THORNS 139

Chapter 139 - Ruined Plans!? New Plan

When Austin stepped out of the small shower, he saw Gary sitting back on the stool, intently reading a piece of parchment.

"What's that?" he asked, picking up a glass of water he presumed was for himself.

Gary looked up with an unreadable expression, though his eyes held a strange, lingering intensity. "It's a report from our insiders. Tobias is dead."

Austin froze with the glass halfway to his lips. Then, it slipped, the water splashed and glass shattered onto his bandaged feet.

"What? What?! Tobias? Dead?! How? That's impossible! I get that he's a low tier jobber of a villain BUT the Academy Tournament hasn't even started yet! He was supposed to be the opening act! The tutorial! How the hell is he fucking dead!?"

"There you go with your spiel again. Apparently, he was intercepted on his own turf last night. It was a joint effort. On paper, Prefect Dominik led the 'search and rescue', but he had help. Emelie Herst, Diana Valentine and... Kurt Rossana."

"Kurt...?" Austin's face went from pale to a deep, vein-popping purple. He lunged forward, grabbed the small wood table and threw it across the room.

"Did you just say Kurt?! Gary, you told me you killed him! Back at the park! You said you used the lethal poison and that he'd be dead!"

"I did!" Gary's voice rose in rare defense. "I watched the poison enter his system! No human survives that dosage. I saw him collapse! He should have been dead before he hit the grass!"

"THEN WHY IS HE ALIVE?! Why is he breathing?! Why is he helping Emelie?! Why is he ruining everything AGAIN?!"

"I don’t know what to tell you, Austin... I’m sorry."

Austin lost it.

He spun around and delivered a vicious kick to a small wooden stool, sending it splintering against the far wall.

"FUCK! What the fuck is happening to the plot!? Why is that bitch still alive!" He began pacing like a caged animal, his breathing coming in ragged, frantic bursts.

"And what the hell is the prince doing!? Why isn’t he with Emelie? That was how things are supposed to go! He was supposed to sneak onto the island with her, get himself captured like the clueless idiot he is, and force Emelie into the Choice! She was supposed to choose between her ’growing love’ for the prince or saving those brats!"

"Err Austin, the prince is, and always has been, at the palace. On the day you were... incapacitated... a public incident occurred. Kurt publicly humiliated both Prince Maxwell, Jr. and Princess Kiana. But mainly the princess. He spanked her."

Austin stopped dead in his tracks. "He... what?"

"He spanked her," Gary said with a hint of a smirk ghosting his lips. "In the middle of the street. In front of witnesses. I believe it was their ’punishment’ for losing their duel in the park. The princess is too embarrassed to show her face in public, so he’s currently inside the palace, most likely looking after his sister."

Austin stared at Gary for a full ten seconds. Then, he let out a guttural, primal roar of pure rage. He kicked the bed frame, the impact sending a jolt of pain up his leg that he barely felt through the adrenaline.

"SPANKED?! He spanked Princess Kiana?! The Villainess!? That’s not in the script! That’s not how the scene goes!"

Austin began to trash the room in earnest, throwing the few supplies they had against the walls, kicking over the water bucket, and sweeping Gary's letters onto the floor.

"The entire opening act is a fucking dumpster fire! I was going to replace the prince! After I finished fucking Amy, I was going to sneak on and be the one to save Emelie on the island! I was going to build the affection points! I was going to be the hero of the first arc!"

He collapsed into the center of the room, heaving, his chest slick with sweat and his bandages starting to unravel.

"Are you finished?" Gary asked softly.

"What are we supposed to do?" Austin whispered as his head hung low. "The game is broken. The protagonist is not acting like one, the villains are dying off-screen, and I'm stuck here beaten half to death by the main heroine who hates me when I've done nothing wrong..."

"First things first. You need to stop moving. You just woke up from the beating Emelie gave you. If you faint now, your internal bleeding will restart. Sit down."

Austin slumped onto the edge of the bed, his anger replaced by a calculating desperation. "Where is she? Where's Emelie?"

"I believe she's returned to her family estate to prepare for the tournament. Oh, and don't bother looking for Amy? She went with her. She's out of reach for now."

