THORNS 115

Chapter 115: Anticlimactic

"The Scions! The Scions of the Heart are here!"

"Praise be the Goddess! We are saved!" The cultists all shrieked, their terror replaced by a frantic, delusional hope.

Emelie stood her ground as she watched the man and the woman approach. Her eyes narrowed as she studied their features. Despite the priest's uniform and the nun's provocative lace, there was an unmistakable family resemblance of violet tint in their hair.

"Well look who we have here. I recognize those faces. You're Violet's little siblings."

The man adjusted the sleeves of his robes and smiled. "Hahaha... I am Indigo," he said condescendingly. "And this silent cutie is my sister, Lilac. You've caused quite a mess, Emelie Herst. Tobias is going to be very cross about the cleaning bill."

"I'm here to ruin more than just his budget, Purple Henchman No.2," Emelie retorted, "I'm here to burn this whole operation to the ground. Yours and this little brotherhood you got going, the story ends here tonight."

"Bold words for a woman who stumbled upon a fortress that doesn't exist on any map... Speaking of which, how did you find us?"

"A lady never tells her secrets," Emelie said with a predatory grin. "Let's just say I have a very good memory for things that haven't happened yet."

Lilac, the blindfolded woman, remained motionless. Her hand rested on the leather-bound book chained to her hip, her head tilted as if listening to a frequency Emelie couldn't hear.

"What's the matter with Purple Henchman No.3?" Emelie teased, gesturing at her with a dismissive wave. "Is she shy? Or did Violet take all the personality for herself and leave her with nothing but the scraps?"

"... Forgive her silence." Indigo's smile thinned. "Lilac doesn't enjoy conversing with anyone outside our bloodline. To her, your voice is nothing more than the buzzing of a fly before the swatter falls."

"How tragic~ I guess that means she'll only be talking to you from now on, Indigo. Which is a shame, really... because Violet is dead."

Rumble— CRASH!

The atmosphere in the courtyard completely froze. The chanting of the cultists died in their throats and Indigo's arrogant smirk faltered.

Until,

".... Pffthaha! AHAHAHA!" He burst into a fit of abrupt laughter. "A nice joke! Truly! You have a sense of humor to match your violence. But Violet? Dead? My sister has more lives than a mountain of cats. Other than Tobias, she is the Heart of this Fortress. She cannot be killed by a mere mortal."

"Is that what you tell yourselves?" Emelie's tone was direct, cutting through his laughter like a blade. "Five hearts." She raised her hand.

Lilac flinched. Her reaction was subtle. A sharp intake of breath and the tightening of her grip on her book, but to Emelie's trained eyes, it was everything.

Indigo stopped laughing. His face turned a sickly shade of grey. "What did you say?"

"It took five hearts to put her down for good," Emelie continued, stepping forward as the rain swirled around her in a telekinetic vortex. "My friend felt every one of them stop beating. Why do you think she hasn't come to help you? She's dead, Indigo. Her head is currently decorating a rug three floors up."

"You lie! You lie, you filth!" Indigo’s composure shattered.

Emelie turned her gaze toward Lilac, her expression shifting into a mock-apologetic pout. "Oh, Lilac~ I was wrong earlier. I said you’d only be talking to Indigo. But I think you will get to speak with Violet after all. Once I’m done killing you and your brother, I’ll be sending you straight to hell. You can have a very long, very quiet family reunion there, hahaha~"

"I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!!!" — "I’LL TEAR THE SOUL OUT YOUR BODY!!!" The sibling roared and–

BOOOM!

The fight exploded with a violence that made the previous skirmish look like a playground tiff. Indigo moved first, drawing two curved shamshir blades that glowed with a sickly purple light.

Lilac didn’t move her feet, but her magic book flew open, the pages fluttering madly in the wind. "Grave Thorns!" she hissed, her first and final words.

Massive black vines erupted from the spaces between the cobblestones. They were tipped with emerald-green thorns that dripped with a neurotoxic slime that lashed out at Emelie’s ankles, trying to drag her into the mud.

"How predictable!" Emelie leaped and hovered three feet off the ground. She then slammed her hands together and let out an icy breath.

The rain itself turned against the siblings. The falling droplets froze mid-air, turning into a storm of jagged, crystalline needles. They shredded the poisonous vines and forced Indigo to cross his blades in a defensive ward.

"Ha! This is nothing!" Indigo snarled, diving through the ice-storm. He was a master of the shamshir, his strikes coming in a fluid, relentless dance. Emelie was forced to manifest a telekinetic shield, the purple blades sparking against the invisible barrier.

