THORNS 159

Chapter 159 - Suicidal Plan

SCREEEECH!!!

Nightmare fuel.

That is the only way to describe this giant monster as it loomed over the entirety of the destroyed village.

The segments of its body ground against one another with the sound of tectonic plates shifting. It reared up, covering out the afternoon sun, and unleashed an ear-piercing screech that shattered the remaining windows of whatever houses that still stood.

Then, its many eyes fixed on Isabel.

The maid stood paralyzed. Her mind was fractured; she couldn't stop seeing the faces of the children as the earth swallowed them whole. The injustice of it, the sheer, senseless horror of an entire village being harvested like wheat, had locked her joints.

SCREEEECH!!!

The monster lunged and launched itself like a massive, chitinous spear.

"Isabel, move!" Kurt roared.

He didn't wait for her to react. He sprinted and tackled her just as the monster's mandibles snapped shut on the air where she had been a millisecond before and tumbled across the dirt as the beast collided with a nearby house.

BOOOM!

The structure exploded into splinters and stone dust. Without losing momentum, the centipede dived, its massive head boring into the foundation and vanished underground.

The ground began to thrum in a low-frequency vibration that rattled Kurt's teeth.

"Gracie!" Kurt yelled, feeling her body shift on his back. "How did you kill the ones in the forest? Give me a weakness, a soft spot, anything!"

"Ha, are you kidding me!? Firstly, those were the size of dogs compared to this fucking mountain! And secondly... I just hit them really, really hard until they stopped moving!"

"Wow! Fantastic! How incredibly helpful! Truly, a tactical genius!"

"You're welcome, cyclops!"

Tingle

Kurt's body screamed at him as he felt death approaching from directly below.

"Isabel, get back!"

"Y-Yes, Master!"

As she scrambled away, Kurt crouched low as he channeled mana into his quads and calves. Then, he shot up high in the sky.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" Gracie screamed, her hair whipping wildly as they soared upward.

Below them, the earth erupted. The centipede burst from the ground like a volcanic eruption, rising straight for them in the mid-air.

Gracie began to thrash on his back as panic began settling in. "I didn't sign up for this! I'm not dying as a backpack!"

"Just shut up and watch!"

Kurt drew his black blade with his free hand. He flooded the steel with a shimmering blue coat of mana that made the blade hum with a predatory hunger.

"What? Is that... mana coating?" Gracie's eyes widened.

Kurt brought the blade down to block – or strike – the monster's ascending strike. But as the massive head neared, he realised his error. The sheer mass of the beast was far too great to parry. It wasn't just going to bite him; it was going to vacuum them both up.

"Shit! Gracie! Push me away! Now!"

Understanding his intent, Gracie planted her bare feet against his lower back and shoved with a desperate, explosive kick. The momentum sent Kurt spinning through the air to the left, while Gracie was propelled to the right.

The monster's head sailed just past them. Kurt slammed into a pile of rubble from a collapsed tavern, the wind knocked out of him, and Gracie landed in a massive hay pile near the stables, disappearing into the straw with a muffled curse under her breath.

"Master Rossana!" Isabel cried, rushing toward the rubble and began tossing aside heavy beams of wood.

The monster landed back on the ground with the force of a meteor, causing a tremor so violent it knocked Isabel off her feet. It turned and fixed its gaze on the hay pile, hissing as its many legs scuttled. It was preparing to finish off the easier target.

Gracie crawled out of the hay, her shoulder bleeding again, looking up at the approaching wall of death. "Oh fuck, you've got to be kidding me..."

"GRACIE!" Isabel screamed. She then turned back to Kurt, looking for help, but he wasn't moving.

He managed to sit up, but his blade was limp in his hand. He was staring at the destruction – the sunken holes where the villagers had been, the blood-slicked wheat and the monstrosity that defied every law of nature.

"Master! Snap out of it! We have to help her!"

