THORNS 143

Chapter 143 - Pompous Noble

The morning sun streamed through the high windows of the dining hall. Julianne sat at the head, looking impeccably refreshed in a deep emerald morning gown and her silver hair perfectly styled as she sipped a dark roast of coffee.

She looked as though she hadn't touched a drop of wine the night before, a stark contrast to the pair entering the room.

Kurt walked in steadily, but he was being dragged by Diana who looked like a vengeful, hungover ghost. She wore a mean scowl, her eyes narrowed to tiny slits against the sunlight, and her grip on Kurt's hand was vice-like.

They entered the dining room when Julianne caught sight of them first.

"Good morning, my little babies!"

"Ugh, keep the noise volume down, mom..."

"Hangover," Kurt explained sympathetically as he helped Diana toward her chair.

"Oh, Diana." Julianne sighed with a smile. "You still have such a long way to go before you can match me. I feel absolutely divine."

"You're a monster," Diana muttered, sinking into the chair next to Kurt. She didn't let go of his hand and rested her head against his shoulder with a soft groan.

"Good morning, Julianne. I take it you slept well?" Kurt smiled.

Julianne's eyes twinkled as they drifted to their joined hands, then back to Kurt's face. She felt a slight heat in her cheeks remembering the princess carry from the night before, but she kept her composure.

"Wonderfully, Kurt. It’s a very restful sleep when a mother knows her daughter finally has a man to keep her in line."

Diana clicked her tongue and reached her favourite cappuccino muffin from a basket in the center of the table. She began to pick at it with one hand.

"A muffin? Again?" Julianne’s voice turned stern. "Diana, when was the last time you had a proper, balanced breakfast meal? You need protein and greens, not sugar and flour."

"I had a proper breakfast yesterday."

Julianne looked skeptical. "Kurt, is this true? Did she actually eat a full meal? And don’t lie trying to cover up for her."

"Well, technically, yes. Although she only ate it by stealing half the items off my plate."

"Diana!"

"What? Rosie doesn’t mind," she countered, looking up at him with big, pleading eyes.

"She’s right, I don’t mind. Besides, the chefs always make more than enough."

Diana beamed at him as her scowl momentarily turned into an adoring gaze. Julianne let out a long, dramatic sigh. "Honestly, at this rate, you two are going to be the death of my dignity."

Knock. Knock.

A servant of the mansion stood by the door and bowed. "Pardon the interruption. There is a guest waiting at the front door."

Diana’s scowl returned. "And why did the guards just let them through exactly?"

"The guest carries the Duke Valentine’s personal seal, Ma’am. He says he is quite important," the servant explained. "And he requested to remain anonymous. He said he wanted it to be a surprise since you haven’t seen each other in some time."

"’He’? Whatever, I don’t care. Just tell me who it–"

"It’s fine," Julianne said, standing up with a graceful flourish. "I’ll go see who this mystery man is. I could use the walk. Wendy, accompany me."

"Yes, Madam." Wendy, who was standing by her three maids, replied, looking every bit as professional as she always has.

"Thanks, Mom."

"In return, you will eat a proper plate of food. No more muffins!"

"Whatever," Diana grumbled, though she pulled a plate toward her as Kurt began to serve her.

As they walked toward the grand foyer, Julianne glanced at Wendy. The Head Maid walked with her usual iron-backed precision, her expression as unreadable as stone.

"I must say, Wendy, you’re remarkably steady this morning. You drank just as much as the rest of us."

"It is part of my duty, Madam."

Wendy reached the heavy front doors and pulled them open. Standing on the porch, framed by the morning light, was a tall man with shimmering silver hair and green eyes. He held a massive, vibrant bouquet of lilies.

"Julianne!" the man exclaimed with booming confidence. "It has been far too long. You remain as breathtaking as the day I left."

"Everett Herst," she said, her eyes subtly twitching. "You're looking... well. I take it the expedition in the Rift is over?"

"Indeed! The S-ranked rift was a challenge, but with Duke Valentine's leadership and my own blade, we came out on top. The monsters and demons have been pushed back into retreat."

"That's lovely. And where is my husband?"

"The duke stayed behind to oversee the collateral damage and the final sealing rituals. He'll be back by the start of the tournament. He asked me to ride ahead and check on the family once I'd settled my own affairs."

