THORNS 177

Chapter 177 - Crisis

Kurt watched this familiar spectacle unfold, completely speechless.

Slowly, he turned head to look at the Dorm Mother behind the counter, expecting her to call for order. Instead, the sweet elderly woman was just beaming with a deeply pleased expression as she rested her chin on her hand.

"Oh, it is so wonderful to see the children so lively and energetic before the tournament."

Then, the sea of dramatic students parted as three distinct individuals marched forward to block his path. They stood in a rigid, unmoving line, looking like the ultimate tier of academic outcasts.

The one on the left was chubby, wearing a uniform that looked a size too small

The one on the right was incredibly lanky, resembling a wooden pole.

And the leader in the middle wore a pair of massive, thick square glasses that magnified his eyes to a comical degree. He pushed said glasses up the bridge of his nose, reflecting a glint of self-righteous fury off the lenses.

"Hold it right there, scallywag! We are the official executive leaders of the Emelie Fan Club, and we demand to know the exact nature of your relationship with her! By what right do you simply barge in here and–"

Whoosh–BAM! BONK! DOINK!

Without warning, they all flew in the air and landed on top of another in a pile of bodies on the lobby couch.

Emelie casually walked past them as she stepped down the final flight of stairs and stood at Kurt’s side.

"It’s none of your business, guys. Come on, Kurt. Let’s go."

"Yeeaah... Right behind you."

"... She took out our last line of defense! The three nerds are down!!"

"... NOOO!! She’s leaving with him!!!"

"... I never even got the chance to confess to her *sob*."

....

As they walked down the stone path leading away from the dormitory hill, Kurt glanced sideways at Emelie with a thoroughly amused smirk playing on his lips.

"Well, well, Lady Emalie~ This is the second time something like this has happened, no?"

"Eurgh. I wish they’d all just stop. It’s stupidly exhausting."

Kurt’s smirk softened, turning into a more curious, observant expression as he watched her side profile.

"Since we’re on this topic, I must ask... You always distance yourself from everyone and build these massive walls. Why is that?"

"Because it’s just easier that way." she murmured softly. "For me. And for them."

"You mean it’s because of your past? Because you’re afraid of letting people get close, only to watch them disappear? Afraid they’ll all forget while you alone remember?"

Emelie stopped for a split second as her shoulders tensed beneath her oversized hoodie. She didn't say anything, but her silence was louder than any words of admission could be.

For someone who had lived through centuries, watching generations wither away while she remained unchanged was a unique type of torture to say the least.

Seeing her slump into herself, Kurt raised hand and gave her a firm, reassuring light tap on her upper back – just enough to snap her out of her thoughts.

"You don't have to worry about that crap anymore," he flashed her a grin of confidence.

"Since I'm here now, we're in this together. And let me tell you, whatever comes our way, we're sure as hell going to make it past the ten-year deadline. So stop overthinking and go ahead and live your youthful campus life."

Stunned, Emelie could only blink at his unyielding optimism.

She stared at his grin for a few seconds before smiling and shaking her head. "You're such an idiot, Kurt. But... Thank you. Though there is still one major problem with that advice."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

Suddenly, the reality of her true nature hit Kurt's brain like a runaway freight train.

"Wait... don't tell me. Is it because you're actually a nearly thousand-year-old granny who can't relate to a bunch of hormonal teenagers–"

THWACK!

Emelie's fist connected squarely with Kurt's upper arm. Her face was flushed with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

"You really don’t need to be so blunt about it, you dick! And I am NOT a granny!"

Kurt let out a lively laugh, rubbing his arm, while Emelie couldn’t help but smile at the playful banter.

As they reached the end of the dormitory path and got a full view of the city below, Kurt looked out toward a specific district.

"So, we’re heading to the prefect station first, right? To check up on the investigation?"

"Yes," Emelie nodded.

Kurt glanced up at the sky and noticed the dark rain clouds rapidly encroaching upon the city, blocking out the last remnants of the afternoon sun.

