THORNS 209

Chapter 209 - The Bandaged Star

Scrambling backward against the propped-up pillows, Everett prepared to let out an ear-splitting scream that would alert any nearby doctors and nurses.

"Oh no you don’t!"

"SE–!"

Thud!

"Mphff! Mmmph!"

Before the first syllable could fully escape his throat, Kurt’s arm shot forward like a striking viper. His hand slammed violently over Everett’s mouth, driving the noble head straight back into the mattress

"Shhh... Keep your damn mouth shut and listen. The reason I’m here right now is because–"

"MMMMFF!!! MPHFFF!!!"

"....."

"MMHHMMMM MMMMPPHH!!!"

Completely losing his mind, Everett began flailing his legs wildly beneath the sheets, twisting his torso side to side as he desperately tried to pry the iron-grip hand away from his face.

"... Yeah, that’s it. That’s much better. Honestly, I love it when my targets pull a desperate last act of survival. No matter how useless it is, it really puts a smile on my face."

In another effort to escape, Everett tried to force a surge of mana in an attempt to enhance himself. But the moment the mana began to gather, it almost immediately faded into nothingness.

Kurt’s grin widened. His tone dripped with cruel mockery as he tightened his suffocating grip on Everett’s mouth.

"Aw, what’s the matter, buddy? Still feeling the crushing effects of yesterday’s beating? I messed you up pretty good, huh? It was a new trick I learnt. Though, I still need to properly get the hang of it."

"MPPHHHH *SOB* MMHHMMMMM!!!"

"Anyway, as I was trying to say before you started throwing a tantrum," Kurt continued in an emotionless tone. "The reason I’m here is because – as you’ve probably already guessed – I came up here to kill you."

Everett’s muffled whimpers grew hopeless as his hands began to weakly hit Kurt’s forearm in vain.

"Before you "sleep", how ’bout I tell you a quick little bedtime story, Ev? Once upon a time, there was a greedy, arrogant little piggy called Everett Herst. And this little piggy thought that just because he had a fancy name, he could–"

"MMPHFFF!!!" At the sound of the word "sleep", Everett let out a sudden, violent thrash of his body,

Kurt’s brow twitched. "... he could–"

"MMMM-MPH–!!!"

"Shut the hell up!"

THWACK!

Feeling his patience thinning and his irritation growing, Kurt abruptly let go of Everett's mouth, curled his hand into a tight fist, and delivered a lightning-fast punch straight into the noble's jaw.

"How the hell am I supposed to narrate your pathetic little life story to you when you keep making all that goddamn noise?!"

Although in pain, Everett finally found his mouth free. He quickly sucked a deep breath of air into his lungs and turned his head toward the door to scream.

"HEL–!"

But Kurt was quicker. He jumped on top of the bed and clamped both his hands fiercely around Everett's throat, digging his fingers deep into the noble's windpipe as he lifted his upper torso straight off the mattress.

"Ghh-k-k... L-Let... g-go..."

Watching the pompous noble reduced to a thrashing, gagging animal cracked Kurt up. A raspy, and dark laugh rumbled from the depths of his chest, echoing chillingly through the room.

"Look at you. Poor little Icarus reached too damn far for the sun... and now you're gonna fall. Fall all the way down to the deepest, darkest depths of hell, you pathetic piece of trash. You should have never messed with me. And you should have never, ever dared to think you could take Diana from me."

Everett's hands lost their strength. He weakly started tapping against Kurt's forearm as his eyes began to roll back into his head. Through the haze of terror, his lips trembled, and with a final expenditure of air, he managed to cough out two barely audible words:

"S... Sorry... I'm... sorry..."

"Too damn late to apologise, piggy."

As Everett’s body grew heavy and limp, a vivid flash of memory cut straight through Kurt’s mind.

He saw the image of Emelie sitting alone in her hotel room, her shoulders slumped as she looked at the gray clouds utterly depressed and broken. Then, it flashed to a conversation they had whilst walking to the academy:

"...Just... don’t kill him, okay? I still love my brother despite his horrific personality."

