The Last Step

#Chapter 31: The Nightmare - Read The Last Step Chapter 31: The Nightmare

Chapter 31 - The Nightmare

Kaiser's Perspective:

Oh... so I died again? That's a sad thing to know.

I stared into the darkness above me, lying there with my arms stretched out. The silence was unsettling—too perfect, too absolute. It wasn't the kind of quiet you find in the middle of the night, nor the kind that comes with solitude. No, this was the kind of silence that felt unnatural, as if even sound itself had been swallowed whole. No echoes, no breathing, no heartbeat—just nothing.

A dark room. No walls. No ceiling. No floor. Just me, floating in this abyss like a corpse in an endless sea. Except I wasn't floating. I was... here. Existing.

I had seen weird dreams before, some stranger than others, but this? This was new. Different. It felt too real to be a dream. Too unnatural to be death.

Then, out of nowhere, a pink light flickered. It wasn't bright, but it cut through the darkness like a knife. I turned my head and saw it—

A chair.

A simple wooden chair, placed directly behind me.

Alright, that's new. Even in the weirdest of dreams, furniture had never just appeared out of thin air.

I pushed myself up, my footsteps making no sound as I walked toward it. As I moved, the pink light shifted—softly at first, then gradually, turning into a deep purple, then slowly bleeding into blue. I stopped in front of the chair, hesitating for a moment before sitting down.

The wood was cold against my skin. My body sank into it as if it had been waiting for me all along.

I exhaled, staring into the endless void ahead.

The last thing I remembered was holding Celia in my arms, bringing her back. I knew I was going to die. My body had been torn apart, my strength spent. I had already accepted it. There was no way I should be here right now.

Yet, I was.

Trapped in this room.

Was this the void again?

A sudden glow pulled me from my thoughts. A path of light had appeared before me, stretching into the distance like a guiding thread.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to make sense of it. Was this some sort of message? A test? Or was I just imagining meaning where there was none?

I sighed and stood up. Whatever this was, sitting around wasn't going to get me answers.

As I moved forward, I noticed something strange—the blue light beneath my chair darkened, shifting into red. And with each step I took toward the glowing path, the light ahead dimmed, changing from white to crimson. The moment I turned back, the chair was gone, replaced by a solid wall. Just a single blink, and it had vanished.

Alright. That's not concerning at all.

I turned forward again. This time, a door stood in the distance. A massive, ancient thing, adorned with a demonic symbol that pulsed faintly in the red glow.

The hallway leading to it... was drenched in blood.

The floor, the walls, even the ceiling—it all looked like something had been painted over with thick, fresh crimson. The door handle was the worst part. From this distance, I could see the glistening wetness of it, as if it had just been bathed in blood moments ago.

My heartbeat was increasing each step.

I wasn't scared, not exactly, but my body knew something was wrong. It was warning me. Screaming at me to stop.

I clenched my jaw.

This was the void trying to stop me.

But why?

Step by step, I pushed forward, my pulse hammering against my ribs. The closer I got, the heavier the air became. It pressed against my lungs, suffocating, unbearable. My heart pounded harder, each beat slamming against my chest with enough force to hurt. A sickening pressure grew inside me, coiling tighter and tighter like an unseen force trying to rip me apart.

For some unknown reason, the closer I got the more my heart-rate increased. It got so worse that it was starting cause pain in my chest.

By the time I reached the door, my vision blurred. My knees buckled. The pain in my chest was unbearable, like my heart was being crushed under an unseen weight.

I grasped the bloody handle, my fingers trembling. I twisted it open, every movement slow, agonizing.

The moment the door creaked open, I saw it.

A room bathed in red.

Unlike the empty abyss I had woken up in, this place had walls, a floor, a ceiling. The glow here was heavier, almost suffocating, as if the very air was soaked in crimson. And in the center of the room, sitting on a black chair, was—

A woman.

She wore a long black dress, elegant yet eerily unnatural. Her face was veiled, obscured behind a thin fabric that only hinted at the features beneath.

I stared at her, mind racing. Who was she? Why was she here?

Before I could move, she stood up.

A single step forward.

My chest pained. My heart, already struggling, finally gave out.

I collapsed to the floor, consciousness slipping away in an instant.

And just before everything went dark—

I heard her voice.

Soft. Gentle. Unnervingly familiar.

"I love you."

I opened my eyes to a plain ceiling above me this time. My heart was still hammering in my chest, the lingering weight of that dream—no, nightmare—clawing at my thoughts. I exhaled slowly, steadying my breath as I shifted my gaze around the unfamiliar room.

Soft light filtered through a window, casting long shadows across the walls. A cool breeze made the curtains sway, carrying with it the scent of fresh air. My body, however, was far from fresh. Wrapped in bandages from head to toe, I felt like a poorly patched-up doll. The bandages on my arms looked new—recent, maybe an hour old at most.

To my right, a small wooden drawer shelf stood next to the bed. A glass vase sat on top, with a single red flower inside it. Someone had placed it there—thoughtfully, carefully.

I wasn't alone.

As I looked down, my eyes landed on a small figure resting their head by my bedside. Her head lay against the mattress, rising and falling with her steady breathing. White hair cascaded over her shoulders, strands catching the soft light. Even in sleep, her presence was unmistakable.

Celia.

A small, almost amused smile tugged at my lips. So, she was the one who brought me here... who patched me up, stayed beside me. It was oddly comforting, knowing she was here. Peaceful.

Her face was relaxed, her breathing soft. The gentle rhythm of her chest rising and falling had an oddly soothing effect on me. She looked... cute. Innocent, even. I rarely used words like that, but there was no denying it. The way her lashes rested against her cheeks, the way her hands loosely held onto the sheets—it was hard to ignore.

Then she muttered something in her sleep.

"Mine... all mine."

I blinked.

...Huh?

A quiet chuckle left me as I watched her faint smile deepen. Whatever dream she was having, it must have been a good one. Probably about food... or something far more ridiculous. I shook my head slightly, amused.

As I glanced around the room once more, I shifted to sit up, careful not to aggravate my wounds. The movement pulled slightly against my bandages, reminding me just how torn up I was. Still, I needed to assess the damage.

Before I could get too far, I noticed Celia stirring. Her lashes fluttered, and she let out a soft breath before her sleepy eyes slowly opened. For a second, she simply stared at me, her drowsy mind likely still catching up.

Then, in an instant, her expression changed. Surprise. Relief. Something deeper I couldn't quite place. She straightened up, rubbing at her eyes as if making sure she wasn't imagining me.

I couldn't help but admire how pretty she looked in that moment. Sleepy eyes, windswept hair, the gentle warmth of the morning light making her silver strands glow softly. Even without trying, she had a certain charm that was hard to ignore.

She blinked again, her lips parting as if searching for words. But instead of speaking, her smile just kept growing—wider, brighter—until she couldn't contain it anymore.

"Good morning, Celia," I finally said, my voice slightly rough from sleep.

That was all it took.

She practically lunged at me, wrapping her arms around my torso in a tight embrace. The force made me wince slightly, but I found myself chuckling anyway.

"Kaiser! You're back!" she cried, squeezing me even tighter. "I thought— I was so scared— I thought I lost you!"

I felt her trembling slightly, her hands clutching at my back. There was no hesitation, no restraint in her embrace.

"I-I don't care if you're hurt, I'm never letting go!" she declared, voice muffled against my chest.

I sighed lightly but smiled nonetheless. "I think you just did more damage than the enemy did."

She pulled back slightly, pouting up at me with teary eyes. "You're not allowed to joke right now."

I reached up, gently resting a hand on her head. "Sorry. Didn't mean to make you worry."

Her lips quivered before she buried her face into me again. "Idiot... Don't do that again."

I didn't argue. I just let her stay like that, feeling the warmth of her presence, the reality of being here—alive.

For now, that was enough.

My body still ached, but at least I wasn't dead. That was something. Wrapped in bandages like some half-mummified warrior, I let out a breath and glanced at Celia, still hugging me tightly. A small chuckle slipped out as I realized she hadn't even noticed what she was doing yet.

And then she did.

Her body stiffened, and in an instant, she sprang back, her face burning red. "I-I wasn't hugging you that long! I-I was just—just checking if you were still breathing!" she stammered, looking anywhere but at me.

I raised an eyebrow, amused. "Oh? So you regularly cling to unconscious people to check their breathing? Interesting method."

"Shut up!" she pouted, flustered, her hands covering her face. Her embarrassment was honestly adorable.

I smiled, shaking my head before my expression softened. "So... how'd I end up here?"

Celia's fingers curled into the fabric of my blanket, her voice soft. "You collapsed right after hugging me... after bringing me back from that darkness. I didn't even realize at first. You were still holding me so tightly, and I—I thought you were just... staying like that."

Her shoulders trembled slightly. "But then... you wouldn't respond. No matter how much I called your name. And when I saw the blood—"

She stopped, biting her lip. Her hands clenched tighter. "It was because of me... wasn't it?"

I sighed, shaking my head. "Celia, it wasn't your fault. Your power just outleaped and took over. You were unconscious—how could you control it?"

"But still..." She looked down. "I hurt you. And I couldn't even heal you."

A faint smile tugged at my lips. "Well, I'm not dead, so you must've done something right."

Celia pouted, clearly not amused. "That's not funny."

I chuckled. "Alright, alright. But really, it wasn't you. If anyone's to blame, it's me for not dodging properly."

She lifted her head, looking at me with a frown. "You didn't even try to dodge, did you?"

I smirked. "Caught me."

Celia huffed, crossing her arms. "Of course, you just had to risk your life to bring me back instead of avoiding it."

"Someone had to," I teased.

She puffed up her cheeks but then let out a breath, her lips forming a small, defeated smile. "You really are impossible, Kaiser."

"I try."

Her expression softened, and she spoke more quietly. "But... in that moment, when healing magic didn't work... I felt my world fall apart." She swallowed hard. "You were lying there, covered in blood, and I couldn't do anything. I thought I was going to lose you."

Something tightened in my chest. I had seen Celia worried before, but this... This was something else.

I reached out, gently flicking her forehead. "And yet, here I am. Sitting. Talking. Alive. Guess you didn't lose me after all."

She blinked, touching her forehead where I flicked her. Then, slowly, a real smile appeared. "Yeah... I guess not."

Her relief was visible in her eyes, and for once, she let go of that lingering guilt. I was about to say something else when she suddenly perked up.

"Oh! But... you weren't merely saved because of me," she admitted, tilting her head slightly. "Someone carried you here after you collapsed."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

She hesitated, then spoke. "Levi."

...

I stared at her.

"Levi?"

She nodded.

"Levi Ashton?"

Another nod.

Levi, the self-proclaimed strongest Sword Saint? The walking ego with a blade? The guy who thinks he's some legendary hero straight out of a myth?

I groaned internally. I owed that guy a favor now. Just great.

As if summoned by my suffering, a loud knock came from the door, followed by the unmistakable voice of my new worst debt collector.

"Oiiiii, Kaiseeeer! The strongest Sword Saint graces you with his presence! Mind if I come in, or are you too weak to handle my overwhelming energy?"

Oh, for the love of—

Celia giggled, clearly used to his antics. "Come in, Levi."

I rubbed my temples, already feeling a headache coming.

What did I ever do to deserve this? First, I get nearly killed, then I get saved by the most egotistical guy in existence? Life really had a twisted sense of humor.

The door swung open, and there he was—Levi. Arms crossed, smirk plastered across his face, radiating confidence like he owned the room. His sharp eyes scanned me, and his grin widened.

"Oh ho? Look who's finally awake! Man, you had me worried there. If you had died, who else would I have to show off to?"

I sighed. "Levi."

"Kaiser."

"...Get out."

Levi gasped dramatically, clutching his chest. "Such cold words! And here I thought we bonded over me saving your life! Where's my heartfelt gratitude? My emotional speech? The tears? The overwhelming appreciation for the 'Great Levi'?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I take it back. I wish you hadn't saved me."

"Too bad!" He beamed. "Now, let's talk about how you're going to repay me!"

Celia giggled again, and I just knew this was going to be a long day.

I exhaled, shaking my head slightly. "So... what do I owe you?"

Levi leaned against the wall, grinning like he just won the lottery. "Ah, Kaiseeer, my poor wounded friend, recovering from a tragic, near-death experience... Don't worry about it! I, the strongest, most generous, and ridiculously handsome Sword Saint, don't ask for much in return."

I squinted at him. "Yeah? What's the catch?"

Levi smirked. "Oh, you know, nothing crazy. Maybe a favor or two down the line. Or, better yet, you can publicly declare that I'm stronger than you. Just a little—tiny— acknowledgment of my overwhelming greatness."

I scoffed. "Yeah, sure. Right after I grow wings and learn to fly."

Celia, sitting nearby, giggled, trying to cover her mouth but failing miserably.

Levi grinned wider. "See? Even Celia agrees. She knows true strength when she sees it."

Celia shook her head. "I never said that!"

I sighed. "I'll figure out how to pay you back later. But you should know, if you start keeping tabs on me, I'll start keeping tabs on you."

Levi laughed. "Oh, scary! The cold and ruthless Kaiser is gonna track my every move. Should I start sleeping with one eye open?"

I rolled my eyes. "You should've been doing that already."

Celia kept giggling at our exchange, her laughter brightening the room.

Then Levi's tone shifted—still casual, but more genuine. "Jokes aside, you know who actually deserves your thanks?" He pointed toward Celia. "I just slapped some bandages on you and made sure you didn't drop dead on the way here. But this girl? She's the one who took care of you the whole time."

I turned my gaze back to Celia.

"Celia..." I said softly. "What did you do?"

She quickly waved her hands, flustered. "Oh, it's nothing, really! I just—"

Levi cut in, clicking his tongue. "Ah-ah! No downplaying. Tell him what you actually did."

She hesitated, then lowered her hands. Her voice grew quieter. "After Levi got you bandages... your wounds wouldn't stop bleeding. No matter how many times I tried to treat them, they kept opening up. Magic wouldn't work, and the stitches came undone constantly."

My fingers tightened slightly. Of course. Those cuts weren't normal.

Cursed chains, mixed with wind magic... The combination alone was enough to tear flesh apart on a deeper level. If the wounds couldn't fully close, then that meant—

I looked back at Celia, my voice more serious. "Did you stay up at night too?!"

She nodded without hesitation. "I had to." Her voice was soft but firm. "Kaiser... you were the one who saved me. I had to do something for you."

For the first time in a while, I found myself at a loss for words.

Levi leaned back against the wall, arms crossed. "You've been out for a week, by the way. And in that whole time, Celia stayed up every day and night making sure you were okay. Checking your bandages, making sure you weren't in pain... She gave up her own sleep for you."

I looked back at Celia again. This time, I really looked at her.

She tried to glance away, her usual shyness creeping in. But I could see it—the exhaustion in her eyes, the faint dark circles, the way her shoulders sagged slightly. She had been through hell taking care of me.

"Celia..." I murmured. "Why?"

She looked at me, her expression sincere. "Because... you were my first real friend."

My breath caught in my throat.

"For the past four years," she continued, her voice trembling slightly, "every night... I cried alone in the dark. Every single night, Kaiser. No one ever came for me. No one held my hand or told me everything would be okay. I had to endure it all alone."

Her hands clenched the fabric of her dress as she spoke. "But that night... you saved me. You pulled me out of the darkness, away from those nightmares when no one else would have. I thought I was going to die, Kaiser. But instead... you stayed. You fought for me."

She swallowed, her voice thick with emotion. "And after all those years of crying myself to sleep, that night, for the first time... I was happy."

