THORNS 111

Chapter 111: Near Misses

Creeaaak

Kurt slowly opened the wooden door while checking for any danger. Once he saw that the coast was clear, both he and Hope quietly slipped out of the closet. He kept his matte-black sword partially drawn, the hilt cold against his palm, ready to strike at any moment.

"Alright, Hope. First, we need to get out of this maze. Stay close to me, ok?"

"Ok..." She nodded her head once.

Together, they backtracked through the labyrinthine service tunnels, moving past the storage barrels where he found the little girl and back down the corridor where the two cultists lay in a growing pool of dark, cooling blood.

'They didn't bother moving these bodies? Whatever. That's convenient for me.'

Kurt stood over the corpses. Hope buried her face in his leg, not wanting to see the gruesome sight. He didn't want to subject her to this scene again, but he needed a disguise for the girl. Her blonde hair and white tunic stood out too much. He reached down and unfastened the dark cloak from the smaller of the two dead men.

"Put this on," he handed the bundle to Hope.

She pulled it over her shoulders, but the garment was absurdly large. The hem dragged a good foot on the grimy stone floor, and the hood swallowed her entire head, making her look like a small, black tent.

"Uhm... Mr. Kurt..."

"Oops. Sorry about that. Here, hold still." He drew his switchblade from its sheath, and with the precision of an amateur tailor, he carefully began hacking away at the heavy wool. He sheared the bottom into a jagged hem that hit just above her ankles and sliced the sleeves so her hands could actually fully fit through. "Not exactly high fashion, but it'll keep you from tripping."

"Thank you, Mr. Kurt," she whispered, pulling the hood slightly back so that she could see properly.

"Just Kurt is fine. We're friends now, right? Also, get ready to lead the way. We're coming up on the exit."

They began the climb out of the underground storage. Hope led him through a series of corridors and damp servant stairs. It was a nerve-wracking experience. At every corner, Kurt had to sharpen his senses and concentrate, listening and feeling for the tell-tale vibration of movement.

They were halfway down a long, torch-lit corridor when the sound of voices drifted from around a corner.

"... I'm telling you, the woman in the western wing is a distraction! Something's not right! There has to be another one!"

"... I swear to the Goddess above, if there's nobody there, I'm telling Sister Violet that this was your idea! That is, whatever she's done playing with her new toy..."

'Crap!'

Kurt's heart hammered.

There was no cover. Only an alcove with two empty crates. He grabbed the torch above and threw it hard in the opposite direction, then he quickly held Hope's shoulder and yanked her toward him.

"Get in," he hissed, throwing open the folds of his own black cloak.

Hope didn’t hesitate; she pressed herself against his leg, tucking her head under his protective arm. Kurt wrapped the fabric of his cloak around her, pressing his back into the shadows of the alcove. He pulled his hood as low as it would go and held his breath.

When the two cultists rounded the corner, their torches casted a long, flickering shadow that danced over Kurt’s boots. He went perfectly still, a statue of cloth and hidden steel. He could feel Hope’s nervous heart racing against his thigh.

"... Wasn’t there supposed to be a torch here?"

’Shit! Please don’t look over here, please don’t look over here!’

"... What, are you blind? It’s over there." The cultist pointed ahead.

"... What’s it doing way over there?"

"... Probably got knocked over during the panic."

"... Oh right... Come on. Let’s get it."

The torchlight lingered on the crates for a terrifying second, then moved on. Kurt waited until the footsteps were a good enough distance away before releasing his grip and swiftly turning the corner with Hope.

"That was close," she whispered while speed walking with Kurt.

"Too close. Let’s not get complacent. How far are we from the exit?"

Hope pointed toward the end of the hall, where a heavy, unassuming wooden door stood beneath a single, flickering lantern. "There!" She excitedly whispered. "That’s the way! It leads outside and to the gate!"

They bolted for it; Hope’s small feet pitter-pattered against the stone. When they reached it, Kurt grabbed the iron handle and twisted. It didn’t budge. He braced his shoulder against it and shoved, but the door was locked tight.

"It’s locked," he growled. "They must have sealed the perimeter when the alarm went off."

"We have to go back?" Hope’s voice trembled.

"No. We don’t have time." Kurt closed his eye, focusing on the core of his being. He felt the familiar, hot surge of his strengthening magic channelling into his shoulders and legs, his muscles bulging slightly beneath his gear.

He didn’t kick it since that would be too loud. Instead, he placed his palm flat against the center of the wood and gave one massive, controlled push. The internal bolt shrieked as the wood around it splintered. With a muffled snap, the lock broke and the door gave way, swinging open into the night.

SHAAAA!!!

