THORNS 119

Chapter 119: Kurt VS Tobias

Tobias rolled off the silk sheets and onto the carpet. Calming himself, he spat a mouthful of red fluid onto the floor and looked up at Kurt, opening his fox-shaped eyes that burned with predatory intellect.

"Haha, Kurt Rosanna." Tobias chuckled, slowly backing up and reaching for his black dagger. "So nice to see you again. I must say, meeting you here was certainly the last thing I would have expected."

"Oh, I bet it was."

Kurt reached into his belt and slid on a pair of heavy brass knuckles, clicking the mechanism on the side. With a sharp shink, the switchblades erupted from the front of the knuckles, shimmering with deadly intent.

"But I'm not here for any pleasantries, Tobias. I'm here to put you down." Kurt said as his Mana Coating flared to life. "Now die."

Shooting himself forward with the explosive power of a coiled spring, his fist whistled toward Tobias's jaw. Tobias, despite his age, moved with a fluid, unnatural speed. He ducked the blow and lashed out with the black dagger, aiming for Kurt's throat.

Kurt pivoted on his heel, using the momentum to swing a heavy wooden chair into the bishop's path. Tobias caught the chair with his free hand. His veins began to bulge, turning a bruised black colour. With a roar of effort, he crushed the solid wood into splinters.

"... What the hell is wrong with your body? You look even creepier than before."

"Hahaha, this? This is Divinity! Blood Magic magic in its purest form."

"Blood magic? Is that what you've been doing with those innocent children? Draining their blood for your own selfish means and giving their hearts to that purple-haired bitch?"

"So you know that much? That saves me the explanation. Tell me, Rosanna. What is the life of a few dozen peasants compared to the birth of a deity?"

"It’s more than your life is worth," Kurt retorted.

He lunged again, but this time it wasn’t a punch. He grabbed the golden silk curtains and yanked them downward. The iron rod snapped, and the massive fabric collapsed over Tobias like a net. Kurt followed up with a barrage of stabs through the fabric, his blades tearing through.

"Grrr! Stop that!" Tobias let out a guttural growl.

A burst of crimson energy erupted from beneath the curtains, shredding the silk into confetti. He emerged, his skin now a pale, deathly grey, his strength tripled by the cursed blood flowing through his veins. He tackled Kurt, slamming them both into a marble-topped vanity.

"You keep this shit in your bedroom!? So, you’re one of those types, huh?!" Kurt mocked as he reached for anything his hand could find.

Perfume bottles shattered. Mirrors cracked. The room was quickly becoming a ruin of high-end decor and low-end violence.

Tobias pinned Kurt against the wall, the black dagger inches from Kurt’s remaining eye. "I can smell the desperate mana on you, boy. You’re burning yourself dry just to keep up with me."

"You’re imagining things, old man."

Kurt slammed down his foot on Tobias’, stunning him for a moment. This gave him just enough room for an inward knee strike on the bishop’s sternum to break the hold. As the bishop staggered, Kurt grabbed an iron fire poker from the hearth and swung it like a mace. The iron whistled through the air, catching Tobias in the shoulder with a bone crushing crack.

Tobias fell back, his blood magic instantly beginning to knit the wound together, the black veins pulsing faster. "Is that all? I've been whipped by better men than you for far less!"

"Whoa. T.M.I. If that's the case, then let's try something heavier."

He kicked the heavy oak nightstand into Tobias's shins, following up with two quick strikes to the bishop's face and jaw. As the fight continued on, Kurt used anything and everything he could find. He destroyed furniture, opened a closet and used a belt to lash at the bishop's eyes, and even shattered a floor lamp to use the jagged base as a secondary spear.

But he wasn't being willy-nilly. He was looking for something.

Tobias, on the other hand, was relentless. He used his dagger not just to cut, but as a focus for his magic. He flicked his wrist, and droplets of his own blood became hardened needles, dying Kurt's clothes and drawing thin lines of red across his cheeks.

"You're nothing, Rossana!" Tobias laughed, his voice sounding more demonic with every passing second. "And I am the one who is loved the most by our dear Mother!"