She swallowed, her hands gripping the fabric of her dress. "You saved me more than once, without even knowing me. You risked your life for me. And even when my cursed power took over... you still held on. You still risked yourself to bring me back."

Her voice cracked. "I—" Tears welled up in her eyes. "I was scared, Kaiser. I didn't want to lose you. I never want to lose you. You make me happy."

I felt something tighten in my chest.

She wiped her eyes quickly, but I still saw the tears. "That's why... even if I couldn't sleep at night, even if I was exhausted, I was happy knowing you'd be okay."

I exhaled slowly. My eyes burned slightly, the warmth in my chest spreading. Without thinking, I reached out, gently brushing away the tears on her cheek.

She blinked, then turned pink.

"That's why, Kaiser," she whispered, "I did all of that."

I let out a small breath, smiling. "You're a silly girl, you know that?"

She pouted, but I could see the small smile forming.

But then I spoke again, more seriously. "Nobody's ever done that much for me before. Not without expecting something in return." My voice softened. "Yet you did, Celia."

She smiled, her eyes glistening. "I don't need a reason to help you, Kaiser. I just wanted to."

I took her hand, feeling how small and warm it was in mine. She stiffened slightly, surprised, but didn't pull away.

I gave her a light squeeze. "Celia, you're a part of my heart now. Forever and ever, after what you did for me."

Her eyes widened. "You mean that?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I do."

She looked at me, searching for any sign of a joke or exaggeration. But when she found none, she smiled—a genuine, beautiful smile.

Levi, in the background, smirked but stayed quiet, watching us with an amused expression.

Then—

Knock knock.

The door creaked open.

A new voice rang out, smooth and confident. "So, this is the infamous Kaiser, huh?"

Levi grinned, stepping aside. "Kaiser, Celia. Meet my sister—Emma Ashton."

Chapter 32 - A New Stage

Kaiser's Perspective:

Infamous Kaiser? Wow, I didn't know E-ranks like me ring bells.

The door creaked open, and in walked a girl with a playful smile, standing next to Levi. Her golden-brown hair bounced with each step, and her sharp, teasing eyes locked onto me like a predator spotting prey.

"Ahaha! Just kidding! Never heard of you." She clapped her hands together like she'd just pulled off the ultimate prank. "I just wanted to see how you'd react."

I smirked, leaning back against the pillows. "Never knew the self-proclaimed strongest Sword Saint had a sister. Thought Levi was a solo act, the one-man legend."

Levi scoffed, but before he could defend himself, Emma fired back. "And I never knew a bandaged-up, mummified man could talk! Shouldn't you be lying still, recovering? You're practically walking medical history."

I chuckled. "At least I don't have to live with the fact that I share blood with Levi. That must be rough."

Emma gasped dramatically, placing a hand on her chest like I'd just insulted her ancestors. "I take offense to that! Levi may be the worst, most arrogant, self-absorbed brother ever, but he's my self-absorbed brother!"

"Hmph!" Levi turned away, arms crossed. "At least I have the skills to back up my claims. Unlike certain injured individuals lying in bed."

"You're right, Levi. Unlike you, I'm so powerful that I can defeat my enemies while lying down. Truly, a terrifying skill."

Emma gasped. "Oh no, Levi, he's delusional. The injuries must have affected his brain! Quick, get a healer before he starts calling himself the 'Great Bandaged Knight' or something."

Levi smirked. "Too late. I think he already believes it."

I shook my head, feigning disappointment. "And here I thought I'd be welcomed with warmth and sympathy. Instead, I get roasted by Levi's long-lost twin."

Emma placed her hands on her hips. "Twin? Please, I'm the upgraded model. More charm, better jokes, and zero need to self-glaze like a certain someone we know."

Levi scoffed. "Excuse you, I am not self-glazing. I merely acknowledge my greatness."

Emma waved him off. "Yeah, yeah. Keep telling yourself that. Meanwhile, Kaiser, if you ever need an actually cool sibling figure, I got you."

I smirked. "I'll keep that in mind next time Levi starts monologuing about his own brilliance."

Levi sighed. "You two deserve each other."

The teasing continued, volleying back and forth like a sport, each jab hitting perfectly—until Levi, visibly tired of our antics, decided to put an end to it.

"Alright, enough. You two, shake hands."

Emma "hmmph'ed" and turned her head away. I raised a brow at her childishness while Celia, sitting next to my bed, burst into laughter.

Emma, still avoiding my hand, turned to Levi. "Where did you even pick this guy up from? The slums? The streets?"

I arched an eyebrow at the blatant disrespect, though her sarcastic tone made it clear she was just messing around. "Wow, Emma. That one cut deep. But for your information, Levi is alive because of me."

Emma immediately burst into laughter. "Pfft—Kaiser, you're such a self-glazer!"

I blinked. "Me? A self-glazer? Emma, you gotta check this out."

Turning to Levi, I gestured for him to step forward. He looked at me suspiciously but complied.

"Turn left."

Levi did so, nodding to himself. "Ah, from this angle, I look even more imposing."

"Now turn right."

He followed the command, smirking. "This side really highlights my strong jawline."

"Alright, now do a full 360."

Levi hesitated but spun dramatically. "Truly, from every direction, I am perfection itself."

I finally turned to Emma, completely deadpan. "I'm trying to figure out from which angle you think your brother is NOT self-glazing. Every two seconds, this guy has to remind us he's the best."

Levi let out a confident chuckle. "But it's true."

That was it. We all burst into laughter, the room filling with unrestrained joy. Emma clutched her sides. "Okay, okay! I'll admit, you've got a point. But hey, at least Levi has the weight and power to back it up."

I exhaled, shaking my head. "Maybe so."

Celia, who had been watching quietly, smiled warmly. "Thank you, both of you. For helping Kaiser."

Levi and Emma turned to her, their expressions softening. "Of course," Levi said simply, while Emma gave Celia a cheeky grin.

"Aww, you care so much about him, huh?"

Celia's face immediately turned red as she waved her hands frantically. "N-No! I was just—!"

Emma smirked. "Wow, Kaiser, you've got such a nice girlfriend."

Celia let out a squeak of protest. "I—! I'm not—!"

Emma continued teasing, completely unfazed by Celia's panicked fluster.

I sat back, letting the laughter wash over me. After everything, after all the fights, the pain, the endless struggle—these moments of peace were rare. And yet, here we were. Laughing, teasing, being... human.

I glanced at Levi, who was now fixing his hair in the mirror, completely unfazed by our ongoing conversation. I let out a quiet chuckle.

He may be the most self-glazing person alive, but he's still the one who brought me here.

As we continued to talk and joke, time moved on, and before we knew it, a few days had passed with me living with them.

In those days, we've had our fair share of fond bonding memories, especially that day.

Sitting at the dining table, I felt strangely at ease—an odd sensation after everything that had happened. Levi and Emma sat across from me, their faces suspiciously neutral, which, in their case, meant anything but good.

"Come on, Kaiser. You've gotta eat, man. Recovery and all that," Levi said, pushing a bowl of stew toward me with a grin that was just a little too wide.

Emma chimed in, feigning concern. "Yeah, we made it with extra care. Just for you."

That should've been my first clue.

I picked up my spoon, giving them both a lingering look before taking a bite. The moment the stew touched my tongue, I felt my soul trying to escape my body.

"Agh—what the hell is this?!" I nearly gagged, my face contorting in ways I didn't know were possible.

Levi and Emma burst into laughter, practically falling out of their chairs at my suffering.

"Oh man, did you see his face?!" Emma wheezed, clutching her stomach. "He looks like he just bit into pure misery!"

I stuck my tongue out, grabbing my water. "Levi, did you try to poison me? Is this revenge for being better looking than you?"

Levi smirked. "Better looking? You're wrapped in bandages bandage boy."

"Yeah," Emma added, "if anything, you should be thanking us! That stew probably burned away any infections you had."

I groaned, rubbing my face as they continued their victory laugh.

Across the table, Celia smiled, watching us, but there was something in her expression—an unknown feeling of longing, like she wished she was part of this teasing mess.

I sighed. "My god, how am I supposed to eat this?"

Emma leaned forward, smirking. "Man up and finish it. You're supposed to be some unstoppable adventurer, right?"

I lifted the spoon, thinking I had control over my fate. But the second I even considered taking another bite, my entire body rejected the idea.

Levi and Emma cackled harder.

"Ahhahahahah"

Then, in a soft, shy voice, Celia spoke. "Kaiser... Say Aaaa."

I blinked, turning my gaze toward her. She held up a spoonful of her own meal, her cheeks a faint pink.

For some reason, I actually did it. "Aaa—"

Before I could overthink it, she gently placed the spoon in my mouth.

The food tasted normal. Good, even. But I barely noticed.

Celia looked at me expectantly. "Is it good?"

I swallowed, nodding. "Yeah. Maybe even better being fed by you."

Her blush deepened as she turned her eyes away. "Th-thanks."

She took another spoonful, completely ignoring Levi and Emma, who were whispering to each other while trying (and failing) to hold back their smirks.

I had this thought that I'd never admit out loud—she was even cuter like this, acting all serious and focused while feeding me. How could I not smile at her antics?

She continued to take full spoons of her own stew and continued to feed me it only. Completely ignoring herself once more taking care of me.

"Celia, you're giving me all your dinner," I pointed out, watching as she scooped up another bite.

She smiled, shaking her head. "I like doing it, Kaiser. It's nice... knowing you're recovering."

Levi snorted. "Man, Kaiser, you really got someone devoted to you, huh?"

Emma grinned. "Should we start calling her Lady Kaiser?"

Celia pouted, her face going bright red. "I-It's not like that!"

I just chuckled. It really was something else, having moments like these.

By the time dinner ended, Emma patted my shoulder. "Don't worry, bandage-boy. We made a separate meal for you. You won't have to go to bed starving."

I smirked. "Oh? Such generosity. Thank you, Your Majesty."

Emma grinned. "That's right. You better appreciate it."

That night, with them, was truly something else.

A few days passed. Almost a week since I woke up. My body was moving again, but Celia still hovered around me, making sure I wasn't in pain. Silly girl. She couldn't take her eyes off me long enough to focus on herself.

But today—by some miracle—she was asleep for longer than usual in the morning.

I slipped out of bed and told Emma I was heading out to the river. She just gave me a wink and a thumbs-up.

"Make sure to bring some fish back, fisherman."

I raised a brow. "I'm not going fishing, cook."

"Then what? Collecting river water for a dramatic ritual?"

"Nah, I'll leave the dramatics to Levi. He probably spends more time flexing at his reflection than training."

Emma snickered. "True. He polishes his face more than he polishes his skills."

I chuckled, stepping toward the door. "Try not to burn down the place while I'm gone."

She saluted. "No promises."

And with that, I slipped out, enjoying the first real breath of fresh air in what felt like forever.

Celia's Perspective:

I slowly fluttered my eyes open, feeling the warmth of the blanket still wrapped around me. Today... today, I actually had a good night's rest. Maybe even overslept.

Not that I minded. It was nice.

The past few days had been different. I had stayed up late, making sure Kaiser was okay—checking his wounds, changing his bandages, sitting beside him just in case he needed anything. It wasn't tiring. It wasn't something I regretted. Even now, if I had the chance, I'd do it all over again.

With a small yawn, I pushed myself up and freshened up, washing my face before heading to Kaiser's room. But the moment I stepped inside, my eyes blinked in confusion.

The bed was empty.

The window next to his bed was slightly open, the gentle morning breeze swaying the small flower in the vase on the table. But no sign of Kaiser.

Where... did he go?

My brows furrowed as I quickly turned on my heels, heading downstairs to search the house. Levi and Emma's home was cozy in a way that felt lived-in. Wooden floors, scattered books, a few old swords hanging by the wall—everything had a touch of personality, as if each item had its own story. But none of that mattered right now. Kaiser was nowhere to be seen.

I stepped forward, calling out, "Kaiser! Where are you?"

No response.

Instead, Emma appeared from the kitchen, a playful smirk already tugging at her lips. "Looking for your loving Kaiser?"

My steps halted.

Loving?

I felt my cheeks heat up slightly, but I shook my head, forcing my voice to stay neutral. "W-Where did he go?"

Emma's grin widened, and she leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Oh? What's with that blush? You always turn red when it's about Kaiser."

I gasped, covering my cheeks with my hands. "I do not!"

Emma laughed. "You totally do. That's sweet. You really care about him, huh?"

I nodded without hesitation. "Of course. He's important to me."

Emma's smirk returned, but there was warmth in her voice. "You know, you kinda sound like an obsessive girlfriend."

My face burned. "I'm not! We're just friends!"

Emma shrugged. "Uh-huh, sure." Then she playfully tapped her chin. "Honestly, I don't see what's so special about him. He's just a brooding, mysterious guy with a knack for making some what funny jokes."

I frowned slightly but then placed a hand over my heart. "He's kind. He's caring. And he... he was my first real friend. The first person who ever truly cared for me."

Emma tilted her head. "Oh? Then what does that make me?"

I blinked, caught off guard. "Y-You're my friend too!"

Emma gasped dramatically, placing a hand over her chest like she'd been wounded. "So I'm just second place? Wow, Celia, I thought we had something special."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're so dramatic Emma, I can see it."

She grinned. "Yup."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Where is he?"

Emma chuckled. "Fine, fine. Your precious Kaiser is by the east riverside. But it's not like you have to go check on him."

I touched my cheeks lightly, trying to will away the warmth, then let out a small breath, going neutral. "He's still recovering. He shouldn't be outside right now. I have to go and make sure he is okay."

Emma leaned against the wall, smirking. "You say that, but you're acting like a worried wife looking for her runaway husband."

I puffed my cheeks, crossing my arms. "I'm not!"

She tilted her head, clearly enjoying this. "Oh? Then why do you care so much?"

I opened my mouth, but no words came out right away. Why did I care this much? It wasn't like Kaiser couldn't take care of himself—he was Kaiser. Even injured, he was probably stronger than most people. But still... I wanted to be the one who looked after him.

My gaze softened. "It's just... this feeling in my heart. I can't ignore it."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "That's pretty vague."

I hesitated, fidgeting slightly. "I just... when I'm around him, I feel safe. I don't feel alone. And it's not just that... he listens. He makes me feel like I matter. Like I'm someone important, not just... there."

Emma stared at me for a moment before letting out a low whistle. "Wow. You are in deep."

I blinked, flustered. "I—No! It's not like that! Kaiser is just—"

Emma leaned in, grinning. "Your beloved~?"

I turned red instantly. "No! Stop that!"

She laughed, clearly enjoying my suffering. "Fine, fine. But you know, it's kinda unfair."

I frowned. "What is?"

Emma folded her arms, tapping her fingers against them. "I don't think I've ever met anyone who made me feel like that. Not even Levi."

That caught me off guard. "What do you mean?"

She sighed dramatically. "I mean, sure, I'd throw hands for him. Maybe even stab a few people. But you? You act like you'd tear the world apart just to keep Kaiser safe."

I paused, thinking about it.

Would I?

I smiled softly, stepping toward the door. "Maybe... but that's just how I feel."

Emma hummed, then suddenly smirked. "Well, congrats. You win."

I glanced at her, confused. "Win what?"

She waved a hand. "Nothing. Just thinking about how I feel about Levi compared to how you feel about Kaiser. Looks like you've got me beat there."

I didn't know what to say to that, but somehow, it made my heart feel warm.

I reached for the door, determined. "I have to go check on him."

