THORNS 207

Chapter 207 - Lingering Hatred

Kurt and Diana stepped out into the hallway and greeted the household maids who had been quietly waiting at a respectful distance away.

Diana, who was happily clinging tightly to Kurt's left arm, radiated such an aura post-coital bliss that two of the younger maids felt incredibly shy, quickly lowering their eyes to the floor with burning pink cheeks.

"Girls, if you wouldn't mind... our bedroom requires a comprehensive cleaning today. Please see to it."

""Right away, Ms. Valentine!""

Kurt, meanwhile, stopped just before Isabel who stood between them. He cleared his throat and drifted his eye slightly to the side. "Hey, Isabel... listen, I'm real sorry about this."

"Sorry? Sorry for what, Master Rossana?"

"Just... yeah. I'm just sorry."

Without explaining the mystery any further, the couple began their slow walk down the hallway toward the central staircase. Confused, Isabel watched their retreating backs with a tilted head. Unable to understand what Kurt was talking about, she shrugged her shoulders and entered the room.

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As they walked hand-in-hand through the corridor, Diana looked up to him with sparkling eyes. "You coming to watch the tournament today, Rosie?"

"Of course I am. Today's semi-final matches are going to determine exactly who faces each other at the finals tomorrow. There's no way in hell I'm missing it."

"And who do you think is going to win?"

"Hmmm... That’s really hard to say. With both teams containing monsters, it could honestly go either way.

"Alright then, I’ll change the question. Who do you want to win?"

"Well, that one’s easy. I want–"

"Oh, there they are! Good morning, you two!" A remarkably lively voice suddenly drifted up from the foyer below just as the couple reached the top of the staircase.

Kurt and Diana both paused, looking down past the banister.

Standing at the base of the stairs was Julianne, also beaming with an unprecedented amount of radiant life. And right beside her, standing with an easy stance, was Reuben.

Diana’s own glowing demeanor instantly vanished. Her crimson eyes turned sharp and cold and her fingers released Kurt’s arm as her posture went rigid.

As they slowly descended the steps, the atmosphere in the foyer shifted into something incredibly heavy and suffocating. The contrast between the two couples was staggering. Kurt and Diana were dead serious, whereas Julianne looked younger than she had in a decade, while Reuben remained his usual, quietly brooding, stoic self.

When they finally met face-to-face at the bottom of the stairs, Julianne subtly but firmly reached out her elbow and nudged at Reuben’s side.

"... Hm. Diana. I–"

"I don’t want to hear it."

Julianne tried stepping in, her hands raised soothingly. "Diana, sweetie, please, just let him–"

"And you..." Diana turned her cold gaze directly onto her mother. "Why on earth are you acting all chummy with him right now? Just yesterday afternoon, you were crying in my arms because of him. Are you seriously going to stand there and act like none of that just happened?"

"I know, I know," Julianne whispered as a gentle smile traced her lips. "But everything is okay now."

"Okay?! Okay how, mom?!"

"Your father came to the estate last night explicitly to apologize for everything he did. He canceled all of his political plans and arrangements with House Herst–"

"MOM! How can you be this blind?! This is the man who wanted to rip my Rosie and me apart! He wanted to forcefully marry me off to Everett like a piece of prize cattle, even though I screamed 'no' to his face a hundred times! I was nothing but a tool to him! A pawn in his ridiculous political games!"

"Diana, please... he only wanted–"

"Wanted what?! Did he want me to be happy?! Because if that was his grand plan, it didn't damn well work! He hurt you, and he hurt me! Do you have any idea how miserable, how completely dead inside I would be without Rosie in my life?!"

"Diana," Reuben's deep voice spoke up.

"Shut up!" She spun on her heel to glare at her father with absolute hatred. "I don't want to hear a single word coming out of your mouth! Why are you even still standing inside my house?! Get out!"

Julianne tried to interject once more. "Diana, please, listen to reason–"

"Leave this house right now, Reuben." Diana pointed toward the open front doors. "Leave, and don't you ever dare come back here again."

For a single, microscopic fraction of a second, a profoundly sorrowful flash of sadness flickered behind Reuben's piercing eyes. But within the next heartbeat, the stone mask returned.

