THORNS 211

Chapter 211 - Request

Kurt kept his pace calm and steady as he walked up the lively cobbled road leading toward the Future Academy.

Suddenly, the ambient chatter of the crowd was cut short by synchronised thunder of armored hooves.

The populace rapidly parted to the sidewalk as a pristine white carriage trimmed in gold swept past them. Flanking the transport were four horsemen riding purebred white stallions. Every rider was clad in full silver plate armor, their blue capes fluttering behind them with the unmistakable crest of the Royal Guard embroidered in silver thread.

As the carriage rode past Kurt, the lead horseman raised a gauntleted hand. With a coincided pulling of reins, the entire convoy slowed and came to a stop directly in front of him, blocking his path.

Their heavy steel boots hit the cobblestones with a series of metallic cracks as they all dismounted. Without a word, they fanned out in a tactical semi-circle and marched directly toward him.

Kurt let out a weary sigh and dropped his shoulders into a loose, deceptive posture that would allow him to draw his blade or launch a counter-offensive at a moment’s notice.

"Well, well. Don’t tell me you boys are out here trying to avenge your favorite little bootlicker, David?"

Three of the four guardsmen clenched their jaws and tightened their hands on their weapon hilts as their auras flaring with offended pride.

"Stand down, you three." The fourth guardsman commanded, stepping to the front of the line.

"I am the Vice Captain of the Royal Guard, Kenneth. I ask that you hold your tongue and your blades, Kurt Rossana. We are not here to seek a grievance for David’s utter lack of competence. If you would be so kind... we request that you please follow us."

"Follow you? Let me guess. Is this the official King's summon I was told to be prepared for? Because if it is, I hate to break it to his Majesty, but I kind of have a very important semi-final tournament gauntlet I want to watch pretty soon."

"No. This is not a formal decree from his Majesty. This is an entirely separate matter, but one of equal, if not greater, importance. Worry not, Rossana; you will be delivered to the coliseum grounds precisely on time for the afternoon matches."

"...Is that so? Alright then. Lead the way."

Kurt followed Kenneth toward the carriage where he smoothly pulled the door wide open, gesturing for Kurt to step up. "The individuals requesting your presence are just inside. If you would please."

Poking his head inside, Kurt's eye widened at the sight of the three individuals sitting comfortably on the cushioned seats.

Sitting on the far side, dressed in her signature military uniform, was Princess Faye. And sitting across from her, looking remarkably recovered, were the royal twins, Prince Maxwell Junior and Princess Kiana.

Faye offered him a polite smile as she gestured toward the empty space beside the twins. "Good afternoon, Kurt Rossana. Please, step inside. The streets are too crowded for the nature of our conversation."

"... Okay?"

The moment Kurt hoisted himself inside and took a seat, the door gently shut behind him. Outside, the Royal Guardsmen remounted their white stallions; the front driver then let out a sharp whistle, whipping the reins of the two lead horses, and just like that, the white carriage began to move smoothly up the road with the four horsemen maintaining a protective perimeter around them.

"Well. Getting hijacked by the royal family today certainly wasn't on my bingo card today. Good afternoon, your Highnesses."

Kiana, with her posture impeccably straight and her hands folded neatly in her lap, offered him a proper, dignified nod. "Good afternoon, Rossana."

Junior, however, possessed absolutely none of his sister's high-society discipline.

The young prince shot his torso forward, leaning across the small space until his face was barely a foot away from Kurt's. His eyes were practically sparkling with an unprecedented amount of admiration.

"Kurt Rossana, you were so incredibly cool yesterday! The way you just stood there and completely destroyed David without even breaking a sweat! It was the most badass thing I've ever seen in my entire life!"

"Junior! Pull yourself together!" Kiana grabbed the back of her brother's white collar and yanked him back onto the cushion beside her.

"Why must I always, without fail, have to constantly tell you to act with proper, dignified decorum for someone of your standing?! You are the future King of Eldoria for Goddess's sake!"

"Now, now, Kiki. It's alright. Let MJ express his enthusiasm. It's rare for him to find a martial figure he respects so deeply."

"Rare!? Please! Don't even get me started! First, it was Emelie; now it's him! Also, do not call me 'Kiki' in front of a guest! I am a grown woman!"

"Uh, you do realize she already called you that on the live in front of the whole world during her commentary yesterday, right? It's too late to preserve your *Ahem* immaculate reputation~, dear sister."

Kiana let out a defeated whine, burying her face in both of her hands, refusing to look at any of them.

Junior completely ignored her plight, immediately leaning forward toward Kurt once more, his eyes wider than before.

"Seriously, Kurt – do you mind if I call you Kurt?"

"Sure."

