THORNS 171

Chapter 171 - Daddy's Home

Mwah~ Mwah~* Mwah~* "Hehehe~ Rosie~"

"Y-You're killing me, Diana."

Diana was completely lost to the world. Her professional demeanor entirely dissolved the moment her arms wrapped around Kurt's neck.

She began kissing his cheek in quick, rapid succession. The sudden, overwhelming barrage of affection caught Kurt entirely off guard. But despite the slight protest in his voice, he let her do what she wanted anyway.

Realising he wasn't going to win by simply taking it, he decided to launch a counterattack.

He leaned in and began rapidly kissing her cheek back, pressing his face against her smooth skin until Diana broke into a bright, musical laugh of her own.

They became completely trapped in their own private world, giggling and whispering to one another, entirely ignoring the fact that three of the most powerful people in the world were watching them with varying degrees of bewilderment.

"AHEM!" Jack cleared his throat out loud to get their attention. "Hey! If you two are finished acting like a pair of love-struck idiots, do you think you could stop ignoring the rest of us in the room?"

Kurt slowly pulled his head back, though his hands remained resting on Diana's hips.

"Huh? Oh. I didn't actually know Diana still had guests in here. At least, that's not what Amber told me outside."

"Are you not even going to introduce yourself, boy?" Axel snapped. "Or are manners something they don't teach in Eldoria these days?"

Chuckling, Kurt made a move to step forward and properly greet the foreign people. But the moment he tried to detach himself, Diana’s grip only tightened. Her arms remained locked around his neck, and her legs around his waist.

"I can’t really talk to these people with you clinging onto me like a koala, Diana."

"Oh, Rosie. You don’t need to talk to them. They aren’t important."

"They aren’t?"

"WE ARE!!" Jack roared.

"Jack, please, do calm yourself," Morgan sighed as he picked up his monocle from the ground and wiped it with a silk handkerchief. "You are making a thoroughly embarrassing spectacle of yourself. Think of your stature."

"Indeed, Principal Axel," Mei added. "You wouldn’t want to raise your blood pressure and drop dead of a stroke right before the tournament even begins, would you? The paperwork for your replacement would be dreadfully tedious I imagine."

"Hmph! I swear, youngin’s these days..." Jack grumbled under his breath, crossing his arms tightly and turning his gaze toward the window.

Kurt felt that Diana’s grip on him wasn’t loosening in the slightest, so decided to just roll with it. Standing tall with her hanging from his chest, he offered a polite nod to the remaining guests.

"Well, regardless of the spectacle... My name is Kurt. Nice to meet you all." He moved his gaze from Jack, to the stoic Morgan, and finally settled on the elegant woman in the golden kimono.

Mei’s eyes intently studied Kurt. Her gaze swept his features, the eyepatch covering his right eye, and the faint aura of confidence oozing off his person. An intrigued smile slowly spread across her lips.

"Ah... so you are the one. The mysterious one-eyed warrior that Lady Ayako spoke so highly about. She described you as quite a fascinating anomaly. Indeed, she spoke no lies"

The moment those words left her mouth, Diana’s head snapped up toward her.

The affectionate, soft expression she had worn seconds ago completely vanished, replaced by a terrifyingly dark and possessive look in her lifeless crimson eyes.

"Keep looking at my man like that, Chihara Mei, and I might just gauge those pretty little eyes right out of your skull."

"Whoa! Easy there!" Kurt chuckled nervously, sweating slightly as he felt the familiar dark aura radiating off Diana. "By the way, I introduced myself. Don’t you think you guys should– Mm–!?"

Before Kurt could finish his sentence, Diana grabbed him by the cheeks and aggressively pulled his face into a deep and fierce kiss.

But this wasn’t just a display of affection; it was a warning.

While her lips were pressed firmly against his, her lifeless eyes remained half-open. She side-eyed the other principals – especially Mei – with a cold glare that screamed: He is mine. Back off.

"And that’s my cue to leave." Allaster Morgan was the first to react. He stood up abruptly, smoothing down his academic robes with rigid precision and marched out the office without looking back.

Jack Axel was next. He pushed himself out of his chair, muttering a string of colorful curses under his breath, and stomped out of the office.

