THORNS 221

Chapter 221 - Nature Calls

Kurt leaned slightly toward Diana, keeping his gaze fixed on the arena where the Ayako is waiting for her next opponent.

"I need to pick some flowers."

Diana gave his hand a quick squeeze before looking up at him pleadingly. "Be quick, okay? I'll be lonely without you here."

'Oh, good Lord...'

As he stood up and began navigating his way through the crowded rows, Ken's voice boomed over the speakers, echoing off the stadium walls. ["AND CURRENTLY MAKING HER WAY TO THE ARENA, ELDORIA'S FOURTH COMPETITOR... LILY MATHERS!"]

"""YEEEEEAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!"""

"LILY MATHERS, MY QUEEN!!!"

"I LOVE YOU, LILY! PLEASE BE MY MOMMY!"

A massive roar erupted from the Eldorian stands.

For Kurt, the deafening cheers quickly began to quiet down as he stepped through the archway and walked into the shadowed concrete tunnels beneath the coliseum. The further he walked, the more the sound of the crowd became a distant, muffled hum.

The three pairs of eyes watched him intently from the crowd near the tunnel as he walked inside.

When he finally pushed open the door to the men's room, he found the place entirely deserted. The rows of white urinals and polished mirrors stood silent.

'Huh. Can't really blame anyone; nobody wants to miss the action out there.'

As he walked past the long row of urinals, trying to decide which one to use, a faint sound caught his attention.

Sob... sniffle...

'... Is... Is that someone crying? I'm seriously running into a lot of situations like this.'

He followed the sound further in until he stopped in front of the very last stall in the row. The sobbing from behind the metal door was at its loudest here.

Kurt raised a fist and knocked lightly.

Knock. Knock.

"Hey. You alright in there, buddy–"

BRAAAP!

"Eurgh!"

A loud and uncomforting wet sound echoed from inside the stall, followed by an immediate, excruciating groan.

"Oh, sweet Goddess Bula, please have mercy on my soul!" the man inside wailed at the physical torment. "I swear to you, I'll never visit the ladies of the night again! I'll treat my wife like a queen! Just make it stop! Please!"

Kurt slowly pulled his knuckles away from the door as his face twisted into a mask of mild disgust.

He took a couple of steps back and cleared his throat. "Yeah... Goddess Bula, please let this man sit on this bowl until today's entire tournament is over. Better yet, lock him inside."

BRAAAAAAAAAAP!!!!

"EURGH!! *Sob* Waah! Eurg– *brap* *sniff*"

'Holy timing.'

He walked back, choosing at least five urinals away from the crying man and began his business.

He was right in the middle of relieving himself when he heard the heavy creak of the restroom door opening.

Footsteps approached.

Kurt assumed it was just another spectator, but to his annoyance, the newcomer walked straight down the line and stood at the urinal immediately next to his and unzipped his trousers.

Without turning to look at him out of respect, Kurt spoke. "Look, buddy, not to be a dick – pun not intended – but there are at least twenty other empty urinals in here, not to mention the stalls. Mind scooting over a bit?"

The figure next to him didn't move away, nor did he say a word.

"..... Haaaa." Kurt let out a deep sigh, finished up, and turned his head to glare at him. "Hey, what the hell is wrong with–"

The man swung a giant iron battleaxe straight toward his head.

Kurt’s instincts kicked in. He bent his knees and threw his upper body backward, the blade whistling past his nose closely enough to cut a few loose hairs.

CRASH!

The battleaxe slammed into the tiled wall, shattering the ceramic plates into a cloud of dust.

From the end stall, the crying man let out a terrified shriek.

"Ah! W-W-What’s happening out there?! Oh Mercy–!" *Braaaap!*

"Get him, boys!" the axe-wielder ordered.

Two more men rounded the corner. One of them lunged forward and thrust a jagged dagger toward Kurt’s ribs. Kurt twisted his torso, letting the blade slip harmlessly past his side.

The second attacker swung a spiked metal bat at his head. Kurt coated his left forearm in a layer of mana coating and raised it to block the strike.

CLANG!

The spiked bat struck his arm, but Kurt didn’t flinch. The attacker’s eyes widened in sheer surprise as the metal spikes failed to pierce his skin.

Before the man could pull the bat back, Kurt reached out, grabbed him by the hair, and violently slammed his head downward.

SHATTER!

The attacker's face crashed straight through the urinal Kurt had just been using, piss and marble shards lodging itself in the man's face.

Feeling a sudden, dangerous tingle from both the front and behind, Kurt moved.