"You know," he muttered thoughtfully while rubbing his chin.

"Thinking back on that whole mess in the swamp... maybe that kid Austin will actually know something useful about the missing gem. Since he was apparently acting as a spy for that cultist and all that."

The moment the name "Austin" left his lips, Emelie stopped dead in her tracks.

It was so sudden that Kurt took two more strides forward before realising he was walking alone. He paused and turned around with a confused expression.

"Emy? What’s wrong?"

The sight that greeted him caused his breath to catch. Her face was a ghostly shade of pale white, and large beads of sweat were breaking out across her forehead and temple. Her green eyes were wide, completely dilated with primitive terror as she stared blankly at him.

"... Hey, Emy. Seriously, what’s wrong?"

"Wh-What... what did you just say?"

"Huh? I said maybe this kid called Austin knows something about the missing gem since he was–"

Before he could finish the sentence, Emelie lunged forward. Her hands shot out of her hoodie pockets and grabbed Kurt's forearms with a desperate grip.

"How do you know that name?!" she demanded.

Stopping herself from losing control, she let out a forced, and nervous laugh that sounded completely hysterical.

"Haha... no. No, wait. That's ridiculous. It... it has to be a different Austin. There are thousands of people named Austin in the kingdoms! It's a completely common name! Kurt... it's a different one, right?! Tell me it's a different one!"

Kurt stared down at her as he felt the genuine panic radiating off her skin. "Emy, I don't know what you're talking about. You're completely losing it right now. You're not making any sense."

"Describe him! Please, just describe him to me!"

"Uh... okay. Messy brown hair. Dark brown eyes. He's about your height, maybe a little taller. I remember Izumi-san saying he has a 'colourful personality'. And honestly, from what I gathered, she's kind of right."

With every single descriptive detail that left his mouth, Emelie's face grew visibly more horrified.

"Oh, and there was one more thing," Kurt added, trying to remember the report. "He's apparently involved with some sort of succubus named Gracie–"

"WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANYTHING?!" she snapped, wildly shaking his arms back and forth.

"Say anything about what?"

"ABOUT AUSTIN!!"

"Austin?! What is there to even say?!" Kurt shot back, thoroughly confused by her escalation.

"The kid didn't exactly play a big role in the grand scheme of things! No offense to him, but even without him acting as a 'spy' in the cult, I'm pretty sure Izumi-san would've handled that cultist somehow!"

"It doesn't matter what Ayako would have done to some stupid cultist! This is... this is Austin! You don't understand, Kurt! He knows things many wouldn't! And he's always up to something devious! If he was there... "

"Emy, seriously, look at me. The only suspicious thing about the kid is that he might be tied to a succubus called Gracie. That's it."

"Gracie? Ga..ry? No.. Oh no.."

'Gary? Why does that sound–'

Thud!

Emelie collapsed directly onto her knees on the hard road.

She clutched her head with both hands and began to rock back and forth. "No... no, no, no. This can't be happening. This cannot be happening.."

Kurt's heart thumped hard with worry. He'd seen her episodes of vulnerability, but this was without a doubt the worst mental breakdown he'd ever seen.

"Emelie," he kneeled in front of her. "Is there something about this Austin that I should know? Who the hell is he?"

However, she kept rocking back and forth, twisting her fingers into her silver hair as she muttered to herself in a disjointed panic.

"The gem... the Saintess' gem is gone... and Austin was right there... in the swamp... with Gary... They're not supposed to be their.. The entire kingdom... no, the world..."

Suddenly, her head snapped up. "KURT!"

"Yeah? I'm right here."

"There is absolutely no time to waste!" she yelled as a green aura took over her body. "We are going to the prefect station right now!"

"Okay, fine, but you still haven't told me why the hell you're freaking out so bad."

"I'll tell you at the station! Once we have confirmed the exact status and location of that missing gem!"

