THORNS 89

Chapter 89: Reconciliation

The hallway of the west dormitory, i.e., the female side, was unusually silent, the kind of heavy quiet that follows a storm. Normally it would be filled with the white noise of idle chatter, laughter and the footsteps of students coming and going to and from their rooms.

But now, as Emelie stood in front of her room door, the space around her felt uncomfortably small and empty.

She hovered her knuckles over the wood once again and took another deep breath as her chest tightened with guilt and deep regret at how she had dismissed her best friend on that rainy evening.

Finally, her knuckles met the door. It wasn't the usual "secret knock" that Amy made up just for the two of them in case the door was locked. It was three dull, hesitant thuds.

"Amy." Emelie spoke softly as she leaned her head against the cool surface of the door. "I know you're in there. I can see the faint light coming from below. May I come inside?"

Nothing.

There was no movement. No sound of a chair dragging across the floor or a bedspring creaking under the weight of another person. She noticed through the small crack of the handle that the door was unlocked, but she didn't want to open it and potentially make matters worse by invading her space. She wanted Amy to open it herself or to at least respond to her.

Knock Knock

"Amy, please open the door. I came here to apologise and I want to say it in your presence. Not from out here."

Emelie waited, staring down at the scuffed tips of her shoes. A stray draft drifted through the hallway, chilling the back of her neck. The door remained closed like a physical boundary marking the distance that had grown between them since yesterday's blowout.

However, she didn't walk away but nor did she knock again. She just stood there in the gloom of suffocating silence.

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A few minutes had passed when she decided to try again. But right as she was about to knock, she heard the ever so discreet sound of something rustling and shifting inside.

Slow, heavy footsteps approached the door, and a shadow appeared and stopped from beneath it.

Beep

The door handle clicked as it was gently being pulled down. Then finally, it opened inch by inch until it revealed Amy's tired silhouette.

She wore a thick grey sweater and matching pants. Her hair was an untangled pink mess, and her dead eyes showed signs of dried-up tears. To Emelie, she looked hollow and lifeless.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Emelie tried to reach her hand out but immediately pulled it back, remembering how she had swatted it away when she tried doing so before. Amy, seeing her hesitation, simply dropped her head down as her hair swooped down most of her face and new tears started to form.

"Amy, I'm sor–" But before Emelie could finish her sentence, Amy took a step forward and hugged her while crying softly on her shoulder.

"I.. *sniff* I didn't think you'd come back here at all *sob*. I was so mean to you..."

"Amy..."

"I didn't even give you a chance to explain and *sob* I accused you of such horrible things. I'm such *sob* I'm such an ugly person!"

Emelie quickly wrapped her arms around Amy's arms and pulled her in for a tight hug.

"Shhh, it's okay. Please don't self-deprecate and blame yourself. I'm also the one who's in the wrong. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. I should've properly explained myself, but I just brushed you aside like you don't matter. You're my best friend and one of the kindest souls I've ever come across. I'll always love you, Amy. Never forget that."

"Emmyyy... I-I'm sorry!" Amy squeezed the back of Emelie's jacket and fell to her knees. So as to continue holding her, Emelie also went down on her knees with her and waited until she was finished crying.

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"Wow. This room looks and smells like death." Emelie noted as she opened the curtains and windows. "And why is my bed so... neat. Like, uncannily so. I don't remember leaving it like that."

"Ahaha... When I came back to the room that evening, I sorta kinda maybe thrashed your bed in frustration. Once all the steam was out of my system, the guilt hit me hard and I started crying while cleaning the mess I made..." Amy twiddled her thumbs after putting on her round glasses and tying her in a loose ponytail.

'Oh Amy, you innocent soul.'

"Well, in any case," Emelie sat next to her. "Let me just clear the air on a few things so that there are no misunderstandings between us. Kurt and I are not secret lovers who are doing despicable things while lying to everyone.

Also, I don’t really talk to anyone about anything in class, let alone my private life. Gary was lying to you. Why? Probably because he has something against me. Why? Who cares. I sure don’t.

