THORNS 129

Chapter 129: New Friend

"Hope, can you go with Sadie to the carriage?" Kurt asked softly. "I have a few things I need to discuss with my friends before we head back. I'll be there in five minutes, and then we're going home."

"Ok!" Hope nodded, her small face was still blotchy from tears but her expression much brighter.

She took Sadie's hand, trusting the boisterous maid instinctively. As they walked away, Kurt caught the tail end of their conversation.

"... Now, listen here, kiddo. Since you're coming to the mansion to be a little maid, you've gotta learn the rules. You can't just call him 'Kurt' anymore. You have to call him Master Rossana or be like me and call him Bossman."

"... Bossman? Hehehe, that sounds funny."

Sadie's laugh was cut off as they rounded the corner of a stack of crates, leaving Kurt alone with Dominik and Emelie.

Dominik let out a long breath as he stretched his limbs. "Well, with that settled, I'm heading out. I need to finish escorting the rest of these kids to the community center. Some of the parents might not make it until the middle of the night or later, and I'm not letting them sit out here in the storm."

He gave Kurt a firm nod and Emelie a tired wave. "See you both later. Try to stay out of trouble for at least twelve hours, Kurt."

"No promises, Dom." Kurt smiled as he watched him leave.

Once Dominik was out of earshot, the atmosphere between himself and Emelie shifted.

"Emy, is it really over? With Tobias, I mean. Are there any loose ends? Any parts of his plan for the children that we might have missed?"

"No. It’s done, Kurt. Tobias was... well, he was pretty incompetent, truth be told. He was low on the power rankings within the cult. His little ’extraction’ and ’show’ project died with him and his blood alchemists."

"Well, if he was part of a larger group, won’t they send someone to avenge him? Or to finish what he started?"

"The cult doesn’t waste their time or resources on failures. Tobias was worthless to them from the start and died to them the moment he let his ’brothers’ die. Let’s not forget that little stunt he pulled at the king’s palace. They’ll likely scrub his name from their records and move on like he never existed."

"Harsh... Oh yeah. Violet mentioned something to me. She talked about a place. The Sanctuary. What is it?"

Emelie’s posture went rigid, and the casual weariness in her eyes vanished.

"Stop right there, Kurt. Do not even think about The Sanctuary. Not now. Not for a long time."

"But, why–"

"It is effectively the cultists’ paradise," Emelie interjected, her hands beginning to glow with a faint, nervous hum of mana. "It is their main place of operations, their holy ground, and their fortress. It is a place, Kurt, that you, not even I, are not even remotely ready to take on."

"But if you know where it is and how they operate, then we can plan. We can get manpower. An infiltration mission, like this one, but with proper preparation. We can nip the whole–"

"Kurt, I am begging you," Emelie’s voice trembled with an intensity he hadn’t seen before. "Please. Neither I, nor anyone I know, can currently take on the Sanctuary. It’s not just a base; it’s a death trap guarded by things that make the Great Weaver look like a house spider."

"Currently?"

"... I don’t know if we ever will be. The Sanctuary should be our Endgame. It is far too early to focus on them. For now, we should keep getting stronger and ruining their smaller plans. We chip away at the edges. We don’t go straight for the throat when the beast is a hundred times our size, ok?"

Kurt went silent, absorbing the weight of her warning. He trusted Emelie’s judgment on magic and the cult more than anyone else’s.

"Alright. I understand. So, what now?"

"Now? We have a grace period," Emelie said, regaining some of her composure. "We’ve dealt with Tobias. The cult will be reeling and reorganizing. Stay low and live your life with the principal. I’ll tell you about our next move after the Academy tournament is over."

"Sure. And I’ll even be there to come cheer you on."

A sudden commotion broke out near the entrance of the pier. The sound of heavy hooves and wood clattering against stone drew their attention. A dark blue carriage with silver embellishments pulled through the gates, clearing the crowd with an air of immense self-importance.

"Oh no. Not now." Emelie’s face went pale.

The carriage hissed to a stop, and the door swung open before the footman could even reach it. A man jumped out; Tall, elegant, and possessing similar features to that of Emelie’s. He scanned the pier with frantic energy until his eyes landed on her.

"EMELIE! THERE YOU ARE!"

