THORNS 195

Chapter 195 - Enough Is Enough

"Wait a minute... Mr. Valentine," Kurt placed a hand over his mouth and gasped, dripping his voice with an irritating layer of sarcasm. "Haven't you told these poor people about me yet? Wow. I'm genuinely hurt. And here I thought I was the talk of the family dinner table."

"The only poor one here is you, you miserable vagrant!" Everett stepped directly in front of Kurt's face. "You're nothing but a parasite clinging to a woman you don't deserve! So why don't you do everyone a massive favor? Go crawl back to the adventurers' guild, pick up a pathetic F-rank quest to clean out some sewers, and maybe – just maybe – you'll earn enough copper to–"

"I dunno, man... I'm actually feeling pretty damn rich if you ask me. Also, just a minor detail, but apparently, I'm expecting to have an official audience with the King himself soon. I'm sure you've read about how I've captured a member of the zealots and also successfully retrieved the sacred body of the old Saintess. I can't wait to see just how hefty my pockets will feel after I receive my reward. But hey, what do I know? I'm just a lowly adventurer~ Hahaha."

Everett's mother, who had been staring at Kurt with a confused expression, suddenly let out a knowing gasp. Her hand flew to her chest as the puzzle pieces inside her mind snapped into place.

"Honey... my goodness, it's him!" she whispered to her husband in a voice of trembling recognition. "He's the one! He's the person who was seen running through the streets completely covered in blood from head to toe!"

Nearly tripping over himself, Kurt looked at her with amusement. "Argh! Really? That is such old news. Can we please focus on the present? I washed the blood out of my hair weeks ago..."

Beside him, Julianne couldn't help but let out a soft laugh, though her eyes remained subtly anxious. She reached out and gently took hold of Kurt's arm.

"Please, be careful, Kurt. You'd make Diana incredibly sad if you came back to her looking hurt again."

"Haha... Yeah. You're right, Julianne. I'll be more careful from now on–"

"Get your filthy hands off her!" Everett demanded.

He looked wildly around the marketplace, realising that his own "fiancée's" mother was openly leaning on the man he despised. Feeling desperate, he snapped his head toward the silent duke.

"Lord Reuben! Are you honestly just going to stand there and watch this happen?! Please do something about this!"

Reuben, who did not look fazed in the slightest, stood like a stone statue as he stared blankly at Kurt. As his cold and merciless gaze shifted onto his wife, Kurt felt Julianne tremble against his arm.

"Julianne," Reuben finally spoke in a tone entirely devoid of any emotion.

"Firstly, get away from that man. You are acting beneath your station as my wife. Secondly," he turned his piercing eyes onto Kurt again, "I believe I have already explained the reality of this situation to you, boy.

"You are not fit for my daughter. You possess no lineage, no status, and no future that aligns with the house of Valentine. Both you and Diana need to wake up from this childish delusion, accept reality, and go your separate ways before–"

"I'VE HAD ENOUGH!"

The sudden, piercing scream shattered the tense atmosphere.

Julianne ripped her hand away from Kurt and stepped directly in front of her husband. Tears were already welling in her eyes, but her face was completely flushed with years of pent-up rage.

"Your daughter finally found someone she actually loves! She found someone who makes her smile like no man ever has! And now... now you want to tear them apart?! And for what?! For your precious pride?! For a political alliance?!"

She took another furious step closer to Reuben. "You didn't even give Kurt a single chance! You didn't even try to get to know him! You just looked at his status and decided he was nothing! You are hurting our only baby girl, Reuben! You are destroying her happiness because of your own selfishness!"

Everett immediately stepped forward and raised his hands in a patronizingly soothing gesture.

"Madam Valentine, please, it's nothing like that at all. You're just being emotional right now. Diana and I love each other very much. She's just a little confused at the moment. This F-rank has most definitely manipulated her, but once we are married, she will see reason. I promise."

'This bitch. Sorry Emy, but I swear if he says her name one more time, I'm tearing his throat out.'

"Stop saying that!" Julianne turned on Everett with disgust written all over her face.

"Stop telling that lie! Diana is NOT confused, and she is certainly NOT in love with you! She has made her feelings perfectly clear to you for years! You made her detest the very sight of you with your incessant confessions of love! Yet you dare to ignore her feelings? You dare to barge into her home, make these ridiculous, delusional claims, and then you dare to run straight to my husband like a frightened toddler when nothing goes your way?!"

