THORNS 227

Chapter 227 New Rumor, The Toilet Demon

High in the upper VIP section of the Eldorian stands, the atmosphere was a mixture of tense anticipation and lingering disappointment. Down in the arena, the medical priests were helping escort Summer out of the ring following her loss against Yukimura.

Sitting in one of the most lavish seats in the coliseum, Duke Reuben Valentine rested his elbow on the seat's arm rest.

His calculating eyes swept over the remaining representatives of Eldorian, quietly evaluating. After a moment, his gaze shifted across the expanse of the arena and locked onto the Myrian representatives.

Done with his assessment, Reuben let out a quiet breath. He leaned back in his seat and turned his head toward his wife who was currently watching the arena with mild interest.

"Julie. I'm going to use the restroom. And I'll be stepping out for a quick smoke break."

Julianne, with her elegant features, turned to look at him fondly. "Alright. But don't be long, Rubi. Otherwise, I'll come looking for you myself."

Reuben gave a short nod and stood up, smoothing down the front of his tailored coat. He turned to the impeccably dressed butler standing at attention at the exit of their seating row.

"Do you have the communication orb?"

"Yes, My Lord," the butler replied respectfully.

He reached into the pocket of his coat and produced a smooth, crystalline orb roughly the size of a tennis ball.

"Good. I'll contact you if anything comes up."

As he turned around, Julianne called out after him, raising her voice just enough to be heard over the rising cheers.

"Twenty minutes! That's all I'm giving you!"

Without looking back, Reuben raised one hand over his shoulder and gave her an acknowledging wave as he pushed open the doors and stepped into the cool, shadowed corridors.

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A few minutes later, having finished his business in the facilities, he made his way down the sweeping staircases, heading toward the front plaza. However, his peaceful walk was abruptly interrupted.

As he rounded a corner near the exit, his path was blocked. A group of three private security guards was standing in a tight circle around a disheveled, red-faced man who was currently kneeling on the polished floor, sobbing uncontrollably.

"You have to listen to me!" the man cried whilst desperately clutching one of the guards' boots. "You have to detain that one-eyed man! Keep him here for the prefects! They need to come and arrest him immediately! I feel so violated!"

"Sir, please let go. Stop talking about this nonsense. You're drunk, and you're causing a scene."

"I am not drunk!"

"What's going on here?" Reuben's authoritative voice cut through the echoing hallway.

The three guards instantly stiffened.

Recognizing the crest on his coat and the oppressive weight of the aura surrounding him, they immediately snapped into perfect salutes, greeting the duke with the utmost respect.

The weeping man on the floor, however, saw an opportunity. He scrambled forward on his knees and clasped his hands together in a prayer.

"My Lord! Please, I beg of you, you must find and punish the one-eyed man! He is a demon!"

Reuben looked down at the pathetic display and turned to look at the guards. "What exactly did this ’demon’ do to him?"

"N-Nothing, My Lord. This man is just spouting drunken nonsense. We were just about to throw him out."

"It’s not nonsense! He forced me! He made me defecate upon a bald man’s head!"

""""...."""

"... What?"

"That is enough out of you!" the lead guard barked, completely mortified that Reuben had to hear such filth.

He and the other two guards bent down, grabbed the weeping man by his armpits, and hoisted him roughly into the air. "We apologize for the disturbance, My Lord. Have a wonderful day!"

Reuben stood bewildered as he watched the guards dragged the flailing, sobbing man away down the corridor.

"JUSTICE! I DEMAND JUSTICE FOR MY SOUL!"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Reuben letting out a long exhale. Deciding it was best to simply pretend the last two minutes of his life hadn’t happened, he continued making his way out of the coliseum.

Once he pushed through the doors, he stepped out into the vibrant atmosphere of the front plaza.

Although the matches were still going on inside, the massive field market was in full swing. Packed nearly shoulder-to-shoulder with tourists, merchants, and academy students helping out where they can.

