THORNS 225

Chapter 225 - Sudden Emergency

["Ladies and gentlemen!"] Commentator Ken's amplified voice cut through the lingering smoke of the previous battle. ["As it stands, the illustrious Skyward Academy of Myria only has three contestants remaining, whilst the home team, Future Academy of Eldoria, boasts a comfortable five!"]

["Actually, Ken!"] Christy's bubbly voice chimed in. She held up four small fingers, correcting him with a wide smile. ["Eldoria technically only has four available fighters left! Don't forget, contestant Gary was a complete no-show!"]

["Ah, right you are, Saintess! You are correct. My apologies to the audience for the miscount! And let me just say, this exact attention to detail is exactly why I am so honored to have the great Saintess sitting beside me as my co-announcer today!"]

["Hahaha! Oh, stop it, Ken! But honestly, if you praise me a little more, I might just offer you a free heal!"]

["Oh, wow! Really? A free heal from the Saintess herself? I'd be so–"]

Ken's enthusiastic response died in his throat as he felt a terrifying chill run down his spine. Slowly, he turned his head toward the back of the commentary booth, where Gloria was sitting with her arms crossed.

The elderly woman wasn't saying a word, but her piercing glare was practically freezing the blood in his veins, clearly communicating what she would do to him if he dared to take advantage of the Saintess.

Gulp ["R-Right! Well, I think you might have to save all your healing magic for the loser of our next anticipated match! Speaking of which, the next two contestants are already making their way onto the field!"]

The coliseum roared as their next representatives stepped forward.

["Representing Eldoria!"] Ken shouted, throwing his hand out. ["We have the fierce and lovable... SUMMER WINGARD!"]

"AVENGE YOUR SISTER, SUMMER!

"WIN THIS ONE FOR ELDORIA!"

["And her opponent, stepping in for the Myrian Academy! Give it up for the swift spear... YUKIMURA!"]

Yukimura stepped forward, his dark hair tied back and his hands casually spinning his spear. The Myrian sections of the crowd cheered hard, banking their hopes on him. With Ayako having surrendered her match, Yukimura was under immense pressure to secure multiple eliminations.

["Alright, Saintess, are you ready?" Shout with me now!"]

[[""LET THE MATCH BEGIN!!!""]]

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Meanwhile, high above the deafening noise of the arena, Kurt and Diana were currently in the process of fixing their disheveled appearances.

Moving in an unspoken, synchronised rhythm, they both reached for their trousers first, pulling on the lower halves of their clothing in the quiet aftermath of their... intense lovemaking.

Once his belt was securely fastened, Kurt knelt on the floor and picked up the two shredded halves of his pink shirt. He held the ruined fabric up to the light and looked at it with a mournful gaze.

"... Minus one gold coin. I didn’t even get to wear it for a full hour."

Diana stood a few feet away, her posture impeccably straight, and her chin raised in a satisfied smug expression. Her bare chest heaved slightly as she looked down at him.

"Don’t worry about your awful taste in fashion. I had already planned for something like this to happen."

Kurt raised an eyebrow, dropping the ruined pink fabric onto the couch.

He watched in curious silence as Diana casually walked behind her massive desk and took out a small silver key from a hidden drawer. She then walked over to a tall cupboard built into the wall near the bookshelf and clicked it open.

Inside was a perfectly organized, fully stocked mini wardrobe.

One side of the cupboard contained rows of neatly pressed blouses, tailored slacks, and spare academy cloaks in Diana’s exact measurements. But the other side held an entirely different array of clothing: dark grey shirts, leather jackets, blazers and tailored trousers.

"Wait... why do you have all of that in here?"

"I always keep a few spare sets of my clothing in the office," Diana explained, reaching in and pulling out a crisp white blouse for herself. "A principal must always maintain a pristine image. This is the best academy one could attend. Meaning, somehow, someway, I might ruin my attire during the day."

She slipped the blouse over her shoulders as her crimson eyes flicked toward him. "However... I recently added yours to my emergency wardrobe. Consider it a ’just in case’ measure. Looks like I wasn’t wrong to do so."

