THORNS 137

Chapter 137 - Apologies & Nightmares

"... Is that... the Izumi Heiress?"

"... "Look at the crest on her robes."

"... It’s called a kimono, dumbass."

"... It’s her, the ’Blossom of the North’, Izumi Ayako!"

Mist from the boiling river began to thin, revealing the wreckage of the street and the stunned faces of the onlookers. Whispers of reverence rippled through the crowd as this new figure entered the scene.

Kurt kept a firm grip on the hilt of his black sword as his eye tracked even the slightest shift in her movements. The calm pressure he felt radiating from her was far more dangerous than Ryuuji’s explosive rage.

Yuna landed softly beside him as she observed the situation closer.

"Yuna, who is she?" Kurt gestured with his head.

"That is Izumi Ayako, heiress to the Izumi clan. Like Emelie Herst, she is the strongest student from Skyward Academy. The Izumi clan is legendary, second only to the Shogunate clan itself – the Wrights of Myria. In the North, her name is law."

"An impressive introduction. I thank the maid for her knowledge."

The voice came from directly behind Kurt’s ear.

Yuna spun around instantly, her daggers flashing into her hands, her heart hammering against her ribs. But Kurt didn’t turn. He kept his gaze fixed on the person still standing on Ryuuji’s head.

"You’re not going to defend your back?" the Ayako behind him asked in a tone carrying a hint of mild surprise.

"Defend from what? I don’t feel another presence nor killing intent behind me."

"Hmm. Is that so? What about now?" In a blink, the figure on Ryuuji’s head vanished into a flurry of cherry blossom petals.

Simultaneously, the air behind Kurt turned deathly cold. He quickly spun on his heel, coating his black sword in mana and swung.

CLANG!

The sound of metal on metal rang out like a bell. Kurt’s blade was met by a slender, elegant katana, its steel shimmering with a high-frequency blue mana coating that mirrored his own.

For a second, they were locked in a stalemate, however, Kurt mana shone more brilliantly as he slowly started cutting through hers.

Ayako’s eyes widened. She felt the sheer physical power behind his arms. Suddenly, she noticed she was pushed back an inch-by-inch.

"How marvelous..." A small, delighted smile touched her lips.

Using the momentum of Kurt’s force, she leaped backward, her body as light as a feather. She performed a mid-air flip and landed gracefully on her geta sandals, sheathing her katana. The hostility vanished as quickly as it had appeared. She stepped forward and performed a deep, formal bow toward Kurt and Yuna.

"I offer my humblest apologies," Ayako said with clarity and sincerity.

"The actions of Yamada Ryuuji were beneath the dignity of our homeland and traditions. He has caused you great distress and has disturbed the peace of the people. I will see that it is rectified."

"Izumi-san!"

Ryuuji burst out of the river, dripping wet and shivering with fury. He propelled himself onto the pavement, his face bruised and swollen from Kurt's punch and kick.

"Why are you bowing to this nobody?! He struck me, heir to the Yamada clan and member of the ten representatives! He should be in chains!"

Ayako turned her head slightly, her gaze turning into shards of ice. "Ryuuji. You will be silent. And then, you will bow."

"I will do no such–"

"Now."

Ryuuji's mouth hung, then snapped shut. He looked at her serious expression and realised that if he pushed further, the next person to hit him wouldn't be one-eyed nobody, but her. Reluctantly, his face boiling with humiliation and rage, he bent his back and bowed.

"I... I apologise for the trouble," he muttered through gritted teeth.

"You're forgetting someone," Kurt glared at the top of Ryuuji's head. He then turned and waved toward the carriage which had taken up safety down the street.

The horses trotted over and soon enough, the carriage door creaked open. Hope stepped out, her eyes red from crying, and she walked over to stand behind Kurt, gripping the fabric of his leather jacket.

"Now, apologise to her for being a bully." Kurt said to Ryuuji.

Ryuuji clicked his tongue, looking like he wanted to spit, but a sharp cough from Ayako made him flinch. He bowed lower.

"I am sorry... for hurting you and calling you mean things, kid."

Hope looked at him for a moment, then peeked at Kurt, who gave her a reassuring nod.

"Thank you for apologising. I'm sorry too for bumping into you." she said softly.

Ayako looked at Kurt, her curiosity clearly piqued. "May I ask for the gentleman's name?"

"Why? So Mr. High & Mighty here can go find my family and 'destroy' them like he threatened? I think I'll pass."

"I give you my word as an Izumi," Ayako said firmly. "I will not allow the Yamada clan to take any retributive action against you for this encounter. Ryuuji's behaviour was a public disgrace; he has no legal standing here."

