THORNS 151

Chapter 151 - Bite Of 780

The sun hung high in the sky, reflecting brilliantly off the surface of the lake, which was now as calm as if the slaughter of a hundred piranhas had never occurred. Kurt watched as Isabel carefully tucked the last of the herbs into her basket, lining them with damp cloth and counting them down.

"Is that enough, Isabel?" Kurt asked, glancing over the harvest. "Not gonna lie, but I think we may have gone a bit overboard thanks to a pretty enthusiastic magic swordswoman."

"My deepest apologies." Ayako bowed with a polite smile.

Isabel wiped a smudge of dirt from her cheek and nodded. "Yes, Master Rossana. We have more than enough. We can return to the capital anytime you like."

Kurt reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. The screen lit up, reflecting that it was exactly 1:00 PM. He clicked the side button to lock it and felt a weight of curiosity leaning into his personal space.

"What... what is that?" Ayako asked. "I felt no mana from it, yet it glowed with such precision."

"This? It’s just a fancy watch. Keeps the time and stuff..." Kurt said and put it back in his pocket, but Ayako was skeptical.

"It is awfully big for a watch, don’t you think? And quite flat. It seems very impractical to carry such a slab of glass just to know the hour."

Kurt smiled nervously, trying to keep his backstory from unraveling further. "Yeah, exactly. It’s actually a very outdated model. I’m thinking of getting a proper one soon. Something more... local."

Ayako seemed about to press further, but suddenly, her posture shifted. Her head snapped toward the dense treeline of the forest nearby. The playful curiosity in her eyes vanished, replaced by the cold, analytical focus of a predator.

"What’s wrong, Izumi-san?" Kurt asked as his hand instinctively moved toward his knives.

After staring for another second, Ayako turned back to him. Her face smoothed into a pleasant, easy smile that didn’t match the sharpness of her gaze.

"Oh, nothing to worry about. I felt a faint unfamiliar mana signature, and it seems that we are simply being watched. Do not look in the direction of the forest so as to not arouse suspicion."

"Were being watched? Are you talking about the curious kind or do you feel any malice?"

"No," Ayako, almost disappointingly, shook her head. "There was no malice. Just eyes stalking us. Or rather..." She shifted her gaze toward Isabel, who was humming softly as she organized the herbs. "Stalking her."

Kurt followed her gaze to the unsuspecting maid, then back to the swordswoman. A small, challenging smirk played on his lips. "Well, Izumi-san, if you really want to impress me, why don’t you go catch our little stalker?"

Her eyes went wide for a fraction of a second before they narrowed into a delighted grin. "A challenge? I accept."

In a burst of pink Sakura petals and a sudden rush of wind, she vanished.

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Inside the forest, nestled within the thick foliage, the figure gasped. It was an old man. He had been watching the maid with an insatiable hunger. Then, he noticed that the woman wearing a kimono had just... disappeared.

Feeling that something was wrong, he scrambled out the bush and began to book it, sprinting between trees. But as he vaulted over a stump, his foot caught on a rock that he knew for certain hadn’t been there a moment ago when looking ahead.

He fell hard, slamming his face into the dirt. Groaning, he rolled over and looked up.

Standing before him were two feet clad in pristine white socks and traditional geta sandals.

He tried to scurry away, but Ayako was quicker. She drew her katana in a blur and stabbed it downward. The blade didn't pierce his skin; instead, it pinned his baggy trousers to the earth, sinking the steel deep into a tree root between his legs.

"Please, I'd advise you to give up. It's over." Ayako said, looking down at him with a terrifyingly calm expression.

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Back at the lake, Isabel, who had just finished sorting through the basket, looked up, blinking in confusion. "Master Rossana? Where did Lady Izumi go? She was just here."

"She went to catch your little stalker." Kurt pointed his thumb to the forest.

"My... my stalker?" her face turned pale as she clutched the basket to her chest. "I don't understand..."

Before Kurt could explain, the wind picked up. Ayako returned from the forest, but she wasn't alone. She was strolling casually, twirling her finger in the air as if she were conducting an invisible orchestra. Following her finger, a man's body was suspended mid-air, spinning slowly in a localised vortex of wind magic.

She stopped in front of Kurt and Isabel, pointed her finger down, and the wind dissipated. The man fell to the grass with a heavy thud.

