THORNS 113

Chapter 113: Ghost In The Rain

"Alright, crew," Dominik crouched down until he was eye-level with a cluster of toddlers and whispered. "Remember, we have to be so quiet that even the floorboards and stones know we're here. If you hear a loud noise, you duck into the shadows and pretend you're a statue. Can you do that?"

"Can I be a statue of a cat?" a small boy whispered with gleaming eyes.

"Oh oh! I also want to be a cat!"

"A statue of a cat? What does that mean?" Dominik asked.

"It means I get to go down like this!" The boy crouched down on all fours and posed like a cat waiting for his food.

"U-Uhm... sure..." Dominik looked at the boy sceptically. "But you have to be the quietest cat in the world."

"""YAAAY!"""

"Shhh!" Dominik shushed at the kids.

"""S-Sorry Captain... yaaay..."""

They began the descent. And true to what they said, Dominik felt like he was herding a sea of kittens through a minefield.

'Fucking hell. Do these kids even know that these people are evil in every sense of the word? They're acting so innocent and excited, like we're playing hide and seek or something.'

Every time a child giggled, or a pair of oversized boots clattered against the ground, Dominik felt a cold spike of ice shoot up his spine.

As they reached the first major landing of the stairs, the sound of sprinting boots echoed from the floor below.

"... Search the eastern corridors for backup!" A cultist screamed with panic. "That Emelie Herst woman is tearing up the courtyard! We need reinforcements!"

’Oh crap!’

"Hide! Statues! Now!" Dominik’s eyes went wide as he signaled frantically for the children to back away.

The children froze momentarily, then moved. Some tucked themselves behind stone walls of the stairs; others simply sat down on the ascending steps, squeezing their eyes shut. Dominik slipped to the edge of the staircase, his hands igniting with a dim, orange glow. He saw two cultists charging up the stairs.

"Wait here," He mouthed to the kids.

He didn’t give the cultists a chance to react or speak. As they rounded the corner, Dominik lunged and used his fire magic to superheat the air in their lungs, silencing their screams before they could begin. With two swift, brutal strikes to the temple, they went down.

Feeling curious eyes on his back, he knew the children were watching, Dominik forced a cheerful, strained smile. "They’re just... taking a nap! Too much hide-and-seek. Help me tuck them in."

He dragged the bodies to lean on the nearby wall, patting them on making them look comfortable as if they were in a peaceful dream.

"Ok, that’s good enough." He wiped the sweat from his brow and waved the children forward "Keep moving, crew. The ship is waiting."

The journey through the lower fortress was a series of near catastrophes. At one point, a young girl tripped with a heavy thud, dropping her storybook. Three cultists were immediately alerted and turned toward the noise.

Dominik wasted little time. He told the kids to look at the "pretty carvings" on the ceiling. While their heads were tilted up, he became a blur of elemental violence. He used his water magic to draw the moisture from the air and formed razor-thin discs that silenced the guards before they could draw their swords. He hid them behind the curtains, his movements frantic and precise.

"Why are they sleeping behind the curtains, Captain?" a girl asked

"They're playing a very high-level game of hide-and-seek," Dominik replied, his voice trembling slightly. "We're winning. Let's go."

"Huh? We are? Who's the seeker?"

"Everybody! Now come on!" He urgently hissed.

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Finally, the air changed. The stagnant, oppressive heat of the corridors gave way to the wet chill of the outdoor rain. They had reached the main courtyard. The exit was only a few paces away.

Dominik stepped out from the archway first, his hand held out to keep the children in the shadows of the stone hallway. The sight that greeted him made his blood run cold.

'Holy shit...'

The courtyard was no longer a beautiful garden. It was a graveyard. Dozens of cultists lay scattered across the grass and the stone pathways; their bodies twisted in ways that suggested the terrifying slaughter fest they went through. The rain washed the blood into the black-water pond, turning the surface into a swirling dark crimson.

In the center of the courtyard, standing before the towering white-marble statue of the Goddess, was a lone figure.

The figure was draped in the cultist's signature cloak, the hood pulled so low it obscured nearly their entire face. In their hands was a massive halberd, similar to the ones of the front guardsmen. The weapon looked too heavy in the hand of this mysterious figure, yet they held it with an effortless, haunting grace. Skewered through the blade of the halberd was the limp body of a high-ranking cultist.