Kurt paused, searching her eyes for a lie. Finding none, he sighed and lowered his guard.

"I'm Kurt. Kurt Rossana."

"Rossana? I have not heard of such a family name."

"I get that a lot. I've been told it's a blessing from the Goddess."

"I see... Rossana.. sama?" Ayako said, testing the name. "In any case, I appreciate your cooperation."

The sound of whistles and heavy boots echoed down the street as the prefects finally arrived. A squadron of armored men pushed through the crowd, led by a captain who looked particularly stressed.

"We have received reports of an earthquake and a boiling river!" The captain stopped when he saw Ryuuji. "Yamada Ryuuji? Witnesses say you were the one who initiated a high-level elemental discharge."

"What?! It was a... friendly duel!" Ryuuji shouted.

"It was a public disturbance," the captain countered. "You've cracked the foundation of the roads and boiled half the fish in this district. You're coming with us."

"I'll replace the damn fish!"

Ayako stepped in, placing a hand on Ryuuji's shoulder.

"Go with them, Ryuuji. I will contact Sensei and explain the situation. Perhaps some time in a cell will help you find the manners you've lost."

Defeated and fuming, Ryuuji was led away in mana-suppressing cuffs.

"With that settled," Kurt said, turning to Yuna and Hope. "We have work to do. It was nice meeting you, Izumi-san."

"The pleasure was mine," she replied. She watched them walk away with a faint light in her eyes. "I hope one day we might have a proper duel, Rossana-sama. One without distractions."

Kurt raised a hand in a wave as they reached the steps of the Bureau. However, when they reached the top, they found Ayako standing right there beside them.

"Why are you still here? I believe we already had our very emotional farewell." Kurt asked, genuinely confused.

Ayako blinked as a slight blush of embarrassment touched her cheeks.

"Ah... this is actually where Ryuuji and I were supposed to go. I’m afraid I have a terrible sense of direction, and I was following him but lost my way. Now that he is... detained... I shall have to handle our business here myself."

She looked down and noticed Hope staring at her from behind Yuna’s apron.

"My, where are my manners? My name is Izumi Ayako. What is your name, little one?" Ayako crouched down and asked.

"Hope," she whispered.

"Hope. A beautiful name. I am truly sorry if that hot-headed man scared you."

"It’s okay," Hope said, her shyness fading. "He already apologised."

"Oh? You are very mature for your age, Hope. Most children would still be hiding."

Hope continued to stare, her eyes traveling over Ayako’s intricate hair ornaments and clear skin. She looked away, then looked back, repeating the motion several times.

"Is something wrong?" Ayako asked.

"You’re... you’re really pretty," Hope blurted out.

Ayako went wide eyed for a second then let out a genuine laugh, while Yuna clicked her tongue and muttered under her breath.

"Honestly, Hope. Is everyone from Myria ’pretty’ to you? You said the same thing to me."

"N-No! I mean, she’s pretty, but Yuna is the prettiest! I promise!"

Yuna looked away as her ears turned red.

"Whatever. Don’t be silly." But a small, rare smile crept onto the corner of her mouth.

"Alright, enough diddly-daddling," Kurt clapped. "We still have much to do and haven’t even gotten started. Let’s get inside before another ’representative’ falls out of the sky."

"That would be quite the sight to see." Ayako giggled and followed them inside.

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While the sun shone brightly above, the world below the city remained draped in shadow.

Deep within the labyrinthine sewage systems of Eldoria, a secret stone door sat flush against a mossy wall. Behind it lay a dry, magically ventilated chamber. It was a hideout for those the world had forgotten.

In the corner, a makeshift shower stall hummed with the sound of running water. Gary was inside, rinsing the grime of the city from her skin, her mind focused on their next move.

On a nearby cot, Austin lay sprawled in bandages. His body twitched from the nightmare he was currently having.

In this nightmare, he was running through the dormitory hallways. His lungs were burning, but the footsteps behind him were steady. He tripped over his own feet and fell flat on his face. When he turned over, Emelie was there.

She didn’t look like the girl he knew from the game. She looked like a vengeful spirit. Her silver hair was matted with blood, his blood, and her eyes were voids.

"You think you can just do whatever you want?" she whispered.

"I’m sorry!" Austin screamed, scrambling backward. "I’ll never do it again! I’ll leave Amy alone! I’ll leave the cult! I’ll do whatever you want! Just, please!"

Emelie didn’t answer. She stepped onto his chest, the weight of her boot crushing his ribs. She leaned down as her hands reached to his throat. Then, she began to squeeze. The world turned black, the sound of his own pulse thundering in his ears until–

"NO!"