The volume of her screaming had halted the bustling activity of the festival surrounding them.

Hundreds of students, tourists, and stall owners stopped what they were doing and turned their attention toward the commotion. Whispers began to ripple through the crowd as people recognised the Duke of Valentine and the wealthy Herst family.

When Everett noticed the gathering crowd, his aristocratic pride instantly flared as he realised they were becoming a public spectacle.

"Madam Valentine, look around us," he hissed under his breath and reached his hand out to grab her wrist. "We are making an embarrassing scene. We should leave this place immediately and discuss this in private–"

WHACK!

Before Everett's fingers could even brush Julianne's skin, Kurt's hand snapped forward like a striking viper and smacked his hand away with brutal force, making the noble flinch in pain.

"Do not touch her, muchacho. If you reach toward her again, I won't just slap your hand – I'll take the whole damn arm off."

Everett stumbled back a step. Automatically, his eyes darted right back to Reuben, silently begging the duke to put this one-eyed ruffian in his place.

"Look at him!" Julianne let out a bitter, mocking laugh. "There he goes again! Look at your chosen successor, Reuben! The moment a real man stands up to him, he runs straight to you like a spineless coward!"

Tears fell down her face as she heartbreakingly gripped her husband's wrists. "Is this really the man you want to force our daughter to marry?! Look at him, Reuben! He has no courage, no strength of his own! He hides behind your shadow because he cannot stand on his own two feet!"

Reuben let out a long breath through his nose. "Julianne. Stop making a scene. You are embarrassing yourself in front of everyone. Compose yourself and get ready. We are leaving."

Without waiting for her response, Reuben turned and offered a stiff nod toward the Herst family. "I apologise deeply for my wife's unseemly outburst. We will discuss this topic another time–"

"Why?!" Julianne finally broke down completely.

The cold rejection from her husband shattered her spirit causing her to fall to her knees hard on the ground. Her hands covered her face as heart-wrenching sobs racked her body.

"Why do you never listen to me?! Why do you never listen to Diana?! Every single day, you are pushing us further and further away! Please, Reuben... I am begging you! Don't push us away!

"Ever since that Emelie girl had been deemed a prodigy, you've completely changed! We are your family! Diana is your flesh and blood! We need you... not the Herst family! Why do they matter more than your own daughter's tears?!"

"What is going on here?"

A cool, commanding voice suddenly drifted over the crowd.

Walking through the parting sea of people was Diana herself. She saw Kurt standing with his fists clenched, and right next to him, collapsed on the dirt and crying her eyes out, was her mother.

"Mom? Rosie?"

Julianne snapped her head up. The moment she saw her daughter standing there, the last of her emotional walls completely disintegrated.

"D-Diana! My baby girl!" She scrambled up from the floor and ran straight into her daughter's arms.

Diana immediately wrapped her arms tightly around her mother and gently stroked her hair while looking over her shoulder.

"Ana." Kurt gestured with his head. "Take her out of here. Take her straight to our place. She shouldn't have to be around these scum for another second."

Diana looked from Kurt, toward her father, then to Everett, and finally to the uncomfortable members of the Herst family. She didn't need any further explanation. The scene spoke for itself.

"... I see. I understand."

SHWOOSH

Everett took a frantic step forward, his hand reaching out into the empty air where Diana and Julianne had just been standing "Wait! Diana! Come back! We need to properly talk–"

THWACK!!!!

CRASH!

Out of absolutely nowhere, Kurt's fist connected with a sickening, bone-crushing crunch directly on Everett's nose.

The force of the punch was so brutal that Everett flew off the ground – bloodied nose – and crashed into the jewelry stall behind him.

The surrounding crowd gasped in horror with several noble ladies screaming as they covered their eyes. But Kurt didn't care.

He walked over and stood over the unconscious noble, slowly lowering his fist as he shook the tension out of his knuckles. A dark, deeply satisfied, and feral grin split his face.

"Hehehe~ Man... I have been waiting to do that for a long, long time."

Chapter 196 - Open Challenge

Laying sprawled out across the shattered jewelry display, Everett clutched his bloodied nose with both hands as he glared up at Kurt with eyes of tears and humiliation.

"Why?! Why are you always getting in my way?! Diana is meant for me! Why do you constantly sabotage my pursuit of her?!"

"Because, you delusional little prick, you have no standing in this non-existent race," Kurt's voice carried clearly over the whispering onlookers.

