THORNS 155

Chapter 155 - Wild Spraying Fountain

"Now, Gracie," Kurt leaned against the cold stone wall of the basement. "When and where was the last time you saw your friend? Seeing that he was the first thing you asked about when waking up, I'm guessing he's pretty important to you, no?"

Gracie, who'd just finished wrapping her cloak, didn't look at him. She looked at her hands, which were still trembling slightly despite her bravado. The infection's effects still slightly lingered, but she ignored it.

"What day is it?" she asked dismissively.

"It's Wednesday afternoon."

Tsk "Then it's been since yesterday morning since I last saw him."

"Look, Gracie," Kurt said, stepping forward. "I'm sensing some attitude coming off you. If we're going to work together, you need to talk. It's important. I don't know if you know, but the cult is almost certainly involved in this. Any information you have could be the difference between finding your friend and finding a corpse."

"I don't need your help. I don't need anyone's help. I'll rescue Austin on my own."

Kurt shook his head and sighed as his patience lowered.

"Listen, I don't mean to sound rude, but I did just save your life. That cure? The guy who made it is currently dead and I doubt there's a secret stash under the floorboards. You owe me the least bit of cooperation.

Besides, I saw the state you're in under those bandages. You displayed them proudly enough after all – you're a mess. You won't make it a mile into that swamp before your stitches pop. Like it or not, you need us."

Gracie stared at him with eyes of malice. Her jaw tightened, but slowly, the tension began to leave her shoulders. She sat back down on the edge of the cot and began talking.

"We were in the forest. About three miles away from the lake. Austin... he had to go pee."

She looked up at the ceiling, a faint, lopsided smirk touching her lips. "I insisted on going with him. For safety reasons obviously. But he was adamant. He's... he's shy about things like that."

"Yeah, I get it," Kurt nodded. "Nobody really wants an audience for that."

"I told him fine," Gracie continued. "I let him have his stupid privacy... Except I didn't. The forest was nice and thick, quiet too. So I used my magic to spy on him."

Suddenly, her expression shifted. A creepy, predatory smile spread across her face, and her eyes widened in a way that made even Kurt feel a bit of a chill. She then let out a soft laugh. "Hahaha... His little dick is so cute when it's flaccid... but it's a monster when it wakes up. Definitely a grower, that one. I could watch it for hours."

Kurt blinked. While his face remained a mask of stoic professionalism, his brain screamed, 'Too much information, lady! TMI!'

Isabel, standing behind him, blushed profusely while looking intensely at a spiderweb in the corner.

"Ahem, right," Kurt said, clearing his throat. "So... you were spying. And then?"

Gracie's smile vanished instantly, replaced by a cold scowl.

"And then, I heard movement nearby. Something fast. I went to deal with it, thinking it was a monster. It was a man – or it looked like one. Blood-shot eyes, grey skin. When he saw me, he didn't fight. He turned and ran on all fours at inhumane speeds."

She gripped the edge of the cot. "Then I heard Austin scream. I raced back, and I saw another one of those grey bastards dragging him away. Austin's pants were still around his ankles, and his little dick was magnificently spraying pee everywhere like a panicked fountain."

Kurt felt a snort of laughter bubble up in his throat. He caught it just in time, however, and transformed it into a serious cough. When Gracie glared at him, he looked every bit like the attentive investigator.

"... I went after them. But from nowhere, the first man tackled me from out of nowhere. He tried to bite my throat but never got the chance. I killed him easily enough. Then more came. Ten, twenty, thirty... they just kept coming out of the brush, attacking with no self-preservation. Just a bunch of mindless husks..."

She paused as a look of genuine disgust crossed her features.

"And then something sick happened. After I cut them down, their bodies didn't stay dead. They cracked. Their bones contorted and morphed, their skin splitting open as they turned into those... those fucking centipede monsters.

That's when the situation turned. They were wild and unorthodox. They move and attack from underground, they're incredibly fast despite their massive size, and they spit some kind of acidic bile."

Isabel stepped forward and asked in a trembling voice, "How many? You said you fought them?"

"At least thirty of them. They didn't give me a chance to breathe. I struggled and eventually killed every last one of them, but by that point I was spent."

