THORNS 163

Chapter 163 - F-rank Quest Complete

"A succubus," Austin repeated. "I’m talking about a literal, drop-dead gorgeous demon of the night who calls herself Gracie."

Ayako narrowed her eyes, the previous lightheartedness completely vanishing from her posture. "Explain yourself, Austin. What precisely gave you the impression that Gracie is a succubus? Demonology is not a subject to be broached lightly, especially given the current crisis."

"Because... because she literally invaded my dreams! I swear I’m not making this shit up! I had this crazy, vivid dream a little while back where this naked woman attacked me. She pinned me down to the bed, forced herself on me, and then she completely drained me!"

Kurt raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms "Drained you? You mean she siphoned your mana or something?"

"No! I’m not talking about my mana! I am talking about my life essence!"

"Your... what?"

"My jizz! My semen!" Austin yelled, completely losing his filter in his panic. "She drained my semen, okay?! She’s a succubus! It’s what they do!"

"""..."""

A profoundly uncomfortable silence fell over the clearing.

Isabel’s face immediately turned red, slamming her hands over her burning cheeks and spinning around on her heel to face the horses.

Ayako, usually the picture of aristocratic grace, took a distinct step backward, her lips parting in mild horror as she looked at Austin as if he were a particularly strange species of insect. Ironic, considering the danger they just faced.

Even Kitty, perched on Kurt's shoulder, let out a judgment-filled sigh as he stared at Austin blankly.

"Anyway," Austin muttered. "I just find it incredibly weird and terrifying that this 'Gracie' person suddenly showed up again, but now in the physical world. Why is she stalking me?!"

Ayako slowly recovered her composure, turning her gaze toward the empty carriage door. Her eyes flared with a faint, crystalline blue light as she scanned the residual mana in the air.

"Her dark mana signature still lingers very faintly inside the carriage... but it's fractured and scattered. Regrettably, she is truly gone."

Austin's eyes went wide, and he practically threw himself toward Ayako. Though he wisely stopped a few feet short of her blade. "She's gone?! What if she's waiting for me in the woods? Lady Izumi, please! I don't want to go through that again! You have to protect me!"

"Haaa. I shall extend my protection to you only until we breach the gates of the capital. Once we are within the city limits, your safety is entirely your own prerogative. For I have many other things that require my attention."

"Deal! Absolutely a deal! ARIGATO!"

Kurt, meanwhile, looked over at Isabel. The maid was no longer covering her face; instead, she was looking down at the muddy ground with her shoulders slumped and a heavy sadness radiating from her small frame.

"Isabel. You okay?"

"I... I just don’t understand, Master. We fought so hard together. I thought Gracie and I were becoming friends after everything we went through in the village. To think she just up and left without saying goodbye... and to hear that she’s a demon..."

Ayako shared a look of sympathy for Isabel then turned her sharp gaze toward Austin again. "Tell me, Austin. Did you inadvertently forge a binding contract with this entity recently?"

"Wha–! No! Hell no! I didn’t sign anything! I was a victim!"

"Hmm. Then it is highly probable that you are somehow cursed, or perhaps she marked you during your last encounter. Once we arrive in the capital, I suggest you immediately make your way to the church. The priests there specialize in purgation and spiritual cleansing. Perhaps they can extract whatever tether she left on your soul. The current Saintess is also in Eldoria. If all else fails, you must ask her for help. Though I hear her miracles are quite expensive."

"R-Right. Church. Holy water. Will do..."

"Good. Now, I believe we have squandered enough time. Austin, are the specimens inside the laboratory still secure?"

"Yes, Lady Izumi. Fully intact and perfectly frozen," Austin replied, instantly slipping back into his obedient act.

"Excellent." Ayako nodded toward Kurt and Isabel. "Follow me. We must catalog the evidence before we transport it."

’Damn. No wonder she’s the heiress to her clan.’ Kurt thought as he followed her inside.

Austin took a deep breath, preparing to follow them over the threshold, when a deep, smooth voice suddenly echoed directly inside his mind.

[Austin.]

"Holy–!"

He quickly shot a glance at Kurt, Ayako, and Isabel, ensuring they were fully inside and out of earshot.

Once he was certain he was in the clear, he dropped his gaze down to his own feet, staring directly into the dark, shifting contours of his own shadow on the wooden porch.

"Gary?" Austin hissed under his breath. "Where the hell have you been this whole time?!"

[....]

"Well?!"

[I've been hiding inside your shadow the entire time.]

