THORNS 123

Chapter 123: A Brand-New World

Kurt took a confident breath, intending to lead the way, but as soon as he shifted his weight, his mangled right leg gave way.

"Oh shit–!" He let out an involuntary hiss as he plummeted toward the mud. Diana, still anchoring him with her hand, was also yanked forward by his sudden drop.

She stumbled, skidding her boots on the slick stone, but she managed to plant her feet and stabilize them both, lowering him gently until he sat propped against the stone banister. She then sat right beside him in the muck, refusing to let go of his hand.

Now that the fire of battle had died, Kurt's body began to scream. The deep gash in his shoulder, the puncture wounds from Tobias's dagger, and the deep cut wounds on his leg hit him all at once. He leaned his head back against the banister, his breath coming in shallow hitches.

"Kurt!" Emelie dropped to her knees beside him, her hands already glowing with a soft, pulsating green light. "Goddess above, Kurt... it's not just your leg. Your ribs, your shoulder, your... everything."

"Meh. I've... had better days."

Emelie's hands hovered over his chest, knitting muscle and sealing the deepest gashes. "I'm honestly surprised you're still conscious. Most people would have gone into shock long ago."

"I'm honestly surprised too," Kurt admitted with a weak smile.

Hope knelt on his other side, her small hands twisting the fabric of her cloak. Her eyes were wide and brimming with fresh tears. "Kurt? Are you going to be okay? You look... you look really hurt."

"Don't you worry, Hope. I'm made out of tough stuff. It'll take more than a grumpy old man to keep me down."

"He’s telling the truth, kid," Emelie added, furrowing her brow in concentration as she worked. "I’ve healed him before. His cells are... stubborn. They knit back together faster than a normal human. Look, he’s already getting better."

Hope looked at how the torn flesh on his body began to quickly mend itself.

"See?" Kurt whispered to her. "I’m just built different, haha."

The girl let out a long sigh of relief, her shoulders finally dropping. Emelie finished the primary healing, the light fading from her hands. "That’s the best I can do for now. You’re stable, but you need real rest. No more fighting."

"Yes, ma’am... Wait. What about the kids?" Kurt asked, trying to sit up. "They’re too weak to walk."

Emelie pushed him back down with a telekinetic nudge. "Don’t worry about them. I’ll handle it."

"And I’ll help her!" Hope chirped, standing up and puffing out her chest.

Emelie looked at Diana, then back to Kurt. "Go on ahead. I’ll meet you at the ship. Besides..." she leaned in, whispering so only Kurt could hear, "Principal Valentine looks like she’s about to explode at any moment. You’d better handle that."

"O-Okay..."

With a wink, Emelie pointed a finger at Hope, floating both her and she into the air with a gentle green shimmer. They disappeared into the drizzle, leaving Kurt and Diana alone.

The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the steady patter-patter of rain on stone. Kurt looked at Diana. She was staring at her lap, her hair clinging to her cheeks, her shoulders rigid. Yet, her hand was still clutched in his, her grip almost painfully tight.

Finally, Kurt moved. He reached up with his uninjured arm, gently brushing a wet lock of hair away from her face. He wanted to see her properly.

"Ana–"

"What were you thinking?" she interjected. Her voice wasn't angry. Rather, it was trembling with a pain that cut deeper than any blade Tobias had used.

She looked at him, her eyes searching his face. "Why would you go on such a dangerous mission without me? Why would you keep this from me?"

Kurt looked down at his lap. "I honestly didn't know it would turn into this much of a mess. It was supposed to be a quick extraction. And... I knew you were busy. The upcoming tournament, the Academy schedules... I didn't want to take you away from your commitments."

"Commitments? I told you my work was settling down!" she snapped, a single tear finally breaking free and racing down her cheek. "I would have been fine taking a day or two off. I would have gone with you to the ends of the earth if you had just asked."

She leaned closer, her voice dropping into a desperate sob. "Why didn't you tell me? I woke up and the bed was empty. I found that note saying you'd be back late, and I tried to be the 'supportive partner.' I tried to trust you. But as the hours went by, I felt this... this knot in my chest.