He sprinted toward them, his cloak billowing behind him. Before Emelie could even move, he had scooped her up into a massive, suffocating hug, spinning her around.

"My little sister! My precious, talented, tiny Emelie! I finally get to see you again!"

He began doting on her, rubbing his cheeks on hers, checking her face for scratches and smoothing her hair while Emelie looked like she wanted to evaporate into the void.

"Who... is this?" Kurt asked, genuinely baffled by the man's explosive personality.

Emelie tried to push him away, her face bright red. "Kurt, this is–"

"Everett!" the man interrupted, spinning around and striking a pose. "Everett Herst, Emelie's much more handsome and protective older brother. And who might you be?"

Kurt was taken aback by the man's boisterous energy but extended a hand politely. "I'm Kurt. A... friend of Emy's. Nice to meet you."

"'Emy', you say?" Everett looked at Kurt's hand, then at Kurt's face, then back at his hand. He didn't take it. Instead, he leaned in, his eyes narrowed.

"A friend? Just a friend? Because I hope for your sake that it's not 'boyfriend,' otherwise I'm going to have to kill you right here on this pier. Nobody is good enough for my sister. Especially not some ugly pirate wannabe."

Kurt's temper flared, his hand tightening into a fist, but Emelie stepped between them. "Everett, stop! Kurt is my friend. Nothing more." She sighed, rubbing her temples. "What are you even doing here?"

"Mother was worried!" Everett cried, clutching his heart. "You were supposed to be home days ago! When we heard you were at the docks dealing with a crisis, I came to pick you up personally."

"Of course you did." She rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'm leaving now."

She then turned to Kurt, softening her expression for a brief second. "Remember what I told you. Lay low."

Kurt affirmed with a nod, watching as Emelie walked toward the blue carriage. Everett, however, didn't follow her immediately. He stayed behind, staring at Kurt with a look that had shifted from boisterous to deathly cold in the span of a heartbeat.

"What's the problem?" Kurt asked flat. "I already told you, we're just friends."

Everett suddenly smiled, a bright, artificial thing that didn't reach his eyes, and extended his hand. Kurt was confused by the sudden shift but took it anyway.

The moment their palms connected, Everett's grip turned into a crushing vice. He yanked Kurt forward, leaning into his ear.

"Stay away from Diana Valentine," he whispered, dripping his voice with a calculated, frozen malice. "She is far above your station, stray dog. Don't think for a second that just because she called you 'Lovers' makes you her equal."

Kurt's eye turned sharp and dangerous. The air around them seemed to thicken with killing intent. Everett, satisfied with the warning he gave, tried to pull his hand away, but Kurt didn't let go.

He tightened his own grip.

The sound of Everett's knuckles grinding together was audible over the crashing waves. Kurt's smile grew wider, his expression radiating a terrifying, quiet amusement.

"What are you doing? Let... let go," Everett hissed, contorting his face as he tried to maintain his composure.

Kurt only squeezed harder, leaning in until they were inches apart. His blank eye staring into the very soul of Everett's gaze.

"Everett! What is taking you so long?" Emelie called out from the carriage window.

Kurt finally released his grip. Everett stumbled back a few steps, cradling his hand and face pale with a mixture of shock and pain.

Kurt smoothed the cuffs of his shirt, his smile turning gentle and polite.

"It was nice to meet you, Everett. I really hope we'll get along. You seem like a very... passionate brother."

Without waiting for a response, he sharply turned on his heel and walked away toward his own carriage.

Everett watched him go, his breath hitching. He took a few seconds to massage his throbbing hand, forcing his "loving brother" persona back into place before climbing into the carriage with Emelie.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, dear sister! Just had a man-to-man talk. Shall I take you to the academy dorms to get your things?"

"No," Emelie dismissed him, staring out the window. "Stop by City View Hotel first. I was staying there with my friend Amy. I'm bringing her home with me for the next few days."

"Haha, no problem at all! I love meeting your friends! You were always such a quiet one; it's good to see you're finally branching out."

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Kurt climbed back into the red-and-gold carriage, where Sadie and Hope were waiting.

"All done, bossman?" Sadie asked.

"Yep. We can leave now," he said to the driver.

As the carriage began to move, Hope looked up at Kurt, her brow furrowed in confusion. "Kurt? Why are you in such a good mood?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You're grinning like you just found a chest of gold," Sadie noted, leaning forward.