The transition was violent. One moment they were in the stagnant heat of the fortress; the next, they were slammed by a wall of freezing rain and wind.

Kurt looked around and dragged the green trash container nearby to block the door. Looking up at the sky, he noticed the light grey clouds had turned dark grey. He reached into his pocket and checked his phone.

"6:00pm," he muttered. "The sun’s gone. That’s good for us."

"This way!" Hope shouted over the wind and heavy rain.

Together, they ran through the muddy pathway. The rain turned the world into a blur of grey and black. Eventually, they reached the side gate Hope had mentioned. It wasn’t a grand entrance; it was a service gate, but the cultists had reinforced it. Heavy iron chains were coiled around the bars like snakes, secured by three massive padlocks and barbed wire on top.

Kurt reached out to break the chains, but the moment his glove touched the metal, a bright blue zap of electricity snapped through the air.

"Gah! Motherfmmmm!" He yanked his hand back and held his words, making sure to be careful as to not swear in front of her.

"Kurt! Are you okay?!"

"I'm fine," he hissed as he shook off the pain.

He looked at the gate, then at his hands. If his adaptation skill was going to help, he needed to give it a better conduit. He focused on drawing his mana to the surface of his skin. Mana Coating. A faint, sapphire shimmer enveloped his hands, a protective barrier of mana.

He reached out again. This time, the electricity hissed against the coating but couldn't penetrate.

'Nice.' Kurt gripped the central chain.

With a roar of effort, fueled by his strengthening magic, he twisted the links. The metal zapped, glowing white-hot for a second, and then snapped. He threw the chains aside and kicked the gate open.

They stepped through, leaving the fortress grounds behind. Kurt took a moment to pull the gate shut and wind the broken chains back around it. It wouldn't stop anyone now that it's broken, but it might buy them a few minutes if a patrol came by.

The path ahead was a narrow stone trail that led toward the distant silhouette of Tobias' estate. It was surrounded by overgrown bushes and twisted trees that looked like reaching hands.

"Hope, what kind of monsters are out here? Did the zealots mention anything specific?"

"I don’t know," she said in a small voice. "I haven’t seen any. They just told us that the ’Unworthy’ were turned into food for the monsters. They also said if we ran away from the path, the Great Weavers would catch us."

’Great Weavers? I don’t like the sound of that.’

"Ouch!"

Hope’s foot caught on a gnarled root. She went down hard, sliding into a patch of thick, grey weeds. Kurt was by her side in a second, hauling her up.

"You okay?"

"Yes, just... sticky." She complained.

Kurt looked at her. Her cloak was covered in thick, white, ropey strands. It wasn’t mud. It was spider silk. Thicker and tougher than anything he’d ever seen. He began frantically brushing it off her, the silk sticking to his gloves like tar.

"Change of plans," Kurt said. "Get on my back. We need to move faster than this."

Hope didn’t argue. She climbed onto his back, locking her arms around his neck. Kurt adjusted her weight and began to run. He moved with the tireless pace of a predator, darting his eye between the trees.

Suddenly, a sound cut through the roar of the rain.

CRACK!

Kurt skidded to a stop, his boots splashing in a puddle.

"What’s wrong?" Hope whispered into his ear.

"Shh."

Kurt felt a cold, tingly sensation erupting across his skin. His unique skill, Adaptation, was screaming at him. The air felt charged, heavy, and wrong.

Then, the world changed.

Everything slowed down. The rain falling around him became a curtain of individual, shimmering diamonds, suspended in mid-air. The sound of the wind stretched into a low, guttural moan. The swaying trees moved with the agonizing slowness of underwater kelp.

’Shit. This only happens when I’m moments away from death.’

He scanned the perimeter. Nothing. Then, from the corner of his eye, he looked at his own shoulder.

A massive, black, hairy talon was inches from piercing his flesh. It was descending from above with silent, terrifying speed.

Kurt looked up.

’Oh my...’

Hanging from the trees was a monster that defied logic. It was a spider the size of a carriage, its abdomen pulsing with a sickly violet light. It had dozens of eyes, all of them fixed on him with a cold, alien intelligence.

"Move!" Kurt roared, though it sounded like a slow-motion growl.

He threw himself forward in a desperate lunge, making sure to not hurt Hope. Time snapped back to its normal flow with a violent jolt.

BOOM!

The monster crashed into the spot where he had been standing a millisecond before, its massive weight shattering the narrow stone path and sending a spray of mud into the air.

Kurt scrambled to his feet with Hope still clinging to his back. Her eyes wide with a terror that stole her voice. The Great Weaver rose, its legs unfolding like jagged knives, blocking the path to the estate. It hissed, a sound like steam escaping a pipe, and its mandibles clattered together in anticipation.

