THORNS 167

Chapter 167 - Intimacy

Isabel brought the carriage to a smooth stop right before the wide steps of the mansion's entrance.

Slipping down from the driver's seat with the effortless grace inherent to her training, she opened the carriage door for Kurt. He stepped down and popped his stiff joints. Isabel gently closed behind him and bowed.

"Goodnight, Master Rossana. Thank you for allowing me to accompany you today. I shall retire to the servant quarters to cleanse myself and prepare for tomorrow's duties."

Kurt looked down at her when a small, genuine smile broke through the dirt and dried blood masking his face. He reached out, gently tapping her shoulder to signal her to rise from her bow.

"Night, Isabel. You did pretty well today – all things considered... I mean, look, I know today was a lot. And I know you probably won't be able to just forget about everything that happened. But I really hope you don't put yourself down over it. Sorry, I'm trying to find the right words, but my brain is completely fried."

Isabel blinked as her usual doll-like eyes widened for just a moment.

Then a faint warmth softened her expression, and she bowed her head a second time, but this time with a distinct vulnerability. "Yes, Master. Thank you for your kind words. I shall try my best not to harbor unnecessary regrets."

"Good. And hey, if it is any consolation, despite the absolute disaster at the end, it was really fun hanging out with you today. Now go get some rest."

"Hehehe. I had fun too, Master. Goodnight again." Isabel turned and left for the maid's dormitory.

Kurt watched her go until she vanished around the corner. The moment she was out of sight, he entered the mansion and closed the doors when the final vestige of his adrenaline-fueled resolve crumbled.

He stood entirely alone in the massive foyer. Surrounded by marble pillars and the oppressive, silent luxury of the high nobility. The feeling was still unfamiliar, but as Diana told him, all this belonged to him too.

Slowly, his body finally registered the absolute truth of his situation: He was home. He was safe.

With that realisation, every single ounce of tension holding his skeleton together completely gave out.

Kurt let out a long, high-pitched sigh that felt like a deflating balloon. He leaned his upper back against the door and tilted his head back to thud gently against the frame.

Slowly, his back slid down the smooth wood of the door until he sat on the floorboards. He pulled his knees up against his chest and wrapped his arms around them, burying his face deeply into the crook of his elbows.

He didn't move. He didn't think.

He was just so incredibly, profoundly tired from everything that happened today.

From the moment he entered the guild, to the explosive, bone-shattering violence of fighting the infected and centipede monsters, then finally to the fight at the guild. He felt like a clockwork toy whose spring had been wound far too tight and had finally snapped.

Step.

A quiet click of low-heeled shoes began to echo from the western hallway.

Wendy stepped into the foyer carrying a silver tray with a freshly polished tea set. She stopped dead in her tracks the moment her eyes looked toward the entranceway.

She saw that sitting in a crumpled heap directly against the front door was a disheveled figure. And as Wendy took a few cautious steps closer, her sharp eyes picked out the familiar dark hair and bruised clothes.

"Master Rossana? You have returned. Welcome home."

"... Mmh." Kurt hummed without looking up.

"My goodness. Where on earth have you been to look so utterly disheveled and beaten up? Have you taken up a dangerous request from the guild?"

"... Mmh."

Realising very quickly that she was not going to get a single proper sentence out of him, Wendy let out a soft, defeated breath. "Very well. Since you appear to have lost the capacity for human speech, should I perhaps go and call for Ms. Valentine?"

"... Mmh."

"Understood," Wendy smiled. "I shall inform the Ms. of your... unique arrival." She turned and swiftly marched up the grand staircase.

Not even two minutes later, the silence of the mansion was shattered by the sound of frantic and entirely un-aristocratic running footsteps.

The thudding echoed across the second-floor eastern wing, moving at a breakneck speed before suddenly stopping right at the top of the grand steps.

"Rosie!?" Diana’s voice rang out through the foyer with a breathless panic.

She stood at the top of the stairs, clad in luxurious silky robes that billowed around her ankles. Her long hair was tied in a loose bun and her eyes wide with a terrifying amount of worry.

Not bothering to use the stairs, she teleported straight to him and before Kurt could even process what was happening, Diana threw herself downward.

She enveloped him in a desperately tight, and suffocating hug.

