THORNS 157

Chapter 157 - Tragedy In The Quiet Village

Martha made her way back toward the village entrance where the Elder was sitting on a wooden chair, waiting.

Every step she took felt like she was treading on broken glass. How couldn't it? She was nervous. She was about to speak with the man who killed her only son in cold blood.

Her heart was filled with grief and fury, but she would not cry. She kept her head low and her movements relatively quick as she made her way to him.

When he was in sight, she noticed he looked remarkably serene, his hands resting on his knees as he watched the dirt road. When he spotted Martha, he offered a smile that was neighbourly-warm and yet utterly chilling.

"Martha," he greeted her. "A tragic day, isn't it? I trust you've found some peace in your prayers."

Martha felt a scream clawing at the back of her throat. This man who had butchered her son not even thirty minutes ago, now he spoke to her as if they were discussing the weather over tea.

She forced her hands to stop shaking by clutching her shawl tightly.

"Elder," her voice sounded raspy when she spoke.

The Elder's smile didn't falter, but his eyes sharpened. "About Liam... it was a necessary mercy, Martha. He had grown sick. Not in the body, perhaps, but in the mind. He was becoming a danger to the cause. I hope you can find it in your heart to understand. It was for the good of the village."

"I... I understand, Elder. I only wish to serve. Which is why I came to you."

"Oh? How can I help you?"

"While I was tending the wheat... I heard things," she said, leaning in as if sharing a dangerous secret. "I would have called for the men, but they are all away on the road. I didn't know who else to turn to."

The Elder leaned slightly forward as his interest piqued. "What kind of noises? Perhaps you're just overwrought from the excitement, Martha. Old ears can play tricks. Trust me. I would know, haha."

"T-They weren't tricks. It sounded close. Like whispers. Not voices I recognised. Whispers coming from the center of the stalks, near the old irrigation ditch."

"Are you sure that it isn't the children playing?"

"No. I've long forbidden them from playing in the crops. Please Elder, I'm worried."

"... I see. Well then," the Elder slowly got up with the support of his cane. "Lead the way."

"T-Thank you, Elder!"

They walked together in silence. Martha matched the Elder's slow pace with an exaggerated patience that made her skin crawl.

When they reached the clearing where Kurt, Isabel, and Gracie had been hiding, the space was empty. The Elder stopped and huffed as he scanned the area.

There were no suspicious persons. Instead, three small red foxes were huddled together, gnawing on a discarded crust of bread. At the sight of the Elder, they yipped and vanished into the wheat with a flash of orange fur.

"Foxes, Martha? You brought me out here for–"

He turned to look at her, but the space where the old woman had been standing was vacant. Martha had vanished into the stalks as if she had never been there at all.

The Elder froze as the wind died down. The only sound was the dry hiss of wheat brushing against wheat.

That was all, until–

SNIKT!

Before he could even process the shift in the air, a black blade whistled through the air. It was a stroke of deadly precision. The Elder's head was lobbed from his shoulders. A look of mild surprise still etched onto his wrinkled face as it tumbled into the dirt.

After Kurt, Isabel and Gracie followed, emerging from their cover.

Ptooey Gracie spat. "Burn in hell, you old fucking freak."

"Is... is it over? Is he dead?" Isabel asked.

"Maybe. Or maybe not. I'm guessing not." Gracie answered. "If he's anything like the monsters I fought then he'll probably wake up as a monster any second now."

Kurt didn't need to be told twice. He stepped over the corpse and with four sickeningly clean strikes, he dismembered the Elder's limbs from his body.

For good measure, he drove the point of his sword straight through the ribcage, pinning the torso to the earth through the heart.

He yanked the blade free and swung it in a wide arc to clear the blood. To his disgust, the spray wasn't red; it was a viscous green, smelling of stagnant water and rot.

"Isabel," Kurt looked at her. "Bury him far and deep."

Isabel nodded and slammed her palms into the dirt.

Thick, thorny vines erupted from the soil, wrapping around each limb and the torso like hungry serpents. They dragged the pieces of the Elder deep into the earth, burying them in separate pits, yards apart.

"""..."""

For a moment, there was silence. Isabel let out a breath of relief. "It didn't revive. We did it."