"... *Tsk*"

With an aggressive motion, Kurt released his grip and got off the bed.

Thud.

Everett collapsed back onto the pillows while clutching his bruised neck and coughing violently, desperately gasping for the crisp air of the room. He rolled onto his side, trembling from head to toe as he looked up at Kurt through a layer of tears.

"I... *cough*... I won’t ever go after Diana again... I swear... I swear it... just please... please let me go..."

"I don’t trust a single word that comes out of your mouth. I can tell you still love her. Whether it’s for her lineage or true love, you’re too stubborn to let it go."

"I do... I did..." Everett dragged his weak body backward until his back hit the headboard. "But I promise... I promise to leave her alone! I lost our match and my pride yesterday... I will respect the outcome of it! Please, I will not pursue her any longer!"

"Still don’t trust you."

"I promise on everything I swear on my family name! On my life!"

"Do you promise on your sister’s life? Do you promise on Emelie?"

"Yes! Yes, I promise on my little sister’s life! And I swear to our merciful Goddess above, just don’t kill me!"

As he stared at the weeping mess of a man before him, he let out a long, heavy sigh through his nose.

’You bastard. You’re lucky you’re tied to Emelie... if you were just some random, if you were literally anyone else, your head would already be rolling across this carpet.’

".... Fine."

Everett’s eyes widened in disbelieving shock and fresh tears of pure relief flooded his face.

Completely overwhelmed by the gift of survival, he crawled right off the edge of the hospital bed and clung straight onto Kurt’s knees. "Thank you... thank you so much... thank you..."

Kurt looked down at the man clutching his leg with disappointment and pity. He then reached down with his hand and lightly patted Everett on the top of his smooth silver hair.

"There, there. Stop crying, you look ugly when you do."

Everett instantly flinched and froze.

The gentle warmth of the touch – contrasting so violently against the monstrous, bloodthirsty ruthlessness Kurt had displayed just a second prior – sent a bizarre shock from his lightheaded brain straight down his spine.

With eyes wide of a strange, bewildered emotion, he slowly lifted his face and stared up at Kurt with a confused blush face.

Kurt’s expression twisted into a mask of unadulterated horror. He violently kicked his leg back and punched Everett square in the shoulder, sending him tumbling away across the floor.

"Gross! What the hell is wrong with you?! Stop looking at me like that!"

He then turned his back to the noble, fixing his medical coat and mask as he marched straight toward the door. He paused just before the handle and spoke with finality.

"Today is your last warning, Everett. Go after Diana again, and there is no amount of begging or sisterly love on this continent that will save your life. Remember that."

Without waiting for a reply, Kurt threw the door open and stepped out into the corridor.

Before he could reach the stairwell door, he caught the distinct hum echoing from the end of the hall.

The light fixtures above the elevator shaft began to indicate that someone was just about here, nearing the fifth floor.

Not wanting to risk any potential complications or draw the attention of doctors who might question his presence here, acting on instinct, Kurt gripped the handle of the nearest room – Room 508 – pushed it open, stepped inside.

Silently, he closed the door behind his back, cutting himself off from the hallway.

Standing flat against it, he listened intently to the quiet corridor outside. But as he waited for whoever it was to pass, a very faint, sorrowful sound drifted from deeper inside the room.

It was the fragile sound of someone softly crying.

A broken, little sob that was continuously being muffled, filled with a deep sense of physical and emotional agony.

Abandoning his position by the door, Kurt soundlessly stepped into the main area of the medical room. He couldn't help it. Curiosity got the best of him.

The space was dim, the curtains drawn tight against the afternoon sun. And there, sitting upright while crying into their knees in the center of the hospital bed, was a female figure covered from head to toe in white medical bandages.

Virtually no skin was visible as the wrappings meticulously secured every limb, every finger, and the entirety of her torso to treat her bruises and burns.