Austin's eyes narrowed. He went silent for a long time. Finally, he looked up as a dark, crooked grin spread across his face.

"Fine. If the game wants to play hardball, I'll play hardball. Before the Tournament Arc officially kicks off, I need a Training Arc. And I don't mean hitting straw dummies."

"What do you mean?" Gary asked.

"I mean I’m going to start stealing the ’Cheats,’" Austin said as his voice dropped to a conspiratorial hiss. "The hidden power-ups, the ancient artifacts, the secret scrolls that the ’Main Character’ is supposed to find by ’accident.’. I’ll take every advantage Junior was supposed to get."

"What are you even talking about, Austin? You aren’t even an entrant in the tournament. You have no standing."

"Shut up and follow me," Austin snapped, standing up with renewed vigor. "If you play your cards right and keep helping me, I might even give you one of the cheats for yourself. Now, let’s get out of here–"

Bonk!

"What the hell! Where’s the door!?" Austin held his forehead as a tear rolled down his cheek.

"There is no door, Austin," Gary said, walking up behind him. His hand touched the wall, and the shadows began to bleed out of the stone.

"I built this saferoom specifically so it could only be accessed through my shadow magic. You’re safe here because no one else can enter."

"Just get me the hell out," Austin growled.

Gary nodded, his hand resting on Austin’s shoulder. The shadows rose up, swallowing them both in a cold, suffocating embrace before they vanished from the chamber.

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Back at the Bureau of Civil Affairs, the afternoon sun was at its peak, and the buzz of the city had returned to normal. Kurt stood by the open door of the carriage, watching as a clerk handed over a finalized set of documents.

"Everything on the list Miss Hope provided has been inventoried," the clerk said respectfully to Kurt.

"All of her personal belongings will be delivered to the Valentine mansion by tomorrow morning. As for the matter of the late Peter's inheritance... it is a complex legal web. It will take approximately six months to process the transfer to her name. We will notify you the moment the decree is signed."

"Six months is fine," Kurt said, slipping the receipt into his vest. "She's not going anywhere."

"Thank you, Mr. Clerk," Hope said politely.

The man smiled warmly at her and retreated into the building. Kurt turned to Ayako, who was standing a few feet away.

"Well, it's been an eventful morning. I guess this is where we part ways. For real this time."

Ayako nodded with a serene expression. "Indeed. I must return to our lodgings. My sensei will be... displeased... about Ryuuji's arrest. I have much to explain before the sun sets."

"Do you want a lift?" Kurt offered, gesturing to the carriage. "It's the least I can do after you kept that hot head from leveling the block."

"You are kind, Rossana-sama, but I think I shall walk." Ayako smiled looking at the street. " I haven't had the chance to truly see Eldoria's sights. The air after last night's storm is quite refreshing."

"Alright then. Take care of yourself, Izumi-san."

"And you, Rossana-sama. I look forward to our next meeting. May your blade stay sharp." She performed a graceful bow, which Kurt returned with a nod.

Yuna and Hope both waved their goodbyes. "Stay safe, Miss Izumi!" Hope chirped.

"Until next time," Yuna added, her tone professional but no longer icy.

The three of them climbed into the carriage, and with a crack of the whip, the horses began to trot away.

Ayako stood on the steps, watching the carriage until it disappeared around a distant corner. The moment it was out of sight, two figures dressed in nondescript, grey commoner's clothes that bled in with the crowd, stood next to her.

"Ayako-sama," one whispered.

Ayako's gaze didn't waver from the road. Her voice was no longer warm. It held the tone of the Izumi Heiress.

"Dig up everything. I want his history, his birthplace, his connections, and every duel he has fought in. Report to me by midnight."

""As you command,"" they whispered in unison. They then turned and walked in opposite directions, vanishing into the bustling crowd as if they had never existed.

"Kurt Rossana," she murmured to the empty air. "I cannot wait for our next meeting. I want to see what lies beneath that strength of yours."

As the wind picked up, Ayako's form began to shimmer. A sudden gust of wind sent a cloud of pink petals swirling around the steps, and when the air cleared, the heiress was gone, leaving only the faint scent of spring behind.

