THORNS 213

Chapter 213 - Anatomy of a Lie

"It’s about the cul– uhm.. Zealots. A few weeks back, I ran into these two kids. Brother and sister. The zealots brutally murdered their parents right in front of the brother. Luckily, the sister wasn’t there, seeing as they were after her specifically.

"The kids somehow managed to escape, surviving in the streets of the slums for about the better part of a week... until Dominik and I finally found them."

Sophie didn’t interrupt. Her sharp eyes remained locked onto his face, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she listened with the quiet intensity of a guild master.

"Here’s the thing... the brother, he wanted to protect his little sister from the horror of it all. So he told her this ridiculous, elaborate story that they’re going on some sort of grand ’adventure.’ And she bought it.

"Basically, long story short... Instead of sitting her down and telling her the cold, hard truth that her parents were slaughtered, Dominik and I deepened the lie. We backed up the brother’s story, telling her that her parents were out on a highly classified, secret adventure issued by the King himself."

"Kurt..."

"It gets worse," Kurt muttered as a self-deprecating grimace pulled at his lips.

"To keep the illusion alive, we have spent the last few weeks fabricating and sending her fake letters, pretending they’re from her parents. Writing about how much they love her, how the adventure is going well, and that everything is okay.

"She reads those letters wholeheartedly, Sophie. She cherishes them. She spends every waking moment looking forward to the day her parents finally return... which they’re obviously never going to do."

Sophie let out a long, slow sigh as she uncrossed her arms. "So... what exactly is the advice you’re looking for from me, Kurt?"

"You’re the leader of the Adventurer’s Guild. In your line of work, with all the casualties and failed contracts... I’m assuming you must have had to deal with the burden of delivering bad news to families too many times to count.

"I need to know what to do. Should I finally come clean and just tell her the truth? Or... do I continue maintaining the lie, waiting until she’s old enough to properly understand?"

Without a single second of hesitation, Sophie reached her hand out and rested it firmly on Kurt’s shoulder. "You tell her, Kurt. Right away."

"But... but she’s so happy right now, Sophie. She smiles every time a letter arrives. Wouldn’t it be easier for her to just... not know the horror? To live in that happy little bubble?"

"Easier for who? Easier for her, or easier for you?" Sophie countered sharply.

"Think about what you’re actually doing to her. That poor little girl is spending her childhood waiting for two ghosts who are never, ever coming home.

"She’s reading fake words, pouring her heart into pieces of parchment in the desperate hope that the next line she reads will say they’re finally coming home. It is too cruel."

Kurt’s gaze drifted erratically as he tried to find an alternative. "What if... what if I get Dominik to arrange for some Prefects to break the bad news to her? They could sit her down and tell her that her parents died while away..."

"And what on earth will deepening the lie accomplish? At the end of the day, she is going to be hurt regardless of who says what. But think about the long game, Kurt. She is not going to stay a child forever.

"She will eventually grow up, and she will inevitably uncover this elaborate web of lies everyone has spun around her. And when she realizes that the years of comfort were all fake – that she was lied to continuously by the people she’d come to trust more than anyone else in the world – she will completely break, Kurt. Her entire world will shatter."

Sophie squeezed his shoulder tighter as her eyes softened with protective earnestness. "So don't do it. Don't drag innocent third parties into this burden just to shield yourself. Don't lie to that little girl anymore."

"But– I–... Haaaaa... You're right. I'm just being a pathetic coward about this, aren't I?"

Sophie smiled gently and lightly patted his shoulder before letting go. "I can see your intentions were good. You wanted to protect her innocence. But a beautiful lie is still a lie, and this is simply not the way to go about things."

"Heh... you know, that's exactly how most villains are made in the stories. Doing the wrong thing for the right reasons." He took a deep, steadying breath, his posture re-aligning as an unyielding determination hardened behind his single eye.

"She's probably going to absolutely hate my guts for the rest of her life... but I'll do it. I'll tell her the truth."

"Good." Sophie smiled proudly. " By the way, how old is the girl now?"

"Six."

"I see... In any case, tell her as soon as humanly possible. At that age, it's going to sting terribly, but the wound will be fresh and temporary. She has time to heal, and more importantly, she has you, that idiot, Dominik, and the brother to help her carry the grief. She'll grow up strong."

Kurt offered her a genuinely thankful nod. "Thanks, Sophie. I needed to hear that."

BZZZZZZ!

["Attention all spectators not inside the coliseum. The semi-finals will formally begin in exactly thirty minutes. You are urged to clear the plaza paths and please begin making your way inside."]

Suddenly, as if on a perfectly orchestrated cue, a crimson, gold-trimmed carriage smoothly pulled up to the private VIP drop-off zone. A man in servant uniform stepped out first and held the wooden door open. Stepping out into the sunlight right after him were both Reuben and Julianne Valentine.