Kurt snapped out of his lethargy instantly.

The warmth and sudden intensity of her embrace forced his head up. He slowly uncoiled his arms from his knees, his hands resting awkwardly against her waist as he looked at her.

"Diana? What's wrong? Why are you squeezing me like I'm about to evaporate?"

Diana pulled back. Her hands gripped his shoulders with a fierce, trembling strength as her eyes scanned every single square inch of his face, taking in the cut on his lip, the dried blood on his temple, and the unmistakable smell of cheap booze.

It wasn't a stretch to say that she looked completely dumbfounded and deeply offended by his casual tone.

"What's wrong??? Rosie, look at yourself! You crawl back home looking like a bum! Your clothes are torn to shreds, you smell like a degenerate's tavern, you're covered in dried blood and bruises, and you're sitting on the floor of the front door looking like the most depressed, miserable creature in the entire kingdom! And yet... yet here you are, looking at me with that stupid, blank eye, casually asking me what's wrong?!"

Kurt stared at her wide-eyed, completely stunned by her explosively breathless rant.

"I..uh..pfft..ahaha!" Unable to control himself, Kurt threw his head back and burst into a loud, bright, and thoroughly genuine laugh.

Diana's face instantly flushed a brilliant shade of crimson.

Her worry completely morphed into pure embarrassment. She gave his chest a flustered series of playful hits as she complained back. "Why are you laughing?! Stop that! It isn't funny, you idiot!"

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry! I know it looks bad, Ana. I know I look like total crap right now. But I promise you, I was just sitting here to decompress myself – or something like that. There's absolutely nothing wrong with me. I'm completely fine."

Diana stopped hitting him and rested her fists against his chest as she glared at him with a heavy pout. She stared deep into his eye, looking for any hidden pain or lies, but finding only peaceful exhaustion.

Slowly, the defensive hardness in her face dissolved, and a gentle smile graced her lips. She let out a soft sigh of relief and leaned forward, pressing her forehead against his chin.

"You can be such an infuriating man at times, Rosie," she whispered affectionately.

She pulled back slightly and gently wiped away a smudge of dirt from his cheek with her thumb. "Do you want to talk about what happened today?"

"... Nah. Let's talk about it tomorrow. Right now, I'm really just too tired to construct proper sentences. I just want to crash for the night and forget the alphabet exists."

"Okay. By the way, did you even eat yet? You're looking a little thin."

'Huh? I mean I didn't, but am I really?'

"N-No, I didn't. I probably should eat something, given how many calories I burned, but honestly... I really don't feel like moving a single muscle to do it."

Diana's eyes lit up with an excited spark.

She clapped her hands together with a cheerful sound as a wide mischievous grin broke across her face. "Perfect! That is completely fine! If you don’t want to move, then I will simply feed you myself! Wendy!"

Like a ghost materializing on command, Wendy stepped out from the shadows of the adjacent hallway. "Yes, Ms. Valentine?"

"Bring a plate of light, easy food immediately. Something soft and warm that doesn’t require a lot of chewing."

"Right away, Ms." Wendy bowed before turning back toward the kitchen.

Still sitting side-by-side on the floor, Diana leaned her head against his shoulder. Her soft silky robes offered a beautiful, luxurious contrast to his rough, grime-streaked clothes.

"You know, after we get some food into you, you also desperately need a bath. You smell like a brewery that exploded in a swamp."

’That’s one hell of a nose she’s got.’

She then leaned in close to his ear and whispered in a teasing purr. "Do you... need my help with that part too, Rosie~?"

"Why yes, actually. Having you bathe me sounds lovely~"

Diana’s entire face erupted into a vivid blush. She quickly looked away and bit her lower lip as she tried her absolute best not to smile like a silly, lovestruck schoolgirl.

As if to come in and save the day, Wendy returned.

She was carrying a delicate plate filled with warm, cut-up pieces of soft roasted poultry, light bread, and a small bowl of savory broth.

She placed the tray gently on the floor beside them and slipped away without a word, leaving the couple to their privacy.

Diana immediately took charge by picking up the small silver fork, carefully blowing on a piece of warm meat to ensure it wasn't too hot, and guided it gently to Kurt's lips.

