THORNS 203

Chapter 203 - Climax

"ARRRGH!!!! EVERETT! KURT!" Emelie let out an agonizing scream as the backlash of her brother's suicidal blast slammed into her telekinetic barrier.

Inside the broadcasting booth and the rest of the stands, Commentator Ken and the hundreds of spectators were forced to violently clamp their eyes shut against the blinding silver glare that filled the entire space.

Ayako stood perfectly still with her hands resting flat against the stone railing. Behind the dark lenses of her sunglasses, she watched the cascading silver fire devour the center of the ring with an unreadable expression.

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Inside the Rossana-Valentine estate, the previously rowdy living room fell into a suffocating silence. The holographic projection screen flickered violently, distorted by the magical static of the explosion before settling into a sickening display of white dust and crackling silver lightning streaks.

Hope dropped her teddy bear and buried her face into the fabric of Isabel's dress. Sadie was nervously biting her thumb nail as she stared at the screen in worry. Yuna sat rigidly in her seat. Her flat, usually apathetic expression had been warped into a terrified stare.

Diana, who had been sitting on her mother's lap while Julianne herself held her waist, suddenly snapped up.

"I've had enough. I'm putting an end to this right now."

"Diana–"

SHWOOSH

A split second later, she appeared at the exact stone row of seats where she had sat with Kurt earlier that afternoon.

In front of her, the entire arena pit was completely obscured by a dense fog of pulverized stone and smoking ash. Almost nothing was visible inside the ring. She could see the faint translucent green shimmer of Emelie's telekinetic barrier, but the field itself was a dead zone.

"Principal Diana Valentine..."

Standing a few paces behind her, perfectly composed despite the chaos, was Ayako. The Izumi Heiress offered a respectful bow of her head.

"... Izumi Ayako. Please head up to the announcer's booth and find Ken. Tell him to announce that the show is over and order every spectator to vacate the coliseum grounds immediately."

"Certainly,"

With another distortion in the air, Diana teleported into the obscured ruins of the arena pit.

Left alone, Ayako slowly lowered her sunglasses. A deeply solemn, and melancholic sigh escaped her lips as she stared at the ground.

"I wished we could have had a proper fight... Kurt," she whispered quietly to herself in a tone of unspoken grief. "This is goodbye..."

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Inside the cratered arena.

"Rosie!" Diana called out in a desperate panic. "Rosie! Where are you?! Say something!"

No answer.

As the silence hit her, suddenly, a traumatic memory flashed through her mind – the image of the frozen and of Kurt lying bloodied on the ground.

"Rosie! Please answer me!" she screamed louder, blindly rushing through the dust until her shoulder violently bumped into another figure.

Thud!

Diana recoiled and froze when the smoke parted slightly to reveal Emelie who was standing entirely still with her hands dangling limply at her sides.

She was staring blankly down into the dirt and moved her lips in a continuous low-pitched murmur. Diana couldn't make out the words at first, but as she stepped closer, the phrases became clear.

"...you liar. You liar... you promised... you promised me you wouldn't... you promised you'd be there..."

"Emelie...? Emelie! Look at me! Where is Rosie?! What happened?!"

Slowly, almost mechanically, Emelie slowly turned her head toward Diana. Her green eyes were completely hollow, looking right through her principal as if she weren't even there.

"Maybe... maybe cycle 101 will be different..."

"What...? What are you talking about? What cycles?!" Diana yelled as tears finally spilled over her eyelids. "Where is he, Emelie?! Where is Rosie?!"

Emelie’s head drifted slightly to the side. And with a trembling movement, she raised a single, limp finger, pointing directly into the thickest layer of fog ahead.

Diana didn’t wait another second. She let go of Emelie’s shoulders and hurried in the direction she pointed.

Behind her, Emelie’s legs completely gave out. She fell to her knees in the dirt and clutched her hands over her chest as a single tear traced down her cheek.

