THORNS 103

Chapter 103: Enter The Fortress

"By the way, Kurt." Dominik glanced over his shoulder from the box seat and slid the glass open slightly. "Why'd you take so long to show the guardsman the information he was looking for? Don't tell me you meant what you said about enjoying the suspense?"

"What? Of course that's not true. Why would I willingly try and get us in trouble? This mission is too important for me to be messing around. The reason I took so long is because I didn't know where, or how, to find the cultist's page."

"Oh. Sorry about that, haha. For some reason I thought you knew."

"I'd like to apologise too." Emelie said as she looked away from her window side. "It completely slipped my mind. But if that's the case, then how'd you know where to find it?"

Kurt stayed silent for a moment, then shrugged with a casualness that didn't match the gravity of their situation. "I didn't," he admitted. "I just pressed down my entire hand at the popup screen and acted like I knew what I was doing. I figured if I did that, I'd hit the right spot by accident. I got lucky."

""..""

"What? It worked, didn't it? And since it worked, that just means that these cultists are a bunch of incompetent idiots. I mean, what kind of a design flaw is that?" Kurt shrugged.

Dominik slowly closed the front glass and kept looking straight ahead in silence while Emelie froze. She stared at him in utter disbelief with her mouth slightly agape. "You got... lucky? Kurt, if you had missed that mark by an inch, they would have seen that nothing changed. They would have suspected us right there and then. Argh, but then again, you couldn't have known, so, props to you and your devil's luck on your quick thinking."

"Haha, thanks. But I'd rather not rely on cheesy luck. Could you show me how to actually pull up the cultist page without me looking like an idiot?"

"It’s right here," she said as she took out her own tag, showing her popup screen and pointing at the top dot of the colon (:) symbol.

"I see..." Kurt copied what Emelie demonstrated to him. He then looked at her and gave a short, grim nod. "Understood. No more luck."

.....

Minutes past and the interior of the carriage fell into a concentrated silence. Kurt sat in the shadows, his one good eye tracking the silver streaks of water on the windowpane, while Emelie remained perfectly still, her presence being a quiet figure of pure focus and professionalism.

The steady roll of the wheels abruptly jolted to a stop. From the elevated driver’s bench outside, Dominiks’s voice cut through the storm, distorted by the wind and heavy rain, which was starting to pick up again.

"Kurt! We’ve hit a split!" Dominik roared, banging his fist against the wood of the carriage frame. "There’s a fork in the road and there’s not even a friggin’ sign! Which way?!"

Kurt leaned forward and grabbed their captive by his sodden collar, hauling him toward the light of the small interior lantern. "Talk," Kurt commanded. "Left or right? Which one takes us to the main fortress?"

The man’s teeth chattered so violently he could barely form words. His eyes rolled back in his head, lost in a fog of trauma and confusion. "I... I don’t... the Goddess... the shadows walk..."

"Oh my God..." Kurt cursed under his breath and looked at Emelie. "Has the stress gotten to him or something? He’s speaking a bunch of mambo jumbo again."

Emelie didn’t look at their captive. She was staring straight ahead at the dark wooden door of the carriage; her eyes focused on something far beyond the present moment. She gave a decisive flick of her head.

"Left. Tell Dominik to go left." She whispered.

Kurt nodded and shouted back, "Dom! Left! Mr. Shittypants said the left path leads to the main fortress!"

The carriage lurched as Dominik snapped the reins, the horses neighed as they lugged the heavy vehicle onto the muddy left-hand path.

"Incidentally, what leads to the right path? Tobias' estate?" Kurt asked Emelie.

"Mmhm."

"I see. Good to know..." He turned away, hiding behind his hood as a wicked smile began to tug on his lips.

Within minutes, the silhouette of the fortress loomed over them like a titan. They pulled into a side structure of the stables where the smell of hay and manure offered a brief reprieve from the rain.

As they stepped out onto the straw-covered floor, Emelie immediately took charge. She grabbed the captive's arm with a grip of iron. "Let me lead," she said, her tone tolerating no room for argument. "Stay two paces behind. Don't speak unless I signal."

Dominik leaned toward Kurt as they followed her toward the front entrance of the fortress, his voice a low hiss. "She's wound tighter than a crossbow string, isn't she? Must be anxious about saving those kids. I've never seen her this... enthusiastic. Not even when we went to rescue those women from that goblin island."

"She knows what's at stake, Dom." Kurt nodded, though his expression remained guarded.

In truth, Kurt knew something Dominik didn't. Emelie wasn't just anxious; she was navigating a map burned into her soul through multiple lifetimes. As a regressor, she must've walked this path countless times before. To Dominik, she was a brave comrade; to Kurt, she was a woman haunting her own past.