"You're sprinting toward a finish line where nobody is waiting for you. From what I've been hearing, you had literal years to try and seal the deal with her. And yet you still failed miserably.

"Face it, Everett Herst. Diana never loved you; she does not love you now, and she never will. Especially now that I'm here, ha."

The crowd of onlookers had quickly grown within seconds. Their eyes darted between the bleeding Herst and the one-eyed man standing over him.

"... Wait... isn't that him? That's the guy! The one Principal Valentine claimed as her lover at the docks about a week ago!"

"... Yeah, it is! My buddy that works at City View Hotel said he saw the two of them kissing smack-dab in the middle of the lobby!"

A collective gasp and a wave of murmuring rippled through the audience resulting in Kurt's grin to widen.

"See, Ev? Even the random people on the street know what's up. The whole damn continent is aware of the reality. So why, oh why, do you insist on living in Lalaland?"

"You savage! Step away from our son this instant!" Everett's parents finally found their voices. "Do you have any idea who we are?! You are a common vagabond! To lay a hand on a Herst in broad daylight–"

"Shut the hell up! Both of you!" Kurt snapped back.

"You two are just a bunch of irresponsible enablers. You're the ones who fed this prick his daily dose of royal fantasy, allowing him to fall deeper and deeper into his own pathetic delusions instead of teaching him how to take a hint. You built his sandbox, and now you're upset that he's eating the dirt."

The Herst parents flinched. Their faces turned a flushing red as they were unable to find a single counterargument against the pressure Kurt was radiating.

"L-Lord Reuben!" Everett whimpered from the ground. "Please! Do something about–!"

CRASH!!!

In a flash of movement, Kurt’s dress shoes slammed into the wooden framework of the trashed stall, missing Everett’s ear by an inch.

"Haaaa... There he goes again. The second things go south; he tries to hide right behind daddy dearest’s coattails. Christ, I mean, I already knew it... but Julianne was right about you. You’re pathetic."

A deadly aura suddenly erupted from Reuben Valentine.

The ground beneath the duke’s boots vibrated under the immense weight of his mana. The crowd instantly went dead silent, with several people falling to their knees from the atmospheric pressure.

Reuben took a single, heavy step forward as his eyes burned with a terrifying light.

"Rossana–"

SHING!

In a fluid motion, Kurt drew his black blade from his scabbard and pointed it directly at Reuben’s throat.

"Shut the hell up, you piece of shit excuse for a father! Don’t you "Rossana" me! The moment you made Diana cry; you lost every single ounce of my respect. But what I find even worse is that you stood there like a brain-dead statue while your own wife wept on the dirt!"

Kurt took a step closer, keeping his blade and gaze fixed on him.

"What kind of husband, what kind of father, what kind of man does that? Oh, wait, I know! No real man does! You aren’t a protector, Reuben. You’re just a hollow, rusted suit of armor with a title.

"You’re an emotionally stunted coward who hides behind ’politics’, ’nobility’ and ’duty’ because you’re too goddamn terrified to face the fact that now your family despises the very ground you walk on! You’re an absolute fucking joke!"

The crowd had basically stopped breathing.

"... You dare point your blade at me, boy?"

"Yeah, I dare. Go on. Try me."

"Move! Clear the way! Royal Guard, coming through!"

An authoritative voice cut through the dense crowd. The spectators hurriedly parted, revealing a tall, imposing man clad in the gleaming armor of the King Maxwell’s Royal Guard.

Kurt glanced over to look at the newcomer. Then, a dark and amused smirk returned to his face.

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in. If it isn’t David the bootlicker. Tell me, David, how was the taste of my boot when I kicked your face in, huh? Did you finally get the leather flavor out of your tongue?"

David’s face instantly contorted into a mask of rage at the humiliation.

"David!" Everett shrieked. "Remember me?! We went to this very academy together! Arrest this scoundrel immediately! Look at what he did to me! Assault on a noble!"

"Assault?!" Kurt scoffed. "Aren’t you supposed to be a certified S-rank, Ev? Why don’t you, instead of always crying and running behind someone else’s back, actually stand up for yourself for once in your dogshit life?

"You want Diana? Fine. Come try and take her from me. But just know, if you step up to me, you’ll end up looking a hell of a lot worse than a broken nose."

Goaded beyond all reason, his pride, lineage, and public reputation laid bare, Everett's eyes went completely wild. He forced himself to his feet and wiped the blood from his nose.