Isabel's voice reached him, but it sounded like she was underwater. Because of Kurt's mind, the walls were closing in.

'Dammit! I thought I had this.I lived a life of absolute cruelty and horror – hell I revelled in it. I saw the syndicate, the torture chambers, the back-alley butcheries. I came to this 'world' and fought the Cult, saw their twisted experiments, I saw the goblins, the women and the pain they've endured... I thought I was hardened. But this...'

This was a scale of horror he couldn't process.

An entire community erased in minutes by the very ground they walked on. The sheer helplessness of the villagers, the way the earth had swallowed the children.

There had to have been better ways to handle the Elder. It felt like a personal failure.

His "cheat" abilities, his sword, his mana... What good were they against this massive being that simply opened its mouth and ate you? Kurt was spiraling.

"Fuck..ou! I'm no..dyi..until I..ind Austin!"

SCEEEEECH!!!

BOOOM!

In the distance, Gracie dived out of the way as the monster's head smashed into a house, pulverizing the stone. She was losing steam. Isabel was crying, her voice cracking as she begged Kurt to wake up, but he remained a statue of despair.

"GAAH–!"

BOOM!

Gracie was sent flying and crashing into a stone house as the centipede monster knocked her off her feet.

It then turned its massive head toward the two people standing in the open. It coiled its body, preparing for a final, crushing charge.

Isabel saw death approaching. She saw Kurt's glazed eye and realised he wasn't coming back. However, she didn't run. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling his head into her chest, closing her eyes to shield him – even if it was a futile gesture against a creature that size.

The monster let out a final, triumphant screech and lunged.

Suddenly, the world slowed.

The sound of the screech stretched into a low, droning hum. The debris falling from the sky stopped mid-air. Isabel's tears stayed frozen on her cheeks. The monster's open maw, dripping with green venom, was nearly inches away, frozen like a statue in a museum.

Tap

Kurt felt a light weight perch itself on his shoulder.

He turned his head slowly, his mind still sluggish. There, licking its paw was a small, pristine white cat.

"Ki..tty?"

Thinking perhaps he had finally lost his mind, he reached up with a finger intending to pet the small creature. The cat's ears flattened and with a lightning-fast motion, it swatted his hand away, its claws leaving three distinct red welts on Kurt's finger.

"Ow! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

"What the hell is wrong with me???" Kitty snapped back.

The voice was smooth like a proper Englishman, cultured, and currently very annoyed. "You're the one standing there like a decorative garden gnome while a World Ender tries to eat you. Are you suicidal, or just exceptionally stupid? Goddess above, where's Emelie when you need her?"

Kurt stared, his jaw dropping. "You're... you're talking. A cat is talking to me. Okay. I'm dead. And this is the afterlife. Got it."

"So, suicidal, huh?" the cat sighed, shaking its head.

"I'm not!" Kurt yelled, the absurdity of the situation finally jarring him out of his spiral. "I'm just... I'm overwhelmed by everything that's happening! And how the hell are you talking? You've been following me all this time and you never said a word!"

"There was never a need. But listen, in case you forgot, time hasn't actually stopped. It just slowed your perception down to the limits of your soul's processing power. If you don't move in the next ten seconds, that World Ender is going to finish its last bite."

Kurt looked at the monster. It was moving, albeit imperceptibly slow, and its mandibles trembled as they closed in.

With the fog in his mind now cleared and the sheer weirdness of a talking cat giving him a handhold to pull himself out of the pit, he grabbed Isabel, jumped, and rolled to the side.

Time resumed with a violent CRACK.

SCREEEEEECH!!!

BOOOM!

The monster’s head slammed into the dirt where they had been standing, the impact sending a spray of earth at least fifty feet into the air.

Isabel gasped, looking up to see Kurt standing over her, his eye sharp and glowing with a dangerous, blue light.

"Master! You’re back!"

The centipede turned around and prepared for another lunge.

"W-What are we going to do?" Isabel asked, clutching his shirt.