"Is that so!? And what exactly have you been doing!?"

[Sleeping? Listen, Austin. For now, you need to maintain your composure and follow the others. We need to ride their coattails all the way back to the capital where it's safe.]

Tsk "Fine! Also, since you just woke up, I'll tell you now already. Do not be reckless. It turns out that Kurt is also here, and it looks like he's firmly on Ayako's side. Whatever you do, do not try to kill him. Them teaming up against us is like asking for a death wish."

[I am fully aware of his capabilities,] Gary's voice carried a rare hint of caution. [I have no intention of provoking them.]

"Good," Austin muttered, turning back toward the door to rejoin the group.

Before his hand could touch the brass doorknob, Gary's voice echoed one final time. The usual cynical edge was completely absent from his tone. It sounded genuinely heartfelt.

[Austin.]

"What?"

[... Nothing. I am glad you are safe.]

Tsk "Whatever, man. I'm... I'm glad you're safe too, I guess..."

[Though I must say, the way you described this "Gracie" character as "drop-dead gorgeous". Was she your type? Gonna add her to your harem?]

"S-Shut the fuck up!" Austin snapped aloud, throwing the door open in a huff as Gary's echoing laughter filled his mind.

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Inside the underground laboratory, the air remained freezing cold, courtesy of Ayako's lingering ice magic.

The group stood huddled around the primary workbench and stared directly at the frozen statue of the cultist whose face was locked in a mask of screaming fury.

"Yeesh, this guy looks angry. Who rocked his shit? He looks like he desperately wants to strangle the life out of somebody."

"That 'somebody' would be Austin, Rossana-sama. Right before I froze him, the cultist discovered that his young assistant wasn't quite who he claimed to be. He was... in the process of attempting a lethal termination of Austin's employment when I intervened."

"Huh. I see. Good timing, then."

His gaze then drifted past the cultist, landing squarely on the second, much larger block of clear blue ice. Inside it lay the pale, ethereal form of a woman.

"And who exactly is she?" Kurt asked.

"This is the body of the previous Saintess. I have no idea how the cult managed to kidnap her corpse. It appears she was the primary source and medium for the cultist's wicked biological experiments regarding the infected."

Isabel let out a sharp gasp, her hands flying to her mouth as her eyes widened. She stumbled back a step, completely overwhelmed by the gravity of the revelation. "The Saintess... the holiest figure of all, used for such filth? It's... it's horrible!"

Kurt, however, didn't flinch. His expression remained entirely stoic. Ayako watched him closely, expecting the same shock that Isabel had displayed, but he merely stared at the frozen woman.

'I can't really say I don't know the significance of the 'Saintess' status in a world like this. However, judging from Isabel's reaction and Ayako's tone, it's probably a massive political and spiritual shitstorm. But right now, a corpse is a corpse, and a piece of evidence is a piece of evidence. Getting emotional won't fix the damage.'

"Well," Kurt said aloud, breaking the silence. "Let's give this entire lab a full sweep. Gather anything remotely incriminating, pack up the two bodies, and let's get the hell out of this swamp."

"Agreed."

"Yes, Master."

Kurt began sorting through piles of stained parchment on the main desk until his hand brushed against a thick leather-bound book hidden beneath the mess.

"Hey, I think I found a journal."

The group crowded around as he flipped the book open.

The pages were filled with messy notes, punctuated by complex alchemical diagrams and sketches of human anatomy intertwined with insectoid segments.

Kurt scanned the lines and furrowed his brow as the terms became increasingly hard to understand. "Can anyone actually read this? It’s all gibberish to me."

Ayako glanced at the pages and tried piecing it together. "These are his personal notes detailing the specifics of his experiments. However, the cipher and the magical terminology used here make absolutely no sense when looking at them casually..."

Kurt let out a heavy sigh and closed the book with a dull thud. "Fine. Let the experts and the royal researchers or whatever take over from here when we report back to the capital. We’ve got what we came for. Let’s leave."

A sudden, practical problem occurred to Kurt as he looked at the two massive, incredibly heavy blocks of ice. "One issue. How exactly are we going to get these two frozen bodies back to the capital? They aren’t exactly going to fit in the passenger seats of the carriage."

Austin immediately piped up, eager to be useful. "Ah! There is a large, slightly broken wooden supply cart around the side of the house! The wheels are still intact; we can easily hitch it to the back of the carriage."

"Perfect."

