THORNS 169

Chapter 169 - Betrayal Of The Master Assassin

Emelie was about to let out a witty retort, but the words died in her throat as she finally took a moment to look around.

The previously desolate diner had completely transformed during their conversation. Every single wooden booth was now packed to capacity. She noticed some were even holding up the morning news sheet, whispering furiously while gesturing toward them both.

"We should probably get out of here since we're done eating anyway. Before someone gathers the courage to come over and ask for an autograph."

"Yeah," Kurt nodded. "Fair point. Let's bounce."

"Bounce? We're bouncing now? Is that what we're doing–"

"EMY!"

"Holy fuck–! Why'd you scream at me!?"

"Do you know what you're saying?"

"Why...? What did I say?"

"... N-Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Stop being so weird." Emelie shook her head as she pulled her hood back over her face.

'Is that you Michael? Have you become Emelie De Santa?'

On his way out with Emelie, Kurt caught Cindy’s eye as she rushed past with two handful trays of breakfast. Shouting over the noise, they waved her over, settled the bill with a generous tip, and left a hefty tip for her troubles.

As they walked through the main road, they couldn’t help but notice how it was an absolute sea of movement. Banners representing various nations and their academies fluttered from the stone lampposts.

"By the way, Emy, on a completely different note. Can we swing by the place where the tournament is actually taking place? Is taking a sneak peek possible or not?"

"Sure, no problem. It’s being hosted at Future Academy. It’s a bit of a trek up the hill, but I’m sure you’ll manage. Besides, we can talk while we walk..." She paused, turning her head slightly toward him.

"Seriously... I still cannot believe you actually took out a World Ender. Do you have any idea how insane that sounds?"

"Like I just spent the last hour telling you, it wasn’t me. It was Izumi-san. She’s the one who hung his body on a giant tree like some Christmas decoration."

"Yeah, but you still went toe-to-toe with one and lived to tell the tale. Though, I’m more surprised that Ayako was even traveling with you in the first place. The Izumi clan isn’t exactly known for playing nice with foreign adventurers."

"It was purely coincidental," Kurt explained as he stepped aside to let a merchant’s cart pass by. "We literally just crossed paths at the adventurer’s guild, and she arbitrarily decided to tag along on my F-rank herb-gathering quest under the guise of ’sight-seeing’."

Emelie raised an eyebrow. "And why on earth would a prodigy like her decide to do that?"

"I don’t know. Ever since we clashed blades in a mana-coating standoff a few days ago, I’ve noticed her constantly sneaking these weird glances at me. And let me tell you, it is not the shy, blushing, or loving kind of look.

It’s the highly specific, terrifying kind of look that says she absolutely cannot wait to cut me down to pieces. There was also that moment by the lake where she tried getting my ’attention’ by showboating and showing me what I can do."

Emelie stared at him with a completely deadpan expression before letting out a dramatic sigh.

"Kurt... Ayako is a textbook battle junkie. You clashed blades with her and stood strong, which means you instantly hooked her attention. She’s desperately showing off her power in hopes that it will spark something inside of you – the same twisted competitive fire she feels – so that the two of you can eventually have a real, serious fight to the death."

"Huh. You sure seem to know a lot about her."

"Pshh, please. I’ve been in your exact shoes more times than I could care to count. Now, I’m just grateful that you have taken up that ridiculous mantle of attracting all the local psychopaths. Thanks, Rosie~"

"Haha. I’m happy to oblige... Say, tell me what these ’World Enders’ actually are. And what’s their connection to the cult?"

"Hm. Hold on."

They arrived at a bustling crossroad, forcing them to halt at the edge of the cobblestone sidewalk. A chaotic stream of heavy carriages, galloping horses, and armored vanguard units streamed past, kicking up small clouds of dust. Emelie leaned against a stone pillar and began to explain as they waited for the road to clear.

"The World Enders are exactly what their names imply. They’re not your typical monsters; they’re living weapons of catastrophe. The cult artificially engineers or corrupts ancient entities, binding them to forbidden, archaic mana sources in order to create unstoppable forces capable of wiping entire nations off the map. Their ultimate goal is to completely tear down the current world order and take it over."

"Ha, take over the world? Seriously, every time I hear that, it just sounds so childish. Like a cartoon villain from my time."

"It is nothing to laugh at, Kurt. I’m being completely serious."

The tone of voice told Kurt to not make light of them.

"During my previous cycles," Emelie continued. "I died many times over to that exact entity – the Elder Centipede. In one timeline, I was ripped apart and eaten alive. In another, I was infected, watching my own flesh mutate until I turned into a mindless, screaming monster serving the hive..."

