THORNS 201

Chapter 201 - Stop And Go

Everett's eyes were completely bloodshot as his rapier moved in a continuous zigzag pattern of silver light. Each individual strike carries enough high-voltage electrical current to completely fry the internal organs of any person it comes into contact with.

Kurt dropped his center of gravity into a low brawler's stance. His superior close-quarters combat prowess and unique skill kept him in a state of hyper-focus as he parried and weaved through the lightning strikes.

BZZT—CLANG! WHOOSH! CLANG!

"Die! Die! Die!!!" Everett doubled his speed as his silver aura flared.

Finding an opportunity, he swung his left hand forward and discharged a massive bolt of lightning point blank at Kurt's face. Unbeknownst to him, however, Kurt's right brass knuckled fist was already enroute toward his ribs.

WHAM!!!

"NGH–AURGH!"

Driven by psychotic pride, Everett drove the tip of his rapier cleanly through Kurt's right thigh while he was staggering back, drawing a deep gash of blood and releasing a backlash of lighting that forced both men to recoil away from each other.

As he skidded backward across the ruined stone, Kurt stabilized his stance and looked down at the bleeding gash on his leg. His smile widened when he realised that his wound began to close faster than usual thanks to him pouring mana onto it which allowed his adaptation to work faster.

"Wow. Is that the best an S-rank can do?! Come on, Ev! I thought you were going to kill me!"

"Shut it! Do not call me that!"

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK! BOOM!!!

Losing all rational thought, Everett vaulted into the air. By using a destructive discharge of wind and lightning, his body shot straight up toward the clouds, ascending higher and higher until he hovered nearly hundreds of feet above the open pit.

The sky began to darken as a massive blanket of unnatural thunderclouds rapidly condensed around his airborne figure.

["HE IS TAKING IT TO THE HEAVENS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! IT LOOKS LIKE EVERETT HERST HAS BEEN PUSHED OVER THE TIPPING POINT! OPTING NOT TO PLAY HIS OPPONENTS GAMES AND TO END THIS BATTLE IN ON GO!"]

Up in the sky, Everett raised his rapier high above his head. The thunderclouds roared as dozens of silver lightning coiled around his blade like serpents, preparing to rain down an apocalypse that would completely flatten the entire arena into a crater of molten glass.

"LOOK DOWN UPON YOU GRAVE, YOU MISERABLE TRASH! CAUSE THIS IS THE END FOR YOU! GO TO HELL!"

Down on the floor, Kurt stood perfectly still as he looked up at Everett with a wild smile. He quickly pocketed brass knuckle switchblades and drew the dark blade from its scabbard.

"Sorry my sweet little knives. Looks like you won't be able to stab the lighting boy today. I'm going to need Silent Night for this one since it's the perfect time to test out my true abilities. Step one: Mana Coating."

VREEEEM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

In a sudden flash of movement, Kurt enveloped his entire blade in blue mana. But before any of them could make the next move...

Before the thunderclouds had ever rolled over the coliseum, and before Kurt had stepped into the ring to dismantle the parasites that dared to think of taking Diana from him, we need to go back to about an hour ago.

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

Emelie and Ayako stopped eating their popcorn and exchanged a brief glance before turning their attention back to him.

"Give us your hands," Emelie said.

Kurt extended his hands to them both. Emelie took his left, and Ayako firmly wrapped around his right.

Almost instantly, both girls' eyes glowed brighter. They began scanning his mana veins, pushing their respective mana deep into his being to read the blueprint of his soul.

Suddenly, Ayako's eyes widened. Her breath hitched in her throat, and she stared up at Kurt with absolute shock. Emelie, however, merely let out an unsurprised sigh.

"Ms. Emelie... you do not look surprised. Are you truly not sensing the anomaly within him?"

"I am. And I'm guessing we're sensing the same thing. Haaaa, I had a sneaking suspicion this was the case ever since he fought with Principal Valentine ... I guess this just confirms it."

"Alright, clear the mystery then." Kurt looked between them. "What is it? Do I get to throw fireballs easier than others or what?"

