

The room is quiet in a way that feels intentional.

Not empty.

Controlled.

A private suite somewhere above the arena lights, where the noise of AWS fades into something distant and unimportant.

A single table sits at the center.

Valentina Cruz places something down without ceremony.

Thirty poker chips.

White and gold.

Neatly stacked.

Perfectly aligned.

Nico Valentino doesn't look at them immediately.

He's adjusting his jacket first.

Slow. Precise. Like the moment is waiting on him, not the other way around.

Valentina watches him.

Not impatient.

Just observant.

Finally, Nico turns his attention to the table.

Thirty chips.

He exhales softly through his nose, almost amused.

Then he reaches forward.

Not to scatter them.

Not to play with them.

He lifts one chip from the stack.

Holds it between two fingers.

Looks at it like it has already disappointed him.

Valentina speaks first.

“Thirty competitors.”

Nico nods once.

He sets the chip back down.

Carefully.

Deliberately.

Then he slides it slightly away from the stack.

One small movement.

A separation.

A decision.

“Thirty,” *he repeats quietly.*

He looks up at her now.

Not smiling yet.

Not performing.

Just present.

“One winner.”

A beat.

Valentina doesn’t respond immediately.

She doesn’t need to.

Nico taps the separated chip once with his finger.

Not aggressive.

Not symbolic in a theatrical way.

Just certain.

“Too many people think survival is about lasting longer than everyone else.”

He finally smiles—small, controlled, almost polite.

“It isn’t.”

His hand moves again.

He touches the remaining stack.

Not counting.

Not organizing.

Acknowledging.

Then he looks back at Valentina.

“It’s about being the only one still standing when it matters.”

A pause.

Then, softer—almost to himself:

“And I intend to make that simple.”

Valentina’s eyes stay on him.

Not surprised.

Not impressed.

Affirming.

Nico slides the single separated chip back toward the stack.

Then straightens his jacket.

As if the conversation has already ended.

As if the outcome has already begun.

Outside the room, the arena roars faintly.

Inside, there are only thirty chips.

And one man who has already stopped thinking in numbers.

The training space is quiet except for the sound of movement.

No crowd.

No entrance music.

No performance.

Just repetition.

Valentina stands near the edge of the mat, arms folded, watching without interrupting.

Nico Valentino is already moving.

Not sparring.

Not improvising.

Drilling.

A partner steps in—light attack, predictable pace. A standard clothesline motion.

Nico doesn't dodge dramatically.

He reads it.

A fraction of a second early.

He pivots.

Not fast in a flashy way.

Fast in a decisive way.

The motion breaks instantly into control.

Counter.

Reset.

Again.

Valentina signals.

Another attack.

This one is slightly different. Faster. Less obvious.

Nico doesn't react late.

He reacts

earlier than the attack finishes forming.

A small step to the side.

A shift of hips.

The kind of adjustment most people never notice until it's already too late.

He stops the sequence clean.

No flourish.

No celebration.

Just a nod.

“Again.”

Valentina raises an eyebrow slightly.

The partner hesitates.

Nico notices.

That hesitation matters more than the strike.

“Don't think,” *he says quietly.*

Not harsh.

Not arrogant.

Certain.

“Just move.”

Valentina gestures again.

This time the attack is layered—feint into strike.

Something designed to catch timing, not strength.

For a split second, it looks like it might land.

Then Nico is already gone.

Not retreating.

Redirecting.

The counter isn't a move.

It's a conclusion.

The partner stumbles past him.

Nico doesn't even look back.

He resets them with a light hand on the shoulder.

Like correcting posture, not surviving an attack.

Valentina speaks finally.

"You're anticipating too early."

Nico wipes his hands on his wrist tape.

"No."

A pause.

He looks at her.

"I'm recognizing it too late for them."

That sits in the air for a moment.

Valentina doesn't immediately respond.

Because she sees it now.

This isn't reaction speed.

It's pattern recognition refined into instinct.

Nico rolls his shoulder once.

Loose. Calm.

Like none of it cost him anything.

“People think counters are defense,” *he adds.*

A faint smile returns.

“They’re not.”

He looks back at the mat.

“They’re permission.”

The partner adjusts stance again, slightly more cautious now.

That change is visible.

Nico notices that too.

And now he’s smiling properly.

Not because it’s funny.

Because it’s useful.

“Again,” *he says.*

And the room obeys.

The wrestling ring is empty.

No cameras.

No audience.

No music.

Only a single phone mounted on a tripod, recording.

Nico Valentino kneels beside it.

Not to admire himself.

To watch.

The footage begins.

A Diamond Cutter.

Frame.

Frame.

Frame.

He pauses.

Rewinds.

Plays it again.

Valentina sits a few rows back, a notebook resting on her lap. She has watched him do this often enough to know not to interrupt.

Another pause.

Another rewind.

Nico leans closer to the screen.

“There.”

Valentina looks up.

“What?”

He rewinds the footage three frames.

Plays it again.

“There.”

She watches carefully.

Nothing.

Again.

Frame by frame.

Then she sees it.

His planted foot had landed perhaps two centimeters wider than normal.

Barely noticeable.

Almost impossible to see at full speed.

Nico exhales.

“My hips opened too early.”

Valentina blinks.

“That?”

He nods.

“If they stay closed another fraction...”

He traces the movement in the air with his hand.

“...they have less time to rotate.”

He lets the video continue.

The Cutter lands.

Clean.

Violently clean.

Most people would have called it perfect.

Nico presses rewind.