I asked Mia if you were with Dominik and where, but she didn't know anything. Only that Dominik told her it was a 'secret mission," Diana continued, her tears finally spilling over, mixing with the rain on her cheeks.

"I barged into the prefect station. I nearly took the Chief's head off demanding to know where you went. He finally pointed me in the right direction... I teleported to the ship and after much searching, I found you here. Beaten half to death. Covered in blood. Almost lost to your own rage... You pushed me away..."

She gripped his shoulders, her head low and full-on crying. "Why didn't you take me with you!?"

"I-I..." Kurt felt the words stick in his throat.

He saw her vulnerability. The principal of the most prestigious Academy in the region, the "Crimson Flash", his precious lover, reduced to a trembling mess because of him.

He didn’t say anything. He simply reached out and pulled her into a deep, fierce hug.

He held her until her sobbing slowed. Then, he backed away just enough to hold her cheek, wiping her tears away with his thumb.

"Rosie... What if I really lost you this time? I hate seeing you like this–"

Kurt leaned in and kissed her. It was a deep, lingering kiss that tasted of rain and salt and the profound relief of being alive.

Diana was shocked at first, her body tensing, but she quickly melted into him, wrapping her arms around his neck as if she were afraid he might vanish if she let go. When they finally pulled away, Kurt rested his forehead against hers.

"I’m so sorry, Ana," he whispered. "I thought I was being noble, but I was just being selfish with my own worries. I’m sorry for hurting you."

"You’re the one who’s hurting the most." Diana sniffled, resting her hands on his chest. "Look at you... you’re a mess."

"Still, I should have spoken to you. I deeply apologise. I’ll do whatever you want to make it up to you. Anything."

Diana paused. She lowered her head, shielding her expression with her hair. "Anything?"

"Yes. Anything."

"Move in with me."

"Okay."

"...."

Diana suddenly whipped her head up, her eyes wide with shock. "Wait... really? Last time I asked, you said you couldn't. You said you had a commitment to the hotel."

Kurt smiled, a genuine, warm look. "I did just say you could ask me anything. I'm sure the hotel will understand. Especially given your last visit. I'll move in with you."

Diana's head dropped again. She began to tremble. Kurt panicked, reaching out. "Ana? What's wrong? Did I—"

"ROSIE! HAHAHAHA!"

"Whoa–!"

She burst into a scream of pure, unadulterated happiness. She jumped on him, her momentum nearly knocking him over again, and wrapping him in a crushing hug. She began to kiss all over his face repeatedly. "I love you! *Mwah* I love you so much, you stubborn,*Mwah* Lovely idiot!"

"Ow–Ana–pain! Slight pain!" Kurt laughed, groaning as she jostled his healing ribs, but he didn't push her away.

"Oh! Sorry! I'm sorry!" she squealed, backing off but still beaming with a radiance that could have lit up the entire island.

"It's fine," Kurt chuckled, leaning back. "But we should probably get moving. I'm worried about any leftover cultists from the estate or the fortress."

"Don’t worry about them. I’ve already dealt with any and all of them. The ones who weren’t killed by you, Emelie or Dominik ran into me while I was looking for you. They aren’t an issue anymore."

Kurt stared at her, astonished. "Everyone? In the time it took me to fight Tobias?"

"I was motivated."

"Damn. You really are a one-woman army," Kurt shook his head in awe.

"Hehehe~ Now, can you stand? Or do I need to carry my new roommate to the ship?"

"I’d hate to ask, but can you manage to teleport us both?"

Diana nodded, her expression turning professional again. She gripped his waist and focused. In a flash of crimson light, the stone landing was empty, with Tobias’ unrecognisable body left to lay under the statue of his weeping Goddess.

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SHWOOSH

They reappeared on the deck of the ship with a sharp crack of displaced air.

"Gah! Bloody hell!" Dominik shouted, nearly dropping his lantern as he jumped back. He saw Kurt and Diana and sighed, clutching his chest. "You two are going to give me a heart attack. Kurt, you look like you’ve been through a meat grinder."

"I feel like it too, Dom," Kurt grunted, leaning on the railing.

The ship was a hive of activity. The two prefect officers who had come with them were helping children down into the hold.

"I'm going to go help Emelie bring the rest in," Diana told Kurt.

