THORNS 125

Chapter 125: The Lovers Bombshell

"Make way! Official business! Move it, or I'll cite the lot of you for obstructing a public thoroughfare!"

Willy, a patrol guardsman whose uniform was slightly too tight and whose patience was perpetually thin, found himself swimming upstream through a sea of weeping adults and bewildered onlookers.

When he finally broke through the frontline of the crowd, he stopped dead. His jaw dropped so low it nearly hit his chest plate. Before him stood a small army of children. Some still being ushered off the ship by Dominik and a hovering Emelie.

Then he spotted the two figures walking down the gangway. Kurt, who looked like he had been put through a professional grade woodchipper, his clothes tattered and stained with mud and dried blood. Beside him, holding his hand with an iron grip, was the principal of the Future Academy, Diana Valentine, looking remarkably composed despite the chaos.

"Kurt? Ms. Valentine?" Willy sputtered, rushing up to them. "What in the bloody blazes is going on here? I get a report about an unscheduled docking, and I find a literal orphanage being unloaded on my pier!"

"Morning, Willy." Kurt greeted. "It's just what it looks like. We did a bit of spring cleaning on the outlying islands. Rescued a bunch of kids. They're going to need their parents to come fetch them."

Willy's eyes bugged out as he looked back at the ship, where yet another wave of children was emerging. "A bunch? Kurt, me boy, this isn't a 'bunch'! This is damn near a small army! Where did they even come from?"

"Patrol officer Willy," Diana stepped forward." I would appreciate it if you could spread the word immediately. To the bureau, the town criers, and the merchant guilds. If any parent has lost a child, or had a child taken by someone associated with the 'Church' they are to report to the docks at once."

"What?! But I–!"

"Please, Willy. Hurry. Time is of the essence for their health. Now, chop-chop."

Willy swallowed hard, nodding reluctantly. "Right. Right away, Ms. Valentine. I'll get the runners moving."

As he turned to leave, Diana's voice called him back. "One more thing. Call for a carriage– actually, call two. High-capacity ones. There are some children that need to be transported to the hospital via the central teleportation circle immediately. They've been through enough."

"On it!" He affirmed, disappearing back into the crowd at a sprint, already blowing his whistle to clear the street.

Dominik approached them, carrying a very sleepy-looking Hope on his hip. The girl was rubbing her eyes, but as soon as she saw Kurt, her face lit up.

"She was looking for you." Dominik set the girl down.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Kurt greeted, crouching down to her level. "Excited to finally go home?"

"Yes! I miss Grandpa. I can't wait to see him. He's probably really worried."

"I bet he's going to be very happy to see you."

Hope gestured for him to lean closer. When he did, she lunged forward, wrapping her small arms around his neck in a fierce, bone-deep hug. "Thank you, Kurt. Thank you for coming for us."

"Aw shucks. I'm just glad everything turned out alright, Hope."

She pulled back, her eyes sparkling with a sudden idea. "You have to come over to eat at our house! Sometime soon! Grandpa makes the best stew in the whole city."

Kurt laughed, a genuine, warm sound. "Tell you what, next time I'm in your neighborhood, I'll stop by. I wouldn't want to miss out on the 'best stew'."

Emelie floated over, landing gracefully beside them. She looked Kurt up and down, her expression a mix of pity and amusement. "So, Hero. What's the plan? I'm staying here to help Dominik manage the kids."

"I'll stay behind too," Kurt said, moving to stand up. "I can help carry the ones who can't walk, and—"

"Absolutely not," Diana interjected. Her hand tightened on his arm. "Not looking like that."

Kurt looked down at his ruined clothes. "What? I feel fine. Emy's healing worked wonders."

"Kurt, the principal is right," Emelie said while trying to suppress a grin. "You look like a high-ranking bandit who lost a fight with a mountain. If you stay here, the parents might mistake you for one of the kidnappers. Or worse, you'll scare the kids who don't know you. Go home, take a bath, and change."

Kurt turned to Dominik, pleading with his eye for a bit of brotherly support. Dominik just shrugged, looking away. "Sorry, dude. You're a liability to the aesthetic right now. Get out of here."

"Betrayal," Kurt muttered.

Diana didn't give him a chance to argue further and began dragging him away by the hand.

"Hey! Wait!" Kurt yelled back over his shoulder. "I'm coming back! As soon as I change, I'm coming back to help! Hope, I'll see you later!"

"See you later, Kurt! Bye, Lady Principal!" Hope jumped up and waved.

Dominik watched them go, letting out a long breath. "Man... I felt like I was going to die. Did you see the way the principal was glaring at me?"