"A prepared woman, I like that."

Once they were both fully dressed and looking as though nothing inappropriate had just occurred behind locked doors, Diana walked over to him, her expression softening into genuine affection.

"I am going to go sit with my representatives for the rest of the match," she told him while gently brushing a stray lock of dark hair away from his eye.

"I also need to check on those who were taken away by the healing priests. I want to comfort them in case they are feeling particularly down about their losses. A little reassurance goes a long way."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "But let me take you back to your seat first."

Kurt wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close. "Thanks. And thanks for the change of clothes."

They leaned into each other and shared a lingering kiss, ignoring the muffled sounds of the magical explosions rocking the building outside.

When they finally broke apart, Diana’s eyes glowed softly. The space around them warped and in the blink of an eye the quiet office was replaced by the deafening, overwhelming roar of the coliseum crowd.

They reappeared right beside their assigned VIP seats.

"Mia, I am heading down to the infirmary and the representatives for the rest of the day," Diana called out over the cheering crowd.

"No problem! See you tomorrow!"

With a final nod, Diana’s form dissolved into a ripple of spatial magic, teleporting away.

Kurt dropped into his seat with a heavy sigh, rolling his shoulders to settle into the comfortable new shirt.

From the seat to his right, Sadie leaned toward him and teased. "What a crying shame, Bossman. You actually looked really good in that other shirt. I was hoping you’d start a new trend."

"Please don’t remind me. My poor gold coin..."

Down in the arena, the intense clash between Summer and Yukimura was reaching its climax. Summer fought valiantly, but the Myrian spearman was simply too fast, exploiting a minor gap in her defenses to dismantle her and hold his spear to her neck.

["AND IT IS OVER!"] Commentator Ken’s voice blasted through the speakers. ["MYRIA SECURES A CRITICAL VICTORY! YUKIMURA HAS ELIMINATED SUMMER WINGARD!"]

The Eldorian crowd let out a collective groan of disappointment.

"Nooooo! Come on!" Dominik threw his hands up in the air. But almost immediately, he began clapping his hands together loudly, shouting toward them. "CONGRATS ON THE HARD FIGHT, SUMMER! YOU DID GREAT!"

Just as Summer began to make her way off the arena, the empty seat next to Kurt was suddenly occupied.

He glanced over to see Emelie settling into the chair. She wore a casual white hoodie over her black bodysuit.

"Hey." She greeted simply.

The people sitting in the rows above them immediately began cheering, pointing at the legendary prodigy sitting so casually among them.

"Congratulations on your matches, Emy. You dominated out there... Until you decided to shit the bed."

Emelie’s lips twitched into an upward satisfied smirk. "What can I say? All in a day’s work, nishishishi~"

Before the conversation could continue, Vicky marched briskly down the steps, making her way toward him again. She wasn't wearing her usual stoic expression. Her face was grim and her brows furrowed in with concern.

She walked straight up to Kurt and leaned in close to his ear.

"Boss. I just received an emergency transmission from my men stationed over at the orphanage."

"What is it?"

"Rupee has apparently run away. She slipped out unnoticed while locking herself inside her room. The window was wide open. Some of her clothes, toys and her backpack are missing as well."

Kurt's eye went wide as a sudden jolt of dread hit his chest.

He stood up immediately. "Thanks for telling me, Vick– Victoria. I'll handle it from here."

Vicky nodded, turning on her heel and marching out of the VIP section.

"Sorry, Emy. An emergency came up. Gotta leave."

"Whatever it is, I'm coming with you. Besides, there's nothing left for me to do here."

"Hey, Kurt, what's going on?" Dominik asked, noticing the serious look on his face. "Is something happening?"

Kurt paused, looking at Dominik. Both he and Mia are having a wonderful time. They were practically on a date, seeing as they both had the day off. Kurt contemplated deeply on whether to tell him the truth but quickly decided against dragging him away from being with her.

"It’s nothing too urgent," he lied smoothly, offering a reassuring smile. "Just a minor mishap that needs my attention. I got it covered."

