THORNS 179

Chapter 179 - Dead Men Tell No Tales

Midnight.

Heavy rain.

The world was swallowed by darkness, save for the city lights and the flash of distant lightning that illuminated the massive perimeter walls of the king’s royal palace.

Beyond the back of the palace walls, where the manicured gardens dissolved into dense, unkept woodland, two dark hooded figures moved like ghosts.

They ran in a low crouch along the edge of the foliage, meticulously staying perfectly within the shadows cast by the trees to avoid the powerful magical spotlights beaming down from the walls and watch towers.

Suddenly, the front figure’s hand shot out, stopping the one behind from moving any further.

"Austin, stop," Gary hissed, his voice cutting through the thundering roar of the rain. "There’s a patrol guard directly on top of the wall. He’s looking our way."

Austin wrapped his fingers around the edge of his own hood and peered through the sheet of rain with an irritated scowl.

"Who cares?" he muttered back. "We’re dressed in full dark hoods, under the cover of night, and it is raining hard as fuck. He probably can’t see shit. Let’s just go."

"This is the king’s palace, you idiot. We only get one shot at this. If the alarms are raised, the royal guards will lock down the entire perimeter within seconds. It is best to be careful."

Austin let out a dramatic groan as he rolled his eyes beneath the shadow of his hood. "Whatever, mom. Fine."

"Heh, mom."

They crouched in the mud, breathing silently as the guard on the wall paced back and forth. The moment he looked away, Gary gave the go ahead. "Alright. Let’s move quickly."

They burst from the foliage and ran along the slippery mud, pushing through the stinging rain until they had traveled far enough down the perimeter wall, deep into a forgotten, overgrown corner of the palace.

"I think this is it," Austin whispered when looking around.

He stepped toward a particularly massive bush. With a grunt, he shoved his hands into the thick leaves and yanked the shrubbery aside.

Revealed beneath was a concealed iron trap door, half-buried under wet earth and dead leaves.

A secret passageway.

Gary stepped up beside him and stared down at the hidden latch in genuine surprise. "This is the secret path the Dorothy twins use to sneak out of the palace?"

"Yeah, this is definitely it," Austin grinned knowingly.

"I remember this area perfectly. I can almost see the CG image from the game of when it was revealed for the first time–" He caught himself, quickly clearing his throat before Gary could question his weird wording again.

"Alright, Garthy, this is as far as I can go. I’ll wait for you right here. Do you remember the plan?"

"Haaa... It’s Gary. And yeah. Don’t worry. I’ll kill Brother Jules before he can say a word to the interrogators about you fiddling with the divine gem. Which he shouldn’t have, given that you’re a part of our Brotherhood. We don’t sell out our own."

"... You’re literally about to go assassinate him for me. You’re not exactly proving your point here."

Gary paused. Then, slowly, a soft smile graced his lips. "That’s because you’re much more important to me than my allegiance to the Brotherhood, Austin. You always will be."

The sincerity in Gary’s smile caught Austin completely off guard.

A sudden jolt ran through his spine, and his face instantly flushed from embarrassment. He nervously cleared his throat, pulling his hood down harder to hide his burning cheeks.

"S-Stop doing that! Stop smiling like that! And for the millionth time, I’m not gay!"

Gary’s smile only grew more affectionate. He stepped closer and closed the distance between them. Austin flinched, instinctively taking an inch back as his heart hammered.

Leaning in, Gary’s face came tantalizingly close to Austin’s, making the boy squeeze his eyes shut in panic.

But at the last second, Gary veered slightly, pressing his lips right beside Austin’s ear.

"Me too," he whispered softly.

Before Austin could process the words, Gary unlatched the iron trap door and jumped down into the pitch-black darkness below, pulling the door shut behind him without making a sound.

Left completely alone in the pouring rain, Austin stood frozen for a few seconds.

Suddenly, he brought his fist down and forcefully punched his own chest.

Thud!

"Stop beating!" he hissed at his own heart with a red face.

Thud! Thud!

"Stop fucking beating so fast!"

Then, unconsciously, his trembling hand rose up and his fingers wrapped tightly around his own throat as the image of Gary's smile flashed vividly in his mind.

He felt overwhelmingly embarrassed as panic swirled in his brain. Not knowing what the hell he was doing, or how else to snap himself out of the emotional overload, he suddenly drove his head forward and bashed it violently against the stone wall of the perimeter.