A heavy silence settled between them over the roar of the passing traffic. Kurt looked down at her, the remnants of his casual demeanor entirely gone. He reached out and gently tapped her shoulder. "I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made light of it."

Emelie took a deep breath and shook her head as the tension left her shoulders.

"It’s fine. Honestly, I’m just happy that I don’t have to deal with that massive headache in this cycle. I guess I technically owe Ayako a massive favor for dealing with him."

The traffic cleared, and Emelie signaled with her head. "Come on, let’s cross."

As their boots clicked against the stones of the walkway, Emelie continued, "You know, while I was away, I was actually preparing to properly take on the cultists in that swamp and face the Elder myself once the Grand Tournament concluded."

"What do you mean by ’prepare’?"

"I spent the last few days compounding a cure for the infection. Spent countless hours over a cauldron... Oh well, I guess I won’t be needing those vials anymore."

"You know how to make the cure?"

"Yep. From Liam. He's basically the answer to the mess of that specific World Ender. Though, his cure only works on people who've just been infected; with a little tweaking I've learned from countless cycles, I've come up with a proper cure. Rip Liam. He was a good man."

Kurt's mind flashed back to the horrific scene of the villagers being swallowed into the earth. "It's a shame we couldn't save anyone out there."

"Some sacrifices cannot be helped, Kurt. I learned that the hard way. But tell me... what about the body of the Saintess the cultist was using as the main conduit for his research?"

"What about it?"

"Was it intact?"

"That's a pretty strange question to ask. Yeah, of course it was intact. Izumi-san even made a pretty little ice coffin to preserve her body when we brought her out so the authorities could handle the rest."

"What about her gem?"

"What gem?"

"... There's supposed to be a gem clearly embedded on her forehead. Was it there?"

Kurt racked his brain, visualizing the pale, serene face of the dead Saintess inside the laboratory. "No... there was definitely no gem on her forehead. I looked right at her face. It was just smooth skin."

"That's... that's not possible. That shouldn't be possible. Kurt, are you absolutely sure? Try your absolute best to remember."

"Look, I'm a lot of things – and I might have one eye – but I'm not blind. I'd definitely remember if there was a magical rock sticking out of a dead woman's skull. There wasn't anything there."

"Oh, no..." Emelie whispered, rubbing her temples frantically. "This is bad. Did you search the whole of the underground lab?"

"I searched. The only important-looking thing I found was a journal, which I handed directly to Dom. He also said he was sending a full team of professionals to thoroughly search the place. If we missed something, his men will find it."

Emelie took a shuddering breath, forcing herself to settle. She smoothed down her hoodie, though the lingering anxiety in her eyes remained.

"Okay... okay. We need to see Dominik later today to get an update on that search. If that gem is in the wrong hands, we could be in severe danger."

"What is this gem you're talking about?"

"... It's a divine gem known as Bula's Pearl. Its function is simple: It grants immortality to whoever possesses it. Not immortality as in everlasting life. It's the kind where no matter the cause of damage you're inflicted with, you'll never die. You'll also be instantly healed. I'm sure you can see the value in having something like that."

"Really? But that Saintess looked relatively young. Mid-twenties at least. How'd she die?"

"That... That's something that's not important to our mission. Besides, what's done is done. Let's focus on the future."

Emelie shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts as they turned a sharp corner, beginning their ascent up the hilled road to the academy. "Let's change the subject before I have a panic attack."

"Alright, on a totally different note, and not to sound incredibly rude... but your brother is a total, unmitigated jackass."

Emelie let out a sudden burst of laughter. "Ahaha! Really? What did he do now?"

"Yeesh. He literally barged straight into my home and started making a massive scene, throwing a tantrum, and unironically claiming that Diana belongs to him. The hell’s wrong with him?"

"Well, to be perfectly fair to him – in his mind – you did just roll into town and steal his precious childhood friend, his first love, and his only love. Cut the poor boy some slack."

"I don’t give a rat’s ass about his tragic backstory. I am seriously going to whack him one of these days. Thought I should let you know."

"Honestly? Go right ahead," Emelie said with a wicked smirk. "I know all about his overprotective, split-personality nonsense, but I don’t really care to manage it. He will quite literally do anything for me, but he can be so annoyingly suffocating at times.

Just promise me you’ll tell me in advance before you fight him so I can bring a massive bucket of popcorn to watch the show. Just... don’t kill him, okay? I still love my brother despite his horrific personality."

Kurt glanced down at her a bit skeptically. "Wait, isn’t he supposed to be incredibly strong? At least, that was the vibes I got from him."

