THORNS 77

Chapter 77: A Job Well Done

[...WILL ALL BE REFUNDED BASED ON THE AMOUNT YOU'VE SPENT IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOUR BETTING TAGS!]

"Looks like the show's over. Let's get out of here before we get scolded by the Prez." Austin slid his hands in his pockets and began to follow the crowd towards the exit.

"Now hold on." Gary held him back by the arm. "Don't you think this is the perfect opportunity?"

"Opportunity for what?"

"Come now, Austin. I know you're not that dumb." The faint red glow shimmered in Gary's eyes as he looked at the arena. Or rather, more specifically, at Kurt.

"Oh. Oooooh... I see. You're right. And this fog mixed with the rowdy crowd will act as the perfect cover."

"Hahaha. I knew you'd get it. As expected from you~" He smiled at Austin with a sudden, jarring warmth that stretched his lips against his teeth.

"S-Shut the fuck up, weirdo." Austin quickly looked away from him. Even though it was the way Gary would usually smile at him, for some reason, this time it felt intense.

"S-So, how are we gonna do this?"

"You can leave this to me. But I do need you to do something else for me." Gary reached into his uniform blazer and took out a piece of paper with a magic circle neatly drawn.

"That's–!"

"My get out of jail free card. Same one I used when escaping the clutches of the king." He took Austin's hand and put the paper inside. "Just like before, you need to find a secure location and pour your mana onto it to set up the circle.

But you need to be quick this time because I doubt Emelie's just going to let me get away scot free. She seems keenly aware of her surroundings, so she'll probably notice when another presence enters the field."

'Well duh. She's basically a war veteran.'

"Austin? Are you listening?"

"I-I heard you." He snapped out of his thoughts and shoved the paper down his pockets.

"Good. And remember to be quick. I'll give you a minute headstart."

"I know already. You don't need to repeat yourself." Austin turned away from him and was about to make a break for it when he suddenly stopped.

"What's the matter?" Gary asked him.

"... Emelie can be dangerous." Austin said without looking back.

"Yeah. I know that. What are you trying sa–"

"G-Good luck! And be careful... Gary."

"Wha–"

Austin, not giving him a chance to respond, ran away at full speed.

"... Ha. Hahaha... Austin Austin Austin. Always the shy one, aren't you? Now I really cannot disappoint you." Gary took out his black dagger and a small plastic bag with purple liquid inside.

He dosed his dagger with the liquid and slowly sunk into the dark shadows below.

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Snap!

"That's the third pen you broke, Principal Valentine." Mia sighed when she looked up from her desk.

"I-I know. It's just *grrr* that Sophie..."

"Are you still going on about that? It's been nearly two hours since you came back, y'know. There's nothing inherently wrong with what you did. It's only natural for you to want to kiss the man you love. Pffthehe, even if it's in public–"

"No! Stop it! I don't need you bringing it up! W-What's more, we didn't even kiss!"

"But you were about to, no?"

"Eeeeeeeeeeek!" Diana squealed and hid her flushed face in her arms on the desk.

"... Perhaps we should take a break. We're just about finished with all the paperwork needed for the tournament anyway."

"... Yes... A break sounds good." She answered in a muffled voice as she didn't take her head off her arms.

"Great!" Mia picked up her purse and walked over to her. "So, where're we going? Personally, I could use a bite to eat."

"I... I want to see Kurt."

"Seriously? You just saw him."

"So?" Diana finally looked up and grabbed her own purse.

"Well, I mean, he is your first boyfriend after all. Aren't you afraid you're being too... clingy?"

"That's the last thing I'm worried about." She smiled affectionately and rubbed the back of her own hand as if to remember his touch. "He loves me just as much as I love him. He also adores it when I'm clingy. In fact, he can get quite possessive himself, hehe~ "

"Really? That certainly wasn't the impression I got from him. He seemed more of the cool and calm type. He didn't even flinch nor stare when he saw my big bazongas... Normally any man would. That definitely earned himself good points in my book–"

Snap!

"You're what?" Diana looked at her with a blank glare.

"I-I was only kidding!" Mia stretched out and shook her hands in denial. Besides, I said it earned him good points, didn't I?! That means I can safely trust him to you!"

