THORNS 197

Chapter 197 - Trust

["TO THE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN MADE IT, WELCOME BACK TO THE COLISEUM OF FUTURE ACADEMY!"]

Commentator Ken’s voice boomed over the arena’s freshly repaired speaker system, carrying a feverish energy that instantly electrified the stands.

Word of the impromptu brawl had spread across the campus like wildfire, drawing thousands of eager spectators.

["We thought Day One had reached its explosive conclusion, but the universe has graciously handed us a masterpiece of an encore! The stakes? The hand, the heart, and the favor of the most beautiful, most powerful woman on the continent–no–the world! Eldoria’s very own Diana Valentine!"]

"""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!"""

["The challengers list? A literal rogue’s gallery of ego-driven adventurers, your ordinary fellow looking for love, nobles, royal guards, and international instructors! The defender? Kurt Rossana! The man who claimed the heart of the queen herself! Grab your popcorn folks because we are witnessing history being formed before our very eyes!"]

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Far away from the chaos of the arena, a calming stillness filled the living room of the Rossana-Valentine estate.

On the long plush couch, Diana was sitting quietly with her mother. She had a gentle expression on her face as she slowly rubbed her fingers through her mother's hair, soothing the lingering tension from the public confrontation.

Julianne rested her head against her daughter's lap, finally breathing steady, though her eyes remained slightly puffy from her breakdown.

"Diana..." Julianne spoke softly. "Do you think I made a terrible mistake out there?"

"Mistake? What do you mean?"

"About making such a horrific scene in public. Screaming at your father like that... humiliating him in front of the Herst family and hundreds of people. It was... it was incredibly unbecoming of me. I allowed my emotions to take over..."

Diana let out a warm hum, tilting her head down to lock eyes with her mother.

"Let me ask you a question instead. If you could somehow turn back time... would you have kept quiet?"

Julianne went quiet and closed her eyes. She thought deeply about the suffocating silence she had endured for years, the sight of Everett trying to control her daughter's destiny, and the coldness of her husband. When she opened her eyes, a fierce flash of maternal resolve sparked within them.

"No. I wouldn't have kept quiet. I hate the arrogant way Everett spoke about you, as if you were a piece of property. And I detested the way your father simply stood there like a stone wall, refusing to listen to his own daughter. I would scream at them all over again."

Diana smiled a beautiful expression of love.

She leaned down and wrapped her arms tightly around her mother, pulling her into a warm embrace.

"And there’s your answer, mom. It wasn’t a mistake. Not even a little bit. And I will be forever happy that you took my side, happy that you stood up to Dad, and happy that you put Everett in his rightful place."

She pulled back slightly and gently wiped a stray tear from her mother’s cheek.

"You can stay here with us for as long as you need. Let that blockhead dad of mine come back to his senses first. Until he learns to respect his family, he can enjoy his empty bed all by himself."

Click.

Wendy entered the room carrying a silver tray with a steaming pot of herbal tea and two delicate porcelain cups. She set the tray down on the low table with an elegant flourish.

"This specific brew contains crushed moon-lily petals, Madam Valentine. It will greatly help soothe your nervous energy and calm your mind."

"Oh, thank you, Wendy. You are always so thoughtful," Julianne said while sitting up and accepting the warm cup. She took a light sip and let out a satisfied sigh before turning a teasing gaze onto the head maid.

"You know, Wendy... you are far too grand for this place. Why don’t you come work for me instead? I’ll double whatever ridiculous salary Diana is paying you, and you won’t have to deal with her stubborn tantrums."

"Mom..."

Wendy let out a soft chuckle, bowing her head respectfully.

"I am deeply honored by your offer, Madam. However, my rightful place is here, managing this household for Ms. Valentine and coordinating the rest of our maids and servants. Not to mention... Now that Master Rossana has joined our daily lives, I have a strong feeling things are going to become much more hectic around here. As he is already proving."

Julianne’s eyes widened slightly when a fond smile spread across her face. "That’s true. This unexpected breath of fresh air... it is all because of him."

At that moment, a mischievous idea seemed to spark within her mind. She turned her gaze back toward her daughter with a deeply suggestive smirk playing on her lips.

"...What’s with that look, mom?"

"You know..." Julianne purred. "I think I might actually know a surefire way to completely win over your father and melt his cold, stubborn heart once and for all."

"... How?"

"Grandbabies," Julianne sat up and whispered ecstatically.

Cough

Wendy, who was quietly pouring a second cup of tea, abruptly choked on her own breath.

