THORNS 147

Chapter 147 - Adventurer’s Guild

Steam from the oversized marble bath rose in thick, lazy curls, clinging to the opulent gold fixtures of the master washroom.

The water, infused with aromatic oils that smelled of sandalwood and citrus, provided a stark contrast to the destructive display of power they had shared only an hour prior.

"Ahhh... Now that’s much better." Kurt leaned back against the cool edge of the hot tub as his muscles finally began to loosen.

Diana was nestled between his legs, pressing her back against his chest as she let the warmth soak into her skin. He had his arms wrapped loosely around her waist, and she rested her head back on his shoulder.

"Hey, Ana? I was thinking about what you said. About merging elements with mana coating. How do I even figure out what my affinity is? I don’t feel particularly ’fiery’ or ’airy.’"

"Hmm~" she hummed contentedly, shifting her body to get more comfortable. She reached down, taking his hands in hers and interlocking their fingers beneath the water.

"You want to figure out what your affinity is? Well, I have no way of figuring it out but I do know a place that does."

"Really? Where?"

Diana looked up at him and smiled, "The answer is already on your personal tag."

...

A half-hour later, they stood near the front doors of the mansion. Julianne stood with her arms crossed, looking radiant in an emerald morning gown, while Wendy and her three maids stood in a neat row, ready for the day's duties.

Diana, now dressed in her formal – but no less stunning – principal's attire, adjusted her cuffs. "Well... I'm leaving for the Academy now. The last batch of students from overseas should be arriving today."

She turned to walk away, but Kurt cleared his throat. "Wait, Diana. Aren't you forgetting something?"

Before she could teleport away, Diana stopped dead in her tracks, and her ears turned a vivid shade of pink. She slowly turned back to him as her eyes darted toward her mother, who was watching with an insufferable, predatory grin.

"Rosie... not in front of my mom." she whispered under her breath.

"Oh, don't mind me!" Julianne chirped, leaning against the doorframe. "I'm just a part of the scenery. Please, by all means, continue whatever scandalous farewell you had planned. I insist."

Diana fidgeted with the hem of her jacket as her usual composure began to crumble. She tried to step toward him, but she looked as though she wanted to bolt. Seeing her struggle, Kurt took pity on her.

"I'm fine with just a hug, if that's easier."

Nodded shyly and appearing immensely relieved, Diana hesitantly stepped into his space until she finally wrapped her arms around his middle. She buried her face deep into the crook of his neck so as to hide her flaming cheeks from Julianne's sharp eyes.

"Oh, how sweet," Julianne remarked, dripping her voice with a mockery of sentimentality. "Though I do remember your father being much more... adventurous with his hands during a goodbye."

"Mom!"

Kurt let out a soft chuckle and after a moment of holding her, he began to pull away but he found that Diana's grip only tightened. She remained anchored to him, still hiding her face. Confused, Kurt looked over her head and at Julianne, silently asking for guidance.

Not missing a beat, Julianne puckered her lips and made a soft "mwah" sound, gesturing wildly toward her daughter.

Picking up what she's putting down, Kurt reached and gently cupped Diana's chin and lifted her face. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and misty with embarrassment. As she met his gaze, he leaned down and deeply kissed in a way that silenced the teasing comments from the background.

When they broke apart, Diana looked like she was about to float away. But she snapped out of it and cleared her throat, trying to regain her authority. "Yes. Right. Well. Have a good day, Rosie... and you too, mom."

"Mmhm. Have a good day, my shy little baby." Julianne waved.

""""Have a good day, Ms. Valentine."""" the maids bowed.

With a final, lingering look at Kurt, Diana stepped out the door and teleported away.

"Excuse me, Master Rossana, may I know what your plans are for today?" Wendy asked.

"I know!" Julianne clapped her hands together. "We should spend the day together! I can show you the high-end boutiques, or perhaps we can visit the vineyards–"

"As much as I'd love that," Kurt cut in, scratching the back of his head, "and as embarrassing as this is to admit... I was thinking about finding some work. I need to make my own way here."

