THORNS 107

Chapter 107: Pretty Fireworks

Bursting out from the wreckage of the broken door was Emelie. She soared into the room, her eyes and hair glowing with a fierce, ethereal light as she moved like a streak of pure magic. Before Violet could even raise her whip, Emelie was already on top of her. Her hand grabbed onto Violet's forehead, fingers digging into her skin, and slammed her down into the wooden boards.

"Gargh! Unhand me! Get your filthy hands off–!"

"Disrupt!" Emelie screamed.

crackle— BZZZT!

An electrical green current of mana surged from Emelie's palm and into Violet's head. The purple swirls of magic suddenly went haywire, flickering and sparking as Emelie's special magic tore through the internal mana flow that fueled Violet's immortality.

"AAAAAAHH!!!"

Violet let out a high-pitched, agonizing shriek as each and every one of her limbs started convulsing.

"KURT! FINISH HER NOW! WHILE HER MANA VEINS ARE GOING WILD!"

Emelie lifted Violet's body in the air using her magic, giving Kurt the perfect angle to finish her.

Not needing to be told twice, Kurt surged forward, biting his boots into the floorboards. With a flick of his wrists, the heavy, serrated blades of his brass knuckles hissed out, locking into place with a deadly snick.

He closed the distance in a single, blurring stride, pouring the mana coating into the steel. The blades glowed with a jagged, sapphire light as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. Then, he jumped.

"HASTA LA VISTA, BABY!"

As he reached Violet, he snapped his arms outward in a violent, scissoring motion. The mana-infused blades met at the center of her throat. There was no resistance. Only a clean, whistling arc of steel through air and bone.

Her head was thrown backward by the force, spinning into the shadows of the room, while her body remained pinned in the air for a heartbeat longer by Emelie’s magic before collapsing into a heap of lifeless meat.

Kurt landed behind her in a low crouch, his blades clicking shut as he retracted them into the brass. Behind him, the purple magic vanished completely from her body. The oppressive weight in the room evaporated, leaving only the sound of the rain drumming on the roof and the heavy, ragged breathing of two survivors.

Slowly standing up, Kurt looked at the wreckage of the woman who had died five times and then to Emelie, who was watching the body carefully.

"Is she...?"

"Yeah, she’s dead. With her magic being temporarily disrupted, all it took was the finishing blow to sever her connection with those hearts. She won’t be getting up again."

"Oh, thank God." Kurt’s voice cracked with tiredness. "I was starting to think she had more lives than a cat... By the way, what are you doing here? You were supposed to be with Dominik and that Thomas guy."

Emelie wiped a splatter of blood from her cheek as her eyes scanned the room to ensure the purple mist was disappearing now that its host is dead. "I knew Violet would become too dangerous for you to handle once enough time had passed, so I had to find a way to leave Thomas without looking suspicious. Duncan started slipping back into that maddened, babbling state of his. Dominik told Thomas something about him forgetting his meds. That gave me the excuse to take him to the infirmary immediately. He bought it."

"Duncan?" Kurt raised an eyebrow. "Who's Duncan?"

"... Mr. Shittypants..." Emelie sighed

"Ooooh, right! I'm so used to calling him Mr. Shittypants that I completely forgot his real name. So, where is he now?" Kurt asked, looking at the broken door.

"In the infirmary bed. I knocked him out cold before tossing him under the sheets. He won't be waking up for hours. We don't have to worry about him for now..." She paused, her eyes narrowing as she looked at Kurt's wounds. "You need me to quickly heal you?"

"Nah, this is lightwork..." Kurt grunted as he moved toward a pile of debris to dig out his black sword, Silent Night. "There you are, my precious. Also, Emy, Violet knew who I was. She said someone named Gary tipped them off. Apparently, it's the same person who poisoned me in the park. Who the hell is Gary?"

At the mention of the name, Emelie's hand curled into a tight, white-knuckled fist. "Gary is... never mind. Let's just focus on the matter at hand. I am dealing with Gary. He is... a complication from my side of things. You don't have to worry about him. Not yet at least."

