

# Client's Custom Christmas Story

Names Changed for Privacy

## Chapter One

*The feeble carrot stands no chance. Collin's Gyuto glides through it with ruthless precision, auditioning for a ballet of culinary violence. Each slice is immaculate, the shoots of orange curling slightly at the ends, an accidental flourish that could make any chef weep with envy. Collin marvels at the knife's performance. Sure, he's holding it, guiding its movements, but this isn't his doing. The Gyuto is alive, a masterpiece of carbon steel, honed by his hands and obsessive care. This knife is his child—his blade-baby—and tonight, it's on fire.*

*RAP RAP RAP.*

The knock at the door shatters his reverie. Collin freezes, knife poised mid-air, his mood plunging faster than a poorly prepped soufflé. Four hours past closing, and someone dares interrupt his sacred carrot-slaying ritual? Sighing, he wipes the blade clean with the reverence of a priest tending a relic, places it down, and prepares for battle—or, at the very least, for whatever poor soul stands on the other side of his door.

Swinging the door open, Collin's annoyance dissolves into confusion. Standing there is a woman he has never seen before. Stunning. Long, dark hair cascading over her shoulders, golden-brown skin glowing even in the dim porch light, and eyes so dark they seem to swallow the world whole. Her gaze cuts through him like a sujihiki through sashimi. Everything about her is unreadable—cool, composed, detached. Everything except her eyes, which radiate urgency.

"We need to talk, Collin." Her voice is smooth and commanding, leaving no room for debate. Before he can respond, she brushes past him, inviting herself inside.

Collin stares after her, part annoyed, part impressed. *Well, okay*, he thinks. *You're lucky you're cute.*

She settles at his dining table like she's been there a thousand times before. Collin follows, bewildered. Locals know better than to pull stunts like this—he's not exactly the welcoming committee. And he definitely would've remembered someone with eyes like

hers. She glances briefly at the julienned carrots on the counter before her gaze snaps back to him. She doesn't apologize for barging in—she doesn't even look like she plans to explain herself.

Instead, she delivers her opening line like a hand grenade.

“We don't have much time. He's going to get it.”

Silence. Collin blinks. For a moment, he wonders if she's... unwell. Maybe she's mistaken his house for someone else's?

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he says cautiously, his fingers hovering near the edge of the table. “And I don't know you. Why are you in my house?”

“You can kick me out if you want,” she replies, unflinching. “But you might want to hear me out first.”

Her confidence is unnerving. Collin crosses his arms. “Then get to the point.”

She does. For the next five uninterrupted minutes, she speaks. Her words pour out like an avalanche, unstoppable and laden with urgency. Collin listens, his skepticism melting away with each revelation. By the time she finishes, a knot has formed in his stomach, tightening with every passing second.

It dawns on him why she's come to him, of all people. He understands. He understands how dire this is, how catastrophic the consequences will be if they don't act. Now. Immediately.

Collin stands abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. “We don't have much time. We need to stop this.”

“We need a plan,” the woman agrees, her tone sharp and resolute.

Collin nods, his mind already racing. There's no way he can do this alone. Her presence gives him some confidence, but two won't be enough. Not for something this big. His thoughts flicker to a few friends he's visited recently. They can help. They will help.

“We'll need a team,” he mutters, already forming a roster in his mind.

The woman's lips curve into a faint, enigmatic smile. “Good. Then let's get to work.”

## Chapter Two

The next day, Collin and the woman are seated exactly where they had been the night before, except now, they aren't alone.

Collin realizes with a pang of guilt that he still hasn't asked for the woman's name. He's so suffocated by the weight of their task that he has shoved the thought aside, but it nags at him like a paper cut you can't stop licking. Referring to her as "hey, you" doesn't sit right, but she doesn't seem like the type to care.

Three new faces crowd the table: Carlo Fuentes, Peter Parkah, and Nick Reeves. Each of them brings skills and talents that fit neatly into Collin's hastily scrawled plan—an outline he'd agonized over all night. Thankfully, his loyal friends have answered his frantic pleas to meet immediately.

Carlo is the first to break the silence. "What's this all about?" he demands, his voice tinged with impatience. "You could've given us a heads-up, man. I thought it was life or death."

Peter smirks, leaning back in his chair. "Probably just wants to show off his new whetstone. Or his new girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," Collin snaps, more defensively than he intends. Out of the corner of his eye, he thinks he sees the woman's lips twitch upward in a fleeting smirk. His cheeks flush as his friends burst into laughter, their teasing cutting through the tension until she silences them with a single look.

