THORNS 161

Chapter 161 - Awestruck

Although the stone pillar held them high above the roiling sea of the infected and monsters, the sanctuary felt dangerously unstable and temporary.

Ayako stood at the absolute edge of the platform entirely unbothered by the sheer drop of death below. She turned her head slightly and softened her gaze as she took in the weary state of the group.

"Please accept my formal apologies for the delay, everyone. Navigating the marsh of the swamp proved to be tedious. I also bring good news. The primary architect of this tragedy has been subdued and I have left him under relatively secure supervision."

"Honestly? I'm just glad you're back in one piece." Kurt said as he wiped away the remaining blood from his nose. "We were starting to run out of options here."

"Your resilience honors you, Rossana-sama."

"So tell us, was it really a cultist behind this? Just making sure."

"Indeed. I would attempt to describe the contents of his subterranean laboratory, but the reality is so grotesque it defies simple narrative. It is something you must observe with your own eyes to truly comprehend. As they say, seeing is believing."

Kurt grunted and nodded once. "Fair enough. Who did you leave him with?"

"A young man," Ayako said, adjusting the guard of her katana with a thumb. "A student who claims affiliation with Eldoria's Future Academy. He introduced himself as Austin."

The name hit the small platform like a lightning strike.

Gracie, who had been leaning weakly against Isabel for support, suddenly pushed herself forward with a violent burst of adrenaline. "What did you just say? Austin?! Are you sure?!"

"I... yes. That was the name he provided. I’m sorry but, pray tell, who might you be?"

Isabel quickly stepped between them and raised her hands in a calming gesture, though her own eyes were wide with surprise.

"Lady Izumi, please excuse her. This is Gracie. She is... she has been through an incredible ordeal. She was infected by the same poison that was inflicted upon Master Rossana, and we have been fighting by her side to rescue her friend. His name is Austin."

Ayako’s eyebrows arched as she looked at Gracie up and down, noting the tattered cloak, the fading black veins near her collarbone, and the fierce, desperate light in her eyes.

"I see. I’m Izumi Ayako. Does this Austin of yours possess dark brown, rather unruly hair? A scattering of light freckles across the bridge of his nose? A, shall we say, exceptionally colourful personality? And did he happen to claim he was abducted by the infected while being ’distracted’"?

"Pfft–! A-Ahem! *Cough* Sorry." Kurt apologised.

"Yes!" Gracie cried, her voice cracking with an emotion she had been burying since the first centipede dragged her into the dark. Tears broke through her hardened exterior, tracing clean lines through the dirt on her cheeks. "Yes, that’s him! That’s my stupid idiot!"

"Then you may put your mind at ease. He is unharmed and awaits at the wooden house in the swamp. When I departed, he was entirely cooperative."

Thud!

Gracie’s knees gave out upon hearing the good news. Her hands clutched her chest as a massive, shuddering sob of pure relief wrung itself from her throat.

Ayako watched her with glowing, prying eyes and a look of quiet fascination. "He must be an extraordinary individual to inspire such devotion for someone as... powerful as you."

"He can be a fucking pain in my ass. More than you could ever know. But he’s mine." Gracie pushed herself back up to her feet, her posture instantly shifting from broken to predatory. "I need to go. Now. I have to see him."

"Whoa whoa whoa! Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, now." Kurt interrupted and pointed a finger down into the sea of danger. "I hate to be that guy, but we still have a multi-ton problem down there. One problem at a time, okay?"

Below the pillar, the nightmare had reached its boiling point.

The gray-skinned infected were no longer just clawing; they were throwing themselves against the base of the stone structure, trying to knock it down. And a sickening chorus of low, vibrating moans and high-pitched screeches rose from the swarm.

The smaller centipedes and their hundreds of legs caught the minor imperfections in Ayako’s conjured stone. They were already making rapid progress up the vertical pillar.

Ayako looked over the edge, peering down and far beyond the writhing mass. "My. The terrain has altered significantly since my brief departure. Where are the inhabitants of the village?"

"They’re gone, Lady Izumi." Isabel broke the news. "The Elder killed them all when turning into that horrid being."