Diana’s entire face instantly turned a bright shade of crimson. Her jaw dropped in absolute shock before she buried her face into her mother’s shoulder to hide her immense embarrassment.

"Mom! What on earth are you talking about?!" she muffled into the fabric.

Her heart hammered against her ribs at the vivid mental image of a mini-Kurt running around the estate.

Slowly, she peeked her flushed face out. Her crimson eyes were wide, and in a tiny breathless whisper, she asked, "...H-How many grandkids do you want?"

"EEEEE! Diana! Hehehehe~"

"EEEEE! Little Rosie babies! Hehehehe~"

Both mother and daughter simultaneously let out a high-pitched, ecstatic squeal of pure excitement, comically kicking their feet outward and completely abandoning all dignity as they gushed over the fantasy.

Suddenly, Julianne stopped squealing.

Her expression shifted into one of deadpan seriousness as she gripped Diana's hands.

"I want all the grandbabies. Every. Single. One of them. I want a whole army of tiny blue-eyed, white-haired troublemakers running through my gardens."

""EEEEE~!"" They both squealed again.

Click.

The living room door opened once more. A servant rushed into the room with a look of urgency. "Ms. Valentine! Madam Valentine! Please forgive the abrupt intrusion, but something major is currently unfolding at the Future Academy right about now!"

Diana and Julianne instantly stopped their giggling and regained their composure.

Wendy stepped forward, taking a small, glowing silver tag from the servant's trembling hand. "This is version two of the recording tag?"

"Yes, Head Maid. They are currently broadcasting a live event. It concerns Master Rossana."

Wendy's quickly activated the tag.

VREEEEM.

A massive, clear holographic projection screen manifested at the center of the living room, displaying a live broadcast of the crowded Future Academy arena.

THWACK!

Inside the projection, Kurt delivered a vicious kidney punch straight into the torso of an armored Eldorian patrol guard. The force of the impact resonated through the audio feed with a sickening, wet thud.

Before the patrolman could even slide to the floor, Kurt snapped his leg upward, executing a heavy front kick that connected directly with the man’s chest plate, launching him clean out the ring.

["AND THERE GOES NUMBER TEN!"] Commentator Ken’s voice boomed, accompanied by a roaring mixture of wild cheers from the excited spectators and furious jeers from the opposition section.

["A CATASTROPHIC FINISHED! Kurt has just secured his tenth consecutive victory, and my goodness, ladies and gentlemen, the man has yet to shed a single drop of sweat!"]

Kurt casually rolled his shoulders and let out a prolonged yawn, resting his hand on the hilt of his sheathed black blade.

He cast his bored eye over a small, trembling group of remaining challengers who were currently huddled near the edge of the stage, their faces pale with gripping regret.

"Next," he muttered lazily. "Come on, don’t stop now. I’m just getting warmed up here. Who else wants to try and win a date with My Diana?"

The random challengers nervously looked at each other.

Nobody stepped forward.

They had watched Kurt dismantle ten victims back-to-back using nothing but raw physical strength and close-quarters combat. He hadn’t even drawn either of his weapons yet.

"I suppose it is finally time for me to put an end to this pathetic farce," Nakamura spoke smoothly, dripping his tone with an arrogant certainty as he raised his eyes to lock with Kurt’s. "Step down, F-rank. Your luck ends here. I shall defeat you, and then I shall rightfully claim Principal Valentine as my own."

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Back in the quiet estate living room, Diana’s crimson eyes flashed with a dangerous fire. Her grip on the couch cushion tightened so fiercely the fabric began to tear.

"Excuse me, what?! Who the hell does this Nakamura think he is, making such a ridiculous claim?! I already rejected his stupid advances! How dare he speak about me like I’m some prize to be won! Also, what is Rosie even saying?! Sorry to leave so quickly, mom. But I’m going–!"

Before she could teleport away, a steady hand firmly clasped around her wrist.

Julianne, with a calm and knowing smile, was looking up at her daughter. "Sit down, Baby."

"Mom, you don’t understand–"

"I understand perfectly, sweetie. But look at the screen. Look at Kurt’s face. Let us trust that he knows what he’s doing out there. He is fighting for you, Diana. He is personally weeding out every parasite who dares to look at you with greed."

Julianne gently pulled her daughter back down onto the cushion. "Tell me... you trust Kurt, don’t you?"

