THORNS 153

Chapter 153 - Curious Cat

"Hey, you two, come take a look at this. Someone was struggling here. Hard."

Near the edge of the lake, the three men sent by the Elder were pacing around the muddy banks. The leader of the bunch had found skid marks on the ground that led out to the water.

He then looked out toward the center of the lake and saw a faint, dark smudge of crimson still lingered in the depths, refusing to dissipate entirely.

"There's blood out there. A lot of it. What the hell happened here? Whose blood is that?"

"Maybe the fish monsters dragged the woman's dead body out after being killed by an infected?" another man muttered, wiping sweat from his brow.

"But there's no clothes. No hair. Just... nothing."

Further up the bank, near the edge of the flower field, the two women were moving through the tall grass.

"Nothing unusual here. Just a few picked flowers. That's what the F-ranks came for, isn't it?"

Her companion, who was searching nearby, crossed her arms. "It doesn't make sense. Why would an infected attack them? There were three of them in total, no? The one eye, the maid, and the fancy looking lady. Those who are turned... they're rabid, yes, but they're usually like stalkers. They attack when someone is alone. They're like wolves."

"Maybe it got spotted?" the first woman suggested.

"Don't be an idiot. Even if it were spotted, it would've bolted the moment it thought something was fishy. Those things are fast. Nobody in that group should have had the speed to catch up to him, especially not some F-rank adventurers here to pick weeds. Something is wrong."

"Hey! Over here!" one of the men called to them. "We think we found something!"

The women sprinted over to the lake where the men were huddled around a patch of dirt that looked recently dug. One of them was frantically digging bare hands, and with a final heave, he uncovered a shallow pit.

Inside, there were no bones. No clothes. Just a thick, grey mound of fine ash.

"Ashes?" the woman whispered as she leaned in. "Whose ashes are these?"

"None of this makes sense! The one eye is infected, the fancy woman is dead, there's blood in the middle of the lake and now ashes lay in the dirt!? I say we just go back and interrogate the maid!"

The leader of the group stared at the ashes for a long time. He looked back toward the village, then toward the dark, deep forest. Then came to a decision.

"We aren't going back yet. We need to check the swamp. We need to ask the mystery man in the dark hood if he knows what's happening."

"Are you crazy!?" one of the men yelled. "The hooded man said only the Elder is allowed to meet him! If he catches us there, he'll turn us into feed for those fucking centipede monsters! Or worse, he'll turn us into the infected! We should go back and tell the Elder what we found!"

"The Elder is busy with the one eye and maid! He trusted us with this. I'm worried other strangers might come by and notice what's happening here. Time is of the essence, and this is important. We find the hooded man and let him handle this mess."

Without saying another word, the others looked at one another and nodded reluctantly. They all turned and sprinted into the thickening gloom of the forest.

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From a high branch of an ancient tree, Ayako watched them go. She had heard every word with her sharpened hearing sense of wind magic she had woven around the clearing.

"A mystery man in a hood," she murmured to herself. "Is he the cause of these "infected"? It seems Eldoria's backyard is quite filthy. Oh, how I bet Ryuuji would've loved to see this."

She leaped from one branch to another as she silently followed the group further into the forest. As she moved deeper into the woods, she began to see the aftermath of a one-sided massacre.

Scattered throughout the brush were the corpses of Giant Centipedes. Dozens of them. Shells were smashed and many legs twisted and broken.

The villagers ran right past them, ignoring the carnage as if it were a common sight, but Ayako slowed down just enough to inspect one.

'Hmm. I sense the faint residue of dark magic.', she noted, seeing the blunt-force trauma on a shattered head. 'Someone fought through here with raw, desperate strength.'

She leapt back up and continued her pursuit. Soon, the air around her began to change, growing heavy and thick with the cloying scent of stagnant water and rotting vegetation.

The forest gave way to a sunless swamp, where the trees were draped in grey moss and the water was a murky, toxic green.

The villagers stopped at the edge of the mire and Ayako stood on a high branch directly above them.