"Are you sure?" Kurt asked. "That's going to severely deplete your mana. By the sounds of it, you've already been jumping all over the island."

"It's fine," she said, her voice soft as she looked at the children. "Helping them is more important than my mana reserves." She turned to the two officers who'd come from below the deck. "You two. Hold onto my shoulders. We're going back for the final group."

""Yes, ma'am!""

As the officers reached out to touch her, they suddenly felt a deathly, freezing glare pricking at the back of their necks. They turned slowly to find Kurt staring at them, a gentle, terrifyingly sharp smile on his face. His hand was resting casually on the hilt of his black sword.

The officers gulped and moved very, very carefully.

Diana turned back to Kurt, oblivious. "I'll see you in a bit."

The evil smile vanished instantly, replaced by a truly gentle one. "Come back safely, Diana."

She smiled and vanished with the men.

Kurt turned to Dominik. "So, what are we doing about this island? We can't just leave a power vacuum for another cult to fill. There's probably a bunch of evidence and stuff too."

Dominik pulled out a glowing blue communication orb from his green robe. "Already ahead of you. I told the Chief the mission was a success. The naval reinforcements should be here in the morning to secure the fortress. The two prefects that came with us are staying behind to look for survivors and documentation about this place and the cultists activities."

He then looked toward the hold. "You want to see the kids?"

Kurt sighed, rubbing his eye. "Later. Honestly, Dom... I'm dead on my feet. I need some serious shut eye."

"You definitely look like you need it. However, you can't sleep below deck. It's practically wall-to-wall children. It's going to be a tight squeeze."

"It's fine. I'll just find a corner."

"Actually," Dominik pointed toward the helm. "The blanket Emelie used last time is still up there. The captain's cabin is empty for now, but once the next batch kids arrive, it'll be a nursery. You're better off near the wheel."

Kurt nodded. "Thanks, Dom. You can even keep me warm with your magic during the trip home."

"Sure. I've been nothing but a human torch this far. What's one more person added to the mix?"

"I was kinda joking, but if you're gonna do it, who am I to refuse. Thanks Dom."

The rain had finally stopped. Kurt hobbled up to the helm, wrapped himself in the warm (courtesy of Dominik), woolly blanket, and leaned his back against the wooden wall of the ship. The gentle rocking of the waves and the distant sound of the sea finally lulled him into a dreamless, deep sleep.

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When Kurt’s eye finally cracked open, the world was bathed in a soft, ethereal purple.

He felt a familiar weight on his right arm. He looked down to see Diana fast asleep, wrapped in her own blanket, her head resting peacefully on his shoulder. On his left, Hope was wrapped up, curled into a ball, clutching a corner of his blanket, her breathing deep and even.

Dominik was at the helm, his silhouette dark against the brightening sky as he steered the ship through the calm morning waters.

Off in the distance, the sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, bleeding gold and orange into the deep blue of the ocean.

"Beautiful," Kurt whispered.

Dominik turned around, a small smile on his face. "Ah, you’re awake. It is, isn’t it? Want to stand with me and watch the first sunrise of the new world?"

Kurt nodded. He carefully, agonizingly slowly, maneuvered Diana and Hope so they wouldn’t wake, propping them against each other. He stood up, his joints popping, and limped over to the railing next to Dominik.

A moment later, a blur of green light descended from the mast. Emelie landed silently beside them, hood over her head and her eyes tired, but she looked content.

"Morning, boys," she greeted quietly.

Together, the three of them stood in silence, watching the light reclaim the world. The nightmare of the fortress was behind them.

Kurt stared at the sun for a long moment before his brow suddenly furrowed. He looked at Dominik, then at Emelie.

"Hey..." Kurt’s voice cracked. "Where’s Mr. Shittypants?"

Dominik froze. Emelie’s jaw dropped.

""Oh crap...""

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Vol. 1 End.

Chapter 124: The Rising Sun

The morning sun over the island of Tobias’ estate was a harsh, unforgiving spotlight. Quite the contrast to the storm it had endured the night before. It illuminated the gore in the garden and the absolute desolation of a cult’s fallen small empire.