He stepped forward as his eyes scanned the foyer. "Now, where is my future fiancé? I've brought her back only the finest of blooms."

Julianne gave him a look of profound pity. "She is in the dining hall. But regarding the 'fiancé' topic, Everett, things have changed–"

"Perfect!" he interrupted, shoving the flowers into Wendy's startled arms. "Store these in a crystal vase, maid. I want them to be the first thing she sees."

He moved to push past her, but Wendy stepped into his path.

"Ms. Valentine is currently suffering from a severe hangover, Sir Everett. She would not be pleased to be disturbed."

"Ha, nonsense! I'm sure she's missed me terribly. An S-ranked rift is dangerous work; she's likely been sick with worry."

Before Wendy could respond, Everett's form blurred. He moved with a high-speed flick, appearing behind Wendy in a flash of silver light. Wendy's eyes widened in surprise; she hadn't even tracked the movement.

"I'll just give her a quick greeting!" Everett called out, striding down the hall toward the dining room.

Wendy turned to chase him, but Julianne raised a hand. "Leave him, Wendy."

"But Madam. He is intruding."

Julianne's lips curled into a wicked, expectant smile. "Oh, let him go. This is going to be a very... funny scene. I want to see the look on his face."

"... Like mother, like daughter. You both enjoy chaos far too much."

They walked leisurely toward the dining hall. Inside, the doors burst open with a bang.

"My dearest Diana! Your champion has returned!" Everett announced, striking a heroic pose in the doorway.

His eyes first landed on the staff standing nearby.

Isabel was looking at the ground and blushing for some reason.

Sadie looked at him then bit her lip, her shoulders shook as she fought back a burst of laughter.

Yuna simply stood between the two maids. Her expression was one of cold, professional disapproval.

Then, Everett's gaze moved to the table.

Diana was not sitting in her chair. She was perched sideways on Kurt's lap, her arm draped over his shoulder while he held a fork, casually feeding her a piece of seasoned sausage.

Diana looked like she wanted to murder Everett for making so much noise, but she didn’t move an inch. She chewed slowly, swallowed, and stared at him with dead eyes.

"Leave," she said flatly. Then opened her mouth for another piece of sausage.

Sadie nearly lost it, covering her mouth with both hands to muffle the snorts of laughter.

Wendy and Julianne entered behind Everett, the former looking stern and the latter looking like she had front-row seats to the opera.

"Ms. Valentine!" Wendy yelled. "How many times do I have to tell you to sit in your own chair!?"

Everett stood with his mouth hanging open and stuttered, "D-Diana... what... what is this? Who is this man? What are you doing on his lap?!"

Not sparing him a glance, she leaned back against Kurt’s chest and closed her eyes. "Didn’t I tell you to leave, Everett? You’re loud and annoying. My head hurts."

He then snapped his gaze to Kurt, who was nonchalantly chewing on a piece of toast.

Kurt looked up, offered a small smile, and shifted his arm to pull Diana even closer against him, resting her head right under his chin.

"Take your hands off her! Do you have any idea who I am–?!"

Kurt flicked his wrist, tossing a small piece of sausage through the air. It flew with the precision of a bullet, landing squarely in Everett’s open, shouting mouth.

"Shut up. Can’t you see my woman has a bad hangover. This is your third and last warning. Shoo. Get out."

The dining hall went silent for one heartbeat before,

"PFFTAHAHA! AHAHAHA! I can’t! My tummy! Ahahaha!" Sadie fully burst out in laughter.

Even Yuna’s lip twitched but she quickly composed herself.

Everett spit the sausage out as his eyes glowed with a murderous fury. "You... you fucking no-name! You dare treat me like a dog?! Diana, move aside! I will show you why I am the one chosen for your hand!"

He reached for the hilt of his sword, but he never got the chance to draw it.

SHING!

In a crimson blur, Diana had summoned her odachi. She didn’t even stand up. She just leaned outward from Kurt’s lap as the tip of the long blade pointed squarely toward him.

"If you release one more ounce of killing intent in my dining room, I will take your head. Herst or not. ’Champion’ or not."

"You... you point your steel at me? Your future husband?"