"Fine! I accept! I'll tear you apart in front of everybody!"

"Hehehe~ Perfect."

"Count me in on this wager as well," David suddenly spoke up.

"Hah?! David, what are you saying?! This has nothing to do with you!"

David, however, glared at Kurt with pure hatred.

"This is revenge for humiliating me in front of Diana that day. And while I'm at it... once I crack your skull open, I'll gladly take her for myself. A woman of her stature belongs with a true royal protector."

The crowd erupted into a wave of excited murmurs and whispers. A public brawl for the hand of the most beautiful, powerful woman in the nation was unfolding right before their eyes.

Kurt threw his head back and laughed out loud. "Ahahaha! Seriously, this is too perfect! Don't be shy, people! Anyone else want a piece of this?! This is your one and only golden chance to try and take Diana Valentine away from me! Step right up!"

"I will accept that challenge."

An elegant man dressed in traditional Myrian robes stepped out from the crowd. He possessed a calm demeanor, but his eyes carried an intense ambition.

"Oh really?" Kurt turned to him. "And who the hell are you supposed to be?"

The man bowed politely, though his smile was dripping with arrogance. "My name is Nakamura Kenji. And I am proud to declare myself as Valentine-sama's soon-to-be lover. A woman of her supreme magical caliber deserves a true master of the arts, not a rugged mercenary."

The murmuring crowd turned into a roar of anticipation. More and more tourists, ego-driven adventurers, and ambitious nobles began to shout from the crowd, being completely swept up in the high-stakes bravado.

"I challenge you too!"

"Count me in!"

"Me too!"

"Alright, already! All of you, be quiet!" Kurt's voice silenced the shouting crowd.

He pointed his blade around the circle of challengers, his smile turning into something completely terrifying. "Once I'm finished beating the ever-loving shit out of every single one of you..."

Slowly, he turned the point of his dark blade back around, aiming it directly dead center at Reuben Valentine's chest.

His devilish smile widened. "I'm coming for you last, old man."

"""""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!!!!"""""

Standing perfectly still amidst the roaring chaos, entirely unnoticed by anyone in the crowd... a small, barely perceptible, and deeply intrigued smile tugged at the very corner of Reuben's lips.

"WHAT IS THIS I HEAR?! AN UNPRECEDENTED EPIC WAR WHERE THE WINNER CLOTHES THEMSELVES IN THE HAND OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN ALL OF THE LAND?!"

From out of absolutely nowhere, Commentator Ken stepped forward with a microphone already gripped tightly in his hand.

"This calls for an epic broadcast with an epic commentator! People of Eldoria! Participants of the world! Let us rendezvous at the grand arena once more for an immediate pre-Day Two showdown!"

The announcement acted like a spark in a powder keg. The spectators didn't need to be told twice. Hundreds of people immediately turned on their heels and sprinted at full speed back toward the massive coliseum tunnels, frantically spreading the viral news across the campus along the way.

Reuben gave Kurt one final, unreadable look before silently walking away toward the arena.

Everett, still holding a cloth to his bloody nose, marched past Kurt to follow the duke. As he passed, he deliberately slammed his shoulder against him in a pathetic attempt at intimidation.

But Kurt didn't budge a single millimeter. He simply watched Everett stumble slightly from the rebound with a devilish smile that never faded.

As the dense crowd quickly thinned out, Kurt let out a relaxed sigh, tossing his black blade lightly before catching it and smoothly sliding it back into its scabbard.

"Hmm?"

What he noticed next was Emelie and Ayako standing side-by-side looking completely immersed in the drama. Both girls were wearing absurdly oversized goofy sunglasses and were each casually eating a large bucket of popcorn.

Ayako gracefully popped a piece of popcorn into her mouth. "There is truly never a dull moment when it comes to your presence, Rossana-sama. You manage to invite a war wherever you breathe. Splendid work."

"You can say that again." Emelie said while adjusting her glasses.

"There is truly never a dull moment when it comes to your–"

"Don’t actually say it again, jeez."

Kurt chuckled and walked over to them. "Well, look at you two, enjoying the theater. This is actually perfect timing, though. There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask the both of you."

Emelie stopped chewing, her green eyes looking up at him through the dark glass.

Ayako tilted her head, her interest instantly piqued. "Oh? And what is it that you would like to ask of us?"

"Yeah, the thing is. I need to know... What exactly is my natural elemental affinity... and how the hell do I actually use it?"