THORNS 99

Chapter 99: Early Bird Gets The Worm

Buuzzz Buuzzz

The early morning silence was broken by the dull vibration of Kurt's phone buzzing on the wooden dresser beside his bed. When he cracked open his eye, he noticed that Diana was somehow still latched onto him. Her breathing was soft and steady, a stark contrast to her crying in agony a few hours earlier, as she continued sleeping even through the noise.

At first, he didn't move. His tired eye just stared at the dark ceiling as he wrapped his arms around Diana's back, wanting to feel the warmth and weight of her before he inevitably had to leave.

That moment of peace was quickly disturbed by Father Time, reminding him that he had a job to do, and that time does, in fact, not wait for anyone.

Buuzzz Buuzzz

'And that's my cue to get up. I hate early mornings...'

With agonising slowness, he moved his arm away from her and reached for the device. He swiped the alarm off before the noise actually could wake her, the screen's harsh glow illuminating to him that the time was 4:05am.

With that done, he tried to shift his body to sit up, but as soon as he moved, her hands tightened. Even in her sleep, her fingers curled into his shirt with a desperate, iron-like grip. Her brows furrowed as if she sensed him slipping away. Kurt immediately froze and waited for her features to soften again. It took a couple of minutes of careful manoeuvring and delicate finger prying to loosen her grasp and replace his warmth with the pillow he was using before he was finally free.

He then slowly slid out of bed and took a moment to pull the thick duvet up to her chin, tucking her in securely to ensure she wouldn't wake from the sudden chill of his absence. After a quick icy shower to shake off the lingering fatigue from the night before, he grabbed a scrap of parchment and a fountain pen lying on the dresser to scribble a short note:

Had to head out early to take care of urgent business. Will hopefully be back later today, or tomorrow by the latest. Love you.

– Rosie.

After unlocking the door with a beep, he left his room card next to the note, grabbed the bag with his disguise inside, and silently stepped out into the dimly lit corridor, where he found Emelie standing with her back to the wall, waiting for him.

"Hey, morning." She greeted.

"Emy? I thought you said you wanted to meet by the docks." He whispered while peeking through the door and gently closing it, enabling the auto lock feature to kick in.

"Why’re you whispering? Is there someone inside?"

"Yeah, Diana. She swung by last night."

"She did? Why? Actually, never mind. I could properly take a guess."

"Augh. Let’s not talk here. C’mon." Kurt walked ahead of Emelie and entered the elevator together to go down to the lobby.

"So, why’d the principal come over? She miss her little Rosie~? Or is it that she found out about the public spanking?"

"What? How’d you know? Don’t tell me that shit already hit the newspapers?"

"No. Kiana will most likely suppress any news outlet using her royal status to keep what happened to her on the hush hush."

"But last night she played a recording of the princess moaning to my spank."

"Oh, did she now? Do tell, Kurt. How'd she react when she brought it up to you? I bet it was ugly. Hell, I'm surprised you're still alive considering what happened last time." Emelie smirked as she started teasing him.

Ding

"Hey, Kurt!" Darwin waved at the two as they stepped out the elevator. "Ms. Valentine came by last night asking about where your room is. What was that about? First Emelie Herst, and now Diana Valentine?! Just who are you?"

"I am... inevitable."

"What?"

"Please ignore him, Darwin. I noticed this before, but he likes to spout out random things at times. Also, forget about what you saw last night. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say." Emelie shot him a meaningful look.

"Forget? Why would I– Oh! Aaaaah... I shall not inquire any further on this topic."

"Just like that?" Kurt raised his eyebrow. "You're not gonna delve any deeper?"

"There's no need. If what I'm thinking is correct, then soon the world will be brought into chaos, and this hotel will go down into history as the place that housed a legend at the start of his journey."

"See Kurt. Now you've got the front deskman spouting a bunch of nonsense."

"No, Emy. I fear that Darwin may be on to something. And I need to be fully prepared for it."

"I'll be rooting for you all the way." Darwin looked at him like he was a hero and pumped his fist downward.

"Heh. Thanks, buddy."

"Can you two stop being so melodramatic? Kurt, let's go. Dominik should be at the docks when we arrive." Emelie pulled him by the arm as she made her way to the exit.

The early morning air was biting, and a thick fog covered the entirety of cobblestone streets. As they stepped out of the hotel and into the gray hush of the city, the only sound that could be heard was the synchronized click of their boots against the damp pavement.

"So is Principal Valentine fine? She didn't have a meltdown, did she?" Emelie asked as she fastened the strings of the hood over her head to try and keep her head warm.