"Nonsense. As long as you are with my daughter, you'll never want for a copper coin."

"I don’t want to become a bum, Julianne," Kurt said firmly but kindly. "I like to stay busy. Besides, I have a pretty good idea of where to look."

Julianne pouted, though there was a twinkle of respect in her eyes. "Aww, what a shame. Perhaps we can spend time together another day?"

"It’s a date." Kurt smiled.

Julianne’s eyes went wide as she blushed. She let out a small, flustered "Oh!" and hastily retreated back into the mansion, muttering something about checking the wine cellar.

"Master Rossana, I believe you are still not yet familiar with Eldoria’s layout yet. Please take one of these three maids with you for assistance."

"Take me! Take me!" Sadie shouted, jumping up and down. "I know all the best spots!"

"No," Wendy said flatly.

"Aw, but why?!"

"Because you sneaked out on your break to follow him to the docks. Consider your ’adventures’ suspended for the week."

Sadie immediately deflated, looking like a kicked puppy, and slunk back into line.

Yuna stepped forward next. "I would volunteer, but I am still in the middle of teaching little Hope the proper ethics of a maid and her duties. I cannot leave her unattended."

That left Isabel. The quietest of the trio looked up, her face turning pink as all eyes fell on her.

"Isabel," Wendy commanded. "Accompany Master Rossana."

Isabel gave a tiny, shy nod. "Yes, Head Maid."

"Good. Now, girls, back to work!" Wendy clapped her hands, and the group dispersed. Sadie groaned a "bye-bye, bossman" to Kurt, while Yuna and Wendy offered polite nods.

Left alone with the shyest maid in the house, Kurt turned to her.

"Uhm... sorry, Isabel. You probably feel pretty uncomfortable being stuck with me for the day, huh?"

"That– That's not true at all!" Isabel burst out, sounding much louder than usual. She realised her volume and immediately shrunk back, fiddling with her apron.

"I mean... I am not uncomfortable. Not at all. Please... follow me. The carriage is ready."

She marched toward the driveway with a stiff, military-like gait. Kurt shrugged and followed, amused by her sudden burst of energy. When they reached the carriage she opened the door for him, watched him enter but didn't follow suit and closed the door. Instead, she climbed straight up onto the driver's bench, taking the reins.

Kurt opened the front driver's window and teased her. "That's right, I remember Sadie telling me you liked horses more than people. I guess she wasn't kidding."

Isabel gasped, looking down at him. "S-Sadie talks too much! It's not that I dislike people... people are just as wonderful as horses. Mostly..."

"Oh? So that means you like me too, right?"

Isabel's brain seemed to short-circuit. She looked down at the reins, her fingers fumbling with the leather.

"I... you... well, Master Rossana is... a person, yes. And a very... nice... um..." She began to stutter incoherently, her face matching the crimson trim of the carriage.

"Pffthaha! I'm just teasing you, Isabel. Don't worry about it." He leaned back on the seat and relaxed. Through the small front window, he saw her huff and puff out her cheeks in a fake display of anger.

"Ahem! Where are we going, Master Rossana?" she asked, her voice regaining its composure.

"The... uh... Adventure Building? Adventure Firm? Is that what it's called?"

Isabel giggled, a tiny, cute sound. "You mean the Adventurer's Guild, sir."

"Right. That. The Guild."

"Understood." Isabel snapped the reins, and the horses lurched forward, pulling the carriage out of the estate's grand gates and into the bustling streets of Eldoria.

As they rode, Isabel proved to be an excellent guide, pointing out landmarks through the window. After twenty minutes of navigating through increasingly crowded streets, the carriage began to slow down.

"Master Rossana?" Isabel called out. "We are approaching the guild soon."

"Can you stop somewhere private? Like a block or two away? I don't want to make a scene by pulling up to the front door in a royal-looking carriage."

