THORNS 101

Chapter 101: Inner Turmoil, Mission Start

The air inside of the cabin was cold and damp. Kurt lay trapped in a restless sleep, his body sliding back and forth on the narrow cot as the ship climbed and dropped with the heavy waves. Outside, the thunder was a constant roar, shaking the wooden walls of his tiny room below the deck.

Rumble— CRASH!

"Richard, stop!"

"MOMMY!"

"You called me evil, didn't you? I'll show you just how evil I can be."

Rumble— CRASH!

While the storm tossed his body, a memory gripped his mind. The sound of the thunder turned into the heavy footsteps of his father. The rocking of the ship felt like being shaken by his collar in the middle of a freezing afternoon.

"No daddy please, I'm sorry. I won't call you that again." A little Kurt cried, his tiny hands pushing fruitlessly against his father's chest. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm-"

But his father's face was a mask of drunken rage. He didn't listen. He just raised the broken liquor bottle, brown glass gleaming like a predator's tooth, and with a grunt he lunged. The sharp edge plunging right into the little boy's right eye.

STAB!

"AARGHHH!"

"Go on," his father taunted, leaning in close so that Kurt could smell the rot on his breath. "Call me evil again. Say it!"

Rumble— CRASH!

Outside the dream, tears fell down Kurt's sleeping face. He was clutching and squeezing onto his empty eye socket behind his eyepatch and, as if his eye were stabbed in real time, blood slowly trickled out.

"I SAID CALL ME EVIL AGAIN, YOU LITTLE SHITBAG!"

The little boy couldn't hear him. The world had narrowed down to a single point of excruciating pain. He rolled his head back and forth, wailing in a high-pitched cadence of pure shock and horror.

"U-UWAAAH! MOMMY! IT HURTS! UAAAAA! W-W-WAAAAHH!"

The irritation on his father's face grew; the noise was becoming an inconvenience, a nuisance to be silenced.

"Shut up!" the man roared, his fingers tightening around the boy's throat as he raised the blood-stained shard once more, aiming for the left eye to finish the job.

Suddenly, a shadow moved in the corner of the room. Kurt's mother, Rachel, who had been lying slumped and unconscious against the wall, surged forward with a burst of adrenaline born of pure desperation.

"Let my baby go!" She collided with the father, her shoulder catching him off balance and shoving his heavy frame away from the child and into the small kitchen.

SHATTER!

"Argh! Fuck!" Richard dropped the broken bottle on impact. "RACHEL! You fucking bitch, you're still alive, huh!? Fine! I'll just kill you again! And this time, I'll make sure you're dead! Then I'm gonna kill that fucking bastard child next!"

While Richard scrambled to find his footing, Rachel didn't hesitate. Her hand closed around a long, razor-sharp shard of glass from the same broken bottle. Before the father could roar another threat, she drove the shard deep into the soft tissue of his throat.

Before Richard could recover, her hand closed around a long, razor-sharp shard of glass from the same broken bottle. With a raw, primal scream, she drove it deep into his throat. His taunts now turned into a wet, gurgling sound.

Thud!

He collapsed while clutching his neck as the life slowly drained out of him.

"Haaa.. *huff* *puff*... I... *huff* I need to move."

"W-waah... u-u-uwaaah...."

Kurt's crying had faded into a weak, fading whimpering. His mother, on the other hand, moved with a frantic, mechanical speed. She ignored the body of her husband, her eyes fixed on survival.

She lunged for her purse, sweeping her own wallet and her husbands into the bag. She tore open the medicine cabinet, dumping bottles of painkillers and gauze into the heap.

Rumble— CRASH!

The flash of lighting followed immediately by the sound of thunder, stopped her in her tracks. She peeked out the window behind the bathroom curtain and saw the rain starting to pick up fast.

"No, not now... I need to hurry." She then paced to the front door and grabbed both hers and Kurt's winter coats from the hooks.

When she turned back to her son, the sight stopped her heart. The little Kurt had gone silent. His small face was pale and half-masked in red while his body limp against the cold floor.