Without a word of complaint, Kurt walked over to the frozen cultist and hoisted the heavy block of ice onto his shoulder. His mana-enhanced muscles strained slightly under the dead weight.

Ayako then raised her left hand, channeling a calm wind spell that lifted the ice coffin into the air, letting it float effortlessly behind her like a balloon.

The process of securing the cart to the back of the main carriage took twenty minutes of hard labor in the humid swamp air.

Once the two frozen packages were safely secured, Kurt climbed up onto the passenger steps, looking over at Isabel, who was once again holding the leather reins of the horses.

"Hey, Isabel. Tell me something... is this how all F-rank adventurer quests turn out? Because if so, I might start to actually fear for the future." He joked.

"Hahaha... I believe this was the exception. Not the rule."

Ayako, who was stepping into the carriage behind him, paused on the ledge. "My, Rossana-sama. If F-rank assignments truly involve unearthing international conspiracies and battling such monsters, then I might genuinely have to reconsider being the formal heiress to my clan. Perhaps I shall renounce my title and become a simple adventurer alongside you."

"NO!" Austin suddenly yelled from the back.

Everyone stopped, turning their heads to look at him.

Austin froze, realising he had just screamed at one of the most powerful high-ranking nobles in the world. He immediately let out a loud, incredibly nervous chuckle, rubbing his arm as his face flushed.

"I mean... no, Lady Izumi! Your clan absolutely needs you, haha... Myria would fall into utter chaos without your lineage! You can’t just run off and become a mercenary..."

Ayako stared at him for a beat, her expression completely unreadable, before a small smile touched her lips. "I am fully aware of my duties, Austin. I was merely jesting. Also, I believe Myria will be just fine under the rule of the current Shogunate – but thank you for the kind words."

Austin let out a massive, visible sigh of relief, wiping his brow. "Right! Ha ha! A jest! A truly excellent joke, Lady Izumi!"

Ayako didn't laugh further. She simply shrugged her shoulders and stepped into the interior of the carriage. Kurt followed her, taking his seat across from Austin, who quickly scurried in and claimed the corner furthest away from the one-eyed assassin.

Isabel sat straight on the driver's box, the sadness in her eyes slowly giving way to a quiet, focused determination. She looked out at the long, winding road that would finally take them out of this place of death and back toward the high walls of Eldoria.

She lifted the leather reins, snapping them down with a sharp crack.

The horses let out a collective snort, their hooves digging into the dirt as they pulled the heavy carriage and its grim cargo forward. Leaving the gnarled trees of the swamp and forest behind them as they began the long journey back home.

Chapter 164 - Not A Moment's Rest

Dusk.

The skies above the capital of Eldoria had turned a bruised orange, casting long, dramatic shadows through the iron spires of the city's towering walls.

At the massive front gates, two guardsmen leaned against their halberds, letting out a wide yawn. It had been a quiet shift; the kind of boring afternoon that made a man look forward to a warm tavern and a heavy pint of ale.

Then, breaking the silence was the steady clatter of hooves echoing down the cobblestone road. Squinting through the haze, one of the guardsmen saw a red carriage, moving at an unhurried pace.

He recognized that carriage. It belonged to the F-rank adventurers he had given a warning to earlier that morning before they departed for the outskirts.

The carriage slowly pulled to a halt right at the threshold of the gate. Isabel leaned out from the driver's box, her hands still steady on the reins, though her face carried the weight of a hundred lifetimes.

"Good evening, sir," Isabel greeted him. "Please, we need you to call the prefect officers immediately. We have captured a high-ranking zealot."

"A zealot? Little maid, if this is a prank–"

"It is most assuredly not a prank," a sharp, clear voice interrupted.

The carriage window slid open, and Ayako poked her head out into the twilight. "Kindly summon the authorities without further delay. Time is of the essence."

The guardsman’s jaw dropped. The skepticism vanished from his face in a fraction of a second, replaced by absolute panic as he recognized the unmistakable, elegant features of Myria’s Izumi clan heiress.

His gaze instinctively darted to the back of the carriage, where a crude, wooden supply cart was hitched.

There, he saw two massive blocks of blue ice: one containing a man in black robes frozen in mid-scream, and another encasing a pristine, beautiful coffin of a woman.

"Goddess above! R-Right away, my lady!"

The guardsman spun on his heel and sprinted through the gate, his frantic shouts echoing down the inner corridor and to the city.

Within fifteen minutes, the thunderous galloping of horses signaled the arrival of the prefect officers. Leading the pack was none other than Dominik.

