THORNS 133

Chapter 133: Family

The storm outside had finally fully broken into a violent lashing force against the heavy glass of the dormitory windows.

Inside Yuna’s room, however, the atmosphere was a stark contrast to the storm outside. It was orderly, quiet, and smelling faintly of old parchment and ink.

Yuna moved with her characteristic precision, pulling the thick, quilted blankets up to Hope’s chin and tucking the edges beneath the mattress with efficient tucks.

"Are you comfortable, Hope?"

Hope snuggled deep into the pillow, pulling the sheet close to her face so that only her wide, curious eyes were visible. "It’s perfect, Yuna. It smells like sunshine."

’Sunshine? What does that smell like?’

In any case, Yuna nodded once, a small gesture of approval. "Good. Rest is a maid’s most valuable tool. We shall sleep now."

She walked to the other side of the bed, switched the lamp off and slid beneath the covers, lying perfectly flat on her back. Her hands folded over her stomach as if she were posing for a statue.

The silence of the room was filled only by the muffled roar of the rain. After a few minutes, Hope shifted her head on the pillow to look at Yuna’s profile in the dim light peeking from behind the curtains.

"Yuna? Do you... do you have a family?"

Yuna didn’t move and fixed her gaze on the ceiling. "A strange question to ask at this hour. I heard what Master Rossana told Ms. Valentine. Is this about your grandfather?"

Hope nodded, a small, sad movement.

"On rainy nights like this... Grandpa would make me hot chocolate with extra foam. Then he'd sit by the fire and read me the stories of the King of Heroes, Lucas. He said that even when the sky was crying, the Hero was always watching over the little people." She let out a shaky breath. "Now, he won't be there to make the hot chocolate. There won't be any more stories. It makes the rain sound... lonely."

Yuna remained silent for a long time. Just when Hope thought the maid had fallen asleep, Yuna let out a slow breath. She turned her head slightly.

"By the standard definition of the word, Hope... no. I do not have a family."

Hope scoots closer, hesitant at first, until her head came to rest on Yuna's shoulder. Yuna stiffened for a fraction of a second, then relaxed, allowing the contact.

"I am not from Eldoria," Yuna began gently, her voice losing some of its sharp edge. "I was born in Myria. But many years ago, my family was taken from me. Not by a monster, or a plague... but by my very own brother."

Hope flinched at the revelation. Her small hand reached out under the sheets to grab Yuna's in a tight grip that felt like an anchor for the older woman. Yuna looked down at the small hand, a ghost of a smile touching her lips, before she returned her gaze to the ceiling.

"I was not always like this, Hope," Yuna admitted. "You see me and call me a cool maid, someone you admire and want to be like. But, five years ago, when I was fifteen, I was a rebellious delinquent. I hated my parents' expectations. I hated the local academy. I spent more time in detention than in the library."

"You? A delinquent? Did you... get into fights?"

"Often... On the day it happened, I had stayed late at the academy for detention. I had been particularly cruel to my mother that morning, screaming that I wished I lived anywhere but with them. A friend stayed with me, sneaking around and helping me finish my punishment work so we could go home together."

Yuna’s voice grew cold, more hollow. "When I walked through the front door... the house was silent. As I walked further in, I heard noises coming from the dining room. Then, I saw it. My brother had killed them both. He was standing over them, wearing the dark cloaks of the zealots. The same people you just escaped."

Hope let out a small gasp, her grip on Yuna’s hand tightening.

"He was muttering to himself," Yuna continued.

"He said it was the will of the Goddess and that it’s not his fault. He said that to be accepted into the brotherhood, to receive her ’divine love,’ one must sacrifice what they cherish most. He looked at me, and I saw nothing of my brother in his eyes. Just blank, empty void."

"Did he... try to kill you too?" Hope whispered.

"He tried. He raised his black dagger. But he was stopped by another zealot. That stranger’s face was hidden by a deep, tattered hood. So I couldn’t get a proper look at him. He then told my brother that killing me would be a waste of a ’resource.’ He suggested I be sold into slavery for quick coin to fund their next ritual."