"T-Thirty of them? And what rank would you classify those creatures as?"

"A-rank. Maybe S-rank in a swarm."

"S-rank?! Just who are you?" Isabel looked at her with newfound terror.

"... I told you. My name is Gracie."

"That’s not what I–"

"So!" Kurt cut in, sensing that she wasn’t willing to share that piece of information. "So, Liam found you after the fight?"

"No. Well, sort of. After I fainted from exhaustion, and when I came to, I was in the swamp. Some grey-skinned freak had me over his shoulder, carrying me toward a wooden house in the distance.

That’s when I saw a shadow creeping up behind him. I’m guessing that it was this Liam you keep talking about. He was holding a massive rock, and when he got close enough, he bashed the freak’s head in with a single swing.

He then grabbed me and ran like his life depended on it. Next thing I know, I wake up here, hearing voices getting closer and closer. I thought more of those freaks came for me, so I laid in wait."

"And that’s where we are now," Kurt finished. "Say, if you don’t mind me asking. What were you two doing in that forest anyway? It’s a long way from the capital."

"I don’t know," Gracie shrugged. "It was Austin’s idea. He said he had something he needed to find. I just followed. I go where he goes."

Kurt narrowed his eye. "Is it possible Austin is involved with them? Maybe he was leading you–"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Gracie was on her feet in an instant, her face inches from Kurt’s. The murderous intent radiating from her was suffocating to all in that small space.

"Don’t you ever speak badly about Austin again! He is pure! He is innocent! If you speculate about him being a traitor again, I don’t care how many holes are in my body – I will rip your fucking heart out and feed it to you. Do you understand?"

"....."

The silence in the basement was deafening. Kurt stared her down, his one eye reflecting her fury without blinking. Behind him, Isabel was shaking as her hand hovered near her thigh.

After a moment, Kurt's face broke into a small, easy smile. He raised both hands in a gesture of peace. "My bad. I shouldn't have said that. Based on your story, they kidnapped him while his 'equipment' was out. That's not exactly a position of power if you ask me. I apologise."

Gracie nostrils flared as she huffed. She sat back down, looking away with a scowl.

"In any case, it looks like the swamp is the main destination," Kurt said in a professional tone.

"But before we head out, we have to clear this village. Specifically, the Elder. From what Liam said that old man is a 'monster'. I can't and won't in good conscience just leave him hanging around. And if they return from the road, we can't have those men flanking us while we're in the muck."

"Wait a minute." Gracie looked at him with her eyebrows furrowed. "You mentioned this before, but the cult? How can you be so sure they're behind this?"

"Off of two simple context clues. One: The Elder spoke of a 'Brotherhood.' That's their favorite word for a group of lunatics. And two: The person in the swamp is a 'mysterious person in a dark hood.' That's practically the cult's uniform. Although I could be wrong, the odds are in my favour of being right."

Tsk "Fuck..."

"What's wrong?" Kurt asked.

"Nothing!" Gracie snapped and stood up. Her movements were stiff, but the blue liquid was doing its job. "Let's just hurry up and kill that old man. Then I want to find the bastard in the hood. If they've touched a single hair on Austin's head, I'm going to turn that swamp into a graveyard..."

"That’s the spirit. Also, if we can help it, let’s not target the other villagers. We’ll leave them to the guards when we report on what is happening here."

"Yes, Master Rossana."

"Whatever..."

"Alright. Let’s take this secret way out and catch him by surprise. Assassin style."

Chapter 156 - Plan Of Action

- A few minutes earlier -

Austin stood paralyzed as his hand was still gripping the wooden handle of the front door. His gaze locked onto the woman standing on the porch.

Izumi Ayako.

Her beauty was even more striking in person than she had been on the screen of his previous life. Her predatory eyes narrowed as she took in his disheveled appearance. White apron, the scrub hat, and the lingering scent of chemicals mix with blood.

"You know my name?" Ayako asked. "I do not recall ever meeting someone like you. Have we met before?"

"N-No!" he blurted out; however, the word came out a bit too loud.

Outside, the slumped, aimless figures of the "zombies" snapped their heads toward the door in perfect unison. Their guttural growls rose in a sickening chorus.

"Shit! Inside, now!" Austin hissed.