Diana’s breath hitched. She looked at the holographic screen, her eyes locking onto Kurt’s relaxed profile. The anger inside her chest slowly dissolved, replaced by an overwhelming warmth that filled her soul.

"Yes, I trust him. With all my being."

"Then sit next to your mommy and," Julianne pulled her daughter close as she grabbed a handful of sweet pastries from the tray. "Let us sit back, relax, and watch your man crush the hopes and dreams of many~"

Chapter 198 - Kurt VS Nakamura

["WE ARE MOVING INTO THE ELEVENTH MATCH OF THIS UNSCHEDULED SHOWDOWN, AND THINGS ARE HEATING UP! On one side, the undefeated black-horse, Kurt Rossana! On the other, the proud instructor belonging to Myria’s Skyward Academy, Nakamura Kenji!"]

Nakamura stood relaxed with his hands tucked into the wide, flowing sleeves of his traditional Myrian robes. Beneath his Geta sandals, the stone of the arena was beginning to grind and shift, turning into a swirling golden mist of sand.

"You fight with the crude and ugly violence of a cornered beast, Rossana-kun. Raw physical strength can only carry you so far. But against the majesty of a master-class mage... you are nothing but a child swinging his fist into empty air."

Staring at him blankly, Kurt didn’t answer with words.

An eager glint flashed within his eye before he planted his foot on the ground, violently cracking the stone as he channelled his mana to strengthen himself.

BOOM!

In an explosion second, Kurt vanished from his position and reappeared directly in Nakamura’s blind spot with his right fist whistling through the air, aiming squarely at the Myrian’s temple.

"Ha. Too slow, Rossana-kun."

Without even turning his head, Nakamura tapped his foot.

Tonk.

A dense wall of iron-earth shot out from the arena floor, perfectly interposing itself between them.

BAM!

Kurt’s enhanced fist slammed dead center into the barrier. A thunderous explosion of shattered stone echoed through the coliseum, but before the dust could even clear, the debris dissolved into a swirling vortex of razor-sharp sand.

"Now, sink," Nakamura commanded with a cruel smile splitting his face as he gestured downward with his sleeve.

The swirling sand shot toward ground beneath Kurt’s feet and instantly liquefied the rest of the stone into a treacherously deep quicksand trap that forcefully dragged him with it.

At the same time, a massive, multi-ton hand of compacted earth materialised above him, slamming down with the force of a falling meteor to crush him into the dirt.

At the lower VIP section, Everett Herst was practically leaning over the polished stone railing as a manic grin of pure ecstasy broke through the bloody bandages currently wrapped tightly around his shattered nose.

His eyes went wide with an unhinged glee when he watched the massive earth hand completely bury Kurt beneath the tons of debris.

"Yes! Look at that, Lord Reuben! He’s completely trapped! That arrogant fool actually thought he could stand against a true elite! It’s over for him, hahaha!"

Standing quietly next to him, Reuben remained motionless. His piercing eyes didn't look at the arena; instead, he slowly turned his head, casting a cold side-eye.

"And what if Nakamura wins?" Reuben's deep voice cut through Everett's celebratory shouting.

Freezing at the question Everett slowly turned his head at the duke of Valentine. "W-What do you mean, Lord Reuben?"

"If Nakamura successfully defeats the boy below, according to the conditions set, he will have earned the right to claim my daughter as his own. So, if Nakamura stands victorious... what exactly do you intend to do about it?"

"I-Isn't it obvious? I will simply... I'll challenge him myself! I'll prove that the Herst family is–"

"Hmph." Reuben let out a dismissive grunt, turning his eyes away from the noble and returning them to the fractured ring below. "Foolish."

Back on the arena floor, the cloud of dust from the earth hand's impact slowly began to drift away. Nakamura stood a few yards away with his arms still tucked neatly inside his sleeves and an arrogant smile.

"A pity. I expected at least a brief moment of amusement from the Principal Valentine's chosen–"

CRUNCH

The solid mounds of compacted earth suddenly trembled. Nakamura's smile faltered slightly as a series of glowing fractures spider-webbed across the giant hand.

BOOM!

With a casual stride, Kurt slowly walked out from beneath the wreckage. His maroon blazer was completely free of dirt and tears. He didn't possess a single scratch.

Surrounding his entire body was an incredibly dense layer of Mana Coating that was actively deflecting every single particle of sand away from his skin.

Through a combination of his unique skill Adaptation and his own growing understanding of mana, his body had already analyzed the friction and density of Nakamura's earth magic, adjusting his own mana to completely negate the environmental hazard.

