THORNS 173

Chapter 173 - Fearsome Warning

- At Future Academy -

On his way back to the carriage Julianne arrived in, Duke Reuben Valentine walked with an unyielding posture, his right hand resting firmly on the hilt of his blade.

Julianne herself followed next to him with her head up straight so as to not show weakness. Her eyes were still red from the tears she had shed in the office, but she kept her face regal.

The rhythmic clicking of their steps against the stone was suddenly interrupted by the sound of hurried, echoing footsteps from behind.

"Lord Reuben! Please, wait!"

Reuben paused in his tracks. He turned around slowly and narrowed his eyes as he waited for the approaching figure.

It was Everette.

He stopped a few feet away before smoothing down his clothes and adjusting his silk neckcloth, restoring his picture-perfect, aristocratic composure.

With a theatrical bow, Everette turned to Julianne. "Madam Valentine, it is an honor to see you again. I hope the day finds you well."

Julianne offered a small, strained nod. Her smile was tight and thoroughly forced.

"Hello, Everette," she greeted back in a tone completely devoid of her usual enthusiasm.

The image of her daughter sobbing in Kurt’s arms was still burned into her retina, and she found herself lacking the energy for noble pleasantries.

Everette turned his attention back to the duke. "Are you already returning to the estate, Lord Reuben?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Ah, well. I happened to see Diana down at the arena just a short while ago. She was there with that pathetic F-rank I told you about. I tried to approach her, to offer my greetings, but she vanished into thin air with him before I could even utter a full sentence."

The moment the words "pathetic F-rank" left Everette’s mouth, Julianne subtly flinched.

A sharp pang of discomfort shot through her chest, but she clamped her jaw shut, forcing herself to remain silent.

Reuben, however, didn’t seem bothered by the description. "I am aware. I met with my daughter and Kurt Rossana in her office just a moment ago."

"You did?! My Lord, how did it go? Did she finally realise–"

Before Everette could finish his question, a faint hum of telekinetic energy vibrated through the air above them.

Emelie came floating down from the sky and landed her softly on the ground with a faint tap.

"Everette. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t just run away like that. In case I can’t find my friend, you’re my ride out of here. I’d rather not waste my mana flying around."

Reuben gave a stiff, formal nod toward the young woman. "Good afternoon, Emelie Herst."

"Oh. Hey, old man Reuben. Good afternoon to you too."

"E-Emelie!" Everette hissed, his face flushing with a mixture of embarrassment and anger as he turned to scold his sister. "Mind your manners. You can't speak to my future father-in-law so casually. Show some respect to the duke."

Julianne's hands subtly clenched into tight fists against her dress when she heard the phrase "future father-in-law".

The arrogant presumption of it made her blood boil. She opened her mouth, wanting nothing more than to put the pompous young noble in his place, but Wendy placed a soothing hand on her shoulder and shook her head.

Julianne swallowed her anger and slumped her shoulders, forcing herself to back down.

Emelie, meanwhile, rolled her eyes so hard it looked painful.

"Everette, why are you still going on about that ridiculous fantasy? Seriously, let it go. Principal Valentine already has a lover. She's taken. You need to accept reality and just move on."

Reuben stepped forward, drawing all eyes back to his imposing figure.

"Do not waste your breath worrying about that, Everette," the duke stated with a chilling certainty. "I have already given the two of them a talking-to in the office."

"Ah! As expected of the great Lord Reuben! A man of true vision! An F-rank nobody like that ruffian has absolutely no right standing next to a woman of Diana's stature."

"What do you mean by that, old man?" Emelie asked.

Reuben met her gaze with an impassive stare. "I told her to break off her ridiculous relationship with him immediately."

"You did what...? Ha! You think she's just going to happily comply? I mean, do you really think she's just going to say 'Yes, dad,' and throw away the man she loves because you told her to?"

'Even in all my other cycles where Kurt wasn't a factor, she still refused. If that doesn't speak of her resolve, I don't know what will.'

"It does not matter what she wishes," Reuben replied coolly. "She is the daughter of House Valentine. Her betrothal to Everette has already been decided by me, and that is final. My word is law to her. She will obey."