He lunged forward and grabbed Ayako by the wrist, hauling her inside. He slammed the door shut and threw the heavy wooden bolt. He listened closely for any sign of abnormality and when none came, he sighed a breath of relief.

It was only then that he realised he was still clutching Ayako's hand. Her skin was cool, and she smelled faintly of spring blossoms. He yelped, his face turning red, and scrambled backward, nearly tripping over a crate of vials.

"S-Sorry! I just... they're sensitive. Especially toward women... Men, not so much..."

Ayako didn't seem bothered. She simply smoothed her kimono, her hand never straying far from her katana. "You didn't answer my question. How do you know me?"

"O-Oh! I mean... it's just that you're famous! Heiress to the Izumi clan! Words of your feat has uhm... traveled all the way from Myria to Eldoria, haha... It would be weird if I didn't recognise you. I'm Austin by the way. Student of Future Academy."

"Of course, haha." Ayako smiled as a small laugh escaped her lips. "Fame is a heavy burden, isn't it? And what about you, Austin?" Her eyes swept over his apron and hat. "Judging from your attire, you seem quite at home here. Do you work for the master of this house, perchance?"

"Yes... something like that. I assist with the... laboratory work."

Ayako's smile remained, but the temperature in the room seemed to drop to chilling degrees.

She rested her palm on the hilt of her blade. "Thank you for being honest, Austin. It makes this much easier." She bowed her head slightly, a gesture of terrifying politeness. "Goodbye. I shall kill you now, and afterward, I will be sure to inform the Academy of your unfortunate demise."

A "death flag". Something that Austin had been dreading was soon to become a reality. He snapped out of his daze and raised his hands up in a frantic 'stop' gesture.

"Wait! Wait! You're totally misunderstanding! I don't actually work here! I'm on a... a secret mission! A deep-cover operation!"

Ayako paused with her blade only an inch out of its sheath. "A mission?"

"Y-Yes! I'm here to ruin the plans of the cultist that resides here! I'm sabotaging him from the inside!"

The word 'cult' acted like a trigger. Ayako vanished and before Austin could even blink, he was slammed against the wooden wall. The cold, razor-sharp edge of her katana pressed firmly against his windpipe.

"The Cult is involved?" she asked in a tone no longer nonchalant. "Tell me everything. Who are you really, and what is your involvement with those monsters?"

"I-I'm telling you, I'm a victim!" Austin squeaked as his eyes watered from the pressure on his throat. "I was kidnapped! Those zombie-people dragged me here while I was... uh... distracted in the forest! Please, don't kill me, Ayako-tan!"

"If you were kidnapped, why are you alive? Why hasn't the resident in the lab turned you into one of those mindless things?"

"F-From what I know, those things only kidnap men while they kill women. They kidnap men so that they can bring them back here for the cultist to experiment on! And I'm only alive because I begged and pleaded like a bitch! Please! I don't know much else! I was only here for a day!"

Right as Ayako opened her mouth to ask him to explain further, she was interrupted by a buzzing sound from a brass horn mounted on the wall.

BZZZ

[Austin,] a distorted voice echoed through the intercom. [I have finished my business with the village guests. Come to the laboratory entrance and escort them out immediately. Do not keep me waiting.]

The intercom clicked off.

Ayako’s gaze turned lethal as she pressed the blade harder, drawing a thin, bright line of blood on Austin’s neck. "Escorting guests? Sabotaging from the inside? Your story has more holes than those rotting corpses outside."

"I swear! I have to play along or he’ll kill me! I’m just a student! I’m not a bad guy! And now that you’re here, you’ll save me, right?! Please don’t kill me! I have so much to live fooooorrrr!"

Ayako stared at him for a long, agonising minute. Finally, she sheathed her sword.

"Fine. It will be far more interesting to let you live for now. If you are not a cultist, you will lead me to the heart of this foul nest. And if you have lied to me..." She smiled with a beautiful yet terrifying expression. "I will kill you then and there. I’ll be watching."

"W-Watching from where?"

"Do not worry about that," she said. In a sudden swirl of sakura petals, she vanished into thin air. But not before leaving one last echoing message.

"And please. Do not call me Ayako-tan ever again."

