THORNS 135

Chapter 135: Bonding Exercise

The carriage descended the smooth serpentine roads from the hills and onto the main cobblestone of the city.

Below them, the sprawling capital of Eldoria hummed with the energy of a city shaking off a storm. Inside the cabin, the atmosphere was a mix of Hope’s childhood wonder and Yuna’s rigid professionalism.

"Master Rossana," Yuna began. "Where are we headed to first?"

Kurt leaned back, folding his arms. "Hmm. I was thinking we could go to Hope’s place first but... are we even allowed in. Don’t they usually clear out the houses of the deceased?"

"Huh? But I’m not dead." Hope said with her hand on her chin.

"Thank God. And here I thought my only remaining eye was starting to fail me."

"Hehehe~"

"Since Peter was a priest and had no immediate legal heirs, I believe the Bureau of Civil Affairs would have moved in to possess the belongings," Yuna explained.

"If there is a will, or if we want to reclaim Hope’s personal effects, we should head to the Bureau first. It will save us the trouble of being arrested for trespassing later."

"Mmhm. Yep." "Kurt nodded. "Driver! To the Bureau of Civil Affairs."

"Yes, Master Rossana!"

As the carriage lurched forward, Hope pressed her nose against the glass, pointing out a street performer juggling colorful balls. Whereas Yuna, however, closed her eyes as her hands rested perfectly on her lap.

Kurt watched Yuna for a moment. To him, her stoicism was... fascinating. Quite the stark contrast to the chaotic energy of Sadie or the nervous fluttering of Isabel. So he decided to break the ice.

"Yuna," he called softly.

Her eyes snapped open. She saw him smiling at her, but her expression didn't waver. "Yes, Master Rossana?"

"How far away are we from the bureau?"

"Quite the ways."

"So we've got a bit of a drive ahead of us, huh? Well then, why don't we use this time to get to know each other? It's going to be a long day, and we're going to be working together a lot I imagine."

Yuna's brow furrowed almost imperceptibly. "I am simply here to serve, Master. My personal history is of little consequence."

"Come on. Don't be like that. No need to hold back when you're with me. Tell you what, you can start. Ask me anything you want, and I promise to answer truthfully."

Yuna breathed in and out slowly, considering the proposal.

"Very well. Since you insist. Where are you from? You don't have the accent of a city born."

"Whoa, what a start, haha. I'm from... Riverton. But, not from the main capital. I'm actually from a secret village that I cannot disclose. Sorry."

Yuna narrowed her eyes but quickly let it go. "I understand, Master."

"Now, it’s my turn. Where are you from? Your facial features suggest that you too are not from Eldoria."

Before Yuna could answer, Hope raised her hand high like a student in a classroom.

"I know! I know!"

Kurt acted surprised, leaning toward the girl. "Whaaat? You know Yuna’s secret origin?"

"She’s from Myria!" Hope announced proudly.

Kurt looked at Yuna, waiting for her to confirm.

"... Yes, it’s true."

"Hehehe~ Yuna told me during our sleepover! Sadie and Isabel came over too! We had so much fun."

Kurt whistled. "A sleepover? Man, I’m jealous. You should have called me over, Hope."

Hope’s face lit up. "I wanted to! I even went to your–"

"Ahem!" Yuna suddenly cleared her throat loudly as a faint pink blush crept onto her ears.

"I told you, Hope, he was focused on his work. We couldn’t disturb him." She gave Kurt a sharp, meaningful eye.

Kurt took the hint immediately as his own face heated up slightly. "Ah, right. Yes. Very important work. Lots of... tactical manoeuvring. It’s a good thing you didn’t come in, Hope. It was very serious. But hey, invite me next time, okay?"

"Okay!" Hope cheered, turning back to the window.

Kurt looked at Yuna and mouthed, "Sorry, and thank you".

Yuna gave a stiff nod of acknowledgement.

"Now, it's your turn to ask," he prompted the maid.

Yuna's expression turned deathly serious as she leaned forward to ask, "Are you serious about your relationship with Ms. Valentine?"

Kurt blinked, his playful demeanor softening into something genuine. "What led you to asking that question?"

"Because," Yuna said quietly. "I have served her for years. I have seen her at her most lethal and her most distant. But I have never seen her the way she is with you. She is happy. Genuinely, vulnerably happy. And quite frankly, Master Rossana, it scares me. If you are merely playing a game, the fallout would be... catastrophic."

"... I see. I hope this answer will ease your worries, if not only slightly. I've never been as happy with anyone as I am with her. We complete each other in ways I can't even describe. I am one hundred percent committed to her."