"She's fine. Granted, she was a bit drunk when she attacked me–"

"She attacked you?"

"–But other than that, there shouldn't be any problems. I left a note, but I'm not sure how she'll take it when she wakes up and finds me gone.

Emelie glanced at him, her single eye sharp and unreadable as she watched his side profile. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I know," he muttered, his mind drifting back to the cold smile and the crushing grip from the night before. "But there's no way I'm giving her up. Besides, if I really do decide to leave her, then I suspect you'll find my headless body just lying somewhere, and Diana'll be missing."

"What the hell? Are you saying she'll decapitate you and disappear with your head? What the fuck, Kurt?"

"Hehehe~ Maybe. It’s kind of sweet once you think about it."

"Sweet? Wait. Why are you blushing?"

"So many questions, Emy. Don’t you think it’s my turn now? For instance, those tags. Did your contact finish forging the fakes?"

"... Yes, they did." Emelie answered like she didn’t just hear him say the craziest thing. "I gave them to Dominik since he said that he wanted to verify them with the chief. I already told him that they will expire in twenty-four hours, but I guess they needed to double check."

"So that means they’ll expire tonight?"

"Yeah, at around 8pm to be exact, which is more than enough time seeing as we’ll be there by midafternoon."

"Haha. I’m getting excited just thinking about wasting those cultists. After saving those kids, of course."

"Don’t underestimate them. This is a big operation for those cultists, and there will be powerful foes. We can’t risk getting into a fight when those kids could be caught in the crossfire. So like you said, let’s save those kids first before we attack them."

"You’re not opposed to fighting them? I thought for sure that you would’ve called my enthusiasm reckless."

"It is reckless, but I’m confident that we’ll come out on top. Those scumbags deserved everything that we’re going to dish them." Emelie clenched her fist as a faint green aura surrounded her body.

"Ooou, I’m definitely like this side of you, Emy. You’re getting my blood pumping."

The rest of the walk was spent in silence. Once they reached the entrance gate of Eldoria, they took a carriage and rode toward the lower end of the city, where the scent of salt and rotting timber began to replace the soot of the coal fires.

As they neared the docks, the towering masts of merchant ships began to emerge from the clearing haze, with the morning sun slowly creeping up from beyond the horizon. Bells of small boats and ships could be heard gonging in the distance, which was all accompanied by the squalling of seagulls.

"We're early. That, or Dominik's late." Emelie noted as they stepped onto the weathered walkboards of the pier, where their ship was docked.

"It's 5am on the dot." Kurt said as he took a quick look at his phone. "Let's give him a couple minutes. I'm sure he'll be here soon–"

"Hey guys!" A voice from afar.

"–Speak of the devil."

"Morning Kurt, Emelie. Phew! I'm not late, am I?" Dominik heaved, looking a bit disheveled.

"Pffft! Hahaha! What the hell? Your face, hahaha!" Emelie suddenly burst out laughing.

"Huh? What's wrong with my face? Even the carriage coach was laughing when he saw me. The hell is going on with everyone today?"

"D-Dom. Here, take a look." Kurt pointed his phone in selfie mode at Dominik for him to take a look.

When Dominik took the phone and saw what the big deal was, all the laughs he received this morning started to make sense. His face was full of red lipstick kiss marks.

"W-What the! Mia, you went too far..." He frowned and embarrassingly gave Kurt's phone back to him.

Chapter 100: Calm Before The Storm

"Hey Dom. Where’s Mr. Shittypants?" Kurt asked when looking around. "Don’t tell me you came straight from your place to here?"

"Really Dominik? Did your girlfriend’s smooches seriously scatter your brain so much that you forgot to bring the most important piece to this puzzle?" Emelie sighed as she shook her head.

"What?! No way! Where’s the trust, guys? Not to brag or anything, but it’s basically confirmed that I’m going to be the next chief of the prefects once Chief Hudson retires. It’d be pretty dumb of me to forget to bring our so-called ’golden ticket’."

"But, like, did you actually forget to bring him, though?" Kurt asked. "It’s ok, you can tell the truth. Emelie and I won’t judge. You’re in a safe space."

"... I did–"

"Dominik..."

"Dom..."

"–not forget about him. He’s currently being escorted here by two of my colleagues. They’ll also help me sail this ship and act as minor support during this operation. Now where’s my apology? Emelie, you first."

"Haaa. I’m..."

"You’re..." Dominik’s smug smile grew wide.

"I’m gonna put my shit in the room quarters." Emelie waved her bag in his face and floated on the ship.

