THORNS 193

Chapter 193 - Closing Thoughts & Speech

["WHAT A SPECTACULAR CONCLUSION TO THE OPENING ROUND!"] Commentator Ken's voice echoed through the stadium.

The holographic scoreboard in the sky slowly transitioned from the qualifying text to a peaceful, rotating montage of the day's most explosive clashes.

["We have seen royal blood spilled, magnificent magic unveiled, and a sudden-death tiebreaker that will – without a doubt – be talked about for generations to come!"]

He then turned his head toward his royal co-host and offered a tired smile.

["Princess Faye, before we wrap up our broadcast and hand the keys of the stadium over to the academy administration for the closing remarks... I think it's only fair that we indulge the audience in a classic tradition.

["Let's talk about our personal choices for the day. If you had to name one student who completely embodied the spirit, the power, and the sheer spectacle of Day One... who is your VIP?"]

Faye closely watched the floating particles of pink sakura petals that were still gently drifting across the ruined stone pit below. She let out a slow breath and shifted her features into a thoughtful expression.

["That is quite the difficult question you threw at me, Ken."] Faye murmured as a teasing smirk played at the corner of her lips.

["Especially considering my own little brother decided to casually shock the entire continental hierarchy by flaring divine mana out of nowhere. But... if I have to cast aside my obvious familial bias, I would have to say my VIP for Day One is the Captain of Riverton, Nichole Firestar."]

["Nichole Firestar? I mean, she put up an amazing performance in that final triple threat, but she did ultimately end up taking a one-way flight through the enhanced protective barrier courtesy of Myria's finest. You're picking someone who technically lost the sudden-death match?"]

["It’s precisely because of how she lost. Nichole entered that arena with nothing but a giant slab of iron, raw human determination, and a near-flawless mastery over Mana Coating and Mana Infusion. She forced Izumi Ayako – a literal prodigy, said to be the second coming of Myria’s hero, Layla Wright – to be on the back foot. She showed the entire world what it means to never give up. That is why she, like Izumi said, has earned my respect."]

["That’s some high praise coming from you, Your Highness,"] Commentator Ken nodded his head in agreement before a bright grin returned to his face.

["But I’m a man who appreciates a good old-fashioned dominant showstopper! So, for my personal VIP... even though her methods were borderline traumatizing for the medical staff, I have to give it to Eldoria’s own Amber Strongwill!"]

["Haha, of course you would.]

["Hey, you cannot argue with the results! Match Ten was supposed to be a tactical battle for points. Instead, Amber stepped onto that arena floor and completely bent her opponents over. She used an opponent’s own weapon to knock him out, slammed her opposition to the ground like a nail, and literally stomped her way to victory!

["It was brutal and unhinged... but my goodness, it was the single most entertaining display of pure, unadulterated power I have ever witnessed in my entire broadcasting career!"]

His expression then softened as he looked out over the fractured arena floor.

["But as incredible as today was... it was merely the prologue. Tomorrow, the remaining survivors of Team Eldoria and Team Myria will face off in an entirely different beast. Day Two: The Gauntlet."]

["Indeed,"] Faye’s eyes narrowed with anticipation. ["Tomorrow’s battle will be nothing short of a war-torn blood bath. But for now, audience of the world... it is time to officially close the curtains on Day One. Let’s pass the mic over to the Principal of Future Academy, Diana Valentine!"]

Down at the lower VIP seats, Diana smoothly stood up and brushed an imaginary speck of dust from her blazer. She glanced down at Kurt's relaxed profile and smiled softly.

"Well, Rosie. Duty calls. I'll probably be quite busy over the next few hours dealing with... well, a lot. No need to wait for me and try not to get into any ridiculous trouble on my campus while I am away."

"Ha, no promises. Don't overwork yourself. I'll see you later."

"Mmhm. Later."

SHWOOSH

Teleporting into the shattered stone arena, Diana began to give her speech.

"Greetings to you all once again. Today, we have witnessed the definition of excellence. To the representatives of Tricea and Riverton – though your journey in this tournament concludes here today, let it be known that your effort was nothing short of magnificent.

"You pushed our host nation to the absolute brink, you demonstrated the pinnacle of technological innovation and a warrior's resilience, and you have left an honorable mark upon the history of this academy.

"True strength is not merely defined by victory, but by the courage to stand unyielding against overwhelming odds. You have earned our highest respect."