Finally, they reached the massive, iron-banded wooden doors of the fortress's entrance. "Keep your hoods low," Emelie instructed. "Act invisible. We are shadows in the peripheral. Just a bunch of low tier goons. If you don't look like a threat, they won't see one."

She placed her palms flat against the heavy oak. Kurt saw the faint, green shimmer of telekinetic magic ripple through her fingertips. There was no sound of a turning key or a sliding bolt. Only the creak of wood as the doors swung inward of their own accord.

They stepped into the heart of the lion.

Before them lay a massive open courtyard, a surreal paradise hidden behind grim stone walls. Lush green grass sparkled under the lantern light, surrounding a meticulously kept garden and a black-water pond. Stone benches were tucked into quiet alcoves, and in the very center stood a towering, white-marble statue of Goddess Bula, her stone eyes weeping rainwater. Stone hallways stretched out from the courtyard like the legs of a spider, leading into the dark recesses of the complex.

They began to move along the left-hand stone pathway, their boots clicking softly on the masonry. They were passing a heavy door when it suddenly flew open, crashing against the wall.

Two hooded cultists stepped out. The woman was mid-rant, her voice high with irritation. "—this awful rain! I can't conduct the ritual, I can't walk the grounds, I'm stuck inside listening to the walls groan!"

Her male companion sighed as he adjusted his robes. "It is the Will of the Goddess, Sister. Perhaps she is weeping for the brothers we recently lost."

"Hm?" The female cultist stopped mid-stride. Her eyes snapped to the four cloaked figures trying to slip past. "You there! Stop!"

'Great.' Kurt thought as a cold knot formed in his stomach. They all stopped walking, keeping their heads bowed low and their faces lost in the shadows of their hoods.

The woman marched up to them, her boots clicking aggressively. She reached out and snatched the hood off the person closest to her. Kurt.

She froze. Her initial anger evaporated, replaced by a slow, predatory curiosity. She looked over Kurt's eyepatch, her gaze lingering on the line of his jaw. A sly, dangerous smile spread across her lips. "Well now... I haven't seen this face before. A new devotee?"

"That's right, Sister," Kurt said, dropping his voice into a humble drone. "Just arrived tonight."

"Is that so? Let me see your tag."

Kurt reached into his cloak, his heart hammering as he imbued magic into it and pressed the specific area that Emelie had shown him.

"Kurt Rosanna, huh?" The woman's smile widened. She reached out, catching his chin between her fingers and tilting his head back. "Fresh meat with such passionate eyes. Or I guess, eye. Hahaha. I like that. You... follow me."

"I'm afraid I'm busy, Sister," Kurt said, his voice straining to remain polite.

"Busy with what?" she purred.

"Sightseeing," he blurted out. "Getting my bearings of the grounds."

"Then you're in luck," she said as her grip on his chin tightened slightly. "I'll personally show you around. It's important for a new brother to know the... private sectors."

Kurt looked desperately toward Dominik and Emelie. "Can my friends come? They're new too."

"No," she snapped, looking back at her male companion. "Brother Thomas will show the rest of your 'pack' to the common quarters. You belong to me for the hour."

Kurt realised that arguing further would draw the very attention Emelie had warned against. He caught Emelie's eye; she gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

’Godammit. Is this really the right thing to do? But what choice do I have?’

"Fine," Kurt muttered.

The woman led him back through the door she had emerged from, leaving the others behind with the male cultist known as Thomas. As they walked through a series of wide, torch-lit corridors, she began to chatter.

"Why did a man like you join a dying cause like this anyway? Was it the promise of salvation? Or perhaps did our ’Glorious Leader’ somehow coerce you into joining our empathetic cause?"

’Empathetic? The hell? You call letting goblins rape women and killing children empathetic?’

"I follow Bishop Tobias’ vision," Kurt said neutrally, trying his best to mask his anger.

She clicked her tongue in disgust. "Tobias is an incompetent fool. Lately, he has been ruining the lives of many of our brethren. Now, he locked himself in his estate doing who knows what. If the Goddess can hear my prayers, I honestly hope that they’ll send him back to the Sanctuary. I truly am beginning to bear ill will against him"

’The Sanctuary? Sounds important. I’ll keep a mental note of that.’

Kurt also noted the internal strife, a crack in the foundation they could exploit later, but he kept his focus. "Will I see the children soon? I was told that they will be used as an example to teach the... blasphemous members of the church to not use the Goddess’ name in vain. That treacherous ’prophecy’ truly leaves a sour taste in my mouth."