Crack!

He bounced back, only to slam his forehead against the muddy ground multiple times. A massive, deep cut split across his brow, and a thick pool of blood poured down his face, mixing with the rain.

But within a fraction of a second, a ripple of divine mana flared, and the flesh stitched itself back together, healing almost instantly.

"Haa..*huff*.. *puff*... what the hell's wrong with me..."

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Deep within the underground belly of the palace, the iron trap door creaked open.

Gary peeked his head to scan his surroundings. He found himself in a dimly lit horse shed located in the lower courtyard of the inner palace.

Ensuring no stable hands or guards were nearby, Gary slipped out of the hatch and pulled a crumpled piece of parchment from his cloak. Unfolding it, he stared down at the incredibly crude and horribly misshapen lines drawn across the page.

It was a map Austin had drawn for him.

"What an ugly drawing," Gary chuckled to himself.

Despite the awful artistic skills of his friend, he memorised the layout within seconds, shoved the parchment back into his cloak, and melted into the darkness.

Sneaking in and through the palace corridors was an exercise in absolute perfection.

Gary didn't just sneak; he became part of the castle's architecture. More specifically, it's shadows.

Whenever a patrol of heavily armored royal guards marched down the hallways, he would smoothly step forward and dissolve his body into the guards' moving shadows. He traveled with them, perfectly synchronised to their movements.

While riding inside the shadows, Gary kept his ears sharp.

"... The tournament tomorrow is going to be a madhouse," one guard whispered to another as they walked down a grand corridor.

"... The Prince and Princess have been rigorously ever since their public humiliation. I guess a good spanking was just the right motivation they needed, huh?"

"... Yeesh. Keep those types of comments to yourself."

Gary waited until they passed a deep alcove, smoothly sliding out of the royal guardsman’s shadow and into the darkness of a curtain.

He navigated the upper levels with fluid grace, dropping down from balconies and avoiding sophisticated magical tripwires with the ease of a master thief.

A few minutes later, he slipped into the shadow of a pair of elite sentries guarding the throne room.

"... By the way, have you heard the rumors from the high courts?" one sentry muttered, leaning against his halberd. "They say the First Princess might be back by tomorrow morning. She’s cutting her diplomatic tour short just to watch the tournament."

"... Oh no... If she’s back, security is going to double. She’s way too unpredictable." the other grumbled.

Gary didn’t care about the royal family’s schedule.

The moment the guards shifted their stance, he glided past them, slipping down the dark, twisting stone spiral staircase that led deep into the earth. The luxurious carpets and golden candelabras of the palace faded away, replaced by damp, freezing stone walls and the oppressive scent of stagnant water and old blood.

The underground dungeon.

Keeping his hood low, he walked down the central corridor of the high-security block. Every single cell here was lined with massive, glowing blue anti-mana crystals embedded into the iron bars, completely draining the prisoners of their internal mana.

As he walked past the cells containing high-profile political assassins, rogue mages, and disgraced nobles, his eyes remained locked on the nameplates bolted to the stone walls.

Finally, at the very end of the deepest block, he found his target. On the wall next to the reinforced iron gate, a plaque read: Prisoner 842 - Cultist: Jules.

Inside the dark, damp cell, Jules was curled up fast asleep on a thin straw mat.

"Hey. Psst. Brother Jules. Wake up."

The cultist pushed himself up from the straw and clicked his tongue in irritation as he glared through the darkness at the cloaked figure, assuming it was yet another late-night interrogation squad.

"I already told you dogs; I don’t know where the divine gem is. Now leave me in peace, you heret–"

"Quiet down," Gary whispered sharply, pulling his hood back just enough for the dim torchlight to catch his face. "It’s not a guard. It’s me. Brother Gary."

"B-Brother Gary! Oh, Goddess above, you haven’t abandoned me! Are you... are you here to break me out perchance?!"

"Be. Quiet," he commanded coldly.

Jules instantly shut his mouth, nodding frantically. Gary leaned closer to the anti-mana bars. "I can get you out. But I need to ask you one very important question first."

"Anything, Brother. Anything."

"During your interrogation... Did you say anything about Brother Austin?" Gary asked, his eyes narrowing into slits.

The cultist leader looked offended by the mere suggestion.

"What? Never–! I mean... Never." Jules softened his voice.