Chief Hudson stood at the center of the carnage, right beside the pristine marble statue of the Goddess, which now watched over the mangled, unrecognizable remains of Tobias.

A wooden cart’s wheels creaked under the weight of several black-robed bodies, rolled to a stop nearby. An officer wiped sweat and grime from his brow.

"That’s the last haul from the estate, Chief. That makes 52 here and 198 at the fortress."

Hudson clicked his tongue, sounding sharp with irritation. He looked at the list of names on his clipboard, then at the pile of meat that used to be the revered bishop. "250 bodies. Zero survivors. Not even a low-level acolyte left to sing."

He sighed, a puff of frustrated air. "I’m honestly starting to regret telling Valentine about this. If she hadn’t come through here like a localized apocalypse, we could’ve had a thorough interrogation. We could have had tangible leads, we could have known what position they’ve taken in society, their connections... now we just have a lot of paperwork and a very high body count."

He shook his head and straightened his posture. "Alright. Give me the reports. I want to know exactly what we're dealing with before the king or royal guards starts breathing down my neck."

An officer stepped forward, holding a notepad. "First report, sir. We cleared the eastern wing of the fortress. We found a giant playroom. It's... it's unsettling, sir. Hand-painted murals, wooden blocks, but the doors were reinforced iron."

"Any children that were possibly left behind? Any dead remains?"

"No, sir. Not one. The room and entire eastern wing leading to the front were empty, save for a few discarded toys and a single shoe. Dominik must have cleared every living soul out of there."

"Good," Hudson muttered. "I expect nothing less from him. The kid's a pain in my ass, but he's thorough. Next."

Another officer approached, looking slightly green. "Chief, we searched the sanctum. We found a woman... or what was left of one. She was headless, in a room filled with... extracurricular activities. But the strange part, sir... is that there were multiple hearts scattered in the room."

"Hearts? Store them all for the forensics team. I want to know whose they were. If we can return even a piece of those kids to their families, we do it. Next."

"We found the underground cells beneath the estate, sir," a third officer reported. "A lab, mostly. Someone did a number on the doctors there. We're still clearing the rubble from a localized explosion in the back, but we're finding evidence of illegal alchemical extraction."

"Keep digging," Hudson commanded. "I want every vial cataloged. Next."

The fourth officer stepped forward, his expression grim. "The woods that lead to the fortress and back, Chief. We found the carcass of an A-rank monster, more precisely, a Great Weaver. Its lair was... it was a graveyard. We found the bones of multiple children."

"Fucking hell. They kept a Great Weaver as some sort of pet or disposal unit? Sick bastards. Gather the remains. I want those parents to have a name to put on the headstones."

"We've already started the collection, sir."

"Good work," Hudson said. He looked at the final officer, who was carrying a heavy leather sleeve and a communication orb.

"Report."

"We thoroughly searched through Tobias's private chambers again, Chief. This is all we've gathered. Ledgers, names, even some correspondence with the rest of the continents, but nothing substantial. We believe Tobias is mostly a small piece to the bigger puzzle. And this..." He held up a clear communications orb. "Found it amidst the rubble. It's still active, but it's only a one-way line."

Hudson's eyebrows shot up. He took the orb, feeling the cold, oily hum of its magic. "Now this is a lead. Good work, son."

He looked at the Goddess statue, then at the dead bishop. With a sharp snap of his fingers, a spark of lightning jumped from his thumb, lighting the cigar clamped in his teeth. He took a long, deep drag, letting the smoke curl into the morning air.

"Chief!" a voice called out. "We found a rat! Caught him sneaking around the perimeter."

Hudson turned, hoping for a high-ranking priest he could break. But as the officers dragged the prisoner forward, his excitement turned to immediate, flat disappointment.

It was the captive Dominik, and the others had brought along for the mission.

"Him?" Hudson sighed, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "He wouldn't know a damn thing that would be considered useful. Cage him back up and put him on the transport. He can be a witness, if nothing else."

An officer checked his watch. "The mainland investigation and forensics teams should be arriving at the docks any minute, sir."

Hudson nodded. He tapped the communication orb on his belt. "Men, round up at the ship. This island is secure. We're handing the keys of this hellhole over to the specialists."