"... Kurt. I told you, didn’t I? I have a very good read on people." He pointed a finger at his own golden eyes. "I can tell right now that you’re lying through your teeth."

"Dom..."

"But! I trust you." Dominik smiled. "If you say you’ve got it handled, I believe you. Just... let me know if you need me, alright? I’ll be there in a jiffy."

Kurt smiled back, extending his fist. The two men bumped fists solidly.

Without wasting another second, he and Emelie turned and hurried for the exit tunnel as the roar of the crowd swelled once more.

["AND NOW, STEPPING INTO THE ARENA FOR ELDORIA! GIVE IT UP FOR THE ONE, THE ONLY... VICE PRESIDENT OF FUTURE ACADEMY, VICTOR MOOR!"]

Behind them, Dominik and Mia jumped out of their seats, screaming at the top of their lungs in support.

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Kurt and Emelie rushed through the cool concrete tunnels of the coliseum, eventually bursting out into the bright sunlight of the academy’s main plaza. The massive courtyard was packed with tourists, merchants, and guards, making it difficult to navigate.

"C’mon, Kurt. I’ll fly us. Where’re we going?"

As his hand reached out for Emelie, his eye caught a familiar silhouette standing near the large stone fountain in the distance.

"Wait... isn’t that... Reuben?"

Chapter 226: IGNORE THIS!!!! DON’T UNLOCK!!! WRONG BOOK LOL!

"You’re... aren’t you... Maelle?"

Vincent stared in utter bewilderment at the white-haired girl slumped against the cold dungeon wall. She was beaten within an inch of her life, her body covered in deep whip marks and burns.

Before he could process the absurdity of the situation, it felt as though an invisible thread tied directly to his soul dragged him toward her with an undeniable urge to take her far away from this place.

’What the hell?! Is this the control Dee was talking about?!’

He tried with all his strength to fight the sensation, but the moment he resisted the command, a searing pain surged through his entire being. It felt as if his blood was burning him from the inside.

"Argh... Dammit! Whatever! Fine! You wanna get outta here? Then let’s get outta here!"

Dropping to one knee before her, Vincent reached out and grabbed the thick iron shackles binding her ankles. With a casual flick of his wrists, he snapped the iron like twigs. Maelle’s limp body slumped forward, tumbling directly into his arms. Whilst holding her, he broke off the remaining shackle binding her wrist, freeing her from captivity.

Looking down at her close up, Vincent’s heart sank. Her breathing was dangerously shallow and she was cold. Inhumanely cold. She was fading fast.

And if she dies... you die.

Deina’s words of warning echoed in his mind.

"Oh, hell no. I am not dying right when I’m about to get my first actual girlfriend!"

Without wasting another second, he hovered his hand over her bloody chest. A radiant golden-blue light flared from his palm – his divine healing power pouring directly onto her broken body.

Her deep whip wounds began to knit together, the bleeding stopped, and color slowly returned to her pale cheeks.

As he channeled his power, a thought struck him: ’Can I just use my divine portal to retreat back to the Divine Realm with her right now?’

He paused, weighing the idea, but quickly shook his head.

’No... a mortal would be crushed by the pressure. Then again... she did manifest genuine divine power when she summoned me... No! It’s not worth the risk. If I’m wrong, she dies, and I die with her. I need to get her somewhere safe in this world first.’

Suddenly, the metallic clacking of armored boots echoed far from the dark stone corridor outside the cell block, accompanied by panicked, echoing shouts.

"... The noise came from Princess Maelle’s cell! Hurry up!"

Vincent cut off the flow of his healing. "That’s good enough for now..." he muttered and gently rested her head against the stone wall.

Now that the blood and bruises were just about gone, he couldn’t help but notice that she was actually quite breathtaking. But he quickly cleared his thoughts and wrapped his jacket around her.

’No time for distractions.’

The sound of oncoming guards grew louder, with their footsteps fast approaching. Vincent raised his fist, preparing to simply obliterate the iron gate with a single punch, but stopped himself mid-swing. An idea sparked in his mind.