"Hold tight, Hope," Kurt drew his black sword. "This is going to get messy."

Chapter 112: The Great Weaver

Heavy rain fell in punishing, freezing sheets, turning the narrow path into a treacherous trudge of mud and rotted leaves. Before them, the Great Weaver stood like a monument of nightmare. Its pitch-black eight eyes, varying in size, shimmered with wet light, reflecting Kurt’s lone, wide eye.

Kurt felt the shaking of Hope’s body against his spine. She was vibrating with a primal, bone-deep terror. He could hear her breath hitching into jagged, silent sobs against his shoulder.

"Hope," Kurt whispered, his voice barely audible over the clatter of the spider’s mandibles. "Listen to me. Pull your hood low. Close your eyes. Don’t look at it. Just hold onto me as tight as you can. I’ve got you, ok?"

He felt her small arms lock around his neck, nearly choking him, and her legs squeeze his waist with surprising strength. Kurt reached back with his left arm, hooking it under her legs to lock her against his back, while his right hand gripped the matte-black sword. The blade absorbed any flashes of lighting like a void in the storm.

The monster finally shifted. It moved with a sickening, liquid grace, its long, spindly legs thudding against the earth. Kurt began to circle, his boots sliding through the muck. Every muscle in his body was tightening; his Strengthening Magic hummed beneath his skin like a live wire ready to explode.

He took a cautious step, but the mud betrayed him. His heel came down on a water-logged branch.

Crack

SCREEEEECH!!!

The sound was like a starting pistol. The Great Weaver let out a high-pitched, ear-piercing screech that vibrated in Kurt's teeth. The monster lunged, moving far faster than anything that size should.

Kurt threw himself to the left. The monster's massive thorax slammed into the ground where he had been standing, the impact sending a spray of gravel into the air. Before Kurt could recover, one of the creature's forward legs swung in a wide, horizontal arc.

"No–!"

He didn't have time to dodge again. He brought the black sword up, bracing the flat of the blade with his palm. The impact felt like being hit by a runaway carriage. The metal shrieked against the chitinous leg, and Kurt, holding himself steady, was sent skidding five feet back through the mud, his boots carving deep furrows in the earth.

"I'm scared! Kurt, I'm scared!" Hope screamed into his cloak.

"I know, Hope! I know! Just keep your head down! I'm not letting go! I promise!"

SCREEEEECH!!!

The spider reared up on its hind legs, its pulsing violet abdomen glowing brighter. It hissed, and a mass of thick, grey webbing erupted from its spinnerets. It came at him like a weighted net. Kurt ducked, the sticky, foul-smelling mass whistling over his head and slamming into a tree behind him with enough force to snap the trunk.

’I can’t do this,not here. Not in the open. Especially with her on my back.’

He turned and bolted. He used his Strengthening Magic to its limit, his legs pumping with supernatural power as he sprinted deeper into the woods. Behind him, he heard the terrifying thud-thud-thud-thud of the Great Weaver giving chase. It didn’t matter how fast he ran; the monster was built for this terrain. It leaped between the gnarled trees, its legs clicking against the bark like hammers.

Suddenly, the tingly sensation of his Adaptation skill flared again. But this time, time didn’t slow down. Instead, he felt a violent jerk at his back.

"KURT!" Hope shrieked impure terror and agony.

Kurt spun a full 180 degrees on his heel. A strand of webbing had latched onto Hope’s cloak. The spider was perched on a high branch, reeling the silk in with its front legs, dragging the girl off his back.

"No!" Kurt lunged forward, swinging his sword at the strand. The matte-black steel struck the silk, but the webbing was incredibly dense and elastic. The blade bounced off, barely making a nick.

The spider pulled harder and Hope’s grip on Kurt’s neck began to slip.

"LET HER GO!" Kurt roared, focusing his mana into the blade.

A jagged, blue aura erupted around the sword. He swung again, and this time the enchanted edge sliced through the silk like it was warm butter. The tension snapped, and the spider stumbled backward on its branch, falling hard to the ground, struggling to flip itself back over.

Kurt caught Hope as she fell, her face ghostly pale and teeth clattering. He scanned the immediate area, desperation clawing at his throat. Then, he saw it. An old oak tree, its base hollow.

He sprinted to the tree and practically stuffed Hope into the narrow, dark opening.

"Stay here! Don’t move! Don’t make a sound!" he commanded, his voice trembling with urgency.

"No! Don’t go! Don’t leave me alone! You said you wouldn’t leave me!" Hope grabbed his bloody sleeve, her fingers digging in. "Please! It’s going to eat me! I’m scared, Kurt!"