"Are slaves... really real?" Hope’s voice trembled.

"They... unfortunately are. The world is much darker than the stories of King Lucas would have you believe. My brother didn’t hesitate. He took a syringe from the hooded man and injected me with a sedative. I pleaded with him, I begged him to tell me why, to tell me he was joking but... but he just watched me fall asleep with a blank stare."

Yuna closed her eyes. "When I woke up, I was in the hold of a black-sailed ship, chained to a dozen other children. I thought my life was over. But then, a commotion started above deck. It sounded like the sky was falling. Thunder, screams, and the sound of steel shearing through wood. When the hatch opened, a savior appeared."

"A savior? Who?"

"Someone that I will forever be grateful to. My hero, my light in the darkness and our master. The "Crimson Flash", Diana Valentine."

"Ms. Valentine," Hope breathed.

"I remember being stunned." Yuna continued. "She was so young then, yet she moved like a goddess of war. She defeated the slavers effortlessly. She told us we were lucky; she had intercepted the ship just hours before we were to be ’branded’ and lost to the markets forever."

Yuna’s hand squeezed Hope’s back. "Ms. Valentine organised a way for all the children to return to their homes. But I had no home. My parents were dead, and my brother was a murderer. So, I fell to my knees and begged her to take me in. I told her I wanted to be strong. I told her I wanted revenge."

"What did she say?"

"She told me... "No." That she was not looking to take in or teach murderers. She said that if my only goal was blood, I would eventually become exactly like my brother. It deflated me. I felt like I had been rejected by the sun itself.

But then, her expression softened. She told me her Head Maid was looking for a capable apprentice. She said the two she already had–Sadie and Isabel–were ’hopeless at times’ and needed someone to balance them out. She asked if I would work for my keep. I said yes immediately."

Yuna’s face finally fully softened as she looked down at Hope.

"At first, I hated it. Scrubbing floors and polishing marble felt like a distraction. But Wendy... she must have seen through me. She taught us how to fight properly. She taught us how to weave our mana into our work. For years, I told myself I was only staying to get stronger, to find my brother and end him."

"And now?" Hope asked.

"Now... Over time, Wendy, Sadie, and Isabel grew on me. They forced their way into my heart. They became a real family. I haven't forgotten my parents, and I will never forget what my brother did... but my priority is the people of this mansion and Ms. Valentine. They are my world."

She reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind Hope's ear. "And tonight, Hope, you have become a part of that family. I know you still need time to properly heal after the passing of your grandfather, but I sincerely hope that one day, you will feel the same."

Hope didn't say anything; she simply hugged Yuna's arm, a bright, tearful smile on her face.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Yuna's eyes snapped toward the door. She clicked her tongue. "Who could possibly be loitering at this hour?"

She climbed out of bed and swung the door open, only to be met with a wall of fabric. Sadie and Isabel were standing there, each clutching a mountain of pillows and rolled-up futons.

"Sleepover time!" Sadie shouted, her voice booming in the quiet hallway. She didn't wait for an invitation; she ducked under Yuna's arm and plopped her bedding right in the center of the floor.

"Hiya, Hope! Ready for the best night of your life?"

Isabel followed, chuckling nervously. "Ahaha... I'm sorry, Yuna. She wouldn't listen. She said it was 'mandatory bonding' for the new recruit."

Yuna stood with her hands on her hips, looking utterly scandalised. "What do you think you are doing? This is a place of rest! Hope needs sleep!"

"Oh, come on. There's no need to get your panties in a twist." Sadie smirked, reaching into her futon roll and pulling out a box of honey-glazed crackers, board games and a deck of cards.

"You can’t have all the fun with the junior maid. I brought some games, snacks, and the good cider! Don’t be a party pooper."