".... I see." She threw the fourth pen she broke in the trash bin beside her. "Mia, turn around."

"W-Why?"

"Just do it. I’m not going to do anything to you."

"... O-Okay." When Mia turned around, she could feel Diana’s gaze burning inside of her.

"You can turn back now."

She slowly turned back around and saw that Diana was looking at her with a smug expression.

"What? Why’re you looking at me like that?"

"Because. My butt’s bigger than yours." Diana stood up and victoriously put her purse on her shoulder.

"W-What’s that supposed to mean!?"

"Don’t worry about it."

Knock Knock Knock

"Excuse me, Principal Valentine. This is Vice President Victor Moor."

"Come in." Diana answered.

Victor entered the office with sweat on his forehead and a file of papers on his hand.

"I’m sorry if I bothered you when you’re so busy with the preparation of the tournament, principal. Oh," Victor noticed that both Diana and Mia looked like they were about to leave. "Are you perhaps not as busy?"

"That’s right. We’re just about finished working and were about to leave on a short break. You however look like you just finished running a marathon. Is something wrong, Mr. Moor?"

"I was just wondering if President Amber was here. I looked for her everywhere but couldn’t find her. I need her to sign these budget approval forms from various clubs. She said she’ll do it today but... Argh, these club members are getting restless..."

"Did she not tell you where she’s headed?" Mia asked him.

"N-No, Secretary Mia. She didn’t say anything to me about going out. Where did she go?"

"Apparently Prince Maxwell, Jr. and Princess Kiana are holding a special event at Evergreen Park. She went there to help manage it."

"Don’t tell me she forgot about her responsibilities..." Victor drooped his shoulders in defeat.

"Give me those papers. I’ll get them to her." Diana stretched out her hand.

"Are you sure, Principal? I don’t want to inconvenience you during your break."

"It’s okay. I want to see what this event is about in any case. And the park seems like a perfect place for a break."

"Thank you for your help." Victor handed her the file.

"No problem. It’s my job to help my students." She smiled at him which caused him to blush.

"T-T-That is all from me! Enjoy your break, Principal Valentine! Secretary Mia!" He bowed at them each and quickly left the office.

"Smooth move, Diana."

"What? Stuff like this cannot be helped with beauty like mine."

"Whatever. So, I guess we're headed to the park then?"

"Yes."

"That's perfect! Cause I know this bagel stand Dommy and I go to when we're on dates over there. I'm sure you'll love it." She said as she held onto Diana's.

"S-Speaking of dates. I might need your help when it comes to mine..."

"Ooohh! Do tell, Diana. Do tell."

SHWOOSH

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Swish! Poof!

"You're finally back, Gabe!" Austin sat up from the floor as he ran up to Gary.

"Yeah... *sniff* *sniff* aurgh! Where are we, Austin? It smells like shit, barf and piss."

"The men’s abandoned park toilet. It was the only place nearby where I knew nobody would come."

"No wonder..."

"But never mind that! What about Kurt?! Did you finish the job?!"

"Heh, of course I did. I even coated my dagger with the cult’s deadly poison when I stabbed him through the stomach."

"Nice, haha! I knew I could trust you!" Austin jumped for joy when he heard the news.

"I wanted to confirm the kill by snapping his neck, but that bitch Emelie was too quick on the uptake. She probably sensed me as soon as I popped from his shadow and acted immediately. She was fast, but not fast enough."

Austin stopped celebrating and asked, "So you didn’t confirm the kill?"

"N-No. Please don’t be mad at m–"

"Meh, it doesn’t matter. I know all about the poison and its effectiveness."

"You do? How?"

"Errr. Tobias showed it to me... ANYWAY! Let’s get out of here and have ourselves a proper celebration! My treat!"

"Austin..." Gary smiled and followed him out the toilet room.

They both check their surroundings before sneaking out and leaving the toilet area unnoticed by anyone.

"Alright! We safely made it to the front gate!" Austin skipped ahead with his eyes closed.

"Hahaha, wait for me, Austin! You're moving too fast!"

"Haha! Keep up Georgie! Hahaha! Ahahaha– Oof!" He staggered back as he bumped into someone.

"Austin?"

"P-Principal Valentine?!"