Reuben offered no defense, no argument, and no further words. He slowly turned around, his heavy boots clicking against the carpet as he marched straight through the open doors, exiting into the morning sun.

Julianne stood frozen in the foyer, completely torn inside. Her gaze darted between the door where her husband was walking away and the trembling, furious form of her daughter.

Diana side-eyed her mother. "What are you waiting for? I can clearly see you want to be with that man. Just go."

As Julianne's lower lip trembled, she reached out to gently squeeze her daughter's hand for a brief moment. "Please... just know that your father truly does love you, Diana... he truly does."

With those final, pleading words, she spun around, her dress fluttering as she ran out the front doors to follow the retreating back of her husband.

The foyer descended into an echoing silence.

Diana's chests heaved with jagged breaths as the adrenaline began to fade. She turned around and violently threw her arms around Kurt's sides, burying her face into the comforting fabric of his shirt.

"What is wrong with those two..." she whispered in a cracking voice. "How can she just forgive him after everything? How can he just walk in here and expect a neat little apology to fix years of isolation? It's unfair..."

Kurt didn't interrupt her. He stood perfectly anchored as his hand gently rubbed slow circles across her back. He simply listened to her breathing and let her pour out every ounce of resentment she carried.

After a long, quiet five minutes, Diana let out an exhausted sigh. She slowly lifted her head from his chest to look at him. "Rosie... what do you think?"

"About what?"

"Is... Is what I did the right thing to do?" she whispered as her fingers lightly gripped the back of his shirt. "Did I take it too far?"

Kurt looked down at her softly and smiled. "Did it feel right to you?"

"I... I honestly don't know..."

"Listen to me, Ana. It doesn't matter what choices you make. Whether you want to lock those doors from him forever or open them up tomorrow... I am always going to support you. I'm your man. That's my job."

His eye then narrowed as a dark resolve took over his expression.

"But... if you want my honest thoughts on the matter? A huge part of my personal malice towards that old man died the moment he turned his back and walked out of that coliseum ring without a fight yesterday. He gave up his pride for you."

Kurt's thumb continued to softly trace her jaw as his voice dropped into a dangerously calm and fiercely protective drawl.

"But... if you still hate his guts, then I hate his guts. If you want to declare war against him, I will stand right by your side with my blade drawn."

His lips slowly curled into a dark smirk. "And... if you ever decide you want to kill him... I'll happily be the one to help you drive the knife straight through his heart~"

A sudden crimson blush exploded across her cheeks and a thrilling warmth rushed through her veins at the terrifyingly nature of his devotion. Not that she didn’t know of it.

She buried her face into his neck and deeply inhaled the comforting scent that clung to his skin.

"I... I still hate my dad," she whispered softly. "But... definitely not to the point of killing him. I think... I think I just need some time to think about how I actually feel about him now that it’s all over..."

"Take all the time you need."

Diana pulled back slightly and leaned up to press a quick, thankful kiss against his lips.

"Thank you, Rosie. For everything... I should head to the academy grounds now. I imagine poor Mia is currently crying tears of agony at her desk trying to handle the tournament logistics all by herself yesterday."

"Go handle your business, Principal. I’ll see you later."

Nodding happily, she stepped back a single step before vanishing.

SHWOOSH

"..."

"M-Master Rossana...?"

A trembling, high-pitched embarrassed voice suddenly drifted down from the top of the staircase behind him.

Kurt turned around. Standing at the top of the stairs was one of the younger maids who had entered the master suite a few minutes ago to begin the cleaning chores. Her face was violently red and her hands gripping her apron.

"Yeah? What's wrong?"

"Um... well... we desperately need your assistance upstairs, sir. While we were cleaning your bedroom... Senior Maid Isabel... she... she accidentally slipped on the incredibly wet floor near a blanket, lost her balance, and plummeted directly face-first onto the master bed. And... um..."

The maid covered her burning face with both hands as her cracking voice panicked into a squeak. "I believe the... pheromones and the... the residual liquid on the sheets were so p-potent... she immediately fainted cold upon impact... She won't wake up, sir."

"Oh."

Chapter 208 - Intruder In The House Of Healing

Click—Clank.