"Understood." Isabel expertly guided the horses into a quiet side-alley a few streets over. She tied the horses to a hitching post and hopped down, opening the carriage door for him with a professional bow.

Together, they walked back toward the main road. As they turned the corner, the atmosphere shifted instantly. The quiet, residential beauty of the upper district was replaced by a roar of life.

The street leading to the Guild was packed with a diverse mix of people. Kurt watched in awe as a group of women walked by. Some in ’bikini armor’, others in expensive flowing robes with pointed witches’ hats as they argued about the price of mana-infused ink. Behind them, a massive man clad in heavy, scarred plate armor hauled a wagon filled with monster parts.

"This place is... incredibly lively," Kurt noted.

"It’s no exaggeration to say that this is the heart of the city," Isabel said, staying close to his side. "Many come here seeking work, fame, or fortune. Some are luckier than others. But the Guild is where the pulse of Eldoria is definitely loudest."

They soon stopped in front of the building itself. It was a massive, sprawling double story structure built in dark stone, intricate ironwork balconies, and huge glass windows. A giant sign hung over the double doors, depicting a sword and a staff crossed over a shield.

Inside, the lobby was cavernous and bustling. The floor was polished wood, worn smooth by thousands of boots. To the left, a giant corkboard was plastered with hundreds of parchment notices, surrounded by a crowd of eager-looking men and women. To the right, a long mahogany counter was staffed by busy receptionists in similar uniforms.

The air smelled of old paper, sweat, and cheap ale from the adjacent tavern section. Groups of adventurers sat at round tables, polishing weapons or poring over maps, while a constant stream of people moved in and out of the high, arched doors. It was a place of high stakes and high energy.

’It’s like an entire world of its own within the city.’

Kurt took a deep breath, feeling the familiar hum of a place where things got done. "Well, Isabel," he said, adjusting his collar. "Let’s see what awaits us."

Chapter 148 - Elemental Affinity

Isabel walked beside Kurt, keeping her hands clasped tightly in front of her. "Master Rossana," she leaned in close so as not to be overheard by the rowdy parties nearby. "Are you already registered with the Eldoria branch, or do you need to go through the proceedings of becoming a new adventurer?"

"Hmm. I think I am? It was one of the first things that was checked for me when I arrived here. But how would I even know if I am registered or not?"

"When you are registered, you receive a special identification tag. It's enchanted to display your assigned rank, which is calculated based on your strength and how much work you have contributed to the Guild's request board. As well as other miscellaneous information."

'Another tag? I wonder if she's talking about...'

Kurt reached around his neck and pulled out the second tag Willy had given him back at the bureau. He hadn't paid much attention to it during the chaos of the last few days.

"Oh! That is a standard Adventurer's tag." Isabel's eyes widened.

Kurt then focused a small thread of mana into the metal. A translucent blue display popped up from the surface, hovering in the air.

Adventurer org -

Guild - N/A

Rank - F

Party - N/A

Skills - (Concealed)

"It says I'm F-rank," Kurt said, tilting the display so she could see.

"F-rank? Did you become an adventurer very recently, Master Rossana?"

"Something like that," he replied with a shrug.

"I see... In that case," Isabel said, regaining her footing as a guide, "you can look at the F-rank section of the board for any requests you could take up."

"Actually, before that, I want to find out what element I possess. Diana said I could find out if I came here."

Isabel blinked as her expression turned into one of pure bewilderment. "I'm surprised you don't know your affinity yet, sir. Especially since you can already use mana coating– Oh–!"

She stopped abruptly as she realised what she had just done and quickly clamped both hands over her mouth, but the damage was done.

In a building full of veteran warriors with ears trained to catch the word "mana coating," her voice had carried throughout the hall like a bell.

The bustling noise of the guild plummeted into a suffocating silence.

From the tavern wing to the request board, heads turned. All eyes were suddenly fixed on the young man in the simple clothes and the shy maid hiding beside him.