"There isn't time for jokes. You won't be laughing once you hear this." She turns to Collin, her eyes sharp. "Go ahead. Tell them."

Collin takes a deep breath. "You know the story we grew up with? The one about the Infinity Knife? The knife made of antimatter? Supposedly only wieldable by someone of pure intentions? Yeah. It's real. It exists. And it's the source of the thrill."

Nick gasps. Peter's face hardens in disbelief, while Carlo's brows furrow. "That's bullshit," Peter mutters, though his face has gone pale.

The thrill—the inexplicable high chefs experience while wielding Noble Knives—has long been a mystery. If the Infinity Knife is real, it would explain everything.

“You know it’s not bullshit,” the woman says, her tone weary. “Anyone who’s felt the thrill knows it’s magic. And the Infinity Knife defines magic.”

“I’ve seen it,” Nick blurts, his voice trembling. All eyes turn to him, including the woman’s, now narrowed in suspicion.

“You?” she scoffs. “It must’ve been a dud. Everyone who’s seen the real knife is dead—except the man who has it.”

“Luke Klemens?” Nick stammers. “I know him. We grew up together. He stole the knife after the Chef Lord died. Now he controls the thrill. Worst of all, he uses the Infinity Knife to... to...”

“To what?” Collin presses.

“To peel apples,” Nick whispers.

The room erupts. Collin drops his head into his hands, trying to breathe. Carlo projectile-vomits across the table, and when it splashes onto the woman’s face, she joins in. Peter, ever composed, clenches his fists so tightly his knuckles turn white.

“What blasphemy,” Peter growls. “Who would defile the Infinity Knife this way?”

Nick raises his hands defensively. “Don’t blame me! I didn’t pick my friends in kindergarten! He wasn’t always like this. Something changed. He stopped feeling the thrill... Thrillrectile Dysfunction or whatever. Now he’s bitter. Greedy. He’s charging chefs a fortune to keep the thrill alive, but he’s losing interest. I don’t even want to know what he’ll do next.”

Carlo sobs, tears streaming down his face. “Without the thrill, what do we have? Peasant knives? Those dull, lifeless commoner alloys?”

“Stop,” Collin says firmly. “We’re going to stop him. That’s why we’re here.” He avoids looking at the woman, but he can feel her gaze on him, steady and unrelenting.

He stands, his voice calm but electric with resolve.

“Let’s cook.”

## **Chapter Three**

The team stands outside the Cline Dynasty’s palace walls, the very air heavy with the stench of excess. The estate practically screams “new money,” dripping with opulence so gaudy it could only be described as tasteless brilliance. Pristine opal walls

sparkle like some overambitious jeweler's fever dream, adorned with diamonds so blinding Collin would've preferred to stare into a pair of impossibly dark eyes instead.

Verenna Garden Vines wrap around the pillars, their lush green tendrils swaying in the breeze. Each vine's upkeep demands an obscene five million gallons of water a day, a number that makes Collin's blood boil. He hasn't even set foot inside, yet he already feels inferior, his anger threatening to bubble over. But there is no room for doubt. Not tonight. He is the leader. If he falters, so will they all.

"It's time," Collin whispers. The team huddles close, the weight of the moment pressing down on them as they review the plan's final details. Collin scans each face, searching for cracks in their resolve. He finds plenty.

Carlo looks as jittery as a sous chef awaiting Gordon Ramsay's verdict. Collin doubts he fully grasps his role—or perhaps he grasps it too well and is paralyzed by fear. Nick exudes an unsettling overconfidence, the kind that could easily spiral into recklessness. Peter... oh, Peter. Their acrobat, their wall-scaler, their trap-navigator, has stress-eaten his way to an additional fifty pounds in just two days. And then there's the woman—mysterious, calm, and infuriatingly unreadable. Her silence gnaws at Collin. Was she confident? Confused? Would it kill her to confirm she understood the plan?

The truth is, she scares him most of all. Collin can deal with problems as long as they are predictable. She is anything but.

The time has come. Suppressing the pit in his stomach, Collin gives the signal. The team scatters into the night, each member slipping into their designated position. All except the woman. She stays with Collin, as per his instructions. He needs to keep an eye on her. Or so he tells himself. The truth is, she is... *distracting*. The way her eyes gleam in the moonlight...