Each villager pulled a small vial of pungent green liquid from their belts and began rubbing it onto their skin and clothes.

'Goodness. I can smell it from up here. That stench reeks. ' Ayako covered her nose as she watched them. 'Why would they...'

She looked ahead and saw why. All across the swamp, resting on mossy hillocks and half-submerged logs, were hundreds of Giant Centipedes. They were enormous, their bodies pulsing with a slow breath. They were sleeping.

'Ahh, a repellent? Or something to mask their scent?'

The villagers, now coated in the green muck, walked directly into the swamp. Just as Ayako half deduced, the monsters didn't even stir.

She stayed to the very edge of the swamp, moving through the high branches where the air was a bit clearer. As she bypassed a particularly large cluster of monsters, her eyes caught something on the ground below – something that wasn't a centipede.

She dropped down and landed silently beside a slumped figure. It was a man, but he was dead. His skull had been completely caved in, and lying just inches from his hand was a heavy, blood-stained stone.

With nothing else to see here, she leaped back into the high trees and saw the villagers reach a clearing. Her heart began to race with a mixture of excitement and caution.

In the center of the swamp stood a large, lopsided wooden house.

Then, she saw "them". Walking aimlessly around the perimeter were several people. Their movements were disjointed and jerky. Their eyes were vacant, their flesh was pale and rotten, and their mouths hung open with yellowish foam as they wandered in circles with no apparent purpose.

'Those symptoms... They're the same as the one who had attacked Rossana-sama.'

The five villagers walked straight to the front door of the house and knocked.

After waiting for a while, the door creaked open, and the group shuffled inside.

Ayako landed on the broken branch a few yards away. She looked at the wandering husks, then at the house.

’I could return to Rossana-sama and Isabel’, she thought. ’Or I could end this here.’

But the curiosity was too strong to ignore. She wanted – no – she needed to know.

She gathered her mana and her body shimmered as she dissolved into a flurry of sakura petals. She reappeared directly in front of the rotting door. She didn’t sneak in nor did she hide. She wanted the "hooded man" to see her.

She steadied her heart, wore a polite smile and raised her hand to knock firmly on the wooden door.

After a long, agonizing silence, the door finally opened.

Ayako’s hand went to the hilt of her katana as her body coiled like a spring. But when the door swung wide, she didn’t see one of the infected, or any of the villagers that had just entered, and she certainly didn’t see a dark-hooded person.

Standing there was a boy. He looked to be around her age, perhaps a year or two younger. He had messy brown hair that fell over his forehead, and his face was dotted with light freckles. He was dressed in a clean white apron and a starched white scrub hat, looking more like a laboratory assistant than a swamp-dwelling villain.

He stared at Ayako and his eyes widened in immediate, shocking recognition.

"... What the fuck? Why is Ayako-tan here?"

"A-Ayako-tan? Excuse me?"

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- Back at the stone house –

"Master Rossana!" Isabel threw herself toward him and hovered her hands over his leg.

Kurt was hunched over, gripping his thigh hard as he bared his teeth. Isabel watched, the horrific purple veins that had been snaking toward his knee began to recede.

The dark, oily blackness in the wound was being pushed out by the glowing blue liquid, bubbling away like acid – the likely cause of his pain. The redness of the bite marks also began to fade into a dull, manageable pink.

When it was over, Kurt let out a long, shaky breath. He looked down at his ankle and saw that the infection had been completely neutralised.

"It... it worked. It actually worked. Master, you're cured!"

"What?" The man on the floor looked confused. "How'd it heal so fast–"

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"LIAM! IS IT OVER?! DID YOU DEAL WITH THEM?!"

"Shit! It's the village Elder! You all need to hide!"

Chapter 154 - Atonement

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"LIAM! ANSWER ME! IS IT DONE!? HAVE YOU SILENCED THE GIRL AND THE ONE-EYED BRAT YET!?"

Liam’s face went white and his body became shaky. His hands trembled as he grabbed the edge of the heavy worktable and looked to Kurt and Isabel.