Kurt stared at her for a long moment. He didn't like the secrets, but he trusted her judgment, seeing as it brought them this far. "Fine. But if they know me, they might know Dominik. He's up there alone with Thomas."

"Dominik will be fine," Emelie reassured him, though she began to move toward the door. "Thomas is a middle-manager. Basically a 'suck-up'. He isn't nearly as strong as Violet was. Besides, think about the gate. The guards didn't know you; they only knew that we're part of their brotherhood. Sure, Violet and Thomas knew who we were, but they didn't expect us to walk through the front door. The guards didn't dig into our story because they didn't have a reason to."

She then gestured to the shredded curtains and the shattered furniture. "And this ruckus? People know that Violet is violent. They probably think she's just breaking a new toy. It won't rouse the alarm immediately, but we can't stay here."

"That’s all fine and dandy, but we have one problem. Look at me. My cloak is ruined."

"Just take Violet’s." Emelie walked to the broken bed and picked up Violet’s cloak.

"Ahh, yes. Come to think of it, Violet did take hers off and fought me in that skimpy leather suit. Thanks." Kurt took it and replaced his ruined one. "Alight. Let’s hurry." He said as he pulled the hood low.

As they stepped into the threshold, Emelie turned back. She raised her hands, and Kurt felt the ground beneath them vibrate. Using a delicate blend of telekinetic precision and earth magic, she pulled the shattered wooden frames back together. The splinters knit into place, and the stone doorframe settled with a soft groan. To any passing guard, the door would now look closed and undisturbed. Little do they know that it’s now a silent tomb for their fallen sister.

"Holy shit... You really can do anything, can’t you?" Kurt admired.

"Heh. It comes with the territory of being nearly a thousand years old."

"Damn." He smirked knowingly at her. "You really said that with your whole chest puffed out."

"S-Shut up... I’m not a granny."

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High above the and inside the observation room, Dominik stood with his back to Brother Thomas, his eyes fixed on the glass partition. Below him, the sea of children moved in their strange, rhythmic play. It

was eerie, and for a moment, he felt a pang of genuine horror for what these kids might've been led to believe.

Then, he caught a movement in the reflection of the glass.

Thomas was no longer the polite guide. His face was twisted into a wide, jagged smile, his eyes reflecting the golden light of the playroom below. In his hand, he held the cultists black, signature jagged dagger. He was mid-lunge; the blade aimed directly for the base of Dominik's skull.

"—Oh shit!" Dominik dropped low.

SHATTER!

The blade slammed into the tempered glass, causing the partition shattered, creating a jagged hole. Huge shards of glass rained down into the playroom like frozen lightning. Below, the hundreds of children stopped. They looked up, their small faces tilted toward the ceiling, whispering to one another as the "sky" above them broke.

"You bastard!" Dominik roared, his hands erupting into bright, orange flames.

"Intruder!" Thomas shrieked, his voice cracking with madness. "The Goddess saw you! She saw the rot in your soul!"

"Shut up, bitch! You knew who I was and led me here. You waited for me to be distracted enough so that you could use the opportunity to kill me. Well too bad, it didn't work. Now you die."

Thomas lunged again, but the fight was a mismatch from the start. Thomas was no fighter. Just a crazy devotee. Dominik moved like a wildfire, unpredictable and scorching. He parried the black dagger with a palm cloaked in intense heat, the metal of the blade glowing red-hot instantly. He delivered a brutal kick to Thomas's chest, sending the cultist sprawling across the control panels.

"You think a little toy knife makes you a killer?" Dominik snarled. He snapped his fingers, and a whip of fire lashed out, searing across Thomas's robes.

From below, the children watched in awe. To them, it wasn't a life-or-death struggle. They saw bursts of brilliant red and orange light illuminating the dark upper deck.

"Look! Pretty fireworks!"

"Wow! So cool!"

"I'm hungry..."

