THORNS 85

Chapter 85: Granny’s Golden Ticket

"Urgh, not even an umbrella and raincoat combo would save us from this downpour." Kurt groaned as he sat and waited for Emelie at the hotel’s lobby.

"What, scared you’ll get your panties wet?"

"Finally. I was getting tired of waiting." He looked over his shoulder and saw Emelie, who was wearing a plain black hoodie and ripped skinny jeans. She was also eating what looked to be a protein bar.

"I usually like to take my time when showering, but I made sure to be quicker than usual on account that I knew you were waiting. Some praise would be nice."

"Ahh. You’re a shower type? I was too until I came to learn the joys about bathing."

"Do I even want to ask what happened to make you change your mind?"

"... I’d best keep that information to myself."

"Good. Then let’s move. We have a bunch of kids waiting to be saved and time is of the essence. We have one week before the month is over."

"You know where they are?" Kurt excitedly sprang up from his seat and kept pace with Emelie as they left for the exit.

"Of course I do. Who do you think I am?"

"A walking cheat code?"

Emelie flinched like she'd been hit with a physical blow and abruptly stopped walking as soon as she heard Kurt say that. Her front foot stayed planted, hovering an inch above the ground before dropping down with a dull, lifeless click.

She didn't turn to look at him. She ceased all motion as her hand hovered a modicum away from the brass handle of the glass door and gulped as if she swallowed a stack of needles.

"W-What did you just call me?" She let out a shaky whisper.

"Whoa. What's with the vibe shift? Are you having another episode?"

The air in the foyer suddenly felt thin and frigid. To him, it was just a throwaway jab. A casual snark meant for her to simply wave off and ignore. Possibly, to maybe even get a small chuckle out of her.

But to her, that clearly wasn't the case. As her hand rested on the door handle, Kurt noticed that her shoulders started tensing up and that her knuckles were turning white as she squeezed it. The reflection through the glass door showed Emelie's terrified expression. Her eyes were wide open, shaking, and her mouth hung slightly ajar as if she were trying to say something but couldn't.

"A w-walk... c-cheat–" The ambience of the rain, the sound of people chatting and walking about, and anything external that could be heard were all beginning to sound muted as the sound of her breath and heartbeat resonated much louder in her ears.

"Emelie. Snap out of it." Kurt put his hand on her back to stop her from shaking.

Hearing the sound of his voice and feeling the weight of his hand on her back snapped her out of whatever state she was in.

"R-Right. Sorry. I got lost in my thoughts for a second there."

"Are you okay? You looked gone."

"I’m fine now. Just, please don’t call me that again... please."

"Got it."

"Thanks... " She breathed in deeply and let out one heavy breath.

The suffocating tension that Emelie felt her body was going through had begun to ease up. Natural sounds were returning to her. Her shoulders dropped, and the rigid line in her spine softened as she loosened her white-knuckled fist.

"Alright then. Now, let’s–"

"Now hold on for just a second, Emy." Kurt pulled her back from opening the door. "You seriously weren’t about to walk out in this storm, were you?"

"Yes? Is there a problem with that?"

"’Is there a problem’, she says. Yes, Emy, there’s a massive problem."

"And that is?"

"We’re gonna get sick obviously! I was gonna try and bravado this weather, but nope. Nuh-uh. I can’t have you getting sick with the tournament right around the corner. Diana already entrusted you to me, so let’s just wait this weather out."

"Stop being such a wuss. Here."

Snap!

When Emelie snapped her fingers, the green streaks in her glow began to glow which usually indicated to Kurt that she was using magic.

"...What did you do?"

"Covered our bodies with a microscopic telekinetic barrier the size of our body's proportions. Think of it like an invisible wet suit, without the wet part. Now we won't get wet."

"Oh damn. Say less." Kurt stepped out of the hotel, and sure enough, the rain had not hit him but instead hit the invisible barrier around his body.