Emelie nodded fervently. "Terrifying. If we had tried to keep him here for five more minutes, she probably would have teleported us into the middle of the ocean. That woman is on a mission."

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Kurt and Diana walked hand-in-hand through the outskirts of the dock crowd. Kurt was still grumbling under his breath. "Did you see that? Dom and Emy were acting so weird. It was like they couldn't wait to get rid of me. We've been through a war zone together, and now I'm getting the boot?"

"You must be imagining things, Rosie. They probably just wanted you to get some rest." Diana kept her gaze fixed forward as an innocent, almost playful hum vibrated in her throat.

"I'm not imagining—wait."

Kurt stopped. He realized the crowd around them had gone silent. It wasn't the silence of respect, but the silence of absolute, wide-eyed disbelief.

The people stood with their mouths agape, staring at the sight of the beautiful, untouchable "Crimson Flash", Diana Valentine. The woman who had turned down every suitor in the continent and beyond, is now holding hands with a man who looked like he'd just crawled out of a grave.

A group of nervous-looking men and women surrounded them.

"Ms. Valentine?" one woman whispered, her eyes darting to their joined hands. "Is... is everything alright? Who is this man?"

"Why are you holding his hand?" a man stepped forward, sounding like his entire worldview was collapsing. "Did he threaten you? Are you under a spell?"

More and more questions started to break out as more people arrived.

Kurt felt a cold sweat dripping down his forehead. He knew how shy and agitated Diana would become. "Uh, listen, it’s not what—"

Suddenly, Diana raised her free hand. The crowd fell silent instantly. Her face was turning a spectacular shade of crimson, but her voice was steady.

"Lovers," she said.

One word.

Absolute, pin-drop silence followed. Kurt himself froze, staring at her in total shock. He hadn’t expected her to just... say it.

The blush on Diana’s face reached her ears. She looked like she was about to overheat. Then–

SHWOOSH

The two vanished from the docks.

The silence lasted for exactly two seconds before the docks erupted into pure, unadulterated madness.

"WHAT?!"

"The most beautiful woman in the world?! With HIM?!"

"Did you see his face? He looks like a ruffian! A very handsome, dangerous ruffian!"

"Dammit! I owe Sarah twenty gold! I bet she’d stay single until the end of the world!"

"Lovers?! They looked like they’d been fighting a war together! That’s so romantic!"

The two lovebirds reappeared in the center of the hotel lobby. The plush carpets and quiet atmosphere were a jarring contrast to the docks. Kurt stumbled slightly, but Diana held him up.

Kurt looked at her, a slow, mischievous smirk spreading across his face. "So... 'Lovers,' huh? That was quite the announcement, Ana~"

Diana's face was still bright red. She looked everywhere but at him. "It was the fastest way to stop the questions! Now... freshen up. Pack your things. I'm coming back for you in two hours to move your belongings. Do not make me wait."

She prepared to teleport away, but Kurt was faster. He reached out, grabbed her waist, and pulled her in close.

"Rosie!" she whispered, her eyes wide as she looked around the lobby. "People are watching! The staff, the guests..."

"That didn't stop you at the docks," Kurt teased.

She tried to argue, her mouth opening to retort, but Kurt silenced her by leaning in and kissing her deeply right in front of the new crowd.

The lobby, which had been fairly quiet, suddenly sounded like a stadium.

"Is that the kid from Room 15?!" a maid shrieked, dropping her duster.

"He's kissing the principal of Future Academy!"

"Yeah! Get some, Kurt!" Darwin yelled, pumping a fist in the air.

Once they separated, Kurt beamed at her. "I love you. See you in a bit."

"He said the L-word!"

"Omigosh! Omigosh!"

Diana looked like she wanted the floor to swallow her whole. She turned to teleport, but Kurt held her wrist one last time, his eye sparkling with mischief. "Hey~ Say it back~"

The lobby went dead silent. Every guest and staff member leaned in, holding their breath.

Diana looked at the crowd, then at Kurt. She leaned in, stood on her tiptoes, and planted a soft, lingering kiss on his cheek.

"I love you too, you idiot," she whispered and put his room keycard in his hands.

Then, with a final burst of crimson light–

SHWOOSH

She was gone.

And the lobby erupted into a frenzy.

"HE DID IT! THE MADMAN ACTUALLY DID IT!"

"I'm telling the newspaper! This is the scoop of the century!"

"U-Uaaaa! I didn't even get the chance to confess to her!

Kurt just stood there, a silly, tired smile on his face, as the cheers and jeers of the hotel staff and crowd echoed around him.

