THORNS 199

Chapter 199 - Once A Bootlicker...

"Oh, he did it! Down he goes, haha!" Julianne held Diana's hands as she celebrated. "Did you see that punch? It looked like it was about to be over, but Kurt just knocked that Myrian straight out the ring like yesterday's garbage."

Beside her, Diana was in a state of zeal. Her entire face was bright red, and she had the biggest smile spread across her lips as she stared wide-eyed at the glowing holographic screen.

"Did you see the way he looked at Everett in the end? That way he slid the knife across his throat? Oh, Rosie is being way hotter than usual, hehehe~"

Julianne plopped back down onto the cushions and bumped her shoulder against her daughter with a suggestive grin. "I told you we could trust him. Look at you, you're practically drooling over the screen."

Slurp "I-I'm not drooling!"

She was drooling.

And although she hid her face behind a pillow, her eyes never left the projection of Kurt who was currently dominating the arena floor.

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Back in the coliseum where the chaotic roar of the spectators reached a crescendo, Nakamura's unconscious body was being hauled away on a stretcher, while Kurt stood casually with his hands on his hips, waiting for his oh so pompous noble friend.

The man in question took a furious step forward, intending to finally leap down into the arena to reclaim his shattered pride. But before he could, an imposing figure clad in royal guardsman armor stepped directly past him.

"Stay back, Herst." David spoke in a venomous tone.

He pulled a beautifully crafted silver spear from his back. "I shall be the one to pierce his arrogance. Once he is bleeding at my feet, you may have what remains."

WOOSH!

David launched himself using an explosive burst of emerald-green wind magic. He descended into the arena pit like a falling hurricane, spinning his spear through the air before slamming it violently into the stone floor, sending a shockwave of dust and gale-force wind ripping across the ring.

["AND THE PLOT THICKENS! For match twelve we have a true heavy hitter stepping into the fray! David of the King's Royal Guard! Known for his exceptional skill with the spear and his mastery of the winds! Can Kurt's unbroken streak survive another high-stakes altercation?!"]

Kurt's lazy grin subtly receded as he took in David's perfect military stance. This wasn't your average joe or arrogant instructor. David was like him, a seasoned killer who had survived the capital's darkest skirmishes.

'Maybe not as dark as me, but still...'

"You're a dead man, cyclops."

"Should a royal guard really be saying that to an ordinary citizen, I wonder?"

SHING.

Kurt smoothly drew his black blade from its sheath and coated it in mana. "In any case. Less talking, more fighting, bootlicker. Let’s see if that spear of yours is actually sharp, or if it’s just for show."

"Hmph. As you wish."

SWOOSH!

David vanished.

In a split second, a piercing, high-pitched whistle echoed right behind Kurt’s head.

Tingle

’Shit–!’

David appeared out of literal thin air, thrusting forward the tip of his silver spear which was surrounded by a drilling swirl of highly compressed wind.

Kurt quickly whipped his body around and snapped his blade upward to parry the strike.

CLANG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The collision created an explosive sonic boom that shattered the stone beneath their feet.

"You managed to block that? Impressive, I must say. However, let’s see if you can handle this!"

Before Kurt could reset his stance, David’s spear became a shifting blur of thrusts, slashes and pivots. The silver tip attacked from every conceivable angle, backed by invisible wind blades that flew off the weapon as an aftershock.

For the first time today, Kurt found himself on the defensive. He parried a ferocious thrust aimed at his throat, but a stray wind blade cleanly sliced through the fabric of his sleeve, drawing a thin line of blood across his forearm.

"Haha, yes! Look at him struggle!" Everett screamed with joy. "He can’t keep up with a real opponent!"

WHOOSH—CLANG! CLANG!

"See if you can block this!" David spun his spear over his shoulders and slammed the butt of his weapon to the ground, creating a hurricane domain.

A fifty-foot-wide tornado violently erupted near Kurt, trapping him within the swirling, chaotic vortex.

The air pressure within the domain rapidly plummeted, suffocating his lungs while what felt like millions of wind needles systematically began to cut through Kurt’s defenses.

"You are nothing but a parasite! Diana does not and never will belong to you!" David’s voice echoed from everywhere within the storm as he glided through the air.

He then aimed his spear directly at Kurt’s heart. "Your journey ends here!"

"You talk too goddamn much!"

Instead of trying to dodge the incoming thrust, Kurt did something entirely unhinged. He took a page from Nichole Firestar’s book and leaned his chest directly into the path of the silver spear.

Right when the tip was about to stab through him, time slowed.

And stopped.

"Gotcha, bitch." Kurt grinned terrifyingly.