Reuben expertly navigated his way through the dense sea of bodies, until he reached the quieter edge of the plaza near the main decorative fountain.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a beautifully engraved, vintage metal cigarette case. With a soft click, it popped open. As he reached for a cigarette, his sharp hearing picked up the murmurs of a group of tourists rushing past the fountain.

"... Did you hear? The guards are still looking for it!"

"... The toilet demon? Yeah, I heard it drowned three people in the bowls!"

"... And then, it took the stinkiest shit on all of them."

Reuben paused with the cigarette halfway to his lips. Before he could piece together the bizarre connection between the sobbing man and a mythical bathroom fiend, a sudden but faint surge of mana picked up on his keen senses.

He looked up toward the sky.

Two figures had just launched themselves into the air, flying rapidly away from the academy grounds. Reuben easily recognized the silver hair and the telekinetic aura of Emelie as well as the silhouette of Kurt being carried alongside her.

Intrigued, he placed the cigarette back into the metal case and snapped it shut. After putting it away, he reached into his other pocket, pulling out his own communication orb.

He poured a small fraction of his mana into the crystal. It flared with a blue light.

A moment later, the butler’s polite voice came through, underlaid with the muffled, roaring cheers of the crowd. "Yes, Your Grace?"

"Hand the orb to my wife."

There was a brief rustling sound. A few seconds later, Julianne’s voice came through. "Rubi? It hasn’t even been ten minutes. What’s wrong?"

"Nothing’s wrong," Reuben replied, keeping his eyes locked on the two distant figures shrinking against the clouds. "But I have to leave for a bit. I’ll be back by your side before the matches end."

"Leave? Leave where? Where are you going?"

"... To capture a toilet demon."

"... Excuse me?"

"I’ll see you later," Reuben cut off the connection and slipped the darkened orb back into his pocket.

A faint, nearly invisible gray aura began to swirl around him. Without bending his knees, he vaulted straight up into the air.

Once he was high in the sky, he placed both of his hands casually into his pockets, and with a calm, effortless stride, he began sky stepping forward. His cape fluttered in the wind as he shot across the sky with terrifying speed, rapidly closing the distance between himself and the two flying figures.

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Further ahead, Kurt and Emelie were speeding through the air when a deep voice suddenly asked from behind, "So where exactly are you going in such a rush?"

"OH CRAP–!"

"JESUS–!"

Without a single conscious thought, Kurt drew his black blade from his waist, twisted his torso in mid-air, and swung a full-powered backhand slash directly at the source of the voice.

CLANG!!!

Sparks rained down through the clouds. Reuben had half-unsheathed his signature red blade, catching Kurt's strike perfectly on the flat of the steel with only one hand. His other hand was still casually resting in his pocket.

""REUBEN?!""

Casually pushing Kurt's blade away and clicking his sword back into its scabbard, Reuben tilted his head slightly and asked. "Who is Jesus?"

"What the hell are you doing up here?! You nearly gave me a heart attack!" Kurt then turned his head toward Emelie. "Didn't we sneak past him at the plaza?"

"We did. He must have seen us leaving from the sky."

"Yes, I did see you. But that is not why I came after you."

Kurt stared at him and asked, "How are you even... flying?"

"Advanced wind magic. Now, answer my question. Why are you running away?"

"Running away? Running away from what?"

Reuben narrowed his eyes. "You are the toilet demon, are you not?"

"Toilet demon? Kurt, what the hell is this old man talking about?"

"Oh, for the love of... yes. That was me."

He looked at Emelie, waving a hand dismissively. "This group of losers jumped me while I was trying to use the bathroom. They tried to ambush me, so I beat the hell out of them. And then I made this one random guy shit on their leader's head."

She stared at him for three seconds, then completely lost her composure.

"Pfft–HAHAHAHA!"

Emelie burst out laughing, clutching her stomach as tears slid down from her eyes.

Reuben, however, did not find it amusing. "If you were attacked, that is one thing. But why involve someone who had nothing to do with it? Making an innocent man soil in such a way seems unnecessarily cruel."