Emma chuckled. "Go get your man, Celia."

I turned red all over again. "Emma!"

I tilted my head, but she simply gave me a wink.

Shaking my head, I opened the door and stepped outside. Kaiser... just what am I going to do with you?

I kept my head down as I walked through town, weaving through the narrow streets and staying close to the edges. If I could just avoid being noticed, then maybe—just maybe—I could make it out without hearing anything.

I wasn't in the mood for whispers.

Not today.

But even as I walked, I could still feel it—the weight of their stares, even if they weren't directly looking at me. That same unspoken thing hanging in the air whenever I was around.

Cursed child.

I clenched my hands into fists, tightening them against my chest. It was stupid. I wasn't a child anymore. I shouldn't care.

And yet, I did.

There was a time I used to wonder why people looked at me that way. Why they avoided me. Why they whispered my name like it was something meant to be erased. But now, I didn't need to ask.

I already knew.

I sighed, shaking my head and picking up my pace. There was no point in thinking about it. I had something more important to do.

Kaiser.

He was outside, and he shouldn't be. That was all I needed to focus on.

Making sure my hood was pulled low, I slipped past a few merchant stalls, narrowly avoiding a man carrying a sack of potatoes, then finally found an open path leading to the east side of town. I glanced around once, twice—okay, coast clear.

With a quick step, I hurried out, leaving behind the heaviness of the town's eyes.

The moment I was past the last building, I let out a breath, feeling a little lighter.

The east river. It was just ahead.

I followed the riverbank, my steps quiet against the soft earth. The sun hung high in the sky, casting golden streaks over the water's surface. The river itself was clear—so clear that I could see the fish swimming underneath, their scales glistening as they darted

between the rocks. The soft rustling of leaves mixed with the steady sound of flowing water, making everything feel... peaceful.

I wish I could stay here forever.

I let out a small giggle as a few fish swam close to the edge. They looked so carefree, just wiggling around like nothing in the world mattered. Lucky.

My smile grew when I spotted something ahead.

Or rather—someone.

Underneath a tree near the riverbank, Kaiser was doing push-ups.

Shirtless.

My feet slowed, my eyes fixating on the way his muscles flexed with each movement. Even with the bandages wrapped around his torso, his body was... well... built. Every motion made his arms tense, his back shifting with defined strength. And when he pushed up one last time before rising to his feet—

Oh.

Oh no.

The moment he straightened, reaching for his discarded shirt, I saw them. His abs.

I froze. My brain? Not working. My heart? Beating weirdly. My face? On fire.

Why does he look like he was sculpted by the gods?!

He turned slightly, and before I could snap out of my daze, his eyes landed on me.

A small, knowing smirk touched his lips. "Oh? Celia?"

Abort mission. Abort mission.

I tried to keep my expression neutral as I walked toward him, but I knew my face was still warm.

"W-What are you doing?" I managed to say.

Kaiser, now fully dressed—thank goodness—tilted his head. "Exercising."

I pouted. "Obviously. But why? You're still recovering."

He stretched his arms, then rolled his shoulders as if to test his movements. "I'm fine." His usual calm, confident tone was there. "You don't have to worry."

I frowned. "I do have to worry! You're hurt! You should be resting, not... not—" I motioned at the ground where he had been doing push-ups. "That!"

Kaiser chuckled, stepping closer. "It's just part of my routine."

I crossed my arms. "Routine?"

His smirk grew. "You wouldn't understand, Celia. Let's go back."

Excuse me?

My brows furrowed as I stubbornly planted my feet. "Hey, I might not know everything about training, but I still wanna know." I pointed at him. "So explain!"

Kaiser gave me an amused look, but when I didn't back down, he let out a small sigh. "Alright, alright. I'll tell you."

I leaned in slightly, listening carefully.

Then, in that effortlessly cool voice, he said—

"I normally do 200 push-ups, 200 pull-ups, 200 squats, and 200 sit-ups. For stamina, I finish with a 15 km run. I've been doing it daily for four years straight. But since I was injured, I missed this week—so I'm just making up for it."

Silence.

My brain? Gone. My ability to process information? Completely destroyed.

"You—what?"

Kaiser tilted his head. "What?"

I stared at him. "Two hundred everything?! And then fifteen kilometers?! Every day?!"

He nodded like it was normal.

I slowly turned to glance at a tree nearby, noticing a thick, sturdy branch that could probably hold weight. My mind immediately pictured him hanging off it, doing pull-ups.

Then push-ups. Sit-ups.

And then running.

And then—

Oh no. The blush was back.

Kaiser noticed.

His smirk returned as he leaned slightly forward. "Hey now... don't fall for me~"

I swear to the heavens above—

My entire face burned. Without thinking, I playfully punched his shoulder. "S-Shut up! Stop teasing me!"

He laughed, completely unbothered. "You make it too easy."

I turned away with a huff, refusing to look at him directly. "I did not fall for you. I was just... surprised."

"Surprised by what?" he mused. "My training, or my body?"

I gasped, smacking his arm again. "Kaiser!!"

He chuckled, rubbing his shoulder as if my tiny punches actually did something. "Alright, alright, I'll stop."

I pouted, still feeling warm all over. He loved teasing me.

But... I guess it wasn't so bad.

As we started walking back toward Levi and Emma's home, I found myself sneaking another glance at him. Strong, confident, and always somehow one step ahead of me.

Maybe I was falling for him.

Just a little.

Kaiser's Perspective:

Celia really was adorable.

The way she kept sneaking glances at me, then immediately darting her eyes away— like she thought I wouldn't notice—was almost too much. Every time I caught her, there was a tiny blush on her cheeks.

What's gotten into her lately?

Not that I was complaining. Watching her flustered reactions was quickly becoming one of my favorite pastimes.

We walked side by side, the dirt path crunching softly beneath our feet as we made our way back to Levi's place. The sun hung low in the sky, painting the town in warm shades of orange and gold. Everything felt calm—until we stepped back into town.

That's when I saw it.

The shift in her posture. The way her fingers tightened slightly at the hem of her cloak. Her steps slowed, just a little. And then—she lowered her head, letting her hood cover her face.

She was hiding.

I frowned, my amusement fading. It only took a second to realize why. The townspeople weren't looking at her directly, but I could still feel it.

The way their gazes hovered, whispering just low enough to go unheard. Their movements stiffened slightly when we walked by, as if our presence alone was enough to bring discomfort.

No—not our presence.

Hers.

My fingers curled into a fist.

I realized it was always like this for her. People didn't see Celia the way I did. They didn't see the girl who worried over everyone, the girl who gave without expecting anything in return, the girl who smiled with a warmth that could make anyone feel at home.

No, they looked past all of that—choosing instead to focus on something as meaningless as her red eyes.

Like a bunch of cowards.

I glanced at her. Even without seeing her face, I could tell she was nervous. The way her shoulders tensed, how her hands fidgeted under her cloak, making sure not even a glimpse of her red eyes showed.

She had gotten so good at hiding.

Too good.

I hated it.

With every step we took, the anger inside me burned hotter. It wasn't fair. She had to smile, talk, and live with the knowledge that people would never accept her, no matter how kind she was. And despite all of that—

She still cared about them.

I exhaled sharply, coming to a stop. I couldn't take it anymore. Watching her shrink away like this, watching her hide something that should never have to be hidden—it was wrong. And I wasn't going to let it continue.

Celia took a few more steps before realizing I had stopped. She turned back, blinking. "Kaiser?"

I didn't answer immediately. My fists loosened, then tightened again. The words were right there, pushing at my throat, demanding to be spoken.

But first—I reached forward, gripping the edge of her hood.

And I pulled it down to reveal her face to the world.

Celia's Perspective:

The moment Kaiser pulled my cloak down, my breath caught in my throat. A chill ran down my spine as I felt the weight of a hundred unseen gazes pressing against my bare face. My hands twitched, instinctively reaching to pull it back up, but his hand was faster, steady, firm.

"Kai... Kaiser?" I stammered, my voice barely above a whisper. My fingers clenched at my sides, heart pounding more and more.

His gaze met mine—deep, unwavering, piercing straight into me like he could see through every wall I'd ever built around myself. "Never hide your beautiful face for anyone," he said.

"You're not a curse, and I know that."

My throat tightened. No one had ever said that before. No one had ever looked at me like that before—with absolute certainty, like there was no doubt in his mind that I belonged. I wanted to say something—thank him, argue, something—but my voice refused to cooperate. And then there's what he said...

Beautiful?

Me?

I wanted to believe him—so badly. But after years of whispers and hidden judgment, doubt clung to me. Still, Kaiser's words pressed against it, steady and unshaken.

"Now, come," he said, his voice carrying that same unshaken authority.

I hesitated, tugging at his sleeve. "But Kaiser, they'll see me—"

He cut me off before I could finish. "So?" His tone was sharp, unyielding. "If they have a problem, they can choke on it. The world doesn't decide who you are. You do. And as long as I'm here, no one will dare lay a hand on you."

A shiver ran down my spine. It wasn't fear. It wasn't unease. It was... something else. Something that made my stomach twist in a way I couldn't name. His grip on my hand tightened, fingers interlocking with mine, grounding me.

"But Kaiser, they may get angry and try to get rid of me—"

"I'd like to see them try." His voice dropped lower, colder. The moment he said it, his grip on my hand grew just a little firmer, and my heart did this weird, fluttering thing that made my breath hitch.

Kaiser wasn't in his usual indifferent mood anymore. That casual arrogance was gone. Instead, something dangerous lurked beneath his words. I could see it in his eyes—his sharp, piercing blue eyes that almost seemed to glow. He wasn't just speaking empty words.

He meant them.

As we walked, whispers spread like wildfire. People turned, some with curiosity, some with that all-too-familiar judgment in their eyes. I was used to this. The stares, the murmurs. The suffocating weight of being unwanted.

But this time, it was different.

This time, I wasn't alone.

I could feel the stares. People murmured behind their hands, eyes flicking between Kaiser and me. But not one of them spoke loudly. Not one of them dared to step forward.

One man did. I noticed him approaching—his steps slow, cautious. His gaze flickered between Kaiser and me, and for a moment, I felt my breath quicken. But then Kaiser turned his gaze on him.

The moment their eyes met, the man stopped in his tracks. His face paled, his body stiffened. Kaiser's eyes—still glowing, still burning with that aura—held something lethal in them.

The man then immediately stepped back.

Kaiser spoke, his voice softer now, but carrying an unshakable finality. "You will never hide your face again. You're beautiful, Celia. And with me, you never have to be afraid."

My heart did a strange little flip. "O-Okay..." My voice was embarrassingly small, my cheeks burning as I tried not to look at him directly.

Nobody dared to approach us, as we continued to walk. I noticed the Guild Hall near the middle of the square, its towering structure built of dark stone. The crest of the renowned Sword Saint of Godspeed, Levi, was etched into the doors, marking this as his domain.

The town, named Levinton after him, was bustling despite the tension in the air, adventurers wielding their swords watching our every step. Their magical auras pressed against me like a thick fog, but they didn't dare to approach Kaiser.

Except one.

A man stepped toward us, his boots clicking against the cobblestone road. He was tall, draped in a long black coat, his dark eyes unreadable, but there was something about the way he carried himself.

I tensed, instinctively stepping closer to Kaiser.

"Hey, you," the man spoke, his voice low, commanding. "I'd like you to come to the guild and explain who she is."

Kaiser didn't slow. Didn't even acknowledge him. His eyes remained forward, steps steady, completely unfazed. His grip on my hand never loosened. When he finally spoke, I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I don't repeat myself. Get out of my way."

My heart slammed against my ribs. That tone... It wasn't just cold. It was absolute. Unshakable. As if the mere thought of defying him was death.

The man's brows twitched, his jaw tightening. He stepped closer and, before I could react, grabbed Kaiser's shoulder.

"It wasn't a request. It was a command. You're coming with me—and her—to the guild."

Silence.

A thick, suffocating silence that made my hands lossen. Even the townsfolk had gone still, their chatter dying down as they watched, wide-eyed.

Kaiser stopped.

For a moment, he didn't move. Didn't speak. Then, slowly, ever so slowly, he turned his head, his blue eyes burning with that chilling, inhuman glow.

He placed his hand over the man's grip, pushing it off with an effortless force. His other hand never left mine still holding it tightly.

"The next time you put your hands on me," he said, voice calm, deliberate, "you won't have hands left to regret it."

I swallowed hard.

The man's face twisted with anger, magic crackling at his fingertips. I felt it—the rise of aggression, the heat of impending violence.

"You're the one walking around our town with a curse—"

"Say that again." Kaiser cut him off, his voice low, dangerous. "And I'll make sure they find nothing but ashes where you once stood."

My breath hitched. The sheer weight of his words pressed down on my chest, making it hard to breathe. I should be scared. I should be terrified. But instead...

I felt safe.

He gave him a death stare of murderous intent himself. The tension in the air was unbearable, and I could feel it growing, intensifying with every passing second. The man's anger flared, his hands trembling, and yet he didn't move. He was too proud, too stubborn.

My anxiety spiked. What if this goes too far? My thoughts raced, my heart pounding harder as I watched the confrontation unfold. Kaiser stood there, unwavering, his eyes glowing with that cold, dangerous light. He wasn't backing down, not even for a second.

And yet, even as my fear crept up, something else pulsed in my chest—something different. A strange sense of security. I could feel it in the way Kaiser held my hand, in the way he stared down the man with such chilling authority.

He won't let them touch me.

My breath caught in my throat. It was like I was locked in a bubble, safe from the world and all its dangers, all its cruelty.

But just as I thought I could breathe again, just as I convinced myself that Kaiser would handle it, the man's voice cut through the air.

"You're making a mistake," he spat, his voice shaking with fury.

Kaiser's lips barely moved, but when he spoke, his words were final, cold as ice. "The only mistake here is thinking you can stand in my way."

The man's face turned pale, his hands clenching into fists, and the crowd around us fell silent. It felt like everything had stopped, as if the world itself was holding its breath.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the man lunged.

And Kaiser...

Kaiser smiled.

But not in the way I was used to. This smile was different. It wasn't playful or warm. It was pure, unfiltered danger.

I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I just stood there, watching the chaos unfold.

The world around us seemed to blur, and I was left with one question:

Would Kaiser's protection be enough to save us from what was about to happen?

My heart raced. My breath caught.

And then...

Everything changed.

Chapter 33 - Stay With Me

Celia's Perspective:

Out of nowhere, a flash of light streaked across my vision. The moment I blinked, a figure appeared between them, catching the man's fist with a firm grip.

"Enough. That's enough of you."

That voice—familiar, cocky, and filled with unshaken confidence.

Levi.

The man gritted his teeth. "Levi, don't interfere between us. He deserves this—" The man, tried to argue, but Levi cut him off.

"I said enough, Zain. I'm telling you to not pick a fight with him."

I looked at Kaiser. He still looked unfazed and completely ready to fight.

Was he... enjoying this? No, maybe 'enjoying' wasn't the right word, but he wasn't backing down either. It's like he's so used to people underestimating him that it doesn't even faze him anymore. If it were me, I'd be shaking. But Kaiser? He just looked... patient, like he was waiting for something to happen.

Zain scoffed. "I only told him to come to the guild and explain why he's walking around with a curse." His gaze flickered to me, filled with contempt.

Before I could react, Levi's voice cut through sharply. "Don't call her that. Her name is Celia." His tone left no room for argument. Then he pointed at Kaiser. "And he's Kaiser."

Kaiser coldly spoke, "He was the one blocking the path."

