THORNS 145

Chapter 145 - Light Sparring

The expansive backyard of the estate had been transformed into a temporary arena. The morning dew still clung to the meticulously manicured grass. In the center of the field, two figures moved with a tempo that was both beautiful and violent.

Julianne sat comfortably near the pool in a lounge chair, sipping a steaming cup of tea. Behind her stood Wendy, her posture as rigid as a statue, though her eyes tracked the combatants with a professional focus.

Diana gripped a long wooden odachi, her silver hair tied back in a high ponytail that whipped through the air as she moved. Kurt stood opposite her, holding a wooden dagger in each hand. They moved in a circle, testing the air and feeling each other out before Diana lunged first.

CLACK!

Wood on wood slammed against each other as they clashed.

Diana pushed with surprising strength for her frame, but Kurt didn't try to match her force. Instead, he twisted his wrists, slid his daggers along the length of her blade and stepped inside her guard. Before she could reset, he hooked his heel behind her ankle and gave a sharp tug while simultaneously shoving her shoulder.

"Ah–!"

Her eyes widened as her center of gravity vanished. As she began to fall backward, Kurt's hand shot out, catching her by the waist and pulling her flush against his chest before she could hit the damp grass.

Diana gasped as her heart hammered against her ribs. Partly from the exertion, partly from the proximity.

"Haa *huff* You... you weren't lying," she panted, looking up at him. "You really could beat me... if no magic was involved."

Kurt grinned, pulling her upright and steadying her. "I told you so. Raw technique doesn't care about mana reserves."

"That's fine and all, Rosie," Diana smoothed her training clothes when a playful smirk returned to her lips. "But it's completely unrealistic. In the real world, no one is going to turn off their mana just to make it a fair fight for you."

"To me, the whole concept of magic is unrealistic. Throwing fire from your fingers? Fighting with telekinesis? Teleporting? Don't get me started."

"Oh, don't be like that." Diana's eyes flashed with competitive spirit. "Come, how about we spar for real? No holds barred. Use everything you've got."

"Are you sure? It's not going to be like last time. I've gotten a lot more experience since our last... encounter."

He held up his right wooden dagger. Slowly, a shimmering, translucent veil of blue energy began to ripple across the wood. It hummed with a low-frequency vibration as the area around the blade began to distort.

"Mana coating? Rosie... that's a high-level knight technique. It hasn't even been long since your body first came into contact with mana. How did you do that?"

"Beat me, then I'll tell you."

Diana's arched an eyebrow. "Is this arrogance I'm hearing?"

"No," Kurt replied, dropping into a low, aggressive stance. "Just think of it as... motivation."

He didn't wait for her to respond back. He blitzed.

Kurt was a blur of motion, his legs reinforced by strengthening magic. But right as his dagger was about to connect with her shoulder, she vanished.

Tingle

’Oh shit–!’

A sharp instinctual prickle at the base of Kurt’s skull made him duck. The wooden odachi whistled through the space where his head had been a fraction of a second prior. He rolled forward, coming up in a crouch as Diana reappeared ten feet away, smiling.

"Nice reflex," she praised.

Kurt didn’t answer and lunged again. He swung a low kick to sweep her legs while simultaneously thrusting with both daggers. His foot connected with nothing but air. Diana vanished again.

He felt the tingle behind him – he spun. Nothing.

He felt the tingle from the left – he dodged. Nothing.

’She’s messing with me.’

Suddenly, the sensation came from directly above. Kurt crossed his arms, reinforcing his forearms with mana.

CLACK!

Diana’s odachi slammed down from the sky, her full weight behind the strike. Kurt groaned as his boots sunk an inch into the soft soil, but he held his ground. Before he could counter, she was gone again.

Tingle

It came from the right, but it was too fast. The wooden blade caught him square in the ribs. The impact sent him tumbling across the grass with a cloud of dust trailing behind him. While rolling, he pushed himself up, coming to a halt. He shook his head and steadied himself.

"Aww~ A little slow on the reaction, Rosie?" Diana taunted, resting her weapon on her shoulder.

Kurt wiped off the dirt on clothes and narrowed his eye as a fierce blue light shone through. He poured more power into his legs, his muscles bulging beneath his trousers and shot himself forward. He moved so fast the grass flattened behind him.

Diana quickly reacted and slammed her foot into the earth.