The glass doors of Eldoria Hospital swung outward as an elderly homeless man stepped out. He adjusted a fraying flat over his thinning gray hair and casually walked along the perimeter wall, doing his best to blend into the scenery and mind his own business.

The courtyard and the surrounding streets were completely bustling with life. Because of the ongoing national tournament, people were constantly streaming to and from the medical facility. As the old man walked, the ambient chatter of the worried crowd washed over him.

"... I just hope the injured students will be alright."

"... Yeah. Especially Nichole Firestar and Ryan Sindelle... I heard from a friend that the internal trauma from yesterday's matches was so severe, the Saintess had to step in."

"... Other reports say the healers are working around the clock. Everyone's praying that Junior and Kiana will be fully restored in time for the tournament matches later this afternoon."

The old man kept his head down and subtly drifted away from the crowds. He rounded a sharp corner off the main road and navigated through a tight space until he reached the end of a dimly lit alleyway that ran along the blind side of the hospital.

Swallowed hard, he raised his trembling hands and nervously clapped twice in quick succession – clap, clap.

He paused for a second and clapped twice again – clap, clap.

Finally, after another brief second, he clapped one last time – clap.

He lowered his hands and waited in the terrifying silence as his heart pounded against his ribs.

".... –!!!"

"Don’t turn around," a low, dangerous voice rumbled directly into his ear. "Just answer me. So, what is it?"

Gulp "R-Room 509, s-sir..."

"509? That’s the very top floor, isn’t it?"

"Y-Yes, sir. Only the incredibly wealthy or those with a prestigious family name are admitted up there..."

"Ahh... Of course he’d be up there, huh?"

Before the old man could panic further, he felt a smooth, light weight drop into his coat pocket. An unmistakable golden glint reflected on his eye.

"There’s a little extra in there than what I originally promised you. Consider it a reward for being so quick with getting the info and not raising any suspicion."

"Thank you... thank you so much, sir. I can finally help my family get through the winter with this... I can buy the medicine–"

"We both know you don’t have any family Mr. Homeless-Man. Though, I do hope you better your life after this. Now scram."

The old man didn’t need to be told twice. He quickly walked away and exited the alleyway without looking back, completely vanishing into the wider city streets.

Once the oat was clear,Kurt calmly emerged from the shadows. He then left the alley and casually made his way in the direction of the hospital’s main entrance.

Click—Clank.

He entered through the glass doors and smoothly navigated the crowded lobby, sliding down into a vacant chair among the waiting visitors. Sitting back with his ankles crossed, he lazily scanned the arena of the lobby, looking for something specific.

’C’mon. It should be right around here somewhere..... Ah.’

His eye locked onto a hanging polished bronze sign that read: Staff Room. Restricted Access.

’Bingo.’

Kurt closed his single eye and took a measured breath as he reached deep into his core to grasp the fundamental anchor of his unique ability.

’Time is mine to control as I will it. Whatever shape you take, you’re mine for the taking.’

He opened his glowing blue eye, and whispered a single command under his resonate breath:

"Pause."

Instantly, a wave of silent energy rippled outward from his position. The vibrant world immediately slowed to a grinding halt as everything turned into a dull, monochromatic shade of gray.

The ambient noise of chattering voices, crying children, and scurrying footsteps vanished into a vacuum of dead silence.

Glancing slightly to his left, his eye landed on an elderly woman who had been in the middle of coughing into a handkerchief. Kurt observed her closely and realised that although she looked almost completely frozen, her chest was still moving at a painfully slow velocity – so slow that to any casual glance, it would look perfectly static.

’Yeah... that probably shouldn’t be happening. I said "pause", not "slow down". Looks like I’ve still got a long way to go before completely mastering this domain.’

Shaking off the thought, he stood up from the chair. He walked across the silent, gray lobby, navigating past the motionless forms of nurses and patients, and pushed open the door to the staff room.

Inside, the room was filled with several physicians and nurses completely frozen mid-action. As Kurt began looking around the lockers for what he needed, a sudden ache throbbed behind his temples. A warm droplet escaped his nostril, and his nose started to bleed as a wave of sudden weakness washed through his limbs.