"T-The carpet," he hissed in a frantic whisper. "Help me move it!"

Confused but not unwilling, Kurt and Isabel helped shoved the table and kicked back the wool rug to reveal a trapdoor. Liam took out a key from his satchel, unlocked the door and yanked the ring up, exposing a set of narrow stone steps leading into the dark.

"Down the steps! Hurry!"

"Why?" Kurt asked as his hand drifted to the knife on his belt. "We can take him. It’s just an old man and some villagers. No big deal, right?"

"N-No–!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"LIAM! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME! OPEN THIS DOOR OR WE WILL BREAK IT DOWN!"

"You don’t understand," Liam whispered, shoving Kurt and Isabel toward the hole. "The Elder... he may look like a frail old man, but he is a monster. He’s been taking some sort of ’Blessing’ from the hooded man. If he sees you’re still alive, he’ll kill us all before you can blink!"

"Blessing?"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"THAT"S IT! YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED! MEN! BREAK IT DOWN!"

Liam fumbled with his leather satchel, moving erratically and filled with terror. He pulled out another blue vial and shoved it into Kurt’s hand.

"L-Listen! *Sob* T-There’s a woman down there," Liam cried as tears finally spilled over his face. "She’s in the back room of the cellar. She’s... she’s fighting the infection. Give this to her and use the tunnel. It leads out past the wheat fields."

"You’re coming with us," Isabel reached for his arm.

But Liam shook his head and a tragic, resigned smile touched his lips.

"I can’t. Someone has to cover the hatch. A-Also, if I’m here, I can buy you time. So please," he pleaded as he grabbed Kurt’s shirt. "Please tell the capital. Tell King Maxwell that Eldoria’s shadow has reached the roots. The real evil... it’s in the swamp. The man in the hood... he’s the one that destroyed our small village."

BASH!

The front door splintered open upstairs, and the heavy trudge of boots filled the house.

"Search the rooms! I want Liam alive!"

Liam shoved Kurt and Isabel down the steps. "Now go!"

He slammed the hatch shut. From below, Kurt and Isabel stood still in the darkness, listening as the carpet was kicked back into place and the table dragged over their heads.

Then came the second crash as the basement door was kicked in.

"Where are they?" The Elder’s voice came out low and cold. "Where is the maid and that man, Liam?"

"E-Elder. Why are you barging in? I told you I'd take care of them..."

"Oh really? Because I don't see them anywhere. Don't lie to me boy. Where are they?!"

"....."

"ANSWER ME!"

The silence stretched.

Then, a chilling sound echoed through the room.

"...Ha! Hahaha! Ahahaha!" Liam began to laugh. It started as a wheeze and escalated into a hysterical, broken cackle.

"Hahaha... Haaa *sniff* It's too late. It's all too late, Elder."

"... What do you mean by that? What have you done, boy?"

"Where did everything go wrong, Elder?" Liam asked, now sounding eerily calm. "We were a quiet, humble village. My father grew wheat. Your wife baked bread. Why did it have to become this? This... factory for monsters?"

"Grrr. Liam..."

"I'm tired, Elder. I'm so tired of pretending to be blind. Tired of luring travelers in with a smile, only to watch them be dragged to the swamp and experimented on by that hooded freak. I helped you. I'm a murderer. I'll never be forgiven... but at least I know it ends today."

"Where are they?!"

The three men grabbed Liam and slammed him to the floor which caused all the contents of his satchel to be revealed, as well as the last vial he has.

"What is this?" The Elder asked when picking it up.

"That?" Liam laughed through what sounded like a mouthful of blood. "That is my atonement. A cure. And they're gone, Elder. They're halfway to the capital by now. King Maxwell will bring his knights. And he will bring judgment down on every one of you!"

"You... you traitorous rat! I'll kill you! I'll peel the skin from your–"

"It doesn't matter," Liam's voice was peaceful. "Like I said, I'm tired. And it's finally over..."