Chapter 140 - Unexpected Visitor

- In Diana's office -

"I believe that concludes our meeting today, Nakamura-sensei."

"Yes, Principal Valentine. I am most grateful for the help you have aided to my students and I, as well as the hospitality you have shown to me in our meeting."

"Hm. You're welcome."

Nakamura Kenji, a man whose reputation for the magical arts was matched only by his reputation for being a persistent romantic, stood up from the leathered chair across from Diana. He adjusted his traditional robes as his gaze lingered on her with an intensity that would have made a lesser woman flinch.

"You have grown to be even more radiant since the last time our paths crossed, Diana," Nakamura said smoothly. "It has been... how long exactly?"

Diana didn't even look up from the document she was signing when she answered him.

"Please refer to me as Principal Valentine. As for the last time we met, it was eight years ago, during our own Representative Tournament. I believe the match lasted approximately three seconds. I beat you in a single strike, and received complaints from your family that you spent the next four hours in the infirmary complaining about your ribs."

She capped her inkwell and finally looked at him with a polite smile on her lips. "But thank you for the compliment, Sensei."

"Hahaha, still as sharp as your blade, I see. Truly, Eldoria is lucky to have a woman who hasn't let time or authority dull her edges."

He then leaned against the edge of her desk with a casual pose. "Tell me, are you free after this? The sun is high, the sky is clear, and it has been far too long since I've walked the streets of this gorgeous city."

Diana leaned back, spilling her hair over the high back of her chair. "And why are you asking, Nakamura?"

"Well, having someone as beautiful as you by my side while taking in the sights on a beautiful day like this... it would be a memory I'd cherish. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Are you asking me out on a date, Nakamura-sensei?" Diana asked as she arched an eyebrow.

"I am suggesting that two masters of the craft share a moment of aesthetic appreciation. If the world wishes to call that a date, who am I to argue with the world?"

"You can't. But I can. I respectfully decline. I have far too much work, and my schedule is limited."

"Another time, then?"

Diana leaned forward, the sunlight catching the crimson depth of her eyes. She smiled so dazzlingly that Nakamura felt his heart might just leap out of his chest. He leaned in with anticipation, expecting a yes, but–

"No. We will never go out on a date. Not today, not another time, and not in your lifetime."

"Pfft– Ahem. Busy busy busy..."

A muffled snicker erupted from the corner of the room. Mia, who had been doing nothing in particular at her own desk, was currently quickly trying to mask her outburst by shuffling a stack of papers, assuming a "professional" demeanor that fooled absolutely no one.

Nakamura didn't miss the sound, but he chose to maintain his dignity. He cleared his throat and began to gather his belongings from the desk.

"A shame," he said, sighing dramatically. "But I suppose I shall have to give up... for now."

"Why ’for now’? I believe my rejection was cut and dry."

Nakamura stopped at the door, looking back at her with a look of genuine, albeit stubborn, admiration.

"Because, Principal Valentine, after seeing you today, it is simply impossible to give up. I am quite hopelessly in love with you. A man of my station doesn’t encounter a goddess every day."

Diana looked at him for a quiet second with an unreadable expression. Then, she let out a small, amused huff.

"I see. Well, you are free to harbor whatever feelings you wish, Sensei. Just don’t expect me to return them. It would be a waste of your energy."

Nakamura bowed deeply to her, then gave a shorter, polite nod to the still-smirking-behind-her-papers, Mia. "I shall see myself out. Farewell, ladies."

As the door clicked shut behind him, Mia immediately skidded her chair back across the hardwood floor. She practically threw herself toward Diana’s desk, grabbing both her hands in her own.

"Diana! You were so cold! Poor Nakamura-sensei is going to go cry in a tavern!" Mia giggled.

Then her eyes turned mischievous. "But seriously, why didn’t you just tell him about Kurt? That would have shut him down permanently."

"And where’s the fun in that, Mia? Besides, if I told a man like Nakamura that I have a lover, he’d immediately go and try to ’test’ him. Rosie has enough on his plate to worry about without having a Myrian sword mage hounding him for a duel over my honor."