"I would never betray one of our own, Brother Gary." He let out a bitter, self-deprecating sigh, shaking his head.

"You see... upon further reflection over the past few hours... I realise I misjudged the boy. Austin must have known that everything was going to go to ruin the moment he realised the Izumi heiress had shown up. That's why he tried taking the divine gem for safekeeping...

"I admit... in a blind fit of rage, I thought he was trying to ruin my work, and I tried to kill him. But the Izumi girl had already frozen me before I could strike. I acted foolishly."

He looked back up at Gary, his eyes full of hope. "I haven't spoken a single word about Brother Austin to the guards. I swear it. I would like to apologise to him personally once I am free."

Gary stared at him through the bars. A cold, chilling stillness settled over his features. "Good. I'm glad to hear that." He offered the cultist a faint, reassuring nod.

"Come a little closer to the gate. I need to give you something."

"Of course, Brother," Jules quickly stepped forward. "What is it–"

Flick.

Gary's hand snapped forward from beneath his cloak. A jagged black dagger, its edge dripping with a glowing lethal venom, flashed through the dark.

Squelch!

The blade drove directly into Jule's throat, burying itself up to the hilt.

His wide eyes instantly dilated into horrified confusion. He tried to scream, tried to ask why, but the venom instantly paralyzed his vocal cords.

He could only stare in pure terror into Gary's face. Underneath the dark hood, Gary's expression was completely emotionless, devoid of a single shred of remorse or brotherhood.

Gushhh!

Gary ruthlessly pulled the dagger out.

Jules clutched his bleeding throat while stumbling backward into the center of his cell. He collapsed onto the cold stone floor, his body twitching violently for a brief three seconds before he went completely still, dying without making a single sound.

Wiping the blade on the edge of his cloak, a dark, victorious smirk slowly creeping onto Gary's face. He turned back and melted back into the shadows of the dungeon corridor.

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- One hour later -

The rain was still coming down heavily.

Austin paced back and forth along the edge of the foliage; his hands shoved deep into his pockets as he grew increasingly restless.

'What the hell is taking him so long? Did he get caught? If the royal guards find him, I'm screwed...'

Creeaak

"AH!" Austin shrieked, jumping a full foot into the air.

"Holy shit! You scared the holy ghost out of me! I thought you were one of the Dorothy twins coming back to sneak out! So, how did it go?"

Gary pulled his hood back. His face was perfectly calm, completely unaffected by the brutal assassination he just committed.

"Heh, it went flawlessly. That shitty map you gave me was actually surprisingly accurate. I managed to locate and eliminate Brother Jules without raising a single alarm."

"And the interrogation? Did he say anything about me taking the divine gem?"

"He didn’t spill a single bean about you. Looks like he misunderstood your intentions. Your secret is perfectly safe, Austin."

An overwhelming wave of ecstatic joy washed over Austin. And without even thinking, he lunged forward and threw his arms around Gary, hugging him tightly.

"Fuck yeah, thank you! Thank you so much, Gary! You’re a fucking lifesaver!"

Gary froze entirely.

His breath caught in his throat as his face exploded into a blush.

Slowly, he hovered his hands just centimeters away from Austin’s back, desperately wanting to wrap his arms around the boy and hold him forever.

But was cut off.

"Alright! Mission accomplished! C’mon. Let’s get the hell outta here."

Austin began to jog back along the foliage line, completely leaving Gary standing in the mud.

Gary’s hands slowly dropped back to his sides as a wave of disappointment washed over his face. He stared at Austin’s retreating back through the pouring rain when a soft, bittersweet sigh escaped his lips.

"Anything for you... my Austin," he whispered to the empty night before pulling his hood up and quickly following the boy into the darkness.

Chapter 180 - New-New Plan

The previous night’s heavy rain has subsided, leaving only clear skies the following morning.

Standing on the smooth stone driveway outside the mansion in the hills was Kurt, dressed in a new maroon suit, black shirt, black pants, and his usual weaponry.

Beside him was Hope, practically vibrating with quiet excitement, and Sadie, vibrating with no so quiet excitement.

"Are you sure you three don’t want to come with us to watch the tournament live?" he asked, directing his question toward Wendy, Isabel, and Yuna who stood opposite them.

Wendy offered a polite smile as she shook her head. "There is no need, Master Rossana. Tricea has recently developed its second version of recording tags. Regular recording tags are now synced to all broadcast arrays across the campus, allowing us to watch every single match live from the comfort of the manor’s lounge."

