THORNS 149

Chapter 149 - Sticks And Stones

Standing there, dressed in a sleek, midnight-blue kimono with a long katana strapped to her hip, was Izumi Ayako. Her dark eyes were fixed on him, and a small, enigmatic smile played on her lips.

"What a pleasant surprise to see you here, Rossana-sama."

"You're surprised?" Kurt blinked, genuinely confused. "Shouldn't I be saying that? Don't you have a tournament to prepare for?"

"Haha, and that is exactly what I'm doing. I am here to take on a request. I find that I need a bit of a warm-up before the tournament on Friday. A real blade feels different when it hasn't tasted blood in a few days."

'A battle junkie. Got it.'

"Wait a minute. Friday?" Kurt arched an eyebrow. "That's only two days away. Shouldn't you be resting, or meditating, or whatever it is you high-tier fighters do?"

Ayako smiled as a genuine flicker of warmth softened her eyes. "Thank you for showing concern for my well-being. It is a rare trait in our world. But do not fret; I am fine. I have no intention of taking on anything that would truly tax me. Just a small excursion to keep my senses sharp."

As they spoke, the atmosphere in the guild hall shifted from mockery to utter confusion. The whispers were no longer about Kurt's "dud" status, but about the bizarre sight before them.

".... Is that... Isn't she the Heiress of the Izumi clan?"

".... Why is she talking to the F-rank scrub?"

"... Look at how she's smiling. They look like friends..."

Ayako’s sharp ears caught the shifting tide of the room. Her smile didn’t leave her face, but her eyes grew cold as she scanned the surrounding adventurers.

"Rossana-sama, why are these people speaking about you as if you are nothing? Their tone is... disrespectful."

Kurt shrugged with a bored expression. "It’s just a misunderstanding on their part. They put a lot of stock in that glass orb on the counter. Since it didn’t light up for me, they’ve decided I’m a nobody."

"And you do not correct them? You let them speak to you this way?"

"It’s not my job to teach them. They’ll come to respect me in due time. Or they won’t. It doesn’t change what I can do. Besides, there’s the saying; Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

Ayako paused, studying him for a long moment when a small, appreciative laugh escaped her lips. "I like that. Such confidence is more regal than any title. But," she gestured to the board behind him, "why are you lingering by the F-rank section? Surely the S-rank requests at the receptionist desk are more your speed?"

"Because I am F-rank."

Ayako blinked, her poise momentarily faltering. "Truly? I find that hard to believe."

"It’s the truth. What about you? What rank did the guild give someone like you?"

"Oh, I am still a student. Students of any academy are not permitted to be official members of the Adventurers Guild until they graduate. And even if I weren’t, I am the heir to my clan; that’s where my duty lies."

"Then why are you here looking for a request?"

"I am sightseeing," she said with a playful wink. "The guild happened to be on my list of ’interesting landmarks’ in Eldoria. I thought I might ’borrow’ a request if something caught my eye, hehehe."

The heavy thud of boots announced the return of the eight-foot giant. He cleared his throat loudly, ignoring Kurt entirely as he bowed toward Ayako.

"Lady Izumi," the man rumbled as his voice dripped with forced politeness. "It is a profound honor to see you in our humble hall. My name is Bigi. My team and I are currently preparing for a B-rank subjugation in the southern woods. We are one person short, and it would be the highlight of our careers if you would join us."

Ayako didn’t even turn her head as she turned her eyes at him. "I was busy speaking to someone else, ’Bigi.’ Have you no manners? Or does your size preclude the need for common courtesy?"

Bigi stiffened, his face flushing when a wicked smile touched the corner of his lips. "My lady, I only meant to offer a more... meaningful use of your time. This person you are speaking to is nothing but a hack. A showoff nobody that hides behind his maid. Surely a warrior of your stature would prefer the company of real adventurers."

"A hack?" she repeated the word.

Kurt let out an internal sigh. He knew exactly where this was going. He turned toward Isabel, who looked ready to attack him at any moment. "Isabel," he whispered. "Can I just grab any of these and leave?"

"Yes, Master," she whispered back. "Once you have the poster, the request is technically yours until you fail or complete it."

Nodding, he reached out and yanked the first parchment his hand touched without even looking at it. He turned to leave, but as he moved, a massive, calloused hand clamped onto his shoulder.

"I wasn’t done talking, hack. Go on. Tell Lady Izumi about the type of fake person you are."

Kurt stopped but didn’t turn around. "Baldy... let go of me."

Isabel stepped out from behind Kurt, her voice shaky but determined. "Please... let go of my Master. He hasn’t done anything to you. Must I report this to the guild master?"

Bigi laughed, looking at the crowd. "See? Look at him! Hiding behind the maid! Why don’t you man up for once in your privileged little life."