She caved inward, curling her body into a tight ball as she began to sob into the dust. "As I thought... it’s better to work alone... I shouldn’t have... I shouldn’t have gotten so attached to you... You liar..."

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Diana ran blindly through the fog. Suddenly, her boot caught on something heavy, causing her to trip and stumble. As she steadied herself, she looked down at what had tripped her.

It was a pair of black-trouser legs.

And only legs.

"... W-What?" Her crimson eyes, wide with horror, followed the thick, steaming trail of dark blood that painted the ground.

A few feet away, lying beside an exploded, horrifying puddle of blood, was the other half of the missing body.

The upper torso of Kurt Rossana.

"No... Nonononono..."

Diana’s heart rate skyrocketed past the point of safety, her vision blurring as her entire world collapsed into absolute ruin.

She forced her trembling limbs to move across the blood-slicked path until she fell to her knees right beside his torso.

She could see a faint, incredibly weak layer of Mana Coating still desperately trying to flicker across the exposed, severed area of his waist, and his innate adaptation frantically attempting to knit together flesh that was already gone.

But it was a losing battle.

"Rosie... Rosie, please... look at me..." she sobbed softly as she reached out to gently turn his face. "Please don’t do this to me... H-Hey..."

Feeling a presence around him, Kurt’s eye fluttered open.

The vibrant blue light that usually burned within his iris was nearly extinct, replaced by a dull haze of fading consciousness. Through the veil of his dying sight, he saw the blurry, beautiful outline of her platinum hair and her crimson eyes.

"H-Hey... Ana..." he smiled and whispered weakly. "Look at that... I didn’t let him... I won..."

"Mhm.. You did.. *sniff*."

"I guess... next.. is... y-your.. Dad... right? D-Don’t... worry. I’ll take *cough* c-care of... him... O-Oh yeah... we still need to... go.. on our... d-date– *cough*."

"Rosie... stop talking... Please, just stop talking. I’m sorry I left everything to you. We should’ve tackled this problem together... So let’s face him together, okay? Please, I-I’m right here! I’m holding you! Don’t leave me, Rosie! I love you! Please, I can’t lose you! I need you!"

"Ana? Where'd... where'd you go?" Kurt's raspy voice spoke again as his only eye drifted aimlessly, staring right through her.

The light in his iris was completely gone. He couldn't hear her voice anymore; the cold embrace of death had already severed his senses from the material world.

"It's... it's getting really dark... I can't see your face... Are you... still there?"

"I'm still here! I'm right here!" Diana desperately screamed at the top of her lungs.

Her heart completely broke as she leaned down and pressed her lips against his cold, bloody mouth in a determined kiss, trying to pour her very soul into his lips.

Kurt's body gave a slight, final shudder. Through the void of his fading consciousness, he felt the familiar, warm touch of her lips against his.

"Ah... there you are..." he whispered.

His final breath passed through his lips in a soft, peaceful sigh. "I.. love.. you... A..na..."

His head rolled to the side as his chest went completely still. The faint, flickering blue mana coating across his waist extinguished, leaving nothing but a cold, unmoving shell in her arms.

"....."

"Rosie?" Diana's hands shook violently as she cupped his cheeks. "Rosie, wake up. Wake up! Please! This isn't funny! Open your eye! Look at me! If you don't, I swear I'll kill myself! Rosie! Rosie!! *Sob* ROSIE!"

She buried her face into his bloody chest, and she let out a guttural scream of heartbreak. The agonizing sound of her crying echoed fiercely through the shattered columns of the coliseum, carrying a grief so profound, several people still evacuating turned around to look for the sound through the haze.

A few yards away, still on her knees in the dirt, Emelie buried her face in her hands as she cried in unison with her principal.

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"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."

SHATTER!

Kurt's eye snapped open.

He let out a violent gasp of air, expanding his lungs as his heart hammered against his ribs with an explosive velocity. He instantly looked down at his torso. His blazer was torn, but his body was still whole. His legs were attached. There was no blood, no crater, and no crying Diana.

