THORNS 127

Chapter 127: Fighting Temptation

The carriage wound its way up the serpentine roads that carved through the Eldoria’s highlands. Kurt pressed his face against the glass with his jaw practically on the floor.

"I didn’t realize we were so high up," Kurt murmured, peeking his head out the window. "You can even see the harbor from here."

"Yep," Sadie chirped, leaning back with her hands behind her head. "Nice to be away from the noise and the smells of the city, isn’t it? Up here, the only thing you have to worry about is the wind and the occasional high-society gossip. Though," she glanced at him with a wink, "I think you just gave them enough fuel for the next decade. Maybe more."

They reached the summit, where a pair of massive wrought-iron gates stood as sentinels. Two guards in polished silver plate straightened as the red carriage approached. Recognizing the crest, they heaved the gates open, offering a crisp salute and broad smiles. "Welcome, Master Rossana!" they called out in unison as the carriage rolled through.

"Haha. Thanks."

The path inside was a dream made of smooth stone and emerald hedges. The path was filled with blooming roses in every shade of crimson and white. Reaching the front, the carriage glided around a massive marble fountain before coming to a soft halt in front of the mansion’s oak doors.

Isabel hopped down from the driver’s seat and opened the door for Kurt with a shy bow. As Kurt stepped out, he froze. The entire staff was there. Dozens of maids and servants stood in two perfect lines, their uniforms crisp and their expressions expectant.

The oak doors creaked open, and two servants flicked their wrists, rolling a plush red carpet down the stone steps. It unrolled all the way and stopped exactly at Kurt’s shoes. Yuna, Sadie, and Isabel scurried to join the ranks of the other maids.

Then, she appeared.

Diana stepped out from the shadows of the entrance.

She had changed into a deep crimson gown of flowing silk. Her platinum hair was pinned back with a scarlet brooch, and her eyes were soft, filled with happiness. She walked down the carpet toward him, moving gracefully.

She stopped right in front of him and took both of his hands in hers, the warmth of her touch seeping into his skin.

"What’s mine is yours, Rosie," she said in a low, loving melody. "Welcome home."

POP! POP! POP!

On cue, the staff exploded. Confetti cannons popped, raining red and silver paper over the couple. The air was filled with clapping and a thunderous shout of: "WELCOME HOME, MASTER ROSSANA!"

Kurt felt his face heating up. "Master? Ha, it’s gonna take a while to get used to that."

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" Sadie’s voice rose above the crowd, her hands cupped around her mouth as she jumped up and down.

"Well? What do you say?" Kurt looked at Diana.

Diana’s composure cracked as a shy pink hue crept into her cheeks. "R-Rosie... such an occasion... It’s not even our wedding day yet, and... All these people are watching."

"Think of it as early practice," he whispered. He reached out, his fingers gently lifting her chin.

The courtyard went silent. Every servant and maid held their breath. Diana looked around for an escape route, but finding none, she looked back up at Kurt. Her gaze went glassy and soft.

She leaned into him... and kissed.

"""YEEAAH!!"""

"Hahaha! Look at the lovebirds! So cute~!"

When they connected, the staff let out a roar of approval. Sadie cheered so loud she nearly fell over; Isabel watched through the gaps in her fingers, whispering about how scandalous it was; and Yuna clicked her tongue and turned her head, though the twitch at the corner of her lips betrayed a rare, genuine smile.

Diana immediately hid her burning face in Kurt’s chest, refusing to look at anyone.

However, the moment of romantic bliss was punctured by the sharp, authoritative voice of Wendy, the Head Maid.

"Ok everyone! That is quite enough loitering," Wendy clapped her hands and walked up to the couple. She offered Kurt a formal, deep bow. "I’d like to officially welcome you to your new home, Master Rossana."

"Thank you, Wendy."

She turned around to the trio of maids. "Sadie, Isabel, Yuna. Take the Master’s belongings to the master room."

"Oh, I can grab those," Kurt said. "No need to trouble them."

Wendy shook her head with a firm but polite smile. "Master Rossana, you, along with Ms. Valentine, are the masters of this mansion. You do not need to worry about ’small things’ like luggage. That is why we are here. To serve is our honor."

"I see. In that case, I'll leave it to you three." Kurt looked at the three maids.

"Good." Wendy approved. "Now please, follow me for a tour."

Kurt tried to step forward, but Diana was still glued to his chest, her arms wrapped tightly around his waist.

"Diana? We're going inside."

"I know, but I'm too embarrassed to move," she muffled against him. "I can't believe I did that in front of everyone. I'll never be able to show my face to them again."

Seeing no other way, Kurt let out a huff of laughter. He slid his arms under her knees and back, hoisting her up into a princess carry.