"Focus," Collin blurts, immediately regretting it. For the first time that night, the woman cracks a grin.

"You got it, boss," she teases, her voice light and mocking. Collin's frustration flares. How can she be so casual on the most critical night of their lives?

"You understand your role, right?" he asks, his voice low and urgent. "None of this starts without you. It might be the most important one of all."

Her smile fades. She turns to face him, her expression uncharacteristically serious. "I do. Don't worry. I need this as badly as you do."

Her words, and the desperation in her eyes, ease the knot in his stomach. For the first time tonight, Collin believes in her.

She turns and walks toward the front entrance. Collin ducks into the shadows, taking cover behind a bush to watch her in action, ready to move at a moment's notice. As he settles into his position, one stray thought wanders through his mind, unbidden and absurd.

*What's her favorite knife?*

## Chapter Four

The transformation is astonishing. The mysterious, sullen woman who had shown up at Collin's doorstep three nights ago is now a bubbly, swaying, giggling whirlwind of chaos. She stumbles her way to the guards at the palace entrance, singing some wildly off-key tune with all the gusto of a karaoke queen who'd had one too many Horchatas. Her voice is grating, obnoxious even, but there's something undeniably charming about her confidence. The guards certainly notice.

At first, they stiffen at the racket. Then, as they catch sight of her, they relax. Some laugh, some smile, and others... leer. Collin's fists clench at the sight of a group of guards to the left, licking their lips and hollering at her like wolves circling prey. A flood of hot anger surges through him, but he forces himself to breathe. It doesn't matter. As long as they are distracted, she can be as obnoxious as she wants.

Still, he can't shake the question: *Why does he care so much?*

The woman flirts with alarming ease. Her antics are absurdly fake, obvious even without the context of their plan, but the bored, lonely guards don't seem to notice. She giggles and coos at their crude jokes, herding them into a loose circle around her. Collin watches, his stomach tightening. He doesn't like how close they are to her. But then it hits him—this is his chance. The opening they'd needed.

With a quick, silent prayer to the Knife Gods, Collin darts from his hiding spot. He moves quickly, his footsteps muffled against the grass. Behind him, the guards' shouting escalates into chaos. Collin risks a glance over his shoulder and freezes. The

men aren't just shouting anymore—they are punching each other. Somehow, the woman has turned them against one another.

He doesn't have time to process how she'd managed it because suddenly, she is at his side, appearing out of nowhere like a ghost.

"You're not supposed to be here yet—" Collin hisses.

"Relax," she interrupts, her tone breezy. "They already hate each other. All I had to do was bruise a few egos and accuse a couple of them of being gay for not looking at me enough." She laughs softly. "Luke shouldn't have hired League of Legends players. Fragile egos, all of them."

Collin shudders at the mention of that cursed game. He considers it a cognitive poison, a blight on young minds that pulls them away from the noble pursuit of Knife Arts and Sciences. It also, evidently, makes you prone to violent outbursts.

"Let's hope that's not the only bad decision Luke's made," Collin mutters.

The brawl behind them intensifies, giving the two the cover they need. They dart through the trees, their figures cloaked in darkness. The air is thick with tension as they move silently toward the palace gates. When the clearing comes into view, Collin pauses for half a heartbeat, his heart hammering in his chest. Then, without another word, they sprint through the gates and into the inner courtyard.

## **Chapter Five**

Once inside the palace walls, Collin and the woman waste no time. Ducking behind a dense bush, they begin changing into their Royal Servant disguises. Without hesitation, the woman starts disrobing right in front of him. Collin's face turns crimson as he spins around.

"I don't care what you see," she says with a smirk. "We don't have time for modesty."

She isn't wrong, Collin knows, but her flippant tone makes his face burn even hotter. Reluctantly, he begins changing as well, fully aware of her gaze. It's like standing under a spotlight, her eyes taking in every inch of him. He tries to hurry, fumbling with

the unfamiliar outfit, and when he finally turns back, she is already fully dressed, watching him with an infuriatingly amused expression.

“You’re squeamish,” she teases, cracking another grin.

Collin ignores her. He can’t afford distractions, especially not now. His face is hot enough without rising to her bait.

