THORNS 117

Chapter 117: Into The Hive

"Now," Kurt whispered in a low, gravelly caress that made the cultist's skin crawl. "We can do this the hard way, or we can do it the really hard way. Personally? I'm rooting for the latter."

He reached down, grabbed the man by the front of his loosened robes, and hauled him toward the center of the room. The white marble statue of the Goddess loomed over them, her serene, carved face appearing to judge the scene with a cold indifference. In a sudden, explosive motion, Kurt slammed the back of the cultist's head against the Goddess's marble pedestal.

CRACK!

The sound of bone meeting stone was sickeningly clean. The cultist shrieked, kicking his legs uselessly against the floor.

"Oopsy daisy, haha. Gotta control my strength so that you don't die too early. Now, where is the bishop?" Kurt asked, his face inches from the man's. He had a small, crooked smile on his lips. A look of genuine, boyish excitement.

"And more importantly, where are the children?"

"I... I won't betray my brothers," he wheezed as he spat a glob of blood and broken teeth onto Kurt's boot. "The Goddess... She sees you, monster. She will protect me. You are nothing but a heathen in Her world."

Kurt's smile widened, revealing his own grit teeth. He looked at the blood on his boot, then back at the man. "Thank you, Mr. Cultist. Thank you for choosing the latter."

He reached for a palette knife sitting on a nearby workstation. It was dull, designed for mixing thick oils, which made it the perfect tool for what Kurt had in mind. He began to systematically "paint" the cultist's skin, pressing the blunt edge into the soft tissue of the man's thigh and dragging it with agonizing slowness.

"G-Gaa–Mmmmmm!" Kurt covered his mouth before he could scream.

"Please~" Kurt dropped his voice into a playful, mocking whimper. "Please just tell me where they are. I'm begging you~ My feet are so tired from all this sneaking around. Don't you want to be a hero and save me the walk?"

He punctuated the request by slamming his fist into the man's ribs. Two of them snapped with a muffled pop. The cultist let out a strangled cry. His breaths coming in short, panicked gasps.

"Oh, I know. How about a compromise?" Kurt suggested, leaning in close, his one eye shimmering with a sadistic light. He looked like he was having the time of his life.

"How's this sound? You don't have to tell me where the bishop is. I'll find that old vulture eventually. Just tell me where the kids are. That's it! One little secret for your life. I'm begging you, 'Brother'. I don't want to have to search the whole estate. It's so big, and I'm just one guy..."

He grabbed the man's hand and laid it flat on the marble base of the statue. With a casual, almost bored motion, Kurt brought the hilt of his black sword down onto the man's pinky finger and crushed it.

"MMMMHMHM!!!" The cultist's scream was once again muffled by Kurt's gloved hand.

"See? This is exhausting for both of us," Kurt teased. He picked up a jar of turpentine and poured it over the man's fresh wounds. The chemical burn made the cultist thrash like a landed fish. "Tell me where they are. Don't make me get the charcoal. You know that shit gets everywhere~"

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After ten minutes of methodical brutality, the cultist was a shattered shell of a man. His face was a mask of purple bruises, his breathing was a wet rattle, and his spirit was fading into the grey fog of shock.

Kurt grabbed him by the hair, dragging his limp body up until he was forced to look directly into the blank, stone eyes of the Goddess statue.

"Look at her," Kurt whispered into the man’s ear, sharp and hypnotic. "Look at your Mother. Do you see how she’s looking at you? She’s disappointed, Brother. She’s... disgusted by your silence."

"N-No..." the cultist moaned. "She... She loves me..."

"Does she? Look closer. See the way the light hits her eyes? She’s weeping, you fool. She’s weeping because you’re making Her guest wait. She wants you to tell me. She’s whispering it to you right now. Can’t you hear it over the rain?"

The cultist’s mind, fractured by pain and blood loss, began to hallucinate. The flickering candlelight caused shadows to dance across the marble face. To his dying, delusional mind, the Goddess’s lips seemed to twitch. The stone appeared to soften into flesh.

"She... she’s speaking," the man whimpered, his eyes wide and vacant.

"What is she saying, Brother?" Kurt urged, his voice sounding sweet as honey. "Tell me what She says."

"The... the basement," the cultist sobbed, his head lolling against the cold marble. "They’re in the basement. The entrance... It’s on the first floor. Behind the grandfather clock in the main study."