"What's wrong, Purple Henchman No.2~?" Emelie taunted as she parried a strike by hardening the air into a solid block. "Missing your big sister? Does it hurt to know she died alone while you were busy playing dress-up on the balcony? Seriously, what with that priest get-up? You look ridiculous."

"Shut up!" Indigo swung both blades in a scissoring motion, a wave of purple energy slicing through the air.

Emelie dropped her shield and grabbed the overflowing water from the central fountain near the Goddess statue. She twisted it into a massive, rotating serpentine form and swung it at Indigo.

The liquid beast slammed and threw him back across the stones. But Lilac was ready. Her book glowed a violent green, and the vines she summoned wove together to form a protective cocoon around her brother, absorbing the impact.

The courtyard became a chaotic mess of elements. Poisonous vines choked the entire courtyard, while Emelie turned the floor into a sheet of slick ice. Indigo skated across the ice with predatory grace, his shamshirs whistling as they sought Emelie's throat.

"You're good, I'll give you that," Emelie panted, dodging a vine that tried to wrap around her neck. "But you're so sloppy. You're fighting with emotion. Violet was a psychopath, sure, but at least she was focused. You? You're just a spoiled brat with a sword."

"I will make you eat your own tongue!" Indigo screamed, launching a flurry of strikes that pushed Emelie back toward the Goddess statue.

Lilac's book pulsed again and a thick, purple mist began to billow from the pages, mixing with the rain. Emelie felt her lungs burn and heart spike; the mist was a fast-acting aphrodisiac.

"Aww~ Look at the little sister trying to act like her big sister~ Too bad it's just cheap tricks." Emelie wheezed. She then spun, creating a telekinetic whirlwind that sucked the mist upward and hurled it back at Lilac.

Suddenly, a thorny vine crept up and latched itself onto Emelie's ankles, keeping her in place.

"Ow! Really, Lilac? *Sigh* some things never change. You always were the sneaky one–"

"This is where you die, Emelie!" Indigo enchanted himself in strengthening magic for a final, desperate charge. He crossed his shamshirs, the purple light blindingly bright.

He lunged, his blades inches from Emelie's heart.

Emelie's streaks and eyes glowed a minty green as she got ready to counter with her magic. "How many times are you going to try the same things–"

SHINK!

A flash of crimson light, faster than Emelie could pick up, had cut through the rain.

Thud!

Indigo didn't stop moving, but his right arm did. The limb, still clutching a shamshir, flew into the air, spinning uselessly before splashing into the fountain. Indigo stared at his stump for a heartbeat before letting out a high-pitched, gurgling shriek of agony.

"G-GAAAAH!"

"INDIGO!"

Noticing a distinct lack of background cheering, Emelie looked around.

The fifty or so background cultists who had been cheering from the sidelines were no longer standing. In a single moment of silence, they had all dropped dead, their heads lolling at unnatural angles or their chests pierced by a singular, clean strike.

In the center of the carnage stood a woman. Her platinum hair was damp from the rain, her expression as cold and immovable as a mountain peak. She held a long, crimson nodachi, its blade dripping with blood in the cold air.

"Principal Valentine?"

Lilac moved with an instinctual, animalistic fear. She used a mass of vines to snatch her screaming brother from the floor, pulling him back toward the shadows of the estate.

"It’s her," Indigo whimpered, clutching his stump. "The Crimson Flash..."

"We have no chance, Indigo. We should leave." Lilac’s voice was a ragged whisper.

"And leave Violet’s body behind!? We can still revive her if we–!"

"No! We’re going to die here if we stay a moment longer. We’ll retrieve her remains another time! So let’s retreat!"

"... Dammit! You’re right. Ok, let’s retreat for now." The two siblings didn’t wait a second longer. They turned and bolted toward the tall walls of the fortress, Lilac’s vines acting like stilts to carry them away at high speed.

"Oh no you don’t!" Emelie floated off the ground, intending to catch them.

"It’s fine, Emelie. Leave them to me." Diana said, leaving no room for argument. "They have caused enough trouble for you."

She then shifted her stance; her crimson blade held horizontally in front of her face. She stepped into Emelie’s path, blocking her way.

SWOOSH

One moment she was standing in front of Emelie; the next, a ripple distorted the air and she appeared forty feet in the air, directly above the fleeing siblings.

"Die."

"LILAC! LOOK OUT–!"

SHINK! SLASH!

Two clean, wet thuds followed. The heads of Indigo and Lilac bounced off the cobblestones, rolling into the gutters. Their bodies collapsed forward, their momentum carrying them another few feet before they slumped into the mud, the poisonous vines withering into grey ash instantly.

Diana vanished again and landed softly on her toes, next to Emelie. The rain washed the blood from her blade before she sheathed it back into her gem.