Kurt touched his face, realizing for the first time that he was wearing a massive, genuine smile. He then leaned back against the cushions, the image of Everett stumbling back in pain still fresh in his mind.

"Well, let's just say, I just met an interesting new friend."

Chapter 130: Acceptance

The carriage came to a halt as the heavy wheels crunched over the smooth stone of the mansion's circular driveway. Drizzle was beginning to fall again. Sadie jumped out first with her usual boundless energy, followed by Kurt, who stretched his sore limbs.

However, the small, cloaked figure of Hope remained huddled in the corner of the seat as her hands gripped the seat until her knuckles were white.

"Hope? We're here. What's wrong?" Kurt asked, leaning on the carriage.

"It's probably just nerves, bossman," Sadie whispered.

"Really? Uhm... What are you so nervous about, Hope? You saw the garden. You saw the fountain. It's a nice place, don't you think?"

Hope looked up, her eyes wide and swimming with a fresh layer of anxiety.

"What if... what if the Lady doesn't like me?" she whispered. "What if she says I have to go to that place far away after all?"

Kurt opened his mouth to reassure her, but he didn't need to. The massive oak doors of the mansion swung open with a bang.

"Rosie! You're back!"

Diana practically flew down the steps and path. She had changed into a slightly more comfortable. Ignoring the light drizzle, she threw herself at him, her arms wrapping around his waist as she snuggled into his chest.

"I missed you~ The house was far too boring. Now come, let's continue where we last left."

Kurt let out a nervous, strained laugh, his eyes darting toward the open carriage door. He gently tools Diana's hands off his waist and gestured with his head.

"Diana... we have a guest."

"A guest?" She pulled back, furrowing her brow in a look of adorable confusion. She turned her head and peered into the shadows of the carriage.

Inside, Hope looked like she wanted to phase through the floorboards. When her eyes met Diana's piercing red gaze, she immediately ducked her head, her face turning crimson with embarrassment.

Diana blinked, the recognition dawning on her. "Oh! I remember you. Hope, wasn't it? What is she doing hiding in there?"

Kurt sighed, pulling Diana a little closer so he could speak softly.

"Ana, there was a complication. Her grandfather... he was the priest, Peter. He's gone. She's an orphan now, the orphanage I was thinking of taking her to has reached its full capacity. They were going to ship

her off to a special institution." He paused, looking at the small girl. "She's been through so much. And we've become somewhat close, so... I decided to bring her here. I told her she could work as a junior maid."

Diana leaned back, looking at Kurt with an unreadable expression.

"She's nervous, Ana," Kurt whispered so that Hope couldn't hear him. "She's terrified you won't accept her. She thinks you'll throw her out."

Diana's expression softened instantly. Without a word, she stepped up into the carriage, and knelt on the carpeted floor, bringing herself down to Hope's level.

"Hope. Come out from the corner. Let me see you." She called out gently.

Hope hesitated, then slowly shuffled forward until she was standing directly in front of the most powerful woman in the continent. Her breath hitched, expecting a stern lecture or a cold dismissal.

Instead, Diana reached out and pulled the girl into a warm, gentle embrace. She smelled like expensive perfume and home.

Hope froze, her small heart hammering against her ribs.

"There is no need to be scared of me, little one," Diana whispered into her hair.

"I saw how brave you were on that island. You looked out for the other children when we were taking them back to the ship. I would happily accept someone with your spirit into my home."

She pulled back just enough to wipe a stray tear from Hope's cheek. "Besides, if Rosie is okay with it, then I am too."

And just like that the dam finally broke. All the built-up anxiety poured out of Hope in a series of shuddering sobs. She gripped Diana's robes and cried on her shoulder.

Diana didn’t pull away. She just held her, stroking her back. "No more tears now. This is a happy moment, not a sad one, ok?"

After a minute, Hope sniffled, wiping her nose on her sleeve. She looked at Diana and offered a tiny, watery, but incredibly bright smile. "T-Thank you... u-uhm.... bosslady."

"Bosslady?" Diana glanced at Sadie who was whistling beside Yuna and Isabel, who they themselves had just arrived.

"Hope. Please ignore the blubbering’s of that maid and call me Ms. Valentine." She chuckled, stepping out of the carriage and helping Hope down to the stone path.