Julianne was the first to spot them, her elegant dress fluttering slightly as she walked over with a warm smile. "Good afternoon, Sophie. Good afternoon, Kurt..."

"Hey, Jules! Man, it’s been some time since I last saw you."

"Good afternoon, Julianne." Kurt greeted her normally.

Reuben stepped up beside his wife and offered a stiff, formal nod toward Sophie. "Good afternoon, Guild Master."

Sophie immediately let out a wicked little giggle as she placed a hand on her hip and tilted her head to tease the stoic Duke.

"Well, well, if it isn’t the Grand Duke of Valentine himself! I must say, Reuben... everyone in the guild is absolutely losing their minds over what happened yesterday. I mean, walking away without throwing a single punch? That’s certainly one way to handle a family dispute, hahaha!"

All of her sharp remarks and teasing prods washed over Reuben like water over stone.

Slowly, he turned his frame directly toward Kurt. As his piercing gray eyes locked onto his, Reuben raised and extended his hand forward extended, gesturing for a handshake.

Kurt paused in genuine surprise.

Beside them, Sophie shot her eyebrows up and let out a low, amused whistle, while Julianne clasped her hands together against her chest as her face practically radiated with quiet hopefulness.

Kurt looked down at Reuben’s extended hand, then looked back up into the old man’s serious eyes. Deciding to play along, he reached out and shook on it. They shared a single, powerful squeeze before letting go.

"After the tournament concludes today, Rossana... I would like to speak with you privately."

"Oh? What’s this about? Are we finally about to have our much-anticipated battle now that I’m all rested up and ready to go?"

"No," Reuben replied flatly.

Suddenly, a faint silver glow pulsed behind the duke’s eyes as he stared at Kurt’s body. "Besides... I can easily perceive that you are far from being in your best condition today anyway."

"Heh. Well, that’ll just make the fight entirely fair, won’t it, old man?"

As the two men stared each other down, a silent aura of mutual respect rippled between them. "So? May I take a little bit of your time later this afternoon? Rest assured... it is not to initiate a fight."

Kurt casually shrugged his shoulders. "Fine, I guess. I can spare a few minutes."

Reuben offered a brief, rigid nod of appreciation. "Thank you."

Without another word, the duke turned and offered his arm to Julianne. She firmly held onto him and the two, after a quick "thank you" from her as well, casually walked together through the building of the academy, leaving the open plaza behind.

With a smug grin plastered across her face, Sophie turned back toward Kurt and nudged his side. "My, my, my, Kurt... what a busy man you are~"

"Don’t even get started. Let’s just head inside. I need to sit down before my head explodes."

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Deep within the fortified stone corridors beneath the academy’s coliseum, the atmosphere inside the private dressing room was thick with pre-match anxiety.

"Emelie," Amber spoke to the girl beside her. "Just to double check one more time. We have no idea what the Myrian’s opening strategy is today. Are you absolutely sure you want to be the one to go out onto the floor first?"

Standing near the lockers, Emelie smoothly zipped down the front of her tight, sleek black bodysuit, letting the fabric part wide all the way down to her upper stomach.

Victor instantly let out a loud, choked cough, quickly turning his head away to stare intensely at the blank wall. Zack’s eyes blew wide open before he spun on his heel, muttering an apology under his breath, while Junior’s face exploded into a bright red blush, resulting in Kiana frantically covering his eyes with both hands and shoving him toward the corner of the room.

Now feeling comfortable and completely unbothered by the chaos she had just inflicted on her male teammates, Emelie’s eyes turned sharp and ready.

"Yes. I’m sure."

Chapter 214 - The Opening Act

The stands of the academy’s coliseum was a violent blast of sensory overload.

"FOR HONOR AND SPILLED BLOOD!!!"

"FIGHT ON, MYRIA!!!"

"DOMINATE THE PIT, ELDORIA!!!"

Kurt hastily pushed through the lower walkways, making his way to the front-row VIP sector; he couldn't help but notice that the architectural geography of the massive coliseum had undergone a drastic political realignment since yesterday.

The entire northern and eastern upper decks were completely packed by a dense ocean of Myrian citizens, waving their dark crimson and gold banners in synchronised patterns.

Across the massive divide, the southern and western decks were completely claimed by an equally massive wall of Eldorian support, roaring and waving a sea of blue and silver flags.

'Holy crap...'

As Kurt reached his designated seat, he was immediately greeted by the sight of Sadie and Hope who were standing and scream-singing along with the Eldorian national anthem.

"Hey, Sadie. Where'd the Saintess disappear to? Is she not gonna be here?"