"No, no, baby, stay with me," she whispered, her voice cracking with a panic she couldn't afford to feel.

She scooped his small, fading form into her arms, draping both jackets over him to shield his wound and keep out the biting winter air. Without looking back at the wreckage of her life or the man who bled out in the kitchen, she kicked open the door and vanished into the darkness of the storm.

Rumble— CRASH!

"... rt.. ake up!"

"Argh...Ngngh..."

".. urt wake up!"

"Urgh... *huff* Mmnn"

"Kurt! Wake up! You're bleeding!"

"Aagh!" Kurt threw himself sideways, pushing away whoever was rocking him, causing him to fall off his cot, landing hard on the wooden floor of the ship. He gasped for air, his hand instinctively flying to cover his right eye, which was bleeding profusely. As the storm outside continued to rage, the ghost of his mother's frantic heartbeat was all he could hear while she ran through the heavy rain.

"E-Emy? Why're you in my room?" He asked when looking up.

"Shut the hell up! What the fuck are you doing in you sleep?! Here, let go!" She took Kurt's hand away from his face and began to heal the damage that he caused.

"Hm? Oh..." Kurt noticed the blood droplets on the floor as well as the spot where Emelie was healing. "It's been a while since this happened. Sorry for troubling you. And thanks."

"Seriously though. What just happened? I thought you were going to tear your face off."

"Just... a stupid nightmare."

"... Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really. I'm good."

"Are you sure? Because what you just went through is not normal. I'm no expert, but you can trust me when I say, talking about this kind of–"

"I said I'm fine Emelie!" –CRASH! The scream ripped through the small cabin at the same time as the thunderclap.

Emelie froze. Her mouth stopped mid-open, and she went completely still. Her eyes were wide with a mixture of shock and hurt. The silence that followed was heavy, filled only by the creaking of the ship's hull, the white noise of rain and the faint hum of her healing magic doing its work.

"....."

As the adrenaline faded from his system, the look he saw on Emelie's face hit him like a slap to his own.

"I'm sorry, Emy." He whispered, the anger replaced by a hollow, shaking exhaustion. "I'm sorry for screaming. Just... please. Stop talking about it. I can't. Maybe someday. But definitely not today." He said when looking out the round window and into the rain.

Emelie took a slow breath, letting the tension leave her shoulders. She didn't push the topic, nor did she lecture him about his outburst. She simply nodded, acknowledging his boundary. "Okay," she said quietly. "I understand. No more talking. We've all got our nightmares to deal with but just know that if you need someone to talk to, I'm here."

"Will do, thanks. Though you might want to run by that with Diana first. Word is, she gets jealous quite easily and has extreme violence tendencies."

"If you can joke like that, then I believe you're fine now." She smiled as she let go of Kurt's wound.

"Hahaha... I think we both know whether I'm joking or not..."

".... Right. Anyway, come on." She stood up and offered him a hand. "The reason I came here was to tell you that we're about to reach our destination soon and need to get ready."

"Really? What perfect timing." He took her hand and pulled himself up. "Doing good and vanquishing evil will most definitely uplift my spirits."

"LAND HO!" Dominik's voice sounding raw and triumphant, called from the helm. "PIER TO THE NORTH! COMING IN HOT!"

The sound acted like an electric shock. Kurt and Emelie locked eyes in the dim lantern light. The lingering tension from his nightmare vanished, now replaced by a sharp focus for the upcoming mission. They didn't need to exchange words; only a single, solemn nod passed between them, telling each other that it's time.

Emelie quickly turned on her heel and made a beeline for her room. Meanwhile Kurt turned to the corner of his room and grabbed his disguise cloak and tag. He put the chain around his neck and swung the cloak over his shoulders, pulling the deep hood forward until it shadowed half of his face. He checked his fastenings with practiced fingers, ensuring his blades were accessible but hidden.

When he stepped back out into the narrow hallway, the door across from him clicked open at the exact same moment. Emelie emerged, sheathed in an identical dark cloak, her face a mask of grim

determination. They shared a brief, steely glance before turning as one toward the ladder leading to the main deck.