He sprinted toward the returning axe-wielder in front of him, leaped into the air, and planted one foot firmly on the man's shoulder. Using that momentum, he spun mid-air, stepping onto the shoulder of the dagger-wielder, adjusted his balance, and delivered a devastating, mid-air split kick directly onto both of their faces.

CRACK!

Both men stumbled backward with blood spraying from their broken noses.

Kurt landed safely on his feet, spotted the dropped spiked metal bat on the floor, and scooped it up.

He spun and drove the end of the bat straight into the stomach of the dagger-wielder. The man doubled over and coughed violently. Without pausing, he swung the bat upward in a brutal arc, catching him right under the jaw.

BAM—SHATTER!!!

The force of the blow lifted the man off his feet, sending him crashing backward onto the wall and down onto the wet urinal, completely unconscious.

He then turned to face the last remaining attacker – the one who had tried to lob his head off with an axe. The man was backing away while clutching his bleeding nose, his eyes filled with terror.

Kurt continuously tossed the bat from hand to the other and asked with a cold expression. "Who the hell are you guys? Who sent you?"

He stepped closer, squinting his eye as he looked at the man’s bald head and bulky frame. The familiar features slowly began to click in his mind.

"Wait a minute," a dark smile spread across his face. "You’re that bald piece of shit that Sophie gave the boot to back at the guild. Billy–"

"It’s Bigi, you fuck! Because of you, my entire life is ruined! The only thing I was ever good at was being an adventurer! And you took that away from–"

"Shut your bitch ass up! I’m not here to listen to your pathetic sob story. I’ve got a tournament to watch, and you’re already wasting my time. And now, hahaha... Now, I’m gonna make you wish you were never born."

Fearing for his life, Bigi raised his axe and swung it downward with all his might.

Kurt raised the spiked bat he was holding too and parried the heavy blade to the side. With his free hand, he formed a stiff spear with his fingers and thrust them directly into Bigi’s throat.

"G-GACK! *cough*"

Bigi stumbled back while clutching his throat and coughing with watery eyes.

Not giving him a chance to recover, Kurt channeled mana around the bat and swung it low, bringing it down hard against Bigi’s right knee.

CRACK!

"GYAAAH!"

The big bald man fell one leg on the floor. Kurt brought the bat down again, shattering the left knee this time.

CRACK!

"ARRRGH! STOP! PLEASE!" Bigi begged while clutching his broken legs. "Mercy! Have mercy! I'm sorry!"

"No. Apology not accepted."

He grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and began dragging him toward the very last stall.

BANG!

Kurt kicked the door open. Inside, the man with the stomach issues was trembling on the toilet seat, his eyes wide with absolute horror as he looked at the scary one-eyed man and the bleeding, screaming man in his grip.

"Move."

"I–I can't! My bowels won't let me!"

"I said, MOVE!"

The man scrambled off the bowl and ran out of the stall with his pants still bunched around his ankles.

"Hey!" Kurt yelled after him. "Don't you dare leave this restroom, otherwise you're next, Mr. Cheater."

"Y-Yessir!"

Kurt dragged Bigi into the stall.

"Please! Don't! What are you doing?!"

"Screw you! You were trying to ambush me while I was taking a piss. I'm just returning the favor. Don't worry. You won't die... Probably."

He grabbed Bigi by the back of his bald head and lifted it up.

"WAIT, WAIT, WAI–"

SPLASH!

Kurt shoved his face directly into the toilet bowl, making sure to hold him in a way that kept his own clothes entirely clear of any... residue.

"Holy shit, that stinks."

He pulled Bigi's head out of the bowl – his face now covered in brown waste, and a little "extra" sputtering out his mouth – then violently slammed his temple against the rim.

BASH!

Blood splattered against the white tile.

BASH!

More blood mixed with the teeth.

CRACK!

On the third strike, an ominous cracking sound echoed through the stall, and Bigi's body went completely limp, his eyes rolling back as he lost consciousness.

"M-M-Mr. One-Eyed-Man! I... I can’t hold it anymore! It’s coming!"

Kurt tossed Bigi’s unconscious head back into the bowl. He stepped out of the stall, pointing a finger at the trembling man. "There. Go. Shit on him."

"I... I can’t do that! That’s horrible!"

"I said, go shit on him, you wife-cheating piece of crap!"

Sob–!

The man scrambled into the stall, trembling as he stood over the unconscious, face-down Bigi. With a look of deep, tearful remorse, he closed his eyes.

B-BRAAAAP!

"I-I’m so– *brap* I’m so sorry!" The man cried as he let his bowels loose right onto the back of Bigi’s head.

Kurt walked over to the sinks and turned the water on high. He grabbed the soap dispenser, thoroughly scrubbing his hands and forearms twice. When he was done, he sniffed his sleeves. Even though no physical residue had touched his clothes, the incredibly foul odor of the restroom seemed to have clung to his shirt.