Diana looked over at the three maids who had been watching the scene with varying degrees of emotion. "Sadie, Isabel, Yuna! Come here."

The three maids hurried over, bowing low.

"Hope is under your care now. You are to look after her, teach her the ropes of the mansion, and see to her every need. She is a junior maid but treat her as family."

"""Understood, Ms. Valentine!"""

Hope looked at the three women. Her eyes landed on Yuna, who was standing perfectly straight with a professional expression.

"You’re so pretty..." she said innocently.

Yuna’s serious mask shattered. Her face turned a vivid shade of pink, and she immediately looked away, clicking her tongue sharply.

Tsk "Flattery will not get you out of your chores, child," she muttered, though she didn't look nearly as grumpy as she sounded.

Sadie and Isabel pounced on the girl, each taking one of her hands. "Don't mind her, she's actually a big softie!" Sadie laughed. "Come on, kiddo. Think of us as your big sisters. We'll show you where the best snacks are hidden!"

The four of them disappeared into the warmth of the mansion, leaving Kurt and Diana alone in the drizzle.

Kurt pulled her inside the carriage and let out a long sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Ana. Truly. I know I just dropped a child on your doorstep without asking but seeing her smile like that... it means a lot."

Diana wrapped her arms around Kurt's neck, pulling him down for a quick, soft kiss. "I told you, Rosie. Anything for you. If she makes you happy, she stays. It's that simple."

Kurt smiled, but then he remembered the encounter at the pier.

"By the way... I met someone interesting while I was at the docks."

"Oh? Who?"

"A man named Everett. Apparently, he's Emy's brother."

The change in Diana was instantaneous. Her arms dropped from his neck, and her cheerful mood vanished, replaced by a weary, frustrated sigh. She rubbed her temples, looking suddenly exhausted.

"Everett... Did he cause you any trouble? Did he try to pick a fight?"

"No," Kurt said, though he flexed his hand as he remembered the crushing grip. "We just greeted each other with a handshake."

"Ugh, he's insufferable." Diana groaned "Everette Herst is Emelie's older brother, yes, and he has been incredibly persistent, bordering on delusional, about joining our two houses through marriage. He's been chasing me since our days at the academy. I've rejected him more times than I can count, but he treats every 'no' as a 'maybe later'."

Kurt tilted his head. "Really? I wonder where that confidence of his stems from?"

"It's because of Emelie's rising popularity and the political climate. Seeing just how talented Emelie is, my father has been... well, he's been slowly pushing the idea into my head. He believes that with both of our families being joined, our heirs will practically rule over all Eldoria. Maybe the whole world. But I have stayed firm. I'm not a factory that produces little chess pieces for any political interest."

Kurt nodded as his understanding of the situation deepened. He saw the flicker of worry in her eyes. Not of Everett himself, but of the pressure from her own family.

Diana wrapped her arms around him again, pulling herself flush against his body as if trying to shield him and herself from the outside world.

"Forget about him, Rosie. I've already chosen my man, and I don't care what anyone thinks."

Kuer smiled as he trailed his hand down her hair. "I think I'd better meet your parents soon, then. The sooner they see that I'm not going anywhere, the sooner they can stop bothering you about Everett."

Diana bit her lip, a look of genuine concern crossing her face. "My father... he can be difficult, Rosie. He's obsessed with the family legacy. He won't make it easy for you."

"Heh, let him be difficult. Whatever happens. Whatever he says or whoever he sends, I am never letting you go. I've fought through hell once this week; I can handle a few overprotective siblings and stubborn parents."

Diana’s breath hitched. A deep, dark blush spread across her cheeks, and her eyes went misty. She looked at him with a hunger that had nothing to do with "hunger".

"Rosie," she whispered in a tremble. "I... I need you. Right now."

"Wait, right n–"

SHWOOSH

Before he could finish the sentence, the world tilted. The smell of rain and roses was replaced by the scent of lavender and expensive silk.

In a blink of an eye, they weren’t in the driveway anymore.

Kurt found himself standing in the center of the master bedroom. There was a fire roaring in the hearth, casting long, flickering shadows against the curtains. Diana was still wrapped around him, her eyes glowing with a predatory, affectionate light.

"I’ve waited long enough, Rosie. It’s time you made good on your promise~"