

[Adam C. POV.]

The parched sand gritted beneath my boots, a subtle reminder of where we were, miles away from anything remotely resembling civilization. Heat waves danced on the desert horizon, distorting the world in a bizarre mirage that made the reality of the barren land all the more surreal.

I fucking hated sand.

I tightened my grip around the bottle of water in my hand, the cooling sensation providing a slight relief from the blazing sun overhead.

I glanced ahead at Juvia. Her silhouette was wrapped in a shawl of pure white, seemingly untouched by the dust and sand. She carried no water, no apparent form of sustenance, and yet, she seemed undeterred by the glaring heat and the demanding expanse.

It seemed like losing part of my powers had weakened my tolerance to this kind of situation.

I lived a year in the desert during my training, and now a few hours under the sun were weighing heavily on me. Perhaps I had become much too reliant on my powers to protect me from any inconvenience.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to break the oppressive silence. "How much further, Juvia?"

She paused and glanced back at me; her blue eyes gleaming with an unreadable expression. "Not far. The Guild is just beyond that dune."

I squinted ahead, tracing her pointed finger to the monstrous sand dune in the distance. I couldn't see anything beyond it - just more endless expanse of desolate nothingness.

I hate this place.

"We should be getting there in a few minutes," she added, resuming her unwavering pace.

I nodded, taking another sip of water before following her.

As we drew closer to the dune, I could see the slightest hint of movement. A figure, maybe two, shifting on the other side.

I couldn't feel any ill intent from them. But, considering I wasn't at my best, it was best not to trust my senses without more information.

Juvia must have noticed my unease because she placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. They're friends."

"You can recognize them from this far away?" I asked, impressed.

"You can't recognize your friends as easily?" she replied with a small smile. "We see the ones more easily."

We crested over the dune, and I saw them clearly. A group of people, lounging in the shade of a large tent, that was set outside the guild.

"Juvia!" a voice called out, one that I recognized without many problems. It was Mira. "Thank goodness you made it!"

It was here when Mira saw me, her eyes growing wide in shock and fear as she took a step back in complete terror. However, before she could do or say anything, Juvia interjected. "He's not that monster."

I can't wait to fight that guy.

Mira hesitated, eyeing me warily, but eventually nodded. "I suppose you being alive is proof of that."

Juvia snorted, walking towards the Guild. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, jackass."

The wooden doors of the guild creaked open, announcing our arrival. I stepped in, my boots thudding softly against the worn-out floorboards, getting fearful glances from everyone inside.

Despite how... unsettling it was in a... unique manner to be seen in such a form by the faces of those you considered your friends and family, I didn't pay much attention to their looks. My objective here was one, to regroup with my friends.

That being said, I didn't know whether or not I would find them here, but regardless of that, I had high hopes.

Thankfully, though, my hopes were not wasted. Because across the crowded room, I saw her. Erza, who as soon as

she spotted me, her eyes widened with a sudden spark in them, a bright light that wasn't there a moment ago.

Seeing me, I watched as she rose from her seat, her face etched with relief and joy.

And in an instant, she was on her feet, making her way towards me, weaving her way through the bustling crowd. Her face softened into a smile as she neared, her eyes twinkling with genuine affection.

"Adam!" She called out, her voice a familiar melody that I'd missed in my time away.

Before I could respond, she was already upon me, throwing her arms around my shoulders. The sudden warmth of her embrace enveloped me, washing away the lingering coldness of my journey.

I smiled. "Missed you too."

Erza chuckled as she squeezed me tightly. "Gajeel said you were out there, but that we had to wait. I was worried."

I pulled away to look at her, taking in the sight of her fiery red hair cascading down her back, her mesmerizing eyes, it was truly shocking how beautiful she was. "Well, Mystogan needed my help."

I frowned. Where did that come from?

Erza nodded, her fingers trailing down the tattered edges of my cloak. "You feel... weaker... what happened?"

I grimaced, knowing what she was referring to. "Yeah. Long story short, the trip here stole most of my power, sealing it away."

Erza furrowed her brows in concern, her fingers still caressing the fabric of my cloak. "Don't worry, I'll protect you."

I shook my head with a mild chuckle, "Thanks, but I don't think that's necessary. I can handle myself; I didn't lose all my strength."

Her smile faltered for a moment, but then she nodded, her eyes shining with determination. "Of course, I know you can. But still, it never hurts to have someone watching your back, right?"

I smiled. "No, it doesn't."

Erza's eyes locked with mine, and in that moment, I saw a flicker of something, something I hadn't seen in them ever, desire.

I blinked, taken aback by this. "Where's the rest?"

Before Erza could reply, our conversation was cut short as an alarming boom echoed from the distance making the entire guild drop into a deafening silence.

The booming explosion was followed by a tremor, the ground beneath our feet shuddering as if to emphasize the magnitude of the situation.

It seemed my time to fight my Edolas counterpart had come. "Evacuate the building, we might have some company soon, and it would be best to not have them around if that happens to be the case."