Emelie looked him dead in the eye with a serious expression. "Kurt... you have a natural affinity over the element of Time."

"Rossana-sama. Such an affinity is a mythical, forbidden lineage. Fire, water, wind, earth, even light and dark to an extent – those are elements of the material world. But Time? It is a cosmic constant. No amount of brutal training could ever master it, let alone simply learn it. You either are born with it or are entirely blind to it. The same goes for the element over Space."

"Meaning..."

"Meaning... we have no way of teaching you how to use it." Emelie answered sympathetically. "There are no textbooks for time magic in Eldoria, Kurt. I'm sorry. And before you ask, no I don't know anyone who also possesses the Time affinity. You're the first person I know who does..."

"I see... Well, don't sweat it, girls. At least I've got a starting point. I'll figure something out."

.....

CRASH!!!!!!!!!!!

Back in the present, the sky above the coliseum was screaming with volatile lightning that reached its crescendo.

"DIE, KURT ROSSANA!!!" Everett thrusted his silver rapier downward, and the massive cloud of silver lightning violently discharged, raining down a cataclysmic electrical fury directly toward the center of the ring.

The warning signals tingling and pulsing inside Kurt were firing at a suicidal frequency.

Every single instinct screamed at him to run. But he ignored them all. He kept his feet firmly planted, letting the silver light race straight for him, which would destroy his body to the brink of total annihilation.

Right as the attack was about to hit, the roaring sounds of people screaming and cheering, vanished.

The blinding silver glare of lightning lost its momentum and the entire world violently around Kurt began to bleach into a monochrome shade of gray. And the massive bolts of lightning, which had been traveling at the speed of light, suddenly slowed down, quite literally freezing in mid-air.

"I'm really becoming a pro at this," Kurt muttered to himself while looking up at the distant unhinged face of Everett hovering in the sky.

"I hate that this near-death situation is the only way I can force myself into my element. Now how the hell do I actually control it? And what can I properly do with it...?

"Hmm. Time. Let's think about it. How does the concept actually work? There's pausing, rewinding, fast-forwarding, and slowing down... Probably a hell of a lot more things that I'm missing."

He pointed his sword at the airborne Everett, took a deep breath, and yelled with all his might: "Rewind!"

Nothing happened.

"Go, go, gadget time powers!"

Again, nothing happened.

"What an utterly embarrassing display of magical execution, Suicide-Man."

A proper and highly sophisticated English voice suddenly drifted up from beneath him.

Kurt slowly lowered his blade and looked down. Standing perfectly comfortable amidst the shattered cobblestones, completely unaffected by the frozen world, was a tiny white cat.

"Well, look who decided to show up. Hey, Kitty."

"A wonderful afternoon to you as well, Kurt. Though, if I may ask a rather pressing question... Why on earth are you standing directly in front of a lethal elemental discharge? As I'm sure you know, it may look frozen, but it is still technically moving."

"No can do. You see, I'm currently in the middle of trying to figure out how to use my mythical time powers."

Kitty let out an exhausted sigh and leapt perfectly on top of Kurt's torn shoulder, "You are already using it. Just look around you."

"Yeah, but I want to use it without having to be on the verge of death every single time."

"A fair point. Hmmm... Ordinarily, only another true time magician could ever teach a fledgling one the proper ways of mastering their abilities. And although I may not be one myself, I do understand the gist... sort of. I suppose I shall help you get a proper feel for the flow."

Kurt suspiciously side-eyed the cat on his shoulder. "Hey... just who are you anyway, Kitty?"

Kitty didn't answer. He remained perfectly still, as he closed his eyes and entered a state of intense concentration.

Suddenly, the white cat snapped his eyes open. "Alright. Moments before disaster captured. It was rather tricky to get the alignment right since I had to use your own mana signature, but I managed it."

"Hmm? You did what?"

"... Kurt, listen to me very carefully."

'Don't ignore me.'

"This gray world that you are currently seeing... it is part of your personal Domain. This is your world, your private reality, in which only your will controls the flow of time. Inside this specific space, you are, for all intents and purposes, a god."