Yuna opened her mouth to deliver a scathing lecture on discipline, but then she saw Hope. The girl had jumped off the bed and was already sitting cross-legged next to Sadie, her eyes shining with excitement at the sight of the snacks.

Yuna let out a long, theatrical sigh, the kind that signaled total defeat. She walked to her cupboard, pulled out her own spare pillows and a futon, and sat down next to Isabel.

"Fine," Yuna muttered, though she didn’t look angry anymore. "But if I see a single cracker crumb on this rug tomorrow, Sadie, I will make you toothbrush the entire hallway. Now... what are we playing first?"

Isabel and Sadie froze, staring at Yuna in absolute shock.

"Did... did Yuna just agree to play a game?" Sadie whispered. "Is the world ending? Is there a doppelganger in the room?"

The room erupted into laughter, a warm, bright sound that drowned out the storm outside. Hope laughed the loudest, feeling for the first time that the rain didn’t sound lonely at all. And as the four of them settled in for the night, even Yuna couldn’t hide the genuine smile that stayed on her lips until the early hours of the morning.

Chapter 134: New Maid

Morning.

The night’s storm had surrendered to the clear blue skies of washed clarity. Golden shafts of light cut through the gaps in the curtains, shining directly at the couple sleeping on the king-sized bed.

Tweet. Tweet. Tweet.

’... Urgh. I see nature has become my alarm clock now.’

Kurt opened his heavy eyelid as he stirred awake. Immediately, he felt a heavy warmth shifting on his bare chest.

’Oh Diana. You know there’s more than enough space for you to sleep next to me, yet this always happens. What am I to do with you?’

Kurt reached up and gently stroked her shoulder to wake her. "Ana? Hey, wake up. It’s morning."

Diana, of course, didn’t open her eyes. Instead, she let out a low, disgruntled groan and scooted upward, sliding her bare body against his until her arms were wrapped tightly around his head. She buried her face in the crook of his neck and inhaled deeply.

"Hey. Are you actually awake, or just sleep-snuggling?"

Sluurp~

"Ahaha! ... Hey, Ana, what do you think you’re doing?"

His answer came in the form of a warm, wet sensation. Diana began to lazily lick and suck at the skin of his neck, grazing her teeth against his pulse point.

"Okay, you’re definitely awake."

Diana responded by reaching down, grabbing his hand, and guiding it beneath the one sheet that survived their love session. She pressed his palm firmly against the soft, rounded curve of her ass, beginning to move her lower body in a slow, hypnotic grind against his hip. Her breath was hot against his skin which made her intentions very clear.

’Oh lord have mercy on my soul...’

"Ana, w-wait," Kurt warned, though his heart was already starting to race.

"It’s morning. What if Wendy comes in again? She’s going to my naked body, y’know."

"Mm!?" Diana flinched. The mention of Wendy seeing her naked man acted like a bucket of cold water. She pulled back, propping herself against his chest to look him in the eye.

"You’re right. That would be... suboptimal. Sometimes, Wendy has this way of making me feel like a scolded student even when I’m the one paying her salary."

She leaned down, cupping his face and giving him a lingering, sweet kiss. "Good morning, Rosie."

"Good morning," he replied, smiling.

Diana hopped off the bed with a grace that shouldn’t be possible after the night they had. The silk sheets slid off her curves as she stood proudly in her birthday suit, seemingly unbothered by her nudity in the morning light. She stretched, her back arching like a cat, before walking over to a massive, double-sided wardrobe.

She swung open the right-side door and pulled out a dark-blue silk gown, tossing it onto the bed.

"Uhm... I appreciate the gesture, Ana," Kurt said as he eyed the garment. "But wouldn’t your clothes be a bit... snug on me?"

"Don’t be silly," she said, gesturing to the open wardrobe.

"Look closer. There are two separate sections. I had the maids prepare this one just for you yesterday. Your suitcases are already unpacked inside, and I took the liberty of adding a few extras. Such as that gown."