"Hm! Wait, someone's coming." Kurt warned, readying his blade again.

Martha emerged from the wheat; her face streaked with tears. "Is it... is it done?"

"Martha, what are you doing here?" Kurt asked as he drew his sword back. "Didn't we tell you to wait somewhere safe? It's dangerous here."

"But... I heard you. I heard you calling to me. You told me to come out... telling me that it was finished."

Kurt's blood ran cold. "Martha, run! NOW!"

The old woman flinched, turning to look back toward the village, but the ground beneath her feet suddenly didn't exist.

With a muffled scream, the earth collapsed into a perfect, circular hole, swallowing Martha whole.

"NO!"

"Isabel, wait–!" Kurt caught her by the waist just as she lunged towards the hole, his strength the only thing keeping her from falling in after her. "Don't! She's gone! Look!"

The hole began to ripple and swirl.

Then, the entire wheat field began to tremble and buckle as if something massive was breathing beneath the soil. It was a coordinated collapse.

"Dammit! Isabel, run!" Kurt roared.

He scooped the injured Gracie up over his shoulder and grabbed Isabel by the arm, dragging them toward the village road.

As they burst out of the wheat field, the scene that met them was a living nightmare. The village square was a sea of screaming people. But they weren't running from the earthquake – they were being harvested. The ground beneath the cottages, the tavern, and the well was all sinking.

Kurt watched in frozen horror as a mother, clutching her screaming child, was pulled waist-deep into the dirt in a matter of seconds. The child reached out a tiny hand before both were sucked down into the darkness with a wet, slurping sound.

Isabel collapsed to her knees, sobbing as she watched a group of children disappear into the chasm. "Why?! Why is this happening?!"

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the earthquake stopped. The village was a ghost town of empty clothes and half-sunken ruins. The silence that followed was heavier than the noise.

Then came the screech.

SKREEEEE!!!

It was a high-pitched, metallic grinding that tore through the air, vibrating in their very bones.

BOOM!

The ground in the center of the village square exploded upward in a fountain of stone and dirt.

Rising from the depths was a monster that defied logic. It was a centipede monster, and its size was massive – standing at ten stories high. Hundreds of serrated legs churned the air, and its head was a nightmare of clicking mandibles and a dozen milky, lidless eyes.

Gracie, perched on Kurt’s shoulder, let out a shaky breath. "Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me. This thing makes the ones in the forest look like house pets."

The monster reared up, its shadow looming over them, and let out another bone-shattering–

SKREEEEEE!!!

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Deep in the humid, rotting heart of the swamp, the atmosphere shifted.

The wooden house, normally a hive of low moans and aimless shuffling, suddenly went dead silent.

The dozens of infected people wandering the clearing stopped in their tracks. As if pulled by a single invisible string, they all turned their heads in unison toward the direction of the village.

Their bloodshot eyes glowed with a faint, sickly green light.

Then, they began to scream. A collective screech that echoed through the gnarled trees. Without a word of command, the entire horde turned and began to run. They sprinted on all fours with an animalistic, terrifying speed. Their limbs cracked as they pushed themselves toward the village.

Beneath them, the swamp mud began to churn as the rest of the centipede monsters slithered out from the dark. Their segmented bodies rippled as they dived into the earth and surged out again like dolphins in a black ocean.

The hive had been summoned. Every infected soul and every hatched horror was converging on a single point: the three survivors standing in the ruins of a now destroyed village.

Chapter 158 - Mission Complete

- Right before the tragedy -

Deep within the subterranean belly of the wooden house, the cultist – whose features were obscured by a deep, tattered hood – was scribbling feverishly on a clipboard.

His eyes darted from the piece of paper, then up the centerpiece of the room: a vertical glass cylinder filled with bubbling, bioluminescent fluid. Inside the cylinder a body floated, tethered together by dozens of translucent tubes.

Austin’s boots clicked on the stone stairs as he descended from the upper floor. "I’ve seen the villagers off," he announced, his voice echoing in the cramped space. "They’re heading back to the village to await further instructions."

"Hm, yes. Good work, Brother," the cultist murmured without looking up. "My work requires order. Your assistance has been invaluable."