As they left the hatch, the full fury of the storm lashed at them, but they didn't flinch. At the helm, silhouetted against the jagged flashes of lightning, stood Dominik with the now commonly known, Mr. Shittypants. They were already draped in their own disguises, along with the two prefects now dressed as servants.

As their ship crested a massive wave, the lightning flared, momentarily bathing the island in an electric glow. Below the jagged cliffs, a long, blackened stone pier stretched out into the surf, built to harbor ships far larger than their own.

Beyond the docks, the island was locked behind a massive stone wall that looked like it had been carved from the mountain itself. At its center sat a heavy, iron-reinforced entrance gate, flanked by watchtowers that peered out over the raging ocean. It was a clear warning to any who approached: this was not a place for the uninvited.

"That's our target." Emelie pointed further inland. Perched high on the rolling hills, far above the reach of the salt spray, stood a luxurious fortress.

"The fortress?" Kurt asked.

"Yeah. And although you can't see it from here, there's actually an estate located to the right of the fortress. That's where the leader of this operation stays. Bishop Tobias."

"Rumble— CRASH!

Thunder and lightning dramatically struck at the revelation of this news.

"Tobias, huh. You think he's here?"

"There's a high possibility that he is, since the king still hasn't found him yet despite scouring the whole city. But Tobias can wait. First, let's focus on rescuing those kids. Understood?"

"Loud and clear, Emy. Loud and clear."

Kurt tightened his grip on his cloak as he had his one good eye fixed on the fortress. The target was finally in sight.

Chapter 102: Infiltration

The ship groaned as it settled against the blackened stone of the pier. Heavy ropes creaked under the tension of the receding tides, and although the rain was still dense, it began settling into a steady tempo.

Kurt, Dominik, and Emelie stood in a tight circle on the slick wooden deck. The lantern light reflected off their black and red cloaks, making them look like three ghosts haunting the docks. Between them, hunched and shivering, sat their "golden ticket" inside: Mr. Shittypants. A man they had pulled from the steel cage not but a few moments ago, his wrists still bound tight with Dominik's mana blocking cuffs.

"One more time," Emelie whispered, her voice barely audible over the lapping waves. "The plan is simple. We are new recruits. This wretch here is our delivery. He vouches for us; we show them the fake tags if they ask for it and simply walk through those gates like we belong there."

"And if he opens his mouth to scream?" Dominik asked.

"He won't," Kurt said as his voice dropped deep and threatening. He then looked at their captive, whose eyes were wide with terror. "Because he values his pathetic life more than his loyalty to this 'brotherhood'. And also, because he knows if he makes a sound that isn't in the script, he'll be the first one to hit the ground. Isn't that right, Mr. Shittypants?"

"Y-Yes! Just please let me go once you're done with me!"

"Oh? Look who's finally making sense?" Kurt smiled coldly. "I'm glad you're back with us. And don't worry. I'll let you 'go' once your usefulness has reached its limit."

"Y-You promise?"

"I promise."

"O-Okay. I'll do whatever you need me to do."

Kurt then looked around and glanced toward the mast, noticing that the two prefects remained by the rigging. "Dom, why aren't the other two coming? I thought they were here for support."

"Someone has to keep the ship ready for a fast break," Dominik replied, adjusting his hood. "If things go south, I don't want to be swimming back to the mainland. They stay. We move."

"So what were their disguises for?"

"Just in case some random zealot decides to inspect the ship while we're away. They'll say that they're servants/crewmen who were hired to help sail the ship. As far as these zealots are considered, nobody except themselves knows what's happening on this island, more specifically, inside the fortress."

"Right. They believe that this is the place where children are 'training' to serve the chosen one." Kurt mumbled as he nodded to himself. "Well then, let's not waste any more time." He said as he grabbed the captive by the collar, hauling him to his feet.

Dominik removed the cuffs from his wrists, and together the four of them descended the gangplank, their boots hollowly thumping against the stone pier.