Chihara Mei, however, did not move an inch. She remained seated, completely unbothered by the seemingly romantic tension in the room. She watched the scene with a deeply entertained smile on her lips.

When Diana finally broke the kiss, Kurt stared at her glistening lips slightly dazed in the head.

Diana turned her sharp gaze back toward the remaining guest. Her dark aura oozed out once more. "Why are you still here, Mei?"

"Oh, don't mind me. I do not mind waiting until the two of you are entirely finished with your... activities. But I do wish to have a little chat with young Kurt here once you are done."

"You–!... I will never be done with him," she growled possessively, her fingers tightening onto Kurt's face again as she leaned right back in to claim his lips once more.

Mei couldn't help but let out a delighted laugh at how incredibly easy it was to rile the ever-so professional Diana up.

RUMBLE

Suddenly, a low tremor shook in the air.

Mei paused and turned toward the massive glass panel window behind Diana's seat. Out there, her eyes locked onto a flare of green-on-green mana detonating at the tournament's arena.

"Principal Valentine, isn't that your star student down there? The young Emelie Herst. It appears she is currently clashing rather violently with one of those volatile Wingard twins."

Mmch~ "What!?" Diana instantly broke the kiss.

She got off Kurt and turned toward the glass panel to look at the scene below. Sure enough, a massive dust cloud was rising at the arena. Bursts of concussive telekinetic force and gusty winds were clashing against one another.

"Of course... Emelie and Autumn," Diana muttered as she rubbed her temples. "Such a ridiculous scene has become too common between those two. But I absolutely cannot have them tearing each other up right before the tournament."

She prepared to teleport to them, but just before the spell could catch, Mei leaned back in her chair with a teasing, mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Are you quite sure you want to teleport away right now, Principal Valentine? Do you really want to leave your lovely lover up here... all alone with me?"

Diana froze.

Her fiercely possessive eyes instantly snapped back to Mei. Without saying a word, she marched right over to Kurt and aggressively grabbed his hand, wrapping her fingers tightly around his.

"We're going, Rosie."

"... Going? Going whe–"

SHWOOSH

In a blink of an eye, the office was completely empty.

Mei sat alone in the quiet room, staring at the empty space where they had just been standing. She picked her teacup back up and let out a quiet chuckle as she thought of all the ways she could tease Diana.

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SHWOOSH

Diana and Kurt materialised high up in the spectator stands of the academy’s arena.

The massive, colosseum-like structure was partially filled with a small crowd of students, club members, and staff working around the set doing pre-tournament checks.

A good portion of the crowd was cheering loudly for Autumn, who was currently floating in mid-air, unleashing a barrage of gusty winds.

However, an even larger, louder section of the crowd was cheering for Emelie, who was casually standing on the ground below, her hood pushed back to reveal her silver-and-mint hair.

Autumn was completely furious, her face flushed red as she screamed at the top of her lungs. "You coward! You think you can just ditch me without saying anything during the closing ceremony?! And don’t just stand there! Fight me properly, Emelie!"

Emelie, on the other hand, looked entirely unbothered – almost bored – as she casually raised a single hand to effortlessly deflect the incoming spells away into the air.

Diana’s expression morphed into one of cold authority as she stepped off the viewing platform.

SHWOOSH

She appeared directly in the center of the arena floor.

The moment Autumn unleashed another massive windblade; Diana simply dragged a finger through the air.

A small spatial tear opened up before her, completely swallowing the spell whole and redirecting the magic harmlessly up into the sky above the open-air colosseum.

"That’s enough from both of you," Diana’s cold voice echoed across the arena, laced with a terrifying amount of power that instantly silenced the entire stadium.

"P-Principal Valentine!?" Autumn gasped. Her mana instantly sputtered out as she dropped back down to the ground, looking thoroughly intimidated by the principal's sudden intervention.

Emelie, seeing that the scuffle was over, let out a dramatic sigh and tossed her hands into the pockets of her hoodie. "Womp, womp. Fight's over. Later Autumn."

Using a faint ripple of her own telekinesis, Emelie floated off the arena stage and glided smoothly over the stone railings until she landed up high next to Kurt.

The moment her boots hit the stone, she curled her hand into a fist and aggressively punched Kurt in the arm.

THWACK!

"Ow! The hell was that for...?"

