THORNS 91

Chapter 91: Newfound Power

"We deeply apologise for our unethical behaviour, Boss!" Vicky bowed down at the perfect 90° angle as she apologised to Kurt. "You too, Bob! Quit standing there looking like an utter buffoon and lower your head while apologising to the boss right now!"

"Y-Yes ma'am. Sorry Boss." Bob straightened his back and, like Vicky, bowed at the perfect 90° angle.

"Uncle Kurt," Rupee tugged on him from the side of his pants. "Why is Ms. V. and Mr. Shiny Head doing that?"

"R-Rupee! I told you not to call him that! His name is Bob!" Tristan lightly pinched her cheek as he reprimanded her.

"I don't mind if she calls me that. As long as she knows that Vicky and I are here to protect her and that she does not see me as a bad guy, then all is well."

"M-Mr. Bob..." Tristan looked at the burly bald man with eyes of respect as he admired the shine of his head.

"So can I keep calling you Mr. Shiny Head?" Rupee asked as she looked at Bob with adorable puppy eyes.

"You may."

"Yay!"

"Alright, that's enough, you two." Kurt patted the heads of Tristan and Rupee. "Stop teasing the poor guy. Also, you both can stop bowing at me now. What if you make these kids develop a weird habit? They're very impressionable, y'know."

""Yes, Boss."" Right as the two guards stood up straight, Rupee suddenly broke free from Kurt's hand and positioned herself in front of Bob and Vicky.

"Yes sir, Uncle Boss!" She shouted enthusiastically and bowed before Kurt.

The gesture had him slightly taken aback. He glared at the two guards as if to blame them for this situation, but their professional straight faces showed no signs of breaking under his scrutiny.

"R-Rupee, stop it! You're making Uncle Kurt feel bad!" Tristan ran up to her and pulled her up straight, causing her to giggle at Kurt's flustered expression.

"Hehehe! Yes sir, Uncle Boss! Yes sir, Uncle Boss!"

"W-Whoa! S-Stop moving up and down like that! Why are you so strong?!"

"Rupee, can you please stop calling me that. Just Uncle Kurt is fine. And there's no need to bow at me. I'm not your boss."

"Ok!" She suddenly stopped her frantic movements, which led to Tristan letting her go out of sheer dizziness.

"By the way, I don't see your friends with you. Don't tell me you two walk home alone?"

"No way, Uncle Kurt! That's dangerous! Mrs. Maggie came to fetch us!" Rupee jumped up and raised her hand.

"Mrs. Maggie?" Kurt looked at Tristan for an answer.

"S-She's the manager of the orphanage."

"Ohhh. Come to think of it, I never asked for her name."

"Boss." Vicky spoke up. "Mrs. Manager told us to stay here at the orphanage in case someone happened to come by even though we insisted on tagging along. After much back and forth, she revealed to us that she was once a former B-ranked adventurer back in her heyday.

Given this new piece of information, I deemed her to be capable of protecting the two kids while we watched over the orphanage. Additionally, her husband went along with her. He himself was once a former B-ranked adventurer as well."

"You're saying these things about 'rank', but I don't really know what that means. Do you have a frame of reference I could use?"

"You don't know what that means–?! Gah!" Bob held the side of his stomach as Vicky elbowed him.

"Do not speak out of turn, Bob! And do not question our employer!"

"Y-Yes ma'am. I apologise, Boss."

"N-No worries." Kurt promptly closed Tristan's and Rupee's eyes the moment he saw what Vicky was about to do.

"Now, you asked for a frame of reference. Let's use Bob and I for an example. Although I am not in the adventurers business, if I were to be, I say I'd be at least A-rank. And Bob here would be a B-rank."

"So the manager and her husband are as strong as Bob?"

"Much more capable too. The only reason I put him in B-rank is that his overwhelming brute strength makes up for his lack of intellect. If it wasn't for that strength, he'd be in C-rank. Maybe even D."

"Damn, Bob..." Kurt looked at him with slight pity.

"It's okay. I understand my faults, Boss."

"That alone makes you better than most. Just for curiosity’s sake, what would Emelie Herst’s rank be?"

"S-rank no doubt." Vicky answered with no hesitation. "However, I can easily see her become a SSS-rank in the future if she were to continue at the rate she is going."

"Hmm. What about the prefect, Dominik?"

"A-rank. However, I believe he could be S-rank if he were to cast away his self doubt and realise his full potential."

"You talk like you know him personally." Kurt tilted his head with his hand on his chin.

