THORNS 165

Chapter 165 - Breakout Brawl

"I just turned in a quest, big guy. I don’t want any trouble."

"Oh, you don’t want trouble?" Bigi laughed, turning to the crowd to egg them on. "Not only does he ignore my warnings, but now he’s walking around the city starting even more fake rumors? Lying to the guards that he caught a cult leader just to make his tiny little adventurer rank look bigger?"

""""Ahahaha!""""

"... What a fucking joke!"

"... Holy shit! Get a load of this guy!"

"I’m not lying," Kurt said, dropping his voice dangerously low.

"Shut your mouth!" Bigi interrupted, his face contorting into a bullying grin. "Someone needs to teach this cocky, disgraced noble a lesson about respect. You think you’re special, huh!?"

The surrounding adventurers began to shout and cheer even louder, slamming their mugs against the tables, eager for a public beatdown to break the monotony of the evening.

Then, suddenly, and without an ounce of warning or hesitation, Bigi whipped his right hand forward.

SHATTER!

He slammed a full glass beer bottle directly over the top of Kurt’s head.

The glass shattered into many shards. Cheap amber liquor exploded outward, instantly soaking Kurt’s hair, running down his face in wet streams.

The force of the blow was enough to crack any man’s skull, but Kurt didn’t flinch. He didn’t drop to his knees. He stood perfectly straight, his single blue eye fixed on Bigi through the wet strands of his hair as a thin line of blood began to mix with the alcohol, dripping down his cheek from his hairline.

"C-rank Adventurer, Bigi! That is a violation of guild rules!" the receptionist screamed from behind the counter.

"Master Rossana!" Isabel cried out at the same time.

Bigi merely raised his hands in an innocent, mock gesture of defense. "Whoops! Guess my hand must’ve slipped! Look at him, boys! He didn’t even try to dodge!"

"... Fucking pathetic!"

"""AHAHAHAHA!!!"""

"What’s the matter, noble boy? Are you going to hide behind your little maid’s skirt again? Go ahead, let the little girl fight your battles."

While everyone was laughing, a sound began to rise from the center of all this attention.

"...Heh..hehe..hahaha..."

It started slowly – just a low, quiet chuckle that vibrated deep in Kurt’s chest.

"...Hahaha... Hahaha! Ahahaha!" Then, abruptly, it grew.

Kurt began to laugh right along with them. It wasn’t a sound of defeat or humiliation. This was a loud, unbridled and maniacal type laugh.

One by one, the mercenaries stopped jeering. The crowd's laughter died down into an uncomfortable, tense silence as they stared at the bleeding man who was currently laughing like a lunatic.

"... Master?"

Kurt slowly stopped, though the amusement in his face still remained. He wiped the blood from his cheek with his thumb and locked eyes onto Bigi with a wild, terrifying smile that promised absolute ruin.

"You know what? Since you struck first, whatever happens next, just know that this is going to count as self-defense."

Kurt jumped.

"Hah?! What did you say, you little–!"

THWACK!

CRACK!

The sound of Kurt's heel connecting with the side of Bigi's jaw sounded like a timber beam breaking in half. The force of the mana-enhanced strike lifted the multi-ton adventurer completely off his feet, sending him flying across the hall.

His massive body crashed directly over the heavy wooden counter of the in-house tavern, smashing through rows of expensive liquor shelves and breaking dozens of glass bottles in a thunderous explosion of wood and alcohol.

"""..."""

The silence that followed was absolute. Nobody breathed.

Kurt landed softly back on his boots, his dark smile never fading as he began to walk slowly toward the ruined counter.

Before he could reach the debris, two of Bigi's lackeys stepped into his path. Their hands rested at the hilt of their weapons as they looked at him with rage.

"Perfect," Kurt turned his attention to them. "The more the merrier. Let's see what you guys got."

"You're dead, noble shit!" The first lackey, a scarred mercenary with a broadsword, lunged forward with a horizontal slash meant to take Kurt's head off.