They eventually collided in the center of the room; their arms locked in a desperate struggle for dominance. Kurt's brass-knuckle blades were pressed against the flat of Tobias's obsidian dagger, the two metals screeching as they ground together. They were near chest-to-chest, breathing each other's sweat and fury.

"Give up," Tobias hissed, his face inches from Kurt's. "You think this noise will go by unnoticed? The fortress is surely alerted by now. My brothers are coming. You'll die in this room, and I'll use your heart to restart Violet's collection."

"Hahaha. Really?"

"What's so funny? Is the thought of death so amusing to you?"

"Nope. I just love dramatic irony. Also, you talk too much for a man about to die."

Just then, the sound of heavy boots echoed from the hallway outside.

’Dang. That’s what I get for sneaking and not killing on sight.’

"To the bishop’s chambers!" a voice roared. "Hurry! Protect our leader, Bishop Tobias!"

Kurt’s eye flicked toward the door, then back to Tobias. He had seconds.

"Sounds like your fan club is here. Too bad they’re going to be late for the funeral."

Kurt didn’t try to push Tobias away. Instead, he leaned into the pressure and used a quick-witted martial arts technique. He suddenly dropped in his center of gravity while simultaneously hooking his foot behind Tobias’s ankle. He slammed his forehead into Tobias’s nose, the bone shattering with a satisfying crunch, and then used the bishop’s own weight to pivot them both.

With a roar of channeled mana, Kurt jumped and unleashed a double-footed drop kick into Tobias’s chest, propelling them both backward. However, right as Kurt’s foot connected, Tobias grabbed a tight hold on it and flew backwards towards the sliding glass panel.

SHATTER!!!

The glass exploded. Kurt and Tobias plummeted through the frame, glass shards raining down around them like diamonds.

Tobias, realising he was falling toward and off the stone balcony, reached out with a desperate, claw-like grip. He grabbed the back of Kurt’s ankle, digging his fingers deep into the skin.

"If I’m going down... You’re coming with me!"

"Let go, Godammit!" Kurt tried kicking but Tobias’ pull was too strong.

And so, they fell.

They slammed into the wet, cold stone of the outdoor landing together, rolling through the puddles and the mud that had washed up from the garden. The heavy rain instantly assaulted them, soaking their clothes and cooling the heat of the fight.

Tobias scrambled to his feet; his gown tangled around his legs. He ripped the sodden fabric away with a snarl, tossing the ruined garment into the wind. He stood there in his black-silked trousers, greyed skin and eyes that glowed red in the darkness. The glass shards in his scalp were washed clean by the rain, leaving dozens of small, weeping wounds.

He looked around but saw no other body. Then, to the balcony, but the landing was empty. The only sound was the drumming of the rain and the howling wind. Kurt was gone. Vanished into the shadows of the estate walls or the darkness of the garden below

"Rossana! Show yourself, coward!"

""""Father!""""

Four cultists burst through the shattered glass panel, their black-and-red robes waving in the storm. They held heavy maces and crossbows, their faces pale with shock as they saw the state of their leader.

"He’s here!" Tobias pointed a shaking finger toward the darkness of the garden. "The one who killed Brother Arlo! He’s wounded! He’s near! Search the perimeter! I want his head on my dinner tray by midnight!"

The four cultists didn’t hesitate. They leaped over the railing and descended into the dark to hunt the man who had dared kill their own.

Tobias stood on the landing and watched carefully as the rain washed the wine and blood from his face. He gripped his dagger so hard his knuckles turned white. "You think the rain is your ally, boy?" he whispered into the dark. "I am the one who bled this land. I am the future of our Brotherhood. You will not escape me."

Deep in the shadows of a massive oak tree below, Kurt stalked from a crouch, his hand pressed against a gash in his side and his blades extended on brass knuckles. He watched as black-cloaked figures scattered around the garden with a predatory glint in his eye, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

"How many fools can I kill today♪ Too many to count, don’t get in my way♪"

Chapter 120: Assassin

Tobias walked down the steps and stood on the stone patio. His silk trousers clung to his frame like a second skin. He wiped a mixture of rainwater and congealing blood from his forehead.