Dressed and ready, they move to the next phase of the plan: creating an entrance for the rest of the team. Using a sturdy mid-tier knife known for its versatility, they widen a drain hole they discovered during their reconnaissance. The knife bites cleanly through the material, just enough to allow passage. If it weren’t for this drain, they might have needed the Infinity Knife itself to break through the palace’s opulent defenses.

Three minutes later, Carlo, Peter, and Nick crawl through the opening.

“Amazing,” Nick breathes, his eyes wide as he takes in the courtyard. Marble fountains gush water extravagantly, and a massive Waifu statue gleams in the moonlight, encrusted with gemstones so rare they look alien.

Peter, however, focuses on the jagged hole. “You could’ve cut it better,” he grumbles, rubbing a fresh scrape on his side. Collin winces at the sight, guilt flashing through him, but reminds himself that Peter’s bulk is... a factor. The guy can’t touch his head to the floor when he’s laying on his side, for Pete’s sake.

Carlo, meanwhile, stands frozen, his face pale as he absorbs the sheer wealth surrounding him. Collin snaps him back to reality. “Carlo, you’re up soon,” he says firmly. “After Peter climbs the palace walls and finds us an entry point, you have to work *quickly*. No hesitations.”

Carlo nods, shaking off his awe. “I’m ready.”

“Also, did you know I have a master’s degree?”

The woman works her magic again, drawing servants and royals away from their path with whispers Collin wishes he could hear. Peter scales the walls with an agility that belies his size, his powerful hands and feet finding purchase on the smooth surface. Collin feels a pang of guilt for doubting him. Once Peter reaches the top, he lowers a rope for the others.

They climb swiftly, slipping into the palace undetected. The woman joins last, laughing quietly. Collin glances out the window and sees why: the servants and royals

she lured away are now arguing loudly, their voices carrying even through the thick walls.

*How does she do that?* Collin wonders for the hundredth time. He itches to know what she'd said to ignite such chaos, but there's no time for answers.

The woman's laughter stops abruptly. Collin turns to find her face cold and unreadable. Following her gaze, his stomach sinks. They have entered the quarters of Luke Klemens himself. The man's back is to them, his attention consumed by the flashing screen of his computer. Shouts of rage confirm he is playing League of Legends.

"I'll *debone* you, you *KAPPA!*" Luke screams fervently.

"Let's go," Collin whispers, motioning for the others to follow. One by one, they slip toward the rear exit, each step careful and silent. Collin goes first, followed by the woman, then Peter. Nick is next, and finally Carlo—who knocks over a Waifu figurine. It crashes to the floor with a deafening clatter.

Luke freezes. Collin's heart races as he ushers Carlo out the door just in time. They can't afford to check whether they have been seen.

"Don't worry about it, Carlo," Collin says, trying to steady his friend. "Focus. You're the lock wizard. We need this next part to work."

Carlo nods, though his hands tremble. "I'll do better at entering *the* room than I did at... exiting *that* room."

As they navigate the labyrinthine hallways, Collin makes mental notes of their route. The woman leans toward Carlo and, in a voice only Collin can hear, mutters dryly, "It'd be hard for him to do any worse."

## Chapter Six

At last, the team stands before a door that Collin is certain must be the command center. Unlike the others they've encountered, this one is quadruple-locked—a sure sign of its importance. Carlo pulls out his lockpicking knife, its worn handle familiar in his hand, and crouches to work. The others fan out, keeping watch down the hallways.

The first three locks yield easily, each click as satisfying as a heartbeat. But the fourth is stubborn, resisting his every effort. Collin senses Carlo's focus sharpening as

frustration visibly mounts, his hands shaking as the minutes tick by. The faint scuffle of footsteps sends the crew ducking into shadows, their breaths held as servants or nobles pass by.

Most of Luke's connections are virtual—thankfully—but nobles still skitter through the estate like ants, and servants... Collin hates the thought of encountering them. Innocent people with no idea of the stakes. If one spots them and raises the alarm, their entire plan could collapse. A single loose tongue could doom them all unless they locked the witness away—temporarily, of course. But Collin doesn't want to think about that.

*Focus.* He forces his mind back to Carlo working at a snail's pace, and just as he's beginning to wonder whether he should attempt the task himself, the mechanism clicks. The sound of triumph. Collin exhales with relief as Carlo gently pushes the door open.

The sight inside is exactly what he'd hoped for: the command center. Screens blink with data, a sprawling console hums softly, and the room exudes control.

"This is it," Collin breathes, stepping aside to let the team flood in.