"Is that really the best your 'majesty' can do, Ken-kun~? I've felt harsher breezes from a living room fan."

Tsk "Arrogant worm... Let us see how long your little shield lasts against this!"

Nakamura slammed both of his palms flat against the ground.

Snap—BOOM!

The entire coliseum rumbled as five humungous pillars of jagged bedrock shot out from the earth. They twisted together like the jaws of a beast and violently snapped shut around Kurt from all directions, trapping him within a claustrophobic spiked tomb.

"Ha! I have you now–!"

SHING—!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

A single, blinding flash of blue light effortlessly sliced through the stone tomb.

The pillars of bedrock were cleanly bisected into two perfectly smooth halves. Kurt stood at the center point of the tomb with his mana coated black blade finally drawn from its scabbard.

["WHAT AN UNBELIEVABLE TURN OF EVENTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! Just like with Nichole Firestar and Izumi Ayako, Kurt is demonstrating a legendary technique that millions of people train their entire lives to master, yet ninety-nine percent can never achieve! MANA COATING!"]

""""YEEAAAHHHH!!!""""

"No... no way... that's impossible!" Everett's jaw dropped to the floor. "An F-rank shouldn't be capable of such high-tier mana manipulation!"

Ayako slowly pulled her oversized dark sunglasses down to the bridge of her nose. Her grey eyes flared with a borderline obsessive battle-thrill as she watched Kurt begin to get serious.

"Yes... Show me, Rossana-sama..." she whispered to herself. "Show me exactly what you can do once you truly stop playing around..."

Emelie, who was sitting right beside her, slowly turned her head and stared at the Myrian with an expression of creeped-out discomfort. She quietly shuffled her way to the next seat over, trying her best to ignore Ayako's weird behavior as she clutched her bucket of popcorn.

Back in the center of the ring, Nakamura was backpedaling. His hands beneath his sleeves shook as he frantically channeled his mana to summon dozens of smaller, rapid-fire stone projectiles to throw at the approaching Kurt.

"A fluke! That was nothing but a fluke! You cannot possibly possess nor sustain that level of precise mana manipulation! Now stay back and die!"

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

With effortless strides, Kurt walked directly through the barrage of stone projectiles. Every time a pointed rock flew toward his face, a quick flick of his blade instantly sliced the attack into harmless dust.

His Enhancement kept his movements fluid, his Adaptation made him aware of where to strike, and his superior instinct as a combatant allowed him to read Nakamura's trajectory before the Myrian could even throw the next stone.

"Looks like your time is up, Ken-kun," Kurt murmured with a victorious smile.

"Shut up! Diana Valentine will be mine! I will not allow you to take her from me!" Nakamura screamed.

He then gathered every single ounce of his remaining reservoir to summon a towering tidal wave of razor-sharp sand to swallow the arena whole.

But right before the wave could fully crest, Kurt blitzed through the gathering sandstorm and reappeared directly inside of Nakamura's personal space. He slid his blade back into its scabbard while at the same time, equipping one brass knuckle onto his left hand.

"... Huh?" Nakamura blinked.

One moment, victory was assured, the next, Kurt's mana coated left fist drove straight forward, connecting itself hard onto the Myrian's sharp jawline.

Crack—BOOOOOOM!!!

The sheer impact and devastating shockwave ripped through Nakamura's body, instantly shattering through his two factor protection barriers made of enhanced sand and strengthening magic.

Nakamura's eyes rolled into the back of his head and his mouth flew open as his elegant form was launched backward like a broken ragdoll, flying a full fifty feet across the arena before crashing heavily onto the concrete floor outside the ring.

He was knocked out cold, unable to move a single muscle.

""""".... Y-YEEEEAAAHHHHH!!!!""""""

The coliseum fell into a sudden, stunned silence before their thunderous roar of cheers erupted.

Kurt slowly lowered his fist and exhaled a calm stream of breath as he adjusted the collar of his blazer. He then turned his attention around the stands, looking directly toward the VIP section.

He locked his fierce gaze straight onto the trembling figure of Everett Herst. Then, in a typical crazy fashion not new to him – in front of the thousand screaming witnesses – Kurt pointed the tip of his knife at the silver-haired noble and slowly brought it to his throat, sliding it across his neck in a gesture of death.

All of this while having the most infuriating smirk plastered on his face.

Everett's veins bulged against his temples as he slammed his fist against the stone railing in pure rage. He was trapped, and he knew it. One way or another, the lowly F-rank was coming for him.