Tsk "Diana put your weapon away and take a seat." Kurt patted her hip.

To the absolute shock of nobody in the room – except Everett – Diana didn’t argue. She didn’t snap back. She dissipated the crimson blade back into its gem form and climbed off Kurt’s lap, sitting in her own chair.

Kurt stood up slowly. He adjusted his sleeves and walked toward the pompous noble, stopping only inches from the man’s face. They met eye to eye and the calm, overwhelming pressure radiating from him made Everett’s silver mana slightly flicker but not falter.

"You've got exactly three seconds to walk out that door," Kurt whispered. "Or I'm going to leave you crying at your little sister's feet like a bitch."

Chapter 144 - Good Boy

"Three."

Everett's eye twitched violently. The silver aura around him flared, then flickered.

"You think you're clever? You think because you've wormed your way into this house, into her life, you're untouchable? Also, how dare you bring my sister into this. You are a speck of dust compared to the political might I repres–!"

"Two." Kurt interrupted as his eye began to glow with a sharp, predatory blue light.

The temperature in the room practically dropped as Kurt's and Everett's mana began to exert a physical pressure that made the silverware on the table rattle.

Everett's face contorted. He ignored Kurt and turned his furious gaze toward the woman still sitting calmly at the table.

"Diana! Are you really going to sit there and ignore me? You're choosing this... this nobody? He has no lineage nor political standing!! Are you really about to throw away years of planning? Our families joining is the foundation of the next decade of Eldorian prosperity! You're going to break the bond between the Valentine's and Herst's for this?!"

Diana didn't even look up. She was busy using her napkin to wipe a stray drop of sauce from Kurt's plate.

"Lord Everett," Wendy's voice cut through the tension. "You have been asked to leave. You are no longer welcome in this mansion. Please depart with what remains of your dignity."

Everett looked at the Head Maid, then his gaze swept to Sadie, Isabel, and Yuna. The three maids hadn't moved a muscle, but their auras were coiled like vipers. Their eyes were locked on his vitals, waiting for the slightest twitch of his hand toward a weapon or when his mana surges out.

He looked at Julianne. The Madam had leaned back in her chair, a hand supporting her chin as she watched him with a small, entertained smile, as if she were watching a particularly mediocre play at the theater.

And finally, he looked back at Diana. But she was still ignoring him.

"One," Kurt whispered.

The blue light in Kurt's eye flared into a cold spark. Everett felt a shiver of genuine, primal fear shoot down his spine. He knew, with the instinct of an S-rank, that if he stayed for "Zero," he not only would be walking out the room safely, but he'd also be losing face in the eyes of the Valentines.

Tsk "This isn't over," he spat and turned on his heel. His cape billowed behind him as he marched toward the dining room doors.

"That's a good boy," Kurt's voice trailed after him.

Everett flinched. His entire body tensed as if he were about to whirl around and strike, but he forced his feet to keep moving. He stormed through the foyer with heavy boots that thundered against the marble.

He reached the grand front doors and yanked them open, but before he could step out onto the porch, Kurt's voice rang out from behind him. "Hey! Herst!"

Everett spun around, his hand flying to the hilt of his sword.

FLAP!

Pollen and petals exploded in a cloud of white and yellow as a massive bouquet of lilies slammed directly into his face. Everett stumbled back, sputtering as he clawed the flowers away from his eyes.

Kurt stood in the doorway, leaning casually against the frame. "Diana likes roses, not lilies. Get the order right next time, dumbass. Not that there's going to be a next time."

He then slammed the doors shut right in his face.

Outside, Everett let out a scream of pure, unadulterated fury. He grabbed the bouquet and slammed it onto the stone, stomping the flowers into the dirt with his heel.

"I will not let you get away with this! I am Everett Herst! I'll be informing the Duke immediately! And he'll have your head on a pike! Diana will be mine! You hear me?! SHE WILL BE MINE!"

"Um... excuse me, sir?"

The small, soft voice came from his left. Everett paused, his chest heaving as he looked down. Standing there was a tiny maid with large, innocent eyes, holding a bundle of red cloth in her arms. It was Hope.

She looked at the mangled, crushed lilies on the ground and then up at Everett's red, vein-popping face.