"Nice! Kurt, you have to tell me – what the hell did you do to Everett Herst in that final moment of your match? One moment he was about to unleash this annihilation attack, and the next, his entire spell just... vanished! He burst out in cuts and bruises and fell straight down to the ground, defeated! What was it?!"

Before Kurt could open his mouth to give a vague, evasive answer, Faye cut in. Her voice carried a firm, authoritative weight that instantly silenced the young prince.

"Junior. Please wait your turn. I called Kurt – do you mind if I call you Kurt?"

"Sure."

"Thank you. I called Kurt into this carriage because I have a serious matter to discuss with him first. You may interrogate him about his techniques afterward."

"Nnnnnn...Fine! But please hurry. We're nearly at the academy."

Junior reluctantly leaned his back against the cushions, but his gaze remained locked onto the man beside him. Kurt could practically see the boy's imaginary dog ears perked up and his tail wagging at a thousand miles an hour, as if waiting for a treat.

"Now, Kurt. Just a few pleasantries before we get into the serious topic. I must admit, I'm glad I get to finally meet the legendary man who managed to capture the unattainable heart of Diana Valentine. Not to mention... the spectacle you made by spanking my siblings in public."

"F-Faye! Can we please stop talking about that incident?! I do not want to be reminded of it ever again!"

Acting on instinct, Kiana quickly sat straight on top of her own hands, firmly holding her butt as her face exploded into a wild blush. She awkwardly scooted her body across the seat, pressing herself as far away from Kurt as the dimensions of the carriage would allow.

Junior pointed a snarky finger at her and smirked. "Oh, look who's the one acting out without proper royal decorum now. Hypocrite~"

"Alright, alright. That's enough, MJ. I'll stop teasing you too, Kiki. Let's return to the matter at hand. So, Kurt... tell me. What exactly is your secret to capturing the heart of a woman as fiercely independent and stubborn as Diana?"

"My secret? Hmmm. Honestly... it was just love at first sight."

Faye's smile slightly faltered as her eyebrows lifted in disappointment. "Love at first sight? Really? What a cliché and boring answer."

"It's the truth. What, you're telling me you've never just looked at someone across a room and felt a sudden, massive electric spark snap through your entire being?"

"No. Never."

"Well... that's exactly how the two of us got together. We saw each other, we shared a kiss – although now that I think about it, she was pretty drunk – we fought a life-or-death battle, and then we made up. Simple as that."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Junior shot forward once again, unable to contain his excitement. "You fought a battle with the principal?!"

"Yep."

"To the death?!"

"She’s the one who wanted to murder me. Not the other way."

"And... and you actually survived?!"

"I’m currently sitting right in front of you, aren’t I?"

Thud!

Junior dropped down from the seat to his knees on the carpet of the carriage as he grabbed Kurt’s leg with both hands. "Master! Please! I beg of you, teach me your ways! Teach me how to handle that kind of strength! Teach me how to–"

"Junior! Sit still, keep your mouth shut, and be quiet right now!"

"Yes, ma’am," deflating at Kiana’s scolding, he got back up to sit on his seat.

Faye let out a soft sigh, offering Kurt an apologetic look. "I apologise for my younger brother’s unhinged behavior, Kurt. He lacks boundaries, as you can see."

"Don’t sweat it. To be honest, Junior... I thought you looked pretty damn cool yesterday during your match. Especially when you went all golden and super out there. You know what I’m saiyan?"

Junior’s head snapped back up at the compliment.

"The way you awakened your power through anger, a sense of loss, and pure desperation? *Mwah* Cheff’s kiss. Absolutely magnificent. It was a hell of a show."

"Thanks... but it doesn’t really matter. At the end of the day, I still lost the match. I let everyone down."

"Hey, don’t put yourself down over it. From one aspiring golden warrior to another... I can easily see the spark inside you. You’re the type of fighter who gets stronger with every beating you take. That loss is just fuel for your next evolution."

A profound wave of gratitude washed over Junior’s features as he prepared to thank him again. But the words died in his throat when he realized that Kurt’s single eye was sparkling with an intense excitement as he stared back at him.

’Huh? Why’s he looking at me with so much... admiration?’

Clap, clap.

"Alright, that is quite enough of you two boys fawning over each other’s combat capabilities. We have a schedule to keep."

The playful, teasing atmosphere inside the carriage instantly evaporated as Faye’s posture went rigid. Her expression dropped into a cold mask that perfectly mirrored the royal bloodline.

Kurt’s smile vanished as he sat up straighter against the cushions and locked eyes with the Princess.

"Alright, your Highness. I’m listening. So what’s the real reason you picked me up?"

"Indeed. Kurt. Based on the extensive intelligence reports I have personally read regarding your activities... you possess a rather extraordinary talent for uncovering, hunting, and capturing hidden members of the cult."

