THORNS 109

Chapter 109: Shadow In The Barrels

"Emelie? Where the hell have you been?! Weren't you just dropping Mr. Shittypants off somewhere so that he doesn't become a nuisance!?" Dominik hissed while keeping his voice barely audible over the distant shouts of cultists echoing through the burnt hole in the wall.

"I did." Emelie whispered back, her eyes darting toward Marcus, who was currently kicking over a pile of oversized wooden blocks on the far side of the room. "But I was also worried about Kurt. So I went to check on him and lo and behold, he was struggling against a woman who didn't know how to stay dead. I helped him and I came as soon as I could."

"Right. So, where is he now?"

"I don't know," she admitted, a shadow of worry crossing her face before she steeled herself. "He disappeared into the side corridors. Said something about a kitty and went after it. He's safe, Dominik. He's better at being a ghost than both of us combined. He's..... a ninja, remember? Right now, we have a bigger problem."

Across the playroom, Marcus let out a frustrated grunt. "Sister! Anything in that children's house!?"

Emelie kept her cool, not even flinching. She leaned back, putting distance between her and the playhouse door so her voice would carry without sounding like a secret.

"Nothing but dust and disappointment, Brother!" she screamed back sharp and impatient. "The intruder must have jumped. We're wasting time. We should leave and meet up with the others!"

Marcus grumbled over the time they wasted and started walking toward the center of the room. Emelie turned her head back toward the dark interior of the playhouse, dropping her voice to a rapid, hurried whisper.

"Listen to me. I'm going to cause a ruckus. A big one. I'm going to let my identity be exposed. The moment they realize Emelie Herst is in their halls not as an ally but as a foe, every guard on this island is going to forget about the playroom and come for my head."

"Emelie, wait!" Dominik whispered, reaching out to grab her sleeve. "That's suicide!"

She swiped his hand away, a confident, sharp smirk pulling at her lips. "Don't be dramatic. Don't you remember who I am? I'm THE Emelie Herst; I can handle a few dozen cultists in a hallway. While they're distracted by me, you take the children.

Last thing. Don't go through the burnt hole or create another one. The password to the main reinforced door is 221121. Wait exactly ten minutes. No more, no less. By then, I'll have led the main force toward the western spires. Take the kids and get to the pier."

"Emelie–"

"Ten minutes, Dominik. Good luck." She stood up, smoothing her cloak and stepping away from the playhouse.

Marcus was waiting for her near the room's Goddess statue. "What took you so long?" he asked suspiciously.

"I was double-checking with the children," Emelie lied, gesturing to the group of children who were watching them with wide, silent eyes. "I wanted to see if they were lying about the direction he took. They weren't. He definitely went through the hole."

"Go on ahead then." Marcus looked at the jagged, glowing gap in the glass wall. "Tell our brothers we're done checking the playroom. I'll stay here and keep watch. If the kids try to escape through that hole, it'll only spell trouble."

"There's no need for you to stay. Follow me." Emelie said, her hand glowing with a soft, brown light.

"Hm?"

Once they were through the glass, she stomped her foot, and the stone floor beneath the glass wall groaned. A slab of solid rock rose from the ground, sealing the burnt hole with a seamless, airtight slam.

"There. The hole is sealed. No one goes in, no one goes out. Now move, Brother. Let’s not keep our brethren waiting."

Marcus looked impressed and smiled. "Earth magic. Efficient."

Together, they ran in the direction of their brothers, with their footsteps fading into the hallway. Inside the playhouse, Dominik sat in the dark, his heart ticking down the seconds of a ten-minute timer that felt like an eternity.

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Meanwhile, Kurt was moving through the damp, labyrinthine service tunnels beneath the main fortress. The air was colder here, smelling of mildew and old stone.

"Kitty," he hissed. "Kitty, where are you?"

meow

"Huh? Over there?" Kurt looked left. "Kitty, come out come out wherever you are~"

meow

Every time he spoke the name, a faint meow would echo from the darkness ahead. He followed the sound until he reached what looked to be a dead-end storage area, toward his left, that was filled with empty grain barrels.

However, one of the barrels, tucked in the furthest corner, was wobbling.