"This is..." Kurt frowned as he leaned forward to inspect the captive. "Isn't he from the village we passed by? Although, something's wrong with him."

The man’s skin was a sickly, translucent grey. His eyes were entirely bloodshot, the whites replaced by a frantic, pulsing red. Yellow foam bubbled at the corners of his mouth, and his teeth clattered together like stones.

"He looks... sick. Damn, I don’t really know how to describe it." Kurt muttered.

The man looked around frantically, his chest heaving as spit flew from his lips. He let out a guttural, wet growl until his eyes locked onto Isabel.

Isabel flinched as she took a step back. "Sir? Are you alright? Do you need hel–"

"Gr– RAAH!" The old man lunged at her.

"Kyaah–!"

"Watch out!" Kurt reacted instantly. He stepped into the man’s path and brought his boot down with a heavy stomp directly onto the man’s face, slamming his head back into the dirt.

The man didn’t stop. He struggled beneath Kurt’s boot, his strength far beyond what a normal villager should possess. He snarled and sunk his fingers into the leather of Kurt’s boot and then, with a sudden, violent jerk, his nails tore into the skin of Kurt’s calf.

"Ah!" Kurt winced, shifting his foot slightly from the sharp pain.

That split-second opening was all the man needed. He twisted his head, bared his teeth, and bit down hard into Kurt’s ankle.

"ARGH! BITCH!"

After feeling the pain of the bite, Kurt wound up his other leg and delivered a massive, mana-reinforced kick to the man’s ribs.

The impact sounded like a branch snapping. The man was launched through the air, skipping across the grass before tumbling directly into the lake.

"Oops..."

The silence that followed lasted only a second.

The water where the man landed began to boil. The piranha monsters, drawn by the scent of fresh blood and the vibrations of the splash, swarmed the spot in a frenzy. The man managed one final, gurgling scream before he was dragged beneath the surface. A few moments later, all that remained was a small, dark inkblot of blood in the water.

Kurt grunted and fell to one knee.

"Master Rossana!" Isabel cried out, dropping her basket and rushing to his side. Ayako was there a second later, also with a rare look of concern.

Kurt reached down and rolled up his pant leg. The wound was gruesome. Two deep rows of tooth marks were torn into his flesh, but the blood wasn't just red – it was streaked with a dark, oily black. Deep purple veins were also starting to spread outward from the bite.

"It's poisoned," Ayako hissed, her hand glowing with a soft light. "Let me heal you. I can purge the toxin."

"No, wait. Let's leave it for now."

"Are you insane!?" Isabel cried. "What if you die!? Or worse, turn into... into that thing! Lady Izumi, please, hurry!"

"Isabel, calm down," Kurt commanded, fixing his gaze on her with a calm intensity that stopped her heart. "Trust me. This is nothing. I've survived worse."

Ayako frowned, her eyes scanning the spreading purple veins. "Rossana-sama, why? I can stop the pain. Why do you want to keep this wound? Please let me heal you. This is my fault for not being more careful when handling that man..."

"I mean think about it, that man was from the village. If we go back there and just tell them one of their people attacked us, they might lie or hide the truth. But if I show up with this... if I show them what their 'neighbor' did to me... we can use it as confirmation.

We're going to watch their reactions. If they're innocent, they'll be genuinely horrified. If they're hiding something... their faces will tell us everything we need to know. Just to make doubly sure, we'll say he killed Izumi-san before getting to me."

"I'm still worried about your wound... I'd hate to see Ms. Valentine see you like this..."

Ayako knelt down, her eyes glowed slightly as she inspected the wound again.

"He is right about one thing, Isabel. Look at the veins. They are spreading... but at a very, very slow pace. It's strange. His own mana is fighting it off, suppressing the spread. No... that's not right. This is something else... In any case, he won't turn, at least not for several hours."

She looked up at Kurt with a mixture of worry and respect in her eyes. "The village is not far. We should figure out if they are related to this immediately."

Isabel reluctantly nodded, wiping her eyes. She reached out a hand. "Do you... do you need a hand up, Master Rossana?"

Kurt stood up on his own, testing his weight. He had a slight limp, and the ankle throbbed with a dull, burning heat, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. He looked at both of them and offered a small, determined smile.

"It's all good. However, Isabel, I hope your acting skills are good for this next part."