Austin stood alone in the foyer, his heart finally slowing down. He reached up to touch the small cut on his throat. Then, his fearful expression melted away. His hand covered his mouth as a deep, twisted smile spread across his face.

’She’s just as crazy as she was in the game. Perfect. Now that she’s here, she’ll be the one to do the heavy lifting. While she’s busy killing the boss, I’ll be able to steal the ’Cheat’ I came here for. Mwahaha!’

.....

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of the village where the smell of ripening wheat was a constant, a concealed iron grate creaked open.

Kurt climbed out first, offering a hand to Isabel, who was followed closely by a cloaked and limping Gracie. They stood in the middle of a vast, golden field with the village houses visible in the distance.

"What's the play, Kurt?" Gracie asked. Her face was pale, but the fury in her eyes was burning hot. "I know you said not to but rather we waste the whole village. If what you said about Liam is right, they're all in on it."

"Hmm, yes. If they were helping the Elder in kidnapping innocent people, then yes. They're guilty. We can't leave a nest of cultist sympathizers behind us."

"But Master. There are children in this village. Innocent families who might just be afraid and were forced to help. We can't just... kill everyone. That's irresponsible. It's murder."

Gracie let out a harsh, dry laugh. "Who cares? The kids can just become orphans. Better than growing up to be centipede-food."

"Gracie, that's horrible!" Isabel snapped. "How could you say–!"

"Shh! Quiet," Kurt hissed and readied his knife. "Someone's coming."

The rustling of the wheat was slow. Gracie's hand went to a piece of metal she hid, her muscles tensing to lunge.

"Wait!" Isabel cried as she grabbed Gracie's shoulder to hold her back.

Gracie winced a sharp hiss of pain as her fresh wounds protested the movement.

A figure emerged from the tall crop. It wasn't a warrior or a monster. It was an old woman. Her back had been bent by years of labor and her face a map of deep wrinkles. She saw the three of them and froze. Her eyes went wide, and a moment later, they filled with shimmering tears.

She collapsed to her knees in the dirt. "Oh, thank the heavens... you're alive. You're all alive."

Isabel immediately rushed forward, kneeling in the dirt to comfort the woman. "It's alright, ma'am. We're safe. Please, don't cry."

Kurt stepped closer and narrowed his eye. "Who are you?"

"I am Martha," the woman sobbed, wiping her eyes with a tattered sleeve. "This is my wheat field... and Liam... Liam was my son."

Kurt and Isabel shared a grim look at this.

"I saw them," Martha's voice trembled. "I saw the Elder and those brutes banging on his door. When they came out without him... I knew. I went inside after they left. I saw what they did to my boy."

She looked up at all three of them with teary eyes. "But seeing you here... knowing he saved you... it means he didn't give up. My Liam died a good man."

Gracie stayed back with cold eyes. "How do we know she isn't a lure? Why shouldn't we kill her right now and move on?"

"Gracie, stop it!" Isabel yelled, her face red with anger.

"Isabel, stand down. You're causing a ruckus." Kurt said, though his gaze remained on the old woman. "Martha... is it true? Is the Elder the one forcing everyone to do this?"

"Y-Yes. He has poisoned this village. He convinced the greedy ones with promises of power and 'eternal life.' The rest of us... we are just afraid. He is a monster."

"He’s a ’monster’. Liam said the same thing," Kurt noted. "Is it just him? Or are there others as special as he is?"

"Only the Elder... The others are just men and women with clubs and pitchforks."

Kurt rubbed his chin, a plan forming in the dark recesses of his mind. "Martha, if you want to avenge your son, I need your help. Can you lure the Elder here alone? Into the wheat field, away from the village?"

Martha looked at him, then at Gracie. "But... you are hurt. And the girl... she can barely stand. The Elder is strong, young man. Stronger than any human."

Isabel placed a reassuring hand on the woman’s shoulder. "Please, Martha. Trust us. We aren’t just here to save ourselves. We’re going to end this nightmare for everyone. For Liam."

Martha looked at Isabel’s kind face, then back toward the village where her son’s body lay cold. She slowly stood up as her hands shook into clenching fists.

"I will do it. I will bring the devil to your doorstep."