The real Austin vaulted upright in his bed, screaming at the top of his lungs, his eyes bulging with terror. He was drenched in a cold sweat, his hands clawing at his own neck.

The shower cut off instantly. Gary hurried out of the stall, completely naked and dripping wet as her heart raced.

"Austin! You’re finally! You’re okay!"

Gary rushed to the bed and threw her arms around him.

Because of the height of the cot and her position, her wet breasts squished directly into his face as she sobbed with relief.

Austin, still half-trapped in his nightmare, panicked. He shoved her back with all his might, scrambling to the far corner of the bed.

"Who the fuck are you?! Where am I? Where is she?! Where's Emelie?!"

Chapter 138 - My Name Is... Gracie

"I said who the hell are you! Where is this place?!"

Austin's eyes, wide with panic, involuntarily drifted downward. The woman stood before him in the dim, flickering light of a single mana-lamp. He watched the way her skin glistened with water and the way its droplets slowly ran down her curves.

Gary, or rather, the woman who looked like a feminine, hauntingly beautiful version of Gary, smirked.

She didn't miss the way Austin's eyes lingered, nor did she miss the prominent twitch of his open dick.

'Hmm. So he's a grower, not a shower.' she noted in her mind with a predatory smile.

Austin looked down at himself, finally noticing the thick layers of medicinal gauze wrapping his torso and limbs. Then he noticed the involuntary reaction of his own body. Heat rushed to his face in a mix of fury and intense embarrassment.

"You... you crazy bitch!" Austin swore as he grabbed the bed sheet and wrapped it around his body. "I asked who the hell you are! And put some damn clothes on!"

The woman didn't move to cover herself. Instead, she tilted her head, a lock of wet hair falling over her shoulder.

"Don't you recognize me, Austin? After everything we've been through?"

"The fuck I don't! I'd definitely remember a pair of tits like those. I've never seen you before in my life."

"My tits...?" Gary looked down at her breast then back to Austin who is still staring at hers.

"I see..." Shadow subtly fazed around Gary's head and formed strands of long hair. "Nice to meet you, Austin. I'm a distant relative of Gary's. You can call me... Gracie. I've been helping him look after you while you were out cold."

"Liar! Gary's a single orphan! He would have told me if he had any family. So where the hell did you crawl out from?! And g-get dressed already!"

Gracie (Gary) saw an opening and pivoted the conversation. She took a slow step toward the bed as the water from her hair dripped onto the stone floor.

"And why should I? It's just us down here, Austin. Are you scared of a little skin?"

"Scared?" Austin forced a crooked smile. "Don't make me laugh. I'm giving you a warning. If you don't cover up, I might just decide to assault you. I'm not in a patient mood after getting cucked and nearly beaten to death."

Gracie didn't flinch at his threat. She walked closer and closer until her knees pressed against the edge of the cot. She leaned down, her face inches from his. "Go ahead then," she whispered. "Do it."

"... Don't say I didn't warn you," he growled.

He then reached out from under the sheets and grabbed both her breasts with trembling hands. His grip was desperate and rough. He squeezed hard, trying to assert some kind of dominance, trying to see a flicker of fear in her eyes.

"How's that? Feeling scared yet, 'Gracie'?"

She looked at him blankly. Her pulse didn't even quicken. "Is that it? You talk like a big man, but your hands are shaking."

"S-Shut the hell up! It’s been a while since I fucked anyone! Ten years. Not since my wife...."

’Shit! What the hell am I saying?! I can’t give it away that I’m not from this world!’

Gracie’s gaze shifted instantly. The playful amusement vanished, replaced by a dark, swirling intensity that made the shadows in the room seem to deepen. She lunged forward and pinned Austin’s back onto the thin mattress.

"Your wife?" she hissed. She reached out and delivered a stinging–

SMACK!

"Hey! What the—!"

SMACK!

She smacked him again, harder this time, her strength overwhelming his weakened state.

"Tell me. Who is this wife? You never mentioned a wife to Gary."

"That’s none of your fucking business!" Austin yelled, trying to shove her off.

Gracie’s hand shot out and she wrapped her fingers around his throat. She began to squeeze, her eyes burning with a manic light.

"G-Gack! A-Ack! L-Let..go!"

As the air began to thin in his lungs, Austin’s vision blurred. The sensation was a perfect, horrific echo of his nightmare. The stone walls of the cellar seemed to transform into the rainy docks, and the woman above him began to shimmer.

He saw the silver and green hair. He saw Emelie’s cold, beautiful face.