Ayako’s eyes darkened as a shadow of genuine grief crossed her face. "How unforgiveable..."

"Fucking hell! Hey Izumi!" Gracie shouted. "They’re getting closer!"

"Oh no. That will not suffice. Worry not, I’ll handle this." Ayako lifted her right foot and brought her boot down in a single stomp against the platform.

BOOOM!

The stone beneath them exploded upward.

The pillar shot skyward, rising another five stories in a fraction of a second and leaving the climbing monsters scrambling for grip on a surface that was moving too fast to hold.

As the pillar came to a halt, Ayako finally drew her blade. With a series of short, blindingly fast flicks of her wrist, she swung the sword through the empty air.

Each stroke of her blade peeled off a massive, jagged section of the stone platform beneath her feet, shaping the rocks into heavy, aerodynamic spears that shot downward with the speed of ballista bolts.

The projectiles struck the climbing centipedes with pinpoint precision, smashing through their black armor and knocking them loose from the stone.

Kurt watched the display with a deep appreciation in his eye. "Boy am I really glad you're on our side–"

SREEEEECH!!!

"Aww crapbaskets..."

The giant centipede monster reared back within its crater and let out a guttural, vibrating roar that shook the very foundations of the valley.

And the effect was instantaneous.

The hundreds of infected clawing at the pillar stopped. The scurrying centipedes froze. As if answering an undeniable, primordial command, the entire horde turned away from the tower and began running full tilt toward the giant monster's open mouth.

They were throwing themselves into the abyss of its throat, their bodies crushed and absorbed into its mass as it began to recover itself on its own collective hive.

"No!" Kurt shouted. "It’s regenerating! It’s using them to heal the damage to its head and neck! We have to stop it before it finishes!"

Without waiting for a response, without a plan, and without an ounce of caution left in his redlining brain, Kurt sprinted toward the edge of the platform.

"Master, wait–!"

Too late. Kurt leaped over the edge into the eighty-foot drop, his black sword held tight in his hand as he free fell."

"Hahaha... Rossana-sama sure is reckless, isn’t he?"

"Indeed." A smooth voice agreed from above.

Ayako blinked, turning her head to find the little white cat now perched comfortably on her own shoulder. She looked at the small creature with a mixture of surprise and delight. "And who might this little cutie be?"

"There is no time for pleasantries," Kitty fixed his green eyes on Kurt’s falling form. "If you intend to assist, I suggest you expedite your departure."

Ayako’s wild, predatory smile returned in full force. "A talking cat? How marvelous. Very well."

She stepped to the lip of the stone, her hand returning to the sheathed hilt of her blade, and simply dropped down into the open air. She fell with an elegance that made it look as though she were descending a flight of stairs.

Isabel made a move to follow, but Gracie caught her firmly by the shoulder. "Stay. We’re better off up here where the ground doesn’t bite. Let the monsters fight the monsters – if you know what I mean."

Isabel bit her lip as her eyes locked on the chaotic warzone below. Her heart felt stuck in her throat as she prayed for her master's survival.

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The wind roared in Kurt's ears as gravity dragged him down. Halfway through his descent, three of the smaller centipedes that had been clinging to the upper levels of the pillar realised a meal was falling past them. They let go of the rock, lunging through the air with their mandibles wide.

"Oh hell naw!"

With a series of violent, mid-air twists of his torso, Kurt altered his trajectory by fractions of an inch. His black blade flicked out three times.

Snikt! Snikt! Snikt! The falling monsters were sliced cleanly in half each time.

As he neared the ground, he drove his blade straight through the body of the final centipede beneath him, using its dense body as a gruesome cushion to absorb the impact of his landing.

The monster exploded into green fluid beneath his boots as he hit the square. The impact rattled his joints, but he was already moving, and so were his targets.

When the surrounding horde closed in instantly, Kurt took a deep breath and went into the zone.

The exhaustion that had been clouding his mind vanished beneath a wave of pure survival instinct. He moved like a dancer on a floor of hot coals. His blade, coated in mana, became an extension of his will.