With his left hand firmly clamping around the shaft of David's spear to prevent him from pulling away, Kurt raised his right hand and his black blade with an even denser coat of mana.

Now that he was out of immediate danger, time resumed. And much to David's surprise–

SLASH!!!!

Kurt brought the sword down in a vicious, vertical arc. The edge of his blade not only sliced through David's hurricane, but it also completely severed the entire domain of the wind, causing the massive tornado to instantly pop and dissolve into a harmless breeze.

Blood spilled in the air as David's armor shattered wide open across his chest plate.

"Gh–Aaaagh!"

But Kurt wasn't finished with him just yet. Before David's grip could loosen on his spear, Kurt pulled the weapon closer to himself and used the momentum to drive a crushing headbutt right onto the royal guard's nose.

CRUNCH!

With the lights knocked out of him, David fell backwards. His vision flickered as a fresh line of crimson blood instantly covered his mouth and chin. He desperately tried, even in his fading consciousness, to raise his fists to form a defensive stance, but Kurt was already on the move.

He masterfully sheathed his sword and executed a low sweeping kick that swept David's legs out from under him, sending the tall royal guard crashing heavily onto his back on the cold, hard ground.

THUD!

THWACK!!!

Kurt planted the sole of his mud-stained shoe right on top of David’s face, pinning the royal guard’s head against the cracked stone.

The entire coliseum went dead silent as the people stared in shock at the degrading sight of David being treated like a common footrest.

Kurt leaned his forearms casually against his raised knee, putting his whole weight onto David’s face.

"Pfft—Hahaha! Ahahaha!" He let out a loud and thoroughly ruthless laugh that echoed through the silence of the crowd.

"Man, take a good, long look at yourself, David," Kurt mocked as he stared down at the bleeding face beneath his shoe. "Look at you, lying in the dirt like a pathetic little worm. Let me make something crystal clear to that tiny Patrick brain of yours...

"Just like I told everyone that came before you, Diana will never be yours. You see, in your case, she doesn’t like bootlickers. She doesn’t like cowards, and she definitely doesn’t like guys who look this pathetic underneath my foot. You’re nothing but a small, temporary speed bump.

"Just a little knock on the road people barely notice they’ve driven over and continue on their way... Haaaa, who am I kidding. I bet you can’t even hear me given the fact that you’re basically bleeding out. Whatever, man. Now get out of my sight."

With a dismissive flick of his leg, Kurt kicked David’s head aside, launching his unconscious body rolling across the dirt until his limp body ragdolled out of the arena.

He then reached down, picked up David’s silver spear and threw it like a javelin right beside him. Slowly, he turned his predator-like gaze to lock directly onto the final figure standing in the VIP with his mouth hung open.

Kurt’s devilish smirk returned to his face as he extended his index finger, pointing it straight at the silver-haired noble.

"Alright, Everett Herst. That’s enough messing around with all these filler characters. I have a beautiful woman and her hurting mother to return to. It’s finally your turn. So get your pathetic ass down here right now and let’s end this once and for all."

Everett’s furious face, twisted and slowly melted into an unhinged smile that matched Kurt’s energy.

"Fine... FINE! You want a war?! Then I accept! I’ll show you exactly what a S-rank can do when he stops playing games!"

"THAT’S RIGHT, BITCH! BRING YOUR ASS TO THE RING SO THAT DADDY CAN SPANK YOU IN FRONT OF ALL THESE PEOPLE!"

"YOU CUR!"

Up in the broadcasting booth, Commentator Ken felt the massive shift in the atmosphere and completely lost his mind, slamming both of his fists onto his desk as he screamed into his microphone with pure ecstasy.

["LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! THE PREPLAY IS OVER! THE PARASITES HAVE BEEN WEEDED OUT, AND THE STAGE HAS BEEN SECURED! BRACE YOURSELVES! WE ARE FINALLY AT THE MAIN EVENT! EVERETT HERST VS KURT ROSSANA! THE FINAL BATTLE FOR THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD’S HEART BEGINS RIGHT NOW!"]

Chapter 200 - Season Before You Eat

BAM!

"Hey hey! Wendy! We’re back!" Sadie called out from the mansion’s foyer. "The Bossman had some shit to take care of, so he sent us home early!"

Waddling her feet like a penguin right behind her came Hope, whose vision was completely obscured by the giant fluffy teddy bear Kurt won for her. "We’re back, everyone! Look, I brought a new friend, Mr. Fluff-Fluff!"

However, no one answered. The foyer was entirely empty. Even the usual perfectly stationed maids and attendant staff were nowhere to be seen.

"Huh... that’s weird," Sadie muttered while scratching the back of her neck as she glanced around. "Where the hell’d everyone go?"