The coliseum erupted into a respectful wave of applause towards the Riverton and Tricean representatives.

Diana then turned her gaze toward the southern and eastern stands, flashing her eyes with expectant brilliance.

"And to our qualifiers – Team Eldoria and Team Myria – congratulations. You have survived the first crucible. But do not allow the sweet taste of today's victories to make you complacent. Tomorrow, the rules of engagement will change drastically. The arena will transform, strategy will deepen and the pressure will multiply.

"Prepare your minds, hone your strategies, and brace yourselves for a war of attrition. For now... Day One is officially dismissed! You are all free to explore the Future Academy campus. Our plazas, international marketplaces, and exclusive cultural exhibitions brought from every corner of the world will remain open through the night. Enjoy the hospitality of Eldoria, and let us look forward to the dawn of tomorrow!"

Two sides of the coliseum ruptured into a beautiful chaos of thunderous applause, flying banners, and roaring cheers. The other two, not so much.

With the formal constraints of the tournament dissolved, the seventy thousand spectators slowly began to stand up from their seats, laughing, chatting, and filing toward the exit archways.

"Mmmm~! Aaahh... Man! My legs feel like jelly." Sadie stood up to stretch and nudged Kurt's shoulder playfully. "Alright Bossman, what's the plan now?"

"Yeah, I was just thinking about taking a stroll around. See what kind of merchandise the international crews brought over. See what their culture is like and all that."

"I hope you don't mind if I join you on that excursion, Kurt," a cool and composed voice suddenly chimed in from behind them.

The group turned their heads in unison.

"Miss Emelie!" Hope hopped forward and waved her tiny hands enthusiastically. "You looked so super cool and strong out there!"

Emelie knelt down slightly and adjusted her little maid's headband. "Thanks, Hope. I appreciate the compliment."

Meanwhile, Sadie completely froze up. Her usual loudmouthed demeanor vanished into thin air, replaced by a comical expression of geeked-out reverence. She desperately scrambled backward and hid her entire body directly behind Kurt's torso. Only her wide, starstruck eyes peeked out over his shoulder as she squealed in a cute whisper.

"Oh shit oh shit oh shit! It's Emelie... this is the second time I'm seeing her so close... U-Uhm! C-Congrats on the match, Emelie! You were so super c-cool!"

From the side Christy and her stern-faced guardian, Gloria, approached the group.

The Saintess clapped her dainty hands together, her blue eyes sparkling with genuine admiration as she offered Emelie a warm nod.

"Yes, congratulations on a splendid victory, Miss Emelie! Eldoria is very fortunate to have you representing them tomorrow."

"Thank you, Saintess Christy, and thank you, Sadie. Though, truth be told, I did not actually do much out there today."

"Say, Emy," Kurt asked. "You say you want to join us, but shouldn't you be back with the rest of your team? Tomorrow's a pretty important day. I figured you guys would be locked in a strategy room somewhere, mapping out the entire blueprint for The Gauntlet."

"Nah. I'll meet up with the others later tonight. Besides, both Kiana and Junior are currently occupying the medical bays being treated. So I have plenty of free time until the evening, when everyone is present."

"Ooh! In that case, I want to join the stroll too!" Christy's eyes lit up as she eagerly took a step toward Kurt. "Let's all explore together!"

"Absolutely not, Your Holiness," Gloria stateded sharply in a tone that brooked zero arguments.

"We must depart immediately. We have a confidential meeting with the Pope. Furthermore, as the Saintess of the Church, it is your duty to accompany the priests to the medical bays and oversee the final recovery blessings for the injured students. Your schedule is locked for the rest of the afternoon."

Christy's entire face comically collapsed into a sad pout at the news. She slumped her shoulders forward and let out a miserable groan. "Boo Granny. You... are a literal anti-fun warden. A true dream-crusher if you will."

Knowing she couldn't escape her duty, the young Saintess turned around slowly and quivered her lower lip playfully as she raised a sad hand to wave goodbye to Kurt, Sadie, Emelie and Hope.

"Have fun without me, guys... eat a skewer in my honor... bye-bye..." She was practically dragged away by the back of her robes by an unbothered Gloria, disappearing down the main walkway.

Kurt chuckled while shaking his head as he watched them leave. "Well, that leaves the four of–"

"Excuse me," a soft voice suddenly cutting through the ambient noise of the crowd. "If you happen to have one more open spot in your little traveling party... I would deeply appreciate the opportunity to join you as well."