Emelie stood in the middle of the ruined courtyard, looking at the decapitated siblings and then at the back of the woman who had ended the fight in less than three seconds.

"Well," Emelie muttered, crossing her arms and letting out a long, exhausted sigh. "That was... incredibly anticlimactic. I had a whole witty speech ready for the finish."

"Efficiency is the only wit that matters in a war, Emelie Herst." Diana’s piercing gaze met her student’s "Now, tell me... where is Rosie?"

Chapter 116: Room Of Silent Sorrows

"Finally. Looks like we made it out." The side gate squeaked as Kurt eased it shut, his fingers still tingling from the residual mana of the Great Weaver’s venom.

He crouched low, blending his black cloak into the shadows of the estate’s outer trees. Beside him, Hope shivered as rain soaked through her oversized cloak. Tobias’ mansion loomed just ahead.

"Hope, when you were here before, which way did they take you in?"

Hope pointed a trembling finger toward the side leading to the front. "Over there, by the big doors. The ones with the gold handles. They made us wait in a line."

Kurt shook his head with a grim scowl settling on his face. "The front entrance... that won't do. That's like serving ourselves on a silver platter. They probably have guards posted every five feet, especially with all the ruckus my friend is kicking up at the fortress."

He looked up at the building in the distance, squinting through the downpour trying to find an opening that didn't involve a frontal assault. He needed to catch Tobias by surprise. To strike from the shadows before the man could use the children as shields. His gaze landed on a second-story landing. A sliding glass panel stood there, slightly recessed behind a stone railing.

"What about up there," he pointed. "Do you know whose room that is? Is it Tobias'?"

Hope looked up, her brow furrowed. "I don't know. I've never been inside the house parts. Only the big hall and the basement stairs."

"That's ok. It's our best shot in any case. Stay here, at the gate. Don't move until I give the signal. I'm going to climb up and find something to pull you up with."

"Ok..."

With lightning-fast speed and the fluidity of a cat, Kurt ran across the field and lunged for the stone trellis. He ignored the thorns that bit into his gloves, his Strengthening Magic making the vertical climb feel like a casual stroll. He reached the landing and rolled over the stone railing, staying flat against the cold tiles.

The curtains inside were slightly ajar, allowing a sliver of light to spill onto the balcony. He could see a bed, and the silhouette of a figure lying perfectly still. He gripped the edge of the sliding glass panel and pulled.

’Well duh. Of course it’s locked.’

Kurt focused his mana into his fingertips. Using a subtle, high-pressure application of his strength, he gripped the frame and pulled. The metal rattled, but the sound was swallowed by a sudden crack of thunder. With a soft snick

, the lock snapped. He slid the door open just enough to slip inside.

The air inside the room was warm, but it felt stagnant. Kurt kept his blade low, moving toward the bed to neutralize the occupant before they could scream. But as he drew closer, the fresh scent of blood hit his nose.

It wasn’t a guard. It was a woman in a tattered servant’s uniform; her clothes stained with grime and dried up... fluid. Her throat had been opened by a clean, desperate stroke. She was still clutching the fruit knife she had used to end her own nightmare.

Kurt’s heart sank. He didn’t need a detective’s intuition to know what had driven her to this. He looked at the door, then back at the balcony where Hope was waiting.

’I can’t let Hope see this.’

He moved with grim efficiency. He picked up the woman’s frail, cold body and carried her into the en-suite bathroom. He laid her gently in the tub and pulled the shower curtain shut. It was the only dignity he could offer her.

Returning to the bedroom, he stripped the heavy silk sheets from the bed and knotted them together with the practiced speed of a sailor, creating a makeshift rope. He checked for any sign of security outside and once it was safe, he tossed the end over the balcony and waved frantically for the little girl.

A few moments later, Kurt could see a small silhouette running through the rainy field. Hope ran as hard as her little legs could allow her, even tripping along the way as thunder clapped in the clouds. She steadily got back on her feet and went right back to it while keeping her hood low.

’Oh my goodness, my heart *sniff* What a little soldier she is...’

Eventually, she made it to where Kurt and grabbed the makeshift rope. Kurt pulled the rope and hauled the girl up over the railing. She clutched onto his body once she was finally safe in his arms.

"It’s ok, I got you. That was awesome, Hope. I’m so proud of you."

"Hehehe. Thank you."

When they got inside, she whispered while looking at the rumpled, empty bed. "Was somebody here?"

"Oh, no. That rope I used was part of the bed, you see. Anyways, Hope, listen to me. Do you have any idea where they keep the kids once they’re inside the house?"