"See. Aren't I amazing?" Emelie gloated as she stepped out with him and put the hood of her jacket over her head.

"I can still feel the wind, though? And your hair is still glowing, albeit slightly."

"Well, I am still actively using magic to shield us after all, but this amount is nothing. The reason you feel wind is because I'm only blocking out the rain. If I completely shielded you from everything, then how are you supposed to breathe?"

"Only rain? How?"

"A combination of my usual magic plus water magic."

"Right, right. Yes, I see. I'm just gonna nod along and pretend that I understand."

"It's alright. You wouldn't understand even if I went into full detail. It's quite convoluted since it took me hundreds upon hundreds of years to figure out and master."

"I get it already; you're an old grandma." Kurt rolled his eye. "Now, what's the location of the kids?"

"Wha– Hey! I'm still eighteen!"

"Physically? Yeah. But those pajamas don’t lie."

"S-Shut up and forget what you saw!" Emelie turned away from him and speed-walked away.

"Where’re we headed?"

"The docks. Luckily for us, we snagged that ship from the cult. The kids are located on another island similar to the one you and the principal landed at."

"Similar in what way? I seriously hope it’s not what I’m thinking about." Kurt clenched his fist and furrowed his eyebrows as he thought back on the cave and its horrors.

"No. There are no goblins on this island, nor are there sick acts happening to them. The place we’re going is actually the place where Tobias and the other cult members disguised as priests convinced the parents of those kids that they were taking them for their ’special training’." Emelie exaggerated the term by making quotation marks with her fingers.

"Okay then. So the plan is to sail to the island and reverse kidnap them, yeah? Once all the kids are safely on the boat, we can go back and massacre all the remaining cultists."

"Reverse kidnap? You mean rescue? And no. It’s not so simple, Kurt."

"How so?"

"Haaaa, you see. Normally, I would’ve sailed together with Peter to the island. He already knew about the cult’s existence within the church, and they were looking to recruit him into their brotherhood. Obviously, he refused them and in any other outcome, would eventually die by their hands. But after some persuasion, I convinced him to temporarily join them, where he would then sneak me onto the island, and we would save them together. But now..."

"But now Peter’s dead. So that’s why you were looking for him. Sorry about that."

"Don’t apologise. I know you didn’t mean for it to happen. We need to think of a new plan. We can’t just storm the place since that island has eyes everywhere and we’d be putting the safety of those kids in danger by alerting that whole place. Sneaking will also be difficult since they practically have eyes keeping watch everywhere..."

"In that case, I do have a plan."

"Really? What is it?" Emelie looked at Kurt expectantly.

"The way you told me about how you and Peter sneaked on that island gave me an idea. We too, will become cult members!"

....

"... What are you talking about? Becoming a member of the cult is an extremely dangerous ritual to undertake that not many survive. Only a few has ever skipped the ritual, but that’s because a member would’ve forced them to join or–"

"Emy! Slow down! That’s not what I meant, geez. I shouldn’t have paused so dramatically."

"Then what do you mean?"

"What I mean is we go there disguised as one of their own."

"And how do we do that?"

"I see your head is still up in the clouds. Emy, didn’t we just recently capture members of the cult?"

"... Oh!" As Emelie’s eyes widened, Kurt could see the exact moment a light switched on in her brain.

"Right! So basically, we take the cloaks of two of the members for ourselves and convince another to play as our golden ticket to entry on that island. Since we can’t just go there without raising suspicion, the actual cult member would vouch for us by saying that we’re the new guys!"

"Kurt, that’s... that’s not a half bad plan. Only problem is convincing one of them to act as our golden ticket."

"No need to worry about that. We already know who will be playing that role." Kurt smirked devilishly as he rubbed his hands together.

"We do?"

"Yep. A certain little... shittypants."

Chapter 86: White Lie

"Morning, Chief Hudson! Shall we begin day two of the interrogation?" Dominik greeted energetically as he entered the chief’s office.