He looked up at the high shadowy ceiling of the cell, flared his white wings silently, and glided upward, tucking himself neatly into the rafters above the entryway.

A few seconds later, four men dressed in a mix of rugged bandit leather and stolen metal armor skidded to a halt outside the cell gate.

They stared in disbelief at the sight inside. The white-haired princess was no longer chained to the wall, and she was wrapped neatly in a pristine white jacket they had never seen before.

The two men at the front reached for the key ring at their belts. "We'll go check inside. You two stay out here and watch, just in case."

Unlocking the chained gate, two of the four bandits pushed the creaking gate open and stepped into the cell, failing to look up into the dark shadows above their heads, because why would they?

Vincent hovered silently, listening to their conversation.

"Hey... whose white jacket is this?" the first bandit asked. "Where the hell did this come from? It definitely wasn't here when we checked on her an hour ago."

"Dunno," the second one muttered, leaning down to inspect Maelle. "More importantly, how the hell did she get out of those heavy cuffs? Oh, shit, wait... look at her wrist! Looks like the crazy bitch literally tore her own flesh off pulling her hand through!"

"Hey, look over here, man! The cuffs are fucking smashed to pieces!"

"What?! How the hell did she do that?! Fuck... whatever. Luckily, she's unconscious. Come on, let me help you move her to another cell block."

"Now, hold on a second, man," the first bandit purred as a dark, filthy grin spread across his face as he stared down at Maelle's body.

"How’s about we have a little fun while we’re in here, huh? The boss is fast asleep down the camp, and she’s out cold. Let me and you take turns fucking her."

The second bandit glared at him. "What, are you fucking stupid?! You know the boss gets first dibs! Also, you know how much he likes fucking virgins! It’s his favourite pastime!"

"C’mon, man! We can just tell the boss that the intel he got from that redhead noble was a lie! Think about it. She obviously must have just been fucking with the prince! The boss’ll never know."

The second bandit hesitated, looking down at Maelle’s unconscious form, contemplating the offer. Finally, he spat on the floor. "Ahhh, fuck it. I’m taking her ass first."

"Haha! Say less, man!"

"Okay... I’ve heard enough." An icy voice echoed from above their heads.

Both bandits snapped their heads upward, but before their eyes could adjust to the dark ceiling, two hands descended from the shadows.

Vincent grabbed both of their heads with an iron grip and slammed their faces straight down into the hard stone floor.

CRACK!!!

Blood and teeth shattered against the rock as both men went instantly limp and unconscious

Out in the hallway, the two guarding bandits gasped in horror.

"WHAT THE–?!

"CALL THE BOSS! RING THE ALARM–"

Before the bandit could finish his scream, Vincent burst out of the cell. Flying at terrifying speed, he grabbed the screaming man's head mid-flight and drove him face-first into the iron cell bars with sickening force. The man crumpled to the floor like a ragdoll.

Seeing his comrade get obliterated in seconds, the fourth bandit turned on his heel and fled down the dark corridor for his life.

Vincent caught the sight of a steel sword dropped by one of the fallen guards. He picked it up, feeling its weight, and tossed it forward like a javelin.

THWACK—SPLAT!

"NGHAAAAA!!!"

The blade flew through the air, slicing clean through the fleeing bandit's left leg at the knee. The man let out a blood-curdling shriek as he tripped, crashing onto the stone floor and rolling around in a pool of his own spurting blood.

Vincent started gliding down the hallway.

The bandit's face was pale with mortal terror as he stared at the glowing blue eyes and massive white wings of the young man coming straight for him. Trembling violently, he raised his shaking, blood-stained hand. A shimmering blue magic circle manifested before his palm.

"S-SUMMON!"

The magic circle brightened up, and with a sickening, wet squelch, a terrifying monstrosity of a giant spider – easily the size of a carriage – materialised in the narrow corridor.

"KILL THAT FREAK WITH THE WINGS!"

The giant spider let out an ear-piercing screech and launched its terrifying form straight toward Vincent.