"That was for abandoning me at the front gates, you traitor."

"Oh, right. Sorry about that..." Kurt gave a weak apology and went right back to staring blankly out at the center of the arena. More specifically, Diana's elegant posture.

His mind was still trapped in the lingering aftereffects of the intense, possessive kiss they had shared in the office.

Emelie rolled her eyes so hard it looked painful.

Down on the arena floor, Autumn was trembling. The feeling of being denied her fight, combined with the terrifying pressure from Diana, caused her eyes to well up with tears of frustration.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" She stomped her foot as her lower lip quivered.

Seeing the young girl’s distress, Diana’s harsh expression instantly softened.

She walked over and wrapped her arms around Autumn, pulling her into a warm, comforting embrace. She gently stroked her hair, leaning down to whisper soft words of encouragement.

"Shh, calm down, Autumn," Valentine murmured softly. Her voice carried a deep, maternal warmth.

"Save that fierceness for tomorrow. I need you at your absolute best when the tournament begins. You are one of Future Academy’s brightest stars, and I am counting on you to show the other academies exactly what we are capable of. Don’t waste your strength out here."

Autumn blinked away her tears, her anger instantly melting away under the validation and comfort of the principal she respects so deeply. She nodded rapidly, her face flushing a light pink.

"Y-Yes, Principal Valentine! I won’t let you down!"

Right on cue, Autumn’s sister, Summer, came rushing over the stone barriers.

She grabbed her sister’s hands, bowing frantically to Diana in apology, and began dragging the still-pouting Autumn away toward the arena’s exit tunnels.

While she was being dragged away backward, Autumn looked up and aggressively stuck her tongue out toward Emelie in the stands. She then raised two fingers and pointed them at her own eyes before pointing them at Emelie.

Emelie instantly gave Autumn the stink-eye back before raising her own fingers in the exact same mocking gesture with a petty, dramatic intensity.

When the two sisters disappeared from view, the petty look on Emelie’s face completely vanished. A soft smile crossed her lips as she looked at the empty walkway.

Diana stepped away from the arena and utilized a short-range blink to reappear right in front of Kurt and Emelie. The authoritative aura was entirely gone, replaced by a slightly tired expression.

Kurt finally snapped out of his daze and a confident smile returned to his face as he looked down at Diana.

He stepped closer and held her hands. "Ana... I'm really feeling it right now. What do you say we go back to your office and finish exactly what we started before we were interrupted?"

Emelie's eyes went wide as her face turned completely red with secondhand embarrassment. "Are you being for real right now?!"

Diana's cheeks flushed with a warm shade of affection. She looked down at her boots, biting her lower lip before shyly nodding her head. "I... I would like that very much, Rosie..."

"Okay! Nope! That's enough for me! I'm leaving! Bye!"

Right as Kurt and Diana were about to step closer to initiate another teleportation, a loud, incredibly pompous noble voice suddenly echoed through the tunnel ways of the arena entrance.

"Ah! My beautiful, radiant flower, Diana! I knew I would find you here!"

The moment that voice resonated through the arena, Emelie froze.

A look of dread washed over her features as her shoulders slumped into her chest. "Oh, no... not him. Not right now."

Stepping out from the dark shadows of the tunnel was Everette.

He was clad in an absurdly pristine, white noble coat adorned with excessive gold embroidery, a massive emerald pendant resting over his silk cravat. His handsome face was perfectly composed, and his silver hair caught the afternoon sun flawlessly.

Gasp "It’s Everette Herst!!!"

"Kyaaa! I love him!"

"Marry me, Everette!"

The moment he entered the arena’s walkway; a large group of female students and young women who were sitting in the lower stands completely lost their minds.

High-pitched squeals and manic giggles erupted across the stadium. Everette, fully aware of his audience, flashed a devastatingly confident smile, winking smoothly at a nearby group of mages. Two of the girls literally gasped, clutched their chests, and fainted directly backward onto the stone benches.

Everette took a dramatic stride up the stands, holding his arms out wide as he approached Diana. "Diana, my love! I have returned after seeing–"

SHWOOSH

Everette was left standing in the middle of the empty stands, his arms still stretched out wide, clutching at nothing.