As they walked toward the massive iron-reinforced gate, Kurt scanned the perimeter, looking for a weak point in the stone, a loose grate, or a low point in the wall.

'Nothing.'

The walls were smooth, ancient, and impossibly high. The top was covered in what looked to be single row metal spikes and at the bottom, running along the perimeter said wall, were wooden spiked fences. The only feature that broke the horizon were the tall watchtowers, their silhouettes barely visible across the dark sky.

As they approached the shadow of the great wall, the torches flanking the gate sputtered in the damp wind. They were nearly past the first line of defense when two guards, clad in heavy plated armor, stepped forward, crossing their halberds.

"Halt," one growled, his visor up to reveal a face hardened by years of guardsman duty. "Who goes there? This is a highly confidential and private space. No one enters past these gates without authorization."

’Dammit. Why can’t anything be easy?’

Kurt stepped directly behind the captive, pressing his presence into the man’s back like a physical reminder of what will happen if he screws up. He felt the man shudder, and after taking a deep breath, he stepped forward.

"B-Be at ease my brothers." He said as he took down his hood. "It is I, Mr. Shi– I mean– Duncan."

"Duncan?" The guard looked at him from top to bottom. "Wait. Aren’t you one of the members who’s supposed to be in charge of Goboland? What are you doing here?"

"B-By orders of Bishop Tobias, I-I am here to show these new recruits around the facilities. Seeing as they will s-soon be stationed here in order to help with the preparations for the upcoming event that’s taking place next week..."

"Is that right? In that case, you may pass–"

’’’Yes!’’’ Emelie, Kurt and Dominik all internally celebrated.

"–after I see some verification. I know it’s tedious, brother Duncan, but rules are rules. We especially have to set an example for the newbies. Wouldn’t you all agree? Now, hoods down. Identification tags out." He commanded.

Seeing that he was the closest, Kurt stepped forward first. He reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled out his chain with the fake tag attached. After imbuing it with his mana, the popup screen appeared in front of him and he pulled back his hood, exposing his face.

"Hmm. Kurt Rosanna huh? Hmm. Mmhm, adventurer. I see, I see." The guardsman nodded as he scrutinised the info that was shown to him.

’I guess Tobias hasn’t revealed to the cult who I am yet. Lucky~’

"Rosanna." The guardsman looked up. "I take it you know that this isn’t what I’m asking for when I asked for identification."

"... Sorry. Minor slip up." Kurt quickly scanned the popup to look for the hidden prompt that would reveal the secret page.

"....."

"Rosanna? What’s taking you? Show your identification."

’Godammit! I should’ve run this by with Emelie first!’

Dominik and Emelie tried to step forward and help him, but the other guardsman was having none of it as he held his halberd in the path between himself and Kurt.

"You’re testing my patience, Rosanna. I’m giving you until the count of three. One."

’Shit! C’mon Rosie! Think! What stands out to you!?’ Kurt internally panicked as he desperately searched the screen.

"Two."

’Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!’

Emelie and Dominik were readily positioning themselves to quickly dispatch both guards in case worse comes to worst.

"Thr–"

’There!’ Kurt quickly pressed down on the screen. Suddenly, the whole popup started glitching and the screen changed from a blue display, into blood-red which showed new pieces of information.

Personal Info (Brotherhood):

Name - Kurt Rosanna

Currently Positioned At - Eldoria

Rank - New Devotee

Lost Lambs Converted - 0

Leader - Tobias (Bishop)

Mission - TBA

".... Hmph. So you did know what I was talking about. Why did you take so long to show me?" The guardsman asked as he checked the new information.

"... Because I like stalling until the last second. The heart throbbing suspense is what gives me life. Other than my love for Goddess Bula, of course."

"Yeah yeah..." He grunted, and after a few agonising seconds he looked up and nodded. "Okay. Looks like everything checks out. You may pass through, Brother Kurt."