Kurt stood completely still behind the wall leading to the open room with his eye widened slightly. He recognized the person beneath the multi layers of cotton.

It was Nichole Firestar.

Chapter 210 - Don't Worry. Be Happy

"Hik...*Sob*... dammit... *Sob*.. s-so.. stupid.. Hik *Sniff* *Sob*..."

Kurt stood perfectly motionless in the shadow of the privacy wall, as he watched the once confident star of the Rivertonian representatives break down in tears.

'.... I feel sorry for the kid, I really do. But at the end of the day, she's not my problem. Whatever is going on with you, Nichole Firestar, I hope you feel better soon.'

He slowly turned back, making no sound against the tile, as he prepared to exit the room and continue his escape.

Swish

The sudden sound of metal rings sliding sharply against a copper rod echoed through the dim room. The curtains had been aggressively yanked aside, casting light in the dark.

SLAM!

Right as Kurt reached the handle of the door, the echoing crash of the window frame being violently forced open cut through the quiet room next. A panicking wave of anxiety shot straight through his chest.

’Damn it, she’s not about to do something rash, is she?!’

Abandoning all thoughts of a stealthy exit, Kurt spun around on his heel and sprinted past the privacy wall. Nichole was standing right at the edge of the windowsill with her heavily wrapped fingers gripping the wooden panel tightly as fresh tears streamed down the visible patches of her face.

Before she could even process his movement, Kurt’s right-hand shot, firmly clamping around her bandaged forearm and violently pulling her back away from the ledge.

"OW! H-HEY!" Nichole shrieked in startled terror as her bandaged frame stumbled backward into his chest. "What the hell are you doing?! Let go of me!"

"I was about to ask you the exact same thing. What the hell do you think you’re doing standing right at the edge of a fifth-story drop? You definitely don’t look fit to survive it."

Nichole twisted her arm and ripped herself free from his grip with an insulted glare. She stumbled back toward the edge of her bed and collapsed onto the mattress as she pointed an angry finger at the open glass.

"I was just opening the damn window because this room was getting stuffy! I can barely breathe under all this fucking wrap! What’s wrong with you?!"

"... Really? Oh. Right. Well... I apologise for jumping to conclusions then."

"Who even are you anyway? You’re definitely not my assigned doctor."

Kurt smoothly adjusted the lapels of his white coat, slipping effortlessly back into his authoritative guise.

"Your assigned doctor is currently on a rest break. Seeing as I'm still new here, sent me up to do a quick check on you. And frankly, based on what I walked into, it's a good thing he did."

"I told you, I wasn't going to jump," Nichole muttered darkly. "I'm a Firestar. We don't take the easy way out."

"Fair enough. But that still doesn't explain the waterworks. Why exactly are you crying like the world's ending?"

Nichole let out a bitter-pained laugh, her bandaged fingers tightly gripping the bed sheets beneath her.

"Oh, I don't know, Doctor. Maybe it's because all of my friends – the same people who used to look up to me as their leader – are now looking at me with pity. They probably thought they hid it well, but I saw it...

"Or maybe it's because I'm currently stuck in a foreign hospital looking like a crippled mummy.

"Or hey, maybe it's the fact that I talked a big game about destroying our competition, only to let my entire nation down when it mattered most, and the humiliation is killing me inside! Go on, take a guess, Doctor. Decide. Is it option A, B, or C?"

"... All of the above."

"Ding, ding, ding! Looks like the doctor isn't an absolute moron after all. What do you want, a prize?"

Ignoring her defensive sarcasm, Kurt folded his arms over his chest. "Regarding option B. If you don't like being here, why don't you just get the Saintess to lick your wounds and move on? I hear she's pretty good at that kind of thing."

"Ha. With what coin, exactly?"

"What do you mean, with what coin? Didn’t your academy cover the costs? But even then, surely a noble house like yours can afford the oh so divine fee. Right, Firestar?"

Nichole dropped her expression into disdain as she side-eyed him. "I take it completely back. You really are a moron."