"... Did she just say, 'mana coating'?" someone whispered.

"... I think I heard him say he's F-rank."

"... Mana coating at F-rank?"

Unable to handle the sudden, predatory weight of the collective gaze, Isabel retreated behind Kurt's back, her fingers trembling as she gripped the hem of his shirt.

"I—I’m so sorry, Master Rossana. I-I misspoke. I’m so sorry..."

Kurt didn’t flinch. He scanned the room, his one eye cool and observant. He could feel the curiosity, the skepticism, and the outright hostility radiating from the crowd.

"Don’t worry about it, Isabel. Secrets like that don’t last long in a place like this anyway. I’m not mad."

"T-Thank you. By the way, in order to discover your affinity, you need to go to the receptionist desk," she whispered urgently. "They have the testing orbs there."

Kurt gave a small nod and began to walk toward the counter. Isabel followed so closely she was practically stepping on his heels, her head bowed to avoid eye contact with the veterans.

The crowd parted like a dark sea. Most people moved out of the way, whispering as he passed, but as he reached the center of the hall, a shadow fell over him that didn’t move.

A man stood in his path. He was a mountain of a human, standing at least eight feet tall. His burly frame was encased in leather armor, and a double-headed axe that looked heavy enough to crush a boulder was strapped to his back. His skin and bald head was a map of old battle scars.

He glared down at Kurt with the intensity of a predator. Kurt stopped, meeting the man’s gaze without blinking.

After a long, tense silence, the giant spoke in a deep voice that reverberated through the hall. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?" Kurt asked evenly.

"That you can use mana coating,"

"... Y’know, I was under the impression that an adventurer’s skills were supposed to be private."

The man snorted, sounding like a bull. "Hardly private when your little maid blabs it to the whole hall. If an F-rank can use a Master-tier technique, the guild deserves to know if he's a genius or a liar."

Isabel flinched behind Kurt as her breath hitched. Feeling the tremor in her hands, he sighed. "It's true. I can use it."

A collective gasp rippled through the room. The whispers intensified – some of disbelief, others of mocking laughter.

The giant raised a massive, calloused hand, signaling for silence. The room went dead quiet.

"Prove it."

Kurt's expression hardened. He didn't like being told what to do, especially not for the sake of an audience. "I don't have anything to prove to you. I'm here to see the receptionist, not to put on a circus act."

He stepped to the side and walked past the giant. The tension in the air was so palpable it felt like it might snap, but the big man didn't strike. He simply watched Kurt with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

When Kurt reached the front desk, the atmosphere changed. The receptionist, a young woman with a sharp uniform and a bubbly ponytail, greeted him with a bright, professional smile that ignored the simmering violence behind him.

"Good morning! Welcome to the Adventurer's Guild! How may I help you today, sir?"

Kurt smiled back, genuinely appreciative of her normalcy. "Thanks. I'm here to figure out what element I possess."

"... Pfft. He doesn't even know his element."

"... And he claims to use mana coating?"

"... Pathetic."

Ignoring all the snarky comments, Kurt focused his attention on the receptionist. "I'm new to the system, you see."

"Oh, that's quite alright!" she said cheerfully, reaching beneath the counter. She took a clear glass orb resting on a cushion and a small, silver prick-needle.

"It's a very simple process. You just need to drop a single droplet of blood onto the orb. The mana within your blood will react with the device and manifest your primary affinity – or affinities."

"Really? Just like that?"

"Would you like a demonstration?" she asked. When Kurt nodded, she turned her bright eyes to Isabel. "Would the lovely maid like to do the honors?"

Isabel looked startled, but she timidly stepped forward. "Yes... I can do that." She took the needle, pricked her finger with a tiny wince, and let a drop of crimson fall onto the glass.

The orb sat still for a second. Then, it began to vibrate. Suddenly, a miniature torrent of water began to swirl inside the glass, pouring over the sides like a never-ending fountain. But it didn't stop there. Tiny green leaves and sturdy brown branches began to sprout from the base of the orb, intertwining with the water.