"Dominik. How many times do I have to tell you not to slam open my door like that. You are going to break the hinges off them again. Knock and wait for a response like a normal person for crying out loud."

"But it’s fun watching you get startled. Every time your straight face breaks, it reminds me that you are indeed a human being with personality."

"What are you implying? That I’m a boring puppet?"

"Nah. Just a grumpy old man."

"Why you little..." Feeling the last straw of his sanity slipping away from his grasp, Hudson grunted and got up from behind his desk with his fist clenched, ready to beat the brakes off of him.

"Save me, Kurt–!" Dominik looked away and lifted his arms as he braced for impact...

Knock Knock

"Dominik." The prefect who was stationed at the front desk called to him from behind the door. "Your friend with the eyepatch is here. Says he has an important matter to discuss with you in regard to the zealots."

"Woowhoo! Saved by the bell! Sorry chief, but it looks like we're gonna have to put a hold on the interrogation for now. Later!"

Click

Shut!

Hudson watched Dominik sprint out of his office with uncanny speed. He then plopped back into his seat and rubbed the temples of his head. "... To have such dumb luck, I swear the Goddess must be watching over him."

...

"Kurt, my man! I heard from Senior Willy that you got detained by the royal guards. I take it that since you're here, everything is alright now?"

"Hey Dom. And yeah. Everything's alright. Although if there is one thing I'm worried about, it's that people might still call me a criminal after seeing me in the streets."

"You don't have to worry about that." Emelie reassured him. "Right before the principal came to pick me and Kiana up from the park, Amber showed up to check for any people who got lost in the fog. I told her our team won the fight and that she should tell whatever newspaper outlet to redact their statement about calling you a criminal. Princess Kiana's orders."

"Nice work. Thanks, Emy."

"No problem."

"Uhm Kurt. Mind introducing me to your hooded friend? Emy, was it?" Dominik scratched his cheek as he looked down at the hooded figure who was sitting next to Kurt.

"What are you talking about, you dumbass. It’s me, Emelie." She took off her hood and revealed her face for a second before putting it back on.

"Ohhh! Emy stands for Emelie, duh!" Dominik slapped his own head. "Sorry, I couldn’t see you properly. Why the hood though?"

"Cause I don’t feel like dealing with people geeking out over me today."

"Hm? Why? You seemed to have no problem facing it before."

"She doesn’t like the rain. It’s a personal thing apparently." Kurt answered for her, feeling it’s best to give the simplest reason so as to not have Emelie go back into her panicking state.

"Got’cha, got’cha. So, what brings you two here? Something about the zealots you say?"

Kurt and Emelie gave a knowing look to each other and nodded subtly.

"I have news regarding where the location of the kids we’re looking for is." Kurt dropped the bombshell.

"You do!? Oh shit–!" Dominik covered his mouth and looked around to see if anyone was watching. "Are you serious?" He asked quietly.

"Dead serious."

"... Let’s not talk here. The chief should also hear about this. Let’s talk in his office."

"Right." Both Emelie and Kurt followed behind Dominik as they got up from their seats and headed to Hudson’s office.

- A few minutes earlier -

"So, how are we going to convince the prefects to let us take Mr. Shitpants and go to the island without giving away that I’m a regressor?" Emelie asked Kurt as they stood a few blocks away from the prefect station.

"Ah yes. The million-dollar question. I don’t suppose asking them really nicely would do? I believe I’ve built enough trust between us that it could maybe work?"

"Wha– No! Are you an idiot?! Of course they’re going to want to know where you got this piece of information from!"

"Dammit, you’re right. Hmm..." Kurt thought deeply while holding his chin. "What if we say that we found this out by snooping through Peter’s house and finding secret notes which told us about his findings in regard to the island? The notes, however, burnt themselves to a crisp after being unsealed for ten minutes. We didn’t know that that would happen; hence, no evidence, only our word."

"That’s also a no go." Emelie shook her head.