"R-Rosie!"

"Carry on, Wendy," Kurt said, stepping onto the red carpet.

"The legendary princess carry!"

Sadie's cheering started up again, prompting a sharp scold from Wendy. "Sadie! Help the others clear that confetti before it stains the stone!"

"Booo! I'm telling bossman on you, Wendy."

"I swear that girl..." Wendy sighed.

She then proceeded to lead the way through a labyrinth of opulence. They passed through a dining hall with a chandelier that looked like a frozen explosion of diamonds, a library three stories tall, and a gallery filled with the history of the Valentine lineage.

They tour around the entire mansion before coming to a stop at the master bedroom.

"The master bedroom as I'm sure you've come to know," Wendy announced.

She looked at Kurt, still carrying Diana, and offered a small, knowing nod. "I must say, Master Rossana, your stamina is impressive. Carrying her throughout the entire tour... you truly are a man of strength."

"Well, she's a bit of a lightweight," he teased. "But I think I'll keep her."

Diana giggled, finally peeking out from her hiding spot. Wendy bowed one last time. "That's all from me for now. I shall leave you both to settle in."

"Thanks again, Wendy."

Diana reached down, opened the door and pushed it with her foot. Kurt carried her into the room and set her down on the silk covers, but as he moved to stand, she caught his hand.

Diana rolled onto her side, looking up at him with half-lidded eyes. She slowly reached for the collar of her gown, loosening the silk slightly so it dipped across her chest.

"The house is quiet, the staff is downstairs, and I have you all to myself," she whispered, her voice husky. "What do you want to do now, Rosie~?"

Kurt felt his heart skip a beat. He climbed onto the bed, crawling toward her until he was inches from her face. He reached out, hovering his hand over the silk that barely held her back. He leaned in, brushing his lips against her ear.

"I have to leave for the docks now," he whispered.

He reached down, pulled her clothing back up to cover her chest, and hopped off the bed with a triumphant laugh.

"ROSIE!" Diana shrieked, jumping up. "You... you tease! You absolute monster!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Kurt laughed, backing toward the door as she started pelting him with pillows. "But I'm really worried about the kids. I told Hope I'd be back, and if I stay here with you, I know for a fact I'm not making it out of this room for the next twelve hours. At least."

Diana stopped mid-throw, dropping her shoulders. She looked at him, turning her expression into a cute, exaggerated pout. She walked over and wrapped her arms around his neck, looking up at him with puppy-dog eyes.

"Please~? Just an hour~?"

"Oh my Lord... You're really laying the temptation on thick."

"Is it working~?"

"Ana... No!" Kurt shook his head. "I can't, BUT! I promise you... I am yours for the entire night. No interruptions. And I'll be there when you wake up in the morning. And many mornings after that, ok?"

"You promise?" she asked, her voice small.

"I promise."

"Okay," she sighed, letting go. "Go on then. But I'm going to spend the next few hours thinking of ways to make you regret leaving." She gave him a playful, predatory wink. "And save your stamina. You'll need it."

"Uhm, can you teleport me?" Kurt asked hopefully.

"Nope!" she chirped, flopping back onto the bed. "I'm saving my stamina for later tonight~"

"Alright, alright." he laughed and ducked out of the room. He then made his way back to the courtyard, where he found Sadie sitting on the edge of the fountain, swinging her legs.

"Hey, bossman! Done already?" she teased. "That was quick. Should I be worried for bosslady?"

"Ha. Ha. I'm heading back to the docks for some quick business. What are you doing out here?"

"Skipping wo– AHEM! I'm on my break," Sadie said, hopping down. "But I'm bored. Mind if I tag along? I heard what happened at the docks. I can help with the kids. I'm great with rugrats."

"Sure. I'd appreciate the company."

Sadie signaled a stablehand. "Hey! Hitch the carriage back up! The bossman has business at the pier!"

"Yes, Master Rossana!"

Together, they climbed into the carriage. As they rolled back out through the iron gates, Kurt looked out the window. He was a master of a mansion, a hero of the city(?), and the lover of a legend. But as he looked at the city and beyond, he felt as if the real work was only just beginning.

Chapter 128: Hope's hope

Light grey skies of the afternoon had begun to darken by the encroaching slate-grey clouds. A winter-tinged breeze swept in from the sea, carrying the scent of salt and impending rain.

As the red-and-golden carriage approached the final thoroughfare leading to the docks, Kurt tapped on the partition.

"Stop here, please. Near the entrance."

The carriage carried on until slowly coming to a halt. Sadie blinked at him, furrowing her brow.

"Why? We're still a good five minutes' walk from the pier. We can just roll right up to the ship."

