THORNS 39

Chapter 39: New Home

Gasp! "Is that the place Mr. Prefecky?! We play there every Sunday!" Rupee pointed at the many children she saw playing at the church's playground.

"No, not that silly. It's that place over there." Dominik instead pointed at the orphanage across the street from it. "But, if you get accepted, you'll be able to play with all of them every day!"

"Really?! Yaay! I have some friends who stay there too! I can see them playing over there by the church! Can I go see them Mr. Prefecky?"

"R-Rupee behave yourself. You're making a scene..." Tristan nudged at her.

"This is actually the perfect chance for me to ask those kids a few questions." Kurt suggested. "Tristan, why don't you go with Dominik and see if you can get yourselves registered. In the meantime, I'll take Rupee with me to the playground to see her friends since I doubt, she'd be able to sit still."

"S-sure. Is that alright Mr. Prefect?"

"Totally." Dominik threw a thumbs up, "I'll explain the situation and sign off on any paperwork they give."

"Yippee! Come on Uncle Kurt!" Rupee pulled on his hand.

"Alright alright, ha ha! You've got some major ants in your pants, don't you?"

Once they crossed the road and made it to the playground, all the children stared in their direction as they suddenly stopped playing.

'Whoa. That's creepy...'

"... Hey it’s Rupee..."

"... You’re right! It is Rupee!

"Hey Rupee, you’re here!"

"""""Rupee!!!""""" All the children gathered up and ran towards them.

’Holy shit! Just how popular is this girl!’

"Hi! Guys!" Rupee waved at them.

When they arrived at the two, the nonstop questions barrage came swinging in full force.

"Rupee! What are you doing here!?"

"Yeah! And where’s Tristan!?"

"Who’s this uncle you’re with!?"

"Whoa! He has an eyepatch! Can I see what’s under!?"

"Please kids, one at a time, ok? We’ll answer all your questions but first you gotta answer mine. Deal?" Kurt tried to negotiate with them.

"Eeehhh?! But we asked first!"

"And I’m the adult here. We adults always get priority."

"""""Booooo!"""""

"Hey! You better listen to Uncle Kurt or else I'm going home!" Rupee scolded them. "Tristan's here too but I'll take him with me if you don't coomputate!"

"You mean cooperate?" one of her friends asked.

"Yes! That!"

"B-but... I want to see Tristan," an asian shy girl said as she stepped forward. "Okay Uncle Kurt, I'll answer your questions."

"Me too!"

"Also me!"

"Me as well, desu wa."

"Wow. So eager all of a sudden? You all must really like Rupee and Tristan, huh?"

"W-what!? I don't particularly l-l-like Rupee or anything." A boy with short red hair and a plaster on his nose kicked the dirt as he misunderstood Kurt.

"I-I mean if you're asking whether I like or hate Tristan, then I definitely like him... desu wa." A girl with blue swirly hair chimed in as well.

'I guess Rupee's not the only popular one here.'

"Alright first question. Do you like being here at the orphanage?"

"""""Yeeesss!"""""

"And do the people that work here treat you all nicely?"

"""""Yeeesss!"""""

"Are you lying?"

"""""Noooooo!"""""

"That’s good to hear." Kurt smiled. "Alright next question. Do some of you guys get adopted? Or do you all stay here until you’re old enough to leave?"

"We get adopted!"

"Yeah, but only if the mommy and daddy likes us..."

"Oof, that’s just how it is sometimes. Don’t worry, I’m sure a nice couple will take you all in one day." Kurt reassured them.

’Hmm, everything seems normal so far.’

"Ok last string of questions then I’m finished. Do you see Rupee’s hair and eye colour?" Kurt asked as he held her head.

"""""Yeeesss!"""""

"I-it’s very nice..." The red-haired boy mumbled.

"Yes, it is very nice." Kurt said as he rubbed her head.

"Hehehe." Rupee giggled.

"The next question is, do any other kids here at the orphanage have a similar eye and hair colour as her?"

"""""Noooooooo!"""""

"Okay, was

there any kid who had the same eye and hair colour as her but left the orphanage?"

"""""Noooooooo!"""""

’So she’s the first? I can’t tell if that’s a good or bad thing...’