"Sort of. We both attended Future Academy at the same time. He was just a weak nobody back then whereas I was part of the ten representatives. Due to us being in the same class he would often challenge me to a fight, losing each time.

As the years went by and we all went our separate ways, I went on to join a security firm and Dominik a prefect where I would often read about his accomplishments in the newspapers.

One time our company had a joint training session with a bunch of trainee prefects. Dominik was in charge of his trainees, and I was in charge of mine. Spurred on by the cheers of said trainees, we had a spar which surprisingly resulted in a draw. I won again, but only barely. Despite the dirt and sweat that covered him, and despite what he said, in that he told me he was going all out, I knew it was a lie."

"So basically he’s a late bloomer?"

"Yes, Boss." Vicky nodded.

’Hmm. I can’t help but wonder if there’s more to it than that... Wait–’

"Say, if you attended the academy the same time as Dominik and were part of the ten representatives, that means you must know Diana Valentine. How would you rank her?"

"I do not know how her strength fairs these days but back then I'd rate her as SS-rank. She was so much in a league of her own that the whole world became interested in her for all sorts of reasons.

I keep mostly to myself but I did hear that she is now the principal of Future Academy. That alone leads me to believe that she is one of the few SSS-ranked individuals that walks this Earth."

"Woow. The whole world huh? Guess I gotta keep my wits about me."

"... Hm?" Vicky was about to ask him what he meant by that but opted for professionalism and kept her mouth shut.

Meanwhile Rupee, being long bored of this conversation, was playing on the broken swings with Tristan scolding her to get off before she hurts herself.

"So, Ms. V., Mr. Shiny Head. How would rank me based on our fight?" Kurt asked with a smirk.

"I dunno. But you are strong, Boss." Bob gave him a simple yet vague answer.

"I'd say your A-rank teetering on the edge of S-rank." Vicky smiled. "That mana coating move you did towards the end is something not even I could do. I have witnessed only a few use it. That includes Diana Valentine."

"Mana coating? I just used body enhancement magic."

"... What? Forgive my presumption but, do you not know what mana coating is?"

"No? But judging from the name and what I saw, it sounds like a technique that my favourite blonde-haired ninja uses. Or maybe it's similar to a technique that a certain monkey pirate uses to enhance his

abilities. If that’s the case, then holy shit, am I stoked to see what this mana coating can do." Kurt clenched his fist at the thought of it.

"... R-Right. It seems that you already have an idea..."

"Mr. Kurt!" The manager of the orphanage came running but immediately stopped at the entrance of the playground. "Oh my goodness! What happened here?!"

"Maggie!" Rupee jumped down from the broken swings and ran to her with Tristan following from behind.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Manager. I was just... having fun with our new security friends here. However, you don’t need to worry. They said that they’ll clean up any mess that was caused. Right guys?"

"Yes, Boss."

"Did we– Gah! I mean– Yes, Boss."

"Oh my, it seems that you two are not only capable guards, but also skilled handymen."

"Thank you for you kind words, Mrs. Manager."

"Oh please, Vicky. I told you to call me Maggie. You too, Mr. Kurt. ’Mrs. Manager’ makes me sound old."

"Sure thing, Maggie."

"Great! Would you like to stay over for lunch? The other kids should be back with my husband soon. I’m sure they’ll all be happy to see you. Rupee has been talking about you and Mr. Dominik so much that the children have started to idolise you two."

"Haha, is that right? I’d love to stay. Thank you for having me."

"Uncle Kurt! Where is Mr. Prefecky? I want to see him too."

"He couldn’t make it because he had very important work to do. But I’ll be sure to tell him that you miss him."

"Okay! Oh! Come with me! I want to show you my room!" Rupee pulled on Kurt’s jacket as she ran towards the orphanage.

"Alright! Alright! I’m right behind you, haha!"

"W-Wait for me!" Tristan ran with them.

"Hehe. I better make sure that the table is set." Maggie followed them last, leaving the two guards alone in the park.

"Well, what are you doing just standing around?! for Let’s clean this playground back to its pristine condition and go back to our posts!"

".... Yes ma’am." Bob dropped his shoulders in sorrow and rolled up his sleeves as he got ready to work.

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"That’s all. Now leave."

"... *sob*..."

"Austin. Stop standing there, crying like a baby, and leave. I'm busy with work and would like to leave early." Diana shooed him away with her hand without looking up at him.

"U...U-Uwaaaah! I hate you, Dia– P-Principal Valentine!" Austin stormed out of the principal's office after receiving his additional punishment.

"Austin?!" Gary, who was standing outside, watched as Austin ran out the office with tears in his eyes and ran after him.