Sadie abruptly paused her screeching vocals. "Oh! The Saintess told me to tell you that since she sat with you yesterday, today she has to listen to 'Granny' and sit up with the old Pope!"

Without waiting for a response, Sadie threw her hands back into the air and returned straight to her loud singing.

"Ah. Got it."

"Hey, best buddy! It's been a hot minute, hasn't it?" a cheerful voice suddenly greeted him from the side.

"Dom!"

Recognising that carefree cadence, a genuine, wide smile broke across Kurt's face as he turned his head. He immediately bolted up from his seat, and the two men shared an explosive handshake, slamming their free arms together in a shoulder-bump hug.

Right beside Dominik, Mia waved happily at Kurt. "Hey, Kurt! You know, after the spectacle you pulled off yesterday, Diana hasn't stopped smiling since she walked into the office this morning. She was in such a good mood that she even let me take today off just so that I could watch today's match down here with Dominik!"

"That's awesome! I'm glad things worked out that way for you."

Dominik let out a proud grin as he nudged Kurt's shoulder. "Seriously, man. If you keep up this insane pace, you're gonna completely overtake Emelie in terms of popularity. Though... after whatever she pulls out today, she might widen the gap again."

"The less my Rosie is popular with the public, the better it is for me," a smooth and fiercely possessive voice purred from directly above them.

The moment she appeared out of nowhere, a group of guys in the rows behind them went completely wild, their jaws dropping to the floor as they stared at her ethereal beauty.

"SHE"S SO BEAUTIFUL! WHAT WAS BULA THINKING WHEN SHE MADE YOU!!!"

"I LOVE YOU, PRINCIPAL VALENTINE!!!"

"... Bro, Rossana is gonna whoop yo ass."

"IT'LL BE WORTH IT!!!"

"Hey, Diana!" Mia quickly waved at her hand before sharply glaring at her fiancé. "Dominik, move your butt out of the way! That's Diana's seat beside Kurt."

"Whaaat? But I wanted to sit next to my best buddy today..."

Mia’s expression dropped into a stern mask. She pointed a finger at the empty cushion beside herself. "Come sit down next to me. Right. Now."

"Alright... Later, dude..."

Deflated, Dominik meekly shuffled over and plopped down beside her. Mia immediately reached over and gently rubbed his red hair with a sweet smile. "There’s a good Dommy~"

"S-Stop it... not in front of everyone, Mia..."

Diana let out an amused giggle as she slid into the seat beside Kurt. She then tightly interlaced her fingers with his and rested her head comfortably against his arm.

"... Bleugh, look at that guy. How the hell is he that lucky? He gets to sit there and hold the principal’s hand like it’s nothing."

"... Lucky?! Did you NOT see what that monster did here yesterday? He shut the mouths of every person who tried their luck at claiming her hand. He beat a Royal Guard and an S-rank to a bloody pulp. I bet there were fifty more guys planning on challenging him today who are currently too terrified to even look in his direction."

"... Yeah... you’re right. I was actually one of them. I’m keeping my mouth shut now."

SHEEN!

Suddenly, the clear blue sky above the center of the pit flashed a blinding crimson red. The massive holographic runes appeared in the sky, beginning the official countdown for Day Two.

"OH SHIT! IT’S STARTING!!!"

"LET’S GOOO!!!"

""TEN!"" The entire coliseum echoed, a unified roar of seventy thousand voices.

""NINE!"" The Myrian crowd waved their banners in a synchronised surge.

""EIGHT!"" The Eldorian section stomped their feet, making the concrete foundations of the coliseum shake.

""SEVEN!"" Down on the Myrian representative benches, the principal of Skyward Academy, Chihara Mei, sat with her chin resting in her palm. Her narrow eyes locked onto Diana with a dangerous smile filled with competitive spirit.

""SIX!"" Inside the shadowed depths of the eastern tunnel, the Myrian representatives were a mixed bag of emotions – some looking dead calm, others sweating nervously, while Yamada Ryuuji was bouncing up and down in place, his fists punching the air with boundless excitement.

""FIVE!"" Standing at the center of the Myrian line, Ayako kept her disciplined gaze locked onto a single, specific location: the southern tunnel entrance.

""FOUR!"" Inside the southern tunnel, the Eldorian representatives stood in a tight formation, their faces reflecting a mixture of absolute calm and explosive excitement.

""THREE!"" Standing near the back of the Eldorian line, Junior continuously repeated a silent mantra to himself: "I won’t let Master down. I won’t let Kiana down today."

Zack glanced over his shoulder at him. "If you even get a chance to step onto the arena today, that is," he muttered. His eyes drifted forward toward the front of their line. "Look at who we’re starting with."