"Oh, he’s absolutely terrifyingly strong. I mean, he’s been training like a demonic madman for years specifically to stand toe-to-toe with Principal Valentine. But..."

She glanced up at Kurt as a genuine, warm smile graced her lips. "You’re quite the anomaly yourself, Kurt. Tell you what, I might actually bring two buckets of popcorn instead of one. It’s going to be a masterpiece, hehehe."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

As they continued their trek up the road, the surrounding scenery began to shift.

More and more teenagers and young adults clad in elegant, white uniforms began to flood the walkways.

To their left was a wide cobblestone path that led toward a massive complex of luxury dormitories, with streams of students laughing and chatting as they moved back and forth.

They were about to officially enter the grounds of Future Academy.

As they approached the iron gates of the campus, Kurt's eye suddenly locked onto a very specific, highly volatile situation unfolding right by the stone archway.

Standing near the gate was a familiar pair of green-haired twin girls.

The fiery, short-tempered twin, Autumn Wingard, was stomping her foot with an angry pout as she scanned the incoming crowds.

Beside her, the timid, soft-spoken twin, Summer Wingard, was frantically waving her hands, trying her absolute best to calm her sister down before she caused a public scene.

Kurt stopped dead in his tracks.

Emelie stopped right next to him.

Simultaneously, both Kurt and Emelie let out a perfectly synchronized, and utterly exhausted sigh.

They turned their heads and exchanged a silent look of mutual understanding and absolute solidarity.

Split up. Rendezvous inside.

Without a single word spoken between them, they immediately split up.

Kurt smoothly drifted to the left, seamlessly slipping behind a large group of young men who were boisterously laughing about the upcoming tournament.

Using their frames as a shield, Kurt lowered his head and successfully breached the gates.

Emelie swiftly drifted to the right as she attempted to utilize a passing cluster of gossiping girls as her cover.

She was halfway through the threshold, nearly clear of the danger zone, when Autumn suddenly stopped mid-rant.

Like a trained hunting hound catching a scent in the wind, the girl's nose literally twitched. She spun around on her heel and locked her gaze directly onto the oversized hoodie.

"EMELIE?!" Autumn roared as she pointed an accusatory finger straight at her. "EMELIE HERST!! COME OUT RIGHT NOW!! I SEE YOU!!"

Emelie flinched. Slowly, she turned her head toward the left and locked eyes with Kurt who was currently watching the disaster unfold from the safety of the main courtyard crowd.

Her expression was a silent, desperate, and pleading scream for backup.

Kurt met her gaze. However, without a shred of hesitation for wanting absolutely nothing to do with whatever dramatic nonsense was about to transpire, he gave her a deeply apologetic look.

He brought his hands together in front of his chest, offered her a respectful, slight bow of absolute betrayal, and turned on his heel.

Emelie's jaw dropped beneath her hood.

She sent his retreating back a murderous glare of death that could have melted stone.

Before she could even scream his name, Kurt disappeared into the dense crowd of students like a master assassin vanishing into the shadows, leaving her to face whatever happens next completely alone.

Chapter 170 - Meet The Principal's

Stepping away from the impending disaster at the front gates, Kurt wandered deeper into the academy grounds.

This was his very first time seeing the institution where Diana worked from up close, and he couldn't deny that the scale of the place was staggering. It felt fundamentally different from the rest of the gritty, medieval capital. It was youthful. It was beautiful.

The campus was a breathtaking fusion of classic Victorian prestige mixed with advanced magical science. Towering spires of dark, polished stone rose alongside elegant red-brick frontage.

Running like veins through the traditional masonry were glowing pipelines of copper and brass that hummed softly as they channeled refined liquid mana to power the campus.

Massive brass gears turned slowly within the clock towers, suspended in mid-air by localised gravity inversion runes rather than sort of mechanical axles.

Floating platforms drifted effortlessly between classroom wings, and grand glass greenhouses housed exotic flora that pulsed with life under the conditions of its environment.

It looked like any scholar's dream world, fueled entirely by the laws of a highly sophisticated magical revolution.

Because the tournament was scheduled to begin tomorrow, the typical chaotic swarms of uniform-clad students were noticeably absent. The only students scattered across the pristine lawns and stone courtyards were those participating in last-minute club activities.

Kurt watched a group of magi-tech engineers calibrating glowing barrier projectors on a nearby lawn, while further away, a squad of student swordsmen practiced synchronised elemental blade formations.

In addition to the students, a steady stream of highly professional officials from various companies, magical artifact manufacturers, and high-ranking merchant guilds marched in and out of the administrative buildings.

They were busy setting up promotional banners, securing recording tags, and finalising sponsorship deals for the massive event.