Julianne tightly closed her eyes as an agonising sorrow weighed on her chest.

She wanted to scream, to tell her husband how wrong he was, to tell him that he was driving their only child away, but the lifelong conditioning of noble submission kept her throat locked.

Everette smiled warmly, his chest puffing out in complete satisfaction. He looked at Emelie with a proud smirk that practically shouted, 'I won'.

Reuben turned his back to the siblings, gesturing toward the carriage. "I wish you both a good day."

"... Pfft–hahaha! Ahahaha!"

Out of absolutely nowhere, an echoing burst of laughter shattered the tense atmosphere of the plaza.

It wasn't a polite little giggle. It was a fully unrestrained, and mocking laugh.

Emelie was bent over, her hands resting on her stomach as she laughed so hard her silver-and-mint hair whipped around her face. It sounded like she had just heard the funniest joke in the history of the continent.

"Emelie? What on earth is wrong with you? What is so funny?" Everette asked confusingly.

Reuben slowly turned around and stared at the laughing girl.

When Emelie finally managed to catch her breath, she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and straightened up.

"You want to know what's funny? You two are." She pointed a finger between Everette and the Duke. "You and the old man. The two of you... you're the joke."

Reuben narrowed his eyes while Everette, looking utterly bewildered, asked her, "What are you even saying, Emelie?"

"I'm saying that I find it funny that you two truly think that you can stop Principal Valentine and Kurt from being together. Because let me tell you something, 'Lord Reuben'. It doesn't matter who says it. Be it you or the King himself... those two will never be broken apart."

"Emelie, stop it! Why does it sound like you are actively taking the side of that F-rank?" Everette looked at Emelie with hurt in his eyes. "Shouldn't you be happy that your favourite principal and your own brother are getting married?"

"What I think doesn't matter. Because you two getting married is never going to happen. Not as long as Kurt has something to say about it."

"Who cares about what that F-rank thinks? His opinion is entirely irrelevant!"

"... Hold on." Emelie raised an eyebrow at her brother. "I meant to ask this, but why do you keep calling him an F-rank?"

"Because I personally went to the Adventurer's Guild and had his records checked. That is exactly what he is officially registered as. An F-rank."

"You do know his registered rank is not indicative of his strength, right?"

"Oh? And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that if Kurt Rossana really wanted to... he could beat you to a bloody pulp."

"Wha–!"

"""....."""

Dead silence descended upon the plaza.

Suddenly, Everette threw his head back and burst into a loud, arrogant laugh of his own.

"Hahaha! Oh, wow! Now that is a funny joke, Emelie! Me? A high-tier noble prodigy, trained by the best masters in the kingdom, beaten by an F-rank? Ahahahaha!"

Emelie didn't laugh back. She just stood there, a serene, chilling smile on her face as she watched him laugh.

Finally, Reuben spoke. "What exactly are you basing this absurd claim off of, Emelie Herst?"

"I'm basing it off the time I've actually spent with him. And you should know, Duke Valentine... my word actually means something when it comes to assessing threats."

As she spoke, a vibrant green glow ignited deep within Emelie's eyes. Reuben stared at her, his expression turning deeply serious.

He knew Emelie wasn't a fool; she was a prodigy in her own right, and the unyielding confidence in her eyes was not the look of someone telling a fairy tale.

Reuben didn’t say another word after that.

He turned back around and held the heavy carriage door open for his wife. Julianne quickly stepped into the luxurious interior, eager to escape the suffocating atmosphere.

But before Reuben could climb in behind her, Emelie stepped up to the edge of the carriage. Her voice was quiet, but it carried a chilling cadence that made the hair on the back of the duke’s neck stand up.

"Let me give you a piece of friendly advice, old man," Emelie whispered, her green eyes boring into his side profile.

"Kurt Rossana could be your greatest, most unstoppable ally... or he could become your most fearsome, catastrophic nightmare. If I were in your shoes, I would desperately pray for the former. Do not make an enemy out of him. For your own sake, and the sake of your precious house."

Reuben’s jaw tightened. He didn’t acknowledge her warning. He simply stepped into the carriage and settled onto the cushioned seat.