"Ah, so they’re livestreaming the event, is what you’re saying."

"In simple terms, yes." Wendy nodded once.

"Boo," Sadie chimed in. "That’s super lazy of you, Wendy. It’s ten times better to watch it live! The roaring crowd, the sweat, the magic exploding in your face!"

Tsk "Sadie!" Yuna looked at her with a sharp, disciplinary glare. "Watch your tone when speaking to the Head Maid. Show some proper decorum."

"Yeah, yeah. Understood, Officer Yuna." Sadie rolled her eyes with a dramatic sigh.

Observing the familiar bickering, Isabel and Hope couldn’t help but let out soft giggles, covering their mouths with their hands.

"Well, I’ll ask you two one last time just in case," Kurt said when looking at Yuna and Isabel.

"We still have our daily maintenance duties to attend to here, Master Rossana," Isabel replied warmly, bowing slightly. "But please, you, Hope, and Sadie have a wonderful time at the arena."

"Damn Belle~ When did you get so confident when talking to Bossman, hm~?"

"S-Sadie... Stop it..." Isabel blushed and looked away.

"Ahahaha! There’s the usual shy maid I know!"

"Alright then." Kurt nodded. "Sadie, Hope, let’s get outta here."

"Finally!" Sadie cheered, throwing her arms up into the air. "It has been forever since I’ve been allowed out of this estate to stretch my legs like this. I’m going to eat so much stadium food."

"Stretch legs! Eat food!" Hope immediately mimicked her, throwing her tiny arms up in the exact same manner.

Kurt chuckled and stepped toward the waiting horse-drawn carriage. "Well, we’re off."

"""Have a wonderful and safe day, Master Rossana."""

With a crack of the reins, the carriage moved smoothly down the hills, merging into the bustling main road of the capital.

The city had transformed overnight.

As Hope pressed her face flat against the carriage window, her wide eyes darting to and fro, she let out a series of soft gasps. "Look, look! Kurt, the city is so pretty!"

"People from literally all over the continent have flooded the capital just to watch this," Sadie explained, leaning back against the plush seats with a smug grin.

She looked over at Kurt with eyes that gleamed in anticipation. "You should brace yourself, Bossman. Expect the crowd to go absolutely wild today. The tribalism is super real."

"Tribalism? How so?"

"Have you seen the grand coliseum-like arena at the back of the academy grounds yet?" Sadie asked.

"Yeah. I was up in the stands yesterday. I must say, I was honestly surprised that something that massive was tucked away behind the campus structures."

"Well, since this tournament is international, the entire seating arrangement splits into national representation," Sadie said, counting on her fingers.

"The northern seats will be completely occupied by the nerdy people of Tricea. The southern seats belong entirely to our homeland, Eldoria. The eastern side is reserved for the magic swordsmen of Myria, and the western side..." She paused, shooting him a teasing look. "...will be filled with the muscleheads of your home state, Riverton. So, where exactly are you planning to sit, Bossman?"

A relaxed, easy smile spread across Kurt's face as he looked out the window. "That's an easy answer. I'll sit with Eldoria."

Sadie blinked, slightly caught off guard by his immediate answer. "Oh? Really? Why would you sit with the local crowd instead of your own country?"

Kurt turned his gaze back to her, his eye softening with a genuine warmth. "Because my home is right here with them after all. With all of you."

A slight blush warmed across Sadie’s cheeks.

She quickly looked away and cleared her throat aggressively as she patted her warm face. "Y-You... you should really watch where you’re flashing that smile, Bossman. It’s a public hazard."

Hope, completely oblivious to Sadie’s internal panic, let out a joyful giggle.

She lunged across the carriage seat and wrapped her tiny arms tightly around Kurt’s waist. "I’ll sit wherever Kurt sits! Even if it’s the floor!"

"Oh shoot! It’s Head Maid Wendy! What is she doing out here?!" Sadie pointed out the carriage.

Gasping in terror, Hope’s survival instincts kicked in as she instantly detached herself from Kuer and threw herself onto the opposite bench, smoothing down her apron, and sitting perfectly upright with her hands folded neatly in her lap.

She was the perfect image of a flawless, proper maid.

"..... Pfft–hahaha! I can’t believe you actually fell for that! We’re miles away from the manor!" Sadie burst into a loud, thoroughly amused laugh.