Back in the room, Dominik was relentless. He rained down blows, his fists wreathed in flame, turning the observation room into an oven. Thomas was desperate, his robes scorched and his skin blistering. He realized he couldn't win. As Dominik stepped forward to deliver a finishing blow, Thomas slumped, his eyes rolling back as if he had lost consciousness.

This caused him to hesitate for a fraction of a second, his fire dimming as he looked down at the "dead" man. Once he turned his attention towards the glass, Thomas scrambled to his feet with a burst of panicked energy and sprinted for the door.

"INTRUDERS!" Thomas screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice echoing down the stone hallway. "INTRUDERS IN THE OBSERVATION DECK! GUARDS! IT'S PREFECT DOMINIK AND AN UNKNOWN FEMALE!!! HELP ME MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS!!!"

"Damn it!" Dominik cursed. He used his fire magic as a propellant, and with a roar of flame from his boots, he took flight, gliding three feet off the ground and slamming into Thomas's back before the cultist could reach the end of the hall.

He caught up and pinned Thomas to the cold stone floor. The cultist thrashed, still trying to scream, but Dominik shifted his elemental focus. He reached out and condensed a sphere of swirling, heavy water around Thomas's head.

The screams turned into muffled, wet bubbles. Dominik watched with a grim, cold stare as the weakened cultist drowned in a ball of water no larger than a melon. Thomas's hands clawed at the air, then at Dominik's arms, before finally falling limp against the floorboards.

When he dissipated the water he heard the sound of iron-shod boots. Not one or two, but dozens running at him. All coming from the stairs at the end of the hallway.

Dominik looked back toward the room of broken glass and the children, then toward the approaching guards. "Looks like the jig is up. For me at least... I hope." he muttered, though his eyes were scanning for a way out.

Chapter 108: Quick Thinking

Stomp Stomp Stomp Stomp

"Crap. That’s a lot of footsteps... What to do, what to do..." Dominik looked at the dead body and back to the observation room.

Stomp Stomp Stomp Stomp

The iron-shod rhythm of boots pounding against stone echoed down the corridor, a sound that made his blood run cold.

"Nope. That sounds like too many for me to deal with." He stood up without hesitation, leaving the dead body behind, and made a beeline back to the observation room.

After making it through, he slammed the heavy wooden door shut and locked the click, but he knew it wouldn’t hold. Not against dozens of high alert and soon-to-be-angry cultists.

He spun around, darting his eyes across the room. It was a space designed for observation, not defense. There were no wardrobes to duck into, no heavy curtains to slip behind. The room was sparse, filled only with brass consoles and cushioned couches.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath. His gaze then fell on the shattered tempered glass. Below, the sea of children was still looking up, their eyes wide with confusion.

"OVER HERE!" A voice roared from the hallway. "BROTHER THOMAS IS DOWN! CHECK THE OBSERVATION ROOM!"

"Haha, you want me? Come try and get me."

Dominik didn't have time to be subtle. He pressed his palms against the iron door handle and focused. Intense, white-hot flames erupted from his skin, melting the internal mechanisms of the lock and fusing the handle into a useless lump of slag. Before the metal could drip, he shifted his elemental focus. A burst of ice-cold water surged from his fingertips, dousing the molten iron. The sudden temperature shift tempered the metal, turning it into a brittle but solid seal.

"It needs something more... Ah!" With a grunt of exertion, he grabbed the couches, sliding them across the floor with a screech of wood on stone, jamming them firmly against the door frame.

"... The door is sealed shut!"

"... Just forcibly break it down! Brother Thomas' killer is inside!"

THUD!

BASH!

Dominik didn't wait for the next strike and turned toward the broken glass. Below him lay the playroom. A sprawling, artificial valley of grass, foamed play mats and toys. He looked back at the door, then down at the drop.

"Screw it. Going down." He smiled and jumped through the broken glass.

He didn't fall like a stone; he kicked out with his heels, releasing two precise bursts of flame that acted like thrusters, slowing his descent just enough so that he landed on his feet in the center of a soft, green carpet.