"I... might have a plan."

Isabel looked up and saw the white cat. Her jaw dropped. "Where did that come from?!"

Kitty raised a paw and gave a tiny, innocent wave. "Hi."

"It... it talked."

SCREEEEEECH!!!

"Focus, Isabel!" Kurt said as the monster charged again.

"But what's your plan?!"

Kurt didn't move. He stood his ground, spreading his arms wide as if welcoming the monster's maw. "This!"

"MASTER, NO!" Isabel shrieked, throwing herself in front of him again, shielding him with her body as the monster's mouth opened wide enough to encompass them both.

Time stopped again.

"You really are suicidal," Kitty sighed from his shoulder.

"I told you, I'm not."

In this slowed-down world, Kurt moved with agonizing precision. He tightened his grip on Isabel, ensuring she was tucked safely under his arm, and raised his mana coated black blade.

He didn't just swing once. He moved like a ghost, his blade flickering a dozen times in the span of a single, slowed down heartbeat. He carved deep wounds into the monster's soft under-palate and sliced through the clusters of eyes on the left side of its head.

Then, he leapt backward, clearing the splash zone.

Time resumed.

The monster didn't finish its lunge. Instead, it let out a sound like a steam engine exploding. Green, venomous blood sprayed from a dozen deep wounds, drenching the area.

It screeched in genuine agony as its massive body coiled and began thrashing when it crashed into the ground, writhing like a worm on a hook. The tremors were so violent they threatened to knock down the remaining standing buildings.

Isabel looked up from Kurt's chest, her eyes wide with bewilderment. One second they were about to be eaten – the next, the monster was fifty feet away, bleeding and screaming in pain.

"How... how did you...?"

Kurt looked at the blade in his hand, then at the cat on his shoulder. He felt a rush of adrenaline that drowned out the last of his fear.

"Hahaha, maybe this isn't so impossible after all," he said as his smile widened. "Now, let's finish this bug."

Chapter 160 - Suicidal Attack

"Isabel, I need you to check on Gracie. Make sure she's still breathing."

Isabel didn't move immediately. Her tear-streaked face was pale, and her fingers knotted into the fabric of her apron. "But Master... taking on that thing alone? It's too big. You can't possibly survive without backup!"

"Just trust me. Let me handle this. I even got a consultant on my side, isn't that right, Kitty?" Kurt glanced up at his shoulder where the white cat sat watching the beast with narrowed, glowing blue eyes.

Meow

The furball didn't answer back and began to enthusiastically lick its paw as if it had no part in the conversation.

"Really?" Kut stared blankly at him.

SCREEEECH!!!

In the distance, the giant centipede monster was already forcing its massive body back up from the crater. The deep slashes Kurt had delivered were smoking with green, acidic vital fluid, and its massive mandibles clicked together in a frenzy of pure, unadulterated malice.

"Isabel! Move! Now!"

Isabel hesitated for a fraction of a second, but the authority in Kurt's voice left no argument. With a reluctant nod, she hurried away through the debris, her eyes scanning ahead for the ruined house that Gracie crashed into.

Left alone in the center of the shattered village square, Kurt took a deep breath, focused himself and looked ahead.

SCREEEECH!!!

BOOM!

The monster had spotted him. With an explosive burst of movement, it charged with a speed that was insane for an entity of its size. The ground rolled beneath Kurt's boots with tremors that threatened to throw him off balance.

He didn't run. Instead, he gripped the hilt of his black blade with one hand and focused from deep within, forcing the translucent blue mana up through his arm and coating the steel until it hummed like a live wire.

Before taking off, he did a few quick skipping motions in place to shake off any nervous tension and ready himself.

"Alright... let's get it, let's go!" Once he was ready, he burst directly toward the oncoming mountain of armor.

The monster saw the tiny insect running to meet its doom. It opened its massive maw and hissed, a great glob of venomous green spit erupting from its throat like a cannonball.