"Spread out further!" he shrieked at the additional twenty-odd cultists who had swarmed from the lower glass door. "He’s only one man! Scour the hedges, check the trellises! If he breathes, I want to hear his lungs stop!"

He then pointed and called out to four of his brothers. "Wait, you four, stay. That sneaky rat likes to play in the dark. Gather around me. Now."

"""Yes, Father!""" They ran back to Tobias and formed a protective wall around him.

The search began as the cultists moved in pairs of two. The tension was thick enough to choke on. Every rustle of a wind-whipped rosebush, every splash of a heavy droplet against a leaf, made them jump. They were the hunters, yet they moved with the frantic, wide-eyed gait of prey.

Then, the first sound cut through the gale.

"ARGHH–!!"

A short, gurgling yell erupted from the far east corner of the garden, near the stone fountain. It was cut off abruptly, as if a hand had been clamped over a mouth.

"There!" Tobias pointed, his face twisting. "Go!"

A cultist and his partner sprinted through the mud. When they reached the fountain, Kurt wasn't anywhere to be seen. There was only a black-robed body slumped over the marble rim, the water in the basin turning a dark, swirling purple. The man's throat had been sliced clean open.

"He was just here!" one of the cultists whispered, cracking his voice. "How did he do it so fast?"

"HELP–!!!"

Another scream, this time from the west, near the hedge maze. Tobias spun around, his heart hammering against his ribs. The anxiety was beginning to mutate into a primal, paralyzing horror. The rain seemed to be getting louder, a deafening drumming that masked the sound of Kurt's approach.

They ran again. Another body. This one was pinned to a tree by their signature dagger driven through his chest.

"He's picking us off," a cultist stammered, his shield shaking in his hand. "F-Father, he's not a man. He's a demon. The Goddess has forsaken us!"

"Silence!" Tobias roared, though his own hands were trembling. "He's just a trickster! Nothing more!"

But then came another yell. And another. Each one was a horrific cry that punctured the night, followed by the heavy silence of the grave. Every time Tobias heard a scream, the fear inside him grew. Kurt was a phantom, a wraith that existed only in the peripheral vision of his fallen brothers. The cultists were no longer searching; they were huddled in small groups, shaking in their boots, staring into the darkness, waiting for the cold steel to find them.

The psychological warfare was getting too much. The rain, the dark, and the ever-climbing tally of the dead were breaking them.

"Everyone back to the estate!" Tobias panicked. "Regroup at the side entrance! Secure the perimeter of the master wing! Fall back! Fall back now!"

Tobias and his four brothers bolted for the glass panel doors. They ran with a desperate, lung-burning speed, their boots splashing through the muck. As they reached the stone steps, Tobias skidded to a stop and looked back, expecting to see a frantic line of his brothers following him.

The garden was empty.

Then, a shape emerged from the shadows.

It was a lone man, walking with a slow pace that defied the chaos of the storm. Kurt moved with the heavy, inevitable momentum of a landslide. In his left hand, he dragged the corpse of a dead cultist by the collar, the body leaving a dark furrow in the mud behind him. His black sword hung loosely in his right hand, the blade dripping with a mixture of rain and blood.

The sight was a masterpiece of terror. Kurt's singular eye glowed with a faint, predatory blue through the downpour, fixed unblinkingly on Tobias.

"K-Kill him!" Tobias shrieked, his face pale with a coward's rage. He shoved his four remaining brothers forward, pushing them off the stairs and into the mud. "In the name of the Goddess, I order you! Kill that monster! I will go for reinforcements!"

"F-Father, wait–!"

But Tobias didn't wait. He turned and scrambled inside, sliding the glass panels shut behind him.

Kurt didn't stop walking. As the four guards raised their weapons, shaking with a mix of duty and dread, he effortlessly heaved the corpse he was dragging. He threw the dead weight with a mana-enhanced grunt. The body flew through the air like a bowling ball, slamming into the lead cultist and sending the two of them tumbling into the mud.