Levi, arms crossed, smirked at him. "And you were the one about to break his jaw. So, how about we just calm down?"

"Calm down?" Zain interjected, glaring. "After he threatens me in front of everyone? I am doing this to protect the town."

Then, he pointed at me. "She resembles the Queen of Curses."

My heart clenched. Of course. It was always like this. No matter what I did, no matter where I went, people would always see me as something to be feared.

Hated.

The weight of his words sunk deep, cutting into me like a dull knife. It had never mattered who I was as a person—only how I looked. The fear, the judgment, the rejection... It never stopped. Maybe it never would.

Zain continued, his words only adding more weight to the suffocating feeling in my chest. "She's a threat to our town. Without any explanation, I won't allow her to stay here."

Zain took a step closer. "That eerie glow in her eyes, the same aura... Don't tell me you don't see it, Levi." He turned to the others. "She could be her descendant, or worse— her reincarnation. How can we just ignore that?"

Levi exhaled sharply, gripping the hilt of his sword but not drawing it. His jaw clenched, his usual easygoing nature absent. He wanted to counter, to dismiss it, but even he couldn't deny what they saw.

The gathered adventurers murmured in agreement. More and more people were joining, forming a group behind Zain. The hostility in their eyes made my stomach turn.

It hurt. It really did.

Then, suddenly, Kaiser let go of my hand and stepped forward.

Levi raised a hand to stop him, but Kaiser caught his wrist with strength that forced him still. His expression remained unreadable, his dark eyes locking onto Zain with a terrifying coldness.

"She's with me. You got any issues?"

Zain didn't back down. "Yes, I do. I won't let her stay in my town. Either she leaves, or we get rid of her—"

Kaiser interrupted him. His voice, low and chilling, sent a shiver down my spine. "If you insult her again or even attempt to harm her... I'll erase this town from Celestine's map."

The air turned thick. A deathly silence followed. Zain opened his mouth, but Levi was faster.

"Stop." Levi's tone was sharp. "Zain, back off."

Zain narrowed his eyes. "Why are you defending him? Stop taking his side, Levi."

Levi exhaled, then looked at the gathered adventurers, his usual cocky smirk fading into something colder. "I'm saving you, Zain. From him."

Zain's expression hardened. He stole a glance at Kaiser, then back at Levi. "What do you mean? Are they with you, Levi?"

Levi crossed his arms, tilting his head slightly. "Yeah. They are." His tone was unusually serious, lacking its usual bravado. "And you shouldn't mess with him. Trust me on that."

Zain narrowed his eyes, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face. "Why? Who is he?"

Levi let out a short breath, shaking his head. "Just take my advice. It's better that way." He then glanced at Celia, his expression softening. "And don't worry—she's not the Queen of Curses. She's safe. She and Kaiser are with me, and that means they're with you too."

Zain hesitated, searching Levi's face for any sign of deception. But Levi stood firm, unwavering. Finally, after a long pause, Zain exhaled and nodded.

"Then go."

Kaiser took my hand again, pulling me toward him as we walked away.

Behind us, Zain's voice rang out. "What rank is he?" His voice was quieter now, uncertain. "His confidence... his aura, it radiates something else."

Levi hesitated. Then, finally, he answered. "He's E-ranked."

The moment those words left his mouth, laughter erupted from the gathered adventurers. Mocking, condescending, filled with nothing but amusement.

"E-ranked? You mean the lowest of the low?"

"Is he pretending to be strong or something?"

"I thought he was dangerous, but he's just a joke!"

The laughter stung. But what hurt more was seeing Kaiser endure it in complete silence. He didn't react. Didn't flinch. He just... took it.

My hands clenched into fists. For the first time, I felt anger so deep it made my blood boil. Was this what Kaiser felt earlier, when they called me a curse? When they belittled me for how I looked? Was this how he felt every time someone tried to hurt me?

I looked up at him, expecting to see frustration. But there was nothing. He was unfazed.

Then Zain called out again, sneering. "E-ranked Kaiser! What a joke! I've seen rats with a better ranking than you!"

The laughter doubled. My grip on Kaiser's hand tightened as a strange sense of cursed energy surged through me.

But before I could do or say anything, Kaiser looked at me. His expression softened, and a warm smile spread across his lips.

"Don't worry, Celia. Their words don't mean anything to me."

I looked at him, confused. "Why don't you say anything back? They're insulting you."

"Because I don't care what they think of me." His voice was calm, honest. "Their words have no weight. They don't matter."

"But—"

"Celia," he cut me off gently. "I only care about what I believe. And I believe their words don't matter."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to tell him to fight back. But after a few more attempts, after each of his calm rejections, I finally gave up.

I smiled at him instead. "You're amazing, Kaiser. I trust you. To me, you're not just an E-rank. You're the strongest person I've ever seen and you'll always be that one for me."

Kaiser's eyes softened. His lips curled into a small, genuine smile. "Thank you, Celia."

A light warmth spread to my cheeks. A small blush. A small moment of peace amidst the humiliation.

Ignoring the jeers of the guild, we kept on walking knowing we had each other. I could seen Kaiser's anger and seriousness slowly fading as we got closer to our destination.

Soon, we were back in Levi's home. The place was way too fancy for someone like him, but I guessed that suited his over-the-top personality. As soon as we stepped in, Emma's eyes immediately locked onto Kaiser, her lips curling into a teasing grin.

"Oh? What's with the serious look, Kaiser?" she asked, striding over with the confidence of someone who loved poking at people's reactions. "Don't tell me you actually got wrinkles from frowning too much. That'd be a shame, considering how much the ladies are obsessed with your face."

Kaiser, who had been standing there, arms crossed, looking all broody and intense, simply sighed. "If I did, you'd still be first in line to admire them."

Emma gasped, placing a hand over her chest. "I'd never! My standards are way too high."

Kaiser smirked. "That's what they all say, right before falling for me."

Emma rolled her eyes but laughed. "Alright, alright, I see you're back to normal." She turned to me with a knowing smile. "Now, what's got you two looking so serious?"

Kaiser then told Emma what happened from the start, explaining why he made the world see my face.

He glanced at me, his tone softening. "And I held her hand as we walked. I made sure everyone saw that I was with her."

Oh. There it was again. That feeling in my chest. I looked down slightly, my fingers curling around the hem of my sleeves.

Emma whistled. "Wow. That's... unexpectedly cool of you, Kaiser. You almost sound like a knight from some fairytale." She grinned. "Sir Kaiser, sworn protector of his princess Celia."

Kaiser leaned back against the wall, completely unfazed. "Well, I do have a habit of being incredibly cool. I can't help it."

Emma snorted. "You're such a flex."

I managed to compose myself before speaking. "Nobody dared to stop us. No one called me anything... not while he was holding my hand."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

Kaiser nodded. "They wouldn't dare."

Emma folded her arms, tilting her head. "That's actually kinda sweet. But let me guess—someone did step in eventually."

Kaiser's smirk returned. "Zain."

Emma blinked, then burst out laughing. "Mhmm? Zain huh?"

I watched as she shook her head, chuckling. "That guy's always been stubborn. What did he say?"

Kaiser shrugged. "Tried to stop us forcefully and told Celia she had to leave this town."

Emma sighed. "Classic Zain. Always trying to be the responsible one, even when he's being a pain."

I spoke up again. "A fight almost broke out between him and Kaiser."

Emma's eyes widened slightly before she grinned. "Now that... I didn't expect." She turned to Kaiser, her voice dripping with amusement. "Didn't think you were the protective type."

Kaiser waved a hand dismissively. "It was about Celia. So it was important." Then, with a more serious look, he added, "I don't want her to hide her face anymore. Not because of fear. Not because of anything."

My breath hitched slightly. My face grew warm.

Oh no. Not again.

Why does he do this? Every time he says something like that, every time he does anything for me, it just... it just gets worse. My heart feels like it's flipping over itself. Like it's running a race I never signed up for.

I mean, I know Kaiser is just like that—strong, confident, protective—but when it's for me? When he looks at me like that? I don't know how to handle it.

I should say something. Anything.

But my brain refuses to work, so I just stare at the floor, feeling like an idiot.

Emma nudged me playfully. "Look at her, blushing like crazy."

"I am not," I mumbled.

Kaiser chuckled. "Yeah, you are."

I groaned inwardly. This was never going to stop, was it?

She then turned to me and Kaiser. "Anyway, about Zain. You should know he's the other leader of Levi's Guild, Celestial Apex."

Kaiser raised an eyebrow. "Celestial Apex?"

"Yeah," Emma nodded. "It's ranked third out of the five major guilds. Pretty big deal, but honestly, Levi didn't even want a guild. He just thought he was the best without it."

I blinked. "Then why does he have one?"

"Oh, you know, some people just naturally attract followers." Emma shrugged. "Besides, Zain is the other leader, and he takes the whole 'guild' thing seriously. He's A-Rank, unlike some people." She shot a playful glance at Kaiser.

"Most of our members are high-ranked and experienced. That's why we hold our spot at third place. Not that Levi cares about rankings."

As we talked, Levi finally walked in, stretching his arms. "Well, well," he started, his voice playful, "Look who's been waiting for me."

He then slowly walked over to me. "Celia, don't worry. Zain's not gonna hurt you or anything."

I looked at him warily. "Are you sure? He seemed really serious about—"

Levi waved a hand dismissively. "Look, I know Zain. He's stubborn, yeah, but he's not the type to go against me. If I tell him to back off, he will."

I bit my lip. "But... everyone else in the town—"

"Forget them," Levi said confidently. "You're with us, aren't you? That means you're safe."

His words reassured me more than I expected. I exhaled, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders.

Emma, of course, wasn't done yet. "So, Celia, tell me. What exactly did Kaiser do?" Her eyes gleamed with curiosity.

I looked at Kaiser for a moment before speaking softly, my heart warming. "He protected me. He stood in front of me and said I was with him. He told Zain that if anyone tried to hurt me... he'd destroy this town." My voice trembled slightly at the memory, but I smiled.

"He didn't hesitate."

Emma's eyes widened before a smirk formed on her lips. "Oh? Ohhh? Kaiser, you really are something. Acting all protective. You sure she's not your girlfriend?"

Kaiser scoffed. "Tch. You're getting ahead of yourself. I'd say the same thing if it was someone else I cared for."

Emma snickered. "Yeah, sure. Bet you wouldn't have held their hand like that."

I turned red instantly. "That—!"

Emma grinned, seeing my reaction. "Oh? Getting flustered again, Celia? Could it be you actually—"

"Shut up!" I blurted out, my face on fire.

Levi chuckled. "Whoa there, Celia. Didn't think you had that kind of reaction in you."

"It's her fault!" I shot back, crossing my arms while glaring at Emma, who just laughed.

The teasing continued for a moment until Levi turned his attention to Kaiser, his tone shifting slightly. "Look, man. Don't pick a fight with Zain."

Kaiser's cold gaze met his. "If he poses a threat to Celia, I will not hesitate."

Levi sighed, rubbing the back of his head. "You really don't make things easy, huh? I get it, you're protective, but this isn't just some small-time idiot. Zain's strong."

"His rank wouldn't matter when he's under the ground dead." Kaiser replied flatly.

Levi smirked. "Confident as always. But seriously, don't cause trouble here. I'll handle Zain."

Kaiser's lips barely moved, but there was an undeniable hardness to his words. "I said, I'll handle him if it comes to that."

Levi gave him a knowing look, his eyes flashing with an edge of annoyance. "You're really not listening. This isn't something you can just solve with force."

The room fell quiet for a moment, the tension thick in the air. I could see both of them—Levi with his carefree, cocky demeanor and Kaiser with his deadly seriousness—standing at odds. The last thing I needed was for them to clash, especially over something like this.

I stepped closer to Kaiser, my heart thudding in my chest as I gently placed a hand on his sleeve, feeling the tension in his body. His gaze shifted to me, those blue eyes as unreadable as ever, but there was a flicker of hesitation. I squeezed his arm softly.

"Kaiser..." I whispered, my voice steady despite the storm of emotions swirling inside me. "Please, don't make things worse. We don't need more violence. Zain won't hurt me, and I trust Levi to handle it. I'm asking you, don't let your anger decide this. Just... trust me."

Kaiser stood motionless, his jaw clenched as if he were weighing my words against his instincts. His gaze softened just slightly, and after what felt like an eternity, he let out a long, slow breath.

"Fine." His voice was almost a murmur, the hardness in his tone giving way to something gentler. "But only because Celia asked."

I could feel the weight of his decision, and as he finally relaxed, I allowed myself to exhale too. Levi gave a satisfied nod, clearly pleased with the outcome, though I could see his amusement flicker again.

I glanced at Kaiser, his expression still calm but something about the tightness in his posture told me he wasn't entirely at peace with it. But for now, it was enough. He had listened to me. That was what mattered.

Emma, who had been listening in the background, watched Kaiser closely. She had always seen him as a careless, casual person, but the way he had stood up for Celia

earlier—how he had almost gone against an A-Rank adventurer for her—made her rethink her impression of him.

For the first time, she found herself admiring him just a little.

Soon a few hours had passed since that.

The soft glow of the moon slipped through my curtains, casting faint patterns on the floor. I sat on my bed, my hands clutching the edges of the blanket, but my thoughts... they were a million miles away. Everything that had happened today felt like a blur, but there was one moment that was crystal clear.

Kaiser.

When he called me beautiful. When he held my hand.

My face burned at the thought, and I couldn't help but bury my face into the pillow. My legs kicked the bed in a little tantrum, as if I could somehow shake the feeling away. Why did my heart flutter like this whenever I thought about him?

Get it together, Celia. It was just a compliment. Just a touch. But even saying that to myself felt like lying. The way his hand felt in mine... it wasn't like anything else. And the way he looked at me, with those eyes full of meaning, like I was... something important to him.

I buried my face deeper into the pillow.

Stop it, Celia. You're just overthinking this.

But I couldn't stop imagining it. The warmth, the way he made me feel like I mattered. Like I wasn't just some... nothing. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks, making me even redder than I already was.

I can't be this obvious about it, right?

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, pulling me out of my tangled thoughts.

Who could that be at this hour? Before I could even think about it, Kaiser's voice rang out from the other side.

"Celia, it's me Kaiser."

My heart leaped. The sound of his voice made everything inside of me flutter like a million butterflies. I jumped up, hurriedly making my way to the door, my cheeks still burning, my hands slightly trembling.

I opened it, trying to look casual—well, as casual as possible with my face practically on fire.

"Kaiser...?" I said, my voice barely above a whisper, my heart pounding in my chest.

He looked at me for a moment, and I could see the serious look in his eyes, like he was about to say something important.

"I need to talk to you. It's something personal," he said, his voice steady.

My breath caught in my throat. Personal?!

"Personal?" I stammered, the word almost tripping out of my mouth. My face was now as red as a tomato, and I couldn't decide if I wanted to run and hide or stand there frozen.

Kaiser nodded, his expression calm but firm.

"Yeah," he replied. "Can I come in?"

I barely even processed the question before I stepped aside, almost stumbling over my own feet as I let him in. My heart was thundering in my chest, and I was sure he could hear it. I gestured to the chair by the desk, trying to be polite even though I felt like I was about to explode from all the nerves building up inside me.

He sat down, and I immediately went to sit on the bed, my legs crossed tightly as I tried to collect my thoughts.

What was he going to say? What did he want to talk about?

Was he going to say something like... that he wanted to stay with me? That he wanted to keep this connection between us?

I couldn't help but imagine it, each thought more comforting than the last.