Down on the walkway below him, Emelie let out a sudden snort. She covered her mouth as she tried to stifle her hysterical laughter at her brother’s public humiliation.

Feeling the sting of embarrassment, Everette slowly lowered his arms, cleared his throat, and turned his gaze upward toward the sound of the snort.

The loving, theatrical attention on his face instantly shifted into a sharp pout as he looked at his beloved sister. "Emelie! My darling, precious sister! Oh, how much I missed you!"

"Argh..."

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Kurt and Diana materialised back inside the principal's office.

However, the romantic atmosphere they were expecting was instantly cut short. Seated comfortably in one of the leather armchairs, casually swirling a fresh cup of tea, was Chihara Mei. She hadn't moved an inch since they left.

Diana's face instantly dropped into a frustrated scowl.

"Mei. Why are you still here? Our meeting's over. Leave. Rosie and I have incredibly important, private things to talk about right now."

Before Mei could offer a witty retort, a deep and incredibly authoritative voice suddenly spoke out from the main seat of the office.

"Is that so? Because I must admit... I am also very interested in this 'important talk' you speak of, daughter."

Kurt's head snapped toward the principal's desk. Sitting calmly in Diana's leather chair was a man in remarkably structured noble garments of deep crimson and charcoal.

He possessed a strikingly handsome, mature face. His sharp features in the light distinguished lines of an upper middle aged man. His dark hair was meticulously swept back, peppered with elegant streaks of grey at the temples, matching a neatly trimmed beard. His eyes were a piercing, cold, and intelligent shade of flint grey – eyes that held the exact same terrifying and unyielding intensity as Diana's.

Diana's breath caught in her throat as the color drained slightly from her face. Her voice dropped into a quiet, stunned whisper.

"Dad...?"

Chapter 172 - Fracture

"Go on. Continue. I am quite eager to know what this exceptionally important, private conversation is about. Surely, it cannot be so secretive that you would feel the need to hide it from your own father, Diana."

Diana’s posture instantly went rigid.

She glared at her father with a dangerous glint in her eyes. Yet, he showed absolutely no reaction to her hostility.

He merely sat behind her desk, casually resting one hand on the polished wood as if he owned the room, the academy, and everything within it.

Sensing the rapidly escalating storm, Mei set her teacup down with a soft click. She offered a knowing smile and slid gracefully out of her leather armchair. Turning her dark eyes toward Kurt, she gave him a subtle, inviting tilt of her head.

"Well, young man, it seems the atmosphere here has grown rather... familial. What do you say we step outside and let the father and daughter catch up in peace?"

Diana’s head snapped toward the foreign principal, "Rosie isn’t going anywhere, Mei. Do not test me."

Her father let out a dismissive huff, not even deigning to look at Kurt standing beside his daughter. "Actually, Principal Chihara, your suggestion is a fine one. Please, take him away. This office is no place for a common vagrant to be loitering."

Something inside Diana audibly cracked.

The ambient mana in the room violently compressed, causing the crystal chandelier overhead to rattle under the suffocating pressure of her aura.

"Never. EVER. Address my Rosie like that ever again, Father. Otherwise–"

"Otherwise what?" he interrupted, not even flinching at her oppressive aura. "I am your father, Diana. The head of House Valentine. What I say takes precedence over the whims of an F-rank nobody. You would do well to remember your place."

Diana snapped.

SHWOOSH

She materialised directly over her father, her hand blurring as she drew her crimson odachi from its spatial pocket.

The blade sliced downward in a lethal strike meant to cleave through anything in its path.

But her father was already moving. With a speed that defied his mature frame, his right hand blurred toward the hilt on his belt where his own crimson runic blade rested.

CLANG!

A metallic ring echoed through the office, kicking up a shockwave that blew the paperwork off the desk and sent the glass behind them shattering into glittering pieces.

Diana’s father hadn’t even stood up.

With a single hand, his one-handed blade clashed perfectly against Diana’s much longer odachi, holding her back effortlessly as the two weapons ground against one another.

"You dare raise your blade against your own father, girl? Have you entirely forgotten who gave you life?"

"I don’t care if you are my father! I will not allow you to dictate my future! I will not allow you to take my Rosie away from me! I would rather tear the entire Valentine house down to the ground!"