He looked out the window and whispered to himself as a blank, possessive smile crossed his lips. "And nobody – not her father, not the cult, and certainly not a bunch of random entitled pricks – will ever drag us apart. I'll burn the world down before I let her go."

Yuna, with her keen hearing, heard his whispers and sensed the sudden shift in his aura. She gulped, her posture fixing itself even more rigidly. However, just as suddenly his dark aura appeared, it disappeared.

Kurt noticed her reaction and immediately dialed back the intensity, smiling gently again. "Was that answer satisfactory?"

"It was... passable."

"Cool. Now, it’s your turn. Go on. Ask away."

"... Okay, how about this: How strong are you, Master Rossana? I want to know the true extent of the man Ms. Valentine chose."

Kurt rubbed his chin. "Hmm, to be honest, I’m still getting a feel for your power system. A security guard I know said I’m A-rank but... Oh! I can do this."

He raised his hand and concentrated. Blue mana began to swirl around his palm, thickening until it formed a shimmering, translucent glove that hummed with power.

Both Hope and Yuna leaned in, mesmerized.

"It’s so pretty up close." Hope whispered.

Yuna’s jaw practically dropped on the floor as she stared at his hand. "Mana coating? How... how did you do that?"

"I just put a lot of focus and effort into strengthening magic," Kurt explained. "I kept pushing the mana further and further until it just... hardened into this. You know, you basically had the same reaction as the bodyguard I spoke about. Not to mention everyone else that saw this."

"Master Rossana," Yuna’s voice trembled. "That is not how strengthening magic works. If ’focus and effort’ were all it took, every soldier in Eldoria would be walking around with mana armor. That is a high-level technique. I have only ever seen Ms. Valentine use it with such clarity... The power to use raw mana as a weapon... that’s amazing."

Kurt shrugged and let the mana dissipate, much to Hope’s disappointment. "I just did what felt natural. I guess I’m just a quick learner."

’I definitely has something to do with my skill.’

"Alright, my turn," Kurt said as he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. He then put on a terrifyingly serious face. "Answer me truthfully, Yuna."

"Y-Yes."

"What... is your favorite color?"

Yuna deflated so fast she nearly fell off the seat. "What?"

"What do you mean ’what?’ That’s a very important question for team building, y’know!"

"I know the answer!" Hope shouted. "It’s red! Because Ms. Valentine’s eyes are red and Yuna thinks she’s the coolest person ever!"

"W-What?! I am going to increase your chores ten-fold, Hope." Yuna snapped her head toward the window, refusing to make eye contact.

Kurt and Hope shared a loud giggle as the carriage travelled through the city. Yuna and Kurt continued their back-and-forth Q&A, with Kurt primarily focusing on light-hearted questions, hoping to elicit a reaction from the serious maid.

Sometime after, they finally arrived at the grand, marble steps of the Bureau of Civil Affairs. The carriage door opened, and Hope, full of morning energy, hopped out first.

"Hope, wait! Don’t be hasty!" Yuna called out, stepping out after her.

But the sidewalk was crowded. A tall young man wearing a black kimono with a golden dragon printed on the back, was walking briskly toward the entrance. Hope, not looking where she was going, slammed

right into his side. The impact sent the small girl stumbling back until she fell onto the hard stone, scraping her knees.

"Hope!"

Yuna rushed to her side. She knelt down, checking the girl over. Hope's white stockings were torn, and blood was beginning to bead on her scraped knees.

"Ugh! Watch where you're going, you little rat! I swear, the people of this shithole... Do you have any idea how much these robes cost? You filthy twat!"

Yuna's eyes flashed with anger, but she kept her composure. She stood up and bowed deeply, her voice low. "I apologise for the child's clumsiness, sir. She did not mean to–"

"I don't care what she meant!" the young man spat. Then he noticed their uniforms.

"Ah, a maid. Since your master clearly didn't teach you how to watch the road, I suppose I'll have to do it for him."

He sneered, raising a hand to strike the bowing maid.

Suddenly, a black blade appeared in the air, blocking the man's path inches from Yuna's face.

Kurt stood on the carriage step, one hand casually holding the door frame, the other wielding his black sword with effortless precision. His expression was no longer friendly.

"Who the hell do you think you are, blocking my way like this?" the young man yelled.

"It's usually considered polite to introduce yourself before you start demanding so from someone else."

The young man smirked, regaining his arrogance. "Where are my manners? My name is Yamada Ryuuji. My family practically owns the northern regions of Myria. And I am its heir. Now, put that toy away before I have you executed."

Kurt, not putting his weapon away, smiled that same blank, dangerous smile he had shown in the carriage. "My name is–"

"Dead!" Ryuuji interrupted.