"Kurt?!" Dominik shouted, pulling his horse to a sharp halt beside the carriage. His face was currently a mix of bewilderment and amusement.

"What’s going on? A guardsman just ran into the city screaming like his pants were on fire, claiming a bunch of F-ranks brought in a frozen zealot!"

Kurt pushed himself away from leaning against the carriage door, stretching his aching back with a loud grunt. He popped his neck and threw a lazy thumb toward the wooden cart attached to the rear.

"Hey Dom. And yeah, it’s true. We caught a zealot. Although sadly, it wasn’t me who did."

"Good evening, Officer," Ayako made her presence fully known by stepping out of the carriage to stand beside Kurt.

Dominik’s head snapped toward her, his eyes widening even further as he realised he was standing in the presence of Myria’s second highest nobility. He quickly straightened his posture, placing both hands to his side and bowing formally. "Lady Izumi! Good evening! I... I had no idea you were involved in this... uhm... this capture."

"Damn, look at you. All serious and shit. Haha."

"Shut up, Kurt..." Dominik grunted through his teeth.

"Hahaha. Anyway, like I was saying. She’s the real MVP here. Did ninety percent of the heavy lifting, including turning the giant monster in the middle of the village into a landscape decoration."

"Giant monster?"

"Hehehe~ You are entirely too kind, Rossana-sama. It was a group effort. We all contributed to the resolution of the crisis."

"Ohohoho~ Don’t be so modest, Izumi-san. I know a one-shot kill when I see one."

Dominik’s gaze bounced between Kurt and Ayako as his brain was near visibly short-circuiting at how casual they’re being with each other.

By now, a small crowd of civilians and merchants had begun to form around the gate. Their whispers rippled through the twilight as they pointed at Kurt's bruised self, Ayako's pristine robes, and the grotesque frozen statues in the cart.

"Ahem! We need to move, now," Dominik said, his professional instincts kicking back in as the crowd grew. "Please, follow me to the station. We'll take your formal reports there and secure the evidence before this turns into a public spectacle."

As they turned back toward the carriage, Austin nervously slinked forward, his hands shoved deep into his pockets as he tried to look as small as possible.

"Uh... excuse me, Lady Izumi? Cuck– I mean–! Officer Dominik. Do I really have to come to the station? I mean, I'm just an accidental bystander. I'd really rather just go home. I don't have anything important to report."

Ayako turned her cool gaze upon him, narrowing her eyes slightly. "Do not be absurd, Austin. Shouldn't you be reporting to your academic superiors and the authorities regarding your highly successful mission of acting as an embedded spy within the enemy's laboratory?"

Dominik stopped dead in his tracks and snapped his head toward Austin, looking confused.

"A spy? Within the zealots? In that case, young man, you are definitely coming with us. Please get back in the carriage."

Austin let out a miserably pathetic groan as he slumped his shoulders, dragging his boots toward the carriage door.

While the others were climbing inside, Gary's voice resonated in his mind.

[Austin, you fucking dumbass! That was your chance to run away! Why did you walk up to that prefect!?]

Austin didn’t turn his head, but his lips moved in a tiny whisper as he reached for the handrail. "Shut up, Gary. You’re the fucking dumbass. If I ran away, I would’ve looked incredibly suspicious. Especially in front of Ayako-tan."

He shot a quick, admiring glance toward Ayako’s elegant silhouette as she settled into the cushions. "I need to look good in front of her. I need to establish a solid foundation of trust."

[Why? Why do you care about what she thinks of you? Wait, let me guess... because you want to add her to your harem?]

"Duh."

[Now you’re just being delusional.]

"Listen to me, Gary," Austin whispered slowly as he climbed onto the steps. "I know what I’m doing. Her specific character route doesn’t officially unlock until the release of the second game, but if I don’t start sowing the seeds of romance and destiny right now, I’ll never clear her intimacy checks later. It’s all about the long game."

[... You’re speaking nonsense again. Just don’t get us executed.]

The doors snapped shut and with a sharp whistle from Dom, half a dozen mounted officers surrounded the red carriage and escorted it along.

As the carriage moved through the cobblestone streets, the unusual sight of the escort drew the eyes of hundreds of citizens passing by, everyone wondering what kind of royalty was being brought to the central prefecture.

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The reporting process inside the station took about an hour. Statements were written, the journal Kurt found was logged into a secure vault, and the frozen bodies were wheeled down into the subterranean magic nullification cells.