What if he wants to be with me, by my side, always? What if he's... planning something for us, something that could make us even closer?

I tried to calm my racing heart, but the more I thought about it, the worse it got.

Then, Kaiser spoke.

"Celia," he said, his voice steady but carrying an unfamiliar weight. "I wanted to talk to you about our future."

I froze.

Our future? OUR???

My thoughts crashed together in a dizzying whirlwind. My heart was in my throat now, and I had to fight the urge to shake with excitement—or dread.

He continued, as if nothing was amiss. "We won't always be living with Levi and Emma. You know it's just temporary."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. Okay... So, it wasn't exactly what I thought.

"What do you mean Kaiser?" I asked softly, my voice barely more than a whisper. I didn't want to sound too anxious, but I couldn't help it. I needed to know.

Kaiser met my eyes, his gaze calm, but there was something different in the air tonight—something heavier. "What will you do after we have leave this town and... separate?"

Separate.

The word echoed in my mind like an awful, cruel joke. I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to think about being apart from him.

"Separate?" I repeated, my voice breaking ever so slightly. I felt like my heart was shattering into pieces. "What do you mean... separate?"

Kaiser's gaze softened, his voice steady yet heavy. "When we leave Levi's town, Celia... we'll have to go our separate ways. You've got your own journey ahead, and I've got mine. We can't stay together like this forever, but that doesn't mean we won't always be there for each other."

I felt a lump form in my throat, my voice barely a whisper as I spoke, trembling. "I don't have anywhere to go, Kaiser... No one else to go to. I... I don't know what I would do without you."

It hurt to say it out loud. It hurt more than I expected.

Kaiser's expression softened, and he took a small step closer, his voice calm and reassuring. "Celia, I know it feels like you're alone, but you're not. Even if we can't be together all the time, you'll find more people who care for you."

"I don't want anyone else," I said, my voice barely above a whisper, thick with emotion. "I don't want anyone but you, Kaiser. You're the only one who's ever truly cared for me. There's no one else... just you."

I couldn't look at him anymore. My hands twisted in my lap as I tried to hold back the tears that threatened to fall, my heart shattering with each passing second. The thought of losing him, of being left behind... it was too much.

I felt the tears fall before I even knew it, the sobs shaking my body, and I couldn't stop them.

"Please, Kaiser... don't leave me," I sobbed, my chest tight, the words strangled by my tears.

"You're the only one who makes me feel safe. You're the only one who makes me smile, who makes me feel like... like I'm not hated. I can't imagine being alone again. I... I don't know what I would do without you."

It hurt so much. I didn't know how to put all of this into words. The fear, the ache, the absolute dread that filled me when I thought about losing him.

He didn't say anything at first, but I saw him shift in his seat, as though he was going to say something.

I couldn't let him speak. Not yet.

"Please... don't leave me, Kaiser," I whispered through my tears, my voice breaking. "You mean so much to me. You're the one who's always been there for me, the one I can trust. I... I can't lose that. I can't lose you."

The words cut through me, and I cried harder. It was too much to handle—too much for my fragile heart.

I just... I needed him.

Kaiser's silence finally broke as he stood up from the chair. I didn't look up at him. I couldn't. I just sat there, helpless, feeling my whole world crumbling.

Then, unexpectedly, he walked over to me.

I looked up, my eyes swollen from crying, and I whispered one last time, barely able to speak. "Please... don't leave me, Kaiser."

My voice cracked as I added, "I'll do anything... anything you ask. Just... just don't leave me, don't separate from me. I don't know how to be without you. Please."

And then, to my surprise, he gently pulled me into an embrace. His arms wrapped around me, and for the first time in a long time, I felt... safe. Like I wasn't going to be abandoned, not again.

It wasn't the first time he held me like this, but it felt different this time, like he was really there, never planning to let go.

"It's okay," he whispered softly, his voice steady and full of warmth. "I'm sorry for saying we were going to separate earlier. I never meant to make you feel this way."

I buried my face in his chest, crying harder now, but somehow the tears felt different. Maybe it's okay to cry. Maybe it's okay to let him hold me.

"I don't want to be separated from you," I sobbed, my voice muffled in his shirt. "Please... don't leave me, Kaiser."

"You don't have to worry, Celia. I'm not going anywhere." He tightened his arms around me, as if reassuring me with every breath he took. "I'm here. Always."

He didn't pull away. Instead, I felt his hand gently wipe the tears from my face, his touch tender, like he was trying to soothe away every pain I had ever known.

"I'm here, Celia," he said softly. "I'm your friend. I won't abandon you. I'm not going anywhere."

I sniffled, looking up at him through my tears, and he smiled down at me. But there was something more in his eyes, something... uncertain.

He leaned back a little, giving me space to look at him properly.

"Actually," he said, his voice softer now, tinged with something deeper. "There's something I need to ask you."

My heart skipped a beat, and an unfamiliar feeling tensed in my chest. What was it? My thoughts raced, but I couldn't make sense of them. His words lingered in the air, heavy and filled with unspoken meaning.

"What is it?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, trembling with a mix of hope and uncertainty. My breath caught in my throat.

He met my gaze, the warmth in his eyes slowly softening the uncertainty gnawing at me. And then, with that quiet confidence of his, he asked, "Would you... would you want to join me? Become part of my party? Adventure with me, Celia?"

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. His words hung in the air like a promise, like something I never thought I could have, something I wasn't sure I deserved. But as I looked into his eyes, something in me knew that this was it—that I wanted this, needed this more than anything.

"Yes," I whispered, my voice breaking slightly, the weight of my own feelings surprising me. "I would... I would love to. More than anything."

For a brief second, it was like time stood still. Then, as if to break the tension, Kaiser teased me, his grin mischievous. "Look at you, all happy and smiling now. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

I sniffled, wiping away a stray tear, then shot him a pointed look. "Oh, so now you're just gonna tease me after all that? Really, Kaiser? What happened to all that 'don't worry, I'm here for you' stuff?" I crossed my arms, pouting.

"I see how it is, using me for emotional support and then mocking me. What kind of friend are you, huh?"

Kaiser's grin softened, and he rubbed the back of his neck, looking a little sheepish. "Alright, alright, I'm sorry," he said, his voice light but apologetic. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad. It's just... you looked so cute when you smiled, I couldn't help myself."

He gave me a small, genuine smile, his tone sincere. "I'm here for you, Celia, always."

And as we stood there, still embracing, I realized... maybe, just maybe, I wasn't so alone anymore.

I was still in his arms, trying to steady my breath, when suddenly—a scream. It was Emma's voice. The sharpness of it cut through the air like a blade, and my heart jolted in response.

"Emma!" I gasped, my body instinctively tensing. Kaiser and I both froze for a second, the urgency of the scream weighing heavy in the air.

Without a word, we both rushed toward the door, our steps quick and determined. I didn't know what had happened, but the sheer panic in Emma's voice sent a chill down my spine.

Kaiser was right behind me, his steps fast and urgent. We rushed down the stairs together, my mind racing, wondering what could have happened. But when we reached the bottom, I froze.

Levi was standing by the door, his cloak already draped over his shoulders, preparing to leave. Emma stood across from him, her face twisted in a mix of sadness and disbelief, tears streaming down her cheeks.

It looked like her whole world had just shattered in front of her...

"Levi," she sobbed, her voice barely a whisper, "You betrayed me... again."

Chapter 34 - Did I Steal Her Heart?

Kaiser's Perspective:

The last thing I would've expected in life was Emma crying. She was the kind of person who carried sunshine in her pockets, always laughing, always teasing. But there she was—face twisted in grief, tears spilling down her cheeks.

Fate, it seemed, had a cruel way of making sure I experienced everything in life.

Before I could say a word, she pushed past me, her hands shoving against my arm as she stormed up the stairs. The sound of her door slamming shut echoed through the house.

I blinked. My mind ran through every scenario I could think of—Emma wasn't the type to cry over small things. She was strong-willed, playful, even bratty at times. So what could've shaken her up this badly? I considered a few possibilities. Maybe she lost something important. Maybe someone hurt her. Or maybe—

My eyes landed on Levi.

He was standing near the couch, arms crossed, looking more annoyed than guilty. He caught my stare and sighed. "Don't look at me like that, I didn't do anything."

I didn't reply. Just kept staring.

Levi shifted under my gaze, scratching the back of his head. "Tch... fine. Maybe I had something to do with it."

Celia, standing beside me, spoke up. "What did you do?" Her tone was calm, almost gentle.

Levi groaned. "Nothing bad! I just... I had to break a promise."

Celia's eyes sharpened slightly. "What promise?"

Levi hesitated. His fingers twitched at his side, his lips pressing together in a thin line. He didn't want to say it.

Celia stepped closer, her voice soft, persuasive. "Levi, if Emma's crying over this, it's serious to her. You need to be honest."

He exhaled sharply. "It's not that simple."

Celia tilted her head, her expression unreadable. "You promised her something, didn't you?"

Levi's jaw clenched.

"Fine... I promised to spend a week with her. To take her outside the town by the forest and enjoy the view there with her," Levi said, watching Celia closely.

Levi rubbed his forehead. "Yeah... it's the reason why she is crying."

"But now you can't?"

"There's an emergency guild quest," he admitted. "I have to go."

Celia nodded as if considering his words. "And you didn't tell her until now?"

Levi winced. "I thought I could figure something out. But there's no way around it."

Celia folded her arms, her voice carrying a hint of quiet authority. "So you made her wait and then broke the promise last minute?"

Levi groaned. "Look, I didn't mean to! It's just—"

"You should tell her that yourself," I interrupted. "But first, convince her to come down for dinner."

Levi scoffed. "Like she'll listen to me right now."

"Then I expect her not to come at all," I replied.

Levi sighed, looking like he wanted to argue, but then... his lips curled into a slow, cruel grin.

That wasn't a good sign.

I narrowed my eyes. "What?"

Levi snapped his fingers. "I got an idea."

I didn't like that look. That was the kind of look that meant trouble for me.

"You should be the one to take her out tomorrow."

I blinked. "No."

Levi smirked. "Hear me out. The quest is immediate. A-Ranked boss. Found in the nearby forest cave. It's nearly S-Rank in strength."

I let out a quiet hum of understanding. That was serious.

"Zain asked me to come. It's important," Levi added.

"That's unfortunate. Still not my problem."

Levi groaned. "Come on, I can't just leave her like this."

"Exactly. You fix it."

He cut me off with a smirk. "You owe me three times, Kaiser. Saved your life, patched you up, let you live here. So I expect you to do this for me~"

I shot him a glare before sighing. "...Fine."

Levi grinned and clapped me on the back. "Good man. Good luck. Emma's not easy to persuade—that's why I'm leaving her to you."

I rolled my shoulders. "Just don't break promises to her again."

Levi's expression turned serious for a moment before he nodded. "Got it." With a lazy wave, he left.

Silence settled. Celia and I exchanged glances before sighing in unison.

"...Are you going to be okay?" Celia asked hesitantly, her fingers curling slightly as she watched me.

I turned to her. "It's just Emma."

Celia frowned. "I've never seen her like this before. She looked... upset. More than usual."

"She'll be fine."

Celia shifted on her feet, glancing toward the stairs before speaking again. "Should I come with you to convince her?"

I hesitated for a second before shaking my head. "No need."

Celia studied me, her eyes narrowing slightly. "You're that confident?"

I smirked. "I'm good with women."

Celia blinked. "What?"

I shrugged. "I've been adventuring alone for a while. I've met all kinds of people— merchants, nobles, commoners, adventurers. I've spoken to plenty of women.

Comforted them, negotiated with them, handled all sorts of situations. I know how to get them to listen."

A pause. Then—

Celia's carefree expression faded, her face turning completely serious. Her lips parted slightly before she asked,

"What?"

Her voice was quiet. Too quiet.

I frowned. What was with that reaction? Did I say something wrong? It was just a normal statement. Was it weird for a guy to be good at conversations? Or was it—

Something in her eyes shifted. A slow, creeping tension in the air. The warmth that usually surrounded her was gone, replaced by something colder, heavier. Her fingers twitched, as if resisting the urge to reach out and grab me.

Her red eyes, usually filled with kindness, darkened—not with anger, but something far more unsettling. Possessive. Her breathing was steady, but there was a tightness in the way she held herself, as if something inside her was beginning to crack.

I suddenly felt like prey.

"Yeah, I'll be fine convincing Emma," I said quickly, turning toward the stairs.

I didn't dare look back.

But I could feel it.

The weight of her stare pressing against my back. That piercing, unwavering eyes burning into me, as if she was trying to warn me not to test her.

Those red eyes of her darkened significantly. There was a certain mix of jealousy hidden in it.

I reached the top of the stairs, finally standing in front of Emma's door.

Levi's house wasn't fancy, but it had personality. The wooden stairs creaked slightly under my weight, the warm scent of old books and faint hints of sword oil lingering in the air. The walls bore scratches and nicks—battle scars of sparring sessions gone wrong.

It felt lived in. Messy but comfortable.

I exhaled. Then, without hesitation, I knocked on Emma's door.

Emma let out a sharp scream from behind the door. "I don't want to talk to anyone!"

Great. Just great. How did I end up here? One moment, I was watching Levi break a promise, and the next, I was the one left cleaning up the mess. My life really is a joke.

I exhaled, pressing my back against the wooden door. "Emma, if you really didn't want to talk, you wouldn't have responded."

Silence.

I continued. "And if you truly wanted to be alone, you wouldn't be crying loud enough for us to hear."

The sobs from inside quieted.

"Emma, I'm not Levi. I'm not here to promise you anything I can't keep. But I am here now, and I'm not leaving until you open this door."

Another pause. I could hear movement inside, but she still hadn't responded.

"You know, for someone who claims they don't want company, you sure are waiting for me to keep talking."

A soft sniffle. Then, after a few long seconds, the door creaked open just a bit. Enough for me to see her eyes—red, puffy, from crying but still filled with the same fiery spirit she always had.

I stepped inside, shutting the door behind me as she sat on her bed, looking away. Her usual carefree nature was buried beneath sadness, something rare to see from her.

I took a slow step forward before sitting beside her, close but not too close. "Emma."

She didn't respond immediately, her hands clasped tightly together on her lap.

"I feel stupid," she finally muttered. "I shouldn't be crying over this. It's not a big deal."

"That's what people say when something is a big deal."

She let out a dry chuckle. "Maybe. But it's not just about today. I just... I feel lonely. Even when Celia and you are around, it's still there. And sometimes... even when I'm with Levi, I feel it too."

My eyes softened. "That's not stupidity, Emma. That's human."

I lifted a hand, hovering just above her shoulder, watching for any sign of resistance. There was a slight flinch—barely noticeable—but she didn't pull away when I finally rested my palm against her arm, rubbing slow, steady circles.

At first, she tensed beneath my touch, but I didn't stop. My movements remained gentle, unrushed. Comfort wasn't about forcing someone to feel better—it was about giving them the space to do so at their own pace.

Her breathing slowed.

"Why does it always feel like I'm alone...?" she murmured, her voice so small it almost broke something inside me.

I let a moment pass, absorbing her words. Then, shifting slightly, I moved my hand from her shoulder to her back, tracing soothing patterns along her spine. "You're not alone," I said, voice softer now. "Even when it feels like the world forgets you, I don't. Celia doesn't. Levi doesn't."

She exhaled shakily, her body instinctively leaning into my touch.

I didn't pull away. Instead, I let my warmth surround her, my fingers ghosting up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. The smallest action, but it made her glance up at me through damp lashes, her lips parting slightly as if she hadn't expected such tenderness.