"Dammit. Diana’s gonna smell this from a mile away."

He couldn’t go back smelling like a clogged sewer line. He needed a change of clothes, and he needed it fast.

BANG!

And so, he rushed out of the restroom, heading past the tunnels and sprinted toward the open fields where the merchant stalls and clothing vendors were set up for the tournament.

Chapter 222 - An Absurd Detour

Ayako sprinted across the cracked stone of the arena with her katana low and ready against her hip. In her path, the ground trembled and swelled, bursting upward to form a defensive wall of ten towering golems.

The ginormous constructs were knitted together from earth, thick roots of ironwood, and braided veins of green moss that pulsed with Lily Mathers' mana.

The first golem, an unbreakable mass of stone, brought its massive fist down for the kill, but Ayako didn't even shift her stride or give it a second look.

The fist slammed down, but instead of crushing her, the stones passed straight through her body like mist. While dashing onward, her boots barely skimmed the ground as she completely ignored the next several constructs as their arms swung straight through her.

Except for the last three.

Unlike the last seven, these ones caught Ayako's attention.

As the first stone golem lunged, Ayako sank into a low crouch and clicked her blade out of the scabbard. With a single horizontal slash, she sheared the construct through its thighs, causing it to crumble. She then leaped off its falling torso.

High in the air, the second golem, woven entirely from dense wood, caught her mid-flight with a sweeping backhand. Ayako spun against the wood, moving her blade in a vertical wheel that carved the wooden arm into kindling.

She landed gracefully on the head of the third construct – a mixture of stone and earth – and drove her weapon in one full downward motion that had enough force to shatter its core.

Right behind the ruined golem stood the final construct. It was an extra towering amalgamation of all three elements – stone bones, wooden muscles, and a glowing green core of pure nature mana that rattled the air.

Ayako’s lips pulled back into an ecstatic smirk. Her inner battle junkie was practically singing at the sight.

At the VIP seats, Diana sat with her arms tightly crossed over her chest. Her heel tapped against the concrete floor in an impatient rhythm, and although her eyes narrowed at the fight in front of her, her mind was clearly elsewhere.

She bit her lower lip while occasionally looking back toward the dark entrance tunnel.

When Mia noticed the tension, she leaned towards Diana with a curious expression. "What’s wrong? You look like you’re about to bite someone’s head off."

"Rosie isn’t back yet. It’s already been fifteen minutes since he left for the restroom."

"Only fifteen minutes?! Ha, Dominik sits on the John for at least thirty every time he goes. He says it gives him a quiet place to ’think’. Isn’t that right, Dommy?"

"GO ON, LILY! SMASH THAT KATANA RIGHT OUT OF HER HANDS! YOU CAN DO IT! ELDORIA BELIEVES IN YOUUUU!!!"

He was far too invested in what was happening before him to notice his fiancé’s question.

Diana’s expression remained worrisome. "Rosie is usually finished with his business in exactly seven minutes. I factored in the crowded corridors, so I expected him back by the ten-minute mark at the latest. For an extra five minutes to have passed must mean that something is wrong..."

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Meanwhile, in the bustling open field just outside the coliseum walls, Kurt was digging through a rack of shirts at a merchant stall. He was looking for anything that didn't feature obnoxious golden trim or bright neon dyes.

Before he could pull a plain gray shirt with a white printing that simply read "Future" from the rack, his ears picked up the drunken chatter of a group of visitors standing near a food cart just a few yards away.

"... I'm telling you, the guy looked like he'd seen a god change its mind! He ran out of the south tunnel with his trousers half-down, screaming at the top of his lungs about some one-eyed demon that was drowning people in the shit bowls! Ahahaha!"

"... A demon? In the toilet? Shit toilets? Oh! A shitty toilet demon, ahahaha!?"

"... T-The *hiccup* The guards have been put on high alert. I heard the description – a guy with a black eye patch, black shirt, and maroon blazer. I think they're about to search the stalls right about now."

'Are you freaking kidding me? Great.'

This sudden development forced Kurt into a ridiculous game of low-profile stealth.

He ducked behind a display of novelty wizard hats, trying to casually slide a couple of bronze coins across the counter to the merchant while keeping his face turned away from the main walkway.

"Just give me the shirt, please."

"Bronze? Do you not see the price tag? That'll be three silver pieces, sir, and I also need to calculate the local tax for the Eldorian–"

Bam!

"Keep the change," Kurt hissed as he slammed one gold coin down.

"W-Wow! S-Sir. This is... I mean– Thank you very much–!"

"Hey! You there! Turn around slowly!"