"Last question. Now this is an important one, so you have to answer honestly, okay? When you guys go to church for your lessons, have any of the priests been acting weird around you?"

"Weird how? Desu wa."

"Basically, in any way that made you feel uncomfortable."

"""""Noooooooo!"""""

"They just teach us about how to do spells and about Goddess Bula and her scriptures." The asian girl added.

"... Great! That’s all the questions I have."

"Oh! Oh! Now me!"

"No, I have a question!"

"Hey R-Rupee, you wanna play on the swings?"

"I was here first!"

"W-Where's Tristan?"

"I believe I have the most important questions, desu wa"

"Hey Kurt! We're back!" Dominik called from across the street. With him was Tristan and another woman.

'Oh thank goodness he's back...' Kurt managed to untangle himself from the kids and escape their clutches.

"Good morning." The woman greeted Kurt. "You must be the person that saved these kids. On the behalf of their deceased parents as well as Goddess Bula, I thank you." She bowed deeply.

"Please, there's no need for that. I only did what was right."

"Humble and handsome. I'd imagine you're popular with the ladies, hehe."

"Uh oh, has another woman fallen for your devilish charms?" Dominik snickered. "You best give up now Manager; he's already got his eyes on someone."

"Well, I guess that it's a good thing I have a husband then. That must be Rupee?" She looked over the street, "I see she's very well liked already."

"Yeah. Apparently, her and Tristan are very popular among them. They all play together on Sundays, she said."

"Oh my is that so. That means there’s no need to worry about them fitting in."

"You didn’t know? Are you not part of the church?"

’That’s weird. The church and the orphanage are practically neighbours. Are they not affiliated with each other?’

"No. We’re an independent organisation who so happens to be located next to each other. Because of that, the church has offered us a helping hand on some matters. Such as teaching them about religion and building a playground for them to enjoy."

"That’s... great, actually. Excuse me Manager, but do you mind if I ask you for a favor?" Kurt asked seriously.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Do not. I repeat, Do. Not. Let the church get their hands on Rupee or Tristan. For any reason, it doesn’t matter what it is. Don’t let them go to those lessons and, especially, don’t let the members of the church take those kids in the name of serving the Holy Child."

"...Why? Is there something I should know?"

"I’ll take it from here, Kurt."

Dominik then began to explain to her about how they believe the cult and church are working together for some unknown reason, and that they are actually kidnapping children that matches Rupee’s description. Golden blonde hair and crystal-clear blue eyes.

He also told her about how they became orphans with the recent event that has happened and how Bishop Tobias could not be trusted.

"Has Tobias ever visited this orphanage?" Kurt asked.

"Only ever once. But now that I think of it, he did seem a little strange and it did look like he was searching for something. Listening to your story has now made me realise what that something was..."

"The kids... Mrs. Manager! Do you mind giving a testimony at the station whenever you have a moment? This will surely help us nail down on Tobias when the time comes."

"Yes. I'll do anything to protect those kids."

"Can you defend yourself well? In case of an emergency?"

"Dude, Kurt! What are you asking the gentlewoman!?"

"Yes, I can. I was a former silver ranked adventurer after all, hehe."

"Great. That's good to hear. You never know when they might come in with force. Actually, extra security for this place doesn't sound too bad. Dominik, are there any agencies that offer security services?"

"Oh no, Mr. Kurt, there's really no need to–"

"Please. I insist. I'll even pay it out of my own pocket."

"Kurt... That's a lot of money." Dominik sounded worried.

"It’s fine. I have lots to spare. In fact, since those two won’t be going to those church lessons I’ll even offer to pay for their school fees. They were going to school before all this, right?" He looked at Dominik."

"Well yes. We got their information down while you were at their house, but..."

"Then it’s settled. I’ll pay for security as well as their school fees. This is important to me so please let me do this."

After seeing how Kurt wasn’t going to give in, the manager accepted his offer.

"Very well. Thank you, Kurt."

"You’re welcome. Now if that’s all we need to leave. We’re on a tight schedule, you see."

"Of course. Don’t forget to say goodbye to those kids."

"Will do."

Kurt and Dominik crossed the road again in order to say their farewells to Rupee and Tristan.