"You're lying," she whispered.

I tilted my head, my thumb brushing against the side of her face, wiping away a lingering tear. "Have I ever lied to you before?"

She bit her lip, hesitant.

"Exactly," I said, my voice edged with a knowing smirk. "You trust me, don't you?"

A long pause. Then, finally, a reluctant nod.

That's it.

I took my chance, shifting slightly so that we were closer now, the warmth between us growing. "Then trust me when I say this too," I murmured, my voice dipping into something softer, something meant just for her. "You're not meant to carry this weight alone."

Emma didn't respond, but she didn't pull away either. Instead, she hesitated for only a second before leaning into me fully, her forehead pressing against my shoulder, her body finally giving in to the comfort I was offering.

I didn't say anything more. I just held her there, my hand resting lightly against the back of her head, my fingers running through her hair in slow, calming strokes.

Her breathing evened out.

Her grip on my sleeve tightened.

And just like that, her walls came down.

"You're allowed to feel this way," I said. "Loneliness doesn't mean you're alone. It just means there's something missing."

She let out a shaky breath. "Then what am I supposed to do? Keep pretending it doesn't exist?"

"No." I gave her hand a light squeeze. "You face it. And you don't let it consume you."

For a moment, she didn't say anything. But then, slowly, her grip on my hand tightened.

"You didn't want to talk to anyone earlier," I said. "Yet, here you are with me now. You didn't want anyone to comfort you, yet you're leaning into me. You didn't plan for this, but it happened. And nothing bad came from it, right?"

She shook her head softly. "No..."

"Emma, in life, nothing ever goes according to plan. Your happiness shouldn't be limited by them."

I reached for her other hand, holding them both gently. "You care about Levi a lot, and I know you wanted to spend time with him today to forget your loneliness. But Emma... trust me when I say this—one day, someone will come into your life who will make all that loneliness disappear."

She blinked up at me, her cheeks turning a faint shade of red. "What... what do you mean?"

Her voice was soft, vulnerable.

I smiled, a warm and reassuring one. "Instead of asking the world for what you want, ask for what's right for you. The right person, the right moment—someone or something that will bring you true happiness."

Her lips parted slightly, her eyes locked onto mine. Her heart was probably pounding. I could feel the warmth from her fingers increasing slightly in my grasp.

After a moment, she looked away, a shy expression I had never seen from her before appearing on her face. **"Kaiser... would you... would you mind taking me out tomorrow instead?"**

I chuckled softly. "It would be my pleasure."

Her small, hesitant smile turned into something more genuine. "Then... I'll go with you."

I saw the loneliness fade from her face. She still had emotions to process, but at least for now, she wasn't hurting as much.

Then, after a small pause, she shifted slightly. "Hey... would it be okay if I leaned on you a bit more? Just for a while."

I let out a chuckle, shifting to get comfortable. "Careful, Emma. You might start getting used to me being this nice."

She laughed softly, nudging me playfully before resting her head on my shoulder. "Yeah, yeah. Just don't get any ideas."

But there was a slight tremble in her voice. One that told me this moment meant more to her than she let on.

And so, we sat there in silence. Her teasing nature returning, but softer. And for now, that was enough.

Emma sat close to me now, her weight pressing lightly against my side. Her breathing had evened out, but her fingers still clung to the fabric of my sleeve, hesitant, as if letting go would make all of this disappear.

She sighed, her voice barely above a whisper. "You know... my parents were killed by a demon a few years ago. It wasn't a war. It wasn't some great battle. It was just... a normal night. And then, they were gone."

I didn't say anything immediately. Silence was powerful when used right. Rushing in with words would only make her retreat back into herself. Instead, I let her speak, let the weight of her confession settle between us.

She let out a bitter chuckle. "We lived near the town's outskirts. Not far enough to be in the wilds, but just enough that if something came for us... there'd be no one to help. That night, I woke up to screams. When I ran downstairs, the house was already torn apart. My father—" Her voice broke for a moment, and she gripped my sleeve tighter. "—he tried to fight. He wasn't an adventurer, but he tried. My mother... she was protecting me. She pushed me into the basement and told me not to come out."

Her breathing shuddered. "I listened. I didn't move. Not until the house went silent."

Still, I didn't speak. I let my hand move instead, fingers tracing slow, comforting circles against her back. No pressure. Just presence.

"When I finally climbed out," she continued, "they were both gone. Not even their bodies were left. Just... blood. And I stood there, staring, thinking that maybe if I stood long enough, they'd come back."

She let out a shaky breath, her eyes unfocused. "Levi was gone, off training, like always. And when he finally came back... I don't even remember what I said to him. I just remember the way he held me, so tight I thought I would break. He kept telling me everything would be okay..."

Her voice wavered. **"I never cried more than that night, Kaiser..."**

My hand moved up slightly, fingertips brushing the side of her head, a slow, steady stroke against her hair. She stiffened for just a second, then melted into it, leaning her head against my shoulder more.

"No one really talks about what happens after you lose everything," she murmured. "People feel bad for you at first. They offer you their condolences. Then, after a while... it's like they expect you to be okay again."

I finally spoke, my voice quiet but firm. "Because it's easier for them that way. People don't want to deal with what they don't understand."

She let out another humorless chuckle. "Yeah. Exactly."

I shifted slightly, allowing her more space to lean if she wanted. "You never have to be 'okay' for me, Emma. I'll listen. No matter how long it takes."

For a long moment, she didn't respond. Then, she exhaled, something shifting in her posture—less rigid, more trusting. "With you, I feel... a little less lonely."

I turned my head slightly, just enough to see her face. "Then I guess I'll have to stay around more. Can't have you feeling lonely, can we?"

She smiled faintly, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Levi's my only family now," she admitted. "And I care about him. A lot. But... sometimes I feel like I'm the only one looking out for him. Like he's always rushing forward without thinking, and I have to be the one to pull him back. What if one day I can't? What if something happens to him?"

I let her words settle before responding, keeping my voice steady, warm. "Levi's reckless, but he's not alone. You're not the only one watching over him. And more importantly, you don't have to carry that weight alone."

She looked up at me then, eyes searching mine for something—confirmation, maybe. Reassurance. My fingers brushed against the back of her hand, a slow, careful motion. "You've been holding too much on your own for too long, Emma. It's okay to let someone else carry a little of it."

She didn't answer right away, but her fingers tightened around mine. As she placed one hand around me to hold me. The vulnerability in her gaze was something I hadn't seen before—not from her.

Emma was always carefree, always teasing. But now? Now she looked at me like I was something she wasn't ready to let go of.

I exhaled softly, giving her a small, knowing smile. "It's getting late."

Her grip tightened instinctively before she caught herself, hesitating. Then, reluctantly, she let go, the warmth of her hand leaving mine. "Right..." Her voice was quiet, almost reluctant.

I reached up, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. "We'll have a fun day tomorrow," I promised. "So get some rest."

She blinked up at me, her expression shifting, softening. "Yeah... okay."

But even as I stood up, I could feel her hesitation, the way her fingers twitched slightly, as if fighting the urge to reach for me again.

And for the first time, Emma—carefree, teasing Emma—looked almost shy.

"Goodnight, Kaiser," she murmured.

I chuckled, tilting my head slightly. "Goodnight, Emma."

And as I walked away, I could still feel the weight of her gaze lingering on my back.

Good that she was back to her normal mood. Seeing her so sad had been surprising, and her vulnerability... that was way more surprising. She wasn't one to let anyone see her so raw. I never thought I'd be the one to see that side of her. But, I suppose there's a first time for everything.

I ran my hand through my hair, a smile tugging at my lips as I walked down the long hallways of Levi's house. This place... it was massive, the kind of home that made you feel small just walking through it. I noticed the hanging tapestries in the hall, each one telling its own tale from an era long past. The glow of lanterns flickered, casting soft shadows, giving the place a homey but mysterious vibe.

I pushed open the door to my room, expecting the quiet solitude of the night. But what greeted me instead was Celia, sitting on my bed, her gaze fixed on the floor like she was waiting for something... or someone.

I raised an eyebrow, confused. She should've been asleep by now. Why was she still here? Was she waiting for me? Or was there something else going on?

I closed the door behind me, taking a slow step forward. "Celia?" I called out softly, trying not to startle her. "What's going on? Shouldn't you be in your own room by now?"

Her head snapped up, her usual calm demeanor slipping for a moment. "Kaiser..." she began, her voice hesitant, like she wasn't sure how to start. Then, with a worried expression, she asked, "Is Emma okay? You didn't... you didn't hurt her, did you?"

I blinked, surprised by her sudden shift in tone. It wasn't like Celia to be this concerned. Sure, she was protective of those she cared about, but this was... different. She looked genuinely worried. I could see the small crease in her forehead, the way her eyes darted to the door like she was ready to rush to Emma's side if she needed to.

I couldn't help but chuckle lightly, trying to ease the tension. "No, no. I didn't hurt her, if that's what you're asking." I walked closer to the bed and sat down, leaning back slightly. "I just talked to her, that's all. She was... having a rough time, you know? I just comforted her, held her hand, let her lean on me for a bit. She's fine now. Better, even."

Celia's face softened, and I could see the relief wash over her features. She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. "I'm glad," she murmured, but then she paused, clearly deep in thought. "But, Kaiser..." she started, her voice almost quiet enough to be a whisper, "How does a girl like Emma... open up to you so easily? You've only known her for such a short time, yet she trusts you."

I shifted in my seat, not sure how to answer. "I don't know, Celia," I said with a shrug. "Sometimes people just need someone to listen, you know? She was feeling lost, and I just... let her talk. Didn't push her. She was looking for something, and I guess I could be that someone for her, just this once."

Celia nodded, but I could see the wheels turning in her mind. She wasn't fully at ease yet. Her voice trembled just a little as she asked, "What... what comforted her the most? What made her open up to you like that?"

I hesitated, trying to think back to the moment. "I think it was just... being there. Holding her hand, letting her lean on me. Sometimes people just need someone to hold on to. I didn't say anything profound or wise. Just let her talk, and when she was ready, she opened up."

Her eyes darted away for a moment, her fingers twitching slightly at her sides. But before I could say anything else, she scooted closer, a bit of uncertainty in her voice as

she asked, "So... does that mean... you're going to take her out tomorrow? Like... out of town? For Levi?"

I froze, my heart skipping a beat. The sudden change in her tone didn't go unnoticed. Her eyes were dark now, the red growing deeper in her irises. It was clear she wasn't just concerned about Emma anymore.

"Yeah," I said carefully, trying to keep things casual. "Levi asked me to, to make up for the debt. Emma and I are going to head to the forest tomorrow. It's part of what I owe him."

Her face went pale for a split second before her eyes sharpened. "You're actually going to take her out? You... you're serious?" Her voice was strained now, more tense than before, as if she was barely holding herself together.

I sighed and leaned back against the bedpost, trying to make sense of this sudden shift in her behavior. "I don't have much of a choice, Celia," I explained, my voice calm but firm. "I owe Levi. I have to make up for it. Emma will be fine and to be honest I think she wants me to go with her."

Celia's grip on the edge of the bed tightened. "But... you're going to spend time with her? Away from here? In the forest... where no one can interrupt? What if..." She trailed off, her voice faltering, before she snapped her gaze back to me. **"Why? Why can't you just stay here with me?**"

The jealousy was there, creeping in behind the words she spoke. It wasn't subtle. I could hear it in the way she questioned me, in the way her voice cracked slightly. "Celia..." I started, the realization dawning on me. "Are you... jealous?"

Her face flushed, and she quickly tried to hide it, but the way her eyes burned into me said everything. "I'm not jealous," she muttered quickly, her voice more defensive now. "I just... I just don't see why you have to go. Why can't you just... stay here with me?"

I leaned back slightly, my smile softening as I studied her, noticing the tension in her shoulders. She was clearly overthinking it, and I couldn't help but find a bit of amusement in that.

"Celia," I said gently, my voice low but teasing. "You're making this into a bigger deal than it actually is, you know? It's not like I'm running off with Emma or anything. I'm just... helping out Levi, that's all."

Her eyes flickered, but she didn't respond immediately. I could see the uncertainty still lingering in her, the way she was trying to hold her ground, but I knew her better than that.

"You know what happens when you overthink things, don't you?" I added with a playful smirk, leaning in just a bit closer, watching her reaction. "You start losing yourself. And I don't think you want that, do you?"

Celia's cheeks flushed, her eyes narrowing as she glared at me. "I'm not losing myself," she muttered, but there was a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

I chuckled, sensing an opening. "Oh, but you are," I teased, my grin widening. "You're getting all worked up over something that's really not that big a deal. It's cute, but you're making it complicated for no reason."

Her blush deepened when I called her cute, and I could see the mix of embarrassment and annoyance flickering in her eyes. But I kept going, pushing her buttons lightly.

"I mean, you're jealous, right? You just can't stand the idea of me spending time with someone else. It's okay, Celia. I get it. You want all my attention."

She huffed, crossing her arms over her chest, but the blush still didn't leave her face. "I do not!" she snapped, her voice betraying her. "I just—just... don't like the idea of you being out there with her, okay?"

I leaned in closer, my smile turning softer, as I softened my tone. "But you don't have to worry about it. It's not a big deal. You know I'm not going anywhere, right? Just because I'm taking Emma out for one day doesn't change anything."

Celia bit her lip, clearly still unsure, but the jealousy had begun to fade. "I guess," she mumbled, her voice a little quieter now. "But still..."

I chuckled softly, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. "It's really not a big deal. You know that, right? You'll see. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Her eyes flickered up to meet mine, and then she hesitated, almost as if she wasn't quite sure what to say next. "You... you will?" she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

I smiled wider, nodding. "Of course. I'll take you out too. The day after, alright?"

Her face lit up immediately, her expression softening as the weight of her worry seemed to vanish completely. "R-really?" She stuttered, clearly caught off guard by the offer, her eyes twinkling with the hint of excitement. "I... I'd love that..."

The joy in her eyes was so clear, so pure, that it made something in my chest tighten just slightly. Without even thinking, she moved forward and hugged me tightly, her arms wrapping around me with unexpected warmth. "Thank you, Kaiser," she whispered softly against my chest, her voice filled with genuine happiness.

I was surprised by the sudden gesture but didn't pull away. I let her stay there for a moment, my hand reaching up instinctively to stroke her hair. The moment felt oddly comforting, something I didn't expect after everything that had just happened.

But then, as if realizing what she was doing, she quickly pulled away, her face turning a deep shade of red. "I— I didn't mean to... I just—" She stammered, her hands rushing up to cover her face in embarrassment. "I—I don't know what came over me."

I smiled, unable to resist teasing her gently. "It's alright. I didn't mind. You're welcome to hug me anytime... though, next time, maybe ask first?"

Celia's face flushed even more, her eyes widening as she playfully punched my arm, all traces of her earlier embarrassment still lingering. "Stop it!" she squeaked, her voice a mix of flustered annoyance and shy laughter. "You're making this worse!"

I grinned at her, enjoying the moment more than I probably should have. "What can I say? I'm irresistible for you."

She rolled her eyes, though the hint of a smile still lingered on her lips. "You're annoying," she muttered.

I let out a small laugh, feeling the shift in the atmosphere from the tension earlier. "Alright, alright. It's getting late. You should probably get some rest."

She hesitated for a moment, her cheeks still flushed as she nodded quietly, trying to collect herself. "Yeah, you're right. I should..."

With a final glance in my direction, she stepped toward the door. But before leaving, she paused and looked back at me, her eyes lingering for a moment longer than usual.