"The children?" she laughed, a dark, melodic sound. "Yes, eventually. However, we have more important matters to attend to." She said, stopping before a heavy, reinforced door at the end of the hall. "And that starts with your own initiation."

She stepped behind him, her hands sliding over his shoulders. Before he could react, she pulled his hood down over his eyes, blinding him. "Don’t peek. It ruins the surprise."

She guided him into the room. Kurt heard the heavy door thud shut, followed by the unmistakable, mechanical click of a deadbolt locking them in.

’Oh no...’

After waiting for her signal and hearing the sounds of what seemed to be clothes rustling, she finally whispered in his ear, "You can look now," before walking away.

Kurt pulled the hood back. He wasn’t in a chapel or a barracks. He was in a room draped in black silk and red velvet. Chains hung from the ceiling, and a variety of wicked-looking instruments lined the walls. The woman was no longer in her cultist robes. She sat on a large, black bed, dressed in skimpy, leather-bound dominatrix gear that left very little to the imagination.

"Drop the clothes," she commanded, dropping her voice into a husky growl. "Let’s see what the Goddess provided."

Chapter 104: Bad Boy

"I’m sorry, Sister uhm...."

"Violet. Sister Violet." The woman folded her leg over the other as she rested her forearm under her breasts, effectively pushing them up in order to of her cleavage.

"... Yes, Sister Violet. I’m sorry, but I thought you were going to show me around the fortress, were you not?"

"And I have. Have I not?" Violet whipped her deep purple hair back and licked her succulent, black-lipstick, lips.

’You call walking me through a long, ominous hallway a tour?’

"What are you waiting for?" Violet asked, flipping the opposite leg over the other. "Don't keep me waiting. Hurry up and take off those clothes. Mommy has some pent-up frustrations she would like to vent. But don't worry. I promise you'll enjoy it."

But instead of doing what she asked, Kurt stood his ground, his hand moving toward the hidden switchblade in his belt. "I'm afraid I have to decline. I'm already devoted to another... and while I appreciate the gesture, I have other things to do."

He turned toward the door, intending to kick it down if necessary. However, right as he was about to reach for the lock–

WHIP! SNAP!

A purple, shimmering whip snaked through the air. It wrapped around Kurt's waist with supernatural speed and with a violent jerk, he was pulled off his feet. He landed on the silky bed back-first, the air puffing out of his lungs.

Before he could roll away, Violet was already looming over him. She stepped onto the mattress, the sharp heel of her boot pressing firmly, yet with a controlled, agonizing gentleness, directly onto his crotch. Kurt groaned as his body tensed, the pressure increased just enough to signal her total control.

She leaned down, her dark hair falling around his face and her eyes glowing red with a manic light.

"You've been a bad boy, Kurt Rosanna" she hissed, a cruel smirk playing on her lips. "And bad boys need to be punished."

"Bad boy?" Kurt tried wiggling himself free, but the bounds were too tight. "I think you're mistaking me for someone else. I've been nothing but a good boy all year round. Just ask Santa."

"Oh? Are you not Kurt Rosanna? The man who killed our dear brother, Arlo?"

'What? So they do know? How? The guards at the gate had seen my face and name. If I was a marked man, why didn't they stop us from entering?'

"I can see the gears turning," Violet purred, reading the flickering confusion in his one eye. "You're wondering why the boys at the gate let you through. It's simple, really. And mostly our fault. You see, we honestly weren't expecting you to be so bold as to sail right into our harbor. Gary informed us that he killed you, but surprise-surprise, here you are."

"Gary? Who the hell is Gary? Wasn't it Tobias who told you about me?"

"Hahaha. He's the one who supposedly 'killed' you at Evergreen Park. Clearly that hasn't happened. And no. Like I said, Tobias is incompetent. He was too busy playing cat and mouse with the king to let us know about who's been causing so much trouble for us."

"The park..." Kurt hissed. The memory of the shadowed figure and the sudden, heart-throbbing pain of that poison flashed through his mind.

"But enough talk," Violet said, her voice dropping to a predatory croak. "I was a bit sad to learn that Gary killed you, but now that you're in front of me, I finally get to see what the big deal is."

She leaned down and straddled him across his waist. With a slow, hypnotising movement, she reached into the bodice of her leather gear, her fingers disappearing between her soft breasts. When they emerged, she was holding a small, shimmering glass syringe filled with a viscous, neon-green fluid.

Before Kurt could jerk his head away, she slammed the needle into the side of his neck.

"G-Gah!" He let out a strangled cry as the fluid burned like liquid fire through his veins. "What... What did you do..."