Kurt ran a hand over the silk of the gown as the reality of his situation finally sunk in. He wasn’t a guest anymore. He lived here. And this was his home.

He got up and pulled on the gown, noting how the shoulders were perfectly tailored to his frame.

"Whoa. It fits perfectly. How did you get the measurements?"

"I am a very observant woman, Rosie." she said with a mysterious wink.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Ah. Right on time." Diana said as she looked at the clock on the wall. "Come in, Wendy!"

The door opened, and Wendy entered carrying a tray of fresh water and towels. She took one look at Diana standing in the center of the room without a stitch of clothing and sighed heavily.

"I am pleased to see you both are awake and functional, Ms. Valentine. However, I truly wish you wouldn't spend your mornings standing around in your birthday suit. It's hardly becoming of a woman of your station."

"Oh, hush, Wendy. Rosie doesn't mind, do you?"

"I love it." Kurt gave a cheeky smile and thumbs up.

"See?"

Wendy ignored her, turning to Kurt with a polite nod.

"Breakfast is being served in the dining hall, Master Rossana. Please come down whenever you are ready."

"I'll be there right now," Kurt said. He looked at Diana. "Should I wait for you?"

"Go on ahead," she said, heading toward the bathroom. "I like to take a long soak first thing in the morning to clear the... lingering sensations. You're welcome to join me, of course."

"... Tempting. But not after what happened last night. I'll stick to the breakfast table for now. I need the calories."

"Hmm." Diana smiled. "Suit yourself."

Kurt opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, encountering a small group of maids. Isabel was in the lead, hands resting neatly in front of her. The moment she saw Kurt, his slightly opened chest and his messy bed hair, she turned a shade of red that rivaled the master room's silk sheets.

"Oh. Good morning, ladies."

""Good morning, Master Rossa–""

"M-Master Rossana!" Isabel squeaked, darting her eyes everywhere but his face. "B-Breakfast is ready! Down the stairs and– ! I must... we have to... cleaning!"

She gestured frantically for the other two maids to follow her into the master room.

Kurt watched in amusement as the three of them rushed past him like a school of startled fish. Isabel peeked her head out one last time, her face still flaming, before pulling the door shut with a soft click.

Kurt shrugged and made his way downstairs. As he reached the landing of the grand staircase, he saw a familiar little figure standing near the tall grandfather clock.

"Hope?"

The girl's head whipped around, her eyes widening. She sprinted to the bottom step, waiting for him with a vibrating energy.

Kurt reached the bottom and stood back, impressed. Hope was dressed in a miniature version of the mansion’s maid uniform. A maroon dress with a crisp white apron and a small lace headband. Her hair, usually a messy ponytail, had been braided neatly.

"Look at you. You look like a professional already." Kurt complimented.

"Hehe~ Good morning, Master Rossana!" Hope bowed.

Yuna stepped out from the shadows of the hallway, her expression as stoic as ever.

"Good morning, Master Rossana." She bowed. "I was the one who dressed her. And I have begun the preliminary lessons on proper greetings. She is a fast learner, though her posture still lacks the necessary rigidity."

"No wonder she looks so cool," Kurt said, patting Hope on the head.

Hope beamed, looking up at Yuna with pure adoration. "He said I’m cool!"

"Act proper, child," Yuna chided, though her voice lacked any real bite.

Hope immediately gasped, straightened her spine, and put on a serious, ’mature’ face that was so adorable Kurt almost laughed.

"Have you eaten yet?" He asked Hope.

"Yuna fed me some porridge and fruit!"

"Good. I’m going to eat quickly and change. We have a busy day ahead."

As they walked toward the dining room, Hope and Yuna trailing slightly behind Kurt, the little girl looked up at him. "Where are we going, Master Rossana?"

"Well... We're going to your house in the city," he said as he turned his voice a bit more serious.

"We need to get anything that's valuable to you. And... we need to see if your grandpa left a will for you. If we can find where he's being laid to rest, we'll go visit him too."