Chapter 78: The Weight Of A Single Snowflake

"What are you doing here, Austin?" Diana folded her arms which pushed up her slightly revealing chest. "Aren't you supposed to be at the dorms assisting the dorm mother?"

"I-I.. Err.. I w-was.. I-I erhm..."

"Eyes up here." She lifted his chin up with her finger.

When he looked up at her, he saw that there was not a hint of gentleness in her eyes.

'F-Fuck. What's her problem? It's not my fault that she dresses the way she does.'

"And so?" She let go of his chin and folded her arms under her chest again. "I asked you a question. Why are you here and not at the dorms?"

Gulp "Because.. erhm.. t-the..."

"Principal Valentine, good afternoon. To you as well, Secretary Mia." Gary, coming in for the save, jumped in front of Austin and stood before what looked like two lions ready to chew him up.

"The dorm mother told Austin that he could take a little break since he was working so hard. So we decided to hang out at the park where President Amber announced that she and the Dorothy twins would be holding an event."

"Working hard you say? Funny, because last time I was at the dorms, you weren't there." Diana raised her eyebrow in suspicion as she looked behind Gary and at Austin.

"W-Well that's... because... I was... busy? Eheheh... Silly me. We all make mistakes, right? It's only human..."

"..."

'Shit! She's not buying it at all! Lord above! Goddess Bula! Somebody save me!'

"... What a gosh darn waste of my afternoon!"

"... Hey, at least we got our coins back, didn't we?"

"... I really wanted to see what would happen to that criminal."

"... We all know THE Emelie Herst is going to clean house anyway, hahaha!"

"Emelie's here? She told me that she was going back to the dorms to pack up and leave for her family's estate." Mia spoke up.

"That does explain the crowd." Diana looked away from Austin and asked Gary, "Is the event over?"

"Oh! Y-Yes ma’am."

"I see. Where’s Emelie then? Is she still inside?"

"Yes ma’am. Along with President Amber and Princess Kiana. I don’t really understand why but we’ve been told to evacuate the park. Apparently, there was some kind of an emergency..."

"Emergency? Has something gone wrong with the event? I think I also heard someone say something about a criminal–"

"MOVE! MOVE OUT THE WAY EVERYONE!" Three prefects were shouting as they ran through the crowd of people and past their way into the entrance gate.

"Principal Valentine! I’m so glad you’re here!" A girl in white uniform noticed Diana while she was running with the prefects and broke away from them.

"Hm? You’re Amy, right? What’s happening? Gary told me that there’s an emergency going on."

"Y-Yes!" Amy stuttered and blushed at Diana remembering who she was. "The people don’t know this, but President Amber told me that the cause of the evacuation is because of Princess Kiana. She’s lost control of her magic and Emelie is the only one who’s keeping her from causing any more collateral damage."

"What? How did she lose control?"

"I-I don’t know. I’m sorry. I was in charge of the entrance fee here up front."

"Gary. Austin." She turned to them, expecting answers.

"I don’t know either." Austin looked down, trying not to draw any more suspicion onto himself.

"It was too foggy because of whatever spell the princess casted." Gary told the partial truth. "We just heard the announcer and President Amber give the call for us to evacuate."

"Could all this be the fault of the criminal which people are talking about?" Mia thought out loud.

"No!" Amy stepped forward and nervously spoke up. "P-Please don't believe what the people are saying! Kurt is not a criminal! Trust me, he's–"

"Kurt?" Diana grabbed Amy by her shoulders and bent down to look her in the eyes. "Did you just say Kurt? As in, Kurt Rossana?"

"Y-Yes, that's the one. He's actual Emelie's partner–"

"Partner for what? Come to think of it, Amber never said what this event was going to be about. Just that she was helping the twins out with something trivial."

"Trivial?" Amy's voice was soft. To her, this 'event' was anything but trivial. Seeing as this was actually meant to be a punishment to Kurt, where if he loses, the consequences could be dire since Kiana was the one calling the shots.

"Amy. Give me the short version of what's going on." Diana demanded.

"Y-Yes ma'am!" She then recounted to her all the main points of what led up to this event taking place. From the accusations of Kurt knocking out Prince Maxwell, Jr., to the fights and bettings that were happening.