Chapter 126: Wine Tragedy

"Hey, Darwin. Looks like I'm checking out. I'm sorry I couldn't finish out the full month here."

"Checking out, are we?" Darwin smirked. "I'd say I'm surprised but given that Ms. Valentine just marked her territory in front of the whole lobby, I think I can make an educated guess as to why." He leaned in closer, dropping his voice into a whisper. "Are you moving in with her?"

"Well, y'know. I did make a promise to her and all that, haha..." Kurt confirmed, scratching the back of his head.

"I completely understand. If the Crimson Flash told me to pack my bags, I'd be halfway out the before–"

"Huh? What was that? Before what exactly?" Kurt flashed him a dangerous smile.

"N-Nothing! Why would Ms. Valentine ever tell me to pack my bags, haha. Ahaha..."

"Mmhm." The glint in Kurt's eye vanished as he backed away.

"S-So. How much time do you need? I can send the staff up to help with the heavy lifting."

"Hmm, give me an hour and a half," Kurt said. "I need a shower that's hot enough to melt skin, and I need to sort through the wreckage of my new wardrobe."

"Understood. Staff will be at your door at the ninety-minute mark," Darwin said, then his expression softened into something more sincere.

"I'm happy for you both, Kurt. Really. But... good luck. You just stepped into the spotlight of the century. Trouble is bound to come your way once the high society types realize their favorite untouchable bachelorette is off the market. They'll be looking for any reason to knock you down."

"Ooou, sounds fun~" Kurt replied with a grim smile. "I can't wait to knock down a couple of entitled bitches."

And with that, Kurt took the elevator up, the silence of the lift a welcome reprieve. When he pushed open the door to his room, he stopped dead.

"Urgh... Really Ana?"

The bed looked like a battlefield. The sheets were knotted and dragged halfway across the floor, the pillows were scattered like casualties of war, and the duvet was bunched into a mountain of fabric near the footboard. It was a direct result of Diana's late-night visit.

Kurt sighed, realizing that while his new roommate could dismantle a legion of soldiers in seconds, she apparently viewed bed-making as an optional life skill.

'She probably doesn't even know where the corners go,' he thought, remembering her entourage of personal maids and servants. 'Well... I'm guessing she's lived a life where things just... get tidy on their own.'

He stripped off his ruined, blood-crusted clothes and stepped into the shower. The heat was divine. He watched the grime and salt of the island swirl down the drain, his accelerated healing tingling as the steam opened his pores. By the time he stepped out, his skin colour shone and his mind was finally clearing.

He had just started pulling his spare shirts out of the dresser when a soft knocking sounded at the door. He checked the clock. Only half an hour had passed.

"Early birds. I'm pretty sure I told Darwin an hour and a half."

He swung the door open, expecting the hotel staff. Instead, he was met with three familiar faces in matching, high-end maid uniforms.

"Bossman!" Sadie let out a bark of laughter. She lunged forward and started patting his shoulder with enough force to rattle his teeth. "You're finally moving in! I knew you had it in you!"

"S-Sadie! Stop that!" Isabel rushed forward to pull her back. "He is our master now! You must show the proper respect and decorum!"

Kurt waved a hand, chuckling despite the soreness in his shoulder. "It's okay, Isabel. Really. You three can be comfortable around me. I'm not big on the 'master' titles."

"Y-You remember my name!?"

"Hm? Why would I forget?"

"Mnnnnnnn..." Isabel, growing shy, hid behind Sadie as she snuck glances at him.

"Hahaha! See? I told you! The new bossman is chill. He's one of us!"

Yuna, standing behind the chaotic duo, clicked her tongue sharply and stepped into the room. "Ms. Valentine and the Head Maid Wendy are currently occupied with preparing for your arrival. They are... frantic. Therefore, we three were dispatched to facilitate your transition. The carriage is waiting downstairs."

"Really? I thought Diana would be the one picking me up," Kurt noted.

"She wanted to," Sadie chirped, already poking around his nightstand. "But Wendy told her that if she didn't stop pacing and actually helped decide which silk drapes to use, the room wouldn't be ready until next year. She sent us to make sure you didn't 'escape'."

Yuna walked further into the room, her eyes landing on the disaster that was the bed. She turned a slow, judgmental look toward Kurt. "The state of this room is... unacceptable."

"Uh, yeah. That was Diana. She was... a bit rough earlier."

Isabel let out a tiny, squeaking noise and hid her face in her hands, her ears turning bright red. Sadie let out a cackle of pure delight, while Yuna's entire face darkened into a deep crimson. She clicked her tongue three times in rapid succession and looked away.