"Goodnight, **Kai,**" she said, her voice softer now, but with a warmth that was unmistakable.

I smiled at her, leaning back slightly against the bed, feeling a strange sense of contentment settle over me. "Goodnight, Celia."

She turned and walked out, but not before glancing back at me one last time, a small, shy smile playing at the corners of her lips. I watched her disappear into the hallway, her figure fading into the shadows.

As I finally let out a breath, I couldn't help but smile again, the warmth from the encounter still lingering.

Levi owes me for this one. Big time.

I still don't know how he convinced me to take Emma out in his place. Actually, scratch that—I do know. He was persistent, annoyingly so, and somehow spun it like I was the only one who could make up for his broken promise. I should've just ignored him, but here I am.

Still, I won't lie. Talking to Emma wasn't all bad. She's surprisingly easy to talk to when she lets her guard down. It wasn't forced, not something I had to drag out of her. She just... talked. And for some reason, she found my presence comforting. That was new. A little unexpected. But not bad.

As for Celia... well, her jealousy over this whole thing was hilarious. I mean, all I did was agree to take Emma out for one day, and she acted like I was walking her to the altar. I like that she cares about Emma, that she's a genuinely good person. But seeing her get flustered, struggling to hide her jealousy? That was something else entirely.

I guess it's safe to say the past weeks have made her like me a lot more than she realizes. And I don't plan on breaking that trust. If she wants me to take her out too, then fine. I will. If it makes her happy, that's enough reason.

But then...

What she said before leaving...

"Goodnight, Kai."

The happiness I felt thinking back suddenly disappeared with **pain...**

I laid down on my bed, staring at the ceiling as the darkness of the night wrapped around me. My mind played that moment back, over and over again. The same word she used to call me...

Kai.

It hurt. More than I thought it would.

That name—it wasn't meant for me anymore. It was hers.

Elfie.

She was the only one who ever called me that.

I could still hear her voice, still feel the way she'd hold my hand when were just kids, lost and abandoned. She was one of the first—maybe the only—person who ever truly cared for me, who made me feel like I wasn't alone. And now, Celia... she's just like her. That same gentle smile, that same stubborn need to protect me, even when she doesn't have to. It's comforting. And at the same time... it hurts.

And yet, Elfie isn't here anymore.

Because of me...

A weak, useless, E-ranked adventurer who couldn't even protect the one person who mattered most... I was pathetic back then. Because of that weakness, Elfie had to save me... and she lost herself in the process.

The weak always lose. That's the truth of this world. No matter how much you care, how hard you try—if you're not strong enough, you're nothing. I always lost. My home. My only friend. And in the end, all I could do was survive, carrying the weight of my own uselessness.

But never again. I refuse to be that weak ever again.

I hated myself for it.

I still do.

I didn't even realize the tears forming in my eyes until they fell, warm against my skin. The pain never left. It never would.

But Celia...

I clenched my fists.

No one would take her from me.

Not like how the world took Elfie away.

If anyone—anyone—dares to hunt Celia, **if they even think of hurting her... then I'll make sure the hunters won't just be hunted....** If they lay a hand on her, pain will be the last thing on their mind. I'll make sure they don't live long enough to regret it even.

Their suffering will be slow.

Unforgiving.

I will make them disappear.

...

For now, though, there's something else I need to focus on.

Levi's guild—Celestial Apex. Levi dodges too many questions about it. But Emma? She's his sister. If there's anyone who knows the secrets that Sword Saints like him keep, it's her.

Tomorrow, I'll make sure Emma tells me what she knows. Not just about Levi's guild... but about the other four Sword Saints.

God-Gifted abilities don't just belong to Levi. There are others. Stronger. More dangerous.

And it's time I start learning about them.

Chapter 35 - The Wife Gatherer

Kaiser's Perspective:

I woke up with the usual feeling: the crisp air of morning sneaking through the open window, the smell of fresh earth outside, and the faint sounds of birds preparing for their daily routines.

Yet, today was... different. I never imagined I'd be spending my morning with Levi's sister, of all people. Fate really does love playing its little jokes on me.

I stretched, pulling myself out of bed. I didn't have much time to waste—no use dragging this out. A quick glance around the room confirmed that it was, indeed, another day in Levi's house.

The walls were lined with a few rustic wooden shelves, some holding old books, others trinkets that looked like they'd been there longer than Levi had. I didn't mind it, though. The quiet, the warmth of the hearth crackling softly... it felt like home, for now.

I quickly got dressed—nothing too fancy, just my usual outfit. It wasn't like I needed to impress anyone today... well, maybe Emma, but I wasn't going to admit that aloud. The boots went on with a satisfying thud, and the cloak? Always a perfect touch, especially when leaving Levi's house without giving away too much about myself. I didn't need people to know my every move.

When I walked into the living room, though, I found Emma already standing by the door. Her cheeks were a little pink, and she was fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. The sight almost made me chuckle. It was way too early for her to be this shy, but here she was, looking a bit like a deer caught in the headlights.

"You're up pretty early," I said, leaning against the doorframe. "Didn't take you for an early bird."

She shot me a sheepish smile. "Well, you know... I was, uh, too excited to sleep. I've been really looking forward to today," she said, her voice trailing off just a bit at the end.

Her blush deepened, but she tried to cover it up with a small, playful grin. "Well, I couldn't exactly sleep in when I've got such an... interesting day ahead," she said, her voice a bit shy.

I raised an eyebrow. "Interesting, huh? What, you've never been on a hike before?"

She laughed softly, her smile still there but with a hint of hesitation. "I mean... it's not every day I get to go out with someone who actually knows how... I feel, right?"

I raised an eyebrow again, the words catching me off guard. "Oh? So you think I get how you feel?" I said, a teasing smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

Her grin faltered for just a moment, and she looked away. "I mean... you seem to understand, more than most," she mumbled, clearly uncomfortable.

I leaned against the doorframe, giving her a knowing look. "I'll try my best not to make you regret it," I said, letting the teasing tone soften just a bit. I didn't want to push too hard. "But if you ever need someone to talk to, you know I'm pretty good at listening."

She blinked at me, then flashed that playful grin again, though the blush on her face never quite faded. "Guess so. Just don't go getting lost on me, alright?"

"So, where exactly are we going? Somewhere special, or are you just dragging me out for a random adventure?" I asked, giving her a knowing grin.

Her eyes sparkled, but she looked away, clearly flustered. "Well... there's this flower field up by the peak of the mountain outside of town. It's really beautiful this time of year. I thought you'd enjoy it."

I chuckled, watching as she tried to downplay the situation, probably feeling a little too exposed with how much she was revealing. "Is this your idea of making it... intimate, Emma?" I teased, stepping a little closer.

Her face turned scarlet, and she quickly waved her hands in front of her, shaking her head. "N-no! It's just a flower field! I thought you'd like the view!" she stammered.

I couldn't help but notice how she was acting. Emma was usually playful, carefree even, but there was a softness around me now, a hesitation. It wasn't like her usual teasing self. She was a bit shy, and it made me wonder... maybe this meant something more to her than she was letting on.

Emma... she hides her feelings. She likes people who listen, who understand her. People who don't judge her for the way she acts, for the way she teases, for the way

she shields herself from the world. I've seen it before, and it's clear now. She doesn't want to get hurt, but it seems like she's letting me in.

I cleared my throat, breaking my thoughts. "If you say so... it's just a flower field, right?" I said, half-mocking, half-encouraging her.

She gave me a sideways glance, then let out a soft sigh, her shoulders slumping a bit. "What's wrong? Don't you want to go? If not, I can—"

I quickly cut her off with a smile. "I'm fine. Lead the way." I pushed off from the doorframe, giving her a nod to show her I was ready.

Her face brightened instantly. "Good! Don't keep me waiting!" she said, her voice light and excited as she made her way out the door.

I followed her, but just as I was about to step outside, I felt a hand grab my arm from behind.

I turned around, brow furrowed. "What's—"

And there she was.

"Kai... are you leaving really?" Celia's voice had a soft, almost fragile tone, as if her words carried a weight that she didn't want to show.

The sound of her calling me "Kai" struck something deep in my chest. It used to be just Elfie who called me that—her voice echoing in my memories, comforting and painful at the same time. I couldn't stop the smile that tugged at the corners of my lips, despite the sting in my heart.

There was something about Celia calling me that, though, that made me realize how far we'd come. It felt... warm, and yet strangely bittersweet.

I shook it off, trying to focus on the moment. Celia was here, right in front of me, looking at me with those wide eyes that always seemed to be searching for something. I had to do my best to reassure her.

"Yeah, I have to," I said, trying to sound casual about it. "It's a request from Levi. I owe him for everything, and Emma's really looking forward to it." I gave her a reassuring smile, hoping she'd see it for what it was—a favor, nothing more.

Celia didn't respond right away. Her gaze dropped to the ground, a slight blush creeping up her cheeks as she muttered, "I don't think you've ever really taken her out... It's always just me around you."

I sighed, leaning in just a little closer to her. "You're not gonna lose me, Celia. You know that, right?" I reached out and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "This is just something I promised I'd do. It'll make Emma happy. She's excited, Celia. I'm just doing my part."

Her lips pressed into a tight line, but I could see the soft vulnerability in her eyes. She was quiet for a moment before speaking again, her voice soft but edged with something almost possessive.

"I don't want to share you. I don't want to see you with anyone else, especially when I know... I know I'm important to you."

I could feel the shift in the air, the unspoken tension. I couldn't help but tease her a bit, trying to ease her worries. "Oh? You jealous, Celia?" I gave her a smirk, raising an eyebrow. "What's the matter? Are you trying to make this more... intimate than it is?"

Her blush deepened, and I could see the jealousy in her eyes. "I just don't want anyone else... taking my place," she muttered, almost to herself, though her grip on my arm tightened.

I chuckled softly, enjoying the teasing but feeling a sense of warmth at the same time. "You're acting like I'm going off on some grand adventure or something. It's just a walk up a mountain. Nothing to worry about."

She gave me a small, reluctant smile, but there was a sadness behind it. She was really worried about losing me, wasn't she? It wasn't just jealousy—it was fear.

Then, in the middle of the tension, she looked at me with those big red eyes and asked, "Kai... do you really mean it? What you said that day? The day you woke up from your injuries... when you said I was part of your heart?"

I paused, meeting her gaze, feeling the weight of her question. That day had been a turning point. I had said those words because they were true—Celia had been there for me in a way no one else had.

She was more than just a friend. "Yeah, I meant it. You're a part of my heart, Celia," I said, giving her a soft, comforting smile.

Her cheeks flushed, and for a moment, she seemed a little lost for words. Then, her hands raised above her head in a sudden, cheerful movement. "I'm glad! I'm glad I'm important to you, Kai!"

I laughed, the sound light and genuine. "Of course you are," I said. "And just remember, tomorrow, you and I—just like I promised. We'll go out, no more distractions, alright?"

Her eyes softened, though she still seemed reluctant. "I... I don't know if I like it when you're with someone else."

I shrugged casually, trying to keep the mood light. "Come on, Celia. It's not a big deal. I'm not leaving you or anything. We're an adventuring party remember?"

She crossed her arms, still a little pouty, but eventually gave in with a resigned sigh. "Fine, fine. I'll let you go... but only because you promised. Tomorrow, though. Just us, okay?"

I couldn't resist the urge to tease her, knowing she was still a bit upset. "You know, it's kinda cute how worried you are," I said with a playful grin. "Are you, like, starting to like me or something?"

Celia's face instantly turned bright red, and she looked away, clearly flustered. "No! That's not it at all!" she stammered, her voice wavering slightly. She was trying so hard to sound serious, but the way her hands fidgeted gave her away.

I leaned a little closer, smirking. "Really? Are you sure? 'Cause you're blushing like crazy right now."

She quickly shook her head, her words coming out faster. "N-no! I don't like you like that!" But then, her voice softened, and she added, almost too quietly for me to catch, "Maybe... a little..."

I raised an eyebrow, pretending to act surprised. "A little?"

Her arms crossed tightly, and she huffed, her face even redder now. "Maybe... more than a little," she muttered under her breath, but loud enough for me to hear, her words laced with embarrassment.

I smiled softly, enjoying the moment more than I let on. "Celia, you're adorable." But I let the tease die down, knowing it was enough for now. She was clearly a little overwhelmed, but I couldn't help feeling warm at how she was so honest in her own shy way.

I chuckled, shaking my head as we walked side by side toward the door. "Silly girl."

But as I glanced at her, walking beside me, I couldn't help but think that despite the teasing, Celia's heart was so pure. She wore her emotions so openly, even if it sometimes got tangled up in her pride.

I never really understood how someone could be so genuine, so completely unguarded with their feelings. It was one of the things I admired most about her, even if it drove me crazy sometimes.

As I stepped outside, Emma was waiting, a playful smirk on her face. "What took you so long, Kaiser? Were you busy with your girlfriend?" she teased.

I gave her a wry smile. "Celia's not my girlfriend, Emma. But I was just telling her to keep herself safe while I'm gone."

Emma pouted, crossing her arms. "You're just too nice to her, huh?"

I smirked. "You're the one being clingy right now. Are you sure you're not the one with a secret crush?" I teased back, enjoying the way she glared at me.

Emma stuck her tongue out. "Shut up, Kaiser."

I just grinned, giving her a wink. "Alright, alright. Let's get going then."

The two of us walked side by side toward the flower field, the mountains looming in the distance.

The streets of Levinton were as alive as ever, bustling with voices, the clinking of carts, and the hum of people going about their day.

As Emma and I walked side by side, I couldn't help but notice the way the sunlight flow off her hair. It made her look even more ethereal, like some kind of radiant being meant to shine brighter than the ordinary world.

"Look at that," Emma teased, pointing at a nearby vendor selling strange-looking fruits. "I bet you've never seen anything like that before."

I glanced at the fruit. "I've seen it. But I've never tasted anything like it." I grinned. "Maybe we should get some. I can't leave Levinton without tasting the mystery fruit."

She laughed, but there was a softness behind her eyes now. Ever since that talk we had, her teasing was a little more careful, like she didn't want to push too hard but still found a way to make me smile.

"I think it'll be fine without your 'mystery' fruit. Besides," she added with a sly smile, "you'd probably end up making some face that'll haunt me for the rest of my life."

I chuckled. "If that's the case, maybe I should avoid embarrassing myself in front of you. Wouldn't want to ruin that pretty smile of yours."

Her cheeks flushed, but she quickly hid it behind a playful roll of her eyes. "You're too full of yourself, you know that?"

"Full of myself?" I raised an eyebrow. "I'm simply acknowledging the undeniable truth. Your smile has this... undeniable effect on me."

She elbowed me lightly, but I kept my cool. It was becoming too easy to make her laugh, to see her shy away just enough to show her real feelings.

My real reason for this, though, wasn't just to enjoy the day with her. No, it was to make sure she felt something more for me—enough to trust me, enough to open up, to reveal the secrets of Levi's Guild, and perhaps even the hidden truths about the other Sword Saints.

As we neared Celestial Apex, the guild where Levi's notorious guildmates gathered, I felt something shift in the air. Zain stood there, leaning against the stone pillar, his eyes narrowing when he spotted us.

His gaze flickered to me, and a hint of jealousy was evident in his posture. Of course. I could feel it before I even had to look. He wasn't going to let this go quietly.

I sighed inwardly. Zain.

Zain pushed off the pillar and stepped in front of us, blocking our path. His voice was casual, but there was a certain edge to it. "Where are you taking her, Kaiser?"