"I should’ve expected that. Now it’s your turn, Kurt. Apologise for ever doubting me."

"Haaa. I’m..."

"You’re..." Dominik’s smug smile once again grew wide as he blocked the way for Kurt to get on the ship.

"I’m pretty sure that’s Mr. Shittypants." Kurt pointed to his right, toward the end of the pier, where two men were pulling a cage on wheels with another man inside.

"Oh come on, dude! At least give me my vindication!"

As the trio drew closer, the person inside the cage became visible. They weren’t sitting or standing, but huddled in the center of the enclosure, wrapped in a tattered cloak that did little to hide the silver glint of shackles.

""Good morning, Dominik sir!"" The two prefects greeted.

"Morning boys. Did you bring the tags?"

"Yes sir. Chief Hudson has fully inspected them and found no faults. Here you go." The prefect with glasses handed the pouch over to Dominik.

While Dominik was talking to his colleagues, Kurt walked over to the cultist in the cage and decided to say hello.

"Morning, Mr. Shittypants. You’re looking quite... shitty. What’s with the rags? Don’t tell me you ruined whatever prison clothes they gave you."

"... Goddess Bula... sins of the wicked... brotherhood... forgive me... betrayal... important... alive."

"The hell?" Kurt frowned, kneeling so he was eye-level with the bars. "Enough. Save the theatrics for your prison daddy. I know you can hear me." He reached out and rattled the cage door. The sharp

clanging should have startled anyone, but the man didn’t even flinch. His eyes were wide open as he rocked back and forth.

"The silver is glass and the glass is screaming," the cultist hissed, his voice rising slowly as he stared at nothing. "Can’t you hear the clock ticking inside the water? It’s counting the teeth. One for the tide, two for the bone..."

"The water?" Kurt looked at the calm ocean and back at the man. "Helloooo! Is anybody up there? What you’re saying isn’t making a lick of sense."

The man’s head snapped toward Kurt, but his gaze went right through him, focused on something miles behind his skull. He let out a wet, bubbling laugh. "The Goddess has no skin, boy. So why would you give a coat to a man made of smoke?"

"You’re not making sense, Mr. Shittypants. All I came here for was a greeting. But here you are–"

"Hahaha! AHAHAHA!"

"..."

"AAAHAHAHAHA! AHAHA! *cough* HAHAHAHA!"

"Man shut your bitch ass up!"

SLAP!

"Ahh! *Brap*" The cultist fell to his side and let out an audible fart on impact.

Kurt stood up, wiping the grime from his hand onto the back of his trousers. The fury he’d felt from the small interaction had boiled into an internal frustration, which he’s trying his best to contain. He then got on the ship and stood next to Emelie who was watching the sun rise up from beyond the horizon.

’Breath, Kurt. Just breath. You can waste him once his usefulness has reached its end.’

"Is everything alright?" Emelie asked, noticing him trying to calm down. "I could hear the sound of your slap from all the way over here. Not gonna lie, I was kind of expecting a moan to follow."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny. It’s just that our new friend was talking about some mumbo jumbo that made no sense. Then he started laughing to the high heavens and suddenly coughed in my face. It ticked me off so yeah, I slapped the shit out of him."

"Hm. Maybe he’s just tired. It is still really early in the morning."

Scree– Scree– Scree

From behind them, the two prefects were pulling and pushing the cage onto the ship while Dominik was standing a good distance away from them as he held his nose shut and fanned the air around him.

"Say, Emy. Does Dominik know the way to the island? I doubt Mr. Shittypants will be a reliable guide in this situation."

"No need to worry about that. When I gave the tags to him last night, I asked to have a one-on-one interrogation session with him. There, I asked him for directions to the island while waving around a map for him to mark so that the prefects wouldn’t suspect me from behind the glass.

He obviously wouldn’t tell me, not that I was actually trying to get him to, so I just took his hand and made it seem like he marked the spot where the island is. Then, I gave the map to Dominik."

"Nice going. It’s good that you’re always on top of your game."

"What about you? How come you always ask the important questions whenever it’s too late? First the thing about the extra verification, and now the map to the island."

"Meh. I've never been not good at planning. I simply do what I'm told, or I'm super focused on one thing and that thing only. I just ran straight ahead towards my objective and whenever an obstacle gets in my way, I deal with it then and there. I don't plan for the danger that's to come. I just... 'adapt' to it." Kurt smiled at Emelie as if he were waiting for her praise.

"Ok I admit. That was a good one."

"Haha. Thank you."