"I see," Yuna said, her voice strained. "Information I did not require. Regardless, we shall handle this. Move aside, please."

'I get the feeling I'm being misunderstood, but, oh well.'

Kurt moved to grab a suitcase, intending to help, but Sadie gently but firmly shoved him into a chair and flashed him a wide grin. "Sit, bossman. Watch the pros work."

What followed was a display of domestic efficiency that bordered on the supernatural.

Yuna took point, her hands moving with the precision of a master clockmaker. She packed and categorized. Shirts were folded into perfect, identical squares. Boots and shoes were polished and wrapped in protective cloth.

Isabel followed in her wake, her shy demeanor vanishing the moment a cleaning rag was in her hand. She moved through the room like a ghost, erasing every smudge and speck of dust before Kurt could even register, they were there.

Sadie was the heavy lifter. She threw the suitcases onto the bed (which she had straightened in approximately four seconds) and began snapping latches with satisfying thuds. They worked in a silent, practiced synergy.

In less than ten minutes, the room was spotless. The bed was made so tightly a coin would have bounced into the ceiling, and Kurt's entire life was neatly packed into the suitcases that came with his clothes.

Sadie wiped an imaginary bead of sweat from her brow and puffed out her chest. "Pretty impressive, huh?

"I... I think you might rival Diana’s teleportation. Thank you. Seriously."

Isabel turned bright red at the praise, staring at her shoes. Yuna simply adjusted her dress and gave a dismissive, "Hmph!" before turning her head.

The descent through the lobby was a victory lap. Kurt stopped at the desk to shake Darwin’s hand.

"I’m off, Darwin. Thanks for all the kind hospitality."

"Anytime, Kurt. Don’t be a stranger now."

They exited the hotel, and Kurt found himself staring at a carriage that looked more like a mobile palace. It was a deep, lustrous crimson with intricate golden scrollwork detailing the wheels and the roof. The horses were two massive, white stallions, their coats brushed to a mirror sheen.

"Bossman, if you please." Sadie said, holding the door open with a flourish.

Kurt stepped inside, his boots sinking into a plush, cream-colored carpet. The interior was lined with velvet and wool, featuring two long soft seats facing each other and a small, wooden cabinet built into the wall.

Sadie and Yuna climbed in after him, sitting on the opposite seat and closing the door.

"Wait, where’s Isabel?" Kurt asked, looking around.

"Taking the reins," Sadie said, leaning back and stretching her legs. "She’s the best driver out of us three. Says she likes horses more than she likes people. According to her, they don’t talk back or make her blush, hehehe."

From outside, a soft, "Giddy-up!" echoed, and the carriage lurched forward with a smoothness that could put any passenger to sleep.

As they rolled through the city streets, the rhythmic clop-clop of the horses the only sound, Sadie suddenly started to giggle. It started as a titter and grew into a full-on snicker.

Yuna glared at her. "Sadie. Do not even think about it. It is highly inappropriate. We could get in trouble."

"What's wrong?" Kurt asked, looking between them.

Just as Yuna opened her mouth to say "nothing," Sadie leaned forward, her eyes dancing with mischief. "You look parched, bossman. Do you want a little sip of wine to celebrate the big move?"

"... Sure, why not? It's been a long morning."

"YES! Can I have some too? Just a tiny bit? It's a special occasion!"

"I don't see why not," Kurt shrugged.

Sadie practically vibrated with excitement. "You're the best bossman ever!"

She reached under her seat and popped open a secret hidden compartment, pulling out a dark, elegant bottle with a wax-sealed cork.

Yuna's eyes went wide. She grabbed Sadie's wrist before she could break the seal. "Master Rossana, you should know that that bottle is from Ms. Valentine's private, 'do-not-touch-or-face-the-consequences' stash. I'm sure you can guess what would happen if she found out it's been opened by a maid and her lover..."

Kurt's hand, which had been reaching for a glass, froze in mid-air. He remembered the look in Diana's eyes when she became truly furious.

"N-Never mind," Kurt said nervously. "Put the bottle away."

"WHAT?! But bossman..." Sadie’s face fell instantly. Her bottom lip trembled, and she looked like a puppy that had just been told the park was closed.

"You heard him, Sadie."

"Fine... but it’s a tragedy. A real tragedy."

From the front of the carriage, Isabel’s muffled giggle drifted through the window. Yuna closed her eyes, regaining her composure, while Sadie leaned her head against the cushioned wall and pretended to cry.

Kurt shook his head with a smile as he looked out the window at the passing city. The madness of the island was behind him, and a different kind of madness was waiting at the end of the road.