""TWO!"" Amber stepped up to the front of the gates, turning her head to look at the girl standing beside her. "Are you ready for this, Emelie?"

""ONE!"" Emelie lazily turned her chin to look at Amber with a cool smile spreading across her face. "I was ready a thousand years ago, Prez."

""ZERO!""

["LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!!!"] Commentator Ken's amplified voice boomed through the speaker horns, sending an electrical wave of excitement through the coliseum.

["Welcome back to Day Two of the international tournament! Today, we transition into the unforgiving mechanics of the Gauntlet! MYRIA!!! If you are ready to completely dominate this arena today, make some goddamn noise!!!"]

"""YEEEEEAAAAHHHHH!!!"""

The entire northern and eastern decks exploded into a unified roar. The Myrian fans slammed their drums, their crimson and gold banners creating a massive wave of color as their voices shook the very sky.

["Incredible! Myria is definitely hungry for blood today! Next up... ELDORIA!!! At this rate, the vocal volume from Myria alone is gonna snag them the victory before a spell is cast! I need you to be louder! If you are ready to defend your home turf, MAKE SOME NOISE!!!]

"""YEEEEEEAAAAAAYYYYYY!!!"""

The southern and western decks answered with an absolute avalanche of sound. The Eldorian crowd rose to their feet, snapping their flags violently in the wind as a deafening, unified cheer rattled the souls of each, and everyone present.

["NICE! Now that the mood is set, we have an incredibly special guest joining us on commentary today! Help me give a warm to none other than the Saintess of Eden herself... CHRISTY DONNA!!!"]

"HI, EVERYBODY!" Christy's sweet, angelic voice echoed through the coliseum.

"""HURAAAAAAAAAY!!!"""

Both Eldorian and Myrian people alike completely lost their collective minds. Hundreds of fans began weeping openly at the sight of the Saintess waving from the high box, their voices screaming her name in pure worship.

Christy let out a bright laugh as she waved and thanked them for the overwhelming reception.

’I thought she was sitting with the pope? She must’ve weaseled her way out of it somehow.’ Kurt chuckled.

"Now, then!" Christy gestured toward the center stage. "How’z about we have the lovely Principal, Diana Valentine, come up to the center stage to formally explain the gauntlet rules and bring out our two spectacular teams?!"

"""YEEEAAAHHHH!!!"""

Diana let out a soft sigh. She turned her head toward Kurt and gently planted her soft lips against his knuckles. "I’ll be right back, Rosie."

SHWOOSH

Within a second, her form vanished from the VIP section and instantly appeared at the center of the arena.

A massive roar of applause echoed throughout the stadium. However, just like on the first day, Diana raised a single hand and calmly gestured for the audience to quiet down.

As the stands settled down, a random, loud fan from the upper decks suddenly shouted at the top of his lungs: "GOOD JOB ON YESTERDAY, ROSSANA!!!"

Right on cue, another fan from the opposite side roared: "YOU TWO ARE MY ABSOLUTE FAVOURITE COUPLE!!!"

"Thank you all for the sentiment." Diana stopped the buzz before it got out of hand again.

"But I assure you... today is not about myself, nor is it about Kurt Rossana. Today is about them, your representatives. It is about national pride. It is about the elite students currently waiting inside those tunnels, waiting to prove to every single one of you why they represent the future of our respective nations.

"Speaking of... please give an unforgettable welcome to your continental representatives!"

"""YEEEEEEAAAAAAYYYYYY!!!"""

The steel gates of both tunnels slammed open. From the east and the south, the two teams marched out onto the white stone in an imposing line, stepping to their respective sides of the arena.

"Now, to explain the rules of the Gauntlet, which are actually really simple. A single member from each team will step up and duke it out until one or the other formally gives up or is knocked unconscious.

"The winner of the bout stays inside the ring, whereas the losing team must immediately bring out their next sequential representative to challenge them. This process will continue until there is only one single team standing. Understood?!"

"""YEAH!!!"""

"Excellent!" Diana smiled. "Then let the first members of each team remain on the floor and let the continental gauntlet formally begin!"

At the east, the Myrian representative line began to break formation, walking back toward their designated benches. Except for one single individual. Yamada Ryuuji remained, cracking his knuckles as he grinned like a psychopath.

But as the Eldorian team began to filter back toward their own benches, Commentator Ken’s eyes sharply locked onto the single figure who remained. His jaw dropped open and his voice cracked over the microphone in absolute shock.

["Wait... hold on a minute! L-Ladies and gentlemen! As the Eldorian roster leaves the field, their opening act is... is someone we could only describe as the literal final boss of this academy! EMELIE HERST IS STAYING IN THE RING AS THEIR FIRST – AND POTENTIALLY LAST – FIGHTER!!!]