Hope’s jaw dropped.

Realising she had been tricked, she puffed out her cheeks into a massive pout and crossed her arms while looking back to Sadie. Kurt could only shake his head with a quiet smile as he turned his attention back to the crowded streets outside.

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The carriage came to a halt on the open plaza of Future Academy. The volume of the crowd outside and on the field was staggering – thousands of spectators, vendors, and guards managing the flow of traffic.

Sadie let out a dramatic groan as she slid out of the carriage door first. "Ugh, that took forever. My butt feels numb."

Kurt stepped out next, lifting Hope down onto the pavement.

He walked over to the front of the carriage, nodding to the family driver. "Thanks for the ride. Where're you going after this?"

"I'll be heading over to the main city square, Master Rossana. I want to catch the opening matches on the new magical projection of the version 2 recording tags."

"They have those set up outside the campus?"

"Oh, absolutely. The academy set up giant holographic projection screens at the city square, the Adventurer's Guild, and down by the docks."

'Oh damn. Come to think of it, I guess this was why those cultists wanted those display tags way back then.'

"Don't you worry, though," the driver continued. "I'll be back right at this exact spot before the final match of the evening concludes."

"That's perfect. See you then."

With a final wave, Kurt, Sadie, and Hope walked through the academy, blending seamlessly into the sea of eager spectators heading toward the grand coliseum.

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Meanwhile, far below the bustling, sunlit streets of the capital, the atmosphere was entirely different.

Deep within a damp, dimly lit stone chamber hidden inside the undercity sewer network, a sudden, surprised shriek echoed off the walls.

"WHAT?! What do you mean we can’t go back to Future Academy!?" Austin’s eyes nearly popped out of his skull as he stared at the cloaked figure standing across from him.

"Also, What the hell do you mean you’re part of Eldoria’s ten official representatives?!"

Gary stood casually by a rusted pipe, scratching the back of his neck with a sheepish, slightly guilty smile.

"Yeah... I mean, I was originally planning to keep it a secret to surprise you. I thought it would be cool to show up on the arena floor, look up at the stands, and wave directly at you in front of everyone. But... well, that plan is completely canceled now that Emelie’s keeping an eye out for us."

"Oh fuck, you’re right! This is a total disaster! If Emelie spots us, she’ll beat the hell out of us. I mean... I’d heal, but with the Saintess there, she’d just sense the divine mana..."

Gary straightened up and stepped closer to Austin. His voice dropped into a soft, alluring, and deeply tempting murmur.

"Look... I have a much better suggestion, Austin. Why don’t we just run away. Right now. Just the two of us. Let’s leave Eldoria and head to the remote islands of Riverton–"

"Are you fucking crazy?! Why on earth would I run away from the main heroines?!"

"... Haaa. Are you seriously still going on about that? Austin, let’s look at the facts. You’ve completely ruined your chances with Emelie; she looks at you like you’re a plague. Principal Valentine is already taken by your mortal enemy, Kurt Rossana."

Austin flinched as Gary continued to ruthlessly dismantle his life.

"If the Saintess sees you, she’ll realise you stole the divine gem. I guess the Izumi heiress is still technically neutral with you, but she’s way too busy with her responsibilities to care about your existence. Same goes for Princess Kiana. And let’s not forget, you absolutely fumbled your chance with Amy. So... who exactly is left for you in this harem plan of yours?"

"There’s... there’s still Mia! I could still cuck Dominik!"

"Really? Secretary Mia? Settling for sloppy seconds now, are we? How tragic."

"FUCK!" Austin grabbed a wooden stool and hurled it violently across the room.

BANG!

It smashed against the stone wall, splintering into a dozen pieces. He gripped his hair and breathed heavily as panic threatened to consume him.

Gary stepped next to him, his eyes gleaming with a possessive, dark affection. "See? I told you. There is nothing left for you here, Austin. Let’s just run away and–"

"WAIT! I know how to fix my reputation and become an important figure."

A bizarre, crooked grin spread across Austin’s face as a reckless, desperate plot formed in his chaotic brain.

"What, Austin? How could you possibly save this situation?"

"Heh..hehe..hehehehe! Simple. With the power of EX healing, I'll perform miracles. I'll start my own religion and become a god! I'll just become the next Jesus!"

"..... Who?"