Austin leaned against a workbench, keenly fixing his gaze toward the body in the tube. "Uh-huh. No problem at all, ’Brother’."

A moment passed in silence, broken only by the hum of the life-support machinery. The cultist paused his scratching and turned only his head toward Austin. "Is there something else? Your task is complete for now. I have no need for your assistance at the moment."

"O-Oh, uhm! Just curious," Austin said in a deceptively light tone as he eyed the pulsing gem embedded in the floating body’s forehead.

"Say, I never got around to asking, but what happened to your first assistant? The guy with the messy hair and creepy laugh? It’s been a day since he was supposed to come back with Gregory."

"Gregory?"

"I-I mean, Gary, hahaha..."

The cultist certainly wasn’t laughing, but he chose to ignore this and went back to his notes. "He is dead."

"What? Dead? Who? Gary? Just like that?"

"No, not Brother Gary... Or perhaps he is, who knows. I’m talking about my previous assistant. Shortly after your ’misfortune’ brought you here and you claimed to be a friend of Brother Gary, I sent my assistant to retrieve him. He never returned. I tracked his signature to the swamp’s edge this morning and found his skull was practically caved in..."

The cultist paused as a dry chuckle escaped him. "But it matters not. You are proving to be a much more capable replacement. More... observant."

’Caved in with a rock?Where the hell did Gary go? Did that idiot really just abandon me because I didn’t want him watching me pee? No, wait... a rock? That doesn’t sound like Gary’s doing.’’

Suddenly, the laboratory was filled with the sound of glass vibrating. The body in the tube began to jerk violently as its limbs twitched in an unnatural spasm. The bioluminescent fluid turned a murky, angry red.

"What’s happening?!" the cultist panicked, dropping his clipboard. He rushed to the glass and pressed his hands against the surface as if trying to calm the chaos within.

"It’s too early! The synchronization isn’t complete!"

From the floor above, a chorus of high-pitched, metallic screeches tore through the air, followed by the thunderous sound of hundreds of feet – both human and insectoid – sprinting away from the house.

"Nononono! This cannot be happening!"

He scrambled toward the stairs and raced to the upper level to see what was happening. Austin stood in the lab, his heart hammering, but he didn't follow. He stayed behind as his eyes locked on the jerking body in the tube.

The cultist burst through the front door of the house, his eyes widening as he saw the silhouettes of his experiments and the massive centipede guardians vanishing into the fog of the swamp, all heading toward the village with a single-minded purpose.

"Don't tell me... has the Elder died? No! He should be the closest thing to immortal! Were my calculations perhaps off? No! Never!" The cultist started to panic as his mind raced for answers.

"Dammit! I can't be thinking of this right now. First things first. Austin! Get the stabilizers! We need to move the–"

"He's a bit busy at the moment," a melodic voice interrupted from the porch.

The cultist whipped his head around and saw swirling pink sakura petals dancing in the humid swamp air, coalescing into the elegant, lethal form of Izumi Ayako.

"You," the Cultist gasped in a voice full of venomous recognition. "The Izumi's prodigy. What are you doing here? Don't you have some meaningless tournament to prepare for in the capital?"

Ayako offered him a serene, yet predatory, smile. "Does this not count as preparation? I have been scouting your little nest for the last few minutes. You see, I was worried you might have hidden reinforcements, but it seems your pets have all decided to take a sudden trip to the village. How fortunate for me."

She took a slow step forward, still smiling. "You are alone. You are outnumbered by the sins you have committed. If you would kindly be cooperative, I might allow you to keep your head for the King’s interrogators."

"NO! This was not part of my plan! I can’t let you ruin all I’ve worked for!" the cultist screamed and bolted back into the house, diving down the stairs toward his laboratory.

"Chasing a rat into its hole... how nostalgic." She began to walk after him at a leisurely and terrifying pace.

Below, in the lab, the situation had descended into chaos. Austin had grabbed an iron wrench and shattered the glass of the test tube. The green fluid rushed out, drenching the floor in a sticky, glowing slime. The body of the woman slumped forward into his arms, cold and limp.

Austin was frantically digging his fingers into the soft, greyish flesh of the woman’s forehead, where a pulsating, emerald crystal was embedded deep into the bone.

