to eat.

Smiling at the thought, I changed my path towards the open market to get something for dinner, however, once I did, something in the air changed, something cold, something dark... to the point I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease prickling at my skin.

This feeling of unease continued to grow until darkness around the streets of Magnolia seemed to swallow everything whole, creating an eerie atmosphere that made me want to quicken my pace.

I scanned the area, feeling nothing worthy of notice, the town looked normal, just as always at this time of night. The sun had set hours ago, leaving the city illuminated only by the dim glow of street lamps and the occasional window.

But... this feeling wasn't normal, was it?

As I turned the corner onto my street, I noticed a figure lurking in the shadows.

At first, I assumed it was just a passerby, but something about their posture sent chills down my spine. They seemed to be waiting for me, lurking in the shadows like a predator.

I considered turning back, something inside me wanted to avoid this feeling as much as possible, but I knew that if I turned back now, and something happened to those I loved, I would never forgive myself.

Pushing through without hesitation, I approached slowly, trying to make out who it was in the darkness. As I got closer, I could see the approaching glint of a knife making its way toward my face.

Calmly, I reached for my blade, which was concealed under my coat, before slicing through the attacker's arm in one smooth and precise movement.

The blade shone in the dim light of the night sky, cutting through their flesh, separating their wrist from their arm with one swift motion. The attacker let out a scream of pain and stumbled back, clutching their injured arm, as blood slowly dripped from the wound down their arm and onto the ground, creating a small pool of crimson at their feet.

"Who are you?" I asked, not really paying this unknown attacker much attention.

Whoever this unknown was, he wasn't the one behind this feeling of unease, not by a long shot. No one this weak should be able to make me feel this way.

"You will pay for this!" The attacker growled a soft animalistic hiss escaping his lips that echoed off the cold, damp walls of the alley we were in, however, before he could say anything else, something happened.

Suddenly a grimace contorted his hidden face as an indescribable pain gripped him, his body convulsing against the cobblestones beneath his worn-out shoes.

He screamed.

A soft, blue glow radiated from him, making the shadows of the alley dance erratically on the wet pavement. His silhouette began to distort, the boundaries of his physical form blurring and then fragmenting.

It was as if he was being pulled apart, each piece of him disintegrating into a fine cloud dust before my very eyes.

His arms, once poised to gesture, splintered into countless fragments, shimmering in the spectral light before evaporating into nothingness.

His legs followed suit, the solid mass of his body crumbling away in a cascade of glowing particles, each one dissipating into the night air like motes of dust caught in a beam of moonlight.

The man's torso collapsed inwards, the last remnants of his form surrendering to the inexplicable transformation. Yet his face remained intact, a fleeting expression of resignation and peace gracing his features before they too succumbed, fracturing into the same mysterious, luminescent dust.

With a final, silent gasp, the man's form was no more.

His essence had transformed, leaving nothing more than a fine, glistening cloud hovering above the dank cobblestones. Then, just as inexplicably as it began, the cloud solidified, coalescing into a tangible form that gently fell to the ground.

There, lying amidst the detritus of the alley, was a book. Bound in worn, dark leather, its edges gilded with a touch of gold.

A book?

...

A million possibilities rushed into my mind as I stared at the book, but only one came above the rest.

Zeref.

"I must apologize, it seems I have underestimated your skill, and sent an unqualified individual to test you."

I froze, a chill running through my body.

He was behind me.

Jumping to my feet, I turned around to face the man, to find that he had been standing a few feet away from me, his expression empty of emotion.

There was no doubt.

This... man was Zeref.

What was he doing here?!

Is still too early...

I...

I haven't prepared enough!

Trying to reign my emotions in, I stared into the eyes of the man standing in front of me.

His appearance was nothing short of kind looking, dressed in a fine set of robes, his black hair neatly combed. His hands, clad in perfectly clean gloves, were folded together in a peaceful manner.

Nothing about him, at least from a first glance, would make anyone think he was dangerous.

But his aura, his aura would.

His aura was the antithesis of his seemingly harmless appearance. It felt as though I was standing at the mouth of a cavernous abyss, chilling winds of an icy void wrapping around my soul, trying to draw me into its darkness.

It was a paradox, the stark contrast between his appearance and the wickedness that seeped from him.

The air around him seemed to ripple with a corrupted, unholy energy that felt like poison. A sinister darkness that I could feel pressing against my very being, filling me with a nameless feeling of absolute dread.

Without realizing it, my feet shuffled back a step, my eyes never leaving his as I reached for the hilt of my blade at my waist. But as my fingers brushed against the cold metal, I noticed a tremor in them.

I was afraid.

For the first time in years, fear gripped me tighter than I had ever known.

I gritted my teeth in a futile attempt to curb the terror that was gnawing at me.

Fear or not, I had to protect everyone.

I clasped the hilt of my blade, the familiar ridges pressing against my palm for a brief moment. Yet, trying to collect my bearings to the best of my ability, I could feel the hold on my blade was unsteady, my hand shaking visibly.

Pushing through, I unsheathed my blade and positioned myself, no matter what, I would protect them. But as much as I repeated this inside my head, my body refused to obey, my

knees buckling, my blade wavering in my trembling hand under the pressure of Zeref's aura.

I can't move.

I can't even breathe...

I...

I will die.

They will... die.

No!

Fuck that!

I refuse to accept that!

Biting the tip of my tongue off, I used the pain to move forward, quickly releasing my Shikai, before attacking Zeref with all I had, with every ounce of power I could muster, all in a single attack, bringing my blade down on him.

But as my sword came within inches of his body, he smiled, raising one finger, stopping my blade.

I had put more than enough power into that attack to destroy the Town several times over, but he had blocked the attack

with a single finger, while also managing to push me back with just enough power to cancel out whatever destruction my attack could've brought.

He didn't dispel my attack.

He simply nullified it with raw power.

A soft smile formed on Zeref's lips, a gentle yet eerie curve that made my blood run cold. His voice was a gentle murmur, the calm before the storm. "Your magic is... fascinating, I don't think I have ever seen something like that before, that being said you're still not ready to face me."

His words were not a mockery, but rather a statement of fact.

"I won't let you hurt anyone here," I replied, blood coming out of my mouth, finding some trouble speaking thanks to my self-inflicted injury.

"That's your goal? To avoid that I hurt anyone? Then allow me to give you some peace of mind, I don't intend to hurt anyone here," Zeref replied, his smile growing ever wider, his eyes twinkling with amusement and sadness. "I was merely testing you, and you passed. I am interested in you, your power, and your magic, so I will leave you to your own devices for now, but mark my words, young Fairy, I shall see you again."

Test... me?

He had come here... just for that?

To test me?

With another chilling smile, Zeref's form started to shimmer and shift. His body fragmented, breaking apart into a thousand shards of darkness like a painting being washed away by a torrent of black ink.

Each piece fluttered and swirled like loose feathers caught in a gust of wind, before starting to vanish, dissipating into the surrounding gloom, and before I knew it, he was gone.

No trace remained of his presence, not even the haunting chill that had lingered in the air moments before. The alleyway was left in an oppressive silence, the only sound of my own ragged breath echoing off the cold, unfeeling stone walls.

His haunting words echoed in my mind, a reminder, a promise that he would return someday and that when he did, I would need to be ready to face him.