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The docks of Eldoria is usually a place of salt, fish, and the mundane chatter of merchants. But today, the air was charged with a different kind of energy.

A sleek, white-and-gold vessel glided toward the main pier. It bore the crest of the Myria. A soaring phoenix etched in front of the rising sun. The gangway lowered, and ten students stepped off onto the wood.

They wore the elegant, high-collared uniforms of the Academy, their capes snapping in the breeze. The crowd of fishermen, commoners and merchants began to gather, whispering in hushed, reverent tones. These students were the future of the magical world.

At the very front walked the leader of the group, who all followed quietly behind her. She had long, flowing black hair and eyes that held the calm, piercing depth of the void.

"... Look! It's Ayako Izumi!"

"... You idiot! It's Izumi Ayako! You have to call her by her family name first, Izumi!"

"... The one-in-a-lifetime genius! They say she's already mastered all-known elements!"

Ayako kept her gaze fixed forward, her expression a mask of serene composure. Behind her, a male student with black spiky hair and fire coloured slitted eyes. He wore a cocky grin and leaned toward her. "Listen to them, Izumi-san. They're already glazing us before we even hit the arena. This tournament is going to be a cakewalk."

Ayako didn't look back. "Don't get conceited, Ryuuji. We aren't here for the applause. We are here to represent the Skyward Academy and secure victory for Myria. Remember why we were sent."

Ryuuji laughed, waving a hand at the cheering crowd, putting on his best "cool" face for a group of swooning local girls. "Yeah, yeah. Win the tournament, bring glory to Myria, yadda yadda. Learn to have some fun will you."

Just then, the resonant gongs of another ship echoed across the harbor.

A huge ship banked into the pier adjacent to Skyward Academy's vessel. It was a stark contrast. Scarred, soot-stained, and smelling of smoke and sea salt. The crowd's attention immediately shifted.

"Alright, listen up!" Dominik's voice boomed from the deck, loud and unrefined. "One pair at a time! Hold hands, stay in line! Watch your step on the gangway, it's slippery!"

Then, the children began to emerge.

They were thin, their clothes were white tunics, and many were wrapped in oversized prefect blankets. But as they stepped onto the solid wood of the pier, the silence of the docks was shattered by a different kind of sound.

"AGGY!"

"Mo...mmy? MOMMY!"

A woman in the front of the crowd let out a piercing scream of joy. She broke through the crowd, sprinting toward the gangway. A small girl in the line recognized her and broke rank, her little legs moving as fast as they could. They collided in a heap of tears, sobs, and desperate embraces.

"My baby! Oh, thank the Goddess, my baby!"

Emelie descended from the ship, not walking, but floating a few inches off the deck, her green aura shimmering. She looked exhausted, but she was smiling as she watched the small girl weeping in her mother’s arms.

The crowd, which had just been "glazing" the Academy students, completely turned their backs on the ten elites. They swarmed toward the children descending the ship, shouting thanks to Dominik and Emelie, offering food, blankets, and prayers. The spotlight was gone, replaced by the messy, emotional reality of a rescue.

"What the hell? They’re just... they’re ignoring us? For a bunch of street rats!?" Ryuuji’s "cool" face crumbled into a scowl of pure annoyance.

Ayako, however, didn’t look annoyed. She stopped walking and turned her head, her sharp eyes locking onto Emelie. She watched the way the silver and green haired mage handled the children, noting the precision of her mana control even in her state of fatigue.

"So," Ayako whispered to herself. "That is the famous Emelie Herst. The best, as they say..."

Ayako’s eyes drifted to the ship’s helm, where a man with a black cloak and a single, weary eye was leaning against the rail, watching the reunions with a quiet satisfaction. She didn’t know his name, but in him, she felt a ripple of something... strange.

Ryuuji stepped up beside her, looking at Emelie. "What do you say, Izumi-san? Shall we make our presence known to that girl?"

"Leave it, Ryuuji," Ayako said, her voice cool and commanding. She turned away from the scene. "Whatever is going on here is none of our business. They’re doing their job, and we have ours. Don’t let your ego blind you to the fact that this city has teeth."

She started walking again, her pace steady. "I look forward to the tournament. If that woman is the standard of the local competition, I might actually have to try."