Kurt didn't turn nor did he plan a detour. He kept his eyes locked on the target, praying to whatever universal logic was pulling the strings that his plan would work.

As the giant ball of acid closed the distance, every nerve in his body began to tingle with a violent buzz. His instincts screamed at him to throw himself into the dirt. To dodge or move because death was coming and it was coming fast.

He ignored this feeling and even pushed more mana into his legs, accelerating straight into the eye of the storm.

Then, the world stood still.

The roaring wind fell silent. The green sphere of acid froze three feet from his face and the debris thrown up by the monster's charge remained suspended in mid-air.

Kurt, however, was still moving.

He didn't waste this chance. He side-stepped the frozen ball of poison, skidding his boots slightly on the motionless dirt, and launched himself off a suspended chunk of masonry. He soared toward the monster's face.

The moment he cleared the immediate trajectory of the danger, the world snapped back to life and the venom ball splattered harmlessly behind him, dissolving the cobblestones into a hissing pit of white smoke.

The monster's head slammed forward as its mandibles clicked on empty air. Confusion struck its freakish twelve milky eyes as it tried to locate the target that had just disappeared.

"Up here, you overgrown maggot!"

The monster looked up just in time to see Kurt descending from the sky with his mana-coated blade held high. With a brutal, two-handed downward stroke, he drove the blade straight into the center of the beast's eye.

SCREEEECH!!!

A wet, sickening explosion of green fluid erupted from the socket. The monster let out a shriek so loud it felt like a physical blow against Kurt's chest. It began to thrash frantically, shaking its massive head from side to side, spinning its body in a chaotic dance of agony to rid itself of the parasite on its face.

Kurt hung on for dear life, his fingers locked around the hilt of his sword as he dangled in the air. Kitty as well, hung onto the fabric of his shirt as he dangled with him.

Realising it couldn't shake him, the creature reared up and then drove its head straight down toward the ground, intending to smash Kurt into a bloody paste.

Tingle

"Move, you suicidal idiot! It's going to squash us!" Kitty screamed from his shoulder, digging its claws deeper into Kurt's shirt and skin.

"Don't worry about it!" Kurt shouted back through the rushing wind.

The ground rushed up.

Ten feet.

Five feet.

Inches.

Then, the world froze again.

The giant head was a hair's breadth from the earth with the pressure of its descent already cracking the stones below. Kurt pulled out his sword, twisted his body in mid-air, and dropped safely into the dirt beside the frozen snout.

Without pausing, he channeled another burst of mana into his thighs and performed an enhanced jump, landing squarely on the back of the monster's neck, preparing his position.

Time resumed and the monster's head slammed into the ground with the force of a meteor. A massive explosion of dirt, stone erupted outward, carving a giant crater into the center of the village.

The shockwave rattled Kurt and Kitty, but because he was on top of the monster rather than beneath it, he survived the impact.

While its head was temporarily pinned by its own momentum in the dirt, Kurt used this opportunity. He gripped his mana coated blade tightly and began to stab, slice, and pierce the thick armor plating at the base of its skull over and over again.

CRACK!

With a final, desperate heave, a large chunk of the monster's exoskeleton broke away, exposing the pale, pink, pulsating muscle beneath.

"GOTCHA!" Kurt roared as savage abandon took over and he began to hack into the exposed meat.

SCREEEECH!!!

The monster let out a sound of pure torment and straightened its massive body straight up into the air like a pillar. The sudden vertical shift pulled Kurt off his feet. He was left hanging onto the hilt of his sword with one hand, his body dangling high in the air again as the beast swayed.

"Play stupid games... win stupid prizes!" With his free hand, he reached into his belt and pulled out his brass-knuckle switchblade.

He clicked the mechanism, wrapped the small blade in a dense layer of blue mana, and began to viciously stab at the exposed flesh within his reach, digging his fingers into the wounds to maintain his grip.

SCREEEECH!!!