Tsk "What is your problem? I’m just trying to leave."

"You’re the problem," Bigi spat. "I don’t care that your F-rank; everyone has to start somewhere. But you come in here like some kind of big shot and spout lies about you using mana coating, knowing it will raise your credibility. Now you hide behind your maid when confronted? Someone has to teach you a lesson, no?"

Ayako reached for her sword, her aura beginning to flare, but Kurt put a hand on her arm, stopping her.

He then reached up, grabbed Bigi’s wrist, and peeled the giant’s hand off his shoulder with a strength that made the man’s eyes widen in brief shock. Kurt shoved the hand away and walked toward the exit, Isabel trailing closely behind.

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"""AHAHAHAHA!""" The guild erupted in laughter as he walked away.

"That’s right, run along!" Bigi shouted. "And don’t bother coming back! We don’t need fucking ’tourists’ like you here!"

Ayako stood there for a second, watching Kurt retreating back. She looked at Bigi and the crowd with utter contempt. "You all truly don’t know who you were just talking to, do you? You didn’t recognize the name ’Kurt Rossana’? I would have thought he’d be a lot more well known."

The name rippled through the crowd.

"... Kurt Rossana? That bloody man running around town covered in blood about a week ago?"

"... I think my ma mentioned that he spanked the princess in public."

"... Wait a second! Isn't he the one they call–"

"... Diana Valentine's lover?"

The laughter died out, replaced by a sudden, chilling realisation.

Ayako sighed as she shook her head. "I suppose I should have kept that quiet. It's more fun when they find out the hard way." She then turned around and followed Kurt out into the late morning gray skies.

"Rossana-sama! Please wait!" She caught up and walked beside them. "I see you took parchment from the board. So, what 'grand quest' did you pick out?"

"Ahh, this?" Kurt unfolded the parchment and showed it to her. "Apparently it's a herb gathering request."

"Oh, Master Rossana... those don't grow in the city. We'll have to leave Eldoria in order to find those." Isabel said as she peered at the paper.

"Really? All that way for flowers? Damn... Well, it was nice seeing you, Izumi-san. But it looks like we've got a long drive ahead just for some weeds. See you around."

"Actually... Can I join you?"

"Aren't you on a sightseeing tour? I'd hate to interrupt whatever you got going on with herb gathering."

"I don’t mind at all. In fact, this is the perfect opportunity to see the world outside of Eldoria. What better way to explore than in good company? Besides, I owe you for the... misunderstanding inside."

Kurt smiled. "Alright. Come along then. Our carriage is right here."

"Excellent!"

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Far beyond the safe city walls, deep within the shadows of the forest, the air was thick with the scent of decay and fresh blood.

Gary lay sprawled on the dirt, his breathing ragged and shallow. His clothes were torn, and his skin was a mess of bruises and lacerations. Surrounding him were the twitching, severed carcasses of dozens of Giant Centipedes.

"Haa *huff* Austin... Whatever it takes... I have to... s-save him..."

He tried to push himself up, but his strength failed him. He limped forward a few paces before his knees gave out, and he fell hard against a mossy root. As his vision began to fade into blackness, he reached out one last time.

"Aus..tin..."

Silence. The only thing that could be heard was the rustling of trees as wind pushed against it.

Until–

"Heh. Hahaha. Ahahaha!"

A mysterious figure, cloaked in tattered grey rags, stepped out from behind a massive oak tree. The figure looked down at Gary's unconscious form with a tilted head. Without a word, the figure reached down, hoisted Gary's limp body onto their shoulder as if he weighed nothing, and vanished deeper into the gloom of the forest.

Chapter 150 - Dancing Petals

The carriage carrying Kurt and Ayako inside had arrived at the grand gates of Eldoria. When they finally reached the head of the queue, Isabel pulled on the reins, bringing the horses to a rhythmic halt.

"Good morning, sir." Isabel greeted the guardsman.

"Morning. Reason for egress?"

Isabel reached into her apron and handed the F-rank request form Kurt had snatched from the board. The guard took the parchment, scanned the seal of the Adventurer's Guild, and nodded. "Herb gathering. Simple enough. Carry on."

He handed the paper back and let them through. But as the carriage began to roll forward, the guard's expression shifted as if he had remembered something.

"Wait! Hang on a minute, missy! One more thing!"

The carriage stopped and Kurt poked his head out the window to ask, "Is there a problem?"

"Maybe," the guard said, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Just a word of advice. Recently, near the area where those herbs grow, there've been rumors. Whispers of suspicious activity. Nothing concrete, so no official notice has been sent, but I'd be extra vigilant if I were you."

"Suspicious activity, huh? Got it. Thanks for the heads-up."

