

[Adam C. POV.]

To think the bastard was handicapping himself, and he was still keeping up with me. Granted, I was weakened, but still, it was fucking impressive nonetheless.

"Don't underestimate me," I said, taking a step forward.

"I won't," Cromwell.

Having said what he wanted, my opponent took a single step forward, and in a blur of movement, resumed our fight, his claymore moving toward me faster than ever before.

Seeing this, and the fact his movements had increased in power and speed beyond my expectations so far, I found myself being forced to tap into my power to match him.

In a silent struggle, our swords clashed, each strike echoing in the deserted ruins with a delay of sound, each clash sending out a shockwave that expanded outwards through the desert like a tidal wave.

We continued clashing, our swords meeting, as each of us tried to get the upper hand over the other.

The more power I used, the more powerful he would become. Showing that he was testing me just as much as I was testing him.

Despite this development, or the fact I didn't know how strong he truly was, my smile never faltered. Instead, it grew into a wide grin. After all, the stronger Cromwell got, the better.

This was what I had been missing all along. This was what I had long forgotten in my quest to save everyone.

The thrill of a good fight, the rhythm of an uncertain battle, the possibility of defeat, this was it!

A combination of hunger, blood and death, one that I reveled in.

Smiling, Cromwell launched himself forward once more, his blade arching from below. This time, however, I met his attack head-on with my own blade. The resulting clash locking us in place, as our eyes met, a silent battle of wills as we strained against each other.

"I hadn't had this much fun in ages!" I grinned, breaking away, spinning out of the deadlock with a swift kick that sent Cromwell sprawling.

Twisting his body around, Cromwell landed on his feet, before moving forward, closing the distance between us in the blink of an eye. Unleashing a barrage of chaotic slashes and stabs, each one more lethal than the last.

With each parry and block, his attacks became harder and harder to read, and it wasn't before long that I found myself being pushed back, his blade finally drawing blood from me, delivering a thin cut in my right arm.

At this, Cromwell's grin widened, a feral light in his smile that matched mine, as he lunged towards me, his blade gleaming in the desert sun.

Grinning, I moved forward, vanishing out of sight, only to reappear behind him, leaving another gash on his other arm.

Cromwell staggered back, his grin only growing wider at the sight of his wound. "If I hadn't moved, that attack would've cut my head off."

I chuckled, "That's the fun of it, isn't it? The thrill of the fight, the uncertainty, the possibility of death... it's exhilarating."

Cromwell nodded. "I couldn't agree more, Adam. I can't remember the last time I had this much fun in a fight."

We were more alike than I would've thought, our desire for a good fight, our way of approaching things, it was like looking at a mirror in more ways than one.

Our existence might not have started the same way, but we shared a lot in common.

Which is exactly why I couldn't help but wonder, why was he obeying the King of Edolas?

It wasn't in my nature to obey others, that's why I enjoyed being a wizard, it gave me the liberties of a freelancer, it gave me the freedom to decide whether or not I wanted to do something.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said, my eyes on him. "Why do you follow Faust?"

Cromwell's expression darkened at the mention of the King. "I was wondering when you were going to ask that. Faust is nothing more than a means to an end."

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "And what is that end you seek?"

"War," Cromwell replied with a smile, his voice low and intense. "I seek the ultimate battle, one that will test my strength and push me to my limits. And following that old bastard promises to deliver that for me."

I see it now.

I finally found the difference between us, beyond the obvious.

He was the result of what could've happened to a normal person had they endured what I did without the support I had.

If our stories had started in a similar manner, then he must have suffered at the hands of this world's Zero.

But, unlike me, he had no one to rely on, no Zanpakuto to guide him, no past life to lean on.

"That's your end goal? War?" I sighed, tilting my head slightly to the side. "We both know that the ultimate battle it's not there; war is nothing but a waste of lives, where the weak fight for their lives."

"I know, but the only way to find the strong amongst the sea of weaklings is by eliminating everyone else," Cromwell replied, a chuckle escaping his lips. "Besides, the weak are destined to lie beneath the boots of the strong. If that angers them, they are free to overcome their deficits."

I frowned. "That sounds a lot like the thoughts of someone I knew and killed."

"Was his name Zero by any chance?" Cromwell asked, a mild tone of amusement lacing his words. "If you're talking about him, I killed him as well."

"Oh, good, I was starting to think, this world's version of me, and Zero were friends," I replied.

Cromwell hummed. "He... was my mentor for a while. Once he had nothing more to teach me, I killed him."

"I reckon that wasn't out of love, so why do you follow his teachings if you hated him?" I asked.

Cromwell chuckled. "Hated him? No, no, I never hated him."

I frowned.

He was being sincere.

"The law of the world is survival of the fittest. It's how the weak are weeded out. That's why I killed him, he was weak. After all, it's only natural for the weak to perish," Cromwell continued, a coldness to his tone that set the line for how different he was to me.

"Judge all things in this universe, Zanryuzuki," I said, unleashing my Shikai. It was time to bring this battle to the next level, one where one of us would not live to see another day.

Before this conversation, I wasn't sure if I wanted to kill him or not. But, it might be merciful to do so, considering how... deranged he was.