He swung, spun, parried, and thrusted with a beat that defied the chaos around him. Every time a claw or a mandible came close, his Adaption skill flared, and his body moved before his brain could even process the threat.

An infected lunged – he severed its hamstrings and sliced its head off.

A centipede sprang toward him – he drove his blade through its lower jaw.

Kurt was a whirlwind of black and blue, leaving a pile of corpses in his wake.

Thud!

Ayako landed directly beside him, her geta sandals hitting the bloody stones with an audible tonk. The moment her feet touched the ground, she became a blur.

Her katana didn’t leave its sheath for more than a fraction of a second at a time. Each strike was a perfect, blinding draw-and-steel sequence that left three or four targets headless before the sound of the blade clicking back into the wood could even register.

The two warriors stood back-to-back in the center of the swarm, a small island of absolute lethality in a sea of rot.

"Hahaha! An excellent workout, wouldn’t you say, Rosaana-sama? Their resistance is quite refreshing!"

Kurt parried a heavy strike from a larger centipede, his teeth bared in a bloody grin. "You’re enjoying yourself way too much! Let me know if you want to swap sides!"

SREEEEECH!!!

The banter was cut short by a sound that made the ground beneath them tremble violently.

The giant centipede monster had finished its meal. The dozens of smaller creatures it had consumed had been melted down into pure, corrupted energy and the deep, smoking wounds Kurt had carved into its head and neck were gone.

Its eyes burned with a furious, toxic green light and the shadow of its massive, vertical form fell over the entire square, blocking out what little light remained in the sky.

Kurt wiped a fresh line of blood from his nose as his breathing came in quick, ragged gasps. "Dammit! Looks like we're too late!"

Ayako turned her head to look at the beast. Instead of feeling fear, the sight of the towering horror seemed to trigger something deep within her. Her wild, predatory smile grew wider.

"So this is the deity you were wrestling with? How magnificent."

"Yeah. And it's a lot harder to try and kill the second time around."

The air around Ayako began to shift. Kitty, sensing the sudden change in the nature of her mana, let out a sharp hiss and leaped off her shoulder and landed back on Kurt's instead.

"Impressive. Truly impressive." Ayako whispered, her voice carrying a strange, melodic resonance that made the hairs on Kurt's neck stand up. "My blade is screaming at me and my heart yearns for its demise. I must have a taste of its strength."

Before Kurt could ask what the hell that meant, Ayako vanished.

She didn't run along the ground. She moved through the air, her sandals lightly tapping the heads of the charging infected and the humped backs of the smaller centipedes as if they were stepping stones in a quiet garden stream. With each step, she drew closer to the massive entity.

She raised her katana and enveloped it in mana coating.

The mana that erupted from her body wasn't like Kurt's erratic, flashing light; it was dense, compact, and so tightly wound around the steel that the blade itself seemed to disappear beneath the blue edge.

Then – like Diana's – the magic transformed. But unlike Diana's, whose coating vanished under her element, Ayako's began to soften, unravelling into hundreds of glowing, pink sakura petals that swirled around the steel in a localised hurricane.

The giant monster saw her coming.

SREEEEECH!!!

It let out a roar and lunged forward to crush her, its mouth opening to reveal a throat lined with rows of spinning teeth. As it charged, it spat three massive, consecutive balls of green venom directly at her mid-air position.

Ayako tilted her body and as if her sandals found solid footing on the very air itself – she displayed a master-class technique of sky-stepping that left Kurt staring in disbelief.

She dodged the first two spheres with minimal movement, her kimono brushing against the acidic vapor without catching fire.

The third ball of venom was too large to avoid and the monster's head followed right behind it as its mandibles closed around her mid-air form.

"Izumi-san! Watch out!"

But there was no blood. The giant jaws snapped shut on nothing but a thick explosion of pink petals that scattered into the wind.

Kurt didn't have time to look for her since a fresh wave of the swarm crashed into his position.

But as he cut through the front rank, he noticed the sky above and behind the giant centipede had gone completely black. The grey clouds had combined into a swirling vortex directly above the monster's head.

"Look up, Kurt! Look closer!" Kitty shouted from his shoulder.