"A little something to keep you still," she whispered while stroking his cheek. "A paralyzer. It'll hold you for half a day. More than enough time for me to enjoy every inch of you before I finally let you bleed out. Consider it a mercy; you won't be able to feel the knife later."

"You motherfuuuuuuu...." The effect was instantaneous. A heavy numbness crawled from Kurt's toes to his jaw. His arms went limp, his fingers sliding off the whip. He became a passenger in his own body, unable to do anything but blink.

Violet smiled, satisfied. She unwound her whip and tossed it onto a nearby chair. With clinical precision, she began to strip him. She pulled the cloak from his shoulders and unbuttoned his shirt, tossing the garments and weapons carelessly onto the floor. When his upper half was bare, she leaned down and traced her tongue a slow, wet line from his stomach up toward his collarbone.

Kurt's chest began to thump a heavy, rhythmic vibration that shook his ribs.

Violet paused, looking up at him with a sly grin. "Oh? I'm glad you're enjoying the show, 'Brother'. I knew you had a heart under all that armor."

But Kurt wasn't enjoying it. If he could have made a sound at that moment, it would have been a laugh. The "thumping" wasn't desire; it was the familiar feeling of his body going through a process of change. A process of change that became much quicker thanks to his last encounter with poison.

As she reached his face, her lips parted to kiss him; Kurt's eyes suddenly flared with a terrifying clarity. The paralysis shattered for one explosive second. He lunged his head forward, putting every ounce of his weight into a brutal headbutt.

BAM! CRACK!

"AARGH!" Violet screamed, her nose shattering as she was thrown backward off the bed, clutching her face as blood sprayed through her fingers.

Kurt didn't wait. The numbness was still clawing at his limbs, but he rolled off the bed with jerky and desperate movements. He snatched the purple whip from the chair. Violet tried to scramble up, her eyes wide with shock and agony, but Kurt was faster. He lunged forward, driving his knee into her chin with a sickening crunch. As she stumbled, he swept her legs, sending her crashing to the floor.

He didn't give her a chance to recover. He looped the magical whip around her throat, planting his foot in the center of her back. And pulled.

"H-Hak! A-Ach! G-Gack!" Violet gagged, a wet, guttural sound as her hands clawed at the cord.

Kurt's face was a mask of cold fury. He slammed her head into the stone floor–

THUD!

Once.

THUD!

Twice.

THUD!

Thrice.

With every strike, he tightened the whip, blood pooling on the floor as she slowly started losing resistance. With her last bit of struggle, her heels drummed in a frantic, dying beat against the rug until, finally, she went limp.

"..."

Kurt stood over her, breathing hard. To be sure, he dropped the whip, grabbed her head, and–

SNAP!

Twisted her neck until the bone gave way.

He stood up, swaying slightly as the last of the poison left his system. He slowly pulled his shirt back on and fastened his cloak. He looked down at the crumpled, leather-clad body of the woman who had tried to claim him.

"Sorry, lady," he muttered, wiping a smear of her blood from his forehead. "I'm just not a 'mommy's boy' type of guy.... God, that was cringe."

Just as he turned toward the door, an icy chill swept through the room. An ominous, low-frequency hum vibrated in his teeth, and when he turned back, his blood ran cold.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me..."

Violet-purple swirls of chaotic magic were erupting from Violet's corpse. Her body began to lift off the ground, floating in a cloud of purple mist. The magic spiraled around her chest, tightening until, with a wet, horrific splat, a literal beating heart burst out of the magical vortex and landed on the floor, twitching in the shadows.

"What the hell are you?" Kurt muttered in pure disgust.

Finally, the swirls vanished. Violet landed on her feet as her neck snapped back into place with a series of wet clicks. Her hair hung over her face, and a low, bubbling laughter began to spill from her lips.

"Ha–! Hahahaha! AHAHAHAHA!" While she laughed, the purple whip flew across the room as if alive, landing perfectly in her hand.

"DIE!"

"NO–!" Kurt tried to block, but it was too late.

SNAP!

With a flick of her wrist, she lashed out. The whip caught Kurt across the chest, but this time it carried the force of a battering ram. He was sent flying across the room, crashing through a heavy wooden cupboard. Wood splintered and glass shattered as Kurt groaned, buried under the wreckage of the furniture.

"Hahaha... Come on Kurt~ Mommy wants to play some more~ I know that’s not enough to kill you."

"Argh..." Kurt threw off the piles of junk that landed on him. "Alright bitch. If that’s how it’s gonna be, then fine. Let’s go for round two."

"Naughty, naughty boy." Violet flipped her hair back. "Normally I’m the top, but at this rate, I might become a bottom. Just. For. You."