The silence of the playroom was instantly shattered. Hundreds of small faces, which had been staring up at the commotion, now converged on him. The children didn't look afraid; they looked captivated. To them, Dominik was a comet that had just fallen from the sky.

"Did you fly?" A small boy asked, pulling at the hem of his scorched cloak.

"Are you a star?" Another chimed in.

"Did you fall from the sky?"

"Why are your hands glowing?"

"Back up, little ones! Move back!" Dominik said in a frantic whisper. He scrambled toward the far wall, where another thick pane of tempered glass separated the playroom from the exterior courtyard. "Stand back... I'm about to do something really cool, alright?"

"Oh, ok!"

"Something cool?! What're you going to do?!"

"Didn't you hear the mister? He said stand back."

The children scrambled back with eyes that shimmered in excitement. Dominik concentrated his mana into his palms. He needed to hurry, so with everything that he had, his hands erupted from orange flames to white then finally into blue flames, which lashed against the glass. It hissed and bubbled, the structural integrity of the pane shattering under the extreme heat. A large, jagged hole melted through the center, the edges glowing cherry-red.

"Wow... So pretty~"

"That. Was. Awesome!"

"Do it again! Do it again!"

BAM! CRASH!

"Search the floor!" a cultist screamed from the ledge. "He jumped! He's in the pen!"

"Nonono! The hole is still too small for me..." Dominik's blood ran cold. He looked around the open playroom. There was no cover except for a large, brightly coloured wooden playhouse shaped like a castle, sitting in the corner near a grove of artificial trees. He bolted for it, sticking to the edges of the wall so as to not be seen.

As he ducked inside, he caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. A small girl, no older than what looked to be seven, was scrambling through the glowing hole he had just burnt into the wall.

"Hey! Wait!" he whispered, reaching out a hand, but she was gone, vanishing into the shadows of the hallway. He wanted to give chase and bring her back before she ran into a guard, but the first of the cultists were already leaping from the observation deck into the playroom.

'Dammit! If I move now, I'll be spotted!'

The children in the playroom didn't scatter. Instead, a small group gathered around the playhouse, peering through the small windows and the door.

'What the fuck are they doing!? I'm gonna get caught!'

"What are you doing?" A boy asked, poking his head inside.

"Are you playing hide and seek?"

"Why are you sweating, mister?"

"Shhh! Please, be quiet!" Dominik pleaded, waving his hand up to his face. "Listen to me. Return to what you were doing. If you stay quiet and help me hide, I promise... I'll take you all on a pirate adventure. On a real ship! With sails and cannons!"

The children's gasps of delight were almost louder than the cultists' boots. "A pirate ship?" they whispered in unison.

"Yes! But you have to be smart," Dominik said, his eyes fixed on the shadows of the men landing on the floor. "If those people ask where I went, tell them I went through that hole I burnt in the wall. Can you do that? Pretty please?"

"Aye, Captain!" the boy whispered, giving a tiny, clumsy salute.

The cultists had all landed inside the playroom.

"Where is he!?" A cultist barked at the children. "Where did the fire-user go!?"

Dominik watched through a crack in the playhouse wall. The children acted with the terrifyingly perfect innocence of those who had no idea of what would happen to them in a week's time. They pointed in unison toward the smouldering hole in the glass.

"He went that way!" One cultist yelled and ran.

"He ran fast! Out into the garden!"

"After him!" The leader of the bunch roared. "Don't let him reach the outer walls!"

Most of the group surged through the hole, their robes flapping in the wind. But Dominik's relief was short-lived. Two cultists stayed behind.

"You," the leader pointed to a woman cultist who seemed strangely silent. "And you, Brother Marcus. Search the entire playroom. Every nook. Every toy box. If he's doubling back, I want his head."

’Fuck!’ Dominik cursed.

He was trapped. He heard the heavy footsteps of Marcus walking toward the left side of the room while the other figure was walking directly toward the playhouse.