"You shouldn't litter on the ground like that. It's bad manners. Could you please pick those up?"

The sheer innocence of the child acted like a dousing of cold water on his public persona. He blinked and the mask of the noble desperately tried to reassert itself. He smoothed his hair, coughing into his hand as he forced a tight, artificial smile.

"Ah... yes. My apologies, little maid. I just... dropped them. That's all." Everett muttered. He knelt down with trembling hands and suppressed rage as he gathered the broken stems and crushed petals.

"Thank you, sir," Hope said with a polite little bob of a curtsy. She adjusted her bundle of cloth and walked away inside the mansion without a second glance.

Everett stood up as he clutched the floral trash when he heard a sharp sound from the mansion.

"Pfft–!"

When he looked up, he saw Kurt was peeking through the door which was slightly ajar from when Hope entered. A massive, mocking smirk was plastered on his face.

The moment Kurt saw that he had Everett's attention, he gave a slow, exaggerated wink and pulled the door shut again.

A vein throbbed in his forehead. He turned and marched for his carriage, throwing the remains of the flowers through the open door before hauling himself inside.

"Move!" he barked at the driver. "Take me to the recently beaten Rift! Now!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

He needed to speak with Duke Valentine. He needed to tell the man that his daughter had been corrupted by a nobody, a thug who had no respect for the bloodlines of the world. As the carriage rattled away, Everett stared at the floor, grinding his teeth so hard that the driver thought they might shatter.

Back in the dining hall, the tension had evaporated, replaced by a sudden, light-hearted mood.

"Man," Sadie smiled. "That was pretty cool, Bossman. The sausage trick? I'm going to be laughing about that for a week. Just thinking about it now... Heh."

Kurt sat back down in his chair, letting out a long breath. "Yeesh, that guy was a prick. I don't like people who think they can walk into a home and demand things just because they've got a fancy title."

"I must say, Kurt," Julianne reached for her tea as her crimson eyes sparkled with delight. "You've taken me back to my youth. My husband used to clear rooms exactly like that. Though he usually broke more furniture. Thank you for the show. It was a marvelous breakfast entertainment."

"Err, you welcome?"

Diana didn’t say anything at first. She stood up, walked over to Kurt, and sat back down on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. She rubbed her cheek against his, her voice a soft, purring murmur.

"Thank you, Rosie. For dealing with that annoyance. He’s been trying to ’claim’ me since we were children and got worse when we met again at the academy. My father... well, my father likes his strength, but I guess he doesn’t see the arrogance underneath. Or maybe he does but is too focused on the future to care about his daughter’s feelings."

Kurt wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close. "I’m a bit bummed out, honestly. I was kind of hoping he did swing at me. Wiping that arrogance out his system would’ve been so satisfying."

"If he had swung, I wouldn’t have let you touch him. I would have sent him to the middle of the ocean. He’s lucky you only used a sausage."

"Ahem! Ms. Valentine," Wendy cleared her throat, her expression returning to its habitual state of stern disapproval. "You are still not sitting in your own seat. Please return–"

"Oh, hush, Wendy." Julianne waved a dismissive hand at the Head Maid. "Leave them be. They’ve earned a few minutes of peace. Besides, look at them. They’re in their own little world."

Wendy opened her mouth to argue, her eyes darting to where Diana was now trailing her fingers along Kurt’s jaw with eyes half-closed in bliss. Kurt was murmuring something back to her with a small, private smile on his lips.

Wendy sighed, sounding full of a weary and fond resignation. She adjusted her posture and stepped back.

"Very well, Madam. I shall prepare the tea in the study. But if another noble barges through the door and yells at them, I am blaming you." She joked.

"Haha. I’ll gladly take the fall."

As the staff began to clear the table around them, Kurt and Diana remained locked in their own space, the chaos of the morning fading into the quiet warmth of the mansion.

"You know, there’s still some time before I have to leave for work. What do you say to me and you getting down and dirty?"

"Really, Ana?" Kurt looked at her with a straight face.

"What? I’m talking about some sparring. What are you thinking about?" Diana smirked at him.

"O-Oh... That sounds great, haha. I’ve always wanted that rematch."

"Then you’d better finish your breakfast," she teased, picking up a piece of toast. "You’re going to need the energy."