Kitty then pointed his tiny paw toward the frozen stands.

"As for how far this domain has expanded... Since you are still an unrefined novice to this concept, it only extends as far as your eyes can see. Or, well, in your specific case... just an eye.

"Which means this coliseum is the limit of your world. For now, you have found a way to enter this space through raw near-death adrenaline. That is a barbaric, entirely unsustainable method.

"Furthermore, as you should well know, staying inside this reality consumes a continuous amount of mana. Stay too long inside and your body will fail."

"Right," Kurt nodded. "Got it. So how do I actually make things... happen in this world?"

"Focus. Instead of shouting those ridiculous incantations all willy-nilly... you must say those words while infusing mana directly into your vocal cords. You must make this world obey the sound of your voice."

"... How?"

"Picture it like you always have. You are remarkably adept at mana manipulation. Picture the specific "action of time" you wish to execute. Infuse that mental image directly into your words and speak it into existence."

Kurt slowly lowered his gaze onto his blade. The translucent blue mana that had been shifting and swirling around the steel stood completely still.

He closed his eye and thought deeply about the concept of time.

"....."

"..."

"....."

"Uhm, Kurt. No pressure or anything, but do you mind hurrying up. Please don't forget that you are standing in front of–"

VREEEEM.

Suddenly the mana dispersed into thousands of bright, sparkling glitters of blue light that danced around his steel like stardust.

'He... he actually did it,' Kitty thought in surprise.

'Oh, Bula... The man you have chosen is an absolute freak of nature.'

Kurt snapped his eye open. He smiled and pointed the stardust-coated black blade directly at the frozen figure of Everett Herst up in the sky.

"Alright. I'm ready, Kitty."

"Splendid," Kitty murmured as his form began to lightly blur. One more thing before you go off. It is ok to fail on your first attempt. Just make sure... that you do not fail more than once."

Kurt turned his head slightly to look at his shoulder. "Ok to fail? What do you mean by–"

He stopped. His shoulder was entirely empty. Kitty had completely vanished into thin air without a single trace.

"... Classic."

Then, with an explosive burst upward, Kurt jumped away to remove himself from the direct impact path of the creeping up lightning bolt.

’This is my world. My reality. Ok, Ev. Time to turn the clock back on.’

Kurt opened his mouth, and in a resonant voice that could be heard throughout the whole coliseum, he commanded:

"RESUME!"

The world didn’t revert its color back to normal, however, the time did actually snap back to reality, signaling that Kurt was still keeping his personal domain active.

CRACK-BOOMMM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The massive rain of silver lightning instantly resumed its downward trajectory, slamming on the exact empty spot where Kurt had been standing a second ago.

Chapter 202 - Scrap Battle

RUMBLE—CRASH!!!!!

"DIE, KURT ROSSANA!!!"

"This cannot be good for the people," Ayako stood up from her seat bench as she shifted her gaze from the dark thunderclouds to the spectators who were currently looking up in terror.

"An attack of that magnitude will send stray electrical discharges out to everyone present."

Emelie reached into her bucket, pulled out a single popcorn kernel, and let out a disgusted hiss.

Crunch.

’Everett, you idiot.You’re taking things way too far. Your fragile ego is going to get people killed.’

Setting her bucket aside, Emelie unleashed a massive telekinetic dome that rapidly expanded outward like a rushing wave. The invisible barrier swept over the entirety of the coliseum stands, sealing the spectators behind a wall of safety just as Everett threw the attack.

Beside her, Ayako’s eyes remained locked onto Kurt, her pulse quickening with the thrill of excitement. ’What are you going to do now, Rossana-sama?Show me.’

Then, the lightning hit.

CRASH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The world went white as catastrophic violence of the S-rank attack hit the arena floor, creating an earth-shattering boom that made the telekinetic barrier shake violently.

Fighting to keep the dome from collapsing under the electrical pressure, Emelie groaned aloud as her white boots slid back slightly against the stone.