While walking aimlessly down a wide, paved walkway, a clear voice suddenly cut through the high noon air from high above.

"Well, if it isn't the most famous person around the block! Up here, Mr. Rossana!"

"Hmm?"

Kurt stopped and looked up. There, standing on the stone railing of a third-floor balcony, was Amber Strongwill.

Before Kurt could even raise a hand to wave back or shout a greeting, Amber casually vaulted over the high stone railing.

"What the hell?! Are you insane?!" Kurt yelled.

A sudden surge of panic took hold of him. Third floor. In a normal human world, that was a lethal drop, or at the very least, a one-way ticket to a wheelchair. For a moment, Kurt seemed to forget about the laws of magic as he watched the young woman drop.

With instinct overriding intellect, Kurt dug his boots hard into the stone pavement and channeled an explosive burst of enhanced physical strength into his leg muscles.

The cobblestones beneath his feet cracked slightly as he launched himself upward into the air like a coiled spring, intercepting her falling form mid-flight.

Kurt caught her cleanly, extending his arms to absorb the momentum, and brought her tightly against his chest in a flawless, sweeping princess carry.

"Oh my? Mr. Rossana?" Amber looked at him in confusion.

Kurt hit the ground and landed safely, his knees bending perfectly to absorb the impact. He set her feet back onto the solid ground, though his face was a picture of furious exasperation.

He gripped her by the shoulders and looked at her up and down. "What the hell were you thinking, jumping from a height like that?! Do you have a literal death wish?!"

Amber blinked at him, completely stunned for a brief moment by his raw, aggressive protectiveness. Then, a soft giggle bubbled up from her throat. She gently patted his hands, signaling him to relax his grip.

"Mr. Rossana, there's no reason to be so frantic. I assure you, I would have been completely safe either way. I am the student council president of Future Academy, after all. Not to mention a representative for the upcoming tournament. If I hurt myself from a simple three-story drop, I would have definitely not been worthy of either title, don't you think?"

Kurt's worry instantly faded, replaced by a flat, unamused expression as she began to boast about her own accolades.

He let go of her shoulders and rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish sigh. "Right. Magic. I dunno why I just... forgot. Sorry for being so forward. I just reacted."

"No, no! Please, don't apologise," Amber said quickly as her cheeks rocked a very faint, appreciative shade of pink.

"Actually... It's quite refreshing to see someone treat me like a normal person who needs protecting, rather than an untouchable student council powerhouse. I must admit, it was quite thrilling. I wonder, is this fearless, protective charm one of the reasons that Principal Valentine fell so completely head over heels for you? In any case, it's definite new material for this novel I'm writing, hehehe~"

"You know about me and Diana?"

"Of course I do. Word around the high society circles travels faster than lightning magic. Not to mention the little public stunt the two of you pulled at the docks and the City View Hotel. The rumors have been absolutely wild. It would be entirely impossible not to know about the two of you by now."

"Well, if word about it reached this place, I guess everyone knows about it by now, haha."

With a sly smirk, Amber stepped into his line of sight, placing her hands behind her back.

"I take it you're here to see her? I'm afraid Principal Valentine is currently trapped in a really boring, high-level administrative meeting at the moment. However, I'd be honored to show you around the campus while you wait. Our little tour can end by sending you straight to the principal's office. Their meeting should be wrapping up right about then. What do you say? Do you mind?"

"Mind? Not at all. Lead the way, President."

"Awesome! Then follow me, Mr. Celebrity," Amber excitedly turned on her heel and started guiding him.

Unbeknownst to Kurt, she's only doing so, so that she can skip out on her own responsibilities.

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Meanwhile, the atmosphere inside the principal's office was filled to the brim with political tension, professional pride and rivalry spirit.

Sitting behind the main polished mahogany desk was Diana herself, representing Eldoria's Future Academy.

And seated in the luxurious leather armchairs opposite the desk were her three counterparts.

First was Chihara Mei, the Principal of Myria’s Skyward Academy. She was an extraordinarily elegant woman, clad in a prestigious, golden kimono adorned with black floral patterns. Her dark hair was pulled up into a neat, flawless bun, secured by an ornate jade hairpin. She sipped her tea with a silent poised grace.

Next to her sat Allaster Morgan, the Principal of Tricea’s Kirstenbell Academy. He was a man of cool, calculating confidence, looking every bit the high-tier scholar. He wore a crisp, tailored academic robe and a golden monocle resting over his left eye as he meticulously reviewed a stack of magical logistics documents.

Finally, lounging heavily in the third chair was Jack Axel, the rough-and-tumble Principal of Riverton’s Crossroad Academy. He was a tough-looking old man. A grizzled veteran with a heavily scarred face, wearing a set of functional, lightweight leather-and-iron armor beneath his formal cloak. He looked like he belonged on a bloody battlefield rather than an administrative meeting.