"I don’t know," she said, her voice small but determined. "But I’ll find them. I can help you look."

"No," Kurt said firmly. He knelt down to her level, his lone blue eye boring into hers. "I can’t sneak effectively if I’m worried about you getting caught in the crossfire. The men in this house... they’re worse than the ones in the fortress."

Tears well up in Hope’s eyes. "Don’t leave me, Kurt. Please..."

"I am not leaving you," he promised, his hand resting on her shoulder. "I’m going to find your friends. I’m going to bring them back here, and then we’re all going to the ship. But I need you to stay here. Hide. Somewhere they won’t look."

After waiting for a minute for her to decide, Hope sniffled and nodded slowly. She hugged Kurt one last time before crawling under the heavy wooden bedframe, disappearing into the shadows. Kurt stood up, his face hardening into a mask of cold fury. He checked his black sword and switchblades then eased the bedroom door open and slipped into the hallway.

’Wow. Fancy.’

The hallway was an excess gallery of dimly lit gold-leafed wall lamps, plush crimson carpets, and high vaulted ceilings.

Kurt moved like a ghost, checking the room directly opposite. It was a vast art gallery. Easels held half-finished portraits of Tobias and Goddess Bula in various saintly poses. In the center stood a white marble statue of the Goddess, her eyes carved to look downward in a gesture of false mercy.

’Nothing.’ Kurt thought, gently closing the door behind him.

He began to move down the corridor when the sound of rhythmic footsteps and muffled laughter drifted from around a corner. He pressed himself into a deep shadow behind a decorative suit of armor and stilted his breath.

Two cultists rounded the corner. They weren’t wearing their signature hoods; their robes were loosened and faces were flushed with a sick, eager light.

"C-Come on, Brother. Hurry, haha." the taller one chuckled. "The bishop said we can finish the leftovers. That servant girl who tried to run... The bishop said he fully cleansed himself and that she’s ’surplus goods’ now."

"I know, I know. You keep repeating yourself, you drunken fool. I think I last saw her running up the stairs toward the guest wing," the second one replied, a lecherous grin splitting his face. "She looked terrified. I love it when they scramble. Makes the hunt better."

’These scum...’ Kurt felt a veil of crimson descend over his vision.

"I’m going to savor this one," the tall one said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small glass vial. "I brought an aphrodisiac. I’m not letting her rest until sunrise. We’ll take turns, yeah?"

"Aye, aye. You go left; I’ll go right. She’s hiding in one of these rooms."

Kurt didn’t move yet. He waited until they reached the doors. One to the art gallery, and the other to the bedroom where Hope was hiding.

"S-Search thoroughly, yeah? Don’t let her slip past, haha." The tall one commanded.

’Now.’ As the man entered the room Hope was hiding in, Kurt followed him in, closing the door with a silent, ghostly touch.

"I know you’re in here, little bird~ Come out, come out wherever you are–"

STAB!

He never saw Kurt.

Kurt silently shifted across the floor using his knives to drive the blade into the base of the man’s skull, severing the brain stem instantly. The cultist didn’t even have time to gasp. Kurt caught the body before it hit the floor, dragging it toward the sliding glass panel. With a grunt of exertion, he heaved the dead weight over the railing, sending it plummeting into the dark shrubbery below.

"Hope," Kurt hissed.

"I’m here," a tiny voice whispered from under the bed.

"Listen to me. Under the bed is too obvious. Get in the wardrobe and cover yourself with the coats. Don’t come out for anything but my voice."

"Is the man gone? I couldn’t see properly from under the bed who it was."

"Yes, he’s gone. Hide. Now."

He slipped back out into the hallway. The second cultist was still in the art gallery. Kurt walked to the door and closed it, but not silently this time. He let the latch click with a sharp, audible thud.

"Oh, you're back." The cultist continued searching, not looking back. "So? Did you find her? Is she in the guest room?"

Kurt stepped into the light, pulling his hood down, his one eye glowing with a predatory, sapphire glow.

"I found something," he said in a low, vibrating growl.

"Wait?" The cultist turned around and reached for his sheath. "Who the hell are you? You're not–"

Kurt closed the distance in a single stride, balled his fist, channeling his Strengthening Magic into his knuckles until the air around his hand distorted and delivered a brutal, straight punch directly into the center of the cultist's face

THWACK!

CRACK!

CRASH!

The sound of the man's nose and orbital bones shattering echoed through the gallery. The cultist flew off his feet, his body spinning in the air before crashing into an easel and collapsing in a heap of canvas and broken wood.

Kurt stood over him, lifted the dazed man up with one hand and smiled coldly. "Hey there fella. You and I are going to have a lot of fun~"