"Yeah! Get him, Kurt! Keep going! Carve the bastard up! I want to hear him scream!" Kitty's little white face was contorted into an expression of manic glee as it cheered from his shoulder.

SCREEEECH!!!

The monster had had enough. It gathered its strength, curled its body, and dove straight back down, its mandibles churning as it began to enter the underground earth to bury its problems.

Because Kurt wasn't in immediate danger of being crushed by an external object, time didn't slow. He stayed on.

The world went dark as the monster plowed into the dirt. Kurt closed his eyes and mouth tight, enduring the brutal, abrasive force of stones, roots, and soil scraping against him as he hung on for dear life beneath the earth. The friction tore at his clothes and bruised his ribs, but his grip remained firm.

Seconds later, the monster burst back through the surface, launching itself high into the sky like a dolphin breaching the ocean.

The air cleared and Kurt opened his eye, spitting out a mouthful of dirt. He immediately resumed his assault, driving his blades into the exposed flesh over and over.

But the beast wasn't done. It tilted its head and dove back into the earth again.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" Kurt grunted, bracing himself as the darkness swallowed them once more.

Another agonizing ride through the subterranean dark followed with the pressure nearly tearing him from the hilt.

When it emerged a second time, it soared incredibly high, losing its momentum at the peak of its arc. Kurt looked down and saw that the beast was tilting backward. If it landed like this, he would be the tiny cushion for this massive insect.

His body flared with the oncoming danger and once he was close enough to the ground, the world stopped mid-air.

He yanked his blades free, used the monster's own frozen body as a launching pad, and jumped as far as his legs could carry him, clearing the falling trajectory entirely.

He hit the ground running as time resumed behind him with a thunderous explosion. The monster crashed on its back, creating a massive crater of dust and stone debris.

Kurt tried to keep his stride, but his legs suddenly felt like jelly. He stumbled, nearly tripping over his own boots. A sharp throbbing started pounding at the sides of his head, and a warm, thick crimson liquid began to drip rapidly from his nose, splattering onto his chin.

"What... What the hell is happening to me?" He gasped, wiping the blood away with the back of his hand.

"What did you think was going to happen?" Kitty responded as a matter of fact. "You've been burning through your mana core like dry kindling. Not just for the blade coating, but for stopping time four times in a row. In one day no less? You're redlining. Keep this up and may even flatline."

"Why the hell didn't you say something before?!"

"Some lessons are best learned the hard way."

Tsk "Dammit! I can’t stop now. It’s not dead yet..."

He put his black sword away since his hand was trembling too much for him to hold a proper grip, and instead equipped both of his switchblades, coating them in a thin, conservative layer of mana.

The monster was currently on its back, writhing and trying to flip over. And the exposed opening on its neck was right there.

"Let’s finish this!" Kurt shouted, leaping out from behind the wall.

He sprinted toward the beast’s head and began bashing the ever-living hell out of it.

"Die! Die! Die! Ahahahaha!" A manic, desperate laugh bubbling up in his throat as the adrenaline fought against the exhaustion.

SCREEEECH!!!

"Yeah! Tear it apart, Kurt!" Kitty yelled as its white fur bristled with excitement as the monster screamed in pain.

Kurt raised his blades and just as he was about to leap onto the neck, a sharp, cold tingle flared in his side. Before his sluggish, distracted mind could process the direction, a heavy body slammed into his ribs, tackling him violently out of the way.

"Argh! What the–!"

"Elder! Elder, we’re here!" a man’s voice screamed.

Standing between Kurt and the writhing monster were three men and one woman. They wore the rough clothes of the village, their faces pale and streaked with dirt and tears. They were the ones who had left for the swamp.

"What are you doing?!" Kurt yelled, pushing himself up. "Get away from it! Run!"

The four villagers didn’t listen. They fell to their knees before the thrashing centipede, their eyes glassy, filled with a fanatical, broken light. "For our beliefs and the Brotherhood! We give our flesh to you! Take us, Elder! Use our blood to rise!"

