

[Adam C. POV]

It had been a week and a half since my unexpected encounter with Zeref.

The air was stale in the confines of my room, the only light coming from the cold empty glow of the moon outside my window.

Without a word, without a sound, I stood there, fists clenched so tightly I could feel my nails digging into my palms, and something warm dripping into the wooden floor of my apartment.

My tongue still hurts, despite Porlyusica's treatments of the former.

That being said, the ache of my body paled in comparison to the throbbing pain in my chest. The memory of Zeref was fresh in my mind, its chilling presence still lingering like an unwanted echo.

I had been powerless.

Weak.

Nothing more than a defenseless child in the face of certain doom.

I was so weak, he had given me time, and even though I was grateful for that opportunity, it made me feel like I was some kind of insignificant bug not even worth squashing. That sting of insignificance, alongside the realization of my own impotence that I wouldn't have been able to save anyone, was a pain far worse than any physical wound.

My gaze fixated on the serene night sky, studded with stars, an ironic contrast to the turmoil within me.

Each star, each celestial body was a testament to how far I needed to go, of how weak I was in the face of the great, dark abyss that lay out there. And yet, they also held a promise, a distant glimmer of hope.

My family. My friends. My Guild. My world.

I had to be strong for them.

This went beyond me.

The thought of them, of those I held dear, steeled my resolve. The fear, the anger, and the disgust; being pushed aside by a burgeoning determination, a desperate need to grow stronger.

I had always known I had to get stronger. And how could I not? I knew more than anyone should know about this world, about the threats lurking in the shadows.

Since the moment I realized where I was, I knew I had to get stronger, no matter the cost.

But after this... encounter, things had become... far clearer.

I had gained a hard... but eye-opening perspective of things.

Taking a deep breath, I unclenched my fist, the pressure releasing with a soft throb. I could feel the residual spiritual energy coursing through my veins, the untapped power that lay dormant within me.

I had to take control of my power, every aspect of it.

I had to harness it, to master it.

But more than that, I needed to learn the ultimate expression of the power of my Zanpakuto, I needed to learn my Bankai.

The word echoed in my mind, reverberating with the weight of its meaning.

I knew that as I was now, I was far from ready to do everything I wanted to do.

It was a daunting task, a path fraught with uncertainty and danger. But I would walk it, I had to. For them. For myself. There was simply no other choice.

No more rest.

No more wasting time.

I had to focus every waking moment of my life to become someone strong enough to protect them, someone strong enough to fight back, someone strong enough to shed away their fear.

My hand reached out, pressing against the cool glass of the window, my reflection a ghostly figure in the moonlight.

"I will grow stronger," I muttered to the silent night, the words solidifying my resolve.

They didn't know what awaited us in the future.

I was the only one that knew, the only one that could actually prepare.

I would become their protector, their shield against these threats. I wouldn't let them threaten this world. Next time, I would face these threats, not as someone trembling in fear out of his own weakness, but as the one whose sword means their end.

Next time, I would thank Zeref for being kind enough to give me time to prepare, by slaying him, freeing him of his curse.

[In the morning.]

As soon as the sun came out, I made my way to the guild.

The clamorous sounds of the guild washed over me like a wave as I stepped inside. Drunken laughter, shouts, and the cacophony of a brawl in full swing filled the air.

But my mind was elsewhere, my thoughts shrouded by the oppressive weight of the responsibility in my shoulders.

One step at a time, I moved through the chaos that always took place in the guild, my senses alert despite my preoccupied mind. Chairs, tables, beer mugs, and other objects were flying across the room in a wild, uncontrolled fashion.

My body weaved, ducked, and sidestepped each item with ease, my body reacting without my input, it was simply an afterthought.

Finally, after a few moments, I reached Makarov's office, a small haven of peace in the middle of the pandemonium, as he liked to call it. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door, the hollow sound reverberating in the hallway.

A gruff voice called out, granting me entry. "Come in, brat!"

Closing my eyes for a brief moment, I pushed the door open, stepping into the quiet office.

"Good morning, old man," I smiled, waving at him.

Makarov was seated behind his desk, his diminutive form dwarfed by the large wooden structure. He looked up as I entered, his sharp gaze instantly softening with concern.

He could read me like an open book, always had been able to.

"Is everything okay, son?" Makarov asked, his voice carrying a note of worry.

I forced a smile, one that felt as hollow as the knock on the door moments before.

"Everything's fine, Master," I replied, the lie tasting sour on my tongue.

I wasn't sure if it was for his sake or mine that I tried to reassure him. I didn't want to burden him with my struggles, not when there was nothing he could do to help.

I could see him studying me, his eyes narrowing slightly.

But he didn't push further. Instead, he nodded, waiting for me to continue.

"I came to announce I will be... out for the foreseeable future," I said, my voice surprisingly steady despite everything. "I have some personal matters to take care of."

Makarov frowned at that, his bushy eyebrows knitting together. It was rare for anyone at the guild to say this, to request time away from the guild, from our family.

I knew he wanted to know what was pushing me to do this, I could see it in his eyes, but as much as he wanted that, he didn't question me, didn't ask me to explain.

He simply nodded, his gaze solemn.

Perhaps in a way, he understood this wasn't a decision I had taken lightly.

That this was a path I was taking because I felt there was no better way.

"Take all the time you need," Makarov said quietly. "We'll be here when you're ready to come back."

I nodded, grateful for his unspoken understanding. "Thank you, Master."

"Just remember son," Makarov said, his voice soft, but at the same time firm and serious. "We are here for you, no matter what."

"I know, old man, I know," I nodded, a faint smile gracing my face. "I have a request or rather an accommodation to ask before leaving if that's okay."

Makarov looked up, his eyes curious. "What is it?"

"I intend to buy a Lacrima Phone before leaving, to keep in touch with Cana, Erza, Laxus, Gildarts... and everybody else, and I would like to know if it would be possible to get missions while I'm away," I replied, letting out a sigh. "I understand if that's not possible, but I would like to keep helping the guild out, even if I'm far away."

Makarov considered my request for a moment before nodding. "I see no problem with that. You are the ONE and ONLY responsible child I have in this... circus I lovingly call a

family, so you are free to take on any job you wish, don't worry about that, I'll just send you requests via Lacrima."

I smiled. "Thanks."

"Now off with you, son," Makarov said, waving his hand in dismissal. "Take care of yourself, and remember, you're always welcome back here."

With a final glance at the old man who had been more of a father to me than anyone else, I turned and left the room, steeling myself for the journey ahead.

I had much to do, a power to master, techniques to perfect, and a family to protect. And this time, I wouldn't rest until I was ready.

But first, I had some goodbyes to give, at least for the time being. After all, I honestly had no idea how long this journey of mine would take, hopefully not too long, but that was just wishful thinking, so... Who knows?