She then floated in the sky and extended both hands toward Kurt, who felt his body instantly lift off the ground.

Before he could brace himself, Emelie launched herself into the sky, tearing through the air at a breakneck, terrifying speed, dragging him right alongside her.

Seeing the terror on her face, Kurt couldn't help but feel a deep knot of worry tighten in his own stomach. Whoever this Austin was... he was clearly a harbinger of ruin.

Chapter 178 - One Thing At A Time

The moment her boots touched the ground, Emelie ran straight towards the station entrance, whipping the glass doors open.

Marching straight past the rows of waiting benches, she slammed both of her hands onto the polished wood of the front reception desk.

BAM!

"Where’s Dominik?! Get him out here right now! I need to speak with him!"

"M-Ms. Herst," the deskman stammered while adjusting his spectacles, trying to regain his professional composure.

"Senior Prefect Dominik is currently out in the field coordinating security patrols for the grand tournament tomorrow. He... he isn’t here right now. If there is an urgent matter, perhaps I could be of some–"

"FUCK!"

BAM!

Emelie slammed her hands into the desk a second time, leaving a faint fracture in the wood.

"Then where exactly is he patrolling?! Give me his location!"

The deskman’s expression hardened slightly. His customer-service smile twisted into a deep frown as he looked at her unstable demeanor.

"With all due respect, Ms. Herst, given your current... highly erratic behavior, I don’t know if it is safe to share the locations of our staff."

"The fuck did you just say to me, you little–"

"Whoa, whoa whoa! Emy. Stand down," Kurt stepped up beside her, and pulled her back a step. "You're making a scene. Look around you. You're raising unwanted attention, and panicking the officers isn't going to get us answers any faster."

Emelie bit her lower lip so hard it bled.

Her chest heaved as she glared at the floor, but she stopped wrestling against his grip.

"What is going on out here?! Who is making all this damned racket?!"

A booming, gruff voice cut through the tense silence of the lobby.

From the back corridor, Chief Hudson walked out. His sharp eyes scanned the lobby and almost instantly locked onto Kurt and Emelie, who were very clearly the epicenter of the disturbance.

"Rossana. Herst. What the hell do you two think you're doing? This is a Prefect Station, not a training ground."

Kurt quickly stepped forward, so as to not give Emelie the chance to crash out again.

"Chief Hudson. Really sorry for the disturbance, but we need to speak with you immediately. In private. It's in regard to the zealots."

Hudson's eyes narrowed. Knowing Kurt's bizarre track record of somehow stumbling into critical information regarding the shadowy organization, the chief didn't hesitate. He jerked his thumb toward his door. "My office. Now."

When he opened the door, Kurt finally let go of Emelie's arm, who then sprinted past him, ducking straight into the chief's office like someone possessed.

After apologising to the front deskman for causing a ruckus, Kurt followed her into the chief's office and firmly closed the door behind him.

"Alright, spit it out." Hudson crossed his arms. "What new information do you have on the zealots?"

"Well, it's not directly to them, Chief, but–" Kurt began.

"Where is the previous Saintess' divine gem?!" Emelie cut in.

She marched right up to Hudson's desk, her hands gripping the edge as she stared at him with bloodshot eyes.

"Have your men recovered it from the swamp?! Is it safe?! Tell me it's locked safe in some kind of vault!"

Hudson blinked, thoroughly caught off guard by the specific nature of her question. "The divine gem of the late Saintess? Herst, why on earth are you suddenly so worried about a historical relic?"

"Chief Hudson, please. I'm begging you. I don't have time to explain. Just tell me if the gem is safe or not. That's it."

Kurt stepped up beside her and looked seriously at Hudson so that he would take the matter seriously. "Chief, please. I'm asking you as well. What's the status on the gem?"

"... Haaa. Fine. If you must know... we don't have it. After a full, meticulous night of searching the wooden cabin in the swamp and thoroughly dismantling every square inch of that hidden under-ground lab, my prefects found no trace of the divine gem belonging to the previous Saintess."