"Innocent? The guy deserved feeling shitty about taking a shit on the bald guy's shit head! I overheard him cheating on his wife, y'know? *Tsk* What a shitty guy he is!"

Emelie was laughing so hard she was actually wheezing. "Ahaha– S-Stop it! Stop saying shit! I'm going to drop us!"

Reuben sighed and shook his head at the vulgarity of the conversation. "I see. Very well. But if you are not fleeing, then where are you going in such a rush?"

"... We’re headed for the orphanage near the church. I just got word that one of the kids I feel responsible for went missing."

"A kid you feel responsible for? Rossana... don’t tell me you have a secret child with another woman."

"What? No! Look, it is a very long story, but we’re not related in that kind of way. She’s just an orphan I’ve been watching over."

Reuben studied his face for a moment.

Feeling satisfied that Kurt was telling the truth, he stopped squinting and relaxed his posture. "In that case, should I come along and help you search?"

"... Are you sure? I mean, I appreciate the offer but..."

"If I assist you now, we won’t have to meet up later. We can handle everything at once."

"Right, there was that. Well then, I greatly appreciate the help, Reuben."

"Hm." Reuben nodded. He then turned toward Emelie, who was still giggling softly to herself. "Get it together, Herst. Let’s leave."

"Right, right, sorry. Man... I really wish I could’ve seen that bathroom fight."

Focusing her mana once more, Emelie smoothly controlled her telekinesis, banking them hard toward the orphanage. She and Kurt shot forward through the clouds, with Reuben effortlessly sky stepping right behind them.

Chapter 228 One Side Of The Story

Kurt, Emelie and Reuben descended from the sky, landing with a soft thud onto the courtyard of the orphanage.

Dozens of young children were scattered across the lawn, peering under wooden benches, climbing fence posts, and shouting a single name into the afternoon air over and over again.

"Rupee! Rupee!"

"Rupee, where are you?!"

The moment Kurt came into view, a keen-eyed boy by the well gasped. "Uncle Kurt's here! Everyone, look!"

"Uncle Kurt?"

"It's Uncle Kurt!"

"Uncle Kurt!"

Within seconds, a flood of children sprinted across the grass to surround and overwhelm him. Small hands grabbed at his trousers, tugged on his shirt, and practically dragged him down to their eye level as everyone tried to speak at once.

"Uncle Kurt! Tristan and Rupee got into a huge fight!"

"It's all Rupee's fault, Uncle Kurt!"

"Is not! How is it Rupee's fault?! Tristan is the one who pushed her!"

"That's because she wouldn't leave him alone! She kept nagging him all morning!"

"Because he made her sad! She was just trying to keep them together!"

Kurt raised his hands at them all speaking over each other. "Whoa, whoa, everyone take a breath! One at a time–"

As he tried to gain control of the situation, a young girl suddenly looked past him, her jaw dropping open. She gasped loudly and clutched her friend's arm. "Wait... are you... are you Emelie?!"

The entire crowd of children went instantly dead silent. Dozens of wide eyes turned toward the silver-haired girl standing quietly off to the side.

"Uhm... hi?"

Gasp "It's Emelie Herst!"

"You're so cool, Emelie! When Mr. Ken was shouting about your match on the recording tag, he said you beat three strong Myrians all by yourself! Even Jin Fu!"

"Yeah! Mr. Ken is so funny when he shouts at the microphone! LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! Ahahaha!"

The children immediately picked up on the chant, raising their tiny fists toward the sky and screaming in unison at the top of their lungs: """LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!!!"""

Laughter burst out among them as they began mimicking the announcer's dramatic voice.

Kurt rubbed his forehead, trying hard to at ease despite the stress. "A-Alright, alright! Everyone, calm down for a second."

A few of the braver kids shifted their attention to the third member of the group, looking up at the stoic figure of Duke Reuben Valentine.

"Whoa... who's this cool old man?"

"Can I see your sword, mister?"

"Spare change for a poor orphan?"