Suddenly, from a short distance away, two distinct feminine squeals echoed through the long corridors.

"He..did..Rosie..it!"

"Ahaha..beat...him...great!"

"Um... Sadie? Isn’t that voice... Ms. Valentine and Madam Valentine?"

"Yeah. It definitely sounds like them. And it sounds like it’s coming from the main living room. Come on, let’s see what’s going on."

As the duo moved down the hallway toward the living room, the noise rapidly grew. It wasn’t just Diana and Julianne anymore; it was the sound of multiple people cheering, talking and laughing that filled the air.

What greeted them as they entered the living room was a jaw dropping sight to say the least. Standing in a tight circle near the back of the room were nearly two dozen household servants, cooks, and maids. All of the clapping hands, pumping fists and celebrating.

Right in front of the cluster of people, Diana and Julianne were holding hands and bouncing on their heels with unbridled excitement.

"Sadie! Hope! Over here, quickly! You’re just in time for the main event!" Isabel spotted the duo and waved her arm, calling them over.

"Ohh... R-Right!" Sadie hurried over while dragging a waddling Hope along.

As they walked deeper in the room, Sadie finally caught sight of what had captured the household's attention. A massive holographic projection screen on the wall was displaying a live feed from Future Academy's coliseum arena.

On said screen, Kurt was standing tall amidst a ruined ring, pointing his knife toward the stands section and openly calling out his final opponent.

"What the?! Huh!? That's Bossman! What the heck happened when we left?!"

Yuna, who is sitting next to Isabel, didn't turn her head from the screen. Although her expression was perfectly flat, a faint yet highly amused glint shined behind her eyes.

"Master Rossana is currently weeding out any and everyone who wants Ms. Valentine for themselves. He's already made an example of ten sad sacks, a prominent instructor of Skyward Academy and a Royal Guard back-to-back. Now, he's about to erase that pest, Everett Herst."

"... Huh. Cool. Kinda wish I stayed to watch it in person now."

"Oh wow! Hope, where did you get such a cute, giant teddy bear?" Isabel asked when she noticed the little maid staring at the screen.

Hope beamed with pride as she lifted the massive toy as high as her tiny arms could manage. "Hehe! Kurt won it for me at the shooting gallery–!"

"Ahem!"

Wendy, who was standing a few feet away, cleared her throat with a perfectly timed, and highly disciplinary tone.

"...I mean, Master Rossana g-graciously secured it for me after a demonstration of his... uhm... awesome marksmanship?"

"Hm." Wendy nodded.

"Look! The screen!" a nearby kitchen servant shouted and pointed. "Everett Herst is finally stepping down to the arena floor!"

"Oh, looks like it’s getting good!" Sadie bumped her hips against Yuna’s side, attempting to force her way onto the tightly packed side couch. "Come on, Yuna, scooty your booty! Make some room for mwah!"

Tsk "There is no space left, Sadie. Stop pushing."

However, somehow, Sadie found the space anyway. She wedged herself tightly between Yuna and the armrest, leaving the seating arrangement extremely cramped but perfectly positioned to watch the oncoming carnage.

The entire room went dead silent as every single eye locked back onto the projection.

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Everett Herst marched down the staircase with his hand clamped tightly around the silver ornate hilt of his rapier at his waist. Above him, hundreds of conservative Eldorian nobles were screaming themselves hoarse in desperation.

"Put that common gutter rat in his rightful place, Lord Everett!"

"Defend the honor of our lineage!"

"Show him the true power of an S-rank noble!"

Everett ignored the crowd and his gaze entirely on the single-eyed figure waiting for him in the center of the ring.

However, as he passed the lower stands at the edge of the pit, his eyes caught sight of two familiar figures sitting comfortably: his sister, Emelie, and the Heiress to the Izumi clan, Izumi Ayako.

The fury on his face instantly melted away, replaced by a deeply adoring smile. He stopped his stride for a brief second to formally bow toward the Heiress.

"Lady Izumi, a wonderful afternoon to you."

Ayako tilted her oversized sunglasses down and offered him a polite nod in return.

He then looked at Emelie, "Ah, my precious younger sister... wish your older brother luck out there? I'm about to finally put an end to this pathetic F-rank's farce and win back the love of my life. The Herst name shall be vindicated."

Emelie lazily threw another piece of sweet popcorn into her mouth, chewing slowly before leaning back.

"Sorry, Everett," she said dryly while adjusting her sunglasses with her pinky finger. "But I'm actually rooting for Kurt to win this one."

"... Huh?"

The words hit Everett like a blow to the sternum.