Wendy stepped forward and closed the wooden door. She turned, offering a polite bow to the siblings, before gracefully climbing up onto the front bench beside the driver.

With a sharp snap of the reins, the Valentine carriage steadily left.

Everette waited for the carriage to disappear through the outer gates before he ran toward his sister. "What’s going with you, Emelie? Why are you so hell-bent on defending that pathetic F-rank over your brother’s happiness?"

Emelie looked at her brother as a wave of genuine pity washing over her features. She walked over and gently placed a hand on his shoulder, shaking her head.

"Oh, Everette... you poor, ignorant fool. You have no idea what you’ve just done. You are already at the very top of Kurt’s shit book."

Everette blinked, completely bewildered. "H-Huh? Shit..what?"

"Later bro. I'll be at the dorms with Amy."

Before Everette could even process her words or demand an explanation, a sudden burst of telekinetic mana erupted from beneath Emelie's boots.

She floated directly up into the air, ascending rapidly into the sky before flying away toward the student dorms, leaving her brother standing entirely alone in the empty plaza, staring up at the clouds in helpless confusion.

Chapter 174 - Kurt Rossana [Pt1]

- Back on the isolated island -

The gentle crashing of the waves against the white sands provided a soothing atmosphere compared to the one Kurt and Diana had just left.

Diana was sitting between Kurt's legs with her back pressed against his chest. And Kurt's arms were wrapped securely around her, acting as a safe space for her to hide in.

After roughly twenty minutes, her breathing finally slowed, though her fingers were still restlessly fiddling and intertwining with Kurts's hands.

"You alright, Ana?" he asked quietly.

Diana didn't answer right away. Instead, she slowly lifted one of his hands up to her face and pressed his warm palm against her reddened cheek, tilting her head into his touch.

"I just want to stay like this for a while longer," she whispered as she looked out at the empty horizon.

"Ok. As long as you need."

They sat in a comfortable, soul-healing silence for what felt like hours, letting the ocean breeze wash away the lingering tension of the capital.

Eventually, Diana broke the quiet.

"Rosie?" she murmured as her fingers lightly traced the scars on his knuckles. "You never really told me what happened to your parents. I remember you only ever saying that they were scumbags."

"... Do you really want to know, Ana? It’s not a pretty story. At all."

Diana shifted slightly, turning her head just enough to look up at him with earnest eyes. "Yes. I want to know everything about you. I want to know the pieces that made you who you are."

Kurt stared out at the sea as a distant, melancholic look settled into his eye. He took

"Alright, I’ll tell you... To begin, everything was completely normal for the first seven years of my life. My dad was happy, attentive and always playing with me. My mom was incredibly loving and deeply caring. It was a pretty standard, quiet household."

He chuckled softly, though there was no humor in it.

"I never knew my grandparents, or any aunts, uncles, or cousins. You see, my parents eloped before I was born. My dad was an ex-gang member trying to go straight, and my mom came from a deeply religious family that completely disowned her for choosing him over what they wanted for her. Come to think of it..."

"It almost sounds like the situation we’re going through." Diana pointed out. "Well, sort of. Theirs sounds like some sort of tragic romance novel."

"Haha, yeah," Kurt laughed back gently as a wry smile touched his lips. "It played out exactly like one, too. The romantic part, for a while anyway."

"What changed? When did it all begin?"

"The signs of change started right around my sixth birthday," Kurt continued, dropping his voice into a flat narrative tone.

Diana suddenly turned her head back toward him and looked at him in surprise. "Wait! I don't even know your birthday yet!"

"To be fair, I believe talking about birthdays and stuff usually happens on the first couple of dates. And technically, we have yet to go on our actual first date."

"And yet, we live together. How backward of us." She turned back around and squeezed his hands tightly as she played with his fingers. "Fine. We will have our official first date the exact moment the Grand Tournament is over. Deal?"

"Deal." Kurt smiled softly.

"Anyway... back to the story. It started on my sixth birthday. Me and my mom were sitting at the kitchen table, completely dressed up, waiting for my dad to come home so we could all go out for a special family dinner.