"Aww but do you have to leave already?" Rupee clung to Kurt with teary eyes

"Yeah. But don’t be sad. This is your new home now. You’ll also be able to go back to school. And I promise to visit at least whenever I can. Once a month minimum guaranteed."

"O-ok... You promised so you have to keep it."

".... Here. Give me your pinky."

Kurt interlocked his and Rupee’s pinky together and swore under an oath.

"If I break my promise, I’ll swallow a thousand needles."

"Ha ha! *sniff* Now you have to keep it."

"Exactly." He stood up and went to Tristan.

"See you around little man."

"Hm. S-see you later. Thank you, Uncle Kurt."

After they finished saying their goodbyes, Kurt and Dominik left for their next destination. Future Academy.

Chapter 40: The Ten Representatives

Beep!

[Attention all students. Before you leave for the end of the school day, please be reminded that tomorrow, which is Friday the 20th, will be an off day much like the rest of next week.

The academy premises will still be open but no classes will occur in preparation for the tournament. If you have club activities in which you need to attend, please do so.

To all those that are representing our academy please use this time wisely to ready and strengthen yourselves. And to all those watching and supporting, we hope you enjoy this extended leave. Thank you.]

Ding-Dang-Dong

The academy bell rang signaling the end of the school day. Emelie, who was lying on her desk, pretending to sleep, waited for everyone to leave the classroom first since she knew what was coming next.

’No matter how many times I lay here and wait, it won’t change the outcome for what’s about to come. I can jump down the window and try to escape but I’d just be caught at the bottom anyway. *Sigh* there’s no stopping the inevitable. Let’s just get this over with.’

Emelie then sat up, slung her bag over her shoulder and lazily made her way out the classroom. She held her hand on the door and took a deep breath to mentally prepare herself.

’Here we go...’ She slowly opened the door and was met with the two things she hated most in life. Especially when they come hand in hand.

People and attention.

"""""""EMELIE!!!"""""""

The entire hallway was packed to the brim with students, staff and a few teachers. All of them, clapping and applauding for her as she walked out down the river of cheers.

"Good luck with your training, Emelie!"

"Use this time to prepare yourself thoroughly, Ms. Herst."

"You’re the best for a reason Emelie! Keep up the good work!"

"C-Can I shake your hand before you leave?"

"I LOVE YOU EMELIE HERST!!!"

’Argh! These people are so annoying! I hate going through this every. single. time.’ She thought as she power-walked through the crowd.

When she finally made it out of the building she was then met with the rest of the representatives. They stood on opposite ends of each other, making way for her to walk between.

The first she walked past were the twin sisters belonging to class 1-A, Summer and Autumn Wingard.

"This is the last time we’ll see each other before the tournament, senior!" Summer clapped her hands as she looked at Emelie in admiration.

Autumn, however, crossed her arms as she puffed up her cheeks, "Yeah! You better be even stronger the next time we see you, so that we can beat you and get our revenge!"

"Mm." Emelie nodded.

The second she walked past were two 4th year students. Zack, who had a giant black scarf covering half his face and Lily Mathers, who had the aura of a loving mother watching her child leave her home and becoming independent.

Zack and Emelie simply looked at each other. Both shared the face of understanding that they’d rather be anywhere else.

"I’m going to miss not seeing you, Emelie! You take care of yourself, ok?" Lily pulled her into her giant bosom.

"You’re suffocating me Lily." Emelie sounded muffled as she tried to speak.

"Oops! Sorry, ha ha."

Finally, waiting at the end of the line was the student council’s Vice President, Victor Moor, and the President, Amber Strongwill.

"With your strength and discipline, we would've loved to have you on the council. But alas a bet's a bet. I had a month to recruit you in yet your will remains strong and thus you won our little game. I hope to see that same energy when we meet again at the tournament, Emelie."

Amber stretched out her hand to which Emelie proceeded to shake.

"I told you trying to recruit me is useless, President Amber. I've already got enough on my plate with my personal life to be thinking about managing a whole academy of children."

"C-Children!? Y-You insolent! Aren't you practically a child as well!" Victor barged in.

"How about we take this to the arena and I'll show you who the child really is. Spoilers though, you'll get your ass kicked like the million other times you tried getting up in my face."