The color drained from Emelie's face as her hands slipped from the desk.

"What...? No..."

"We are well aware that the gem is missing," Hudson continued. "In fact, when the current Saintess, Christy Donna, came to the precinct earlier today to confirm the casualty reports, she too expressed an extreme amount of concern over its whereabouts."

Emelie's mind was clearly spinning, her hands rising to clutch her temples. "The cultist. Where is he? Have you interrogated him yet?!"

"The zealot is no longer in our custody. Early this morning, the royal guards arrived with a direct decree from the throne. They have taken the zealot – and the preserved body of the previous Saintess – straight to the royal castle.

"I imagine the bastard is currently undergoing a brutal interrogation by the King's personal interrogators as we speak. So, you can relax, Emelie Herst. The crown is handling it. We will get answers soon enough."

"....."

A suffocating silence descended upon the room. Emelie stood still as she took in the devastating reality. The gem was gone. And as far as she's aware, it isn't in the hands of the authorities.

She took a grounding breath and forced her erratic mind to focus on the second piece of the puzzle.

"Chief... What about the student? The one named Austin. Did your men find anything suspicious about him during his recounts of what happened?"

"Ah, that brat? To be entirely honest with you, the only suspicious thing about that boy was the absurd story he gave us – which, infuriatingly, turned out to be true."

Kurt raised an eyebrow. "What did he tell you?"

"The kid claimed he was acting as an undercover 'spy' inside that – now destroyed – village," Hudson explained while shuffling through a stack of papers on his desk.

"According to his official statement, while he was ’chilling’ in the student dorm’s lobby at Future Academy, he heard some suspicious rumors about weird occurrences in that specific village. So he decided to sneak out and see what it was about. While investigating the surrounding forest, he was ambushed and kidnapped by a suspicious individual, who dragged him straight to the cultist leader’s laboratory."

Hudson let out a dry chuckle.

"According to him, once he realised he was completely outmatched, he used his ’immense charm and intellect’ to lie and manipulate his way into acting as the cultist’s personal lab assistant. He claims he was simply biding his time, waiting for his friend, Gary, to arrive and rescue him... only for Lady Izumi Ayako to rescue him a day later instead."

"And you just... believed him?" Emelie’s jaw tightened.

"No, we didn’t just take his word for it, Herst. We confirmed his identity as a registered student here at Future Academy. Furthermore, I personally looked through his personal tag to check if he truly belonged to the zealot’s brotherhood. He came up clean. The boy is just a remarkably reckless and chaotic idiot who got lucky. Nothing more."

Emelie went silent.

Slowly, she bowed her head toward the chief. "I see. Thank you for your time, Chief Hudson."

Without waiting for Kurt, she turned around and power-walked out of the office.

Kurt offered a brief nod of gratitude. "Thanks, Chief. Thanks for the info. Stay alert."

With that, he quickly turned and chased after Emelie.

He managed to catch up to her just as she pushed through the front glass doors of the station. The wind was howling now, and a light drizzle was just beginning to fall from the dark clouds above.

Emelie was already summoning a faint ripple of mana beneath her boots, clearly preparing to launch herself back into the sky.

"Emy! Wait!" Kurt reached out and grabbed her under arm, forcing her to stay on the ground.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to find Austin and Gary," she snapped, turning her head to glare at him. "I don't care what Chief Hudson says. I don't trust Austin. I will never trust him. He is a parasite and a bitch, and if that gem is missing, his hands are all over it!"

Kurt didn't let go of her arm and pulled her closer, feeling her about to take off.

"Emy, look at me. Is this really the most important thing right now? Don't you have a big tournament that starts tomorrow? You're completely losing your mind over this kid."

Emelie stopped struggling.

She looked up at him, and for the first time, Kurt saw a deep, breaking wave of agony and ancient pain swimming in her green eyes.