"Wait, Austin! What's wrong?" He caught up to him and grabbed his wrist.

"G-Garan..."

"It's Gary."

"Gary."

"Yes?"

"I need to fuck someone."

"... W-What?" Gary's eyes widened as he slowly let go of Austin's wrist and a barely noticeable blush crept up his face.

Chapter 92: The Shadow Whisperer

"You need to... fuck... someone?"

"Yeah. I can't stand it anymore. Seeing Diana up close like that while she scolds me is making me feel some type of way... You know what I mean?"

"Austin, did your meeting with the principal fry your brain or something? Was the punishment she gave you really that bad?"

"I don’t give a rat’s ass about the punishment!"

"Really? Then why were you crying, hmm?" Gary smirked as he poked Austin’s cheek.

"Stop it!" Already feeling irritated, Austin grabbed Gary’s hand and pushed it back with force. "I swear to God, you can be so weird sometimes."

"Easy now. I was only trying to lighten the mood. No need to get all grumpy."

"Yeah, well? You failed spectacularly. So why don’t you shut up and keep your hands to yourself so that we can go back to the dorms in peace."

"Haha. Whatever you say." Gary then took a step back as they were walking together and suddenly, without warning or making any sound, slipped into Austin’s shadow.

"Hey, what the–! Hey! Get the fuck out of my shadow! Hey! Heeeey!" Not paying attention to his surroundings, Austin began yelling and kicking his shadow.

"Is it not enough for you to always be buzzing around me like a mosquito?! Now you have to watch and stalk me from my shadow?! Oh hell naw! Get! The fuck! Out! Hi-Yah!" Austin blindly jumped towards his shadow, which resulted in him–

BONK!

"OW! FUCK!" –bumping his head onto the metal front gate of the academy causing nearby students to gossip about him.

"... What’s wrong with that boy?"

"... Don’t you know who that is? That’s the weirdo in Emelie’s class who’s always acting up for no reason. He’s also the one who was punished by the principal for making a scene at the dorms that one night."

"... Ew no way! That was him? Do you think he’s on the spectrum?"

"CAN YOU PEANUT GALLERY FUCKHEADS SHUT YOUR TRAPS AND PISS OFF!"

Like a pigeon being frightened at the presence of a human, the students all scattered when Austin stood up and screamed at them. Not wanting to make any more of a fool of himself, he quickly drew on his hood and ran down the hill to the dorms.

[Sounds like you’re popular. Good for you, Austin.]

"HUH?! Grimbledoor?" Austin held his head as he felt Gary’s voice reverberate inside him.

[Relax. This is just one of my abilities that comes with me slipping through the shadows of others.]

"Fan-Fucking-Tastic. Why is it always me..."

[No need to be sad. I’ll get out of your shadow once we reach our room. I promise.]

"How about you get out right now?"

[Nope. I like it here. It’s nice and... dark. As expected of you, Austin.]

"Fuck you, Grimbledoor."

[You said it. Not me.]

After finally making it halfway down the hill, Austin was about to turn left to go to the dorms when he saw a familiar figure walk out of the road, he was about to take.

’Is that?’

"H-Hey! Emelie!" He ran up to her.

"Hm? *Tsk* What do you want, creep."

[Damn, Austin. How did you know it was her? Her face is practically covered behind that hoody.]

"Heh. I’d recognise the sway of that ass anywhere."

"What the fuck did you just say?!"

[Whoa. You really are a creep.]

"W-W-Wait! I didn’t mean it like that! Really! Please believe me!"

"Just stay the hell away from me! And don’t talk to me like we’re friends because we’re any but!" Emelie shoved him away with one hand and walked down the road that leads to the city. "Can’t believe I just got my good mood ruined by that fucker." She muttered under her breath.

"Emelie, wait! I’m sorry! Let me make it up to you somehow!" Austin pleaded as he desperately chased after her.

He lunged forward, his hand catching the fabric of her sleeve. She yanked her arm back as if burned, finally spinning around. For a split second, her face wasn’t filled with the fiery anger he expected; it was a weary look of profound exhaustion that seemed to bruise the air. But just as fast as it appeared, it changed back to the same glare that she’d always give him.

Austin stood there, chest heaving, and his hair plastered to his forehead. He looked smaller than he had five minutes ago. His hands hovered and trembled in the empty space between them

"Why the hell do you hate me so much!?" he burst out, his voice cracking under the weight of his own desperation. "I don't get it! I tried my best to be friendly! I never did anything to you! I've been nothing but good to you, and you treat me like I'm some kind of monster!"