"Y-You little–"

"Okay, that's enough from you two." Amber pulled Victor away from Emelie.

"But President she–"

"She has already proven herself to be the strongest amongst us here. I'd be silly for you to start a fight with her only to injure yourself when the tournament is just around the corner. So please just think of what she said as a simple joke, right Emelie?"

"Yep."

"See! We're all friends here."

While Amber tried calming Victor, Emelie made a smug face towards him as if to make fun of him for actually being treated like a child.

"W-What! You little-"

"By the way Amber." Emelie intervened before things could escalate, "I don't see the prince or princess anywhere. Gary also isn't here. What happened to them?"

"Ah yes, Kiana and Maxwell, Jr. were called in by the royal guards at around lunch break so they left early. Gary on the other hand was last seen in the courtyard during break with a friend. *Sigh* I assume they must've found a way to ditch classes early somehow since I couldn't find him anywhere."

'Normally the three of them would've also been here. *Tsk* Something must've changed again. Come to think of it, I didn't see Gary nor Austin during class. No wonder it was so quiet. They're probably doing something stupid that'll land them in trouble. Meh, who cares about that shitstain.'

"I see. I was only asking because you all gathered here for this grand farewell even though it's only for a week."

"The most important week of the year I'd say. I do hope you prepare yourself well and get lots of rest. You may not know this but a lot of people are counting on you to be at your best. So let's not disappoint them."

"When have I never been at my best?" Emelie smiled. "Don't worry Amber, I got this. I'll be counting on you as well."

"On all of us, Emelie," Amber spread her arms and posed in front of the rest of the representatives. "You can count on all of us because we're a team."

"... Right. Thank you, Amber, and you all. See you next week." Emelie waved to them and said her goodbyes.

...

Once inside of her dorm room, Emelie threw her bag on her bed and plopped down on it while facing the ceiling.

’Finally. With the academy out of the picture for the entirety of next week, I can focus all my efforts into stopping the cult’s plan.’

The room’s exit door opened and in came Amy looking like she just walked through a storm.

"Emelie, you’re here first? That figures I guess. You know I could barely make it out of my own classroom let alone the academy. The place was packed to the brim of students wishing the representatives good luck. Even the ones in my class, Summer and Autumn, were not spared."

Amy then also threw her bag on the bed and plopped down on it.

"No wonder you told me to just go straight here instead of waiting for you at the gate as usual. I’d imagine you must’ve gotten the worst of it, ha ha."

"I did. I even saw one guy rip open his shirt and begged me to sign it with a permanent marker. Said he’d be priceless after I win the tournament. Which makes no sense cause what will he do? Sell himself?"

"Did you sign it?"

"Of course not.... He got dragged away before I even opened the marker."

"Pfft! Ahaha! You’re so mean, Emy! What if he was actually gonna sell himself!"

"Heh heh." Emelie chuckled, "It would’ve been a funny story to say the least. Say Amy, how’s the media club been doing? You got any activities going on next week?"

"The club’s doing just fine. Although they did tell me to tell you that they appreciate you saving me after that whole display tag debacle."

"Damn that sounded like a whole tongue twister. You alright?"

"Ha! You've never heard a real tongue twister before have you?. Listen to this: Peter Piper–"

knock knock

"Go away!" Emelie shouted. "I'm not in the mood for signing anything!"

"But Emy, what if it's for me?" Amy got up from her seat to open the door.

"Then that makes it even better."

When she opened the door she saw her neighbour who stays in the room opposite theirs.

"Yes?" Amy asked.

"Hi Amy. Is Emelie here."

"She is but she's not in the mood to see anyone."

"O-oh. Can you tell her to go to the common room? There's someone here to see her. They said it's very important."

"Ok! Will do!" Amy ran back inside. "Emelie, there's someone here to see you in the common room."

"Did you ask who it is?"

"Oops!" Amy ran back to the door, but she was already gone. "Sorry, I guess I didn't... But they said it's very important!"

"Haaa...Amy..." Emelie kicked herself back up and walked to the door. "I swear if this is nothing you owe me a tub of ice cream."

"Ehhhhhhh!"

Emelie closed the door and made her way down to the common room. When she got to the bottom of the stairs she saw a familiar silhouette and eyepatch.

’Kurt?’