The light in Hope's eyes dimmed slightly, the reminder of her loss casting a shadow over her morning. But before the sadness could take hold, Yuna reached down and took her hand, giving it a firm, supportive squeeze. Hope looked up, saw Yuna's steady gaze, and smiled again.

Kurt caught the exchange over his shoulder and felt a swell of gratitude for the serious maid.

...

Kurt was halfway through his meal when the doors opened and Diana swept in, followed by Wendy, Isabel, and a tired Sadie. The three maids joined Yuna and Hope near the door, standing in a neat line.

Diana didn't go for her usual chair. She walked straight to Kurt and tapped his shoulder. "Scoot back a bit, dear."

"Hmm?" Although confused, Kurt complied anyway, and Diana immediately sat down directly on his lap, wrapping an arm around his neck.

"Ahem! Ms. Valentine," Wendy coughed with disapproval. "Please don't start this again. It is highly inappropriate behavior in a dining hall. Especially in front of the staff."

"Oh, don't be so naggy, Wendy." Diana said as she reached for a piece of Kurt's toast.

"There is a child in the room," Wendy added pointedly.

Kurt looked at Hope. The girl was just watching them with an innocent, curious smile, seemingly fascinated by the way Diana and Kurt interacted. To her, it was just a sign of how much they liked each other.

Diana groaned but reluctantly slid off Kurt's lap and into the chair beside him.

"Fine. Spoil my fun." She turned to Kurt. "So, what are the plans for today? I assume you're not spending the whole day in that gown. Though, that would be nice. For me, of course."

"I'm heading into the city with Hope to take care of a few things. What about you?"

"Just some miscellaneous work at the Academy," Diana sighed.

"Budget approvals, student grievances... the boring side of being a principal. After that, I'm heading to my mother's estate. It's time I told her the news about you officially. Although I'm guessing she already knows." She said as she eyed Wendy who just closed her eyes.

"And your father?"

"He's away from Eldoria on a diplomatic circuit," she said, her expression flickering with a brief moment of relief. "We don't need to worry about him for at least until after the tournament. I'd rather have my mother on our side before he gets back."

"Sounds like a plan."

Diana watched him eat for a moment, her smile turning soft and genuinely happy. But then, her eyes sharpened as she looked toward the door.

"Rosie, will you be out the entire day?"

"I'm not sure. It depends on what life throws at me."

Diana turned to one of the three maids. "Yuna. You are to accompany them."

Kurt blinked. "I don’t mind the company, Diana, but I can handle the city."

"It’s not your competence I’m worried about. It’s your luck. You are prone to getting into trouble the moment you step off this hill. Having Yuna with you will ease my worries."

Yuna stepped forward and gave a respectful bow. "Understood, Ms. Valentine. Thank you for your trust."

"Well, Yuna, I’m looking forward to getting to know you better." Kurt smiled at the maid.

Yuna looked away immediately, a faint clicking sound coming from her tongue. "I am simply doing my duty, Master Rossana."

An hour later, Kurt came down the grand stairs, dressed in a dark opened up leather jacket, white t-shirt, slim-fit black jeans and black boots. All accompanied by his weapons. Diana, who was waiting for him at the door, pulled him into a deep, lingering goodbye kiss.

"Have a great day," she whispered.

"You too."

Behind them, Yuna had her hands firmly over Hope’s eyes.

Once they were done, Diana greeted Yuna and Hope goodbye. The two of them bowed respectfully.

""Have a good day, Ms. Valentine."" They bowed.

With a final wink to Kurt, Diana’s mana flared, and she vanished.

SHWOOSH

Kurt turned to the serious maid and the excited child. "Alright, ladies. Who’s ready to go have some fun?"

"Oh! Oh! I am!" Hope shouted, jumping up and down.

Yuna let out a sharp click of her tongue and walked past them toward the waiting carriage. "Fun is a secondary objective. Efficiency is first."

"Yeesh. You heard the lady, Hope. Let’s go."