"Attention is going to be unavoidable from here on out, Sadie. But I'd still rather not cause a scene wherever I can help it. Pulling up in Diana's personal transport is like lighting a flare in a dark room."

Sadie snorted, hopping out after him. "Bossman, have you been watching your surroundings? We've been getting looks since entering the city and leaving. Look over there." She pointed toward the residential row where a group of dockworkers and laundry women were huddled.

"... Is that Ms. Valentine's carriage? But she isn't inside..."

"... Wait, look at the man. Doesn't he look familiar?"

"... It's him! The homeless man that was with her before! They're calling him Ms. Valentine called him her 'Lover' earlier this afternoon!"

Kurt heard a woman gasp loudly. "Goodness, look at him now. Without the rags and the blood... he's actually quite handsome."

"And look at the girl with him," another whispered. "That uniform... she's one of Ms. Valentine's maids. It has to be true then!"

Sadie thrived under the scrutiny. She straightened her apron, puffed out her chest, and walked with an exaggerated, elegant gait, clearly reveling in the reflected spotlight. Kurt, meanwhile, simply maintained a cool, steady pace as he walked along.

When they reached the main pier, the scene was still hectic, but more organized. Temporary medical tents had been erected, and the local guard was busy cataloging the children. The first familiar person Kurt spotted was Emelie, who was currently levitating a crate of warm blankets toward a group of shivering kids.

Sadie’s eyes went wide. She grabbed Kurt’s sleeve, her voice dropping to a frantic, starstruck whisper. "Oh my gods, it’s her. THE Emelie Herst. She’s... she’s even cooler in person!"

Kurt glanced at her with a playful smirk. "You’re a fan of Emy too?"

"How can I not be?" Sadie hissed. "She’s a high-tier combat mage who destroys anyone who challenges her! She doesn’t answer to any snarky noble yet is still so humble to ordinary folk. Even bosslady say’s she’ll grow stronger than herself one day! She’s too cool for words! Also what!? Why’re you calling her Emy

!"

"Hey, Emy!" Kurt called out, waving his hand.

"No, bossman!" Sadie squeaked, frantically trying to hide behind his back. "What are you doing? Can’t you see she’s busy with important stuff? Don’t bother her!"

"It’s fine, Sadie. Relax."

"Well, look at you." Emelie softly landed in front of him. "Clean, dressed, and actually looking like a functional member of society. Much better than the ’beaten-to-pulp’ look you were rocking this morning."

"I’ve got a reputation to uphold now," Kurt joked. He felt a tug on his shirt and stepped to the side, exposing a trembling Sadie who was trying to merge with his shadow. "I brought a fan along."

Sadie stood frozen, her face a mask of panicked adoration.

Emelie looked at the maid, then narrowed her eyes slightly. "Sadie?"

"Y-You... You know my name?" Sadie’s mouth fell open.

Emelie blinked, looking a bit caught out. She flicked her gaze toward Kurt before looking back at Sadie.

"Uh, yeah. I might have heard Principal Valentine mention you once or twice in passing, hahaha..."

Sadie’s face lit up like a festival lantern. "She talks about me? Really?"

"Kurt," Emelie quickly shifted topics. "We’ve got a problem. It’s about Hope."

"Hm? What happened?"

"I’m sorry I didn’t mention this earlier, but Hope–"

Right as she spoke, Dominik approached from the medical tent, his face grim. Hope was walking beside him, her small hand clutching the hem of his robes. The moment she saw Kurt, she let go of Dominik and sprinted toward him, burying her face against his thigh.

"Whoa! Hey there. What are you still doing here, Hope? Didn’t your grandpa come to fetch you yet?"

Hope didn’t answer. She just shook her head against his leg, her small frame beginning to tremble.

Kurt looked up at Dominik and Emelie. "What is it?"

"Kurt," Dominik said, unusually quiet. "Her grandpa... is Peter."

The world seemed to go still in that moment. Peter. The man who he had approached in the park. The man who tried warning the people about the cult and missing children. The man who had his head blown off because of him.

It was indirectly Kurt’s fault. If he hadn’t been seen with the old priest, speaking about the cult, they might have ignored the old man. According to Emelie, Peter at least lived long enough to help her in rescuing the children.

"Kurt?" Hope looked up, her blue eyes swimming with tears. "Where is he? Why hasn't he come?"

Kurt felt a lump form in his throat. How could he tell her? How could he look into those innocent eyes and admit that the man who loved her was dead because of him? Should he lie again? Just like what he did to Rupee?

"Hope," he started, his voice thick. "Do you... do you have any other family? An aunt? A cousin?"

Hope shook her head again, burying her face back into his thigh. "No. Just Grandpa. He's all I have."

