THORNS 121

Chapter 121: Breaking Point

He never felt the click.

Instead, a silver streak hissed through the air, faster than the eye could track. Kurt's switchblade launched with the full force of his might, tearing through the air. There was a wet, crunching sound as the blade buried itself through Tobias's wrist, pinning his arm to the ornate wood-paneled wall behind him.

"A-ARGHH!"

The remote slipped from his nerveless fingers. Kurt was already moving, his body a blur of shadow. He caught the remote mid-air, his boots skidding on the wine-soaked silk of the floor.

"Not today, you pathetic parasite."

Tobias screamed in pain and pure agony. But he was a man fueled by a lifetime of dark devotion and blood magic. With his free hand, he drew the obsidian dagger from the back of his trousers. He didn't try to pull his pinned hand free and just launched himself forward, swinging his dagger straight down at Kurt.

Kurt tried to twist away, but the confined space of the bedroom betrayed him. The black edge tore through his skin and bit deep into his shoulder, slicing through muscle and scraping the bone.

"Urgh!" He let out a sharp hiss of pain, clutching the remote tight in his left hand as he shoved Tobias back.

"You think a little blood will stop the inevitable?" Tobias spat, his pinned wrist tearing further as he wrenched himself away from the wall, leaving the switchblade behind. His arm hung limp, but his eyes were glowing with a terrifying pulse of crimson light. "I have given everything to this cause! You're not stopping me after I came this far!"

"Then let’s see just how far your resolve will take you!" Kurt retorted, his Mana Coating flaring brilliantly around his knuckles, only to vanish instantly.

"Hahaha! Look who’s out of mana!"

"I don’t need it for taking out scum like you anyway."

"JUST DIE ALREADY, ROSSANA!"

"I COULD SAY THE SAME, TOBIAS!"

CLASH!

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The fight spilled back through the shattered glass doors and onto the rain-lashed balcony. The storm had reached a fever pitch, the thunder drowning out the sound of their steel clashing. They moved across the stone landing like two starving predators, the mud and blood making every step a gamble.

Kurt used his martial arts to compensate for his lack of mana and wounded shoulder, leading with his good side. He delivered a brutal roundhouse kick that Tobias caught with a forearm that felt like solid iron. The bishop countered with a spray of blood from his torn wrist, the droplets hardening into crimson needles mid-air. Kurt ducked, the needles embedding themselves into the panel frame behind him.

"You’re struggling, boy!" Tobias laughed. "I can feel your heart hammering! It’s such a loud, frantic thing! It will look so beautiful in a jar!"

"Keep talking, Tobias! It makes it easier to find your throat!" Kurt lunged, using a low sweep to take the bishop’s legs, but Tobias leaped over the strike, swinging the obsidian dagger in a lethal horizontal cut.

Kurt barely managed to dodge. They then separated, standing a few feet apart in the freezing downpour.

Tobias suddenly stood still. He lowered his head, a low, melodic chanting beginning to vibrate in his chest. Slowly, he raised his uninjured arm. Dark, blood-coloured lines began to etch themselves into his skin.

’Those markings!’

"NO–!" Kurt charged, his fist cocked back for strike. But it was too late. Tobias slammed his dagger into the markings of his palm on his own hand, a shockwave of crimson energy erupting outward.

Everything inside his body turned into an invisible, gelatinous weight. He was frozen in mid-stride, a statue of flesh and bone held in place by Tobias’ twisted magic.

Tobias limped forward, his face a mask of triumph. He reached out and slowly, almost delicately, plucked the remote from Kurt’s pocket.

"I told you, Rossana," Tobias whispered, his face inches from Kurt’s. "You lose."

He stepped back, holding the remote high like a holy relic.

’C’mon body move! We’ve been through this before! NOW MOVE!’

Right as Tobias’ thumb began to apply pressure, Kurt’s Adaptation skill flared with a white-hot intensity. The "Lock" didn’t break entirely, but Kurt’s body forced a singular, violent motion through the paralysis. He lunged forward with his head, putting every ounce of his soul into a brutal headbutt.