Before the situation could spiral into a catastrophic, bloody duel, a warm hand gently pressed down onto Diana’s shoulder.

"Ana."

Diana flinched under Kurt’s touch.

The chaotic mana swirling around her odachi instantly flickered and died.

She looked back at him with wide, trembling eyes, before slowly pulling her blade away. She took a step back and lowered her weapon, planting herself firmly beside Kurt.

Her father slowly lowered his blade, though he didn’t sheathe it.

A look of genuine surprise crossed his stern features as he stared at his daughter. He had raised Diana to be a fiercely independent, prideful, and unyielding force of nature – a woman who bowed to no one.

Yet, with a gentle touch and quiet word from an F-rank adventurer, she instantly compiled.

"Hmm... I have never seen you display such obedience, Diana. Tell me, F-rank, are you controlling my daughter with some sort of forbidden dark magic? A cursed artifact, perhaps?"

"FATHER!!"

Kurt smoothly stepped forward, his eye locking directly onto her father’s grey gaze. The two men stared each other down, the air between them growing heavy as they silently felt each other out.

Kurt didn’t back down. He didn’t show fear, nor did he show unnecessary aggression. He simply stood his ground like an immovable mountain.

Slowly, he reached his right hand out over the desk and offered a formal introduction. "My name is Kurt Rossana."

The father looked down at the calloused, slightly scarred hand extended toward him.

He didn’t move. He didn’t reciprocate the gesture.

He simply stared at it with cold disdain before looking back up into Kurt’s eye.

"Rossana? A peculiar surname. I am well-versed in the genealogy of every major and minor aristocratic bloodline across the continents. I have never heard of it. Tell me... are you a noble?"

Kurt slowly lowered his hand. "No. I’m not."

"Hm. Then tell me this. Have you been blessed by the Goddess? Do you possess a divine crest or a high-tier lineage trait that justifies your presence in my daughter’s life?"

"Some people have called me that. Personally, I don’t really know what it means, nor do I care."

"Hmm~" From the side of the room, Chihara Mei made a distinct, audible sound of intense interest, her eyes narrowing slightly as she analyzed Kurt’s dismissive answer.

Diana, already at her wits’ end, turned her head in blinding fury toward the principal.

"Get out, Mei! Now! Before I make sure you never leave Eldoria alive!"

Mei raised her hands in a mock gesture of surrender as an amused chuckle escaped her lips.

"Very well, very well. I can take a hint. Do try not to kill each other before the opening ceremony tomorrow."

With a graceful swirl of her kimono, she turned and slipped out the office, leaving the room heavy with a suffocating, silent tension.

The father slowly stood up from the principal's chair and finally sheathed his blade.

He walked around the desk, his boots stepping over the glittering shards of broken window glass. He stopped a few feet away from them, towering over the space with the absolute authority of a patriarch.

"I will be direct with you, Kurt," he stated coldly. "I do not approve of this relationship. It ends today."

Diana's face contorted with anger, but before she could scream, Kurt stopped her to ask, "And what exactly is the problem?"

"The problem... is that you are a complete and utter nobody. You might possess a surname, but you carry no noble blood. You hold zero political power, you have no wealth to your name, and you are currently registered as a pathetic F-rank adventurer. You bring nothing but shame and scandal to House Valentine."

He turned his cold gaze toward his daughter.

"Furthermore, Diana, your future has already been decided. You are to be betrothed to Everette Herst. His bloodline is pure, his status is immaculate, and the alliance between our houses will secure our family's dominance for the next century–"

"I am NOT engaged to HIM!" Diana screamed as her voice cracked with raw anguish.

Tears of fury finally welled up in her crimson eyes, spilling over her cheeks.

"I have never agreed to be betrothed to anyone! And I will never allow you to separate me from Kurt Rossana! I love him! I love him and only him! And I swear to you, Father... if you try to get in our way, if you try to touch him or force me into that disgusting marriage, I will kill–"

BANG!

"Diana, stop!"

Before the words ’kill you’ could fully leave her mouth, the office doors violently flung open.

Julianne barged into the ruined room with panic. Behind her, Wendy rushed in, her eyes wide with deep concern.

Julianne marched straight through the office and crossed the distance between them in a heartbeat. Before anyone could react–

SLAP!

The echoing sound of a hand striking flesh cut through the room.