Kurt looked at Emelie and Dominik. They were both watching him, waiting. He saw the pity in their eyes, and it fueled a sudden, painful resolve. He couldn't lie to her. She deserved the truth, no matter how much it cut.

He knelt so he was at eye level with the girl. "Hope, look at me."

She looked up, sniffing.

"How old are you now? Eight?"

"I'm ten... and a half," she whispered.

"The half is pretty important. You're a big girl, huh?" Kurt said, his hand resting gently on her head. "So I'm going to tell you the truth. Your grandpa... he passed away, Hope. He's gone."

"... Huh?" The color drained from her face "No... he was fine! He was okay when I left!"

The pain in her eyes was getting too much for Kurt to bear. He was once again about to lie. 'Natural Causes'. A merciful lie to soften the blow, but Emelie stepped forward, her voice firm.

"He was murdered, Hope."

"Emy! "Why would you–"

"Because she's a survivor of a cult, Kurt." Emelie countered. "She knows what monsters look like. Man and creature. It's best she knows the truth, so she'll know he died because the world is cruel, and that it wasn't her fault... I'm sorry, Hope."

Kurt was about to reprimand her again, but a small, broken sniffle stopped him.

"G-Grandpa is *sniff*... dead? U-Uaaaa uaaaa! Grandpa! Buaaa!"

Hope began to cry. It started as a quiet wheeze and escalated into a full, heartbroken sob. She collapsed into Kurt's arms, wailing for the only person who had ever cared for her. Kurt held her tight, his own eye stinging. He rubbed her back, whispering words of comfort.

"He was a hero, Hope," Kurt whispered into her hair. "I met him once. He told me he knew you were in danger, and he did everything he could to find you. If it wasn't for your grandpa, I never would have known where you were. He saved you."

"Grandpa! Waaah uaaaa!"

After several minutes, Hope's sobs subsided into jagged, wet breaths. Kurt looked over her head at Dominik.

"What happens now? What's the protocol?"

Dominik sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "She's an orphan now, Kurt. Legally, she has to go to the orphanage for processing."

Hope flinched in Kurt's arms, her gripping tightly on to his clothes.

"It’s okay, Hope," Kurt said softly. "I know some of the people there. They’re kind. And you’ll make lots of friends–"

"Kurt, stop," Dominik interrupted. "The orphanage you’re thinking of is full. Beyond full. Between the cult’s victims and the many unfit parents from the rural skirmishes... There’s no room."

"So what? You’re going to ship her off to a work camp?"

"No," Dominik said. "She’ll have to go to a special institution that’s about a day’s travel away. It’s... isolated, but they can accommodate well over 2000 children."

"I don’t want to go!" Hope cried, her voice muffled by Kurt’s chest. "I want to stay with you! Please don’t send me away!"

Kurt looked at the little girl and felt his heart fracturing. He wanted to take her. He wanted to say the words. But he was really sure he should. He had no job, a mountain of trauma, and knew next to nothing about how this world functioned. Not to mention the cult is targeting him.

"I... I can’–"

"Actually," Sadie chimed in, stepping forward. The starstruck maid had vanished, replaced by a woman who had clearly been watching the situation with a sharp eye. "He can take her. Just not as a daughter."

Kurt looked at her, perplexed. "What are you talking about?"

"Hire her," Sadie said simply. "At the mansion. We’re short-staffed in the gardens and the light cleaning crew anyway. If you hire her as a junior maid, she stays at the mansion, she gets a wage, and she has a roof over her head. It bypasses the orphanage and adoption system entirely."

"She’s ten, Sadie!" Kurt hissed. "I’m not putting a ten-year-old to work!"

"You forgot the ’half’ part. Just think of it as an apprenticeship. It’s better than an institution miles away from nowhere. As for her schooling, we have many staff willing to teach her. Or we can escort her to her local school. It’s her choice."

Sadie looked at Hope. "Would you rather scrub a floor once a day at the mansion and stay with Bossman, or go to a big building far away with strangers?"

Hope looked up, her eyes red-rimmed and pleading. "I want to be with Kurt. I’ll scrub the whole house! I’ll be the best maid ever!"

Kurt looked at Emelie, who gave a slow, supportive nod. He looked at Dominik, who looked relieved that the paperwork might just disappear. Finally, he looked back down at Hope. Her face was full of sorrow, but there was a spark of desperate hope that he couldn’t extinguish.

"Fine. If Diana agrees... and I suspect she will... then you’re coming with us."

Dominik, Emelie, and Sadie all let out a simultaneous sigh of relief.

"Kurt!" Hope let out a tiny shriek of joy, crashing into him and hugging him so hard he nearly tipped over. She started crying again, but this time, the tears weren’t just for the man she had lost.

They were for the new family she had just found.