Everyone scatters, taking positions at various stations. Fingers fly across keyboards, alarms are disarmed, security doors are overridden, and all eyes are hunting for one thing: the location of the Infinity Knife. Collin throws himself into the task, though his attention keeps veering toward Carlo, who seems more entranced by the colorful lights on the screens than their mission.

"Carlo," Collin mutters, his voice low but firm. "*Focus.* We don't have time for this."

Meanwhile, the woman—silent and calculating as always—scours the system with precision. Yet, it's Nick who spots it first. Or rather, feels it.

"Uh... fuck," Nick mutters, his eyes glued to a flickering display.

Collin glances over. "What?"

Nick hesitates, then points at the screen. "It's in Luke's room."

Collin's stomach drops.

"We have to go back," Nick says, his voice grim.

The team exchanges glances, a silent understanding passing between them. The command center was supposed to be their key to avoiding this exact scenario. And yet, their target lies deep within the lion's den.

Collin straightens, his jaw tightening. “Then we go back,” he says, his voice resolute. “And we make it quick.”

## Chapter Sevel

The plan has unraveled, leaving Collin to wrestle with the familiar specter of chaos creeping into the team. This time, though, it’s the woman who steps in to steady the ship.

“What’s the issue? We go into his room, knock him out, take the knife, and leave. Five versus one. It’s simple.”

The team nods, visibly rallying around her clarity. Collin, however, feels a pang of doubt gnawing at him. Would Luke have ignored the clatter of the fallen Waifu figurine? Surely, the noise would’ve alerted him to an intruder’s presence. But no—if Luke knew, the palace would already be swarming with guards. They would have been caught. Collin exhales slowly, convincing himself the woman must be right. He nods in her direction, his face warming when she graces him with one of her maddeningly well-timed smiles.

*Why does she smile so much at the most inappropriate moments?*

*And why, he wonders with a flicker of frustration, is it so damn beautiful?*

Pushing the thought aside, Collin takes the lead, retracing their path to Luke’s room from memory. He’s focused—until Nick steps in front of him abruptly, blocking his way.

“It’s this way, actually,” Nick says, pointing to a corridor veering left. His tone is heavy with barely concealed smugness.

Collin stops short, blinking at him. “No, Nick, it’s not. I’ve been charting the course—we need to go right.”

“Well, *I’ve* been charting it too,” Nick snaps. “As insurance. In case you forgot.”

“Why would I forget?” Collin counters, his voice sharp. “I’ve been—”

“Been what? Huh, Collin? Been *what*?” Nick cuts him off, stepping closer. “Let me remind you, since you clearly forgot to assign me a role in all this. The woman’s the distraction, Carlo’s the tech guy, Peter’s the acrobat—so tell me, Collin. What the hell am I? Why am I even here?”

The accusation lands harder than Collin expects. For a moment, he flounders. Nick's right—he doesn't have a role. Amidst the anxiety of planning and the high stakes of securing the Infinity Knife, Collin had neglected to integrate Nick into the plan meaningfully. He realizes now Nick has been reduced to little more than a spare part, a contingency. Of course Nick would cling to something tangible, like memorizing the path.

Collin swallows his defensiveness, taking a step back. "Nick, you're right. I messed up, and I'm sorry. But we don't have time for this. I'll make it up to you—just not right now. Right now, we need to go right."

To his surprise, the woman steps in, tilting the fragile balance further out of his favor. "I've been keeping track too," she says calmly. "And I think Nick's right. Collin, a good leader admits when they're wrong. It's okay to be wrong."

Collin feels the shift immediately. Nick's face lights up in triumphant vindication. The rest of the team—Carlo and Peter—are already leaning toward Nick's side, their feet angling left, as if drawn by gravity. Collin's confidence wavers. Could he have gotten it wrong? Two people are contradicting him now, and the weight of their certainty feels suffocating. Maybe he'd been distracted along the way, too preoccupied with...

The woman. Her random comments, her infuriatingly perfect smirks.

Collin exhales in resignation, nodding. "Fine. Left it is."

The team pivots, following Nick's lead down the left-hand corridor. They move quickly and quietly, confident they're nearing Luke's room.

Which sits squarely to their right.

## Chapter Eight

The team reaches a dead-end. The corridor narrows into oppressive silence, and all eyes land on Nick, who immediately starts to stammer. "I—I thought this was the right way. She thought so too! It's not my fault."