Not drawing his own weapon, Kurt fluidly ducked under the steel, entirely unbothered by the liquor still dripping from his hair.

As the broadsword carried past his face, Kurt stepped inside the man's guard, caught his wrist with a vice-like grip, and twisted.

Pop

Clank!

"AARRHHH!!!"

The lackey dropped his weapon and let out an ugly cry of pain.

"You bastard! I'll kill you!" Another lackey screamed.

Kurt caught the hilt of the weapon before it fully hit the ground, spun it around, and slammed the heavy flat side directly into the second lackey's nose just as the man tried to rush him with a dagger.

CRACK!

BASH!

The second man folded like a lawn chair, his nose completely shattered as he collapsed over the counter as well.

The first lackey, still nursing his twisted wrist, tried to back away, but Kurt swept his leg out in a brutal low kick that took the man's ankles out from under him, making him crash face-first into the floorboards. He then punted the downed man on the side of his skull, sending him into unconsciousness.

"Two down," Kurt quipped, tossing the stolen broadsword over his shoulder. "Come on, people, I thought you guys were supposed to be seasoned adventurers!"

Behind him, four more adventurers – seeing their friends dismantled so easily – decided that honor was for the dead. They drew short swords and heavy iron maces, sneaking up behind Kurt while he was distracted.

Tingle

Without turning around, Kurt ducked a swinging mace that shattered the empty air where his head had been a fraction of a second ago.

He reached out blindly, grabbed a wooden barstool, and swung it in a massive, horizontal arc.

SMASH!

"ARGH!"

The stool connected beautifully with the first sneaker's skull, sending the man spinning into a nearby table of half-eaten stew.

Before the remaining three could adjust their stance, Kurt moved skillfully like a shadow through a storm. He caught a thrusting blade between his palms, snapped the steel with a sharp twist, and drove the jagged remnant into the wielder’s shoulder before delivering a devastating open-palm strike to the man’s chest that launched him backward into his companions.

The entire guild hall was rapidly descending into absolute madness.

The thrill of a high-stakes tavern brawl was infectious, and more adventurers began to throw themselves into the fray just for the fun of it.

"Get the cyclops!" someone yelled from the back.

"Got you, bitch!"

"Nah-uh! Not today!" A massive brawler tried to tackle Kurt from the side, but he simply grabbed the man by his leather vest, used his own momentum against him, and executed a perfect judo flip, hurling the giant over a table and directly into a group of archers who were trying to string their bows.

"Hahaha!! Perfect strike!" Kurt laughed maniacally as he ducked another swinging fist.

Suddenly, the temperature in the room spiked. Near the back of the hall, three guild mages had pulled out their wooden staffs and pointed the glowing tips, crackling with spheres of fire and lightning magic, at Kurt’s back.

"Let’s see you dodge this, noble trash!"

"Master, watch out!"

Before the elemental magic could leave the crystal balls of the wooden staffs, Isabel shot out a massive torrent of swirling, pressurized water that erupted from the side of the hall.

The water struck the three mages like a runaway carriage, completely dousing their spells, snapping their staffs in half, and slamming them violently against the wall.

"Nice assist, Isabel! Keep ’em coming!"

The crowd was getting desperate. Five adventurers, realising that individual assaults were useless, coordinated a simultaneous jump. They threw themselves onto Kurt in a massive dogpile, pinning his arms and legs beneath hundreds of pounds of muscle and iron armor.

Yet, from beneath the mountain of flesh, a muffled rumble of laughter could still be heard.

Kurt was smiling through it all. The pain was real, but the adrenaline flowing through his redlined veins was practically a drug.

He drew deep breath and expanded his muscles expanding as the blue aura of mana flared around his body. With a roar of unbridled defiance, Kurt flexed his entire body and then–

BOOM!

The dogpile exploded outward.

The five adventurers were thrown off him like ragdolls, scattering all across the floor. Kurt stepped forward, delivering a barrage of lightning-fast jabs and hooks that left the remaining standing men completely unconscious before they could even hit the ground.