Kurt accepted the offering gratefully, chewing slowly as the warmth of the food began to restore a tiny fraction of his vitality.

For the next ten minutes, the grand foyer was completely silent save for the quiet clink of the fork and Diana's soft, encouraging murmurs as she patiently fed him like a treasured king, ensuring he ate every single bite.

Once the plate was completely cleared, Diana set the tray aside and teleported them both to their room where she guided a completely cooperative, semi-conscious Kurt into the adjoined bathroom.

With loving care, she gently peeled the tattered and-stained clothes off his body, tossing the ruined fabric into the hamper. She took a quick, incredibly thorough session bathing him.

She worked her fingers through his dark hair, massaging away the dried blood, the sticky alcohol, and any lingering grime with sweet-smelling soaps.

Kurt sat in the hot water with his eyes closed, letting out purring groans of absolute bliss as her soft hands worked away the knots in his shoulders and rinsed his skin until it was completely clean and smooth.

Once they were done with the bath, Diana wrapped him in a plush towel, dried him off, and led him back into the bedroom.

Without a single shred of hesitation or modesty, they shed the towels and got straight into their massive, silk-sheeted bed completely naked – just the exact way they liked it.

The feeling of cool, high-grade silk against bare, clean skin was the final touch of paradise Kurt needed.

The moment his head hit the feather pillows, Diana slid across the mattress and snuggled her supple, bare body against his side. She draped her leg over his waist, pulling herself in until there was no space left between them.

Kurt reached out, wrapping his arm around her waist to pull her even closer and Diana leaned up, pressing her soft lips against his in a deep, slow, and profoundly loving kiss that carried all the unspoken depth of her devotion.

"Goodnight, Rosie."

"Goodnight, Ana. And thanks for everything."

Diana shifted slightly, bringing his head down until he was resting securely against her warm, soft, and incredibly comforting breasts.

Being truly exhausted, Kurt didn't even have time to think. Surrounded by her warmth, her intoxicating scent, and the steady, soothing beat of her heart, his mind finally went entirely dark.

He drifted off to sleep first, his breathing instantly falling into a peaceful rhythm. And so, the long, chaotic day finally came to a perfect, quiet end.

Chapter 168 - Guess Who's Back?

Jingle~

"Welcome to Sophie's Diner! Grab a seat anywhere you like, and I'll be right with–"

"Hey, Cindy."

"Kurt! Oh my gosh, you're actually alive!" Cindy, who was busy cleaning the counter with a rag, squealed as she leapt over and ran to him.

"Where on earth have you been the last few days?! Everyone's been talking about you! What have you been up to? Are you okay? Did you see the newspaper this morning?! Look, look, look!"

Before Kurt could even open his mouth to greet her, Cindy frantically reached into her apron pocket and whipped out a folded, crisp sheet of parchment. She unfolded it with a sharp snap and thrust it directly into his face, nearly poking his good eye out with the corner of the paper.

"Look at the front page! The entire capital is losing its mind! There's a giant article about an F-rank adventurer and the Izumi heiress who uncovered a massive conspiracy in the southern remote village!

Look here! That's literally you, right there, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Lady Izumi, and right next to you is Dominik! And what is that behind you?! Is that a literal block of ice with a frozen zealot inside?! Like whaaat?!"

"Cindy! Breath! Jeez!" Kurt laughed as he pulled the parchment away from his face to get a proper look.

The illustration was remarkably crisp – not as good as what his phone could capture, but crisp, nonetheless. It captured the grim, triumphant atmosphere at the city gates from the sunset before.

'Well, damn. Dom wasn't kidding when he said this was going to turn into a public spectacle. The media moves fast in this world. I wonder how they're taking pictures when Chief Hudson and Dominik were so shocked when I took one with my phone...'

"What is all that absolute ruckus out there?!" A booming voice roared from behind the swinging wooden doors of the kitchen.

The doors burst open with a loud slam, and Sophie marched out into the main dining area wearing her chef's attire.

"Well, well, well," Sophie smirked as she leaned against the doorframe. "Finally here, huh? I'm glad to see you kept your word, you crazy cyclops. I was halfway ready to march down to Diana's estate and drag you out of bed myself."