"And how do we get in? The clock doesn’t just move for anyone, does it?"

"The time..." the man gasped. "Turn the long hand from twelve to three. Then... anticlockwise to nine. Press down on the face. The mechanism... the wall will open."

Kurt leaned back, the sadistic light in his eye replaced by a cold, finished precision. He looked at the man–No... this creature who had intended to spend his night hurting a servant woman and felt nothing, but the weight of a chore completed.

"Thank you, ’Brother’," he said sincerely. "You’ve been a massive help. The Goddess thanks you too."

SNAP!

Thud!

He snapped the man’s neck with a singular twist. The body slumped against the Goddess’s feet, a final, bloody offering to a statue that didn’t care.

Deciding not to linger for another moment, Kurt wiped his hands on a clean cloth from the art station, pulled his hood back up, and eased the gallery door open.

The estate was quiet, the sound of the rain outside masking the minor scuffles of his work. He moved down the grand staircase, staying in the deep shadows of the banister while on high alert, sensing the presence of any guards or cultists patrolling the lower floor.

He reached the first floor and found the study. It was a room filled with the smell of old leather, parchment and tobacco. In the corner stood the grandfather clock.

Kurt reached out, his fingers steady. He moved the long hand: 12 to 3. Then, with a slow, grinding click, he rotated it anticlockwise to 9. He pressed his palm against the center of the clock’s face.

A series of heavy iron gears silently began to move behind the wall. Suddenly, the entire section of the bookshelf beside it recessed and swung inward, revealing a dark, stone staircase that spiraled down into the earth.

"Damn. Here’s hoping the place isn’t filled with bats." Kurt looked around one last time before descending.

The lower he got the colder the air grew, smelling of copper, lye, and something sickly sweet. When he reached the bottom, he found himself in a nightmare of clinical precision.

’What the hell is this place?’

The room was lined with iron-barred cells but inside were no beds. Only cold stone slabs and medical equipment. In the first cell he passed, Kurt froze still.

A group of children, perhaps ten of them, were huddled together in the corner. They were completely malnourished and their eyes were sunken and glassy. They didn't even look up when he passed; they were beyond fear, trapped in a state of living death. These were the friends that Hope had been looking for.

Further down the hall, a soft glow of magi-lanterns illuminated a central surgical theater. Kurt pressed himself against the cold stone wall, inching closer until he could see the occupants.

Two men stood over a stainless-steel table. They weren't wearing the black and red robes of the cultists; they wore sterile, white versions. Their robes were stained with brown splotches of dried blood. One was holding a clipboard, the other a long, silver needle.

"The current batch is drying up," the first one said. "We're going to need new blood bags soon. The extraction process is draining them faster than the replenishment cycle can keep up."

"The bishop is getting too impatient," the second one replied, checking a vial of glowing, deep red fluid.

"Even though the children's blood is pure mana and is potent enough to last a significant amount of time, he goes through vial after vial as if he's been stuck in the deserts of Tricea. We should probably clear the cells tonight. Kill the remaining children and extract the hearts while they're still fresh. We can give them to Violet for her to add to her collection."

'... What...?'

The revelation hit him like a physical blow. Violet isn't an immortal mage. She was being revived by a literal hoard of harvested hearts. Every time he had fought her, every time she had "restarted" her life, it had been paid for in the blood of the children in these cells.

"We start with the smallest ones in Cell 4," the first doctor said, turning toward a rack of serrated knives. "This'll be their last extraction."

Kurt didn’t wait for them to finish their conversation. He didn’t care about sneaking anymore. It was time for pure, unadulterated retribution.

"You’re going to need a bigger rack," he said as he stepped out of the shadows.

The doctors stared at the blood-splattered man in the doorway, their eyes widening behind their sterile masks.

"What!? Who are you?!"

Kurt didn’t answer back. He just stepped closer and closer. This underground hell that was built for the extraction of life, was about to become a place for a very different kind of surgery.

Chapter 118: Last Supper

"Wait! You’re not supposed to be down here!" the first doctor stammered, trembling the clipboard in his hands. "Security! Brothers!"

"They’re busy," Kurt said. "And don’t bother pleading to your Goddess. She isn’t taking calls tonight."

Suddenly, he moved with a burst of speed that bypassed the doctors’ ability to scream any further. He gripped the first doctor by the throat, sinking his fingers into the soft flesh, and slammed him onto the very stainless-steel table where the children had been bled. The man’s spectacles flew across the room, shattering against the tile wall.