"What the–!"

CRACK!

The sound of Tobias's nose shattering was like a gunshot. The bishop stumbled back, falling off the railing and down on the wet stone. He gasped, blood spraying from his face, but as he hit the ground...

His thumb finally found the red button.

"I... win..." Tobias wheezed, his eyes wide with a manic, dying joy.

"NO! DON'T DO IT!"

Kurt reached out helplessly from the balcony, but it was too late.

Click

BOOOOM!

The entire estate shook under the impact of the explosion.

Kurt froze. His Adaptation skill had already completely freed him from Tobias' hold, but he didn't move. Couldn't move. He laid there, arm still reached out across the balcony, his mouth open in a silent, horrified scream. The world seemed to go quiet, the rain turning into a dull hum.

'W–What....?'

"Ha! Hahaha! AHAHAHA! There! There go my precious blood bags, Rossana! All that work... all that blood... for nothing. They're charcoal and ash now. And it's your fault. If you hadn't come, they would have at least lived until they proved to be useless. Now? Now they're just meat."

He looked at Kurt, expecting to see a man broken by grief, a man ready to surrender. "Don't worry," Tobias mocked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "The Goddess is merciful. She'll take care of them in the afterlife. She loves the little ones."

Kurt didn’t scream. Nor did he cry.

He dropped down.

Thud!

And began to walk.

His movements were slow, blank, and utterly devoid of hesitation. His eye no longer had its rich, sapphire glow; it was a dark, void-like deep blue that seemed to absorb the very light of the storm. To Tobias, didn’t look like a human being anymore. He looked like an avatar of inevitable, silent death.

Tobias’s laughter died in his throat. He saw the look in Kurt’s eye and felt a coldness that his blood magic couldn’t warm.

He tried to scramble to get up, but the impact of his fall and the utter exhaustion he felt made him slip and tumble back on the wet stone, beneath the statue of Goddess Bula.

By the time he turned around, Kurt was already on him.

What proceeded next was an assault. Kurt tackled Tobias, the force of the impact sending them skidding across the stone. Kurt mounted him, locking his legs tight around Tobias’s waist, pinning the man and ensuring he didn’t get away.

Tobias screamed, driving the obsidian dagger into Kurt’s thigh, again and again.

"Release me! Release me, you heathen!"

Stab! Stab! Stab!

Kurt didn’t flinch. He didn’t even blink. He didn’t even feel the blade. All he could feel, all he could hear, was the sound of that explosion.

Kurt raised his fist, brass knuckles equipped and struck.

THWACK!

He punched Tobias in the face with the full weight of what little Strengthening Magic he had left. Then again.

THWACK!

Then an elbow to the temple.

CRACK!

And again.

THWACK!

And again.

CRACK!

Kurt began to beat the ever-living hell out of the man beneath him. This wasn’t tactical, nor was it graceful. It was primal destruction.

He punched until his knuckles were shredded, until the brass of his knuckles was bent and red. He punched until Tobias’s nose was gone, until his teeth were splinters, until the bishop’s face was a pulp of purple and red.

"ROSIE!"

A voice cut through the rain from the garden below. Diana appeared in a ripple of crimson light. She stood at the edge of the balcony, her eyes wide as she saw the scene.

THWACK!

THWACK!

THWACK!

"Rosie, stop! It’s over!"

Kurt didn’t listen. He raised both hands, bringing them down in a double-fisted hammer blow that cracked the stone tile beneath Tobias’s mushy head. He was screaming a long, agonizing howl of pure loss as he continued beating.

Diana teleported. She appeared directly over him, holding Kurt’s body. Her touch was gentle, but Kurt thrashed her away with a cold and desperate shove.

"Get off me! He killed them! He killed the kids! I have to kill him!"

"He’s already dead, Rosie!" Diana screamed back, her voice cracking as she fought to hold him. "Look at him! He’s gone!"

Kurt shoved her away again and lunged at the body, landing one more sickening punch into the mess that used to be a face.