By this point, the chaos had become entirely self-sustaining.

The chaotic energy of the room had broken the sanity of the crowd. Adventurers who had been friends five minutes ago were now punching each other in the face simply because they had been caught up in the moment.

One accidentally tripped over a warrior’s shield, leading the warrior to think he was being attacked, which resulted in a massive brawl breaking out between two entire parties near the fireplace.

Mugs were flying, tables were being broken over backs, and the entire hall was a swirling vortex of violence.

"... Hey, watch where you’re swinging that axe, you fucking idiot!"

"... Shut up and fight!"

Kurt, laughing at the absurdity of the riot he had started, vaulted over a broken banister and took the fight to the second floor. A group of C-rank adventurers were waiting for him at the top of the stairs with drawn weapons.

"You’ve caused enough trouble, F-rank!" their leader snarled.

"Aw, don’t be like that! The party’s just getting started, boys!" Kurt cheered, lunging up the steps.

The battle on the second-floor balcony was an absolute spectacle.

Kurt used the narrow wooden railing as a balancing beam, sliding beneath thrusts, stepping over horizontal slashes, and using the architecture to his advantage.

He grabbed a heavy decorative tapestry from the wall and threw it over three mercenaries, completely blinding them before kicking them over the edge of the balcony. They fell down to the first floor, crashing onto a pile of broken chairs with loud groans.

Down below, the front doors of the guild hall were suddenly rattled by a massive impact.

A lone adventurer who tried to flee from the second-floor chaos was violently thrown down the stairs, sailing across the entranceway and crashing through the main doors, landing hard on the cobblestones outside.

The adventurer coughed up a mouthful of splintered wood. He looked up, intending to scramble back to his feet and run away, but his vision locked onto a pair of metallic gold square-toed heeled sandals standing directly in front of his face.

His gaze traveled up past the white high-waist wide-leg trousers, the rich navy blue long-sleeved satin-finish blouse, and finally past the v-neckline before settling on a face that made his blood run cold.

The adventurer let out a frightened whimper as his face turned completely pale. He then got up and scurried away on all fours into the dark street like a terrified crab.

The mysterious woman stepped over the threshold and walked into the guild hall.

The sight that greeted her was nothing short of apocalyptic. Half the tables were broken into kindling, the air was thick with the smell of spilled ale and stray elemental magic, and dozens of grown men were currently wrestling and punching each other in a massive, chaotic heap.

The woman clicked her tongue in biting irritation.

She then took a deep breath, her chest expanding before she screamed from the absolute top of her lungs.

"EVERYONE STOP RIGHT NOW!"

Her voice carried a pressurized wave of mana that shook the very foundations of the building and reverberated through the bones of every single person in the hall.

Instantly, the fighting died.

A female adventurer who was about to smash a bottle over a warrior’s head froze mid-swing.

The men wrestling on the floor stopped.

Everyone slowly turned their heads to the front entrance.

"... Oh no."

"... T-That’s–!"

"... The Guild Master."

The Guild Master scanned the catastrophic wreckage of her guild; her veins were practically pulsing with rage.

She dropped her voice into a dangerous, icy register that was somehow scarier than her scream. "Who is the main culprit responsible for all of this?"

Before anyone could answer, a loud shout echoed from the second floor.

Someone had been launched over the balcony by a powerful strike and his body sailed through the air. He was on a direct collision course with the Guild Master, his heavy iron armor carrying enough momentum to crush a normal person.

As the flying warrior neared her face, she simply reached out with a single hand and caught him cleanly by the chest plate, absorbing the entire kinetic force of his descent without taking a single step back.

She then casually set him down on his boots beside her.

The warrior looked up at the Guild Master’s furious face and let out a squeaking sound of absolute terror, before three frantic steps back.

Kurt casually jumped from the second-floor balcony, landing perfectly on his feet in the center of the cleared space.

He popped his shoulder back into place, wiping a fresh line of blood from his chin as he looked up to see who had ruined the fun.