Lastly, the reason why I’m staying at the same hotel as Kurt is because, and I’m only telling you this because you’re my best friend and I trust you won’t blab to anyone about this. It’s because we are deeply involved in investigating the cult."

"T-The zealots?! W-What do you have to do with them?"

"It’s best you don’t know, but what I can tell you is that we’re working with the prefects and are about to crack a case that you’ll probably read about in the newspapers soon. So look forward to that. Of course, my and Kurt’s names will be redacted but you’ll know the truth."

"I-I see... This is much more serious than the silly things I thought it was, haha..."

"It’s not silly, Amy. You’re young. This was a new feeling for you and so you became overwhelmed with emotion. In a way it’s sort of better it ended this way. Imagine you confessed to Kurt and he rejected you? I can already picture how awkward the air would be around you two every time you talked to each other."

"Haha, yeah. I guess you’re right. Also, you call me young but aren’t you only one year older than me?" Amy raised her one eyebrow in suspicion.

"H-Hey! Don’t you start too. Kurt already calls me a grandma because of it." Emelie tried to deflect the topic about her age and maturity.

"What?! How could he? But your skin is so pretty! You have no wrinkles and smell super nice! No old grandma odor whatsoever!" Amy pouted.

"Ahaha! It’s only a joke. No need to puff your cheeks like that."

"Hmph! Good! ... So Kurt is a no go, huh?"

"Yeah. As you now know, he and Principal Valentine are already together. I'd go so far as to say they're infatuated with each other. Like, seriously, you don't want to be there when they are together in the same room. Trust me, you'll feel second-hand embarrassment."

"Sounds nice... But I'm happy for them. Haaaa, what a ride." Amy plopped her back on the bed. "My first love ends in heartbreak."

"Don't get too down. I'm sure that there's someone just for you out there."

"What about you? Is there somebody you like?"

"... N-No." Emelie blushed and looked away.

"..... Oh. My. Goodness! Emy, look at you! Your ears are so red! *Gasp* Is it someone I know?! Wooow, you actually have someone you're interested in! Who is it? Who is it?!"

"BY THE WAY! I have a favor to ask you! I could really use your help with something that'll benefit our investigation with the cult."

"Hmmm... Fine. But I want to hear about who this person is when you have time. Deal?"

"D-Deal."

"Yay! Ok, what do you need my help with?"

Emelie reached into the pockets of her jacket and took out the pouch with all the tags needed inside.

"I need you to use your magic skills and forge temporary tags."

"F-Forgery? But when I showed you what my skill could do, you said that I should not use my magic that way. That I could get into deep trouble with the law and very bad people."

"I know what I said, but this is really important. Your skill will help save a lot of people, so it’s okay to use it this time. Besides, you’re not just doing this for anybody. This is me who’s asking."

"..... O-Ok. I’ll do it. But it’ll take a few hours to finish. That’s a lot of tags you just gave me."

"That’s fine. I’ll be here with you. This is a good chance for me to catch up on some meditation and strengthen myself. I’ll grab you some food since I’m guessing you haven’t eaten yet?"

"Now that you mention it. *Growl*... I guess I haven’t." Amy rubbed her stomach at the growl.

"Perfect, I’ll grab a little extra since I too haven’t eaten yet." Emelie stood up from the bed and walked to the front door.

"Emy!"

"Hmm?" She turned back.

"T-Thank you for not being angry with me. I’m glad that incident didn’t ruin our friendship."

Emelie, choosing not to say anything in return, let her actions speak for her as she smiled and nodded back at her before leaving the room to go grab some food.

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"Who the hell are you, one eye?" A stern looking woman wearing sunglasses and a black suit stood in the way of Kurt entering the orphanage.

"A lone man with an eyepatch and is armed with weaponry? Yeah. You're suspicious as fuck." A burly bald man wearing similar clothing and smoking a cigar, stepped forward from beside her and entered Kurt's personal space. "I'm gonna have to kindly ask you to leave, buddy."

'It's just one thing after another, isn't it?' Kurt's smile twitched as he was confronted by these two strangers.

Chapter 90: Testing The Waters

"I'm the one who looks suspicious? Have you seen the cut of your jib?" Kurt pointed at himself like he'd been accused of the exact same thing he could say about these two standing before him.