High within the dark center of the vortex, a single point of light appeared. Ayako was descending like a missile. Her body aligned perfectly with her blade, which was pointed straight down at the earth.

The speed of her descent was terrifying as a white-hot bullet of pure, concentrated mana that left a long, glowing trail of pink light in the dark sky.

The giant centipede felt the threat from above. It abandoned its hunt on the ground, rearing its entire length straight up into the air, its mandibles opening to their absolute limit as it jumped upward to swallow the falling star whole.

The collision took place fifty feet above the ground.

Ayako didn't slow down. If anything, her speed doubled in the final feet and with a single, vertical downward stroke that seemed to slice through the very concept of distance, she went straight through the center of the monster's head.

There was no sound of tearing flesh or cracking armor. There was only a clean, high-pitched ping that echoed across the valley

Ayako passed through the entire length of the giant centipede like a bullet through paper.

BOOOM!

Her form struck the center of the village square with an explosive force that blew the surrounding horde away in a giant, concentric ring of dust and stone.

For a second, everything went dead quiet. The giant monster remained suspended vertically in the air, its body perfectly still.

Then, the earth broke.

The ground where Ayako had landed split open with a sound like thunder. But it wasn't a monster that emerged.

A massive, twisted trunk of dark wood shot out from the deep fissures, growing fifty, eighty, a hundred feet into the air in a matter of seconds. It was a giant, ancient Sakura tree.

Its thick roots anchored deep into the valley while its massive, sprawling branches erupted with thousands of vibrant, glowing pink blossoms.

The tree didn't grow beside the monster – it grew through it.

The dark wood pierced straight through the center of the centipede's length, its branches tearing through the black armor plates from the inside out, lifting the carcass high into the air and intertwining the dead, segmented segments within the beautiful, flowering canopy.

The dark vortex in the sky shattered, the black clouds dissolving into a perfectly clear, blue afternoon sky. The sunlight filtered down through the pink leaves, casting a warm, dappled glow over the ruins of the village.

And in the midst of all this, Kurt stood in the center of the square, his arms hanging limp at his sides. His mouth was slightly open and his single eye wide as he stared at the monument before him.

The horde was no more – the remaining infected and smaller centipedes had all collapsed the moment the primary node was pierced by the tree.

There was only the quiet rustle of the wind through the pink leaves, and the massive, dead shape of the giant centipede, forever encased in a cage of blossoms.

"What. The. Fu–"

Thwack!

A fluffy tail hit Kurt’s mouth before he could finish. "Language." Kitty muttered as he too watched in awe.

Chapter 162 - Reunion

With a heavy grinding collapse, the stone pillar began to slowly sink back into the earth, retracting like a piston into the ruined foundations of the destroyed village.

Kurt dragged his boots through the thick layer of corpses and green blood that covered the ground. Now that his adrenaline had finally died down, all that was left behind was a hollow vacuum of pure physical exhaustion.

The moment the stone platform touched the level ground, Isabel didn’t wait for it to fully settle. She sprinted across the bloody aftermath and skidded to a halt in front of him, her hands reaching out to hover over his chest, afraid that touching him might cause some hidden wound to open.

"Master! Are you alright? Please tell me you’re not broken."

Kurt offered her a weak, lopsided smile, though he didn’t have the energy to lift his arms. "Yeah. Just extremely exhausted, and I think my brain is currently fried from the inside out... but I’m fine. Trust me."

Gracie walked up from behind her with eyes of absolute bewilderment. She looked at the many infected corpses, then at the severed halves of the smaller centipedes, and finally, her gaze traveled up the massive, twisted trunk of the newborn Sakura tree.

Her eyes locked onto the colossal corpse of the giant monster and its black armor permanently woven into the pink canopy like a grotesque winter ornament.

"What. The fuck. Just happened?"

"Honestly, Gracie?" Kurt smiled weakly when looking at the towering pink blossoms. "I’m still having a hard time wrapping my own head around it. But it seems that somehow, and someway... Izumi-san one-shotted the damn thing. I mean, the proof is in the pudding. Look at the size of that tree."