He let out a forced, hollow laugh, shaking his shoulders as his mind tried to cope with the betrayal.

"Haha... what an... what an amusing jest, Sis. Truly, a very silly lie to try and unnerve me before a duel. You always did have a unique sense of humor–"

"Ahaha! Much appreciated for the explicit support, Emy!" Right on time, Kurt's irritating voice suddenly echoed from the arena. "I'll do my best not to disappoint my number one fan!"

"Shut your damn mouth!" Everett snapped before smoothly talking to his sister again. "Sis–Emelie... stop playing around. You are a Herst. You're just joking around to tease your brother, right? Please tell me you're joking."

"Nope. I'm being completely serious. I even bet a massive chunk of my coins on him to win. If anything, I should be asking you to please not ruin my payout."

Everett stood completely speechless.

His brain short-circuited as he stared at his own flesh and blood openly wagering on his downfall. Slowly, he lifted his trembling hand and pointed at Kurt with the look of madness in his eyes.

"I know what's happening here... It's just like what you did with Diana! You... you have somehow brainwashed her! You cast some disgusting dark magic on my sister to turn her against her own blood! You're a manipulative monster!"

Emelie let out an exhausted sigh, opening her mouth to deny the ridiculous claim, but before she could utter a single word, Kurt cut in.

"Oh, you caught me, Ev! Guilty as charged! You're right, I did! And you what else? Once I'm finished beating the ever-loving hell out of you... I think I might just go ahead and steal your precious little sister away from you too! Having two of the strongest, most beautiful ladies in Eldoria standing right at my side? Man... now that doesn't sound like a bad deal at all!"

["WHAT IN THE HOLY DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT?!"] Commentator Ken's voice cracked high as he ripped his microphone off its stand.

["KURT ROSSANA IS NOT JUST CLAIMING THE BEAUTIFUL DIANA VALENTINE ANYMORE, FOLKS! BUT ELDORIA'S BEST RISING STAR AS WELL?! JUST WHAT IN THE WHAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW?!"]

The stadium erupted into a frenzy of wild shouting, furious outcries, and raucous laughter from those who found this whole spectacle amusing.

Then, to make matters worse, Ayako pulled her sunglasses off her face and smiled dangerously when looking at Kurt. "That sounds like a fantastic idea, Rossana-sama. Tell me... is there perhaps a vacancy for a Myrian such as myself in that little collection of yours?"

"""..."""

["OH MY SWEET GODDESS ABOVE! WHAT CRUEL GAME ARE YOU PLAYING?! THE IZUMI AYAKO HAS ENTERED THE FRAAAAY!!! NOTHING IS REAL ANYMORE!!!"]

Back at the mansion's living room, a freezing silence has taken over the atmosphere. Everyone cautiously turned their heads to the figure of their master sitting quietly on the couch.

Noticing the terrified stares of her staff, Diana slowly turned her head back toward them and smiled calmly.

"What's the matter? Why is everyone looking at me like that? Of course I know Rosie is only joking around. He's only saying these things to unnerve Everett. He would never actually attempt such a thing. Now, let us continue watching, okay? Good."

A collective sigh of relief swept through the servants and maids. Everyone wiped the cold sweat from their brows as they focused back on the projection.

Julianne, however, caught a glimpse of Diana's profile that the others had missed. Behind that beautiful and calm smile... Her daughter's crimson eyes were completely dead and devoid of all light as she watched Kurt through the screen.

’Oh, my dear, sweet future son-in-law...Please know that I will be praying for you. Because if Everett doesn’t kill you... my daughter certainly will.’

Down in the pit, Everett’s entire body was visibly vibrating with manic fury. The veins in his neck were pulsing so hard they looked ready to burst through his skin.

"Not only do you want to steal my woman..." Everett grinded his teeth together with a sickening crunch as glimpses of silver lightning began to crackle across his shoulders.

"But now... now you dare to suggest you can take my precious sister away from me too?!"

"Like taking candy from a baby~"

"I WILL REND your flesh TO ASHES!!!"

BOOMMM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The entire arena floor ruptured as Everett exploded forward in a burst of silver lightning.

Kurt’s instincts flared. Instead of reaching for the hilt of his black sword at his waist, with a blindingly fast motion of his wrist, he equipped his signature weapons: his brass knuckle switchblades.

He wanted this fight to be dirty. He wanted it to be close, brutal, and thoroughly intimate.

Appearing right in front of his opponent, Everett drilled his rapier straight towards his throat in a flash of light.

But Kurt was ready.

CLANG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The lighting spread rapier met the mana coated knives in a collision of sparks and grit. The final match of the day was about to begin. Winner takes all.