A thick slab of rock erupted from the ground, blocking Kurt's path. Without losing momentum, he ran vertically up the side of the wall, flipped over the top, and dove at her.

Diana looked up with an expression of pure excitement. As Kurt's mana-coated dagger descended, it passed straight through her image.

Tsk 'Annoying!'

A prickling sensation came from behind the very wall he had just scaled. Kurt didn't turn to dodge or block. He channeled every ounce of mana into his daggers and swung backwards.

BOOM!

The earth wall shattered into a thousand fragments. Behind the debris, Kurt's dagger collided with the tip of Diana's odachi. Right as they collided, a sickening creak filled the air.

Her eyes went wide as a hairline fracture appeared at the tip of her wooden weapon. It raced down the center of the blade as Kurt's dagger ran through. She teleported away just as his daggers sliced the odachi cleanly in half. The two pieces of wood falling into the grass.

Kurt stood amidst the settling dust, breathing hard. He looked at her as she reappeared by the fountain. "Aww~ Better grab a new weapon, Ana." He taunted, mimicking her earlier tone. "I'll wait."

Diana's smile turned cold with the thrill of the hunt. "Oh, you're in trouble now."

She vanished, reappearing a moment later with a fresh training odachi from the rack.

"What's this? Back so fast? I guess you're feeling... motivated, heh."

She looked at Kurt as her voice dripped with a dangerous, loving edge. "Oh Rosie... That's enough talking."

Suddenly, the tingle he's been feeling changed. It wasn't coming from one direction anymore. It felt like his whole body was vibrating, pressing in on him from every angle. Diana disappeared.

Time stopped.

In the span of a single heartbeat, he saw six different Dianas surrounding him, each one frozen in the middle of a different strike. One was aiming for his neck, two for his ribs, one for his legs, and two more from above. Their blades were inching their way closer and closer.

'Is she seriously teleporting so fast that she's created afterimages?'

He spotted a gap in the overhead arc and exploded upward, propelling himself twenty feet into the air.

Time snapped back to normal. The six afterimages converged on the spot he had just occupied, their wooden blades clashing against each other with a sound like a thunderclap.

Diana looked up, her ponytail fluttering. "Cheater! Is that your skill at play?!"

"You’re calling me the cheater?!" Kurt screamed from above.

Not giving him a chance to land, she pointed her hand up towards him. Blue mana swirled around her palm until in condensed itself at a single point in the center. Then, its form changed into flames.

Boof! Boof! Boof!

Three orbs of roaring flame shot toward him.

Mid-air and with no leverage, Kurt performed a series of tight aerial spins, his mana-coated daggers sliced cleanly through the fireballs like they were paper, dissipating the magic before it could burn him.

He landed safely on his feet, his daggers glowing brighter than ever.

"Y’know, Diana. I heard you could also use mana coating."

Diana flipped her ponytail back and went into stance. "That’s right, I can. But this is just light sparring, Rosie. I’d rather not use it."

"Don’t be like that. Show me."

"My wooden weapon wouldn’t be able to handle the pressure of my specific mana type."

"My weapons are doing just fine though," Kurt countered.

"Hahaha, oh Rosie. What you’re using is the beginning stage of mana coating. Raw reinforcement. There is so much more to it than that."

"More?"

"Much more. But I won’t show you here. I’d rather not put you or the mansion at risk."

"I can handle it. Come on, don’t pull your punches."

Diana looked at him for a long moment, then turned toward the porch. "Mom! We’ll be right back!"

Julianne just waved lazily from her chair.

Diana walked over to Kurt and took his hand. Then, the world turned inside out and a second later, the smell of fresh grass was replaced by the salty scent of the ocean.

"This is... the island we were stranded on." Kurt noticed when looking around.

"I thought it would be the perfect place to showcase my little demonstration." Diana smiled, letting go of his hand.

She walked away from him, her boots crunching on the sand until she was fifty feet away. She let out a long breath and stretched her arm out to the side.

The gem that hung around her chest began to glow with a blinding crimson light. A rip appeared in the air, and a long, curved odachi with a crimson steel blade slid into her hand.

She fell into a wide, low stance, the tip of her blade pointed at him.

"Don’t worry, Rosie, I won’t actually hit you with this. I just want you to see what the finished product looks like. But... you might want to raise your guard. Just in case."

Chapter 146 - Lesson Time

While she held that low, predatory stance, a swirling vortex of energy swirled around the blade until the entire length of the steel was coated in a layer of brilliant blue mana.