Looking around, he realised he was standing perfectly in the arena. His stardust coated black sword was drawn and raised high above his head. Even his body was locked in the exact same stance he had assumed right before Everett unleashed his attack.

'What the hell... what the hell just happened?I died. I know I damn well died. I felt the blast. But I'm back?'

When he looked up and saw the airborne figure of Everett, something caught him by surprise.

The glowing shroud of sparkling blue stardust glitters that he had painstakingly beaten into Everett's body during their scrappy brawl... they were still there. Completely untouched whatever temporal reset that had just happened.

"Kurt. Say the word... Release." A gentle and beautiful feminine voice suddenly whispered directly into Kurt's right ear.

"Who's there?!"

No one was there. The space beside and behind him was completely empty.

Turning his attention back up toward the dark skies, Kurt had a strange understanding of what was requested of him. He didn't know whose voice it was, but he and he didn't care. No for now, at least.

He focused his mana directly into his vocal cords, coating his throat in the weight of his personal domain.

Up in the clouds, Everett bared his teeth as he prepared to launch the cataclysm. "DIE, KURT ROSSANA–!"

"RELEASE!"

Before he could even tilt his rapier downward, the stardust dancing around Everett's body disappeared.

SLASH!!!!

A massive vertical cut suddenly manifested directly across his chest out of absolutely nowhere, slicing through his flesh and ripping him open.

"WHAT–?!"

Then, the truck hit him.

Every single ounce of bone-shattering damage that Kurt had personally inflicted upon him previously – the cuts, the battering, the crushing elbow strikes on his nose and jaw – all of it detonated across Everett's body simultaneously in a single and without mercy.

"GAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Everett let out a blood-curdling shriek of pure agony as fresh blood violently gushed out from his entire body.

His face instantly bruised into a horrific mask of purple, his nose breaking and his jaw audibly cracking out of its socket under the unknown force.

The S-rank silver lightning storm in the sky instantly dissolved into nothingness as his mana had died out from the sudden, immense trauma.

And like a sack of wet bricks, Everett's broken, bloody body plummeted straight out of the sky, crashing heavily onto the fractured stone floor of the ring. There, he laid in a sprawled-out pool of his own noble blood.

Everyone inside in the coliseum stood in deadpan silence. At that moment, no one had seen Kurt move. No one had seen an attack. The one-eyed man had simply spoken a single word, and the S-rank noble had exploded in mid-air.

["I... I DO NOT BELIEVE MY EYES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"] Commentator Ken's voice echoing through the stunned silence.

["THE STORM HAS VANISHED AND EVERETT HERST HAS COLLAPSED! THE WINNER... BY A DEVASTATING – POSSIBLY DEATH INDUCING KNOCKOUT – IS KURT ROSSANA!"]

Chapter 204 - Freedom

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! He’s in critical condition and may need the assistance of the Saintess! Get the diagnostic array ready right this instant!"

Frantic screams of the healing priests echoed through the stunned atmosphere of the coliseum. A team of three white-robed clerics scrambled over the fractured stone and carefully lifted the unconscious, bloodied body Everett Herst onto a stretcher.

Near the center of the arena, Kurt lifted and looked at his right hand where he held his blade. There, still clinging along the edge of the blade were a few lingering particles of sparkling blue stardust.

The moment he tried one of these dancing glitters, they all faded into nothingness.

Up in the stands, Ayako slowly pulled her comically big sunglasses down from her face. A fascinated smile stretched across her lips and her heart raced against her ribs with an unprecedented adrenaline rush as she stared at the confused Kurt.

"Did you sense that, Ms. Herst?" Ayako whispered with a breathless thrill chilling her voice.

"Yeah. I sensed it."

"Truly... this man never ceases to amaze me. To think he only learned of the very existence of his natural elemental affinity not but a single hour ago... yet he has already grasped the surface of Mana Infusion. Rossana-sama, just what kind of a monster are you?"