"No problem. Stay safe," the guard replied, returning to his post as the carriage finally cleared the threshold of the city.

For the first time since arriving in this world, Kurt looked out at the horizon beyond the capital. The sprawling fields of Eldoria gave way to rolling emerald hills and dense, ancient forests that seemed to hum with a life of their own.

"Isabel," Kurt called out to the driver's seat. "Did you know anything about those rumors?"

"N-No, Master Rossana. Actually, I rarely leave the city walls. This is... actually my first time seeing the outside of Eldoria."

"That so? Mine as well," Kurt admitted, leaning back against the plush seat.

Ayako, who had been sitting across from him in quiet contemplation, tilted her head. "Truly? You are not from the capital? You carry yourself with such... familiarity."

"O-Oh! No, you see, I am – or rather was – a traveler... of sorts. I came here by boat from Riverton but decided to settle here because I... found... my people... yup."

'What the hell am I saying!?'

"Riverton? Us Myrian's are neighbours, yet I haven't heard so much as a whisper of someone like you residing there. A man of your caliber doesn't usually go unnoticed."

"That's good," Kurt lied as he dropped his voice into a low, mysterious tone. "I lived in secret for many years, honing my skills in isolation. I wasn't exactly looking for fame."

Ayako’s smile turned predatory as she looked at him with raw admiration. She leaned forward and her eyes locked onto his. "Isolated training... no wonder you are so... strong. I can feel the weight of those years behind your eye."

Kurt felt a sudden, sharp chill creep up his spine. Not unlike Diana who would give off a loving, possessive vibe. Her gaze was like a blade resting against his throat, measuring the distance before she’d cut. But the feeling vanished as quickly as it came. Ayako turned away, looking out the window as the scenery opened up into a breathtaking vista of wild fields.

’This girl... she’s dangerous.’

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The rest of the ride was spent in uncharacteristic peace. Nearing their destination, they passed through a quiet village about an hour and some change away from the city. Just a humble collection of thatched-roof cottages where the people waved at the passing carriage with genuine, weathered smiles. It was a stark contrast to the bustling energy of the capital.

Soon, the air grew humid, and cool and the carriage pulled to a stop at the end of a dirt road that led to a beautiful flower field and giant lake.

Kurt stepped out before Isabel could open the door. "Damn. It’s beautiful."

"Master Rossana, here’s your basket for the herbs" Isabel hopped down, handing him a string basket they received from the village they rode through. "And please be careful. Remember, the villagers mentioned not to enter the lake or even touch the surface. Monsters lurk just beneath the reflection. They are sensitive to vibrations."

"You think that’s why this request was put up for adventurers? Because the doctors or whoever are too scared to pick them?" Kurt asked when looking at the field and lake.

"Most likely. That, and the adventurers could make quick work of it while the alchemist and healers could focus on their own work."

"Ahhh. A win-win situation."

Ayako, standing at the edge of the lake, let out a soft giggle. She unclipped her katana from the sash around her waist and held the sheathed weapon in her hand.

"Little lake monsters? They are no match for us, Rossana-sama. In fact, let's see just how 'dangerous' they really are."

"Huh? Izumi-san, wait–"

But she was already gone.

A flurry of pink sakura petals swirled in the air where she had stood, and a split second later, she appeared in the very center of the lake. She didn't sink. She stood with the tip of her foot resting ever-so-gently on the surface of the water.

She stood there, a lone figure in midnight blue against the crystal water and smiled at Kurt.

She dapped the surface with her sword when suddenly, the surface erupted. A piranha-like monster, with jagged, metallic jaws and teeth, launched itself out of the depths directly at her head.

Ayako didn't even move her feet. With a movement so fast it was almost invisible, she unsheathed an inch of her blade and slammed it back into the scabbard. The fish was sliced cleanly in half in mid-air, and its remains hit the water with two distinct splashes.

This caused the lake to begin shaking erratically.

"Izumi-san! Get back here!" Kurt screamed. "You're waking them all up!"

Ayako didn't listen as a manic, ecstatic light sparked in her eyes. "Come."

Hundreds of the piranha monsters burst from the water like silver missiles. Then, Ayako began to move. She skipped and jumped across the surface as if she were dancing in a ballroom, swinging her blade at anything that came in her proximity. Every step left a trail of Sakura petals; every swing left a spray of dark blood.

"Izumi-san! Izumi!"

Kurt kept screaming for her to return, but she was lost in the rhythm of the slaughter. She was laughing all the while. Her dark whipped around her as the pristine blue lake slowly began to turn a sickening, murky red.

"AYAKO! STOP IT NOW!

Finally, she snapped her head toward him, blinking as if waking from a dream. At that moment, a massive piranha lunged at her blind spot. Its jaws snapped shut, passing through nothing but petals.