Chapter 152 - Desperate Pleading

Thundering hooves raced against the dirt road as the carriage tore through the quiet outskirts of the village.

Isabel, who was gripping the reins like her life depended on it, looked like a woman possessed by utter grief. Her hair was slightly messy, and her face was a mask of sheer, unadulterated distress. Tears and all.

Villagers tending to their gardens or mending fences stopped and stared at the commotion, the peaceful afternoon shattered by the huffing of horses. The carriage swerved into the central square, dust billowing in a cloud as Isabel hauled on the reins, bringing the horses to a desperate stop.

Not waiting for the dust to settle, Isabel leaped from the driver's seat onto the ground and began to scream.

"Help! Please, someone help us! Is there a healer?! Please!"

"... What's going on?"

"... What in the blazes?"

The call for help acted like a magnet.

Within moments, a crowd began to form. Mothers clutching children, elderly men leaning on canes, and sturdy laborers in mud-stained clothes all gathered in a wide circle.

In the center stood the Village Elder, a short old man with a long, grey beard and eyes that looked soft yet seemed to hold a layer of something more beneath the facade of concern.

Isabel stumbled to the carriage door and flung it open. With a sob, she reached inside and dragged Kurt out. He looked like death. His skin was pale and clothes were torn with small cuts and dirt, his eye was half-lidded and glassy, and he leaned heavily on her shoulder while breathing in shallow, ragged hitches.

"... Oh, mercy."

"... Goddess above, what happened to him?"

"What has happened here, child?" the Elder asked.

"W-We were at the lake!" Isabel cried, the tears now fully streaming down her face. "A man... he came out of the woods! He looked like a corpse, his eyes were red and he was foaming at the mouth! He attacked us! He bit my Master!"

The crowd erupted in shocked whispers.

"What happened to this... 'man'?" the Elder asked as his eyes narrowed. "I also recall seeing another woman with you all when I pointed you toward the lake."

"M-My *sob* M-M-My Master managed to kill him. But the woman who was with us... s-she couldn't get away in time. *Sniff* He tore her apart! My Master tried to save help but was too late! She's gone! Please, the capital is too far, you have to help him!"

The mention of Ayako being killed sent a ripple of genuine horror through the villagers. The Elder stuttered for a moment, his composure slipping just a fraction. "Of course... of course we will help. Joren! Take the boy to the sick bed in the apothecary's–"

"I'll do it," a younger man interrupted, stepping out from the crowd. He was lean, with sharp features and a leather satchel slung over his shoulder.

The Elder's jaw tightened as he looked slightly annoyed at the interruption, but Isabel didn't give him a chance to protest. She lunged toward the younger man, grabbing his hand with a trembling grip.

"C-Can you heal him? Can you stop whatever is happening to my Master? Please tell me you can!"

The man looked at her tear-streaked face, a faint blush creeping onto his cheeks at her sudden touch, but he quickly composed himself. "Y-Yes, I can. Follow me, quickly."

He took Kurt's other arm over his shoulder and hauled him toward a stone house at the edge of the square. Isabel followed closely, bowing her head as she let out a fresh wave of quiet sobs.

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High above, perched on the bell tower near the center and hiding in its shadows was Ayako. She watched the scene closely. Standing perfectly still as she gauged each and everyone's reactions.

She watched as Kurt and Isabel disappeared into a house. Then, her eyes shifted back to the Village Elder. The moment the crowd began to disperse, his face transformed. The mask of concern vanished, replaced by a contorted, terrifying rage. He turned to a group of five villagers – three burly men and two sharp-eyed women.

"Go to the lake. Search every inch of the shore. If there are any 'remains' of @gy%#...."

The rest became too quiet for Ayako to pick up on.

The five villagers nodded and sprinted toward the forest path.

'Hmm... Should I stay and watch the old man?No. Rossana-sama can handle the village. I may be able to find out more from those who have left.'

With a faint shimmer, she vanished as sakura petals scattered in the wind.

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Inside the stone house, the man led Kurt down a dimly lit basement where he set Kurt down on a wooden cot. He immediately moved to a cabinet, pulled out a white cloth mask and tied it over his face.

"Uhm, excuse me miss. Please stay back." the man said to Isabel. "There is another room inside the door behind you. Or, please wait upstairs. It wouldn't be good if any residue got onto you too."