The moment his eye locked onto the Guild Master’s features, he froze.

"Sophie?"

"... Kurt?"

Chapter 166 - The Guild Master

"Kurt It’s really you!" Sophie cheered with bubbly warmth.

She threw an arm around his shoulder and pulled him into a suffocatingly tight side-hug, practically squeezing the remaining oxygen right out of his lungs as she buried his face directly against her ample chest.

"Where on earth have you been hiding the last few days? The diner has been dead without you! It’s been so boring, you have no idea. And just when our deal was coming to fruition too! You actually had secret admirers coming in and asking for you by name while ordering food!"

"Sophie... wait, can’t... breathe..."

Sophie wasn’t entirely oblivious to his struggle. She leaned in closer as a teasing smirk played her lips and poked his cheek with a manicured finger.

"Tell me the truth, you didn’t forget about our little deal now that you and Diana are officially together, did you? Because if you’re trying to skip out on your tab or your promises, I will personally hunt you down~"

"Nnnn... Phaa!" Kurt finally managed to push himself back enough to catch a breath of air.

"It’s nothing like that, Sophie, I swear. I just... hey. What’re you doing? Get back!"

Before Sophie could squeeze him a second time, the rapid clicking of heels echoed from behind the main counter. The receptionist marched out into the open floor as her face twisted in a look of professional fury.

"Guild Master! You are two hours late! You specifically stated to the staff that you would be back from your "hobby job" by six o'clock sharp! Look at the time! Look at the hall!"

"Ah... about that. I got completely caught up in the kitchen trying out some experimental new spices for the menu. Time just sort of... evaporated. Sorry. Let's get down to business, shall we?"

Then, as if a switch had been flipped inside her mind, Sophie's posture instantly shifted.

The friendly diner owner vanished, and the cold, terrifying presence of the adventurers Guild Master returned in full force.

She crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her golden eyes to sharp slits as she slowly scanned the absolute ruin of the guild hall.

Broken glass, overturned barrels, shattered banisters, and dozens of bruised men and women groaning in the debris.

"Alright. Give it to me straight. What exactly happened here?"

The receptionist began to explain everything that happened. From Kurt arriving in the guild to turn in his request, to Bigi striking first, and finally to the all-out brawl that escalated from the scuffle.

As the receptionist spoke, the entire room seemed to hold its collective breath.

The rowdy, battle-hardened adventurers who had been happily punching each other's teeth out moments ago were now visibly sweating. Their eyes darted toward the exit as a suffocating wave of Sophie's killing intent began to bleed into the air.

Sophie turned her head slowly to the splintered wreckage of the personal tavern counter.

"Bigi. Get your fat ass over here. Right now."

For a long, agonising three seconds, nothing happened.

Then, with a pathetic, splintering sound, a massive, bald head popped up from behind the shattered bar. Bigi, who stood over six and a half feet tall and possessed muscles like iron boulders, looked completely reduced.

He meekly crawled out from the debris and dragged his trembling-self across the floorboards.

He kept his eyes glued firmly to the wood, completely unable to meet Sophie's golden gaze. Despite his colossal physical advantage, the sheer psychological pressure radiating from the Guild Master made him look like a misbehaving child.

"Look at me," Sophie commanded sternly.

Bigi swallowed hard, slowly lifting his head to look her in her eyes.

BAM!

Sophie's fist connected squarely with Bigi's jaw in a blinding blur of brute force. The impact echoed through the hall like a cannon shot.

Bigi's massive frame was launched entirely off his feet for the second time that night, sailing backward through the air before crashing violently back over the ruined counter, shattering what few unbroken liquor bottles remained.

Kurt stood a few feet away, staring wide-eyed in surprise at the spot where the giant had just been standing.

Sophie blew a stray strand of hair out of her face and yelled, "Bigi! Get back here! I didn't tell you that you could lie down!"

From the ruins of the bar, a pathetic groan echoed, followed by the sound of shuffling boots. Bigi crawled back over the counter with a jaw that was already swelling into a grotesque purple bruise.