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"""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!"""

"Master Rossana did it!"

"Hahaha! Take that, you stinky noble!"

Inside the living room of the Rossana-Valentine estate, the servants and maids began cheering at the top of their lungs as Commentator Ken confirmed Kurt's victory. Celebrating with them, Julianne let out a joyous laugh of relief and embraced her daughter.

However, Diana didn't so much as move. She stood stiff in front of the couch as her crimson eyes stared wide-eyed at the projection. Her mind desperately was trying to comprehend what she had just witnessed.

"What... on earth just happened to Everett? There was no warning sign. He simply... broke."

On the screen, the visual feed zoomed in closely on Kurt's face. He casually shook his right hand, rolling his shoulders and began to search the open air around him, looking for something specific.

Finally, his gaze locked directly onto the floating recording tag that was broadcasting the live feed.

"Diana! Diana, are you watching this? I need to see you right now. Please, come here."

Diana flinched and blushed at him calling her out directly.

Julianne let out a delighted giggle and reached forward to playfully nudge her daughter's waist. "Diana, didn't you hear him? Your man is calling for you! Go on, sweetie, don't keep him waiting!"

"O-Okay," she nodded at her mother before turning around and teleporting away.

SHWOOSH

A second later, she reappeared at the edge of the VIP's lower seats.

"Rosie!" she called out in a vulnerable pitch that blended in with the coliseum noise.

Despite the noise, however, Kurt immediately picked up her voice and spun around.

The moment he caught the sight of her, his worried expression melted away, replaced by an incredibly happy and warm smile. He stretched out both his arms, gesturing for her to come to him.

Diana vanished from the VIP section and reappeared once again inside the ruined arena. As she stepped closer to speak to him, her voice sounded with a mixture of awe and panic. "Rosie... What just happened out there? What did you do to Everett–"

Before she could finish her sentence, Kurt reached and wrapped his arms securely around her slender waist, pulling her against his chest to hold her in a protective hug.

"R-Rosie... Not in front of everyone..." Diana froze at his unexpected public display of affection.

But with her being weak to him, the lingering tension in her soul evaporated. She let out a soft, trembling breath, gently closed her eyes and slid her arms around his neck, sinking into his embrace.

Kurt slowly pulled back just enough to look down into her eyes, his lazy smile widening before he leaned down and pressed his lips firmly against hers.

Diana tightened her grip around his neck, pulling him closer to her as she passionately returned the kiss right in the center of the coliseum. In front of everyone.

"Oh, my..." Ayako’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

Beside her, Emelie practically rolled her eyes to the back of her head, although she too could not help but smile for them. "I swear... this idiot couple. Can they please not do this while my brother is being carried out on a body bag? Yeesh."

Back at the estate, Sadie was shaking Yuna’s shoulders as she gushed with romantic excitement. "Ahhh! Look at them! They are so goddamn cute! Go Bossman! Go Bosslady!"

Tsk "Sadie, stop shaking me. You’re annoying me. Let go."

Sitting on the couch, Julianne watched the giant holographic screen with a deeply affectionate maternal smile. A few tears of pure happiness welled up in her eyes as she watched her daughter display such loving passion.

The reaction from the coliseum stands was a deafening mixture of sounds. Hundreds of high-society nobles were letting out cries of utter heartbreak and aristocratic fury, while thousands of commoners, students, and adventurers were cheering themselves hoarse, stamping their feet against the stone benches in absolute approval.

When Kurt finally parted his lips from her, his single eye drifted past her shoulder, catching sight of a figure slowly turning away near the back of the upper VIP seats.

Reuben Valentine stood quietly in the shadows, his face completely blank. He then turned his back to the arena, his cape fluttering behind him as he began his apathetic retreat toward the exit tunnel.

"Hey! Valentine!" Kurt’s voice boomed across the coliseum, instantly halting a large portion of the crowd’s cheers.