Once Amy finished, Diana let go of her shoulders and clicked her tongue in irritation.

'And now the princess has lost so much control of herself that it warrants an evacuation of the whole park? What have you gotten yourself into this time, Rosie...'

"Mia. Give this to Amber when you see her." She reached into her purse and gave her the file that Victor requested she hand over. "I'm going in to put a stop to this nonsense."

"Pfft–!"

"Is something funny, Austin?" She looked to her side and glared at him.

"N-No ma'am! I just thought of something... funny."

"Funny? I'll give you something to laugh about. Go back to the dorms and finish whatever work you have. I'll be back later to give you an additional punishment for skipping out on the times you weren't there."

"But I–!"

"Leave."

"C'mon Ausin." Gary pulled him away. "Stop trying to dig a hole for yourself and let's bail."

"Eurgh! I told you to stop pulling me! I can walk just fine...." Their voices faded into the distance as they left the area.

"Sorry, Mia. But it looks like we're going to have to cancel our little outing."

"It's fine. Just make sure that the students and Kurt are okay. I'll look for Amber and give this file to in the meantime."

"Right. Thank you." She nodded and instantly vanished.

"E-Excuse me, Secretary Mia?"

"Hm? Yes, Amy?" She smiled warmly at her like a loving mother would to her daughter.

"H-How does Principal Valentine know about Kurt?"

"Oh that? Hehehe, that depends. Can you keep a secret?"

"Y-Yes! Absolutely!" She nodded her head to the point of shaking it.

"Well in that case," Mia bent down to whisper in Amy's ear. "You really cannot tell anybody about this, alright?"

Gulp "I won't..."

"The thing is, the principal and Kurt are actually....."

"...Huh?" Amy's face turned from innocent curiosity to a shocked and stunned expression when she learned the truth.

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SHWOOSH

"... So, this is the fog that Gary mentioned." Diana stopped somewhere in the middle of the park as she felt the ice-cold moisture in the air.

She began walking around the lake when she noticed that it was completely frozen over. Suddenly she felt something light and cold fall atop her head. When she grabbed it, it noticed it was and single snowflake that melted almost immediately at her touch.

’This is no joke. I need to find them quickly before I freeze to death. It doesn’t look like they’re here anyway, so let’s try somewhere else.’

Diana teleported away once again, and this time arrived at the open area where most people would hold picnics.

"..old... s-so cold... h-help..m-me...J-Ju..nior..."

"That voice? Kiana! Are you there?!" Diana called to her but cannot see anything due to the mist and fog obscuring her vision.

"P-Ple..ase... I’m s-scared... J-Junior... E-Eme..lie... s-save m-me..."

Diana ran towards the sound of her voice while making extra sure not to trip or slip on the ice below.

"Oh no..." She stopped in front of a nearly completely ice-covered Kiana who had the shape of half a crown forming on her head.

"P-Prin..cipal? H-Help..me *sob*" Kiana started crying when she finally saw someone that could save her, but even her tears had instantly frozen when they left the corner of her eyes.

"Don’t worry. It’s all over now. You can rest easy." Diana held her cheeks as her face was the only place that wasn’t covered in ice.

She then concentrated and helped calm the mana flowing through the princess’s veins just like she did before with Kurt. This method stopped the ice from crawling up her face, after which the ice covering the body cracked as she fainted from over exhaustion and being entirely drained of mana.

She put Kiana’s head under her purse and stood up to look for Kurt and Emelie.

Which took little effort considering that not far from Kiana, she heard the faint sound of someone crying while their voice cracked under their throat.

"..orry... I’m..*sniff* s-sorry...too.. late...please *sob* wake up."

"Emelie?" Diana recognised that voice back and saw that she was faced away and crouching on the ice floor while appearing to be holding something.

Emelie twitched and slowly looked over her shoulder with a sorrowful face that was covered in snot, tears and pure agony.

"P-Principaaal *sob!* He’s *sniff!* he’s not h-healing! I-I don’t have the *sob!* antidote!"

"Who’s not healing?! What happened?! I’ve never seen you like this!" Diana ran around Emelie to see what she was talking about.

And the sight before her led her to fall straight to her knees.

Thud!

"R-Ro..sie?"