The outer ocean now bled a pale, watery gold, cutting through the heavy indigo of the night. It wasn't the warm, inviting sun of summer; this was a winter sunrise. Cold, distant, and brilliantly clear.

Kurt stood while leaning against the oak railing, his breath blooming white clouds. Beside him, Emelie stood with her hands in her jacket, her hood pulled off as her hair gently flowed with the wind.

"It's beautiful," Emelie murmured, her voice barely carrying over the gentle slap of waves against the hull. "You almost forget what we're heading toward when it's this still."

"Heh, says the regressor." Kurt chuckled. "I honestly have no clue what awaits us there."

"Heaven on the surface. Hell in its depths."

Behind them, the peaceful atmosphere was punctuated by the uniform sounds of preparation. Dominik was already hauling on a heavy line, his face set in a grim mask of focus as he checked the tension of the mainmast rigging. The two prefects moved in sync, their boots thudding against the damp deck as they uncapped the winches and cleared the heavy coils of rope.

The clinking of metal shackles and the groaning of the wooden masts acted as a ticking clock. There was no shouting amongst anyone. Just the practiced and efficient movements of men who knew that every knot tied now was a life saved later.

"You know what they call the moment, Emy?" Kurt asked as he turned away from the sun and looked toward the cultist in the cage.

"What?"

"The calm before the storm."

"Psshh, I could've guessed that." she whispered. "I just let you have your cool moment."

"Mainstay's clear! Prepare to cast off!" Dominik's voice cut through the air, sharp and commanding.

"I'm gonna go meditate in my room." Emelie put her hood back over her head. "I suggest you go rest too. It's going to be a long day."

"Will do. But I wanna hang with Dom for just a while longer."

"Mmhm. See you later then."

"Later, Emy."

As she left and Kurt turned toward the ocean again, He noticed that the sun's visage was now fully visible, and that its golden light had turned into a frigid silver. The ship then began to groan as it turned its nose toward the dark heart of the sea, where hope and death loomed.

.

..

...

- At the same time on the island -

Tobias stepped onto the dock, his heavy leather boots thudding against the wooden planks and transitioning to the cobblestone with an aggressive cadence. As he strode through the pathway that leads to the island's estate; servants, maids and lower ranked members of the cult all stopped to bow and greet him. However, he didn't acknowledge a single soul.

His jaw was set, a muscle twitching in his cheek as he eventually reached the wooden doors of his private chambers. With a violent shove, he slammed them shut behind him, the echo booming through the hallway with a loud bang.

The room was dimly lit, save for the glow of a communication orb on his desk. It hummed and glowed sharp. Someone was trying to contact him. Tobias exhaled, smoothed his tunic, and answered.

"Good morning–"

"Finally, you answer our call, Brother Tobias." A singular, distorted voice interrupted him. "You need not speak. Only listen. We received word that you have jeopardised your mission and that the lives of many of our brothers have been lost under your watch.

In accordance with the members of the round seat, you are hereby to be demoted of your rank and are to return to the Sanctuary where you will receive further punishment for the lives that have been lost. We expect to see you in one week. That is all."

Once the voice finished speaking, the communication orb's glow dimmed down and faded entirely, leaving Tobias standing in the silence of his own grievances.

Then, the dam broke.

CRASH!

BANG!

SMASH!

He swept his arm across the desk, sending heavy ledgers and a glass decanter shattering against the wall. He kicked his chair back, slammed his cupboards and let out a low, guttural snarl that ripped from his throat as he paced the room like a caged predator.

Seeking an outlet for the humiliated rage vibrating in his chest, Tobias swung the doors open to step back into the hall. He stopped dead.

A young female servant was hurrying past, carrying a tray of linens. She froze at the sight of him, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the silver edges of the tray.

"You," Tobia hissed, his voice dropping to a terrifyingly smooth simmer.

"M-My Lord!" The woman stuttered.

"Drop the tray," he commanded, his eyes narrowing as he scanned her terrified face. He felt the familiar surge of dark power as he opened his fox-shaped eyes, revealing a red glow.

The need to exert control over someone, anyone, after being belittled by his superior, was overwhelming. He gestured sharply toward the dark interior of his room. "Come here. I find myself in need of... a cleansing. My spirit is heavy with the failures of my mistakes."

The young woman hesitated for a fraction of a second before the sheer weight of his malice forced her feet to move. As she crossed the threshold, Tobias followed, his hand resting on the handle.

The wooden door swung shut with a definitive, echoing thud. The lock then turned, sealing the room and leaving the horrors within to the silence of the stone walls.