The dust and smoke that erupted from the epicenter was a towering pillar of white stone powder and silver sparks that completely obscured the ring.

Ayako’s eyes widened behind her sunglasses. Her sensory perception of mana sliced through the smoke, but what she found made her heart skip a beat.

"He... he just disappeared," she whispered with uncharacteristic shock. "There was no mana displacement. No draft. He did not dodge."

"HEY! OVER HERE, BLIND PEACOCK!!!"

A mocking roar suddenly echoed from high above Everett.

Everett, who was still hovering in the air, panting heavily as his silver aura flickered, flinched. He spun his head around and widened his eyes in horror as he looked up.

Kurt held his black sword with two hands over his shoulder like an executioner's axe. The dark steel was humming with a terrifying display of blue stardust.

"HAAAAAAA!" Kurt screamed as he began his rapid descent.

"AHHHHH!" Everett screamed back in terror as he tried to lift his rapier to parry.

"AAAAAAA–!"

"AHHHHH–!"

"AAAAAAA–!"

"AHHHHH–!"

"HIYAAH!" With a brutal arc, Kurt sliced his blade directly across Everett's chest.

Strangely, the impact didn't draw blood – instead, it unleashed a deep thud that completely robbed the noble of his breath, sending him hurtling downward through the air like a broken bird.

BOOM!!!!!!!!

Everett slammed into the center of the ruined ring, creating a fresh crater in the dirt.

["WHAT IN THE NAME OF OUR HOLD GODDESS JUST HAPPENED?!"] Commentator Ken’s voice screeched from the speakers.

["JUST A MOMENT AGO, KURT ROSSANA WAS ON THE GROUND, AND IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, HE REAPPEARED IN THE CLOUDS! IS THIS TELEPORTATION?! IS IT ILLUSION MAGIC?! LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! THE EVERETT HERST HAS BEEN STRUCK DOWN!"]

Kurt dropped out of the sky and landed perfectly on his feet with a dust-kicking thud. He rested the flat of his blade against his shoulder, looking toward the center of the crater.

As Everett staggered to his feet, his face twisted into a mask of fury. His expensive, tailored garments were completely shredded across his chest, exposing his pale skin to the open air. But as he wiped the dirt from his mouth, he realised.

There was no wound. There was no blood.

Instead, right across his sternum where Kurt’s blade had cleanly sliced him, thousands of tiny, glowing blue sparkles were slowly dancing around his skin.

"Huh... that’s weird. Hey, Ev. Don’t you feel hurt? Not even a little? I man, hit you pretty damn bad with that swing."

Everett looked down at his intact chest, then back up at Kurt. Not understanding why he wasn’t currently bleeding out, his fear instantly transformed back into arrogant confidence.

"Haha... Hahaha! You see that, F-rank?! Your weak strength can’t even pierce my flesh! Someone like you... someone of your low, disgusting birth can never hurt me! I am an S-rank noble!"

Kurt’s smile vanished. His jaw locked and an irritated tick formed near his temple. He was really beginning to hate the high-and-mighty noble routine, especially when he had just clearly outmaneuvered the idiot.

"Right, right. Noble blood, S-rank plot armor, whatever you say... Hey... by the way, Ev. Just out of curiosity... What colour is my eye right now?"

"You won’t have an eye left in your skull when I am finished tearing you apart, Rossana!"

"Haaa..Man... You really are something else. You go to the best academy in Eldoria, I bet your family also spent millions on your tutors, and you can’t even answer a basic question."

Falling for the blatant bait hook, line, and sinker, Everett’s face turned bright red as he took a furious step forward.

Tsk "It’s BLUE, you moron!"

Kurt’s eye narrowed slightly as a knowing smirk returned to his face.

’Alright. So the idiot can’t see the gray world. To him, everything is still happening normally.’

"Don’t you look so smug in my presence! Die!"

Driven by hatred, Everett charged forward first, completely abandoning his defensive guard as he launched into an incredibly scrappy close-quarters brawl.

CLANG! CLANG! STAB!