Tobias looked back through the narrow glass slit of the panel behind the curtain one last time before fleeing. He saw a blur of black steel and sapphire light. Kurt moved like a dancer as his sword cut through the remaining three cultists before they could even scream.

"Time for plan B." he muttered and turned, sprinting through the hallway toward his master chambers.

He didn’t care about his "brothers" anymore. He only cared about one. The remote. If this were truly the end of his work here, he would have his revenge. He would make the children’s heads bloom like crimson flowers and vanish into the night.

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Miles away, at the edge of the dark forest, the rain drummed against the massive, unmoving carcass of the Great Weaver. The violet fluid from its wounds had pooled around its jagged legs and split open skull, a testament to the violence Kurt had unleashed.

Diana stood next to the monster as her eyes scanned the tracks in the mud.

"He killed a Greater Weaver." She remarked.

"And he did it while protecting a child." Emelie added when coming back from the hollow tree. "Doesn’t seem like they’re here. Let’s move. The estate looks to be just over that ridge."

Diana didn’t respond with words and simply vanished. A fissure of her afterimage appeared fifty feet down the path, then another, then another. She was teleport-jumping. A high-level spatial maneuver that allowed her to blink to any point within her line of sight.

"Fucking– Hey! Wait up!"

Emelie threw her hands back, using a massive telekinetic blast against the ground to launch herself forward like a rocket, her hair streaming behind her as she tried to keep pace with her principal.

They reached the side gate of the estate in record time. The gate was a ruin of twisted iron and broken chains. A sign that shows Kurt has been through here.

Diana scanned the area and readied herself for another jump, when Emelie lunged forward and caught her wrist.

"Stop!"

The principal stopped, her head tilting slowly to look at Emelie. The gaze was chilling. "Release me, Emelie. Rosie could be in trouble, and I'd rather not waste any mana teleporting us both."

"I know!" Emelie hissed a desperate whisper. "But you can't just teleport in and start causing trouble! We don't even know what Kurt's situation is. Tobias is a rat. What if he starts panicking because of your presence? He'll kill those kids before you can even draw your blade. We have to be quiet."

"What kids? Weren't they all taken by Dominik?"

"There's... There's more. The children Dominik took; they told me."

Diana stared at the estate, her red eyes glowed as she narrowed them, focusing on something that only she could see.

"The rat has already been cornered," Diana said, her voice dropping into a register that made the hair on Emelie's arm stand up. "He won't even get the chance to blink once he notices me. I'm going."

"Principal, please—!"

But Diana was already gone by the time she loosened herself from Emelie's grasp. A silent ripple of air was the only sign she had ever been there.

"Damn it!" Emelie punched the gate. "Stupid, arrogant, lovestruck... ugh!"

She didn’t follow with a loud blast. She knew the stakes. She flew over the gate and dropped low, her feet barely touching the grass as she used her telekinesis to dampen the sound of her own movement.

She made her way to the side wall of the estate where she found a dead body with a split open skull.

"Is this your doing, Kurt? *Tsk!* Why’d you have to disappear like that? Haaa, I hope you’ve got a hell of a hiding spot, because a new storm has just arrived."

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Inside the estate, Tobias reached the master chambers where everything was a complete wreck. But he didn’t look at any of it. He dove toward the nightstand, his fingers frantically searching through the debris of the shattered vanity.

"Where is it? Where is it?!"

He found it. The small, silver box with the ornate engravings. It had been knocked to the floor during the struggle. He grabbed and opened it, his thumb hovering over the recessed red button. A manic, jagged laugh bubbled up in his throat.

"You lose, Rossana," Tobias spat, looking toward the door.

BAM!

The door to the chambers bashed opened, breaking on its hinges.

Kurt stood in the doorway, his chest heaving, his clothes were tattered, soaked in rain and the blood of twenty men.

"Oh hey, I was looking for that." Kurt let out a terrifying growl. "Drop it. Or I'll make sure your death takes as long as the lives you've stolen."

"Hahaha! You're too late!" Tobias's thumb descended toward the red button with a twitch of ecstatic malice. "NOW DIE!"