"It's more important than you could ever possibly know, Kurt," she whispered, "More than anyone in this world knows."

"Then tell me. Tell me about Austin. Why the hell does the mere mention of his name make you this freaked out? If we're partners, I need to know what we're fighting."

Emelie turned her face away, slumping her shoulders as the drizzle began to damp her hair. "I... I don't know if I'm ready to talk about that yet. It's too much baggage..."

"Well, you're going to have to talk about it eventually. Because whether you like it or not, I'm involved now. And a couple of things Chief Hudson just said have put me on high alert."

"... What do you mean?"

"The chief mentioned that Austin was waiting for his friend named Gary to rescue him. And just a few minutes ago, I told you that Austin is involved with a succubus named Gracie. The story Gracie told us and the one that Austin is telling... Gracie... is Gary, isn't it?"

Kurt stated as the pieces of the puzzle clicked together in his mind.

"Also, at the cultist fortress, when I was fighting Violet, she told me it was "Gary" who stabbed me in the park. And if Austin openly admits that he and Gary are close friends... Does that mean Austin actually is a member of the cult, and he's just been lying to everyone this entire time? Even somehow managing to fool Chief Hudson."

"I... I honestly don't know. Because in every single one of my other cycles... Gary has never once told Austin about her true identity or her affiliation with the cult. She always kept him entirely in the dark to protect him. If things have changed in this timeline..."

Kurt paused as a sudden, bizarre realisation hit his brain.

"Wait a minute... back up. Is Gracie's actual, real name... Gary?"

"I know it sounds incredibly dumb, but yes. Gracie is just an alias. Her real name is Gary. Also, she's not a succubus."

Except for the sound of drizzle, dead silence hung over them as Kurt stared at Emelie with a deadpan expression.

Suddenly, Kurt couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Pfft—hahaha! Ahahaha! S-Sorry! I'm sorry, I know this is a serious situation, but holy shit..." He wiped a tear from his eye.

"Every single time I picture Gracie – this terrifying, stoic, bat-shit crazy, completely no-nonsense girl who almost killed me in the park – and then my brain attaches the name Gary to her? It tickles my sides. That's the least threatening name in the history of the world. Does she have a pet snail called Gary too?"

Emelie didn't laugh. She just stood there in the rain, staring at him with a deeply unamused expression that practically screamed are you finished?

Seeing that she wasn't sharing the humor, Kurt immediately cleared his throat and forced his face back into a stern, serious expression.

"Alright, jokes aside. Emy, we need to focus on one thing at a time. The grand tournament starts tomorrow morning. From what I've gathered, this event will be broadcasted worldwide, right? You got damn near the whole of Eldoria cheering for you."

He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"You cannot afford to be distracted by this right now. So, let's put this entire Austin situation on hold. Just for now."

Emelie bit her lip, looking reluctant. Her mind was screaming at her to hunt Austin down and demand answers, but as she looked into Kurt's steady, unyielding eye, she knew he was right. Acting on pure panic would only destroy her focus.

"Fine... you're right. One thing at a time. We don't even have definitive proof that Austin actually stole the divine gem. It's possible the cultist hid it entirely somewhere else before being caught..."

Her eyes then stared blankly at the stone floor as her mind automatically began to wander back toward the darkness.

"But... this is Austin we're talking about. He is a literal cosmic magnet for catastrophe. If he has it–"

"Hey. Stop," Kurt interrupted, breaking her train of thought. "No more rabbit holes. Calm down."

"R-Right. Sorry. Thank you."

The – now evening – drizzle began to pick up, turning into a steady rainfall that splattered against the stone, washing away the tension of the afternoon.

"Come on, Emy. Let’s get out of here. You’ve got a tournament to win tomorrow."

Emelie nodded, pulling her hood tightly over her hair and casting magic to stop the rain from hitting them.

Together, the two of them walked side-by-side into the pouring rain, leaving the mysteries of the missing gem buried in the shadows for just the weekend.