Ayako and Austin had to stay behind to account for the events that happened on their side, so the trio said their goodbyes and went their separate ways.

Finally, the tempered glass doors of the station opened, and Dominik walked Kurt and Isabel out onto the front steps.

"A specialized team of prefects and high-tier inquisitors is already being assembled. They're going to be dispatched to the swamp house by morning to thoroughly investigate the laboratory, the monster's carcass, and that secret underground tunnel that led straight into Liam's basement. Hopefully, we can find some of his own personal notes he left behind before the rot spreads."

Dominik looked at Kurt, his professional demeanour turning friendly again. "You did good, man. Bringing in a cultist and stopping whatever plans they had. Not to mention finding the body of the previous Saintess. I'd expect a lot of visits from important people if I were you."

Standing beside them, Isabel looked down at her boots, as a deep, lingering sadness clouded her face. "But so many people died, Officer Dominik. We were too late to save the innocent people."

"Listen to me, Ms. Isabel. Do not be sad over the lives that were lost out there. It's not your fault, and it's not anyone's fault. The cult had their claws deep into that settlement long before you two ever picked up that quest pamphlet. You brought the truth to light, and you stopped it from happening to the next town. Remember that."

Isabel looked up, her lower lip trembled slightly before she offered a reluctant, quiet nod. "Thank you, officer."

"Cool. Now, get some rest, you two. Because not gonna lie, you guys look like shit."

"Always a pleasure, Dom."

"Goodnight, officer."

With a final wave, Dominik turned back into the station.

Kurt stretched his arms over his head, looking down at Isabel as they began the walk down the stone steps toward the carriage.

The atmosphere between them was still tense, the shadow of Gracie’s departure and the tragedy of the village still weighed heavily on Isabel’s shoulders.

"... So, Isabel. What do you think we should do about these herbs for the F-rank quest? We’ve still got them."

"Ah! The request!" Isabel snapped out of her daze. "Master, we have to report it into the guild immediately."

"Come on, can’t we just do it tomorrow? My boots are full of dirt, my face is covered in dried blood, and I’m pretty sure I smell like a dead centipede. Surely the guild isn’t going to care if we’re a day late."

"No no no. A true adventurer always finishes their paperwork as soon as possible. It’s best to do it right now so we can finally close the ledger on today. Mainly my ledger... for when I report the day to Head Maid Wendy."

Kurt let out a long, dramatic sigh. "Fine, fine. Lead the way."

.....

Isabel navigated the carriage through the lamp-lit streets until the familiar doors of the Adventurer’s Guild came into view.

Even through the wood, the roaring laughter, clinking mugs, and boisterous shouts of the mercenaries were audible. Kurt pushed the doors open and stepped into the warm, smoky air of the main hall with Isabel following closely behind.

The moment his boots hit the floorboards, the bustling noise in the room began to die down. One by one, the tables went quiet. They all turned their heads, locking their eyes onto the single-blue-eyed man and his maid.

As they walked forward, the crowd parted for them slowly, and a low running current of whispers filled the sudden silence.

"... Is that him?"

"... Yeah, the one-eyed noble failure from this morning."

"... Did you hear the rumors from the gate? People are saying he brought a frozen cultist in a cart..."

"... Bullshit. An F-rank? He probably found a dead hobo in the woods and called it a conspiracy to get attention."

Kurt ignored them all, keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead as he walked up to the main reception counter.

He took the basket of herbs from Isabel and the official quest pamphlet, placing them gently on the polished wood.

"Oh my! You're that fellow from this morning. Welcome back!"

"Haha. Thanks."

Sitting behind the counter was the exact same female receptionist from that morning. Her friendly attitude hadn't changed an inch.

She didn't look at the blood on his face or the dirt on his clothes. She simply picked up the pamphlet, stamped it with a dull thud, and checked the freshness of the herbs.

"Yep. F-Rank Request: Herb Gathering. Condition: Approved. Thank you for your service to the guild!"

She reached beneath the counter and slid five copper coins across the wood. "Your reward, sir."

"Money’s money. Thanks. See you around."

He turned to leave, but before he could take two steps, a towering shadow fell over his path.

Standing in front of him was Bigi – the exact same bald, heavily muscled adventurer who had mocked and threatened him that morning.

"Well, well, well," Bigi sneered, his booming voice carrying across the quiet hall. "Look what crawled back out of the ditch. Didn’t I give you a very specific warning this morning, noble boy? I told you to never show your pathetic face in this hall again."

"Ah shit. Here we go again."