Peter cuts him off with a sharp, sudden shout. "It's not about *fault*, Nick! Who cares whose fault it is?" His voice lowers, dangerously measured now. "Just lead us back. We had to go right. Collin was right."

“Collin’s always right,” Carlo mutters, gloom dripping from every word. “We should’ve listened to him. I should’ve said something.”

“Fuck should’ve, could’ve, would’ve,” Peter snaps. “We need to get to Luke’s room. Now.”

Nick hesitates, eyes darting around the walls, shoulders sagging under the weight of their collective glare. His voice drops to a whisper. “I... I wasn’t keeping track of the way back there. I didn’t think we’d need to go back.”

Collin’s stomach knots as realization sinks in. They’re fucked.

*The woman thinks to herself, I have zero sense of direction. He was just so confident. But I’m not saying anything.*

“We’re fucked,” the woman mutters, as if pulling the words straight from his mind. There’s no humor in her voice now.

And then, from somewhere behind them, a laugh rises—sharp, hollow, and *wrong*. It doesn’t belong to any of them, yet it worms into their ears, making one of them flinch in startled recognition.

“Well, suck on my middle toe. I have *company*!” The voice booms, laced with theatrical mockery.

Collin turns slowly, dread pooling in his gut. The sight awaiting him confirms his worst fear.

Luke Klemens stands there, a shadowy silhouette made worse by the gleaming blade in his hand. *The Infinity Knife*.

The laughter dies, but the menace in his grin lingers.

## Chapter Nine

“Well, well, well, my Kappachinos,” Luke boasts. “You were too busy squabbling to notice that I’ve been on your heels this entire time. What a *dream team*.”

The team freezes, their arguments dying in their throats. Collin’s heart pounds as he turns to face Luke, who stands at the far end of the corridor, the Infinity Knife glinting ominously in his hand. He looks absurdly smug, like a cat that’s just devoured a whole flock of canaries.

“Kappachinos?” Peter mutters. “What does that even mean?”

Luke grins, spreading his arms wide. “It means you’re all second-rate amateurs, and I’ve already won. But I do appreciate the effort. Very entertaining.”

“You’re delusional,” the woman snaps, stepping forward. Her tone is sharp, her dark eyes blazing. “This isn’t over.”

Luke’s smile doesn’t falter. “Oh, it’s over. You just don’t know it yet.” He twirls the knife in his hand, the motion casual yet menacing. “But I’m feeling generous tonight. How about I show you what real power looks like?”

Without warning, he lunges.

Chaos erupts. The team scatters, diving for cover as Luke’s blade slices through the air with unnatural precision. Collin’s instincts kick in, and he grabs the woman, pulling her out of harm’s way as the knife slashes dangerously close to where she had been standing.

“We need a plan,” Collin hisses, his mind racing.

“Working on it,” she replies, her tone tight. She’s already scanning the corridor, her sharp gaze flicking between Luke and their surroundings.

Peter and Carlo attempt a flanking maneuver, but Luke’s movements are impossibly fast. He dodges their attacks with ease, his laughter ringing through the corridor like a taunt. Nick, for his part, is cowering behind a pillar, muttering something about never signing up for this level of insanity.

Collin glances at the woman. “The knife—we need to get it away from him.”

She nods, her expression grim. “Leave it to me.”

## **Chapter Ten**

The woman steps forward, her movements calculated. “Luke,” she calls, her voice steady despite the tension crackling in the air. “Is this really how you want to end it? A petty fight in a corridor?”

Luke’s grin falters, and he pauses, tilting his head. “You think you can talk me out of this?”

“No,” she replies, her tone sharp. “But maybe Nick can.”

Luke's eyes dart to Nick, who's still cowering behind a pillar. Collin watches as a flicker of recognition crosses Luke's face—not the smug superiority of moments before, but something deeper. *Familiar*.

"Nick," Luke says slowly, his voice softening. "I didn't think you'd... be here."

Nick steps out cautiously, his face pale but determined. "Luke, stop this. You don't have to do this. We can... we can figure it out, like we used to."

"Used to?" Luke's laugh is bitter. "You mean back when I was nothing? When I was just your sidekick? You always had the spotlight, Nick. Always."

Nick swallows hard. "You're wrong. You're the one who shined. I... I just got scared, okay? When you started talking about the knife, about power, I didn't know how to help. So I ran. And I'm sorry."