"You look like you're wearing three layers of clothing just so you can dramatically shed them one by one during a tense monologue. And those shades, I bet you're wearing them just to look 'cool' while you plot your world domination. Don't get me started on the 'vibes' you guys give off. You look like the type of people who iron their socks in the morning, and frankly, that's a level of stability I find threatening."

"Shut him the hell up, Bob. He talks too much." The woman pulled down her sleeve and looked at her watch. "The kids should be back from their magic lessons soon, so make it quick. We don't want to put them in any potential danger."

"Yes ma'am." The burly man spat out his cigar and pulled his fist back.

"Danger? Wait. Are you guys the secur– Whoa!" Kurt swerved his head to the side and narrowly dodged the incoming fist without moving his body.

"Lucky evade." The man said dryly.

"Look, there's clearly been a mix-up. A misunderstanding, if you will." Kurt sighed and raised his hands up to indicate to them that he's no threat. "I have every right to be here. Heck, I'm the one responsible for–"

"We know what your type is ’responsible’ for. You think you’re getting near those kids? Not on our watch." The woman leapt onto Bob’s shoulder and swung her heels to kick Kurt in the head, to which he barely dodged again, but this time he backflipped out of danger.

Tsk "Slimy bastard." The woman clicked her tongue and jumped down Bob’s shoulder to stretch her limbs.

’Looks like these two aren’t interested in debate.’

"Get your baton out, Bob. This one is troublesome."

"Yes ma’am."

They both reached inside of their blazers and pulled out an expandable black baton.

"Fine. If that’s how it’s gonna be, then I’ll play along with your stupid games." Kurt took out his brass knuckle switchblades from his leather belt and held up his fists as he focused on the steel knuckle side of the weapons.

"About time you showed your true colours. Bob, Formation C. Attack."

"Yes ma’am." Bob took one heavy step forward and lunged at Kurt while the woman ran around the burly man, hoping to catch him in a pincer attack.

Kurt instinctively pivoted, leading them away from the main entrance and toward the rubber-matted expanse of the nearby playground.

"Luring us to a playground?" The woman remarked, her voice dripping with cold ridicule. "Tactically, that’s a pretty stupid move. You got nowhere to hide, no exits we don’t cover. You’ve just penned yourself in, ’tough guy’."

"You got it backwards. I’m not trapped here with you. You’re trapped in here with me. This is the perfect chance not only to test what I’ve learnt about myself so far but also to see what you two are capable of." Kurt clanked his weapons together and squared up his shoulders for a fight.

"Hmph. Cocky." Bob didn’t wait for a signal as he jumped towards Kurt and swung his baton, aiming for his ribs.

Kurt, not looking panicked nor particularly stressed, dipped his shoulders and quickstepped back. The steel baton whistled inches above his head. He used this moment of opportunity to quickstep straight into Bob’s guard and drove a sharp left hook right into his solar plexus.

"G-Gaaah! *cough*." The air left Bob in a pathetic wheeze as he buckled.

"Bob! What the hell are you doing!? I did not give you the order to attack!" The woman screamed a war cry, coming in with a vertical overhead strike.

Kurt raised his right arm, the brass knuckles catching the steel baton with a spark-showering,

TANG!

The vibration travelled up her arm, numbing her elbow. But she was fast on the counter offense. She transitioned into a low sweep, trying to take his legs. Kurt, as if he already knew her next move, leaped over the baton and landed with the grace of a predator.

"Please tell me this isn’t everything you got? If so, then I’m seriously wasting my time and money." Kurt sighed in disappointment.

Bob, having recovered from the damage he took, repositioned himself next to the woman and said, "Vicky, this man is no slouch. Don’t let his appearance fool you. Though it may not look like it, he packs a serious punch, and it’s not his weapon that I’m talking about."

"... Yes. I noticed so when we clashed."

"Permission to use, otherwise on normal opponents, lethal tactics. I suspect that is the only way to successfully incapacitate him."

"Granted. Make sure not to kill him. The prefects can take care of the rest once we're done."

"Yes ma'am." Bob drove his fist into his hand.