Kurt crept forward, his boots making no sound on the wet floor. He reached out, gripping the rim of the lid, and ripped it open.

"Aha!"

"KYAAAA!" A scream ripped through the room.

A little girl with a messy blonde ponytail and crystal blue eyes jumped upward and clawed in the air with her small hands. Kurt, being startled by the sheer volume of the shriek, skidded back a step and instinctively reached for his switchblades.

The girl tried to leap out of the barrel, but her foot caught the rim. She tumbled over the wooden barrel crashing down with her and rolling across the stone floor with an echo that travelled across the hall.

"Who's there!?" a voice shouted from down the hallway. "Hey! Over in storage!"

'Did they just come through!? What awful timing!'

Kurt didn't have time to explain anything to the little girl. Two cultists quickly burst into the room with their flickering torches. Thinking fast, Kurt stood over the fallen barrel, keeping his hood low and his posture stern.

"Relax, Brothers," Kurt said smoothly. "Look what I caught. A stray~ She was trying to hide in the grain. Little tot thought we wouldn't check here. Hahaha."

The girl scrambled out from under the barrel, her face pale with terror. She looked at Kurt, then at the two men. She turned to run, but Kurt reached down and grabbed her by the back of her white tunic.

"Good work. Bishop Tobias would be furious if even one had escaped. Give her here."

"N-No! Please let me go!" The girl began to cry hopelessly.

"Shut up, brat," the cultist growled, turning his back to Kurt as they began to lead her away.

They took exactly three steps.

Kurt moved like a flicker of shadow. He drew the two knives and lunged, crossing his arms in the air.

STAB!

The girl, looking up through her tears, saw the blood before she heard the sound. Two steel points burst through the front of the cultists' throats, dripping red onto her face. Kurt twisted the blades in a brutal, mechanical motion that severed the windpipes and the spines simultaneously. He then thrusted the blades outward through the sides of their necks, and the two men collapsed like empty sacks, their blood pooling rapidly on the stone floor.

Rumble— CRASH!

A flash of lightning strode through a high, barred window, illuminating the room in a strobe of silver light.

The girl looked up. Standing over the corpses was, to her, a monster. Kurts's face was splattered with fresh blood and his one eye glowed with a cold, predatory intensity.

"W-WAAAAAAAH!" She let out a strangled scream and dropped to her knees, scurrying backward until her back hit the wall.

"Shh! Shhh!" Kurt shushed, sheathing his bloody daggers and holding up his hands. "I'm a friend! I'm not going to hurt you! Quiet!"

But the girl was beyond listening. She stared at the bodies, then at the bloodied man approaching her. She tried to move, but her legs gave out. Kurt took a step forward, and his boot landed in something wet that wasn't blood.

He looked down. The girl was shivering so hard her teeth were chattering, and a dark puddle had formed beneath her. She had peed herself in pure, unadulterated terror.

"Godammit..." Kurt muttered.

From the hallway, more footsteps approached. The girl's scream had been heard.

"... Hey! What was that!? Is someone in there!?"

"... For Goddess's sake, don't ask who's there and just look!"

Kurt didn't have a choice. He lunged forward, ignoring the wetness of her clothes, and scooped the girl up into a football carry, clamping a gloved hand over her mouth to stifle her next scream. She fought back with everything she had, kicking wildly and scratching at his arms all while her muffled sobs vibrated against his palm.

"I'm a friend, I'm a friend, I'm a friend," he whispered desperately to her as he sprinted down the opposite hallway. "I'm getting you out of here! Just stop hitting me!"

He turned a sharp corner just as a torchlight flickered on the wall behind him. He saw a small, unremarkable wooden door. He kicked it open, ducked inside, and slammed it shut, sliding the bolt into place just as the cultists ran past.

Kurt slumped against the door, still holding the struggling, terrified girl against his chest.

"Listen to me," he whispered in the dark, sounding urgent. "If you don't be quiet, we both die. I just killed those men for you. Do you understand what that means? It means I'm not one of them."

The girl stopped kicking. Her blue eyes were wide and glistening in the sliver of light coming through the keyhole. She looked at the blood on his cloak, then back at his face as her chest heaved with silent, terrified sobs.

