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III AJ TUK The Last Glance Martin Lastovka

Cain had always poured his soul onto his canvases. Every brushstroke carried a piece of his joy, his sorrow, his passion and most of all, his love for Mira. She was his muse, his sun in the darkness, and the inspiration of every painting he had ever dreamed of. But a cruel accident stole her from him, leaving him with a void that neither art nor time could fill. Night after night, he had hoped to find a way to forget in all these bottles and pills, hoping to numb the ache, pain, wound inside of him.

One evening, after an especially harrowing and dark spiral, he stumbled into his studio, where her unfinished portrait stood. His vision blurred, the colors on his painting swirled and suddenly the world shifted and broke around him. His room fell apart, replaced by a place that shadows called home, where faint cries echoed through the endless halls, and rivers that flowed alongside him were black. Shadows shifted, and before him stood a figure, clutching onto a black book, and what resembled a staff. Cloaked in darkness, eyes gleaming like two moons, the God of Death.

"Cain," the god's voice was a cold whisper that cut through Cain's disbelief. "I made a mistake. She was not meant to die."

Cain's heart begged. "Bring her back," he pleaded, desperation decorating his voice. "I'll do anything."

Death tilted his head, his gaze sharp and cruel. "Your love... it reaches beyond life itself," he said, before raising his black, charred hand in a slow motion. Shadows parted, and the book's pages fluttered and there stood Mira, her gaze soft but sorrowful. She looked as if she'd just awoken from a dream, her expression both familiar and distant.

"Take her," Death commanded, a warning painted his words. "But mind my words...do not look back as you leave this place. If you do, she will be lost forever."

Without listening to another word, Cain took Mira's hand, guiding her through the twisting paths, alleyways and halls that seemed to stretch infinitely. His heart thundered with each step.

Yet a soft light appeared ahead, a beacon of hope and life in the endless dark and decay. The sight of it filled him with a joy he hadn't felt since she died. Mira would be his again. They would escape this place. They would be together again.

But then, the unbearable need to see her face one more time overwhelmed him, he could no longer contain himself. He turned, needing to see her face one last time just before reaching the light, leaving this forsaken place. For a brief, beautiful moment, Mira smiled at him with a smile full of love and excitement, right before her expression changing into one of regret, and farewell. Then, she vanished. Her form dissolved like smoke, leaving only emptiness behind. Cain's scream shattered the silence, raw and ragged. She was gone again, taken by his own hand and foolishness, by the cruelty of consequence. Despair crushed him, an agony too great to bear. He stumbled forward, reaching the light, but he was alone. Feeling the world empty and barren.

Weeks passed, each one heavier than the last. Consumed by grief and regret, Cain made a final, desperate choice. He ended his life, hoping that in death, he might find her again. But when he opened his eyes, he was standing again in the underworld. The God of Death was waiting, an eerie stillness about him.

"Foolish," Death spoke out, his voice almost pitying. "You were the one meant to die that night. She took your place."

Cain sank to his knees, understanding too late. His fate had been traded for hers. Every moment of his despair, every ounce of suffering had been meant for him alone. And now, even in death, she was beyond his reach. For all eternity, Cain would wander the shadows of the underworld, haunted by the memory of Mira's face, lost in the darkness. Replaying the tragic moment each time his eyes shut, not being able to escape it.