With a flick of their wrist, the figure tossed the body aside. It hit the wet stone with a heavy, final thud.

"Stay back," Dominik whispered to the children, his voice cracking. "Stay in the hall. Don't come out until I say so. I'm gonna quickly check something."

Dominik began to walk forward, his boots splashing in the puddles. He kept his hood low and his body coiled like a spring, ready to burst into action at any time. He held both his hands up in a peaceful gesture, but his mana already surging to his fingertips.

"Hey!" Dominik called out over the roar of the rain. "Who are you? Why are you killing them?"

'Please be friendly, please be friendly.'

The hooded figure didn't turn immediately. A low, muffled mumble drifted through the wind. Dominik couldn't make out the words over the drumming of the storm.

"What was that?! I couldn't hear you!"

The figure turned. The movement was so fluid it looked unnatural. "It seems..." The voice was cold, melodic, and terrifyingly familiar, "that I missed one."

Before Dominik could process the words, the figure stepped forward. There was no transition nor running start. The halberd was suddenly whistling toward his neck.

Dominik reacted on instinct, throwing himself backward. He channelled the falling rain, spinning the water into a dense, rotating shield around his forearms. The halberd struck the water-shield, and the force of the blow nearly shattered his bones.

"Wait! I'm not with them!"

The figure didn't listen. They spun the halberd around in a complex, mesmerizing pattern, the blade cutting through the raindrops with a sound like tearing silk. Dominik countered with a blast of pressurized water, aiming for the figure's chest.

The attack hit... or it should have.

The figure simply vanished. A shimmer of crimson light flickered where they had been standing, and a second later, they appeared directly behind him.

"Gone!? Was that... telepo– WHOA!"

VOOSH! Again, the halberd aimed for his neck, and again Dominik dodged.

Every time Dominik's attacks were about to connect, the figure moved through the space between heartbeats. It was like fighting a ghost. Dominik would swing, and his fists would pass through a fading afterimage, only for the real figure to strike him from the flank.

The fight was a masterclass in one-sided devastation. Dominik was practically a veteran, a master of fire and water, but he was being dismantled. Easily.

"Dammit! Don't underestimate me!" He roared in frustration, grabbing the shaft of the halberd as it thrust toward his ribs. He poured every ounce of his Strengthening Magic into his grip, the wood of the weapon groaning under the pressure. With a final, desperate heave, the ornate shaft snapped.

"Haha. How's that? No weapon for you."

But the hooded figure didn’t falter. They looked at the broken pieces of the halberd and dropped it into the mud.

"Hmph. You’re the strongest one I’ve met so far." The voice whispered. "But sadly, you’re not strong enough."

The figure reached toward their own chest, their hand sinking into a rift of shimmering crimson energy that manifested over their heart. With a slow pull, they drew out a sword. It was a long, curved nodachi with a hilt of black silk and a blade that glowed with a faint, bloody luminescence.

’That blade! It really is you!’ Dominik froze. His heart stopped. He recognized that sword.

"Prin–"

The figure lunged. The nodachi moved in a vertical arc, a strike so fast the rain itself seemed to move out of its way. Dominik tried to raise a shield, but he was too slow. The flat of the blade slammed into his chest, pinning him to the wet ground.

He looked up, the cold steel of the nodachi hovering inches from his throat. The figure leaned down, the blade trembling slightly.

"Since you made me summon my personal weapon, I’ll do you the honors and allow you to say your last words. So go on, what are they?"

"STOP! DON’T HURT HIM!"

The scream didn’t come from Dominik. It came from the corner of the courtyard.

The children had broken out of their hiding places and surged out from the archway. It was a sea of small bodies running their voices high and desperate.

"Don’t kill the captain!"

"He’s going to take us on an adventure!"

The hooded figure flinched. The unexpected distraction of children caused the nodachi to slightly descend. The blade whistled past Dominik’s ear, slicing through the fabric of his hood and sticking it into the mud.

The hood fell away, exposing Dominik’s face to the rain.

The figure’s mouth opened like a small ’O’. The crimson glow of the nodachi faded. Slowly, they reached up with a gloved hand and pulled back their own hood. Revealing their own striking beautiful face.

"Dominik?"

"H-Hey. Good evening, Principal Valentine."

Chapter 114: Banter Amidst Blood

"Dominik, you have a lot of explaining to do." Diana said as she offered him a hand.