She then turned her sharp gaze onto her waitress. "Cindy! Stop standing there like a starstruck schoolgirl and chatting his ear off! Direct the man to his seat, take his order, and do your actual job!"

"Eeeeek!! Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"Good. I'm going to finish prepping the ingredients. I have a feeling we're going to be busy, so you better hurry up and order, Kurt." With that, she vanished back into the kitchen, the doors swinging shut behind her.

Cindy let out a dramatically relieved sigh as she shook her head. "Whew, she's on a warpath today. Come on, follow me."

She led Kurt toward the front of the diner, guiding him to a prime booth situated directly next to a massive, pristine glass panel window that offered an uninterrupted, wide-angle view of the bustling cobblestone street outside.

"What can I get you started with for a drink while you look over the food options?" Cindy asked when handing him the menu.

"Hmm. You know... I have a friend who's in love with this specific soda called 'Drinksalot'. I'd like a large glass of that, please."

"Sure! What flavor would you like? We have sweet berry, citrus lime, and spiced vanilla."

Kurt shrugged lazily. "Surprise me. I'll let you decide the flavor."

"You got it! Be right back." Cindy chirped, spinning on her heel and scurrying off toward the beverage counter.

Left to his own devices, Kurt briefly opened the menu, scanned the text for a few seconds, and then closed it with a soft thud.

He rested his chin in his palm and turned his gaze toward the massive glass window to watch the city wake up.

Even though the sun had barely finished rising, the street outside was already incredibly busy. Caravans filled with colorful silk banners, armored mercenaries on the move, and wealthy nobles riding in gilded carriages were packed tightly into the thoroughfare.

Kurt chalked it up to the obvious: the grand tournament was scheduled to begin tomorrow.

That tournament was also the exact reason why Diana had to wake up hours before dawn, kissing his forehead with a quiet apology before rushing out to manage the massive security logistics, the church's healing station and the last-minute aristocratic meetings required for the event.

Jingle~

The bell above the front door rang out again, its chime echoing through the quiet diner. Kurt casually looked up. Stepping through the doorway was a slender figure completely enveloped in an oversized hoodie jacket. The deep hood was pulled far forward to obscure their face in deep shadow.

"Welcome to Sophie's Diner! I'll be with you in a minute!"

The hooded individual paused at the entrance as they tilted their head, scanning the empty booths.

The moment their gaze landed on Kurt's face, a soft smile visible beneath the shadow of the hood bloomed.

Without a word to Cindy, the stranger marched straight across the wooden floorboards and slid into the empty seat directly opposite him.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," Kurt chuckled, balling his hand into a fist and holding it out across the wooden surface between them. "So, the prodigal daughter finally returns from her grand journey."

The stranger let out a soft laugh as she reached up and threw back her hood, letting her neck-length silver hair with vibrant, minty green streaks spill out.

"Please," Emelie said, dripping her voice with a playful, sarcastic edge. "That title definitely does not suit me, Kurt. I'm far too grounded to be considered prodigal."

She raised her own hand, bringing her knuckles forward to meet his in a solid fist bump. "It's good to see you."

As if right on cue, Cindy returned from the back counter, carrying a tall glass of purple, bubbling wild-berry Drinksalot. She set it down on the table, intending to slide it to Kurt, but the moment Emelie saw the glass, her eyes practically lit up like stars.

"Whoa! You actually remembered!" Emelie gasped. Her hands flew to the glass, and she grabbed it before Cindy could even slide it over to Kurt.

She then took a massive gulp, her throat moving as she drained nearly half the sparkling soda in one go. "Ah! That is exactly what I needed! This shit is literally the best thing this city has ever produced!"

Cindy stood at the edge of the booth, clutching the tray against her chest. Her face was the perfect picture of utter confusion. She looked at Emelie, then at Kurt as her brain completely failed to process how the famous Emelie Herst just hijacked her customer's drink.

"Don't sweat it, Cindy. Just bring another one of those to the table." Kurt said, breaking her confusion.

"U-Understood," Cindy stammered. "By the way. Have you decided on your order yet?"

"Yeah, there's this interesting one called Fantasy Grand Slam. I'll have that."

"One Grand Slam... And you Ms. Herst? I take it, you'd like the usual morning platter?"