"I guess you could say that. Though, most of it’s just pure coincidence."

"Coincidence or not, you cannot deny the fact that recently, whenever the cult is brought up, your name’s not far behind."

Faye took a slow, deep breath. Her golden eyes darkened with an ancient, rooted pain that she had carried for nearly her entire life.

"Kurt Rossana, I have a deeply personal request to ask of you. A contract, if you will."

Junior and Kiana both went silent, their expressions turning incredibly solemn as they looked down at the floor.

"... Many years ago, on the night Kiana and Junior were expected to be born, a coordinated terrorist attack was launched directly against the heart of the inner royal palace. It was led by a contingent of masked cultists... and that horrific night directly resulted in the brutal death of our mother, the Queen."

Kurt remained perfectly silent, listening intently.

"As you know, Bishop Tobias had revealed himself to be a member of the cult who was present on the night of the slaughter. I must say that it's an absolute shame that neither I nor my father was given the privilege of personally executing Tobias... however, what we discovered from the cultists you captured was that he was nothing more than a pathetic footnote in that tragedy. A mere lackey.

"There was another individual that night. A completely different entity who personally orchestrated and led the entire masked cultists. The true mastermind behind our mother's murder.

"My request to you, Kurt Rossana, is quite simple. Find that specific cultist. Hunt them down to the ends of this continent... and bring them to me alive."

Chapter 212 - A Heavy Reminder

As the carriage began to slow down, nearing the gates of the Academy, Kurt looked out the tinted glass window.

"Just here is fine. I don't particularly want to draw any more attention to myself than I already have."

Faye nodded understandingly. She reached forward and sharply knocked three times on the partition separating the cabin from the driver's seat. Outside, the Vice Captain barked a brief order, and the carriage smoothly pulled to the side of the cobblestone road.

Right as Kurt was about to make his exit, Faye's voice rang out.

"I sincerely hope you will agree to my request the next time we meet, Kurt. In return for your compliance, you may ask for absolutely anything within the crown's power that will assist you in your search. And it goes without saying that if you are successful, your reward will be more than substantial."

"... How long are you planning on staying in Eldoria, your Highness?"

"I plan on staying for quite a bit," Faye replied with a calm smile.

"Alright. I'll get back to you with an answer in about a week. But you know... you wouldn't have to wait a week for my answer if you just gave me some sort of royal order to do so."

"Ahahaha! Oh no, no way. I would rather not force you into this. I value your... unique capabilities, and I would much rather remain in good standing with you. This is a private family matter, after all.

"Frankly, the mere fact that I am asking you, an outsider, for help is already tarnishing the competency of the Dorothy royal bloodline, who haven't been able to locate this mastermind despite it already being eighteen long years...

"I expect to hear good news from you, Kurt Rossana."

'I'd rather you not expect anything at all, Princess.'

He casually nodded at the three Dorothy siblings. "Later then. And good luck to both of you in the upcoming gauntlet. I'll be rooting for you."

Junior slammed his fist against his chest and looked at Kurt with starstruck eyes. "I won't let you down, Master! Just watch me!"

Kiana cleared her throat, her cheeks still carrying a faint pink hue as she adjusted her posture with perfect elegance. "Thank you, Rossana. Your support is appreciated."

With that, Kurt popped the carriage door open and clicked it shut behind him. Within seconds, Vice-Captain Kenneth and his horsemen escorted the transport back into the flow of traffic, making its way toward the entrance of the academy.

As Kurt fell back into a steady stride along the bustling sidewalk, his mind began to process the weight of the information Faye had just dumped into his lap.

'A second mastermind, huh? Haaaa... Once this tournament has finally settled down, I need to find Emy and ask her if she knows anything about that night. Which she probably does.'

Something kept nagging at his chest as he continued up the road. It was the expressions he had caught on Junior and Kiana's faces the moment Faye had recounted the horrific details of their mother's murder.

'I really hope those two don't sit in their rooms thinking it's somehow their fault that their mother died. To be born on the exact same night of the attack... yeesh. At least nobody blames them from what I've seen.'

The thought of their circumstances triggered a memory in his mind that he'd been unknowingly putting in the backlog.

Tristan and Rupee.

Kurt's pace slowed slightly as a wave of guilt washed over his own conscience.

'Damn it... I really need to stop stalling and just tell Rupee the truth about what happened to her family. The longer I hide it from her, the worse the burn is going to be when it finally comes to light.'

Shaking the heavy thoughts from his head, Kurt pushed his way through the gates of the Future Academy where hundreds of students, citizens, and tourists were lined up along the walkways, wildly cheering and waving flags as the royal carriages and noble transports arrived at the main plaza.

"Well, look who it is!"

"Hmm? Oh, hey!"