"B-But–!"

"Go, Isabel... I'll be fine." Kurt said in a shaky voice.

Reluctantly, she stepped into the adjoining room. The man followed her to the door, closed it, and Kurt heard the distinct click of a key turning in the lock.

The man turned back to him with hardened eyes behind the mask. He reached into his satchel and pulled out a tray of glass vials filled with a murky, swirling blue substance, alongside a razor-sharp scalpel.

"Now, let's see the damage..."

He knelt and rolled up Kurt's cuff on his ankle. The wound was a mess of blackened blood and oozing pus, but as the healer cleaned away the surface grime, he paused. He peered closer at the purple veins.

"Strange, the necrotic spread has... stalled? It hasn't reached the bone yet nor has it spread far. It should have taken your leg by now."

"That's because I'm not a very good patient," Kurt said.

The weakness vanished from his voice instantly. Before the man could react, Kurt's good leg lashed out, kicking him squarely in the jaw. The man flew backward and crashed into a table of empty vials and herbs.

Kurt was off the bed in a fraction of a second. He pinned the man to the floor with a knee to his chest. At the same moment, the door to the next room shattered. Isabel burst through the splintered wood, her "distress" now gone and replaced by a cold, lethal efficiency. She held a metal baton from her thigh, ready to crack a skull.

"What... What is this?! What's going on with you two!?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Kurt leaned down and tightened his hand on the man's throat. "What kind of messed-up zombie party are you people throwing down here?"

The man's eyes went wide, but they weren't filled with the mindless rage of the man at the lake. They were filled with genuine terror. "Wait! Please! I'm on your side!"

"Why should I trust a word out of your mouth?"

The man pointed a shaking finger at the tray on the floor. "The blue liquid! It's the cure! I've been developing it in secret for months! I'm the only one in this village who isn't... who isn't a part of it!"

Isabel stepped forward and narrowed her eyes. "Master, don't listen to him. It's a trap. We should kill him and burn this whole place to the ground. It's practically confirmed. They're the ones turning people into monsters. We should nip the problem in the bud."

Kurt glanced at Isabel, a bit surprised by the sheer ruthlessness in her tone, but he didn't disagree. "You're right. Any evil left unpunished just grows bigger."

He then reached into his belt and pulled out his knife.

"No! I swear!" the man screamed as Kurt raised the blade. "The Elder... he's been–! Please stop! I can explain if you give me a chance! I'm trying to stop it!"

Kurt brought the knife down with a violent arc straight to his face.

"HA–! AHHH!"

BAM!

The man flinched, screaming and squeezing his eyes shut. But the blade lodged into the floorboard's mere inches from his ear.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Isabel snapped, looking genuinely pissed off.

"Because dead men don't talk, and they don't give us the proper lead we need. Besides," Kurt reached down and grabbed the blue vial. "I want to see what's in here first."

"What if it's the opposite of a cure!? What if it makes the infection spread faster? He's probably trying to turn you into one of them right now!"

"I'm telling the truth! It's really a cure!" the man pleaded beneath Kurt's knee.

Kurt looked at the blue liquid. "Only one way to find out. Well, technically two. I could pour this down your throat and see if you turn inside-out, but I'd rather not. That'd be a waste."

"Let me use it," Isabel said suddenly, reaching for the vial. "If it's dangerous, it's better it happens to me."

"Absolutely not. I'm not exactly on good terms with Yuna just yet. I can't imagine what would happen if I let something happen to you. No, I'm the one already bitten. I'm the test subject."

Isabel looked like she wanted to scream and argue but the hierarchy of her training won out. She bit her lip and nodded. "Fine. But please... let me administer it. I have steadier hands."

"No. You watch him," Kurt nodded at the healer. "If he moves a muscle or tries to shout for anyone, kill him on the spot."

Isabel's expression went cold as she looked at the frightened villager. "With pleasure."

Kurt picked up the discarded scalpel and sat back on the cot. He pressed the blade into the edge of the bite wound on his ankle and sliced upward, opening the blackened flesh to let the stagnant, dark blood flow out.

Holding his breath, he uncorked the vial and slowly tipped the vial, letting the blue liquid seep directly into the open, pulsing wound.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, Kurt’s entire body jerked. He let out a strangled wince and slumped forward to hold his leg.

"Master Rossana!"