As Zain stood there, blocking our path, my face grew deadly serious. I couldn't ignore the memories flooding back, memories I'd tried to bury.

Zain.

He was the one who threatened to get rid of Celia, to crush the only person I had left. The same Zain who had dared to belittle her, as if her smile didn't mean a damn thing. I clenched my fists, my jaw tightening, the anger simmering just beneath the surface. But it wasn't just anger—I felt something deeper, darker.

I couldn't forget how Celia had looked at me this morning, her smile as sweet as it was innocent. The way she had called me "Kai," with such warmth in her voice, like Elfie used to. The memory of that voice, that soft, comforting tone, made my heart ache in ways I didn't know it could.

I had been weak, scared, and I had let her go once. I wasn't going to make that mistake again. I won't fear anyone ever again. Not Zain, not anyone.

My face shifted to one of quiet intensity. Zain noticed, but I could see it didn't quite register with him. He was too focused on Emma.

Emma, on the other hand, seemed unfazed. She was always good at hiding what she didn't want to show. But I could see the slight tension in her shoulders.

"I'm taking her to the flower field outside of town," I said, voice low but steady.

Zain's gaze flickered to Emma. His eyes softened, but only for a moment. "The flower field?" he repeated, as if trying to gauge something. "That's a bit far out. What's out there that's so special?"

Emma crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Nowhere you should be worrying about."

Zain's lips twitched into a half-smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. He shifted his stance, making sure to stand his ground. "She's Levi's sister. My friend," he said, his voice thick with something unspoken. "She shouldn't be with someone like you."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "And someone like me is?"

"Someone who—" Zain stopped, his jaw tightening. "It's dangerous out there. There could be monsters. What if something happens?"

Emma rolled her eyes this time. "You worry too much, Zain."

Her tone was playful, but I saw the slight curve of her smile as she tilted her head toward me. She was teasing him again, and I couldn't help but feel a spark of pride.

"Besides, I'm the one who asked Kaiser to take me," she continued. "Not the other way around."

Zain's face faltered for a moment, and the jealousy that had been bubbling beneath the surface began to show more clearly. He looked between the two of us, his usual calm composure cracking just slightly.

"You're trusting him?!" Zain's voice dropped, a barely contained bitterness sneaking through. "You really believe a simple E-Rank can keep you safe? Out there, with monsters and danger? It's reckless. You don't know what could happen."

Emma didn't flinch. She met his gaze, her voice firm and calm. "I trust Kaiser."

I felt a jolt of warmth at her words, but I didn't let it show. Zain wasn't done, though. He stepped closer to Emma, his tone now more persuasive.

"Listen, I could take you there. I know the path better. I'm stronger, and I can keep you safe from any harm. You don't have to risk anything." His eyes flickered back to me. "Kaiser... doesn't know what he's getting you into."

I could feel the fire growing in my chest, but I kept my voice steady. "She made her choice. And I'll make sure she's safe."

Emma stepped between us then, her voice unwavering. "I've made my choice, Zain. I'm going with him."

Zain was quiet for a moment, the words stuck in his throat. His eyes, though, told another story—one of growing hatred, and something darker, something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

But Emma had already made her decision.

And now, as I looked at Zain one last time, I couldn't help but feel the pull of something deeper than just jealousy or rivalry. Something more... dangerous.

I couldn't help but let my mind wander, watching Zain's eyes narrow as he looked at me and Emma. Is he jealous? The thought lingered in my mind, and I couldn't suppress the small smile that tugged at my lips.

Does he think I'm stealing his girl? It was almost amusing, really. But I let my expression harden, my thoughts going serious. It was easy to see how people like Zain operated—selfish, possessive, thinking they had some claim to others. But Emma wasn't some prize to be won.

Zain's voice broke through my thoughts, sharper now. "You're really taking her to the flower field?" His words were heavy with something that wasn't just concern.

Emma looked at him with playful defiance, her lips curling into a teasing smile. "Why, Zain? You afraid I'll get lost?" she teased. But there was something else in her voice now—a slight hesitance. I could feel it.

The softness in the air, the small trace of shyness she tried to hide from me. It made me feel good, but I couldn't let myself get too distracted. There was a prickling tension here that I didn't want to ignore.

Zain wasn't having it. "I could take you," he insisted, trying to cover up the jealousy that slipped through in his tone. "It's dangerous out there. You should come with someone who can actually protect you."

Emma tilted her head, her lips still curling up in that teasing way. But her voice dropped a little, more serious now. "I'm fine, Zain. I asked Kaiser to take me. So, I'm going with him."

She reached for my hand, her fingers grazing mine, sending a small shock through me. The way she held onto me, even if it was just a simple gesture, made me wonder if she trusts me now.

I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze as Zain stood there, frozen for a second. His eyes flickered with anger, but he said nothing for a moment.

Zain's glare shifted to me then, his eyes burning with something darker. "What did you tell her, Kaiser?" he asked, his voice low, seething. "What makes her want to go with you instead of me?"

I took a step forward, styling my hair just a bit, looking as relaxed as ever. I could feel Emma's hand still in mine, the warmth of it grounding me. I looked Zain dead in the eyes, my voice playful yet dripping with mockery.

"Nothing really, Zain~" I said, stretching the words out like I was savoring the moment. "It's just my charm, you know. Around the south of Celestine, they called me 'The Wife Gatherer.'"

Zain's jaw dropped. I could practically hear the air leave his lungs as his eyes widened in disbelief. It wasn't often that people were struck speechless, but I'd apparently found a way.

"Ridiculous," he finally muttered, his brows furrowing.

I smirked, running a hand through my hair with effortless confidence. "Not at all. It's experience. And the truth," I mused, tilting my head slightly. "Kaiser Everflirt, at your service."

I glanced at Emma, and her face was flushed—deep red, as if my words had made an impact she wasn't ready for. I couldn't help but smile at that. She was so cute when she blushed.

Before Zain could say anything more, Emma tugged me forward, her hand still gripping mine, pulling me away from him. "Stop bothering us," she said, her voice soft but firm. "I chose to go with him, so let's just go."

Zain was left standing there, staring at us, his fists clenching at his sides. His lips were tightly pressed together in anger. The tension in the air had thickened, but we didn't give him another glance. I walked beside Emma, her hand still in mine, the path to the flower field stretching ahead.

As we continued walking, I couldn't help but hear Zain's voice faintly in the distance, muttering something under his breath. "I'll make you lose everything, Kaiser... for taking her away from me."

I couldn't be sure if Emma had heard it, but I sure did. I wasn't worried, though. Zain was just a nuisance, and I wasn't afraid of anyone anymore—not even him.

With Emma by my side, the rest of the world could wait.

The air was crisp, fresh with a hint of pine as we left Levinton behind, the town shrinking into the distance as we began our journey toward the mountain. The path through the

forest was dense, sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating patches of warmth that felt like little gifts from the sky.

The mountain loomed ahead, its peak hidden by clouds, but I knew we were heading toward something beautiful—the flower field.

The forest was peaceful, almost quiet enough to hear the rustle of the trees as they swayed gently in the wind. I glanced at Emma, walking beside me. She was so quiet, almost nervous, and I couldn't help but notice the way her hand was still clasped in mine.

It was strange, how something so simple could make her seem so... delicate. But it was also kind of cute, how she seemed to be realizing just how much she was holding onto me. The faint blush creeping up her neck made me smirk.

"Something on your mind?" I teased her, raising an eyebrow.

She glanced at me, clearly flustered, and tried to pull her hand away, but I tightened my grip, not giving her the chance. "What?" she said, her voice a little shaky.

"I just... I didn't realize..." She trailed off, her face turning a shade redder. She was trying to play it cool, but her body language was betraying her.

I chuckled. "So, you're shy now? You're the one who dragged me away from Zain, remember?" I gave her hand a little squeeze. "Didn't think you were the shy type."

Emma bit her lip, trying to look unaffected, but I could see the way her cheeks flushed a little deeper. "I didn't drag you away," she shot back, her voice feigning irritation.

"I just—" She stopped mid-sentence, her playful teasing fading as her eyes flicked to the ground. "Okay, maybe I did." She sighed, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

I laughed softly, my grip on her hand firm but gentle. "It's alright, Emma. I don't mind. But you know..." I paused, making sure she was looking at me, "You've got a habit of stealing hearts, don't you?"

Her brow furrowed, and I could see the gears turning behind her eyes. "What do you mean?" she asked, trying to sound uninterested, but I could tell she was intrigued.

"Zain," I said, dropping the name casually, "he's looking at you like you're the last star in the sky. Do you think he likes you?"

Her reaction was immediate. She shook her head, a little too quickly, and I could see her body stiffen. "No," she said, avoiding my eyes. "No, that's not it. He's just... he's just being friendly."

I didn't buy it. I knew exactly what I was seeing. The tiny shifts in her posture, the flicker of hesitation in her eyes. She was lying.

"Emma," I said softly, my voice low and teasing, "You know you're not fooling me, right? I can see it in your eyes." I gently tilted her chin up with a finger, making her meet my gaze. "Tell me the truth."

She sighed, defeated, her shoulders slumping slightly as she gave in. "Fine," she said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I don't know when it started, maybe after he started the Guild with Levi. It's like... ever since then, he's been doing little things, trying to get my attention. I think he likes me, but not in a normal way. It's... almost obsessive. Like he needs me to notice him."

Her words made my blood run a little cold. The way she described him, it was almost like she was talking about a possessive shadow. "Obsessive?" I repeated, my voice steady but laced with concern. "What do you mean by that?"

Emma paused for a moment, looking down at the ground. "It's... hard to explain," she began, clearly uncomfortable. "He gets upset if I talk to anyone else for too long. He always tries to do things for me, even when I don't ask. It's like he's trying to keep me to himself, like I'm his and no one else can have me."

I squeezed her hand again, my thumb rubbing over her skin soothingly, and she looked up at me, eyes wide. "It's okay, Emma. You don't have to worry about him anymore," I said, my voice gentle but firm. "You don't deserve to feel like you're someone's possession."

She smiled softly at me, her anxiety slowly melting away. "Thanks, Kaiser," she murmured, her voice barely audible. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

I flashed her a grin, my gaze playful as I gave her hand a comforting squeeze. "You'd probably be lost without me, huh?" I teased, leaning in a little closer, my breath warm against her skin.

Her cheeks flushed once again, and I could see her trying to hold back a laugh. "Stop it," she mumbled, though there was a lightness to her voice now, a softness I hadn't heard before.

I couldn't help but flirt a little more, my tone lowering to something more intimate. "You know, I'm starting to think you've got a thing for me, Emma," I said with a smirk, the playful teasing lingering in my words.

Emma's eyes widened, her face turning beet red as she fumbled for words. "I—What? No!" she stammered, her voice high-pitched as she tried to backpedal. "I'm just—You're just... ugh, stop messing with me!"

I laughed softly, loving how flustered she was. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. Your secret's safe with me."

She huffed, turning her head slightly, but I could see the curiosity in her eyes as she stole a glance at me. "...What did you mean by that earlier? 'The Wife Gatherer'? What kind of nonsense were you saying in front of Zain?"

I smirked. "Oh, that? Just a little title I earned in the south of Celestine. Apparently, stealing girls' hearts left and right leaves an impression."

Emma's grip on my hand tightened instantly. "That's a joke, right?" Her voice was lighter, teasing—but I caught the slight strain underneath.

I hummed, tilting my head. "Hmm, let's see... I've held a lot of girls, danced with them, whispered things into their ears..." I trailed off, watching as her fingers curled even tighter around mine.

She scoffed, her lips pressing into a thin line before she shot back, "Oh? So you just go around charming every girl you meet? How bold, Kaiser." There was a teasing lilt in her tone, but something possessive lingered behind it.

I chuckled. "It's not a very important title, really. Just something people called me in the south."

Emma clicked her tongue, giving me a side glance before muttering, "You shouldn't say things like that... or do them. Especially not in front of me."

I raised a brow, amused. "Why? Does it bother you?"

She huffed, turning her head away with a slight pout. "...Maybe."

By the time we reached the flower field, the atmosphere between us had shifted. She was still blushing, her heart rate a little faster, but she wasn't as guarded anymore. I could tell I'd made her feel safe with me.

When I finally let go of her hand, I saw it—the brief sadness in her eyes, the way her fingers twitched slightly as if resisting the loss. It was subtle, but undeniable.

For a moment, she looked as if she was losing something she didn't want to let go of. But before that feeling could take hold, she forced herself to turn away, pretending to be captivated by the beauty of the flowers in full bloom. A distraction—one she clung to.

"Wow," Emma breathed, her eyes lighting up as she took in the sight. The field stretched out before us, vibrant colors of every hue mixing in a mesmerizing pattern. "It's beautiful..."

She walked toward the peak, her steps light, and I couldn't help but follow. As she stood at the edge, staring out over the vast field, I could see the calmness in her features, the way she seemed to let go of everything for a moment.

I took a deep breath, then plucked a white flower from the ground, walking up behind her. I leaned in close, just enough for her to notice me. "You're gorgeous," I said, my voice quiet but sincere, the words slipping out like they were meant to be heard. "The way you shine under the sun... you belong here, among the flowers."

Emma's breath hitched as she stared at me, her fingers twitching slightly at her sides. Her cheeks, already flushed, deepened in color as she struggled to form words.

"I-I... you—" She bit her lip, exhaling shakily. "A-Are you serious, Kaiser?" Her voice trembled, laced with hesitation. "O-Or are you just... just saying that?" She swallowed, eyes darting away. "B-Because if you're j-just teasing me, then—"

I tilted my head slightly, my gaze never wavering from hers. "Emma," I interrupted softly, my voice carrying no trace of mockery, only certainty. "I don't use flattery."

Her lips parted slightly, her breath shallow as I stepped closer, closing the distance between us.

"I don't say things I don't mean," I continued, my voice smooth, unwavering. "When I told you that you're beautiful, that you belong here among the flowers, I meant every word."

Her eyes widened, searching my face as if trying to find any hint of deception. There was none. I saw her exhale slowly, her body relaxing, the tension melting away like snow under the sun.

A small, genuine smile broke through her hesitation, her expression softening completely. For the first time, there were no walls, no guarded posture—only Emma, completely open before me.

"You..." She let out a quiet laugh, almost in disbelief. "You really are something else, Kaiser." Her voice was barely above a whisper, but the weight in her words was heavy.

She took a step closer, her eyes never leaving mine. "I think... you're the only one who really understands me."

And in that moment, I knew—I had her completely.

Gosh, that took a while. Enough with the seducing and charming. Now, she's exactly where I need her to be—completely vulnerable, completely open.

It was all part of the plan. I played my role well, made her smile, made her feel safe, and in return, she'll tell me everything she knows about the guilds.

Still, in the process, I made her happier. Who knows, she might even start falling in love with me. It's unfortunate, really. Any other man in my position would've fallen for a girl like her—pretty, playful, a smile that could make anyone's heart skip a beat.

She's standing there now looking from the peak, blushing, smiling to herself, lost in thought. And I know exactly who she's thinking about.

Me.

But... in my life, I've never fallen in love. That feeling is unknown to me.

Maybe if I had been born under different circumstances—if I had a childhood, a family, a life where I wasn't abandoned, beaten, and left to rot—then maybe, just maybe, I could've felt what love was.

Maybe I wouldn't be so empty inside. Maybe I wouldn't have had to manipulate, deceive, and use people just to survive.

Maybe... I could've been a real person.