"Are you insane? That’s not the Elder anymore! It’s a mindless monster!"

They didn’t care. They began scrambling toward the giant, clicking mandibles of the beast, offering themselves up like livestock.

"NO–!"

Before they could throw themselves into the abyss of the monster’s mouth, the air around them erupted.

"Master Rossana!"

Suddenly, thick, thorny green roots exploded from the soil beneath the villagers, wrapping around their ankles and chests, pinning them to the earth in an instant. The villagers screamed, struggling against the magical flora.

A shadow fell over them. Gracie appeared from the side of a ruined building, her dark cloak fluttering. Her eyes were pitch-black, devoid of any mercy.

She didn’t say a word.

She raised her hand, a sphere of dense, violet-black magic forming at the palm of her hand, and slammed it into the center of the pinned villagers. The dark energy expanded foggy mist and entered their systems.

They writhed in pain and foamed out the corner of their mouths while their eyes bled tears. After ten agonising seconds, they lay still. Dead from Gracie's dark magic.

Kurt let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, relieved to see Gracie upright. "You're alive. I'm glad."

Gracie didn't answer. She walked toward him, her face dead serious, her dark eyes drilling into his. Kurt felt a sudden, defensive tingle in his chest as her posture shifted. He raised his switchblades slightly, unsure of her intent.

Instead of attacking, Gracie reached deep into the folds of her cloak and pulled out a small, glass vial. Inside, only a few ounces of a bright, shimmering blue liquid sloshed against the sides.

"Is this the 'cure' you were bragging about downstairs? The one from the dead guy?"

"... Yes. That's it." 'What the hell? The feeling of danger has disappeared...' "How did you get that?"

"Apparently, she crashed through Liam's house when the monster hit her." Isabel said, running up to join them. "She found it near his body."

"I see... There's not much left yet, but maybe it'll help us end this–"

Crack! Shatter!

A stone flew through the air with pinpoint accuracy, striking the glass vial directly in Gracie's hand. The glass shattered into a thousand pieces, the precious blue liquid spilling into the dry dirt, disappearing into the dust in a fraction of a second.

It was gone.

Kurt’s head snapped toward the trajectory of the stone. Standing near the remains of the well was another villager – a woman, her face twisted in fanatical hatred. The moment she saw Kurt look at her; she turned and began to run toward the edge of the field.

"YOU BITCH!" Kurt screamed in rage. "I’LL KILL YOU!"

He didn’t hesitate. He pulled back his arm and threw his mana-coated switchblade with everything he had left. The weapon whistled through the air, striking her cleanly, straight through the back of the skull. She collapsed into the dirt, dead before she hit the ground.

Almost immediately after, the earth began to rumble again – not with the localised thuds of the centipede, but with a deep, low vibration that shook the ground in the distance.

Kurt looked at the monster in the crater, expecting it to be the source, but the beast was still writhing from its injuries, incapable of causing this kind of shift.

"M-Master Rossana..." Isabel whispered as her hand trembled when she pointed toward the road leading to the lake. "Look."

When Kurt turned his head, his breath got caught in his throat. "Haha... Great. That’s fantastic."

Emerging from the horizon were shifting shapes. Hundreds of them. The grey-skinned zombies were sprinting on all fours toward the village with animalistic speed, flanked by dozens of smaller centipede monsters that scurried over the rocks. The entire horde was coming for them.

Suddenly, the ground directly beneath Kurt, Isabel, and Gracie began to swell, and with an explosive motion, the earth beneath them shot upward like a piston. The dirt hardened into stone, rising rapidly into a high, solid, two-story pillar that lifted them far above the level of the village square, isolating them from the reaching hands below.

As the pillar settled, a swirl of pink sakura petals materialized on the stone platform, drifting through the wind before condensing into a familiar, elegant shape.

Izumi Ayako.

"Rossana-sama. I have returned safely."