"This, as I’m sure you know, is mana coating."

Kurt felt his throat go dry. The mana was far denser than the shroud he had managed to produce on his wooden daggers. It perfectly enshrouded the entire blade with no wasted energy.

’It’s so... refined.’

"It isn’t something just anyone can do," Diana continued, fixing her gaze squarely on him.

"What we are both doing is essentially taking the mana that flows through our own bodies and forcing it to take a physical, external form. The entire world operates on mana; it’s in the air, the water, the stones and anything that’s considered alive.

Yet, people cannot control it in its purest essence. It’s like trying to grab smoke with your bare hands.

There are alchemists who spend their entire lives trying to refine mana into its raw, un-elemental state. But the risks outweigh the gain. Pure mana is volatile. One mistake and you could erase a city or worse from existence. There’s also the case of the source... That’s why it was outlawed centuries ago."

"Are you talking about children and the blood alchemists?" Kurt’s expression darkened. "The ones Tobias had hidden away in those labs?"

Diana’s blade lowered slightly. "Tobias had... actual blood alchemists? Rosie, are you serious?"

"You didn’t see them?"

"I mainly cut down anyone that got in my way until I found you. I have yet to read the full report about what happened on that island."

"I see. Well, I killed them before they could do any more harm. And yeah, they were extracting blood from children. If I remember right, it had something to do with the fact that the mana in young children hasn’t fully developed its purpose yet."

"I’m surprised you know that."

"Tobias gave me, along with others, a quick rundown at the king’s palace."

Diana’s face went pale as a flicker of genuine disgust crossed her features before she steeled herself.

"You guessed correctly. The mana inside a young child’s blood is the closest thing alchemists have ever found to the strongest essence in the world. That, and mana crystals, which are the primary vessels for absorption."

"What’s the difference?" Kurt asked. "Between the crystals and... the blood?"

"Purity and function," Diana began to explain.

"It’s simple, really. Mana crystals absorb mana that has already developed a function. Think of it like this: certain plants contain mana with specific properties. Be it healing, poison, fire resistance, so on and so forth.

If that plant grows near a mana crystal, the crystal won’t touch it while it’s a seedling. It waits. Only after the plant is fully grown and the mana has developed its purpose for the plant to exist in the first place, does the crystal absorb it. The plant then withers away because all its mana was sucked dry."

Kurt nodded slowly. "I get it. The crystal wants the ’finished’ product."

"Exactly. But alchemists discovered that mana that has yet to be developed contains power in its purest, most malleable form. In the right hands, it’s a miracle. In the wrong hands... it’s a weapon of mass destruction. It’s the ultimate canvas.

However, they cannot use mana from a seedling since it only has a limited amount, and it grows too quickly to make any real progress. Animals don’t contain mana and monsters are too structurally different that makes it difficult to study.

And that’s where they discovered that the best source of mana in its purest form is in the blood of children..."

Diana shook her head and brought her blade back up. "Mana coating is the closest a warrior can get to that purity. We are manipulating the mana inside ourselves and giving it shape before it can be ’assigned’ a task.

You see, usually, our bodies act as a filter. They convert raw mana and tie it to a basic element of law: Earth, Fire, Water, Wind, Light and Dark."

"What about lightning or ice?" Kurt asked. "I’ve seen people use those."

"Intermediates," she replied. "Either you train the element your body was born with to a higher state, or you simply have a freakish talent for it.

A gifted fire user can refine their element until it converts into lightning. Water becomes ice. Earth becomes nature. Light into holy magic. Most people are born with one affinity, but do note that there are others, like me, who were born with multiple."

"That’s fine and all but what do the elements have to do with mana coating?" Kurt’s curiosity piqued. "If we’re using mana in its... uhm... ’semi-purest’ form, shouldn’t the element be irrelevant?"

Diana offered him a dangerous smile. "That’s where the next step comes in."

Suddenly, the atmospheric pressure on the beach tripled. Kurt felt the air get sucked out of his lungs. The wind stopped and the waves seemed to move slowly.

"By the way Rosie. There are another two more elements. Elements that almost no one is born with. Time... and Space."

She took a breath, and the sand beneath her boots began to swirl in a perfect circle.