"Was it the whole ’notes burning themselves to a crisp’ thing that makes this plan no good?"

"No. Believe it or not, but we actually have magic papers that do function that way. But it’s most used among the upper societal members in order to pass secret messages and whatnot.

The reason I said that it’s a no go is because the prefects have already thoroughly searched through his house and belongings after he died. They would’ve already found something if what you’re saying is true, which is not."

"Well then, I’m all outta suggestions. Do you have any ideas?"

"Ha. Ha. Ha. I thought you’d never ask."

"Urgh! You could’ve said something instead of watching me struggle as I rack through my brain." Kurt exhaled as slid his hand down his face. "And? What is it?"

"Listen to me, Kurt, and listen well. So what I was thinking is..."

- Back to the present -

"Just to be clear, you’re saying that after you proved that Tobias and his priest accomplice were members of the cult and the king sentenced that same accomplice to death, he confessed, as he was being dragged away, that the children that they kidnapped were on another island?" Hudson reiterated what Kurt told him.

"Yes." Kurt confirmed.

"And you want to use one of the zealots you’ve apprehended as a ’golden ticket’ of entry to sneak into the island while posing as one of their own in order to avoid raising any red flags?"

"Bingo." Emelie nodded.

"I see... Kurt, I hope you don’t mind me asking you just two questions that I have. These will determine whether I approve of this or not."

"Go ahead, chief."

"Alrigh then, first question. Why are you only bringing this news to me now?"

"I was going to tell you this yesterday but as you might've heard I got caught in a pickle at Evergreen Park which involved the prince and princess."

"Mmhm. A duel. Or so I've heard. Dominik and I were interrogating the zealots you all captured at the time so we couldn't be there."

"You heard right. Unfortunately, the outcome of that duel left me out of commission thanks to another cult member getting a sneak attack on me. If you need further confirmation of that, you can ask the Saintess. She's the one who healed me."

"No need. I believe you. Hearing you received help from the Saintess is something I never thought I'd hear though. Not just anyone gets to be in her presence, let alone receive her blessings.

Last question. Why hasn't the king dispatched his royal guardsmen to the children's location to save them if what you're saying is true in that the zealot posing as a priest had revealed their whereabouts?"

"That I... I don't know. I don't know what's going through that king's head. The impression I got from him is that he's very stoic. Almost like he's dead inside. However, he has sent his royal guards to scour around the church to look for any remains of the zealots. Surely you've seen them around?

I believe that the king is, firstly, playing cleanup. He wants to make sure that his own backyard is safe from any threats before sending his best men out to save the children."

Kurt tried his best to tell most of the truth while trying to misdirect Hudson into believing that the king does have plans to move out his men. But just not yet.

'C'mon chief. Please believe my bullshit. The king doesn't actually know the location of the kids since he just sent that random priest to the chopping block, no questions asked.'

"Hmm. You say he looks like he's dead inside, huh? I guess what the zealots did to his wife is still affecting him..." Hudson mumbled.

"... Tobias did mention something about his late wife. What did they do? Don't tell they–"

"No. They didn't assault her if that's what you're thinking." Hudson cut Kurt off. "I'm sorry but it's not my place to speak on it. What I can say is that it's related to why he is so 'dead inside', as you so eloquently put it, and why he's so protective of his children...

Anyway, that's all I wanted to ask. I have read the reports on the king sending out his men and the Saintess to various churches in order to flush out the remaining zealots. Your reasoning checks out. You may take one of the zealots with you, and Dominik, go with them in case anything goes south. You also know how to sail a ship which will make things much easier."

"Sir yes sir!" Dominik saluted with a wide grin.

"Thank you, Chief Hudson." Kurt sighed with relief.

"I should be the one thanking you. Over and over you just keep bringing back good news that gets us one step closer into destroying these zealots. Good luck to you all on your mission and I hope you come back safely with those children."

Once Kurt and Emelie were out of the office and in the clear, they secretly fist-bumped each other on a lie well told.