With a sudden, violent motion, Ryuuji thrust his hand forward. A massive, dragon-shaped flame erupted from his fist. The heat was so intense it singed the air.

"Master Rossana, watch out–!"

BOOM!

Chapter 136: Standing On Business

Smoke from the explosion curled around Kurt's silhouette. But as the wind caught the soot, the crowd gasped.

Kurt was standing exactly where he had been, his arm extended. His palm was open and tucked firmly within his grip was Ryuuji's flaming fist. A shimmering, translucent layer of blue mana coated Kurt's hand, acting as a heat-resistant barrier.

He then squeezed the fist, the sound of Ryuuji's knuckles creaking under the pressure audible even over the crackling embers.

"What exactly do you think you're doing? Was that an actual attempt to kill me in broad daylight?" Kurt asked, his voice sounding dangerously low.

Ryuuji's eyes widened, shifting from the sight of his extinguished flames to the blue light surrounding Kurt's fingers. He let out a scoff and yanked his hand back, though the one-eyed assassin didn't make it easy.

"Mana coating," Ryuuji muttered as a dark grin spread across his face.

"Impressive. Truly. You're only the second person I've seen pull that off besides Izumi-san. Maybe you aren't just some backwater carriage driver. Tell me, what's your name?"

Kurt didn't even blink. He adjusted his stance as his gaze shifted briefly to where Yuna was kneeling on the pavement, desperately patching up a sniffling Hope's scraped knee.

"Apparently, my name is 'Dead.' At least, that's what you shouted a second ago."

Ryuuji threw his head back and laughed, a boisterous, arrogant sound.

"Ahahaha! Haaa, I apologise for that. It was a heat-of-the-moment thing. Consider it a compliment that I thought you were worth the effort of a named strike."

"I'm not the one you should be apologising to," Kurt said, stepping off the carriage and standing between the Yamada heir and the girls. He gestured toward Yuna and Hope. "Apologise to them."

Ryuuji's eyes traveled over to Yuna. He paused, his gaze lingering on the sharp, elegant lines of her face and the way her maid uniform fit her athletic frame. He let out a soft whistle.

"Are these yours? Your maids?"

"They are."

"I see." Ryuuji took a step closer to Yuna, ignoring Kurt's warning glare. "On closer inspection, she is quite a rarity. Beautiful, disciplined... and those eyes. You're from Myria, aren't you, sweetheart?"

Yuna didn't look up from Hope's knee as she coldly answered. "I am."

Ryuuji’s smile widened, flashing teeth that looked like they belonged to a predator.

"Perfect. Change of plans. You’re coming with me. You’ll serve directly under me in the Yamada estate. As the heir to the clan, I have a certain... quota for excellence that you seem to meet. I think I’ll make you my concubine."

He looked back at Kurt as if discussing the weather. "You don’t mind, do you? I’ll send a half-dozen common maids your way to replace her. Consider it an upgrade for both of us."

"I do mind," Kurt said, his voice dropping lower. "You see, she isn’t going anywhere. And I’m still waiting for that apology."

Ryuuji’s smile didn’t falter, but his eyes turned icy.

"Do you truly not know who I, Yamada Ryuuji, am? Or are you just that eager to have your lineage erased? I can make you disappear from the face of this planet with a single letter to the Shogunate."

Yuna finished wrapping Hope’s leg and stood up. She stepped toward Kurt, her face a mask of professionalism.

"Master Rossana, please. Let it go. We are making a scene." She then turned to Ryuuji and bowed respectfully. "I apologise, Lord Yamada, but I have already dedicated my life to the service of–"

"Who gave you permission to speak, girl?" Ryuuji barked. "Know your place. When your betters are discussing your price, you remain silent."

The crowd that had gathered around the Bureau began to murmur in fear. The name ’Yamada’ carried a dangerous weight to it.

"Forget this happened and let’s leave." Yuna whispered to Kurt as her hand hovered at her thighs where her daggers hid.

"No," Kurt said. He stepped forward, his boots clicking sharply on the stone.

"I will not stand for someone disrespecting the people under my care. And you hurt the kid." He looked Ryuuji in the eye. "Apologise, right now, or I am going to publicly humiliate you and beat some manners into you in front of every single person on this street. Trust me. I built quite the reputation for doing just so."

The crowd gasped. Ryuuji went dead silent as his face twitched.

"You want to humiliate me? What is your name, one-eyed freak? I want to know exactly whose family I'm destroying today."

"Oh? So now you're threatening my family? You're a long way from home to be talking that kind of talk, Ryuuji. I'll give you five seconds to get on your knees and apologise to the girl and the kid. Five."