He limped back over to her and hunched his massive shoulders inward as he stood in front of her desk, trembling violently.

"Do you know why I just hit you?"

Bigi wiped the blood from his mouth with a shaking hand. His voice cracked as he tried to find an excuse.

"G-Guild Master... please, he's a fake! He's just a disgraced noble pretending he's an adventurer! I... I was only looking out for him! I was trying to make him change professions before he goes out on a real request and gets himself slaughtered by a real monster! Also, he's a F-rank fraud!"

"An F-rank fraud!? What the hell are you talking about, you bald idiot? Kurt here could look after himself out in the wilds more than you could ever dream of! You think you're hot shit because you carry a big weapon and look down at everyone because of your height!?"

"B-But he's always hiding behind his maid! Look at him! He doesn't even fight his own battles! He lets a little girl in an apron protect him!"

Sophie shifted her attention to Isabel, who was still standing defensively near the reception desk.

"Wait a minute. I recognise you. You're one of Diana's maids, aren't you?"

She turned her head back to Kurt when a knowing, wicked smirk broke through her serious expression. "Ah, I guess it makes perfect sense that a maid is accompanying you, considering you and Diana Valentine are... intimately acquainted."

"... Holy shit, so it’s true."

"... The rumors about him and the Duke’s Valentine’s daughter weren’t just gossip..."

"SHUT UP!" Sophie roared, demanding silence now that they know what’s up.

Sophie turned her attention back to Bigi. "You are pathetic, Bigi. Standing in my hall, bullying a new recruit, spreading baseless rumors, and violating the sanctuary of the guild because your tiny little ego couldn’t handle an F-rank showing more competence than you. Apologise to him. Right now."

Bigi’s knuckles turned white as he looked at Kurt with a clenched fist.

But under the deadly watch of Sophie, he let out a barely audible mutter through his swollen jaw. "S-Sorry..."

"Bigi..."

The giant flinched violently at Sophie’s threatening tone.

Without a single second of further hesitation, he bent his torso forward, executing three consecutive, frantic ninety-degree bows, his forehead practically slamming into his knees as he screamed out a formal apology.

"I am deeply, profoundly sorry, Adventurer Kurt! I acted entirely out of line! Please forgive my severe lack of judgment!"

"Where’s his compensation?" Sophie asked.

Bigi scrambled frantically into his leather coin pouch, his fingers shaking so hard he dropped several copper pieces onto the floor.

He pulled out five glistening silver coins and thrusted them toward Kurt with both hands, his head still bowed.

Kurt, not one to say no to free money, reached out and gladly scooped up the silver coins. "Apology accepted, big guy. Always a pleasure doing business with you."

Sophie didn't look at Bigi further. She turned toward the rest of the hall, sweeping her eyes over the dozens of adventurers who were currently trying to blend into the shadows.

"And as for the rest of you!" Sophie yelled with scorn.

"You should all be thoroughly ashamed of yourselves! Behaving like an undisciplined pack of rabid dogs in my establishment! Practically bullying a fellow guild member with cheap insults when you know absolutely nothing about his capabilities or his accomplishments! And then, the moment a bottle breaks, you all start tearing my hall apart like mindless ruffians because you lack the basic discipline to control your own bloodlust!"

She took a step forward as her presence towered over the entire room. "I have absolutely no need for adventurers who cannot conduct themselves with basic professional decorum!"

Sophie snapped her fingers, pointing directly at the – now conscious – two bruised men who had stepped forward to assist Bigi earlier. "You two. Get over here. Line up right next to your leader."

The two lackeys scrambled forward, their faces pale as they formed a neat, trembling line beside the giant bald man.

"Compensation." Sophie stretched out her hand, and the lackeys handed five silver coins to her, no questions asked.

She then walked down the line and without a single word, her hand darted out three times in a brutally decisive blur.

RIP! RIP! RIP!