He took a step closer, his eyes searching hers for a flicker of the warmth that he used to see through the monitor. "Tell me what I did wrong! Just one thing! Because from where I'm standing, I'm the only one fighting for this while you just... treat me like a freak and you just walk away like I never existed!"

Emelie stayed silent for a heartbeat. The wind hummed in the stretch of silence of where her response should've been. She looked at his outstretched hand, then back up at his face. Her expression of anger then hardened into something cold and final.

"You know exactly what you fucking did. Or rather, what you're trying to do. I'm not here to play your stupid little games. In fact. I want absolutely nothing to do with you. Don't you ever try to talk to me, or anyone that I'm close to, ever again. Because even though I will not kill you, you'd best believe I know plenty of ways to make your life a living hell. This is my last warning to you."

After saying her piece, Emelie floated off the ground and flew away. Leaving Austin looking completely dumbfounded.

"..."

[Damn. She really hates your entire being, huh? I mean, you even took a shower and brushed your teeth this morning. What's there to hate?]

"..."

[Oh well. You win some, you lose some. There's plenty of other women that're going to be a part of your harem, aren't there?]

"She was my main heroine..."

[I’m guessing that translates to: "She was the one I wanted the most".]

"Yeah..."

[Maybe she was on her period.]

".... You think so?"

[Duh. She literally has had zero interaction with you. How can she hate you when she doesn’t even know you?]

"She even called me trying to make friends with her a ’game’! Can’t she see my genuine goodwill?! Why is she talking to me like I’m trying to do something bad?!"

[Are you not trying to put her in a harem?]

"Of course I am! But that’s because my love expands across many women! It’s not like I’ll forget about her after I add her to my collection! She literally has the best sex scenes! Second only to Diana!"

[Sex scenes?]

’Seriously!? Where does this hate come from? Is this because I transmigrated and not reincarnated? Did the previous Austin do something to her? But the game made no mention of an "Austin" in her route. I’m so fucking lost on what to do!’

[Speaking of sex. Austin, are you still looking for a fuck?]

"I swear if this is one of your gay jokes..."

[No no no! I'm not talking about me.]

"Then who?"

[Oh, you're gonna be happy about this one. It's actually one of the girls you've been eyeing.]

"REALLY?!" Austin turned to his shadow and kneeled on the ground while looking at it in anticipation.

"... Hey look. It's that weird boy from the front gate again."

"... Is he talking to himself? What a nutball."

"... Let's get outta here before he notices us." The three girls quickly ran down the road that leads to the dormitory, fearing that Austin may get up and scream at them again.

"....."

[As expected of Austin. Your rising popularity truly knows no bounds.]

"So, who is it?" Austin asked as he got up from the ground and clapped his hands clean of any dirt. "It cannot be Diana since I'm not exactly on good terms with her.... yet. It can't be the Saintess since we haven't met... unless it is–"

[No, it's not the Saintess.]

"Oh. *Gasp* Is it Mia?! My God, those delectable curves... Those huge mommy milkers... Just thinking about fucking her makes me wanna–"

[It’s Amy.]

".... Amy? Emelie’s best friend?"

[Yes.]

"Are you kidding me? Did you not hear what Emelie told me?! If I so much as talk to Amy, she’ll–"

[Austin. I’ve already sowed the seeds of doubt in her mind. I made her believe that Emelie was in love with her own crush, Kurt. And that she was secretly going out with him behind her back. This most likely ended in an argument between them because when she arrived back at the dorms yesterday, she was anything but happy.

She stormed into the place soaking wet from the rain, and she had tears in her eyes. I confirmed her suspicious behaviour when I sneaked into her room. She was thrashing Emelie’s bed in rage. It was so funny.]

"But Emelie just came back from the dorms..."

[Probably to try and make amends with her. It clearly didn’t work. I mean, you saw how shitty her mood was.]

"... You’re right. So that must be why she’s so angry!"

[Uh-huh. And with her crush, that being Kurt, now dead, I bet she’s grieving in misery and needs someone to comfort her. This is your perfect chance to swoop in and save her from the pit of despair.]

"Fuck yeah! She may be on the bottom of my priority list, but she’s still on the list. I’ll use all my charm and knowledge of her to cheer her up, make her fall for me, and fuck her brains out!"

[Hell yeah! I even got a little extra something to make sure your plan is full proof. I was gonna use it for... something else, but I’ll give it to you, my best friend.]

"What is it?"

[Hehehe~ An Aphrodisiac Potion. A.K.A.]

"A love potion." Austin rubbed his hands together while smiling deviously.