Kurt nodded back and stepped through, exhaling a breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

Next was Dominik. He played the part of the extreme devotee perfectly, nearly going on his hands and knees, exclaiming how blessed and overwhelmed with joy he is to be here.

"Wait a minute." The guard paused. "I've seen your face before..."

"I-It's no surprise, my dear brother!" Dominik dramatically leaned back with his hand on his forehead. "For I am Dominik! Second in command for the prefects! Originally, my job was to capture the ones known as zealots! However, after apprehending a few of our brothers and sisters and seeing the absolute faith they have in their cause... I was moved! I had to find out more, and so I begged! I begged them to show me the light, but they wouldn't tell me! I left lost. Empty. And just when I was about to give up all hope, is when Bishop Tobias showed up at my doorstep."

"B-Brother Dominik *sniff*..." A tear fell down both guards' faces. "I deeply resonate with the plight you have been in. Please, come through and witness the future of the world before your very eyes."

"Thank you, Brother Guardsman." Dominik bowed and walked past him.

"Please. Call me John."

'What the hell did I just witness?' When Kurt looked at Dominik, Dominik flashed a playful wink at him as he slid the hood back over his head.

Finally, it was Emelie's turn.

As she pulled back her hood, the guards both froze. They didn't reach for their weapons; instead, their mouths hung open. Emelie was not just a random new devotee; she was a woman whose face had graced posters and newssheets across the whole world. She was a well-known figure of high society and even higher scandal.

"Wait a minute," the younger guard stammered. "You're... you're THE Emelie Herst?!"

Emelie didn't skip a beat. She tilted her head, giving them a look of practiced boredom. "I am. And like our friend Dominik here, I am working undercover for the Brotherhood. I'm working with Gary and am on standby at the academy with him. Surely the higher-ups briefed you on the need for discretion? If not, that's fine. Since now you know."

The guards looked at each other, then suddenly burst into a flurry of excitement as their professional demeanor evaporated in an instant.

"Oh, Goddess above! We're your biggest fans!" the front guardsman exclaimed, nearly dropping his halberd. "We saw your last performance at Evergreen Park! Could we... is it too much to ask for an autograph?"

The guards began patting their pockets frantically, looking for paper or parchment. "We have nothing! Nothing to sign!"

Dominik, always the one being prepared, suddenly reached into his cloak. "Fear not, brothers! A true fan is always prepared!" He pulled out a rolled-up poster of Emelie and a charcoal pen.

'Is this guy for real?!' Kurt stood with his mouth agape.

The guards thanked Dominik profusely, their faces glowing with childlike joy. Emelie took the pen, her expression flat and deadpan, the face of a woman who truly didn't care anymore. She scribbled her name across the poster with a sharp flick of the wrist and handed it back.

"There. Can we go now?" she asked dryly.

"Of course! Of course, ma'am!" the leader squealed.

But before they could move, Dominik leaned in and reached back into his cloak. This time he pulled out a heavy glass bottle filled with a dark, amber liquid. "A gift," Dominik whispered, sliding it into the

guard’s hand. "The Goddess above has blessed us with the warmth of a buzz on a night as cold as this. Consider it a thank you for your service."

"You’re too kind, brother! Truly!" He looked back at the long, winding path that led up the hills toward the fortress. "Listen, it’s a long walk to the main entrance. Take the carriage and horses waiting in the courtyard. It’s the least we can do for a good man such as yourself."

"Thank you, Brother John. Many blessings be with you."

The four of them, three infiltrators and their shaking captive, walked past the iron gates and into the courtyard. There, a black carriage stood waiting with horses huffing steam into the cold air.

Emelie, Mr. Shittypants and Kurt all climbed inside while Dominik took the reins.

"We did it." Kurt said softly at his two companions.

"Let’s not celebrate too early." Emelie replied as she looked out the window, scouting the area.

"Now comes the hard part." Dominik chimed in. "Finding a way to rescue those kids. All while not being too suspicious about it."

"Yeah. Things are about to get a whole lot messier." Kurt muttered as he smiled, looking out the side of his window. "And I can’t wait."