The rapier swung wildly, but because his personal domain was still active, Kurt’s perception was superior. Every time Everett threw a high-speed strike, he could see the exact trajectory a full half-second before it arrived.

He ducked under a lethal horizontal slash, ducking low to drive a heavy, left-handed punch straight into Everett’s jaw.

WHACK.

The noble’s head snapped back violently, but instead of bruising or spitting blood, more of those strange, sparkling blue glitters erupted from the impact point, dancing across his cheek.

Everett didn’t even seem to register the pain. High off his seemingly immortal state and the bizarre lack of physical trauma, he leaned into the fight with reckless abandon. He lunged forward, using his shoulder to ram into Kurt’s chest while simultaneously bringing the pommel of his rapier down toward Kurt’s collarbone.

CRACK.

"Aurgh! Dammit– You just don’t give up, do you?" Kurt grunted as the pommel struck his shoulder. As an additive, silver lightning also seared through his skin and left a deep, black burn mark.

Unlike Everett, Kurt was taking very real, very physical damage.

"Haha! See?! You bleed while I remain untouched!"

SLICE!

A fresh spray of crimson blood splattered onto the ground as Everett cut through Kurt’s blocking forearms.

Stumbling back two steps, Kurt furrowed his brows in deep confusion.

’What the hell is going on here?’ He thought as he parried another wild downward swing.

’Every time I land a blow on this clown, he doesn’t get hurt at all. This doesn’t make any damn sense.’

Because of this apparent invulnerability, Everett grew entirely unhinged. He stopped caring about parrying entirely. He stopped trying to maintain distance. He simply rushed forward like a feral animal, throwing wild, unprotected slashes and heavy kicks.

He did all this while being completely secure in the knowledge that he would take zero physical damage.

But Kurt didn't stop fighting back. For every cut he received, he returned three.

A devastating knee to Everett's stomach – WHAM.

A backhand slice across his shoulder – SCHWING.

A brutal elbow directly to his nose – CRUNCH.

With every blow Kurt landed, more and more of those glittering blue lights began to cover Everett's body.

By the end of the exchange, the noble was practically covered from head to toe in a glowing shroud of sparkling blue stardust, making him look like a walking constellation amidst the dust of the arena.

"Hahaha! Got you!" Out of psychotic desperation, Everett saw his opening.

Completely blind to the fact that he was covered in sparkles, Everett dropped his rapier. As Kurt lunged forward for an overhead strike, Everett ducked beneath the long shadow of the dark blade and slid directly into Kurt's left blind spot.

Before he could twist his torso to adjust, Everett lunged forward with everything he had left and wrapped his arms around Kurt's torso from behind in an unbreakable bear hug.

"HAHAHA! I FINALLY HAVE YOU!"

"Get the hell off me! I already have a woman!" Kurt growled as he violently drove his elbow backward into Everett's face.

THWACK! THWACK! CRACK!

The elbow strikes smashed directly into his nose and jaw, throwing off more blue sparkles, but Everett's grip didn't budge an inch. He had locked his fingers together with the strength of a man who had completely lost his mind.

"You're not escaping this!" Everett tilted back as his entire body began to surge with an unprecedented amount of silver electricity.

CRACKLE-CRACKLE!

Everett's downward hair suddenly began to convert upward into blinding silver lightning and his green eyes fully whited out. He was turning his own body into a nuke.

"Let's see you survive this, F-rank! I know I will! Because I'm immortal! Ahahaha! " Everett laughed as the heat radiating from his skin began to melt the surface beneath their feet. "WITH THIS, DIANA IS MINE! GOODBYE, KURT ROSSANA!"

Kurt's heart hammered against his ribs. The temperature was rising too fast, and his skin was already starting to blister.

Thinking fast, he focused his mana deeply into his vocal cords as he prepared to activate his domain once more to freeze the world before the blast could release.

Emelie quickly vaulted over the barricade and flew over to them. "EVERETT! DON'T DO IT!"

"STO–!"

But Kurt was too late.

BZZT–BOOMMM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!