'Uh-oh. That way of speaking is...'

The group all turned their heads toward the source of the eloquent voice.

"Izumi-san..."

"Hehehe~ Good afternoon, Rossana-sama."

Chapter 194 - Back For Round Two

Sling—Pop!

"Wow! Damn, Bossman! That was amazing! You hit that thing right at the perfect angle! It didn't even look like you were trying!" Sadie clapped as her face lit up in awe.

Kurt smoothly lowered the fake wooden crossbow belonging to the shooting range. He didn’t even blink as his eye tracked and easily shot down the stuffed white teddy bear from the top rack of the stall.

The open fields of Future Academy had been completely transformed into a global bustling festival ground. Hundreds of vibrant stalls stretched as far as the eye could see, draped in the unique banners of the four competing nations.

Thousands of students and visitors from around the world filled the academy, laughing, bartering, and playing games under the warm late afternoon sun.

The elderly merchant behind the small shooting range counter let out an appreciative whistle and hauled the massive teddy bear over the wooden ledge.

"A masterclass in marksmanship, young man. Here is your prize!"

"Thanks." Kurt caught the giant bear with one hand and handed the huge plush toy to Hope.

"Wah! It’s so big and soft! Thank you, Kurt! I’ll name him... Mr. Fluff-Fluff!"

"You have a remarkably steady trigger aim, Rossana-sama," Ayako murmured. "The plastic bolt that was shot out of the crossbow was by no means heavy. To account for the wind distortion of while aiming for the exact spot to strike, all without using a speck of mana or conjuring a spell... you possess the instincts of a true killer."

’Holy glaze... It’s really not that deep.’

"Thanks, Izumi-san. Just old habits I suppose."

As the group wandered deeper into the festival, taking in the dazzling sights and sounds, a very different, far more intense conflict was quietly brewing right beside them.

Ayako was walking perfectly in step with Emelie with a refined posture of traditional elegance. However, beneath that serene facade, the Myrian was actively doing everything in her power to provoke Eldoria's best.

She wasn't using words. Instead, Ayako was subtly – and very deliberately – letting her immense mana signature flare out in precise pulses that were directly meant only for Emelie's senses.

Emelie's jaw tightened and a visible vein throbbed faintly near her temple. She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead and forced herself to remain looking unbothered. If she reacts, it's over.

"The architecture of your academy is quite impressive, Ms. Herst," Ayako dripped her tone with a sweet innocence as she tilted her head. "Though, I wonder... does the structural integrity of your training facilities truly hold up well against someone as strong as yourself? Or do you find yourselves constantly having to piece the stone back together after a light warm-up?"

Emelie let out a slow controlled breath through her nose. "I train just fine, Izumi Ayako. It's only when guests forget their proper manners and begin to flaunt their energy needlessly that we find ourselves having to... clean up the clutter."

Ayako's smile only deepened as her grey eyes gleamed with a battle-hungry thrill. "Fascinating. I look forward to seeing how you handle the clutter tomorrow, then."

Sadie and the others, walking a few steps behind them, looked between the two girls and swallowed hard while dragging Hope a bit closer to her side.

"Uh... Bossman? Is it just me, or does it feel like we're currently stuck between a rock and a hard place?"

Kurt, however, wasn't paying attention to the silent cold war between the two prodigies. He was instead scanning through the clustered crowds gathering around the stalls as if looking for something. Or someone.

"Just keep walking, Sadie. Don't make eye contact with either of them if you value your life."

Suddenly, his gaze locked onto a very specific, familiar group of wealthy aristocrats standing near a luxurious Myrian jewelry display.

"Hey, Sadie," Kurt said, stopping in his tracks and pulling his hands out of his pockets. "I'm going to have to split up from the group for now. I just spotted some people I need to have a private word with."

Sadie quizzically tilted her head as she followed his line of sight toward the jewelry stall. The moment her eyes landed on the posh figures, her mouth formed a perfect 'O' of sudden realisation.

"Aah... I see. Yep. Hey, you don't need to say anything more. I got the memo."

Emelie stopped walking and turned to where Kurt and Sadie were looking. "You want backup Kurt? I don't mind going with you." She offered as her expression softened into one of genuine concern.

"Nah, don't sweat it, Emy. Thanks for the offer, but this is a personal matter. It's something I've got to handle on my own."

Emelie looked at him for a long, silent second before nodding understandingly. "Alright. Do what you must."