"Me!?" Dominik pulled himself up and wiped a smudge of blood from his mouth. "Principal Valentine, respectfully, but what are you doing here? Like, seriously, you’re probably the last person I’d expect to see here."

Diana began to open her mouth when a soft flicker of emotion crossed her sharp features. "I’m here for Rosie. Mia told me that you’re–"

She abruptly stopped when she turned her head.

The children, seeing that their captain wasn’t being killed, all broke out from their hiding places. A tidal wave of small bodies erupted from the corner of the corridor and the shadows of the pillars. They flooded the courtyard, splashing through the crimson-stained puddles with no regard for the corpses scattered around.

"She’s so pretty!" a girl squealed, tugging on Diana’s cloak.

"Are you a princess?" a younger boy asked, his eyes wide with genuine awe.

"Look at her hair! It’s like moonlight!"

Within seconds, Diana was completely surrounded by nearly two hundred children. They swarmed her, gushing over her appearance, her glowing sword, which she had fortunately vanished back into her chest, and the sheer, commanding aura she radiated. Diana looked genuinely horrified as she held her arms awkwardly at her sides while tiny hands tugged at her.

"Dominik!" she shouted over the cacophony of high-pitched voices and childlike wonder. "Who are these... these children!?"

"Oh them?! They’re the kids those zealots kidnapped from all around Eldoria! Me, Emelie, and Kurt... we’re here to get them all home!"

"Rosie?" Diana stopped resisting the children’s tugging. The name Kurt acted like a grounding wire. She looked down at the kids and her expression softened from mildly irritated to a fierce, protective maternal instinct.

"Where is he?" She moved closer to Dominik. "Where is my Rosie?"

"I don’t know. Emelie said something about him chasing a cat. By the way, Emelie is currently at the western courtyard, holding off what I believe to be the main force of this fortress to buy us time to reach the ship. Now that you’re here, you can help her, Principal."

Even more children pushed forward. A toddler nearly tripped over the discarded halberd. Diana saw the exhaustion in Dominik’s eyes and the shivering frames of the wet, cold children. She raised a single finger to her lips.

"Shh. Everyone be quiet. Lest you want your adventure at sea to be canceled."

The effect was instantaneous. Two hundred children flinched, widening their eyes as they simultaneously clapped their hands over their mouths. The courtyard fell into a silence so profound that only the drumming of the rain remained.

"Thank you. Now, Dominik, they are freezing. If you move them now, the cold will kill the younger ones before the zealots do. Take shelter and dry them. Now."

"Dry them? Principal, I—"

"Chop chop, Dominik. "Use your fire gently to create a heat pocket. I will be back in five minutes."

Before he could argue, she vanished.

"Huh? Where did the pretty lady go?"

"Aww. I wanted to play with her..."

"C-Captain! W-Was she a g-g-ghost?"

"A ghost?!"

Dominik sighed and set to work. He guided the children back to the corridor and channelled his mana into the air around the children, creating a dome of warm, circulating air. Steam began to rise from their soaked tunics as they huddled together, looking at him, like he was a miracle worker.

"Captain, aren't you going to bring those people who are sleeping in the rain, back inside?"

"Them? Those aren't people. They're all... advanced training dummies. The pretty lady was training until I interrupted her. So she got angry and fought with me. But that's all cleared up now because I invited her to go on the adventure with us, haha..."

"She’s coming with us?! Yaay!"

’""YAAY!!!"""

"SHHH! You still have to be quiet!" Dominik hissed.

Exactly five minutes later, Diana appeared back at the courtyard, her arms laden with four massive rolls of red sheets.

"Principal Valentine, what are those?" Dominik helped take the load off her when she came to him.

"Just some sheets I got from my mansion. These are heavy enough to repel the rain. Everyone, divide into groups of four. Fifty to a group. Hold these over your heads like a roof. Do not let the edges drag."

"""OK!!!"""

The kids moved with surprising efficiency, fueled by the excitement of a new "mission." Soon, four giant red rectangles moved through the courtyard, supported by dozens of tiny hands.

"Lead them to the ship, Dominik," Diana commanded, her gaze turning toward the smoke rising from the west. "The path to the pier should be clear. I’ve already dealt with the perimeter guards. For some reason they were drunk, so they were easy to take care of."

"Oof. Rip... What about you?"