Throughout it all, Reuben remained motionless. His gaze stared straight ahead as if the children swarming around him were nothing more than a passing breeze.

"Children! That is quite enough!"

Maggie, the orphanage manager, came rushing out the front doors of the main building, her apron slightly askew as she hurried down the stone steps. She waved her hands, shooing the youngsters away from the guests.

"Back into the courtyard, all of you! Into the gardens! I need to speak with the adults privately!"

""""Boooooooo!!!""""

"Fine!" one of the older boys called out, waving to his friends. "Hey guys, let’s go double-check for Rupee in the park across the road!"

""""Okay!""""

Just like that, the swarm dispersed, following the boy like a flock of birds as they poured out of the front gates to continue searching the neighborhood.

"I swear those kids... Kurt. I wasn’t expecting to see you here. But thank goodness you came so quickly."

"Afternoon, Maggie. I came as soon as Victoria gave me word of what happened."

Maggie turned her head, intending to thank whoever had accompanied him, but froze the moment her eyes landed on Reuben. Her face turned pale and she instantly bowed deeply, her voice trembling with immense reverence.

"M-My Lord! Duke Valentine... I-I had no idea you would be visiting our orphanage–"

"Act normal," Reuben interrupted smoothly. "Formalities will only waste time we do not have."

"R-Right! Of course!" She straightened up, only to turn her head and lock eyes with Emelie this time.

"Oh my goodness! Ms. Emelie Herst! I... I was not expecting to see a celebrity figure here today–"

Emelie raised a hand while smiling gently to cut her off. "Please, just act normal around me as well, Ms. Manager. We are only here to help look for one of the orphans who had apparently run away."

"Yes... yes! Rupee!"

"Tell us everything. What exactly happened?" Kurt asked.

"Please, come inside to the lobby first."

The four of them walked into the modest, sunlit lobby of the orphanage.

Once they stopped near the central table, Maggie let out a ragged breath and began.

"It all started yesterday afternoon. A very respectable couple – a husband and wife who have been coming in for visits for a couple of months – came by to see if they were finally ready to adopt. We have thoroughly vetted them and deemed them fit to raise children.

"After presenting them with a selection of children who matched their criteria, they found themselves deeply drawn toward a specific pair of siblings. Tristan... and Rupee."

Kurt’s jaw tightened. "Tristan and Rupee..."

"Yes," Maggie nodded sadly. "And that is when everything went downhill. Apparently, Rupee and a small group of her friends were eavesdropping outside my office door. When Rupee overheard that she and her brother were potentially about to be adopted, she completely lost her mind.

"She burst right into the room, crying and screaming at the couple, telling them that they weren’t allowed to adopt them because their real parents were still coming home to get them."

Reuben narrowed his eyes slightly as he looked at the manager, then at Kurt. "Why would the girl say such a thing? She resides in an orphanage. Is she not an orphan?"

Kurt stared at the floor, his voice dropping into a low register that was filled with immense guilt. "She is an orphan. But... she doesn’t believe she is. Because I lied to her."

Reuben’s eyes narrowed further and waited for Kurt to elaborate more, but he held his tongue, allowing the manager to continue first.

Maggie cleared her throat nervously, continuing her story. "After the incident, I apologised profusely to the couple for her outburst and sent them on their way. They were very understanding, thankfully, and said they would return next week to look at the other prospective children.

"Rupee, however, was furious. She ran straight outside to find her brother, who was swinging a tree branch around near the fence – he calls it his ’training.’ She wanted to tell him what happened so they could be angry together. But... Tristan’s reaction was not at all what she was expecting."

Kurt looked up. "What did Tristan do?"

"I don’t know the full details of what was said, since I heard this from the other kids, but I believe Tristan told her something along the lines of that he was fine with being adopted. And that having a new mom and dad wouldn’t be a bad thing.

"This shattered Rupee. A huge argument broke out right there in the yard. I believe Rupee must've thought her brother didn't love their real parents anymore. She accused him of wanting to replace them just because they were taking too long to come back.