Reuben paused at the tunnel’s threshold, though he didn’t turn around.

"Where the hell do you think you’re going?!" Kurt mocked as he pointed his blade toward him.

"In case your old brain forgot... you and I still have some business to settle with each other. I just spent the last hour beating the ever-loving hell out of your favorite little puppy, as well as every other single stray dog who thought they could break Diana and I apart!

"Listen to me very carefully, Valentine. If you walk away from this right now... you aren’t just walking away from a fight. You are permanently walking away from your control over Diana’s life.

"If you step away now, she is mine. Unequivocally mine, and there is not a single damn thing you, your future plans, or your pride can ever say or do about it. So make your choice!"

The aerial recording tag focused its display directly onto the unmoving back of the Duke of Valentine.

The people held their breath in terrifying anticipation, waiting for his response. Will he turn back and continue this charade, or will he walk away?

Julianne's hands flew to her chest, her fingers interlocking as she stared at her husband's unmoving image on the screen. "Please... Reuben... I'm begging you... please..."

The stadium microphones picked up the deep sound of Reuben taking a long, slow breath. Finally, without turning his head to look at the ring, his voice echoed through the arena.

"Do whatever you want."

With those definitive words, Reuben stepped into the shadows, his heavy boots clicking against the stone as he walked out of sight.

["HE– HE HAS CONCEDED, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"] Commentator Ken's voice exploded into his microphone. ["DUKE REUBEN VALENTINE HAS OFFICIALLY STEPPED AWAY! KURT ROSSANA HAS SUCCESSFULLY WON OVER THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE LAND!"]

"""YEEEAAAHHHHHH!!!!"""""

The coliseum erupted into another frenzy of wild cheering.

Inside the living room, Julianne held her trembling hands over her mouth as she let out a choked sob of pure relief. She fell back against the cushions of the couch, crying tears of absolute joy.

Wendy immediately ran forward and began to gently soothe Julianne’s back with a soft smile gracing the head maid’s lips.

Deep within the stone exit tunnels, the footsteps of the Herst parents hurried to catch up to Reuben’s retreating frame.

"Lord Reuben! Please, wait!" The Earl of the Herst family called out. "Is this truly what you want?! To simply discard our alliance like this? We had already formulated so many future plans–!"

The countess stepped forward and locked her eyes onto the profile of Reuben’s face. She caught sight of the weariness hidden behind his cold eyes, a look that told her that any further argument would be useless.

She quickly reached out, grabbing her husband’s arm and pulling him back hard. "Stop. Let him be..."

"But my love–!"

The countess firmly shook her head. "I said stop.

Reuben didn’t look back at them. He simply continued his steady march through the dimly lit stone corridor.

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Diana let out a beautiful laugh of overwhelming happiness. It was a sound so rich and unburdened that it caused Kurt’s heart to swell.

She leaned her head against his chest, her eyes shimmering with tears of joy as she realised the suffocating walls of her father’s control had finally crumbled into dust.

"Ahahaha~! You did it... Rosie... you actually did it..."

"Of course I did." Kurt boasted, pointing his nose to the sky. "I'd do anything to make you happy..... I'd even die for you if I had to."

Diana's breath hitched slightly at the phrase. She looked down as a deeply emotional flush of happiness and desire warmed her cheeks.

Suddenly, Kurt caught onto a very specific sound. He could hear her shallow, and incredibly sensational, breathing passing quickly through her parted lips.

"... Diana?"

Slowly looked up at him. Her crimson eyes were burning with an intense desire that locked onto his own.

Kurt knew that face. And he knew damn well what it meant.

SHWOOSH

Before a single spectator or recording tag could track their movements, they instantly vanished from the arena, leaving the thousands of cheering fans staring at an entirely empty stone ring.

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SHWOOSH

Thud!

They crashed heavily on the mattress of their king-sized bed, ready to begin a completely different, far more private battle.