Ayako reappeared instantly by Kurt's side, sheathing her sword with a satisfied click. She was panting slightly but had the brightest smile he'd seen from her yet.

However, Kurt was not having it. "What the hell were you thinking!?"

"What do you mean?" Ayako asked as her smile faltered.

"That! Look at the lake, Izumi-san!"

"Izumi-san...?" Ayako confusingly said her own name while looking toward the lake and back to him. "I was only taking out the monsters. No harm done."

"No harm–? You turned a scenic landmark into a slaughterhouse! We aren't here to play 'Exterminator.' We're here to pick flowers. Do you have any idea what you just did?"

"I don’t understand why you are angry." Ayako tilted her head quizzically. "If anything, I did the people a favour by thinning the monsters, didn’t I?"

"No! It’s the opposite! We literally just rode past a village. Those people live off this land. What if they need those fish to eat or something? Or what if the blood attracts something even worse from that forest?" Kurt pointed behind them to the woods.

"When we passed those villagers, they didn’t ask us to kill the fish. They just warned us to be careful. They’ve lived with those monsters for who knows how long. You can’t just go around breaking the ecosystem. Besides, don’t you think something would’ve been done if those monsters were really a problem?"

Ayako’s eyes went wide. She looked back at the red-stained water, then toward the direction from which they came. The realisation hit her hard. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked down at her feet in genuine shame.

"I... I didn’t think... I truly am sorry, Rossana-sama."

"Why did you even do it?" Kurt asked softly but still stern.

"I just..." Ayako bit her lip. "I just... I wanted to have some fun. And... admittedly... I wanted to show off to you a little. I wanted you to see what I am capable of."

Kurt was taken aback. He looked at Isabel, who looked just as saddened by the ruined lake. He scratched the back of his head, feeling a pang of guilt for yelling so hard at her. He then reached out and placed a hand on Ayako’s shoulder.

She flinched violently at the touch, her body tensing as if expecting a strike. Kurt saw her trembling. It was a deep-rooted fear that seemed out of place for a girl who just fought a hundred monsters and exudes such elegance.

"Hey," Kurt said gently. "Look up, Izumi-san."

She slowly raised her eyes to his.

"As long as you understand the mistake, it’s all good," he said, giving her shoulder a small, reassuring squeeze. "Just remember, as cheesy as this sounds, strength isn’t just about how many things you can kill. It’s about knowing when not to. Unless you’re dealing with an evil piece of shit, of course."

Ayako visibly relaxed as a wave of relief washed over her. "I see. Thank you, Rossana-sama. I will remember your words."

"Cool. Now... What are we going to do about the lake? We can’t just leave it like this."

Isabel stepped forward and spoke softly. "I can clear the blood, Master."

"How? That’s nearly the whole lake."

"Don’t you remember? I have an earth affinity. More specifically, Nature." she explained.

She then knelt at the water’s edge and dipped her hand ever-so-gently into the red-tinted waves. Immediately, a circle of pure, crystalline blue began to radiate from her fingertips. "I can push the impurities away from the center. Once the blood is gathered in one spot, I can extract it. It will take about an hour."

Ayako stepped forward, her eyes bright with a sudden determination to fix her mess.

"Let me handle it, Isabel. You shouldn’t have to work for an hour because of my foolishness."

Isabel, confused, nodded and made way.

Ayako walked to the edge. She drew her katana and dipped just the very tip of the blade into the water.

A hum filled the air. Suddenly, the entire lake began to glow with a brilliant, multifaceted light.

Suddenly, she slashed her sword upward in a grand arc. And as if gravity had been reversed, every single drop of blood and every scrap of the dead fish remains rose out of the lake at once, forming a massive, swirling red orb in the sky.

She then fell into a low stance and slashed twice in quick succession.

Two vertical strikes cut through the air. From the first, a giant roaring wave of fire erupted; from the second, a massive current of purple lightning followed. The two elements collided in the center of the blood-orb.

KABOOOM!

The blood and remains exploded in a brilliant flash of heat and light. The cluster remained suspended mid-air as the fireworks continued. Soon enough it stopped and revealed itself to be incinerated into fine, grey ash.

Ayako then made a circular motion with her blade, carving a moderate hole in the dirt nearby. With a flick of her wrist, she used a gust of wind magic to guide the falling ashes into the hole, then covered the dirt back over it.

She sheathed her sword and turned back to them, a cute, innocent smile on her face.

"It is finished."

Kurt and Isabel stood there, jaws dropped, staring at the lake which was now perfectly blue and pristine once again.

"Okay," Kurt blinked, impressed. "I guess... I guess we should go pick those flowers now."