Ayako's eyes darted between Kurt and the distant group of nobles. A flash of intrigue crossed her pale features as she smiled mysteriously.

"It seems that you, Rossana-sama, possess quite a complicated web of relationships on this continent. Far be it from me to intrude upon your private affairs. Please, lead the way, Ms. Herst. Show me more of your fascinating campus."

Kurt turned toward Sadie and Hope who was holding her giant teddy bear almost the size of herself. "Sadie, Hope. You two can take the carriage and head back to the mansion without me. I'll meet you guys back home later tonight."

"You got it, Bossman!" Sadie gave him an encouraging pair of thumbs-up.

Hope peeked out from behind Mr. Fluff-Fluff and nodded her head vigorously. "Good luck, Kurt! Make sure you don’t let the mean people be mean to you!"

With a quiet chuckle, Kurt waved them goodbye and began to weave his way through the dense crowd, navigating a direct path toward his targets.

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Near the grand Myrian jewelry stall, the atmosphere was thick with the suffocating aroma of high-society perfume and oblivious arrogance.

Everette Herst stood in front of a velvet-lined display case, carefully holding up two beautifully embroidered silver hair ornaments shaped like blooming lotus flowers.

A boastful grin was plastered across his face as he turned around to proudly display the intricate items to his mother and father – as well as to Reuben Valentine and Julianne Valentine, who were standing a few inches apart, looking bored by the display.

"Ahh... Look at the exquisite craftsmanship on these pieces, Mother, Mother-in-law. The beautiful gems embedded within the silver and the embroidery will beautifully complement your natural complexion as well as any dress you shall wear in the future. I truly believe these would look absolutely magnificent on the both of you."

Everette’s mother happily accepted the ornament with a proud, doting smile that graced her wrinkled features.

"Oh, Everette, you have such an impeccable eye for beauty. You truly know how to treat a lady of high standing."

Everette beamed and immediately turned his head toward Reuben, hoping to secure a scrap of validation from the stern duke. "What do you think, Father-in-law? Won’t this specific piece look stunning on Mother-in-law’s marvelous platinum hair?"

"Hm. It is adequate, I suppose."

Everette’s smile faltered slightly at the cold response.

He then turned toward Julianne, desperately trying to salvage his pride. "Mother-in-law, truly, you must admit that this–"

"I mean, it’s alright. However, personally... I think that piece doesn’t suit her at all," a smooth and utterly unbothered voice suddenly cut through the space right beside them.

Out of nowhere, as if he had appeared directly out the shadows of the shifting crowd, Kurt stepped in to join their private circle.

Instead of focusing on Everette or Reuben, his attention was fixed on Julianne who looked like she was about to commit a mass genocide if Everette had said another word.

With a fluid motion of his wrist, he picked a completely different hair ornament and gently placed it in her hair.

"Now, this one will actually match your style perfectly, Julianne. It doesn’t need to scream for attention to look beautiful. The wearer enhances the jewelry, not the other way around."

The moment Julianne’s eyes landed on Kurt, her previously detached demeanor evaporated and her face lit up with breathless excitement.

She took an eager step forward, entirely ignoring Everette as she looked Kurt up and down, taking in his neat clothing and sharp posture. "Kurt! My goodness, look at you... you look so handsome in that suit. I almost didn’t recognise you, hahaha!"

Reuben’s eyes sharply narrowed into dangerous slits as a sudden, heavy pressure vibrated from his massive frame.

Everette, however, completely lost his mind.

His face turned a deep shade of furious crimson. "What... What the hell are you doing here, you lowly F-rank?! Have you not been chased back to the ghetto you came from?! Leave! Now!"

Everette's mother and father exchanged confused looks. "Everette... who exactly is this rude man?" His mother asked. "And why does his face look so terribly familiar to me?"

"Mother. You don't need to–"

"Well, where are my manners?" Kurt said with mocking politeness as he dipped his head in a flawless bow.

"Allow me to introduce myself properly to the Herst family. My name is Kurt Rossana. The lowly F-rank adventurer, a "fake noble"... and, more importantly, Diana Valentine's official lover – now, and for the rest of eternity~"

Without missing a single beat, Julianne nodded her head enthusiastically as a wide grin spread across her lips.

""Lover?!"" Both Everette's mother and father gasped in unison.

They snapped their heads around and stared at Reuben with horrified expressions of confusion that silently demanded an explanation for the sudden scandal that had just dropped directly into their laps.