Glancing over his shoulder, Kurt saw three guards marching his way with their hands resting on the hilts of their shortswords. They were staring right at him.

"Screw it," He abandoned the coin, grabbed the first piece of clothing within reach without looking at it, and bailed.

"H-HEY! HE'S RUNNING! STOP THE SUSPECT!"

Kurt dove headfirst into the maze of merchant stalls. He moved with a frantic agility born of pure social panic. He took a blinding turn around a tent selling enchanted crystal balls, nearly knocking over a display of glass gargoyles. He heard the heavy clatter of armored boots right behind him as the guards struggled to keep up with his erratic path.

He then pulled a hard left through an obscure path formed by two parallel canvas tents, ducking beneath a clothesline of flags. He could hear the whistles blowing from multiple directions now.

The guardsmen were closing in fast. He needed to change or get a disguise, and he needed it now.

That was when he caught sight of a temporary dressing tent behind a large stage. Sitting on a wooden crate just outside the tent flap was a large, padded costume head shaped like a cartoonish, golden-feathered bird. It was the Golden Phoenix mascot of Myria. The rest of the oversized body suit was draped over a nearby stool.

As the guards rounded the corner of the tent with their swords drawn, they scanned the surroundings. "Where did he go? He was just here!"

They ran straight past the Golden Phoenix mascot, which was currently standing near a banner, awkwardly practicing a hip-swaying mascot dance to blend in with the surrounding performers.

Once the sound of the clanking armor faded into the distance, Kurt – stuffed uncomfortably inside the suffocating layers of the bird costume– let out a massive sigh of relief.

’... Looks like the coast is clear.’

Keeping the massive bird head firmly on his shoulders, he began his slow, awkward waddle back toward the coliseum entrance.

"Hey, Suzuki-san! Where’re you going?!" A performer called to him.

"Errr... Ehhh... T-Toilet..."

"Toilet? Alright, be careful, you hear? I heard there’s a creepy man that eats people’s shit. Make sure you have someone watching your back."

"O-Okay..."

’Dafuq?!’

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Back inside the arena, the serious atmosphere of the tournament couldn’t have been further from Kurt’s ridiculous plight.

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CLANG!

Lily, who was currently piloting the terrifying golem, connected a devastating blow to Ayako’s side. As she launched horizontally across the arena, her body bounced violently against the white stone before she managed to drive her blade into the floor to arrest her momentum.

When she finally stopped, a thin line of blood was trickling from the corner of her mouth.

The stadium fell into a stunned silence. Lily Mathers had just landed a clean hit on the undefeated heiress, proving to everyone in the stands that Amber and Emelie weren’t the only monsters Eldoria had brought to the battlefield.

A few minutes later, Kurt finally made his way back to his seat.

Except, he was still in the mascot suit. Cartoonish face and all.

It was a tight squeeze, but he managed to slide into his seat next to Diana, trying his absolute best to act cool and nonchalant, crossing his legs and staring intently down at the arena.

Diana slowly turned her head and looked at the ridiculous character sitting beside her. It slowly turned its giant head to look at her too when it finally spoke, "Hey, Ana."

"Rosie...? What the... Pray tell, what the hell are you wearing?" she asked with dangerous curiosity.

"Oh, you know how much the birds love me–"

BOOOOM!!!!

An explosion from the center of the arena cut their conversation short.

Down on the field, Lily and Ayako had reached the crescendo of their fight. The entire stone floor had been reduced to gravel and the air shimmered with a volatile mixture of nature and pink sakura petals.

Ayako stood at the edge of the crater, her gray eyes burning with unrestricted joy as she held her mana infused katana high above her head.

At the same time, Lily stood her ground. Her face was pale from exhaustion, but her expression was fierce. She gathered the entirety of her mana into her fists and drove them both straight down into the broken stone, creating a multi-layered shield.

Ayako jumped and swung her blade downwards like a thunderclap.

BANG!!!

A giant sakura tree erupted from the arena and pierced the sky in a dense cloud of smoke. When the thick smoke finally began to clear, the outcome was revealed.

Lily was lying face-down on the shattered stone, completely unconscious in her half-broken golem suit, her green mana faded from the golem’s core as the medical priests rushed forward.

A few yards away, Ayako remained standing. Her uniform was torn to shreds, and her chest heaved with ragged breaths, but her face was split into a wild smile of victory as she slowly sheathed her katana with a soft, satisfying clack.

["THE WINNER OF THE MATCH... TAKING ELDORIA’S FOURTH CONSECUTIVE CONTESTANT, IS IZUMI AYAKO!"] Ken’s voice screamed through the speakers, sending the Myrian crowd into a frenzy.