"What did you just call me?! How dare someone of your stature–"

"Four."

Ryuuji, seeing that Kurt is actually counting down, started laughing with sparks beginning to dance around his shoulders. "Ahahaha! What's this? You're counting me down? To what? To death!?"

"Three."

"I am the Yamada heir! No one touches me!"

"Two."

"Why wait for five!? Let's just get to it, shall we!" Ryuuji snarled.

He lunged, spinning in the air to deliver a massive electric kick aimed directly at Kurt's head.

Kurt didn’t dodge. He moved his mana-coated hands with blinding speed, catching Ryuuji’s ankle mid-air. The electricity surged into his palms, hissing against the blue mana, but it didn’t break through.

"It’s your funeral," Kurt whispered.

He then threw a straight punch. Ryuuji sneered, bringing both arms up in a cross-guard, confident in his defense. It didn’t matter. Kurt’s fist, heavy with concentrated mana, smashed straight through Ryuuji’s guard as if it were made of paper. The impact connected flush with the noble brat’s face.

THWACK!

Crack!

A canine tooth flew from Ryuuji’s mouth, tumbling through the air as the heir was sent skidding backward, his body flying and slamming into the stone wall of the building across the road.

Yuna rushed to Kurt’s side, still clutching Hope’s hand. "Why did you do that?! He is one of the Ten Representatives of Myria! We are causing a lot of trouble!"

Kurt looked down at them, his expression softening instantly. "I don’t care if he’s the King of the World. I won’t let people hurt the people I care for."

He knelt slightly to look at Hope. "You okay?"

Hope sniffled, but then a small, mischievous smile broke through. "I feel a lot better now that you punched him, Kurt."

"Hope! Don’t encourage him!"

Ryuuji pulled himself from the crater in the wall, spitting blood onto the pavement. He was maniacally laughing as the ground beneath his feet began to crack.

"Yuna, get Hope in the carriage," Kurt commanded.

"Hope, go!" Yuna echoed. Hope didn’t argue this time, scrambling into the safety of the cabin. But Yuna didn’t follow.

"Why are you still here?" He asked her.

"He is one of Myria’s Ten," Yuna said, her eyes fixed on the surging aura around Ryuuji. "He is stronger than any opponent you have faced. I will not leave my Master to fight a monster alone."

"Are you worried about me, Yuna?" Kurt grinned.

Tsk "Don’t get it twisted. If you die, I have to explain it to Ms. Valentine. I’d rather not see her pained expression."

Suddenly, the world began to tremble. A massive earthquake shook the street, causing the onlookers to scream and flee. Kurt’s eyes sharpened; his body felt that familiar tingle as he sensed a massive buildup of energy beneath them. Without a word, he grabbed Yuna by the waist and leapt high into the air, clearing the height of the Bureau’s roof in a single bound.

"What the! Let go–!" Yuna started to squirm, but she stopped when she looked down.

The ground where they had been standing split open as if a volcano were erupting. Ryuuji shot upward through the fissure; his entire body wreathed in crackling golden lightning. He was above them now, his fist pulled back for a devastating electric punch.

"Brace yourself!" Kurt shouted. He then threw Yuna toward the balcony of the Bureau. She twisted in mid-air, landing effortlessly and drawing her daggers in one smooth motion.

CRASH!

The collision in the sky sounded like a thunderclap. Kurt blocked the electric punch with his forearm, the force of the blow creating a shockwave that shattered the windows of the nearby buildings.

Kurt didn't let the momentum stop; he grabbed Ryuuji's reaching arm, spun it, and delivered a devastating roundhouse kick to the noble's temple.

Ryuuji was sent hurtling downward, skipping across the pavement like a stone before splashing violently into the nearby city river.

SPLASH!

After landing safely on the road, Kurt watched and waited for the next attack but then he noticed that the river began to steam. Ryuuji burst out of the water a moment later, his robes shredded and his face a mask of pure, unadulterated rage.

"I'LL KILL YOU! I SWEAR I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!"

The temperature began to skyrocket. The stone beneath Kurt's feet turned cherry red, and the river water began to boil into a thick mist.

Kurt braced himself, drawing his black sword for a finishing strike, when a shadow flickered overhead.

A woman descended from the sky, her movements as light as a falling leaf. She landed softly, daintily, right on top of Ryuuji's head.

"That's enough, Ryuuji."

"Wha--!"

The heat died instantly. The steam vanished.

Ryuuji, the young man who had been ready to commit mass murder seconds ago, went completely still. His rage evaporated, replaced by a shivering dread. He slowly lowered his hands and bowed his head as far as it would go while the figure stood on him.

"I-I apologise, Izumi-san."