Austin started to panic, his limbs flailing as he squirmed beneath her. Seeing him so utterly helpless, Gracie began to giggle. She squeezed harder, watching his face turn a mottled red.

"I didn’t mind you chasing other women, Austin," she murmured, leaning close to his ear. "Men are animals; I know how you work. But a wife? That changes things. How would your wife like it if she saw me doing this to you?"

She leaned down, her lips crashing into his in a forced, suffocating kiss while her hand remained locked around his windpipe.

Austin’s mind became a whirlwind of trauma. The lack of oxygen, the physical sensation of being choked, and the overlap of his nightmare with reality created a perverse cognitive break.

As he pictured Emelie’s face in Gracie, his body responded with a sudden, traitorous surge of adrenaline and lust. His dick grew rock hard, poking sharply against her thigh.

Gracie flinched as she felt the heat. She pulled back from the kiss, dropping her eyes to the sheets. Then, she let out a sudden, wild laugh.

"Ha! Ahahaha! You... you got hard!? For me!? While I was choking you!? You really are a sick one, aren’t you, Austin!? Ahahaha!"

She reached down, her hand disappearing under the sheets to grab him. She began to stroke him with a frantic, punishing speed, her eyes locked onto his as she started to chant his name.

"Austin... Austin... Austin..."

"S-Stop, Em– I’m gonna... cum!"

Austin’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. The combination of the near-strangulation and the stimulation from her hands was too much for his battered body. Within seconds, he let out a choked groan and ejaculated into her hand.

The sudden wetness caused Gracie to stop. She pulled her hand back, staring at the white fluid coating her palm. She brought it to her face, inhaling the scent. A visible shock traveled through her spine and her pupils dilating as a wave of lust washed over her.

She looked down at Austin with a smile. He was glazed over, his mouth hanging open as his body twitched in the aftershock of the climax. He looked like a broken shell of a man.

Then, realising what she had done, panic quickly flickered in her eyes.

"Fuck! What have I done..."

Dark, purple-black smoke billowed from her feet. In a flash of shadow magic, she vanished, leaving the room silent once more.

Nearly twenty minutes passed before Austin’s mind cleared. He groaned, rubbing his throat, which felt like it had been crushed. He sat up slowly as his mind spun.

In the corner of the room, sitting on a wooden stool by the shadows, was Gary. His hair was back to normal and he was fully dressed.

"Gary?"

Gary flinched and quickly stood up with a masked look of practiced concern. "Austin! You’re finally awake. You’ve been out a whole day and then some."

"Where the hell is she!?" Austin demanded as he looked around the room. "Where’s Gracie!?"

Gary tilted his head, looking confused. "Gracie? Who are you talking about? I don’t know any Gracie."

"Don’t you fucking lie to me!" Austin yelled, clutching his throat. "There was a woman here. She looked sorta like you! She... she basically assaulted me, Gary! She almost killed me!"

"Austin, I’ve been here the whole time. No one has been here. Nobody even knows about this hideout. It’s impossible."

"She said she was your relative! She said she was a distant family member!"

"What are you talking about? I’m an only child, not to mention I’m an orphan. I don’t have any ’Gracie’s’ in my bloodline." He sighed, looking at the bed.

"You were having a nightmare, Austin. You were twitching in your sleep, clawing at your own neck like you were trying to choke yourself. You even... well, look at the sheets. You must have had a vivid one."

Austin stumbled out of bed, his legs feeling like jelly. He looked at the sheets and saw the mess. He looked at his own hands. He remembered the nightmare with Emelie. Then he remembered the choking from the woman

’What the fuck? Is that my... jizz? What is going on with my brain?’

"Maybe..." Austin whispered as his hand shook, touching his bruised neck. "Maybe you’re right. It felt so real. But... it was just a dream. Just a goddamn dream..."

"Of course it was," Gary said smoothly. He pointed toward a corner where a bucket of heated water and a sponge sat.

"You should take a shower. You smell like sweat and... well, you smell. I’ve left clean bandages and fresh clothes in the basket by the door."

Austin didn’t argue. He felt confused and was still in a state of shock. His mind was a blurry mess of silver hair and phantom hands. He limped toward the wash area and shut the heavy wooden door behind him.

Once the latch clicked, Gary’s entire demeanor shifted. The helpful, concerned friend vanished.

He reached into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out a small, glass vial. Inside was the carefully collected sperm that Austin had spent.

Gary held the vial up to the light of the mana-lamp and a chilling, triumphant smile spread across his face.

"Hehehe~ I should save this as a backup. In case all else fails."