"Oh my! Dual affinities! Water and Earth – or rather, Nature. That's quite rare, dear."

The crowd's snarky whispers at Kurt turned to genuine interest as they looked at Isabel with newfound respect. The orb eventually returned to its clear state, and the shy maid stepped back.

The receptionist wiped the orb clean and handed Kurt a clean needle. "Your turn, sir."

The entire Guild leaned in. Some stood on chairs to get a better view. Kurt took the needle, pricked his thumb, and watched as a dark drop of blood hit the center of the glass.

And so, they waited.

Five seconds passed. Ten. The orb remained as still as clear and stagnant.

A single snicker broke the silence. Then another. Within seconds, the entire hall erupted into boisterous, mocking laughter.

"Ahahaha! A dud! There's no reaction!"

"I knew it! Just look at him! A show-off noble trying to act tough! Mana coating my ass! He probably hides behind that maid whenever a slime shows up!"

Isabel was shaking now, not with fear, but with a quiet rage. She looked ready to scream at them, but Kurt stayed perfectly still with his eye fixed on the orb.

Then, something strange happened.

In Kurt's perspective, the sound of the laughter began to pitch downward. It slowed and warped until it became a low, distorted groan. He looked to his left and saw a man mid-laugh with his mouth frozen open. He looked to the tavern and saw a stream of ale suspended in mid-air, frozen like a golden amber sculpture.

The entire world had stopped.

'This is what happens when my Adaptation skill senses, I'm in life-threatening danger but... there's nothing. No tingle. No danger. What's going on?'

Kurt frowned, looking at the orb. It was pulsing a barely visible light and he felt a strange, cold void emanating from it.

’This is too strange. I should talk to Diana about this later.’

The pulse in the orb faded and just as suddenly as it had started, the world snapped back into motion. The laughter returned at full volume, and the ale splashed into the mug.

He looked at the receptionist, who was looking at the orb with a confused frown. "So, did it... finish?" Kurt asked.

She stuttered, looking a bit dazed. "I... I believe so. It seems there is no elemental reaction. I’m sorry, sir."

"Meh. Don’t sweat it. Thanks anyway. Come on, Isabel. Let’s go look at the board."

Isabel followed him with her head down in shame. "I’m so sorry, Master Rossana. This is all my fault. If I hadn’t opened my mouth, they wouldn’t be mocking you..."

"Seriously, don’t feel bad, Isabel. I don’t blame you. And besides, I’m not here for their approval."

As they neared the request board, the eight-foot giant blocked his path for the second time.

The giant scoffed, the sound full of disappointment. He stepped aside, moving toward the exit. "You’re not worth the trouble, kid," he rumbled. "Do yourself a favor and quit being an adventurer before you get yourself killed. You’re a hack."

Kurt watched him leave with an unreadable face. Slowly, the adventurers returned to their business, though many still shot mocking glances his way.

When they reached the massive corkboard, Isabel pointed toward the bottom-left corner. "These are the F-rank requests, Master Rossana."

He then scanned the papers.

[Find a lost cat]...

[Clean the sewers]...

[Deliver herbs to the apothecary]...

"What the? These are all dumb assignments," he muttered. "Anyone could do these."

"It’s part of the system," Isabel explained patiently. "You must complete ten successful F-rank requests to rank up to E. The higher your rank, the more dangerous and high paying the requests become."

Kurt sighed, reaching for a request about gathering slime jelly, when the heavy front doors of the guild creaked open.

The room went silent once more. But this wasn’t a silence of mockery. This was a silence of reverence and fear.

Clop. Clop. Clop.

The sound of wooden sandals clopped against the floor, moving with a lethal grace toward the request board. Kurt was too focused on the ridiculous requests to look back at who it was.

"Rossana-sama."

Kurt paused. He knew that voice. He then slowly turned around.

"Izumi-san?"