"Nothing over here but dolls and a bunch of other kid stuff!" Marcus shouted from across the room.

"Same here! But keep looking!" The second figure growled back.

"There’s nothing in there! It’s just for us!" The children tried to block the path.

The cultist began to whisper to them and made their way through. A gloved hand reached out, grabbing the small wooden door of the playhouse. Dominik coiled his muscles, fire beginning to lick at his fingertips. As the door creaked open, he prepared to lunge out and take the cultist’s throat.

"Are you hiding in there, fireman?" The cultist gently whispered.

Dominik froze. The voice... it was familiar. It wasn’t the gravelly tone of a cultist.

"Emelie?"

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- A few minutes earlier -

Kurt and Emelie were moving through the stone corridors at a moderately quick pace, their boots echoed silently through the hallway. They were nearly at the observation wing when a group of cultists sprinted past them, headed in the same direction.

Kurt reached out, snagging the last man by his shoulder. "What's the word, Brother? Why the rush?"

"Intruder!" the man gasped, not even looking at Kurt's face. "At the observatory! Brother Thomas screamed for help!"

The man tore himself away and kept running. Kurt and Emelie shared a look of grim understanding. They began to follow, but as they rounded the final corner that led to the stairs, Kurt's eye caught a movement in a darkened side-passage.

meow

'What the? Was that...? Kitty?'

"Emy, go on," Kurt whispered. "I saw Kitty. And every time I do, it's always about something important. I'll meet up with you later."

"Kurt, wait–" Emelie started, but he was already gone, a shadow vanishing into the gloom of the side-hall.

'Dammit, Kurt!' She gritted her teeth. She couldn't wait. She followed the crowd of cultists to the observation room door. She watched as they hammered themselves against the fused door, some cursing Dominik's name, and some crying for their fallen brother.

She squeezed her way through the crowd, making sure to keep her hood low. Once she made it to the front, she concentrated her magic on the door, and as the group slammed their shoulders against it, she focused her telekinetic energy into a singular, piercing point and blasted the door off its hinges.

"WE DID IT!"

"CHARGE!"

The cultists roared and flooded into the room with Emelie right behind them. She saw the broken glass, saw the hole in the wall below, and felt the lingering heat of Dominik’s magic.

When they jumped down into the playroom, the children pointed to the hole. The leader barked orders for the search. When they were about to leave the playroom, she noticed a group of children huddled around the wooden playhouse, their eyes darting toward the wooden door.

’Is he here?’

Emelie then walked up to the leader and volunteered to stay behind, telling him she’s staying just in case the kids were lying.

"Alright. You," the leader pointed at her. "And you, Brother Marcus. Search the entire playroom. Every nook. Every toy box. If he’s doubling back, I want his head."

"I’ll check this side," she told Marcus. "You check that side." She then walked toward the playhouse, while the other guard, Marcus, moved to the far left.

"Nothing over here but dolls and a bunch of other kid stuff!" Marcus shouted from across the room.

"Same here! But keep looking!" Emelie growled back.

"There’s nothing in there! It’s just for us!" The children tried to block her path.

Emelie leaned down, her voice a barely audible thread of sound. "The fireman who burnt the hole... he’s my friend."

The children paused, looking at her with suspicion. Emelie reached up, lifting the edge of her hood just enough to show her face. "I’m Emelie Herst. Do you know me?"

The children’s eyes grew so wide it nearly popped out of their sockets. They had seen her face in newspapers and heard stories about her feats. One girl almost shrieked in excitement, but Emelie quickly pressed a finger to her lips.

"Shhh," Emelie whispered. "Cover your mouths. Make a path for me."

The children obeyed instantly, moving aside like a tiny, silent honor guard. Emelie reached out and put her hand on the wooden door, "Are you hiding in there, fireman?" She looked over the door and found Dominik staring back at her with a fistful of fire.

"Emelie? Ha. Took you long enough," He whispered as the tension left his shoulders.