Shink!

The sound of a blade entering flesh was unmistakable.

And a wet, choking gasp followed.

Until finally... it stopped.

Above them, dark, warm blood began to seep through the carpet and into the cracks of the hatch, dripping onto Kurt's cheek. Beside him, Isabel was shaking violently, both hands clamped over her mouth to stifle the sobs that were tearing through her chest.

"Useless trash, *Ptooey*" the Elder spat on the dead body. "If he had only kept his mouth shut, he could have joined the brotherhood once the Guest was finished with his work. Men! To the road! Take the carriage they came in. Take the reinforcements. Find them and kill them before they reach the capital! GO!"

The house cleared out in a storm of frantic activity. The Elder lingered for a moment, then, his boots clicked on the floorboards before finally exiting.

Kurt let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. "Of course. Brotherhood," he whispered into the dark. "The cult. It’s always the damn cult."

"Master... Liam is..." Isabel choked out.

"I know. We’re going to make sure it wasn’t for nothing. Also, we’re going to capture that cultist in the swamp. This village is pretty much empty with those men gone to look for us. We’ll clear house before moving on. But first..."

Kurt turned and descended the remaining steps into a dimly lit basement. When they made it fully down, what greeted them was what looked to be a little alchemy lab with notes everywhere.

In the corner, resting on a straw cot near a flickering oil lamp, was a figure. It was a woman with long, tangled black hair. Her body was a map of white bandages, many of them soaked through with fresh blood.

Kurt approached her with the blue vial in his hand. "This must be the one Liam mentioned."

Tingle

"Huh–?"

As he reached out to pull back the woman’s hair, a hand suddenly shot out from the bandages with the speed of a viper. It clamped onto his wrist with bone-crushing strength.

"Shit–!"

The woman lunged upward and slammed her forehead into Kurt's nose in a brutal headbutt. This caused him to stumble back, stunned, as she rolled off the bed and landed in a crouch, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

"Master Rossana! Why you–"

"Wait!" Kurt halted her as he wiped the blood from his nose.

The woman's eyes were wild when scanning the room like a trapped animal. "Where am I? Where is Austin? What did you do with him?!"

"Calm down," Kurt said with his hands up. "I don't know who Austin is, but I'm not your enemy. I'm a friend."

The woman froze as her gaze locked onto Kurt's face. Her eyes widened, the wildness replaced by a flicker of recognition.

"You... Kurt Rossana..."

"You know me?"

"I've... seen you around," she muttered quickly when darting her eyes away. "In passing. Mainly at Evergreen Park. I watched you fight the royal twins..."

"Great. Then you know I'm not with the freaks upstairs. This is my maid, Isabel. We're here to get you out."

The woman didn't relax completely. Suddenly, she winced, clutching her shoulder as fresh blood began to seep through the white bandages.

"You're infected," Kurt said, showing her the vial. "This is the cure. Liam – the man who was helping you – gave his life to make sure you got it."

"Toss it here."

Kurt threw the glass bottle and she caught it with one hand. Then, without a shred of modesty or hesitation, she reached up and tore the bandages from her body.

Isabel let out a small gasp as the woman stood there, completely naked in the flickering lamplight. Her body was a masterpiece of toned muscle and deep, jagged wounds that were oozing the same black rot Kurt had seen on his own ankle.

She uncorked the vial and poured the liquid directly over her chest and shoulders. As the blue substance hit her skin, she let out a hiss as the infection began to slowly burn away; albeit at a much slower pace when compared to Kurt’s.

"Ha. That was a brave move. What if what I gave you was poison?"

The woman looked at him, her deep purple eyes unblinking as she began to wrap herself in a spare cloak lying near the bed. "... Poison doesn’t work on me."

Kurt raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Well, since you’re not dead or a zombie, I guess we can trust each other. What’s your name?"

The woman hesitated for a split second as her shadow flickering against the wall. "Gar–" she caught herself and shifted her voice slightly.

"Gracie. My name is Gracie."