A sudden, gentle breeze swept through the ruined battlefield. It carried a light, swirling cloud of pink petals that danced around their ankles. In the center of the vortex, the petals condensed, and Ayako materialized with an effortless grace.

Kurt turned towards her and asked, "Are you alright after, y'know... doing all that?"

"I have never been better, Rossana-sama. It has been quite some time since I was required to put nearly everything I possess into a single, concentrated strike. I must say, I am rather satisfied with the result."

She then turned her head and lingered her gaze on the giant tree intertwined with the monster's corpse. "An interesting piece of art, wouldn't you say?"

Before Kurt could find the right words to respond, a heavy thud of galloping horses echoed from the main road. The sound of iron-shod hooves was accompanied by the rattling wood of a familiar carriage.

"Well, well well." Kurt smiled deviously. "It looks like our ride back into the swamp has just arrived."

The carriage came to a halt and the last remaining villagers who had gone searching for Kurt and Isabel jumped out of the box. They didn't even look at the culprits as their eyes went straight to the giant Sakura tree, and more importantly, to the massive, dead segments of the Elder's monster form dangling from its branches.

They all fell to their knees and began to wail pathetically for a monster that would have harvested them without a second thought.

Ayako watched them with a slight tilt of her head, her hand resting loosely on the hilt of her sword. "What should we do with these ones?"

""Kill them."" Kurt and Gracie responded at the same time.

The two of them blinked and turned their heads to look at each other, momentarily stunned by the perfect, cold synchronization of their responses.

Kurt’s lips twitched into a small, dark smile of amusement. Gracie, however, clicked her tongue in irritation, looking away and refusing to acknowledge the fact that their minds were on the same wavelength.

Ayako looked between them and raised an eyebrow of concern. "Should they not be kept alive for a time? A formal testament and a detailed confession would be most useful for the King’s magistrates when we present the evidence of the Cult’s reach."

"No." Kurt shook his head. "Just look at them. They’re just a bunch of brainwashed pawns who did the Elder’s bidding. And with the Elder dead, they’re useless. They probably don’t know jack shit about anything important, and I don’t care enough to ask. Besides, the most important person we need is currently at the swamp. We don’t need the extra weight."

"... Very well. If they are of no administrative value, I shall insist on taking care of them myself. It will save us the effort."

Before the villagers could even realize they were being discussed, Ayako’s hand became an invisible streak of motion. She executed a lightning-fast quick-draw and snapped her blade back into place with a satisfying click.

Five distinct, crescent-shaped blades of compressed air soared through the distance, cutting through the dust with a soft, whistling sound.

The air blades struck the five villagers simultaneously, slicing through their necks with such clean precision that their heads remained balanced on their shoulders for a full second before tumbling into the dirt. Their bodies then collapsed forward in a neat, silent row.

Ayako smoothed her kimono, her tone completely bright when looking at Kurt. "We may depart at our earliest convenience."

"... Right. Let’s move."

...

The journey riding back into the humid, rotting depths of the swamp was quiet compared to the madness they had left behind.

Isabel, as per usual, had taken the driver's seat.

Inside the red carriage, Kurt sat comfortably on the cushioned seat as his eye fixed on Gracie. The girl was sitting directly across from him, her shoulder pressed against the small glass window, and her gaze lost in the passing silhouette of trees.

Kurt watched the way her fingers constantly twitched against the fabric of her cloak. She was clearly nervous as her mind raced miles ahead of the carriage.

"So. Are you excited to finally see your lover again?"

Gracie's head snapped around so fast her hair whipped across her face. Her dark purple eyes glared at him with an intensity that could have burned a hole through his skull.

"Watch what you say, Cyclops. We are not lovers."

"My bad. I just assumed after all the crying, the screaming, and the literal fighting through a horde of giant bugs that there was something specific going on. I must have gotten the completely wrong idea."

Gracie stared at him for another second with a hardened expression until, slowly, the corner of her mouth lifted. A small, uncharacteristically soft smile broke through her grime-streaked face. She turned back to the window when her voice dripped into a quiet, determined murmur.

"... Not yet."

"Okaaay. Duly noted."

Sitting next to Gracie, Ayako let out a small giggle as she watched the two.