"Come on... come on, you beautiful little cheat code..."

"TRAITOR!"

The Cultist screamed as he flew down the stairs his face contorted in a mask of pure, unadulterated madness. "What are you doing!? That is decades of work! You are ruining everything!"

"Fuck you and your work, bitch!"

"AUSTIN!"

"Ahhh! Ayako-tan, help!"

The Cultist lunged, his fingers curved into claws, but a sudden flash of silver light intervened. Ayako appeared between them. She didn't draw her blade. Instead, she merely touched the cold steel of the hilt to the cultist's forehead.

In a heartbeat, a layer of thick, crystalline ice erupted from the point of contact. It raced over the cultist's body, encasing his robes, his screaming face, and his outstretched hands in a solid, unbreakable block of blue ice. He stood there, a frozen statue of rage, not moving an inch.

Austin collapsed onto his butt, gasping for air, as he looked at the frozen man. "Oh... oh man. That was close. Thank you. Thank you so much."

Ayako turned her gaze toward him with eyes shimmering as cold as the ice she had just conjured. She looked at the body on the floor, then back at him.

"And what exactly were you doing to that corpse, Austin?"

Austin's brain went into overdrive. He forced a somber, heroic expression onto his face. "This... this was my grand plan. After staying with him and watching him, I learned that this body is the source of the infection. I saw an opening when he ran upstairs and decided to destroy it. It was a mercy, wouldn't you say! I mean, she was on life support while being used like a battery."

Ayako scrutinised him for a long second. Then, she gave a slow, measured nod. "A bold move for a weak student such as yourself. But... Did I not tell you to call me by that name again. I believe it's time I teach you a lesson in respect."

Austin immediately hit the floor. He performed a perfect, professional dogeza – forehead pressed to the stone and hands flat.

"I am so sorry, Lady Izumi! Please forgive my insolence! I was under extreme duress! I am but a lowly student, unworthy of even speaking your name! Let alone giving you a cringy one such as that!"

"... Oh my. Your dogeza is flawless," she remarked, sounding genuinely impressed. "Your center of gravity is perfect. Fine. I shall overlook it this once. But not again."

"THANK YOU VERY MUCH! ARIGATO!"

She walked past him as her attention turned to the corpse. She knelt beside it, brushing the wet hair away from the woman's face. "Who is she? To be kept like this... she must have been someone important."

"That...uhm... that is the body of the previous Saintess."

"..... What?" Ayako recoiled slightly. "The previous Saintess? From the Holy Land of Eden? How? How does the cult have her body? This is a heresy beyond measure."

She turned back to the body and placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. "To be used as a vessel for such filth... I am truly sorry. However, please know that it is all over now."

She released a gentle pulse of mana, encasing the Saintess's body in a layer of clear, protective ice, shaped like a coffin.

"The King and the current Saintess will find this 'present' most enlightening," Ayako murmured as her political mind churned. "This will solidify the alliance between Myria, Eldoria, and Eden like nothing else... Wait. Let's slow down. Those infected and monsters all ran in the direction of the village. I must head back and assist them."

She then stood up and turned to Austin. "Stay here and guard this lab. These records and the frozen cultist are vital evidence. Do not let anything happen to them. I know your name, and I know your Academy. If so much as a scrap of paper is missing when the Royal Knights arrive... you will–"

"You can count on me, Lady Izumi! I won't move an inch!" Austin did another perfect dogeza.

"... Good."

With a whisper of wind and a swirl of pink, Ayako was gone.

Austin waited. He stayed in the dogeza position for a full sixty seconds, listening to the silence. Then, he slowly sat up. A slow, triumphant grin spread across his face.

"Evidence? Knights?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out the pulsing, diamond-shaped emerald gem he had successfully pried loose right when Ayako arrived to save him. "I don’t give a damn about politics."

He held the gem up to the light as it glowed with a divine hue.

"EX Healing... the ultimate cheat skill. With this, I’m basically immortal. Mwahahaha!"

Without a second thought, he shoved the gem into his mouth and swallowed it whole. As it slid down his throat, a surge of agonizing, radiant warmth exploded in his chest, and for a moment, his entire body glowed with a blinding, holy light.

"Hahahaaaa.... Mission complete."