Chapter 110: Triple Threat

The closet room was beginning to feel smaller with every passing second. Kurt pressed his eye to the iron-rimmed keyhole of the door to observe the situation while looking for the opportune moment to escape.

Outside, the chaos had only escalated. The muffled stomping of boots on stone was constant now, punctuated by the frantic shouts of men in a panic.

"... Search every corridor! Check the lower vents!"

"... Those heathens dare to kill even more of our brothers?! They will pay dearly!"

’Shit. They’re on high alert.’ Kurt’s jaw tightened. He then turned his attention toward the back of the small room.

The girl was wedged between a shelf of empty buckets and a stack of old, moth-eaten mops. She was hitching in small, violent sobs that she desperately tried to swallow. Her tiny shoulders shook under her thin tunic.

Kurt realized he must’ve looked like a nightmare. He reached up and pulled back his hood, revealing his face fully. He knelt, making himself as small as possible in the cramped space, and wiped a smear of blood from his cheek with the back of his hand.

"Hey," he whispered, dropping his voice into a low, gentle tone. "Look at me. Remember what I said? I’m not them. I’m also sorry that you had to see me do something so scary..."

The girl looked up, her crystal-blue eyes shimmering with tears. She stared at his eyepatch, then at his remaining eye. Seeing the softness of weary, human exhaustion rather than cultist zeal, she let out a shaky breath.

"I’m Kurt," he said softly. "What’s your name?"

"H-Hope," she whispered, her voice cracking. She then hugged her knees tighter and asked, "Are you... are you friends with the fireman? The one who makes the pretty lights?"

’Pretty lights? Fireman...? Oh. Is she talking about Dominik? Or at least, I think she is.’

"Yeah. He’s my friend." Kurt smiled. "He’s a bit of a loudmouth, but he’s one of the good ones. We’re actually here to get you all out."

Hearing him say that and feeling the fear fade, Hope wiped her nose with her sleeve and properly looked up to him. "Are you going to save the others? My friends? They took them away... the mean lady with the purple hair and the bishop. They haven’t come back to the playroom for days. I ran out the playroom because I wanted to see where they went."

’Violet.’ Kurt furrowed his eyebrows.

He thought back to the carnage in Violet’s room. The silk, the chains, the whip and hearts, the sex dungeon.

"I was just in the purple-haired lady’s room, Hope. I didn’t see any children there. There weren’t any other doors inside that would’ve told me she was hiding children."

’Besides, I’m sure Emelie would’ve said something if that were the case.’

"I-If they’re not there, then they must be by the bishop?" Hope guessed.

"The bishop? You mean they’re at Tobias’ estate?"

"Y-Yes! I can show you!" Her voice rose in a frantic whisper. She scrambled out from behind the rack, her small hand catching Kurt’s sleeve. "I know the way. There’s a side door near here. It leads to a gate, and that gate leads to the back pathway to the bishop’s house."

Kurt looked at her with skepticism. "How do you know that? The cult– I mean. The zealots wouldn't just let you wander out there."

"I was there before," she said, her eyes darkening. "They took a bunch of us to the big house. We stood in a circle while the bishop said words that made my head hurt. Then he picked some of us to stay... and sent the rest of us back. I remember the path. And I remember that the scary people said they don't like walking there because of the monsters."

"Hmm. Is that so?"

Suddenly, he heard a wave of new shouting. He then stood up and checked the door.

"INTRUDER AT THE WESTERN SPIRES!" Kurt heard a scream from the floor above. "IT'S THAT EMELIE HERST WOMAN! SHE'S SLAUGHTERING EVERYONE IN THE COURTYARD! ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS, TO THE WEST!"

'Emelie got exposed? No, she's too competent for that. Did she expose herself? Why? Has something gone wrong? No, that can't be it, can it? Whatever it is, I trust that she has the situation under control. This also serves as the perfect distraction, hehee~'

"Alright, Hope," Kurt offered his hand to her. "Lead the way. Stay low, stay behind me, and if I tell you to run, you don't look back. Understand?"

She nodded solemnly and took his hand. Her palm was small and cold, but her grip was firm.