Diana didn’t hesitate this time. She tackled Kurt, pinning him to the ground away from the corpse. She wrapped her arms around him, locking him in a tight, iron-strength embrace.

"Rosie! Stop! Look at me!" she pleaded, her platinum hair whipping in the wind. "Tobias is dead! It's over! Come back to me, Rosie!"

Kurt kept thrashing, his boots scraping against the stone, his fingers clawing at Diana's cloak. "He killed them! Toby... and the girl... they're all gone! Get off me! I have to finish it!"

"No! Look at me!"

Diana leaned down, burying her face against his neck and holding him with a fierce, desperate warmth that shielded him from the freezing rain. She didn't let go. She let him fight her, let him scream into her shoulder, let him exhaust the poison of his rage against her own body.

Slowly, the thrashing began to subside. Kurt's muscles, pushed far beyond their breaking point, finally began to fail. His breaths turned into jagged, shuddering sobs. He slumped against her; his forehead resting on her shoulder and silently began grieving.

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Ten minutes passed. The rain slowed to a drizzle. With Diana's help, Kurt stood up. His movements were stiff and robotic. He stood over the body of Tobias. Just a heap pile of silk trousers and ruined flesh. He stared down with no life in his eyes, feeling empty, as if the explosion had hollowed out his own chest.

Diana stood beside him, firmly holding his hand. She could still feel the slight tremors wracking his frame.

"Hope," Kurt whispered her name. "I promised her..."

He turned away from the body; his gaze fixed on the stone ground. He didn't want to see the estate. He didn't want to see the light. He just wanted to get away.

"Kurt!"

Emelie burst through the side gate, her telekinetic aura dragging a small girl behind her. She skidded to a stop on the patio, her eyes darting between Diana, the battered Kurt, and the unrecognizable corpse of the bishop.

"Gods... Kurt, what happened? You look like..."

"It doesn't matter," Kurt said, his voice flat, his eye fixed on the ground. "I failed. Tobias pressed the button. The children... they're dead, Emelie. The underground cell exploded. I heard it. I felt it..."

Emelie stopped. She looked at him for a long, confusing second, and then a strange, weary smile touched her lips.

"No, Kurt," she said softly, stepping forward and placing a hand on his uninjured shoulder. "They're not dead."

Kurt paused. He slowly turned his head, searching her face for the lie. "What?"

"Kurt?" A little girl came out from behind Emelie.

"Hope?"

Chapter 122: The Long Night's End

"Kurt?"

The voice was tiny, high-pitched, and filled with a cautious, heartbreaking warmth.

Kurt flinched and took a slow, painful step back. There, standing behind Emelie, was a small girl in an oversized black cloak.

"Hope?" His voice broke. Kurt shook his head, retreating another step. "No. You... you can't be here. I–"

"Rosie." Diana didn’t let him retreat further. She squeezed his hand, her grip firm and grounding. Her hair was plastered to her forehead, but her eyes were sharp. "Didn’t you hear what Emelie said? The children are not dead."

"... Really?" Kurt looked at Emelie, almost pleadingly.

Emelie crossed her arms as a tired but triumphant smirk playing on her lips.

"Yes."

"But... how? I felt the explosion."

"Well, you see. What had happened was..."

- A few minutes earlier -

"Hm? It’s open." Emelie drifted onto the upper balcony, noting the broken frame and the smear of fresh blood on the stone.

The room was a wreck. She saw the blood spatters on the carpet and the bedsheets had been tied into a makeshift rope. Just as she was about to turn and head for the hallway, a quiet squeak caught her ear.

It came from the massive wardrobe in the corner.

Emelie narrowed her eyes and floated a few inches off the floor. She opened the front door and closed it with a slightly audible click. She then darted to the side cupboard, pressed herself against the wall, and waited.

Slowly, the cupboard door creaked open. A small blonde head peeked out, eyes darting around the room in a panic.

’Is that...?’

"Hope," Emelie said softly.

"Eeee!" The girl let out a muffled shriek, flinching so hard she scrambled back to hide behind a row of winter coats, and cultist cloaks.