"After that, they stopped speaking to each other. But throughout yesterday evening and all of this morning, Rupee continued provoking him in small ways, venting her anger at him. Eventually, Tristan reached his limit.

"Something happened and they got into a physical fight an hour ago. Rupee ran inside and locked herself in their shared room, and Tristan ran off to the park crying.

"Since I couldn't get to Rupee, I went to the park and managed to comfort Tristan. I eventually brought him back and went upstairs to speak with his sister, but when I unlocked the door... the window was wide open. She had packed a small bag of her clothes and vanished. Which brings us to right now."

Silence fell over the lobby.

The ticking of a grandfather clock in the corner was the only sound for several long seconds.

Kurt suppressed the surge of anxiety in his chest and asked Maggie, "Where is Tristan right now?"

"He is up in their room. He feels terribly guilty for fighting with and shouting at her. He hasn't stopped crying since he came back and found out she was gone."

"Got it. We'll find Rupee before the day ends. You have my word."

He turned around, facing Emelie and Reuben and pointed a finger toward the ceiling. "Emy, could you take to the skies and scan the surrounding area?"

"Of course," she answered immediately, her blue eyes sharp with resolve.

"I will join her," Reuben spoke up, stepping toward the door. "We will cover twice as much ground together."

"Thank you both. I really appreciate this. I'm going to quickly talk to Tristan first, then I'll join you on the ground."

"Don't take too long," Reuben said, already stepping out into the sunlight with Emelie following close behind.

Once the two of them departed, Kurt asked Maggie, "A quick question before we see him. Why were Rupee and Tristan on your list for adoption?"

"Kurt... I understand that the kids may think that this place is their home, but it's not. It's just a... temporary pit stop. I apologise for not telling you sooner, however, children need the love of parents to raise and nurture them."

"... Yeah. They do." Kurt clenched his fist in self-reflection.

"Follow me. I'll take you up to their room."

They walked up the wooden staircase, heading down the narrow, sunlit hallway of the second floor. As they approached the door at the very end, Kurt noticed a small, blue-haired figure sitting on the floor, leaning her back against the wooden frame.

It was the same girl Kurt had subtly noticed held a sweet, innocent crush on Tristan.

The girl scrambled to her feet. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying as she ran straight up to Kurt, holding his sleeve with trembling hands.

"U-Uncle Kurt... Please help Tristan, desu wa. Please... He won't let anyone in, and he's crying so hard... I hate seeing him like this."

Kurt’s heart softened. He reached out and gently tapped her shoulder. "It’s going to be okay. I’ve got it from here."

The girl sniffled, wiped her nose with her sleeve, and gave a small nod before standing by Maiggie’s side whilst holding her hand.

Kurt raised his hand, intending to knock, but stopped himself. Knowing the boy needed his presence, not formalities, he simply reached down and turned the brass knob, stepping inside, then clicking the door quietly shut behind him.

On the far twin bed, a small mound was visible under three layers of blankets. The mound was visibly trembling, accompanied by the muffled, shuddering sounds of painful sobbing.

"... Hey, Tristan. It’s-a me— Ahem. It’s me, Kurt."

The muffled crying hitched.

For a second, there was complete silence in the room. Then, the mountain of blankets was frantically thrown aside.

Tristan sat up, his face red, his eyes swollen, and tears streaming freely down his dirt-streaked cheeks. When he saw Kurt standing by the door, the young boy broke down entirely.

"U-Uncle Kurt!"

He scrambled off the bed and sprinted across the room.

He slammed into Kurt’s waist, wrapping his arms around the man’s torso as tightly as he could, burying his wet face into his shirt shirt

A fresh wave of heartbreaking sobs filled the room.

Kurt just stood there, feeling a crushing weight of guilt settle over his heart once more. He then slowly wrapped his arms around the young boy's trembling shoulders, gently resting a hand on the back of Tristan's head as he pulled him close, silently waiting for the boy to calm down.