"The security parameters for the opening ceremony have been finalised," Morgan stated as adjusted his monocle with a crisp click of his fingers.

"Kirstenbell’s magical barrier corps has successfully synced with your academy’s central grid, Principal Valentine. We anticipate zero structural damage to the spectator stands, regardless of how destructive our students get."

"Good," Jack grunted when leaning back and crossing his thick arms.

"Because my boys from Crossroad aren’t planning on holding back. We’ve been training in the rugged mountain passes all year. I fully expect my representatives to absolutely shatter whatever delicate little spells your students have spent all semester memorising."

Mei offered a small, incredibly polite, yet deeply condescending smile from behind her teacup. "A charming sentiment, Principal Axel. However, brute force is terribly unrefined. I am afraid your students will be defeated by our Izumi Ayako before they can even close the distance. I’m sure you’ve heard, but many believe that she’s the reincarnation of the Supreme Mage, Layla Wright."

"Haha! Is that a challenge, Chihara?" Jack laughed boisterously. "I love the confidence, but we all know the championship trophy is coming home to Riverton this year."

The petty, competitive banter quickly shifted into a three-way debate, with each principal fiercely defending the honor and superiority of their respective institutions.

Throughout the entire display, Diana remained perfectly silent as she leaned back in her chair with an unreadable expression on her face as she casually swirled her tea.

She was bored and wanted to see a certain someone.

Gradually, the topic of conversation began to veer away from the tournament. Jack let out a sly chuckle as he leaned forward to fix his gaze directly on Diana.

"You know, speaking of upcoming shocks... the tournament isn't the only massive news shaking up the world this week, is it, Valentine? Word on the street is that the great, completely untouchable, and unobtainable flower of Eldoria has finally been plucked."

Morgan looked up from his paperwork, his monocle gleaming with sudden, intense curiosity.

"Ah, yes. The rumors have reached Tricea as well. It was described as an absolute scandal. An unknown noble and F-rank adventurer? It has even been said that he might be blessed by the Goddess. Surely, Principal Valentine, it is merely a fabricated campaign to chase away any suitor who comes your way?"

Mei set her teacup down delicately as her sharp eyes locked onto Diana with intense interest.

"Indeed. The higher society is practically reeling from the gossip. We are all deeply curious to hear the truth from the source."

They all pressed her, waiting for the inevitable, cold aristocratic denial or a sharp deflection.

Instead, Diana kept her cool.

A slow, incredibly proud, and radiantly beautiful smile gradually bloomed across her lips. She didn’t deny anything. She leaned forward and rested her chin on her fingers as her crimson eyes glowed with deep warmth.

"Whatever rumors you heard about me having a lover, let me tell you all right now, it’s true. And he is twice the man any of your high-born noble friends, colleges or graduates could ever dream of being."

The three principals sat in stunned silence, completely taken aback by her utter lack of shame and her beautifully glowing face filled with affection and pride.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Before any of them could formulate a response, a crisp knock resonated through the double doors of the office.

"Principal Valentine?" Amber’s voice rang out. "I apologise for the interruption, but I have a highly important guest here to see you."

"An important guest?" Morgan muttered while adjusting his robes.

"Perhaps your king’s Royal Advisor? Or is it that brat of a Saintess?" Jack suggested, sitting up straight.

Diana looked at the three of them and sighed. "Our official meeting has concluded anyway. Do you mind if they enter?"

"Not at all," Mei replied politely.

"Enter," Diana called out clearly.

The doors clicked and slowly swung inward. Amber stood in the doorway, offering a perfect, professional bow as she gestured for the person behind her to step forward.

The figure who walked into the office was Kurt. His eye locked hers first and he greeted her, "Hey, Dian–
"

"ROSIE~!"

SHWOOSH

In a fraction of a millisecond, Diana materialised directly in front of him.

She threw her arms fiercely around his neck, launching her body into him with such pure, unbridled excitement that Kurt had to instinctively catch her by the waist.

"Rosie, I was just thinking of you~! What a coincidence! Yay~! Ahahaha!" She giggled like a joyous, lovestruck teenage girl, completely oblivious to the rest of the world.

Every single principal in the room froze.

Jack’s jaw dropped so low it nearly hit his chest armor.

Morgan’s golden monocle literally popped out of his eye socket, clattering pathetically onto the floor.

Lastly, Mei’s elegant composure completely evaporated. Her eyes were wide with shock, a feeling that she rarely experienced in her forty-plus years of being alive.