Emelie floated to the front of the cupboard and knocked gently on the wood. "Hope? It’s okay. I’m a friend of Kurt’s. My name is Emelie. I’m here to help him rescue your friends."

The coats shifted. Hope’s face reappeared, peering through the gap in the door. "Kurt’s friend? The one with the fire?"

"That’s Dominik. He’s a prefect. There are actually three of us on this mission. I’m the third." Emelie clarified, offering a gentle, reassuring smile. "It’s safe to come out now."

Hope stepped out, clutching the edges of her cloak. She looked exhausted, her small face pale in the dim light.

"Why were you hiding in there, kiddo?"

"Kurt told me to," Hope whispered. "He said it was too dangerous for me to sneak with him. He said he’d come back for me with my friends."

"Smart. So why did you come out just now?"

Hope’s face turned bright red. She shuffled her feet. "I... I really needed to pee. I was looking for the bathroom."

Emelie let out a short, surprised laugh. "Ahh. The call of nature waits for no secret mission. It’s right through that door, Hope."

Hope scurried into the en-suite bathroom. A moment later, she came running back out, her hands clamped tightly over her nose. Her eyes were watering.

"What's wrong?" Emelie asked, alarmed.

"It stinks!" Hope cried, her voice muffled by her hands. "It smells like... like old meat and my grandpa's feet! It's gross!"

"Did you... you know, wipe properly?"

"It wasn't me!" Hope retorted, her eyes flashing rebelliously. "I'm a clean girl! It was already like that!"

Emelie saw the girl's growing frustration and the way her lower lip was beginning to tremble. She cleared her throat and backed off the subject immediately.

"Alright, alright! I believe you. Look, go back in the closet for a bit longer. I need to leave."

"No!" Hope stamped her foot. "Kurt is taking too long. I want to go with you. I want to find the others."

"Hope, it's dangerous—"

"I don't care!" Hope looked up at Emelie with a fierce, stubborn determination. "If you leave me here, I'm just going to sneak out myself."

Emelie stared at the girl. She saw the absolute seriousness in those blue eyes. She knew that if she left her, she'd have to worry about a rogue child wandering into a cultist patrol.

"Urgh... fine," Emelie groaned while rubbing her temples. "But you stay behind me. You don't make a sound. You have to be so quiet that I don't even notice you're there. Got it?"

"Yes!"

"Shh!"

"Sorry," Hope whispered through her fingers.

Together, they slipped out of the room. Emelie was on high alert, her mind reaching out for any signs of movement, but the upper floors were strangely empty.

'Kurt's been busy,' she thought, noting the lack of patrols. She wondered if he was safe, her heart tugging with a rare, unspoken anxiety.

They reached the study. Emelie spotted the grandfather clock. Already knowing what the code is, she turned the long hand and pressed down. She felt the internal tumblers starting to move until the mechanism clicked and the wall swung inward.

Together, they descended the spiraling stone stairs and when they reached the bottom, Hope let out a gasp.

"They're here!"

Hope sprinted toward the iron-barred cells. The children inside, who had been huddled in terrified silence since Kurt left, scrambled toward the bars. It was a heartwarming chaos. Tiny hands reaching through the iron, muffled cries of "Hope!" and "You came back!"

"Is Kurt with you?" a boy asked, his eyes wide as he looked at Emelie.

"He's... finishing up some business upstairs," Emelie said softly. "We're all friends. Now, stay back from the bars. I need to see something."

She walked toward the doctor's theater. The sight that met her was gruesome even by her standards. One doctor was pinned to the operating table, looking like a human pincushion for every syringe in the

room. The other was slumped over a basin, his face a melted, unrecognizable mess where he had been shoved into an acidic compound.

Emelie whistled low. "Yikes. Note to self, never get on Kurt's bad side."

She returned to the cells, her face composed. "Alright, listen up. I'm taking these collars off."

The children recoiled as one. "No! Don't!" the boy cried. "When Toby tried to break his, the bishop made it go boom! When Missy tried taking it off when the bishop wasn't here, it still went boom!"