Emelie set the half-empty glass down with a satisfied grin, wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve as she hummed happily. "Yes, please, Cindy. Extra crispy potato chips and double the butter on the biscuits."

"Coming right up. Be back soon, you two." Cindy said, leaving the two to talk.

"So, Emy, you come here often? You seemed to know the staff pretty well. Not to mention you got a ’usual’ order."

"Well... if you count coming here for nearly a thousand years across various versions of this city... then yes, I suppose you could say I come here pretty often. It’s always been one of the few spots in the capital that stays genuinely nice and quiet."

"Ha, the quiet part is usually much to Sophie’s dismay."

"It’s her fault she doesn’t know how to market. Not to mention she’s keeping it a secret to the adventurers that she works here all day and only goes back to being a proper guild master after dark. Oh, you should keep that part a secret."

"Don’t worry. I already know all about it."

"That right? Oh yeah, I just remembered something. I happened to stumble across a copy of the morning news. And I must say, I read something quite... interesting."

Emelie reached deep into her hoodie and pulled out a crumpled parchment straight from the central capital newspaper. She flattened it out on the table with her palm, sliding it directly in front of Kurt.

"Care to explain what this is about?" Emelie asked as she pointed toward the same news that Cindy showed him. "I go away for not even a week, and I come back to find my favorite one-eyed warrior posing for the front-page news like a legendary knight of the realm."

"... Honestly, the thing that bothers me the most about this... how the hell are they getting my picture like this? From what I know about the magical technology of this world, people don't even know what a photograph or a camera is. How did someone draw this so perfectly?"

"What do you mean 'how'? That's a high-tier Scryer matrix spell embedded into all recording tags. The spell activates in a way that the crystal lens captures a residual mana imprint of a scene, to which you can later project it onto ink-sensitive parchment. You can also use the tag to listen to music and record voices."

"... Uhm... Ok. All that makes perfect sense. Yep. I'll just nod and agree because I understood everything." Kurt said robotically.

His hands then instinctively reached down toward his pocket to pull out his smartphone, intending to show her a comparison.

However, his fingers brushed against nothing but empty cloth. A sudden wave of annoyance washed over his face as his memory caught up with him.

"Ah, dammit. I forgot. My phone got completely destroyed during my fight with that village elder–"

SLAM!

"You actually fought the Elder of that village?!"

"Yeah... The old guy turned into this massive centipede monster. I believe I remember Kitty calling him a 'World Ender'."

"Kitty? That white cat...? Kurt," Emelie said, her voice dropping into a completely serious command. "Tell me everything that happened. Do not leave out a single detail."

Kurt looked at her serious face, then down at his fresh glass of soda that Cindy had just quietly placed on the table alongside their steaming breakfast platters. He let out a slow breath when a small dark grin pulled on his lips.

"Alright, Emy. Strap yourself in. Because this is about to be one hell of a crazy ride."

.....

The story took over an hour to tell.

Kurt spoke in a calm tone, detailing the entire sequence of events:

- The F-rank quest.

- The Infected's surprise attack and Liam's cure.

- The horrifying tragedy of the entire village.

- The brutal nightmare of his battle against the infected, the centipede monsters and the World Ender.

- The way Ayako killed said World Ender in one shot.

- Finally, the retrieval of the cultist and recovery of the previous Saintess.

As the clock ticked closer to mid-morning, something else began to happen.

The massive glass panel window next to their booth became a literal magnet. One by one, people walked by and noticed the single-eyed man they'd come to know from all the different news articles sitting casually eating breakfast alongside Emelie Herst.

The diner too, became near full as the women snuck glances at Kurt and fans of Emelie stared admirably at her.

From behind the kitchen doors, Sophie’s roaring laughter could be heard echoing over the sound of sizzling pans. She was especially delighted at the sudden morning rush of customers.

Finally, Kurt took a final sip of his soda, setting the empty glass down as he concluded his tale with the chaotic resolution of the guild brawl from the night before.

"And that’s pretty much it. Turned in the flowers, got my five copper coins, beat up a bald guy named Bigi, and Sophie banned him for life."

Across the table, Emelie sat completely frozen. Her hands were still tightly gripping her empty glass and her mouth hung slightly agape as her green eyes stared at him in utter disbelief.