He staggered and gripped the edge of a desk. It was the brutal aftereffects of the extreme strain he had forced his body through during his duel yesterday. He had not yet fully recovered.

"Damn it..."

He wiped the blood from his upper lip with the back of his sleeve and quickly searched the lockers. Finding what he was looking for, he pulled out a white doctor’s uniform and a sterile medical mask and quickly changed into them.

After he stepped back out into the corridor, he focused on the resonating word: "Resume."

The frozen world snapped back to life. However, the gray domain had not disappeared yet, meaning the spell was still eating away at his mana.

Tsk

Closing his eye for a brief second, he focused on a new command to fully sever the tether. He whispered the resonate word: "Cancel."

The lingering gray dissipated into nothingness, and the heavy drain on his mana completely stopped

’Alright.Room 509... here I come.’

Walking down the primary corridor, he passed by the mana-stone-powered elevators. Kurt barely gave them a glance, opting instead to take the service stairs right next to it.

And so, his steady ascent began.

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By the time he reached the landing of the third floor, the sound of soft footsteps echoed from above. A senior doctor and a young nurse were seen coming down the stairs, reviewing a clipboard of patient charts.

Kurt kept his head down and his posture relaxed as he pulled a small notepad from his breast pocket.

When they crossed paths, the two medical staff politely nodded and greeted him. "Taking the stairs to avoid the rush too, huh?" the doctor asked with a weary smile.

"Yes. Excuse me, I'm in a bit of a hurry," he replied, keeping his voice altered as he walked past them toward the next flight.

"Wait," the female nurse suddenly called out from behind him.

Kurt turned his head just enough to acknowledge her.

The nurse looked up from her clipboard and offered a sympathetic look. "Are you headed up to the fifth floor right now?"

"... I am. Why?"

"Just thought I'd give you a quick heads up. There's a whole bunch of stressed-out students lingering about up there. It's a bit of a circus, so prepare yourself."

"I appreciate the warning. Thank you."

With their exchange finished, he continued his ascent.

Eventually he exited the door of the stairwell onto the fifth floor. As he walked down the quiet corridor, he immediately spotted the crowd the nurse had mentioned. A bunch of students were huddled together in a tight circle, completely blocking his view to the number on the door.

They were discussing amongst themselves in hushed, panicked whispers about whether or not they should actually go inside, each of them looking nervous and pale.

Kurt instantly recognized their uniforms. They were the Rivertonian student representatives – the very team that had been knocked out of the tournament yesterday.

"Excuse me. Would you guys kindly please move out of the way. This is a hospital, after all."

The students were startled at his authoritative voice. They then quickly shifted to the side to clear a path for the ’doctor’. As they moved, Kurt’s gaze swept past them and caught the bronze plaque mounted on the door. It read: Room 508.

Kurt gave the nervous students a courteous nod and walked straight past them, continuing down the isolated corridor.

Behind him, he heard Jason Campbell, the right hand of their captain, let out a frustrated sigh as he rubbed his face. "Look, we’re just being a complete nuisance standing out here like idiots. We should just go inside and face it."

Jason took a breath, turned the handle, and entered Room 508 first, the rest of his solemn teammates following closely behind him as the door clicked shut.

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Finally, after walking just a couple of paces, he reached his destination. The polished digits affixed to the plaque were unmistakable: Room 509.

A predatory smile spread across Kurt’s face beneath the safety of his medical mask. Without knocking, he stepped into the room. From within, a polite, slightly weary, but thoroughly relieved voice greeted the entering "doctor".

"Ah, doctor... thank goodness," the young man lying in the center of the massive medical bed murmured as his hands rested over his bandaged chest.

"The healing arts of the Saintess truly are a blessing... Honestly, after the way that F-rank struck me, I thought I was a dead man yesterday."

"Don’t worry," Kurt reached up and slowly wrapped his fingers around the edge of his medical mask, pulling it down to reveal his face. His single, piercing eye locked onto the patient with absolute malice. "We can still make that happen."

The color in the young man’s face drained until he looked like a corpse. His eyes widened to the point of tearing and his entire frame began to violently tremble against the pillows.

"H-Huh?! Y-You’re–!"

"Hello, Everett."