Showing absolutely zero momentum of stopping, Vincent flared his white wings, accelerated to supersonic speed, and flew straight through the center of the giant beast.

SPLAT!

Green, gooey monster blood and shattered chitin exploded across the hallway as Vincent tore through the spider like a cannonball.

"N-NO! MY SUMMON–"

The bandit's panic was abruptly cut short as Vincent grabbed the man's head and slammed it violently into the stone floor, rendering him instantly unconscious.

"Eurgh! I'm covered in disgusting yuck! Brrrrr! Okay... that giant spider was actually really freaking scary."

Picking up the fallen broadsword from the floor, Vincent turned his attention to the man below him. Looking at the iron blade in his hand, a vivid core memory flashed inside his mind.

Five hundred years ago, in the back yard of his mother's estate...

Natasha had set up a training dummy, handing a scrawny young Vincent a steel sword. "Alright, bozo. Slash it with full force. Don't hold back."

Vincent took a deep breath, gripped the hilt, and swung with all his strength.

Slash!

The blade cut deep into the dummy. But to his horror, it didn’t feel like wood, straw or sand. It felt horribly soft, dense, and firm... exactly like cutting through flesh.

A hidden bag of red dye inside the dummy exploded, spraying red liquid all over his face and chest.

Vincent stared at his hands, then at the sword. He dropped the sword and let out a horrified scream.

"AHHHHH!"

He collapsed onto his knees, keeling over and vomiting wretchedly onto the grass.

Natasha burst into wild, hysterical laughter, clutching her stomach. "HA HA HA! PAAHAHAHA!"

From the mansion’s back door, Maribelle came flying like a protective streak of light, dropping to her knees beside him. "Vinny! What’s wrong, baby?!"

"M-M-Mama! Natasha...! Natasha made me kill someone!"

Maribelle looked at the dummy, then glared back at Natasha before turning to comfort Vincent. "Oh, baby, no... It’s not a real person. It’s just a special training prop."

"N-Not a real person? B-But it felt so real..."

Natasha walked over, wiping a tear of laughter from her eye. "That’s the next phase of your training, kid. You’re going to slash, stab, thrust, and pierce your sword into these dummies until your hands are completely used to the sickening feeling of cutting through living flesh! Gweheheh!"

"You’re sick!"

"GWEH HEH HEH HEH!

Back in the present, inside the dark hallway...

Vincent snapped back to reality. His grip on the steel hilt tightened as he looked down at the unconscious bandits on the floor.

"From what I just heard you guys saying..." he whispered in a cold, lethal register, "you guys aren't exactly good people. It's best if I put an end to you now... especially since you know what I look like."

Steeling his resolve, he raised the blade and drove it straight through the chest of the last bandit he knocked out, piercing his heart in a single, clean motion.

This was his first kill. But thanks to Natasha's horrifying training, it didn't affect him as much as it would've otherwise.

Behind him in the corridor, the dead spider's lingering corpse suddenly crumbled into fine gray ash. Seeing the summon vanish served as a chilling reminder of what would happen to him if Maelle died.

Without hesitation, Vincent swiftly ended the other three bandits, ensuring no one was left alive to raise an alarm.

He dropped the weapon and walked back into the cell. With extreme care, he scooped Maelle back up into his arms, pulling her close against his chest while ensuring his jacket kept her warm.

He moved quickly through the winding stone tunnels, searching for an exit that led directly out under the open sky. Luckily, this dungeon was situated inside a secluded, natural mountain cave completely separate from the main bandit camp down in the valley.

Reaching the mouth of the cave, Vincent flared his white wings, took a powerful leap off the cliffside, and shot into the starry night sky, flying as fast and as far away from the mountain range as possible.

Down in the forest below, a lone, heavily intoxicated bandit was standing against a tree, taking a leak in the woods.

Hearing the majestic rush of wind above, he stumbled backward, looking up at the sky with wide, drunken eyes.

Tracing a streak of white light soaring past the moon, he blinked and squinted.

"Hmm...? An angel?"