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- Right before Emelie's exposure -

At the far end of the fortress, the atmosphere was a stark contrast to the quiet closet of Kurt and Hope. A dozen cultists stood in a semi-circle; their weapons drawn and faces pale with sweat. At the center of the courtyard stood the high-ranking leader of the group. A man with a scarred lip and a heavy mace.

Emelie stood among the ranks, her hood pulled low over her eyes, her posture humble.

"Report!" the leader barked. "What did you find in the playroom?"

"Nothing unusual, Senior Brother," Emelie said, her voice muffled. "The intruder is gone. He likely jumped the walls."

"Impossible! How can this be?!" The leader roared. "What about the unknown female?! I know I heard Brother Thomas yell something about that before taking his last breath!"

He paced around in the rain, his mace dragging against the stone. "We have a traitor in our midst and I don’t like it! I need to know who is responsible for this!"

Emelie suddenly moved away from the crowd and stepped forward. The other cultists parted for her, thinking she had information to share.

"I’ve seen her," She hinted as a smile touched her hidden lips. "A new member. I believe she’s been walking right under your nose this whole time."

The leader stopped, leaning in close. "Who? Name her, Sister! Show me the light!"

Emelie reached up and slowly pulled back her hood. She let the heavy cultist cloak slide off her shoulders, revealing her white hair with green streaks and a skin-tight black jumpsuit that hugged every curve of her body, allowing her to move freely. She looked the leader dead in the eye, her expression one of bored superiority.

"It was me, you idiot. Bleeeeh." She stuck her tongue out and mocked him.

The leader’s eyes widened, but before he could even draw breath to scream, Emelie’s fingers flicked upward. A violent surge of telekinetic force slammed into the man’s throat, snapping his neck with the sound of a dry branch. He collapsed like a puppet with cut strings.

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The courtyard went deathly silent, save for the sound of rain that filled in the gap. The cultists stared at their fallen leader, then at the woman standing over him.

"Hi. I’m Emelie Herst," she said, her voice echoing with eerie nonchalance. She then floated off the ground as her hair began to glow. "And I’ve killed every single one of you in about ninety-nine different lifetimes."

Emelie pointed her hand at the nearest cultist member and with another sickening snap, their neck twisted.

"Let’s begin round 100, shall we?"

"KILL HER!!!"

"""""OORAAAAAAHH!!!"""""

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Dominik was still sitting inside the playhouse with his eyes closed, concentrating. To the children, however, it looked like he was sleeping.

’Nine minutes fifty-eight... fifty-nine...’

"Ten." His eyes snapped open.

He stood up from the shadows of the playhouse and popped his joints. The playroom was a sea of small, expectant faces. The children had stopped playing and were all huddled together, muttering things about pirate this, canons that.

As they noticed Dominik step out of the house, a collective gasp rose across the entire floor.

"He’s back!"

"Is it time!?"

"Are we going on the adventure now?!"

Dominik looked at the sheer number of them. There had to be at least two hundred. His stomach did a nauseating churn.

’How the hell am I going to get two hundred kids across a war zone and onto a ship?’

"Yeah," he forced a grin and a nervous laugh. "It’s time! Everyone, form a line! Stay quiet, stay close, and follow the leader! Which is me, haha..."

He moved to the heavy, reinforced door near the back of the room. This was the only way out that didn’t involve creating another hole. He looked at the keypad and hovered his fingers over the keys.

’Alright, Emelie. Let’s hope this works.’

He punched in the code 221121. For a heart-stopping second, nothing happened. Then, the heavy locks inside the stone wall clicked. The massive iron bolts slid back with a thunderous clack, and the door swung open to reveal the dark, flickering hallway beyond.

’It really worked! Thank the Goddess above! Though I wonder how she got the password... Not that it matters right now.’

Dominik took a deep breath, his hands igniting with a soft, protective glow. He looked back at the children who were now scrambling toward him, their eyes full of a hope that he wasn’t sure he could fulfill.

"This is it, Captain Dom," he muttered to himself, turning to face the darkness of the fortress. "Don’t screw this up."

He stepped out into the hall, the first step of a march that would either lead them to freedom or to the bottom of the ocean.