Kurt knelt for a split second, grabbing her shoulders. He looked her straight in her eyes, his gaze a hard, unbreakable promise. "Hope, look at me. If I don’t kill it now, it will follow us all the way to the estate. I have to do this. I will be back. I swear."

SCREEEEECH!!!

He heard the Spinner’s screech nearby. It had recovered. He gently pried her hands off his arm. "Stay deep in the hollow. Be silent. It won’t find you here."

He turned and vanished into the rain before she could say another word. Hope retreated into the pitch-black heart of the tree, curling into a ball and weeping silently, the sound of the storm drowning out her grief.

Kurt didn’t run away. He circled back through the undergrowth, his mana coating flickering as he tried to conserve energy. He moved like a shadow, his dark cloak blending into the wet bark of the trees. He saw the Great Weaver; it was on the upright on the ground now, its many eyes scanning the brush, looking for the "meat" that had escaped its web.

He waited for a flash of lightning

Rumble— CRASH!

’Now!’

In the momentary whiteout, Kurt launched himself from a high root. He fell like a stone, his mana-coated blade pointed downward. The spider sensed the air displacement at the last second and tried to pivot, but Kurt was too fast.

The black sword sheared through one of its primary joints. A thick, translucent violet fluid sprayed across the mud as the spider's front-left leg was severed completely.

SCREEESHAAA!!!

The monster let out a sound that wasn't a screech. It was a roar of pure, alien pain. It collapsed on one side, but its remaining legs lashed out with murderous speed.

'Oh fu–!'

BASH!

Kurt was swiped mid-air, a barbed leg catching him in the ribs and hurling him fifteen feet into a thorny bush.

"Gah! *Cough* Oww..." Kurt hit the ground, the air leaving his lungs. He scrambled to get up, but the world was spinning.

The darkness was his biggest enemy. He could only see the monster when the lightning flared or when its own abdomen pulsed with that sickly purple light. The Great Weaver dragged its wounded body toward him, its mandibles snapping like giant shears. It began to spray webbing indiscriminately, coating the trees and the ground, trying to create a sticky arena where Kurt couldn't move.

He then dodged a spear-like thrust that missed his head by an inch. The impact caused the creature's leg to bury itself deep in the mud. Using this chance, Kurt stepped onto the trapped leg and ran up the creature's limb, aiming for the cluster of eyes.

The spider bucked, its thorax slamming upward. Kurt was tossed into the air again. He felt the sting of a thousand small scratches from the thorns, his blood mixing with the rain.

'It's too tough...' He thought as he landed a few feet away.

The monster lunged faster this time, pinning Kurt against a rock. It lunged with its stinger, the sharp, venom-dripping point whistling toward his chest. Kurt dropped his sword and grabbed the stinger with both hands, his mana coating glowing brilliantly as he fought the monster's sheer physical weight.

The venom hissed as it dripped onto the stone, eating away at the rock. Kurt's muscles groaned, his Strengthening Magic pushed to a level that threatened to tear his ligaments.

The acidic venom hissed as it dripped onto the stone, eating away at the rock. Struggling to hold it back, Kurt pushed his Strengthening Magic to a level that threatened to tear his muscles.

"You... are... just... a... bug!"

Kurt's Adaptation skill kicked in one last time. He felt a surge of cold, focused energy. He redirected and twisted his body, using the spider's own momentum to slide the stinger into the soft, unarmored joint of its own leg.

The Great Weaver shrieked as its own leg impaled the other. In the confusion, Kurt reached down, grabbed his black sword, and drove it upward, straight through the underside of the creature's head.

"RAAAH!"

He poured every drop of his mana into the blade. The sapphire light flared inside the monster's skull, pushing and twisting, its brain and eyes illuminated from the inside out.

With a final, spasming shudder, the Great Weaver went limp. Its massive weight collapsed on top of Kurt, pinning him in the mud.

He lay there for a long minute, the rain washing the violet ichor from his face. His body was a map of pain, but he was breathing. He shoved the heavy carcass off his chest, his movements slow and agonizing. He stood up, leaning on his sword like a cane, and looked in the direction of the old oak tree.

He limped back to the hollow. He didn't say anything at first; he just leaned against the trunk, his chest heaving.

"Hope?" He wheezed.

A small, shaking head poked out from the darkness. When she saw him bloody, battered, but standing, she didn't say a word. She just lunged out of the tree and buried her face in his waist, sobbing with a relief so intense it shook them both.

Kurt rested a blood-stained hand on her head. "See. I told you I'll be back."

He looked up the path. The bishop's estate was close now, its windows glowing like embers in the dark. The hardest part was yet to come.

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- At the pier where the trio's ship is docked -

SWOOSH

"So this is where you are, Rosie..."