With three clean, violent jerks, she tore off the iron adventurer tags straight off their necks.

She turned around and hurled the tags across the room, where they landed onto the receptionist's desk.

"Unaffiliate all three of them immediately." Sophie commanded. "Wipe their names from the regional logs and place a permanent, lifetime ban on their ability to ever apply for an adventurer's license within the borders of the kingdom. They want to be adventurers? Go to another continent and become their problem."

"Guild Master! Please! No!" Bigi begged. "This is our entire livelihood! We have nowhere else to go! We're sorry! We'll pay for the damage, we'll clean the whole city, just please don't ban us!"

"Shut your mouths! The decision is final. You broke the primary covenant of this hall. You are no longer welcome here. Get out of my sight, take a hike, and go find work shoveling horse shit somewhere else. Move!"

The three men hesitated as their spirits broke, but Sophie let out a sudden bark of an angry growl, and they practically scrambled over each other in their haste to reach the front doors.

Once the doors slammed shut behind them, Sophie turned her gaze back to the remaining crowd.

"Does anyone else in this hall have a problem with my decisions? If so, please step forward now so we can resolve it effective immediately."

""""...""""

"Good. Now, every single one of you who participated in this little riot is going to grab a broom, a bucket, and a hammer. You are going to clean this entire hall until it sparkles, and you are going to repair every single piece of broken furniture before sunrise. If I see a single drop of spilled ale on these floorboards by morning, you will personally answer to me."

The effect was instantaneous.

All the adventurers scrambled across the hall like frantic housemaids. Grabbing brooms, picking up broken glass, and lifting overturned tables with an orderly, terrified efficiency that they had never displayed during an actual request.

Sophie let out a weary sigh as the tension finally left her shoulders. She turned back to Kurt with a softened expression.

"Kurt... I am so incredibly sorry you had to deal with this trash treatment. Something like this wouldn't have ever happened if the core of my well-known, high-ranking adventurers were actually present in the city today."

"Your core adventurers?"

"Yes. Alas, an S-rank dimensional rift opened up near the northern border this morning, and Duke Valentine drafted every A-rank and above party to assist with the containment. It left the hall completely empty of actual professionals, leaving nothing but these undisciplined ruffians to cause trouble."

"Hm. Don't worry about it, Sophie. Thanks for the apology, and thanks for the assist. It was actually kind of therapeutic. So... do I have to stay and help them scrub the floorboards, or am I free to go?"

"Oh, heavens no! Absolutely not! It wasn't you who caused this mess. You clearly were the victim here."

"Cool. Because honestly, I just really want to go home. It's been an exceptionally long day, and my bed is calling my name."

"That so? You're dismissed then," Sophie said, waving her hand toward the exit.

"It was nice seeing you, Sophie. Take care of yourself," Kurt said as he turned on his heel. He gestured to Isabel, and together, they began walking toward the front doors.

"Oh, and Kurt!"

Kurt stopped with his hand on the handle; he turned his head around over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"You better show up at the diner for a meal, you hear me? Otherwise, I will personally march up the hills and drag your lazy butt there myself. Don't think you can hide from me... I happen to know exactly where you live now~"

"Haha, sure. I'll see you soon, Sophie."

Isabel offered a polite bow. "Have a pleasant evening, Guild Master."

Together, Kurt and Isabel stepped out into the cool, refreshing night air.

They climbed back onto the seats of the red carriage, the leather reins snapping as Isabel guided the tired horses down the cobblestone street, leaving the chaotic lights of the guild precinct behind them.

As the carriage rolled away into the quiet shadows of the capital's alleys, three figures stepped out from the darkness.

Bigi stood in the center, his hand clutching his swollen, broken jaw and his breath coming in venomous hisses.

Beside him, his two lackeys watched the retreating silhouette of the vehicle, their faces twisted into masks of pure, unbridled scorn and burning malice.

They had lost their status, their livelihood, and their honor – and in their twisted, small minds, every single drop of blame belonged to the one-eyed noble who had just ridden away with their silver.