"I'm not 'breaking' them," Emelie said, her eyes beginning to glow with a steady, green light. "I'm a specialist. I know how to disrupt the mana flow so that it doesn't explode when tampered with. Trust me."

None of them moved until a small, skeletal boy stepped forward. "I-I trust her. She has the same eyes as Kurt."

"Thank you."

Emelie knelt. She placed her hands near the boy's collar but didn't touch it. She sent out a pulse of magic-disrupt, a complex frequency meant to temporarily halt the flow of magic. Simultaneously, her telekinesis gripped the internal pins and with a soft click, the collar fell away. Once the disruption ended, it hummed for a second and the little circle on it glowed blue, registering that it's still detecting that it's connected.

"There, one down," she breathed.

"""Wooow!"""

"Haha, see. I told you." Emelie smiled.

She worked through all four cells, her brow dripping with sweat from the sheer mental strain. It was surgical, high-stakes work. Just as she reached the very last child and snapped the final collar, a long, high-pitched whine

filled the room.

The detonator has been pressed.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Emelie hissed. "Kids! Get back! Brace yourselves!"

The collars on the floor all began to pulse with a violent, strobing red light. They were going to explode simultaneously. Emelie didn't hesitate. She gathered all forty collars in a massive telekinetic net and hurled them like a swarm of angry bees toward the doctor's theater at the far end of the hall.

As they flew, she slammed an invisible, reinforced barrier across the cell doors.

BOOOOM!!!

The explosion was deafening. The shockwave rattled the entire basement, and a second later, the ceiling over the doctor's theater began to crumble. Heavy stone slabs and iron supports came crashing down, sealing the lab in a tomb of rubble.

"The roof is going to go!" Emelie shouted. She made a temporary telekinetic wall to hold back the settling dust and debris, but she could feel the weight of the mansion pressing down. "I have to get you out now!"

She didn't have time for stairs. She used her telekinesis to lift ten children at a time, floating them in a protective bubble. She flew them up the spiral staircase and into the study. Four trips, back and forth. Her lungs burned and her mana reserves screamed.

Finally, the last of the children were out safely. The ground below them shook violently and the entire underground area was sealed off.

Emelie panted, leaning against the wall. Worried about what actually triggered the explosion, she looked toward the exit door.

"Something’s happening with Tobias." She muttered, pushing herself off the wall and heading out.

"Emelie! Wait!" Hope called out. "Are you going to Kurt?"

Emelie looked at the girl. She knew Hope would just follow her anyway, likely getting lost or caught in the crossfire. "Yeah. I’m going to go make sure something hasn’t happened to him."

"Take me with you!"

Emelie sighed, then extended a hand. She told the rest of the children to just be patient for a little longer and used her magic to seal the path to the study, ensuring no straggling cultists could follow. And together she and Hope ran toward the center of the storm.

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Kurt listened to the end of the story, his head bowed, the rain washing away the last of the blood on his face. He looked at Hope, who was now standing right in front of him.

The girl didn’t care about the blood. She didn’t care that he looked like a monster. She simply reached out and wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her face in his tattered clothes.

"You came back," she whispered. "With my friends. Just like you promised."

Kurt’s hand, scarred and trembling, slowly came up to rest on the back of her head. He let out a long, shuddering breath.

A sound that carried the weight of the entire night’s trauma.

He looked up at Diana and Emelie. Diana was still holding his other hand, her presence a silent, immovable anchor. Emelie stood a few feet away, her eyes soft, her usual sarcasm buried under a layer of genuine relief.

"Dominik is waiting at the pier with the children from the fortress," Diana said, gesturing toward the coast.

"And the children from the underground cells are waiting for us to pick them up." Emelie added.

"Is that right? Hahaha..."

"Are we finally going home, Kurt?" Hope looked up to him excitingly.

Kurt nodded slowly. He looked back at the dead, unrecognisable mess that had been Tobias lying beneath the statue of Goddess Bula, then back at Hope.

"Yeah," he said, his voice finally steady. "Let’s go home."