"Please! Mercy! We were only following Tobias’ orders!" the second doctor cried, dropping to his knees and raising his hands. "We’re men of science! We can be useful to you! We specialise in Hematology! The study of blood! Longer life, a boost in strength, you name it and it’s yours!"

Kurt ignored his pleas. He looked at the rack of tools the first doctor had reached for. The serrated knives and the extraction needles. He picked up a long, hollow silver tube used for spinal taps.

"Science," Kurt whispered, looking down at the man pinned to the table. "I’ve always admired the... intricacies of it."

"W-Wait wait wait wait! HA–HAAAAAH–"

What followed was a systematic reclamation. Kurt used the doctors' own equipment with terrifying irony. When the first man tried to beg, Kurt used a heavy-duty surgical stapler to silence him, the metallic thud-click echoed throughout the tile walls and into the stone chamber. He worked with a grim focus, ensuring every ounce of terror they had inflicted on the children was returned in kind. He didn't let them go quickly. He made sure they knew exactly what it felt like to be a "blood bag" before their eyes finally glazed over.

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When the theater went silent, Kurt reached around the dead doctor's neck and pulled off a set of iron keys.

'Must be the keys to those cells.'

He turned toward the cells where the children huddled at the back of the iron cages, their skeletal frames blending into the shadows. As he approached, the rattling of the keys caused them to collectively flinch.

"No... please," a young girl whispered dryly. "Not me today. Please, I'll be good."

Kurt stopped. His heart felt like it was being squeezed by a cold hand. He knelt, fumbling with the locks. "I'm not one of the doctors," he said, trying to soften his gravelly voice. "I'm here to take you out of here."

The cell door swung open, but the children didn't move. They crawled further back, huddling into a singular mass of shivering limbs and sunken eyes. To them, any change was a precursor to pain.

"I'm a friend," Kurt urged. He crouched down and reached out a hand, but they only shook harder. He realized he still looked like a monster. Bloody, scarred, and wearing the robes of their tormentors. "Do any of you... do you know a girl named Hope? Blonde ponytail? Blue eyes? .....Well, I guess that description really doesn't say much given that you all practically have blonde hair and blue eyes, haha..."

A boy in the center of the group hitched his breath. He looked up, his gaze flickering with the ghost of a memory. "Hope? She... she was taken back to the playroom. She didn't come back."

"She's upstairs right now." Kurt said, and for the first time, he let a genuine, tired smile reach his eye. "She's the one who showed me the way. She's waiting for you."

The boy crawled forward an inch, his eyes searching Kurt's face. "R-Really? You're not... you're not lying?"

Kurt reached up and pulled off the blood-stained cultist hood and cloak. He showed them his gentle smile and the weary humanity beneath. "I'm telling the truth. My name is Kurt. And I'm taking you home."

The silence broke. It didn't break with a cheer, but with a quiet sob. The boy slowly crawled forward and wrapped his thin arms around Kurt's neck, followed by the others. They clung to him like drowning survivors to a raft, their tears hot and stinging against his clothes.

"W-We want to go home... *Sob* Please, take us home... U-Uaaaa!"

"I will," he promised, pulling them all closer. "I swear it on my life."

Once they calmed down, Kurt pulled back gently, his eye catching the glint of metal around the girl's neck. A heavy, black iron collar was fused around her throat, etched with glowing runes.

"What are these for?" he asked, pointing his finger at the cold metal.

"The bishop," the girl whispered, her hand instinctively flying to the collar. "If we misbehave, he makes them hot. They shock us. And... and if we don't listen to the doctors, he presses the red button and the collars go bang. He did it to Toby. Toby's head went away..."

'... What? But they're just innocent kids. How could he... No. I know why. It's because he's evil

.’ Kurt’s jaw clenched so hard he thought his teeth might shatter.

"Mr. Kurt?" the boy asked, sensing the sudden, violent shift in the man’s aura. "Are you mad at us?"

"No. Never at you. I’m just... thinking." He snapped out of his dark thoughts.

He then looked at their spindly legs, the way their knees knocked together from malnutrition. "Just checking but, can you guys walk?"

They tried to stand, but their legs buckled under the meager weight of their bodies.