For a moment, the air is heavy with silence. Luke's grip on the knife falters. The woman edges closer, her movements slow and deliberate.

"It's not too late," Nick says, his voice cracking. "You can stop this. We can fix it. Together."

Luke's expression wavers. His eyes dart between Nick, the knife, and the woman, who's now within striking distance. But before anyone can act, Collin steps forward, holding up his hands.

"Luke," he says calmly. "Let me show you what this knife is really for."

## Chapter Eleven

The team watches in stunned silence as Collin leads Luke to the palace kitchen. The Infinity Knife hums in his hand, its energy crackling faintly, as if anticipating what's to come. Collin gestures for the others to follow, and despite their confusion, they obey.

"Cooking?" Peter mutters. "We're *cooking* now?"

"Just trust me," Collin replies, his tone resolute.

In the kitchen, Collin sets the knife down with reverence. He begins gathering ingredients, his movements calm and precise. "Luke," he says without looking up, "join me."

Luke hesitates. For the first time, he looks unsure, almost vulnerable. But then he steps forward, taking his place beside Collin. The two work in silence at first, the tension in the room palpable. But as the smells of frying potatoes, rich gravy, and bubbling cheese curds fill the air, something shifts.

The others join in, their initial reluctance giving way to camaraderie. Carlo prepares toppings with surprising flair, Peter assembles garnishes, and Nick slices more potatoes with determination. The woman stays by Collin's side, her presence steady and reassuring.

"What are we making?" Luke asks finally, his voice quieter than before.

Collin smiles faintly. "Poutine. But not just any poutine. This is *my* poutine."

He drizzles a luxurious truffle gravy over the golden fries, adds aged cheddar curds, and finishes with a seared duck and a sprinkle of fresh herbs. The Infinity Knife hums faintly as Collin slices the duck, each motion precise and deliberate. The blade glows one last time before going still.

When the meal is served, the team gathers around the table. The poutine is a masterpiece, each bite a harmony of flavors that celebrates their journey. Luke stares at his plate for a long moment before taking a bite. His expression softens, and for the first time, he looks at peace.

"This..." Luke begins, his voice trembling. "*This* is the thrill. *This* is what it's supposed to be."

The woman leans forward. "You were never meant to *control* it, Luke. It's not about ownership. It's about sharing. Creating. That's why the thrill exists."

Collin nods, his gaze steady. "The knife amplifies the thrill, yes, but it's not the source. It's *in us*. In what we create together."

Luke's hand trembles as he sets down his fork, tears streaming down his face. "I... I thought I needed it. I thought I had to own it to matter."

"You matter," Nick says softly. "You always did. You just forgot."

## Chapter Twelve

As the sun rises, the team sits together in the courtyard, the remains of their meal scattered around them. The Infinity Knife lies on the table, its glow gone. Collin picks it up and looks at the woman.

“What do we do with it now?” he asks.

The woman smiles. “We share it. Not the knife, but what it taught us.”

Collin pauses. “I didn’t ask your name before all of this, did I?”

She laughs softly. “And I didn’t tell you, did I? It’s... Sarah.”

Collin grins, shaking his head. “Sarah,” he breathes, relishing the way it rolls off his tongue. “Damn. Mysterious entrances, endless smirks, no name—you’ve really been committing to this whole enigmatic stranger bit, huh?”

“Someone had to keep you on your toes,” Sarah teases.

Together, they walk to a foundation, a culinary academy they’ll dedicate to teaching the art of the thrill without dependence on the knife. The Infinity Knife will remain there as a reminder of what happens when creativity turns to greed.

Later, as they stand in the courtyard, Collin turns to Sarah. “So. What’s your favorite knife?”

She raises an eyebrow, smirking. “That’s your line?”

“Hey, you’ve had me wondering since the beginning. It’s important.”

Sarah rolls her eyes but steps closer. “Yanagiba. But only if it’s sharp enough to keep up with me.”

Collin laughs. “Figures. You’re impossible.”

“And yet you’re still here,” she quips.

Before he can think, Collin leans in, and Sarah meets him halfway. The kiss is warm, lingering, and filled with unspoken promises. When they pull apart, Collin laughs softly.

“So, what’s next?” he asks.

Sarah grins. “Whatever we want.”

Behind them, the rest of the team cheers, their laughter filling the courtyard. For the first time, they feel like a family. And as the first light of dawn washes over them, they know their journey is just beginning.