"My main affinity is Space. The secret to true power isn't just coating your blade in mana; it's taking the element your body is most acclimated to and finely merging it with that coating. Instead of letting your body convert mana into an element, you fuse the 'Law' with the 'Essence'."

The blue mana on her blade started to tremble violently. The pressure intensified until Kurt felt a bead of cold sweat roll down his forehead. He instinctively stepped back one foot touching the water.

Then, the mana on Diana blade simply... vanished.

Kurt blinked, his one eye scanning the crimson steel. From where he was standing it looked like a normal sword again.

"What happened? Where'd it go?"

"It's still there, Rosie," she said. "It's just... hmmm. Here, just watch."

She slowly sliced the blade through the empty air in front of her. There was no whistling sound, no gust of wind. Instead, the air itself seemed to screech. A visible, jagged crack formed in the space she had cut. A literal tear in the fabric of the world that hung there like a piece of broken glass.

Kurt was speechless. He had seen her teleport, but seeing her wound reality was something else entirely.

"Ready your guard," Diana commanded sharply. "I am about to hit you with my weakest attack. And don't hold back, I'd hate to see you hurt."

Not needing to be told twice, he pushed his mana to the absolute limit, coating his wooden daggers in the thickest blue shroud he could muster. He planted his feet in the sand and braced for impact.

Diana drew a long, slow vertical cut across the air in front of her. The air trembled violently as a second crack appeared. Then, with a flicker of movement too fast for his eye to track, she swung her blade into the crack.

Kurt didn’t see a visible magical wave. He barely caught her movements when–

BOOOM!

Before he could even process what happened, an impact of astronomical proportions slammed into his chest. Sounds of horror screams ringed all around him and the very space he stood at trembled violently.

Unable to withstand it, he was launched backward. The air left his lungs in a ragged gasp. He didn’t hit the water, but rather, he went straight through it. He was blown hundreds of yards back, skipping across the surface like a stone until he slammed into the sandy floor of the ocean bed, which had somehow been exposed.

Kurt lay there for a moment, his vision swimming and blurry. He tried to move his arms, but they felt completely numb and unresponsive. Looking down, his heart skipped a beat.

The mana coating had been completely stripped away, and the wooden daggers he had been holding were reduced to splinters and dust in his hands.

When he forced himself to sit up, he saw a sight that made his jaw drop.

"Oh my God..."

He was sitting on the wet sand of the ocean floor. To his left and right, the ocean had been split perfectly in half. Two towering walls of seawater, hundreds of feet high, stood suspended in mid-air, frozen like glass.

He turned around and saw the split stretched far across the ocean, cutting a straight path all the way to the horizon. The water was caught in a state of suspended animation, with not a single drop falling back down into the trench.

SHWOOSH

Diana appeared in front of him breathing perfectly even. She looked down at him, her eyes softening into a playful, curious expression.

"So," she asked, tilting her head. "What do you think?"

Kurt looked at the miles of divided ocean, then back at his trembling, empty hands. He let out a dry, nervous chuckle that turned into a cough.

"Haha... Yeah. That was... I don’t know what the hell that was..."

Diana laughed, reaching down to offer him her hand. "You did well to survive the shockwave. I did my best to hold back and as you can see, this is the result."

Kurt took her hand, letting her pull him to his feet. He looked at the walls of water, fascinated. "How long will it stay like this?"

"Until I release the spatial tension," she said. "Or until my mana runs out. Whichever comes first. But that’s the point, Rosie. I didn’t just ’hit’ you. I moved the space you were standing in and collided it with the space my blade was in. There is no defense against the world itself folding on top of you."

"You’re amazing, Ana," he said softly, his voice full of genuine awe.

Diana’s cheeks flushed a soft pink, her dangerous aura vanishing instantly. She tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, suddenly looking like the girl who had been eating muffins on his lap an hour ago.

"W-Well... I am the Principal of the Future Academy. Basically, the strongest there is. I have to be a little impressive, right?"

"A little?" Kurt laughed. "You just parted the sea because you wanted to show off. I read of a guy that did this with the power of God. I didn’t realize I was dating one."

"Oh, stop it," she giggled, shoving his shoulder lightly. "You’re the one who survived it. Now, come on. Let’s go home and clean up."

She grabbed his hand, the warmth of her palm a stark contrast to the chilling power she had just unleashed. With a final look at the split horizon, she snapped her fingers and the water began to fall.

Right as it was about to hit them however, they vanished back onto the lush green grass of their estate.