"I’m going to find Emelie," Diana said, resting her hand over her heart where her sword was sheathed. "And I’m going to find my man. Now get moving."

Dominik nodded and towards the children. "Alright, crew! Hold your red roofs steady and let’s march to the ship!"

"""YES, CAPTAIN!!!"""

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While Dominik led the children toward the docks, the western courtyard of the fortress was a scene of utter carnage.

Emelie stood in the center of a wide, stone-floored mess of bodies, breathing steadily. Around her, was a sea of black cultists. Some armed with maces, others with the specialised brother daggers. There were at least a hundred of them left, their faces twisted in a cocktail of religious fury and genuine terror.

"You can’t kill us all, witch!" a cultist screamed, lunging forward with a spear.

Emelie didn’t even look at him. She flicked her wrist, and the spear-tip stopped inches from her throat, suspended by an invisible force. With a sharp twist of her fingers, the metal head snapped off and flew backward, burying itself in the throat of a man behind him.

"You’re right," Emelie remarked with dry sarcasm. "I probably can’t kill you all. Eventually, my arm will get tired from all the waving. But I think I can make it through at least another sixty of you before I need a snack to recharge. Then, it’s back to business."

"Grrr! "Kill her! For the Goddess!"

"""OORAAAH!!!"""

A wave of cultists surged forward. Emelie’s eyes flared with a brilliant, psychic light. She then slammed her palms toward the ground, and the fallen weapons of each dead body rose into the air. And with a violent outward gesture, she sent them spinning like sawblades.

"Gah!"

"Aargh!"

"SCRIOUAHSGAAaaah..."

The weapons smashed into the front line, the sound of breaking bone, splintering wood and flesh being stabbed, echoing throughout the courtyard. Cultists were tossed aside like ragdolls, all the while Emelie danced through the chaos, her movements a blur of telekinetic precision.

When a man tried to grab her from behind, she simply increased the gravity in a five-foot radius around her, slamming him into the floor with enough force to crack the stone.

"Is this the best your brotherhood has?" Emelie teased, catching a volley of thrown daggers in mid-air and hovering them in a halo around her head. "I’ve had harder fights with my morning coffee. Come on, I thought you guys were supposed to be the Goddess’s children! Where’s the ’unending fervor’?"

She launched the daggers back with each one finding their mark.

The cultists were beginning to falter. The floor was slick with blood, and the air was thick with the scent of death. Those in the back were no longer screaming. Instead, they were backing away, their eyes darting toward the exits. They finally realised they were fighting a force of nature.

"Oh, don’t run away now~" Emelie stepped over a dead body and jumped all the way to the cultists who were running away, blocking their escape. "Is the Goddess not answering your prayers? Maybe she’s busy. Or maybe," she leaned in with cold, playful eyes, "she just doesn’t like you~"

The remaining cultists broke. They dropped their weapons, stumbling over each other to get away from her. Emelie let them run past her and once they thought they got away from her–

SNAP

THUD!

They all dropped flies, heads twisted lethally.

"How long are you two going to stand there and watch?" Emelie asked, looking towards the shadows. "I know the opening acts are usually boring, but surely the main stars have better things to do."

"...."

Clap

Clap

Clap

Two figures stepped out of the darkness.

The first was a man who radiated an insufferable arrogance. He wore a dark priest's uniform, but it was made of fine silk, adorned with gold thread that shimmered like snake scales. His violet hair was slicked back, and a cruel, knowing smile sat on his face.

She wore a provocative black and white interpretation of a nun's habit that featured a plunging halter top, a short skirt with high side slits, and a sheer veil. The look is paired with ruffled wrist cuffs and sleek, thigh-high patent leather boots. Her eyes were covered by a thick, white cloth tied behind her violet head, yet she moved with a predatory grace that suggested she saw the world better than anyone else.

"Bravo, Emelie Herst," the priest said condescendingly. "A truly magnificent display of parlor tricks. It's almost a shame we have to put you down."

The blindfolded woman didn’t speak. She simply tilted her head as she squeezed what looked to be a bible close to her chest.

"Ah yes. Violet’s little siblings and Tobias’ personal pets. I was wondering when the lapdogs would come out to play. Tell me, does he give you treats when you kill people, or do you just enjoy the taste of the leash?"

The priest’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. "We shall see who wears the leash by the time the sun rises."