"Speaking of our mysterious lover-boy... How are things going with him? Really?"

Diana’s bravado faltered for just a moment as a soft, shy pink tinged her cheeks, and she looked down at their joined hands. "He... he moved in with me. Officially."

Mia froze. Then, she let out a piercing shriek of joy, jumping up and down while still holding her best friend's hands.

"REALLY?! Oh my god! Diana! Why didn't you tell me sooner! Domestic bliss! You're actually living together!"

"Mia! Shh! The walls have ears!"

"I don't care! I'm so happy for you!" Mia finally settled down, her face glowing. "I know you must've been so lonely in that big mansion, reading those books–"

"Hey."

"But you deserve someone who looks at you the way he does."

Diana's expression softened. "Thank you, Mia. It... it feels right. Righter than anything has in a long time." She paused, studying her best friend. "But you're acting way happier than normal. Even for me. What's going on with you?"

Mia's face turned bright red, and she looked around the office as if checking for spies.

"Because! I had good news two days, but I couldn't tell you! You came charging in here screaming about Dominik and Kurt, and I didn't want to interrupt the 'Battle Commander' vibe. You were also absent for the whole day yesterday."

"Oh, Mia, I'm sorry," Diana said sincerely. "But I'm here now. So, what is it?"

Mia reached into her cleavage, pulling out a delicate silver chain that had been hidden between her breasts. On the end of it hung a simple, elegant ring set with a small, brilliant diamond.

"Dominik... he proposed to me. We're officially engaged..."

Diana’s mouth dropped open. For a second, the principal of the most prestigious academy in all of Eldoria disappeared, replaced by a giddy best friend. She stood up, grabbed Mia’s hands, and began jumping and screaming right along with her.

"HE DID?! Finally! That red head finally grew a pair!" Diana laughed as the two of them spun in a small circle in the middle of the office.

"I know!" Mia wiped a tear of laughter from her eye.

"I was so happy I covered his face in so many smooches. He looked absolutely silly the morning he left for work. He had lipstick marks all over, hahaha!"

"This calls for a celebration. A real one. No paperwork, no annoying Sensei’s and no politics. Mia, pack your things. We’re leaving early."

"Don’t need to tell me twice!" She scooped up her bag. "Where are we going?"

"My place," Diana said, her eyes flashing with excitement. "We’re going to drink the good vintage and party freely. I’ll even let Wendy join us and break her ’no alcohol on duty’ rule for one night."

"That sounds like a plan!" Mia cheered. She stepped forward, grabbing her shoulder.

And with a shimmer–

SHWOOSH!

The office was empty.

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They reappeared outside the front door of Diana’s mansion and almost immediately, they saw a familiar carriage parked at the stables.

"Don’t tell me..."

As they entered the mansion, Wendy appeared from the dining hall. She was carrying a silver tray with a chilled bottle of white wine and a single glass. She stopped, blinking at the sudden appearance of Diana and Mia.

"Ms. Valentine, Ms. Mia. Good afternoon."

"Hey, Wendy!" Mia greeted.

"Wendy. That carriage outside... Please say it’s not who I think it is..."

"I’m afraid it is what you think, Ms. Valentine. Please, follow me."

They walked through the house, past the ornate parlors and out through the glass doors that led to the expansive backyard and the shimmering turquoise pool.

There, reclining on a chaise lounge by the water’s edge, was a woman who looked like a vision of Diana’s future.

She had the same striking platinum hair, though it was pinned up in an elegant, loose bun. Her eyes were the same piercing crimson, and her figure was undeniably voluptuous, possessing the same massive curves and presence that Diana inherited (although Diana loses in the breast department). She was dressed in a flowing, silk robe that did little to hide her status as a woman of immense power and beauty.

She was sipping from a wine glass, looking out over the pool and expansive yard with a calm, proprietary air.

Diana froze still as her breath got caught in her throat. "M-Mom?"

The woman turned her head, a slow, regal smile spreading across her lips.

"Hello, my baby. I heard you finally brought a man home, yet you haven’t told me. So I thought I’d come and see for myself."