"Oh? Finally turning up the temperature, are we?" Kurt bounced on his feet and readied himself for what's to come.

With a heavy step that sunk into the rubber mat and cracked against the cement, Bob burst forward and drove his fist straight at Kurt. And although every fiber in his being told him to dodge for his life, Kurt took it upon himself to stay locked in place and raised his arm in anticipation for the impact.

All of a sudden, everything around him had slowed down. Much like the time he fought Diana at the open field and her blade was about to pierce him, his skill activated.

However, now feeling much more comfortable in manipulating mana, he enhanced himself in strengthening magic which caused his skill to perceive that he was not in danger.

Time returned back to normal, and right when Bob's fist was about to connect with Kurt's guard, his entire hand and forearm had turned to stone, making Kurt flinch split second but not waver.

BOOM!

Wind erupted and travelled through the entire park as an unstoppable force collided with an immovable object. When the dust settled, what was left as a result of this collision was Bob's stone arm being cracked, while a blue, ethereal-like essence was emitting from Kurt's body as he stood strong and unhurt.

'Whoa.' Kurt watched amazed at whatever his body's going through. 'What in the actual–'

"He’s using mana coating! Bob! Get out of there!"

"Y-Yes ma’am..." Bob tried to jump away but Kurt caught onto his wrist to stop him in his tracks.

"Oh no you don’t. You don’t mind me testing this new power of mine, do you?" Kurt mercilessly swung his steel-covered knuckles at Bob’s face, only for him to notice another presence coming straight for him.

He let go of Bob’s wrist and side-stepped the flaming drive kick of Vicky.

BANG!

Vicky landed hard against the rubber mat, melting it in the process, but she did not let up. She made a vicious 270° turn, swinging her blue flamed leg in an ark directly aiming for Kurt’s neck.

Which connected.

KABOOM!

Kurt flew all the way through the swings and crashed against the merry-go-round, spinning him round and round.

"Ha! That’ll teach you." Vicky wiped the sweat from her forehead and picked up her sunglasses which fell to the floor from her earlier kick. "You okay, Bob?"

"Yeah, but if I didn’t cover myself in stone armour, I’m afraid my hand and maybe my entire arm would’ve been broken to the bone..."

"Hmm. That mana coating was expected; however, it seemed that he was still no match for us–"

"Are you sure about that?"

"Wha–!"

"What the–!"

Kurt reappeared from behind them as he put his hands over their shoulders and leaned his head forward between theirs.

"I must say, I'm very happy with the strengths of you two. Bob, was it? Every leader likes a capable subordinate who can follow orders to a T, but it seemed you underestimated me and decided to attack on your own. No worries though. That's something that can easily be fixed with some discipline. I hope today's fight taught you that.

And Vicky, I think I heard? I found no immediate faults with you. You're calm and composed and might I say very quick on your feet. Your fire kicks really packed a punch. You may even rival Dominik in that department. But you did let your guard down towards the end there. To that I have only one piece of advice to give you: Always confirm the kill."

Kurt tightened his grip on their shoulders as a maniacal smile began to form on his face.

"Hahaha... Say. How about we continue fighting? I really wanna test this newfound ability I just manifested~"

Fear crept up the spines of Vicky and Bob as they felt an unnerving pressure being squashed against them.

"W-Who the hell are you? Are you part of the cult that we've been told to watch out for?" Vicky asked with a shaky voice.

"Me? Now you wanna know who I am? Funny. I guess introductions are in order. My name is–"

"Uncle Kurt!" A child-like voice called out. "Tristan, it's Uncle Kurt!"

"R-Really? Whoa! Don’t pull me while running, Rupee!"

"... Aww. Looks like our fun game’s over guys." Kurt let go of the two and dispersed his mana coating.

"W-Wait. Kurt? As in Kurt Rossana?" Vicky’s eyes grew wide at the revelation.

"Yep." Kurt took off and put his weapons away. "Nice to meet you. I’m Kurt Rossana, A.K.A., your employer."

"W-Whaaat!" Vicky stumbled back and nearly fell to the ground while Bob just stood still with his mouth slightly agape as he stared at Kurt in bewilderment.