A genuine smile broke through his gloom as he spotted Sophie and Cindy standing near the edge of a stone fountain.

Sophie stepped forward and lightly slammed her open palm against his back with a hearty laugh.

Smack! Smack!

"There's our favourite lover boy! The man of the hour!"

"G-Good afternoon, Sophie, Cindy, hahaha."

"Seriously, Kurt. Where on earth can a woman find a man like you? Swatting all the annoying flies buzzing around Diana, whooping that blasted Everett's arrogant ass into the next calendar year, open challenging Reuben Valentine to a bloodbath and then he just walks away?! Ooh-wee!"

Suddenly, Sophie boldly grabbed Kurt's arm and pulled it flush against her chest. She looked up at him with a wicked, teasing grin.

"Honestly, maybe I ought to just cut the line and take you all for myself. You don't mind a beautiful, seasoned old gal like me, do you?"

"Ha. First of all, Sophie... there's only enough space in this heart of mine for that one special person. Secondly... old gal? Please. You don't look a single day over twenty-five."

"Hmmm~ Keep talking like that and I might actually have to steal you away from her."

"Eurgh! Sophie, stop it!" Cindy's face turned bright red as she lunged forward and aggressively yanked her older friend off his arm.

She pushed Sophie away with an embarrassed huff, then bashfully looked up at Kurt while twirling a lock of her hair. "Um... ignore her, please. But... she's right. You were really cool out there yesterday, Kurt."

"Appreciate it, Cindy,"

"By the way, you should have seen the look on her face when you and Diana started kissing–"

"Sophie! Shush!" Cindy screamed in terror, frantically leaping through the air to try and cover Sophie's loudmouth with both hands, but was easily dodged.

After a moment of chaotic wrestling, Sophie finally calmed down. Her expression shifted into something remarkably soft and sincere as she looked toward Kurt.

"But in all seriousness, Kurt... really, thank you. Thank you for stepping up and helping Diana in a way that no other person ever could. She needed that more than you know."

"Yeah. I'm glad it all worked out in the end. Although, I really wanted to go to town on Reu–"

"AHOY THERE, LAD!"

The trio turned around, and Kurt's face lit up as he recognised the rugged form of old man Willy. To his surprise, the old guardsman was dressed in his finest coastal coat.

"Old man Willy!"

The two men immediately dapped their hands together in an echoing clap, their grips firm. "You actually managed to get away from the harbor and make it to the capital?"

"Ay, lad! Wouldn’t miss this grand spectacle for all the gold in the sea!" Willy laughed.

He turned his head and offered a polite nod toward the two women. "Good afternoon to ye, lovely ladies."

Willy then reached behind his coat and gently nudged at a small figure who was desperately attempting to hide behind his legs. "Phoebe, lass! Stop yer hiding among the rigging and greet this here magnificent man properly!"

’This old man really loves to glaze me up... Pause!’

A shy little girl slowly peered out from behind Willy’s coat. She wore a pristine little dress, her hands nervously clutching the fabric of her skirt as her wide eyes looked up at Kurt.

"H-Hello..."

"Well, hey there, Phoebe." Kurt crouched down to her level and smiled. "Are you the granddaughter Willy mentioned?"

Phoebe looked confused as she tilted her head. "I... I don’t know. I have four other sisters at home."

’Wow.’

"Bahaha! Ay, that she is! This here is the specific granddaughter who happens to be an unhinged fangirl of Ms. Herst!"

"Oh, is that so? Are you here today to support Emy in the gauntlet match?"

Phoebe’s face instantly lit up with a bright smile, and she nodded her head vigorously. "Yes! She’s the strongest ever! The very Best!"

BZZZZZZ!

["Attention all spectators. The semi-final matches will formally commence in exactly one hour. Please begin making your way toward your designated seatings immediately."]

"Well, blimey! We best be grabbing our seats before the main tide rolls in and fills the galley! Phoebe, lass, follow your old granddad to the upper decks!"

"Okay!" The little girl offered Kurt a small wave. "Bye-bye, mister."

"Take care, kid. Enjoy the show," Kurt waved back as the two of them turned and quickly blended into the massive river of people flowing toward the coliseum.

Once Willy and his granddaughter were completely out of sight, Kurt’s warm expression turned deeply serious as he looked toward Sophie.

"Sophie. Before you head inside, I need to get some serious advice from you."

Catching the drastic shift in his tone, Sophie gestured a quick nod of her head at the younger girl standing beside her. "Cindy, honey... Go ahead. I’ll be right behind you."

"Oh. O-Okay. I’ll see you inside. Later, Kurt."

Once they were alone, Sophie folded her arms over her chest and bore her sharp eyes onto his. "Alright, Kurt. Out with it. What’s got you looking so glum?"