"It’s okay," Kurt said, steadying them. "Listen to me. I know you don’t want to but I need you guys to stay here in the cells for just a few more minutes. I’m going to go find the bishop’s remote. Once I have it, I can take these off. And don’t worry, those doctors won’t be coming for you anymore."

"""Ok, Mr. Kurt."""

"Haha. Just ’Kurt’ is fine."

He moved through the basement, unlocking every door, whispering the same promise of "Hope" and "Home" to the broken children within. Once they were all secure and instructed to stay low, he pulled a new cultist disguise back on and ascended the spiral stairs.

Kurt emerged from behind the grandfather clock in the study. The estate was eerily quiet, the sound of the storm outside providing a constant, low-frequency roar. He stepped out into the hallway, his boots making no sound on the plush carpet.

As he turned a corner near the kitchens, he nearly collided with a servant carrying a silver tray. The tray held a decanter of deep red wine, a plate of roasted pheasant, and a bowl of exotic fruits.

He pulled his hood low, casting his face into total shadow. "Where are you going with that?"

The servant jumped, the silver dome on the tray rattling. "Oh! S-Sir... I-I was taking dinner to Bishop Tobias. He requested it be served in the master chambers tonight."

"Hmph, I see. Carry on then." Kurt grunted as he stepped aside.

The servant hurried past, his shoulders hunched in fear. But as he walked down the long, gilded hallway, he realized the cultist was walking right beside him, his stride synchronized with his own. The servant slowed down, his heart racing.

"Is... is there a problem, sir?"

"Ignore me," Kurt said, fixing his gaze straight ahead. "Keep moving. I'm on perimeter duty."

The servant, too terrified to argue, continued toward a pair of massive, inlaid doors at the end of the hall. As they drew closer, a sound began to filter through the wood. It wasn't the sound of prayer or administrative work. It was the rhythmic, sickening sound of grunting and the frantic thrusting of a struggle.

Kurt stopped next to the servant, turning his gaze toward the door. The sound was unmistakable. Tobias was "indulging" himself before his meal.

The servant cleared his throat, his face flushing with embarrassment. "My Lord Bishop?" he called out, his voice trembling. "Your dinner is prepared."

The sounds from within didn't stop immediately. For another agonizing minute, the grunting continued, followed by a sharp, wet slap and a feminine cry of pain. Then, the sound of scurrying footsteps approached the door.

The ivory door flew open. A young female servant, her hair disheveled and her eyes red with tears, bolted out of the room. Not looking at Kurt or the other servant, she ran down the hall barefoot on the cold stone with a sob escaping her throat.

"Come in." Tobias' tired voice called from within. "And bring the wine. That girl was as useless as a stone; I need something to take the edge off."

The servant with the tray started to move forward, but Kurt's hand shot out, catching him by the shoulder. He didn't say a word. He simply pushed the servant aside. He then reached down, took the silver tray from the servant's hands, and stepped into the room.

The master chamber was an explosion of black and gold silk. Incense burners filled the air with a thick, cloying smoke that smelled of lilies and decay. Tobias stood near a massive canopy bed, his back to the door as he slid on a silk dressing gown embroidered with the image of a bleeding heart.

"Leave the tray near the bed," Tobias commanded, adjusting his collar, not bothering to look back. "And tell the cook the pheasant better be tender this time. I won't tolerate mediocrity on a night of such holy significance. My heart still weighs heavily from the sins of my mistakes, but I'm sure this is all part of the Goddess's plan."

Kurt walked forward, balancing the silver tray in his hands. His footsteps were steady, thudding along as Tobias expected.

Until they stopped.

Directly behind him.

Tobias paused, sensing the change in proximity. A frown touched his lips as he began to turn. "I said the bed, you simpleton. Are you deaf as well as—"

SHATTER!

Kurt smashed the wine bottle across Tobias' head, shattering the glass with a deafening spray of red wine and crystalline shards. The force of the blow sent the man sprawling across his own bed. Red wine, looking indistinguishable from blood, soaked into his white hair and black gown.

Tobias groaned, clutching his head, his vision swimming. He tried to scramble backward, but his hands slipped on the silk sheets.

Kurt reached up and pulled back his hood, his face illuminated by the flickering candlelight of the chamber. He looked down at Tobias with a cold, terrifying clarity.

"Hello, Tobias." Kurt smiled blankly. "Dinner is served. I hope you savor it."

"Y-You! Rosanna!"

"Because this is your last supper."