The carriage continued to roll through the grey mire until the dense trees finally parted, revealing the familiar, decrepit clearing of the wooden rest house.

Even before the horses had come to a full stop, a figure was visible on the front porch. A young man with messy, dark brown hair was jumping up and down, his arms waving frantically in the air as he screamed toward them with an absurd level of excitement.

"Hey! Over here! Lady Izumi! You're back!" Austin yelled as he scrambled down the wooden steps, running toward the carriage with an eager grin, clearly expecting to greet his savior.

The carriage door swung open, and Kurt stepped down first.

The moment Austin's eyes landed on him; his entire face went completely white. The cheerful grin vanished, replaced by a mask of terror.

His knees buckled beneath him, and he fell squarely onto his butt in the wet mud. His hands tried scrambling backward in a desperate attempt to create distance.

He raised a shaking, trembling finger, pointing directly at Kurt's chest.

"Y-Y-You... You!"

Kurt stopped in his tracks. He looked to his left, then to his right, confirming there was no one else behind him. He pointed a finger at his own chest, his brow furrowing in genuine confusion.

"Me?"

"W-What the hell are you doing here?!" Austin shrieked, scrambling back until his spine hit the wooden foundation of the porch. "Why are you in the carriage?!"

"What's that supposed to mean? Do I know you?"

Ayako stepped down from the carriage next, and she watched the exchange with a look of immense amusement.

"My, how fascinating. His reaction to you is nearly identical to the one he displayed when I first arrived – although I must admit, his terror in your presence seems considerably more severe."

Austin, realising that Kurt's blank had absolutely no idea who he was, stopped panicking. He quickly jumped up to his feet, vigorously dusting the mud off his trousers while letting out a loud, incredibly forced laugh that sounded completely hollow.

"Ah! Ha ha! Right! Sorry about that! I... I just recognized you from the capital! I watched the big fight between yourself and the royal twins at the park! You were... really scary! I guess I just had a bit of an overreaction seeing a celebrity in the middle of a swamp! My bad, totally my bad!"

Kurt stared at him for a long, quiet moment with an unreadable expression. "Right. That's quite the overreaction for a spectator. But whatever. By the way, aren't you going to say hello to your friend?"

Austin blinked, his nervous smile faltering. "Friend? What friend?"

Kurt sighed and turned around to face the carriage door. "Gracie, quit hanging back in the shadows and get out here–"

Nothing.

The interior of the carriage was completely empty. The seats were vacant and the curtains fluttered slightly in the damp air.

Kurt quickly spun around, scanning the perimeter of the clearing, the path behind them, and the tall grass near the horses. There was no one there.

"What the–? Where the hell did she go? Isabel, did you see Gracie get out?"

"No, Master. I didn’t even hear the other side of the door open..."

Ayako’s expression turned thoughtful. "I, too, failed to perceive her departure. Hmm, how strange."

"Kitty, what about you–"

But the cat was also gone without a trace.

"Great... Classic Kitty."

Austin looked between the three of them and furrowed his brow as he took a step forward.

"Who are you guys even talking about? Who is Gracie?"

Kurt looked at Austin, his voice hard and dead serious. "Your friend, Gracie. The girl who was infected by the infected in the forest. She’s been with us for the last two hours, fighting through a literal army of monsters and zombies just so she could get to this house and make sure you were still breathing."

Austin’s face didn’t soften nor did it light up with recognition. Instead, his eyes went entirely blank, his jaw dropping slightly as he stared at them like they were speaking a foreign language.

"I... I really don’t know a Gracie. I’ve never heard that name in my life. I don’t have any friends from the academy or the city named Gracie... Let alone friends in general."

The clearing fell into a suffocating silence. Kurt stared closely at him.

’He genuinely has no idea who she is.’

Isabel looked horrified, her hands shaking on her apron as the reality of the situation refused to make sense.

Then, as if a sudden light had just lit up inside his brain, Austin’s expression shifted. The color drained from his face for a second time and his eyes widened into circles of pure dread.

"W-Wait... Are you... are you guys talking about... about the succubus?"

""""The what?""""