Diana’s head snapped to the side. Her platinum hair flew wild as her mother’s hand connected firmly with her cheek.

The strike wasn’t hard enough to cause physical damage, but the emotional weight of it was devastating. Diana froze, completely stunned, as her hand slowly rose to touch her stinging, reddened cheek.

She stared at her mother in heartbroken betrayal.

"Don’t you dare say that to your father," Julianne gasped, her own voice trembling as tears welled in her eyes, her chest heaving with terror at the words her daughter had been about to utter.

"How could you say something so horrific, Diana? Have you completely lost your mind?!"

Distraught, overwhelmed, and completely broken by the sudden rejection from both of her parents, Diana didn't fight back.

She let out a soft, choked sob, turned around, and threw her arms violently around Kurt's neck, burying her face deeply into his chest.

SHWOOSH

In an instant, they both vanished from the office, leaving nothing but a lingering breeze and a shower of fluttering papers behind.

Julianne stood in the center of the ruined office, her hand still raised.

The heavy silence of the room collapsed in on her. Slowly, her eyes filled with tears, and she turned around to face her husband.

"Reuben... Why...? Why did you have to handle it like this? Why did you make our daughter feel this way? Why couldn't you have come straight to me first, so that we could discuss her choices together before you confronted her like a tyrant?!"

Reuben didn't answer her.

He didn't even look at her.

He turned his back, stepping up to the shattered window frame and looked down at the bustling courtyard below.

There, he could see Everette smoothly interacting with a group of cheering students, while a hooded Emelie stood nearby, looking thoroughly irritated by her brother's antics.

Reuben narrowed his eyes in an unreadable expression. Slowly, he turned around and rested his hand casually on the hilt of his sheathed sword.

He walked right past his weeping wife and the silent Wendy without uttering a single word of comfort.

"Follow me, Julianne. We're going home. We have nothing left to discuss here." With that, he marched out into the hallway, his heavy boots echoing down the corridor.

Wendy quickly stepped forward and pulled a clean, silk handkerchief from her apron. "Madam... please."

"Thank you, Wendy... Oh, Diana, I am terribly worried about her. Where could she have gone? What if she does something reckless?"

"Do not worry, Madam. Master Rossana is with her."

Julianne paused, looking up at the loyal maid. She swallowed past the lump in her throat and nodded faintly. "Yes... yes, you're right. I believe... I believe he is exactly what she needs right now."

With a heavy heart, Julianne smoothed down her elegant robes and followed her husband out of the office. Wendy walked closely behind her as they left the ruined office behind.

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SHWOOSH

Far away from the drama, Diana and Kurt materialised at the shore of the familiar, isolated island.

Kurt stumbled slightly as they landed, but he instantly stabilized his stance, wrapping his arms tightly around Diana's trembling frame.

She was clutching the back of his shirt so hard her knuckles turned white. Her shallow breathing sounded muffled as she buried her face in his chest.

Kurt held her back with everything he had, securely resting his hands against her back and the back of her hair.

"It's ok... I've got you, Ana," he murmured protectively to her. "I'm right here. I'm never letting you go. Do you hear me? Never."

The moment those words left his lips, the last of Diana's defenses completely shattered.

She broke down in his arms.

A muffled, agonising sob escaped her throat as she fully started to cry, her entire body shaking violently against him. "Rosie... Rosie... please..."

"I'm here. I'm right here," he whispered, kissing the top of her head as her tears soaked through his shirt.

"I hate him... I hate my dad... I hate Everette... I hate all of them! Why can't they just leave us alone?! Why are they ruining everything?!"

As Kurt listened to her heartbreaking cries, the gentle, relaxed demeanor he usually maintained completely dissolved.

A terrifyingly murderous look settled deep into his eye. He raised his head and gazed out across the vast expanse of the sparkling ocean, clenching his jaw so hard the muscles in his neck turned rigid.

’How dare they...How dare those arrogant, high-born bastards push her to this point. How dare they make my woman cry.’

He tightened his grip around Diana, holding her securely against his chest as the dark fire in his eye burned with an unyielding promise.

Reuben and Everette had no idea what kind of monster they had just provoked.

And Kurt was going to make absolutely sure that both of them paid dearly for every single tear she shed.