"Hey. Watch the attitude. I’m just stating the obvious. I mean, since you got a surname and all that jazz, you guys are a noble family, aren’t you? Just get your family to cough up the coin for the Saintess."

"... Can’t."

"And why not?"

Nichole’s chin trembled slightly as she looked out the open window toward the distant horizon. "Family circumstances. That’s all you need to know."

"Ahh... Right. "Family circumstances". Yeah... I definitely happen to know a thing or two about how absolute garbage those can be. What about your academy? Can’t they pay?"

"They already spent most of the allocated budget into getting me to "this" hospital on "this" floor where Eldoria’s best medical staff operate."

"Huh. You called yourself a crippled mummy but you’re walking just fine. Heck, after that Myrian swordswoman blasted you through that tree and protective barrier, I’m surprised you’re still conscious."

Nichole’s brow furrowed in deep confusion as she stared at him. "What kind of a doctor are you? Haven’t you checked my charts or whatever it is you use? You should know the severity of my condition."

"Like I said, I’m new here. It’s my first day on the job, y’know?"

"Based on your performance... it’s probably going to be your last day, too."

"Hahaha! True, girl. You're probably right about that, ahahaha!"

"... Heh."

The sound of his unburdened laughter seemed to cut through the misery of the room, resulting in a small, yet genuine, smile to lightly break through Nichole's bandaged face. She leaned back against the pillows, her sigh turning weary.

"My mana veins are fried from overexertion. The baseline recovery rate is slow. Too slow. Doc told me it's going to take at least a full year of bed rest before I can even think about channeling a spark of flame again."

She looked down at her wrapped palms, her voice cracking. "Are you kidding me? A whole year... That's the worst thing that could possibly happen. Just sitting around while everyone else runs past me... I feel so... useless."

"....."

"....."

"I watched your tournament matches yesterday. Your fatal four way and final triple threat."

Nichole's ears subtly twitched, her head lifting slightly.

"And while it's true that I could easily predict the outcome of the final fight from the moment the match was announced, I won't lie, just that fiery spirit alone you displayed out there... it got a small part of me to root for you."

"Only a small part?"

"Well, yeah. I happen to know Izumi Ayako personally, so I was obviously rooting for her to win. But you definitely made her sweat for it. That's really impressive."

Nichole looked down at her lap as a strange, comforting warmth spread through her chest at the man's words. "Thanks for the partial support, I guess... Doctor."

"Sure. You're welcome," Kurt grinned beneath the mask. "In any case, seeing as your mood is better now and you're not planning on skydiving out the window... I gotta bounce. Duties call."

He gave her a short nod and turned around toward the door. But just as his frame was about to disappear from view behind the wall, Kurt paused. He slowly turned his head back over his shoulder and looked at her with an eye of sincerity.

"Don't put yourself down so much, Nichole. The show you put on out there yesterday was definitely something you should be profoundly proud of. I highly doubt anyone in your academy or your nation is going to fault you for that loss. Hell... Izumi-san said it herself, didn't she?"

Nichole's eyes widened as the memory of Ayako readying her sword for the final blow flashed through her mind.

"You fought with incredible honor, Nichole Firestar. Let it be known across all of Myria... that you have earned my undisputed respect. Until our paths cross next time."

A fresh tear welled up in her eye, trailing down the edge of her bandage.

"Once you fully recover in a year's time, all the pain and the humiliation you're dragging yourself through right now... it's all going to feel like nothing more than a bad dream. So for now... just persevere. Keep your chin up. And hey... who knows? Maybe a miracle will happen, and you'll find yourself recovering much sooner than you think."

"... Huh? Wait! What do you mean by–"

But before the question could fully leave her mouth, the space the mysterious doctor stood at was empty.

Nichole sat alone in the quiet, sunlit room, the afternoon breeze gently fluttering against the white curtains. She stared at the empty space for a long, quiet minute. Then, a small and grateful smile touched her lips as she wiped her eyes.

"What a total moron... But... thank you, Doctor."