“I don’t.”

Silence settles over the room.

Valentina closes her notebook.

“You’ve watched that one twelve times.”

“Fourteen.”

She smiles faintly.

“I stand corrected.”

Nico stands from the chair.

Walks into the ring.

No opponent.

No referee.

No audience.

He plants his feet.

Turns.

Explodes through the movement.

Stops.

Shakes his head.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Each repetition is almost identical.

Almost.

On the seventh attempt he freezes halfway through the rotation.

“No.”

He resets.

Valentina finally asks the question.

“Does anyone else notice the difference?”

Nico looks over his shoulder.

“No.”

A beat.

“They notice the result.”

He settles back into position.

His breathing never changes.

His expression never changes.

Only the movement evolves.

Tiny adjustment after tiny adjustment.

Invisible improvements.

The kind measured in inches.

Or milliseconds.

He drives through the motion one more time.

This one is faster.

Sharper.

Cleaner.

He lands and stays there for a moment.

Not admiring it.

Evaluating it.

Finally—

A small nod.

Satisfied.

For today.

Valentina rises from her seat and picks up the tripod.

“You know,” she says, “most wrestlers spend their careers looking for a new finish.”

Nico steps through the ropes.

A quiet smile crosses his face.

“I already found mine.”

He slips his jacket back on as though the session never happened.

“I haven't finished learning it yet.”

The hotel bathroom is filled with warm light.

Not bright.

Comfortable.

Two travel bags sit open on the counter.

One belongs to Nico Valentino.

The other to Valentina Cruz.

Neither looks remotely inexpensive.

Nico stands before the mirror, sleeves rolled neatly to his forearms, working cleanser into his face with the same patience he'd shown drilling counters earlier that afternoon.

No rushing.

No shortcuts.

Just habit.

Behind him, Valentina is arranging small bottles into an almost perfectly straight line.

Almost.

Nico notices.

Without looking directly at her.

"The serum goes before the moisturizer."

Valentina doesn't even turn around.

"I know."

"You almost reached for the moisturizer."

"I changed my mind."

"You almost made a mistake."

A tiny smile appears on her face.

"I was testing you."

Nico finally looks over.

"Mm."

"I passed."

"You always pass."

He says it so matter-of-factly that it almost doesn't register as a compliment.

Almost.

Valentina catches his eye in the mirror.

“You've become impossible.”

Nico laughs quietly.

“I've always been impossible.”

She reaches for her moisturizer.

Nico watches with exaggerated suspicion.

“...That's too much.”

“It isn't.”

“It absolutely is.”

“It isn't.”

“It is.”

She applies it anyway.

He watches with theatrical disappointment.

“You've ignored professional advice.”

“I've ignored your advice.”

“Those aren't the same thing.”

“They're very different.”

She finishes and caps the bottle.

“There.”

Nico tilts his head.

“Better.”

“I didn't ask.”

“You didn't have to.”

Valentina shakes her head, trying very hard not to smile.

“You know...”

She folds her towel carefully.

“...most people flirt by buying flowers.”

Nico blinks.

“I bought you sunscreen.”

“You did.”

“The expensive one.”

“You made a presentation.”

“It was a very good presentation.”

“It had charts.”

“The charts were persuasive.”

She laughs.

A genuine one.

Small.

Warm.

Nico catches himself smiling back before returning his attention to the mirror.

For a few seconds neither of them speaks.

The silence isn't awkward.

It's familiar.

Comfortable.

Finally, Valentina studies his reflection.

“You know...”

He raises an eyebrow.

“...you don't actually need perfect skin.”

Nico considers that.

Then smiles.

“I know.”

A beat.

“I just don't see the point in settling for almost.”

He reaches for the light switch.

The room falls dark.

Tomorrow there will be another training session.

Another meal.

Another rehearsal.

Another Diamond Cutter.

Maintenance never really ends.

The arena is empty.

Not abandoned.

Waiting.

The championship belt rests alone inside a glass display near the entrance to the production offices.

Its gold catches the overhead lights.

Nico Valentino stands before it.

Hands in his pockets.

Not touching the glass.

Not posing beside it.

Simply looking.

Valentina joins him a few moments later.

Neither of them speaks immediately.

Finally—

“You've spent this entire week preparing for twenty-nine people.”

Nico smiles faintly.

“No.”

His eyes never leave the championship.

“I've been preparing for one.”

A long silence follows.

The belt doesn't move.

Neither does Nico.

“When the Champions Carnival begins...”

He finally turns.

“...everyone will be looking at each other.”

A beat.

“I'll be looking here.”

He nods once toward the championship.

“The Carnival isn't the destination.”

“It's the invitation.”

Valentina folds her hands in front of her.

“And if you receive it?”

Nico's expression softens.

For the first time all week, he stops speaking English.

His voice is quieter.

More instinct than performance.

“Vine demasiado lejos para conformarme con llegar.”

He takes a slow breath.

“Quiero que mi familia esté orgullosa de mí.”

His eyes meet Valentina's.

“Y quiero demostrarte que tuviste razón en creer en mí.”

The silence that follows feels heavier than any applause.

Valentina looks back toward the championship.

Then, calmly, translates.

“He said...”

“I came too far to be satisfied with simply getting here.”

“I want my family to be proud of me.”

“And...”

She allows herself the smallest smile.

“I want to prove you were right to believe in me.”

Nico says nothing else.

He simply turns back toward the championship.

Somewhere beyond it...

Adam Stryker waits.

The Champions Carnival will decide whether they ever meet.