"When he finally walked through the door, he looked completely shook. Terrified, even. But the exact second his eyes locked onto us; he forced his face back to normal. It was incredibly brief, but I'll never forget the dread that was on his face."

He paused, recalling the vivid memory.

"We went out to dinner, had a great time, and everything seemed fine for the next two months. But then, slowly, he started arriving home later and later. He'd leave for work way earlier than usual, too. He worked in heavy construction, so at the time, we just figured it was a massive new project demanding his time."

Kurt's jaw tightened slightly.

"But over time, he became incredibly irate. Especially whenever he looked at me. Whenever I went up to talk to him or ask him to play, he'd first flinch violently, staring at me wide-eyed like he was looking at a ghost, before reluctantly forcing himself to listen to me.

"There were fleeting moments where it felt like my loving dad was back... but more often than not, he was just angry and irritated."

He felt Diana squeeze his hand a little tighter in reassurance.

"I remember asking my mom what was wrong with him. She'd just smooth my hair and tell me to be patient. She said he was just deeply stressed from work, and to be patient. So, that's what I did. I waited.

"I only ever hung around him on his 'good' days. And honestly, the months leading up to my next birthday actually became peaceful again. Everything seemed great. We couldn't have been more wrong.

"Then came the day of my seventh birthday."

Diana gulped. She could clearly sense the sudden, chilling shift in his demeanor.

"Just like the year before, my mom and I sat waiting for him to come home so we could go out to celebrate," Kurt said, his voice entirely devoid of emotion now.

"But we waited. And waited. And waited. It was way past my bedtime when he finally stumbled through the front door. It was around nine-thirty."

He let out a dry, cynical breath.

"He was completely, utterly drunk. Reeking of alcohol, soaking wet from the pouring rain outside. My mom immediately snapped, scolding him for completely missing his son's birthday. My dad just laughed, slurring his words and saying that technically, it was still my birthday, so he made it on time.

"My mom told him no, that he knew we always went out for a proper dinner, and that I had been looking forward to it all day. Which I was, in her defense. My dad started arguing back, yelling that it was just one stupid birthday, and that he'd make it up to me next year.

"That's when the dam finally burst. My mom lost it. She started screaming at him about his disgusting behavior lately, his insane work schedule, and the horrific way he had been treating me for the past year."

Kurt's eye narrowed as he stared blankly at the sand.

"But like I said... my dad was completely wasted. So he let his own dam burst, too. He pointed a shaking finger at my mom and accused her of being a whore. He screamed at the top of his lungs that I wasn't his son."

Diana gasped softly, her grip on his hand becoming ironclad.

"My mom slapped him across the face, screaming how could he say something so vile about us," Kurt continued.

"But then... he pulled out a piece of paper from his wet coat. It was a DNA test. It proved that he wasn't my biological father. My mom went completely pale, demanding to know where he had gotten such a thing, but she wouldn't deny the results. And just like that... a horrific, bloody fight broke out."

He went silent for a moment. His free hand instinctively rose to brush against the edges of the dark eyepatch covering his right eye.

"I won't go into the gruesome details... but that specific fight is the exact reason I no longer have a right eye – courtesy of daddy dearest.

"By the time the chaos stopped, only me and my mom were left breathing. My dad was dead on the floor. I was barely alive, fading in and out of consciousness on the blood-soaked carpet.

"She grabbed whatever she could, then me, and fled into the night. My loving mom was now a murderer. She patched up my eye herself in a filthy motel room because she was too terrified to go to a hospital and get caught.

"Once I was stable enough to move, we went straight to her side of the family to beg for refuge. But they chased her away. They shamed her for what she had done, throwing it in her face that they had warned her about eloping with a gang member. They completely cut her off.

"The following year was hell. We were constantly hopping from place to place, city to city, because surprise-surprise, she was a wanted fugitive. She'd find some under-the-table work, get paranoid, and we'd leave.

"Money soon became non-existent, and my dad's savings completely ran out. So, one day, I gave her a suggestion. A very, incredibly stupid one in hindsight."

He let out a hollow, self-deprecating breath. "I asked her... why don't we go find my real dad? So he can help us."