THORNS 229

Chapter 229 - The Full Picture

Inside the dim, quiet bedroom, the muffled sobs gradually subsided into soft hiccups.

Kurt remained standing by the bed with his hand resting gently on Tristan's trembling back until the boy finally pulled back, wiping his red eyes with the sleeve of his long shirt.

"Alright," Kurt pulled up a nearby wooden chair and sat down so he was at eye level with the young boy.

"Tell me what happened, Tristan. Maggie told me what she knew, but I want you to be honest with me."

Tristan looked down at his lap and squeaked out a cracking voice. "I-It's all my fault. It's all my fault because... because I got angry with her."

"Go on. I'm listening."

"Every night... she would talk about M-Mom and D-Dad. She would go on... and on about all the fun things we were going to do when they came back home from their adventure. Every night, she would ask me to teach her how to read... just so she could read those letters you and Mr. Dominik gave her."

Tristan swallowed hard as a look of painful guilt washed over his young face.

"And every time a parent came to visit the orphanage, she would refuse to greet them. She'd hide in the closet or be rude to them because she didn't want us to get adopted. She kept saying Mom and Dad were coming back to get us as soon as they were done with their quest..."

Sniff "S-So yesterday... when she made that s-scene in the office with those nice people, she came running out to the yard to find me. She was laughing while telling me how she ruined it so we wouldn't be taken away. And I... And I just... I lost my temper."

Kurt's eye widened slightly as a sudden cold dread sank deep into his gut.

"I-I shouted at her! I yelled at her that Mom and Dad aren't coming home! That they're dead! And... and I told her that those letters were fake!"

Tristan looked up at Kurt with terror, bowing his head repeatedly as he cried, "I'm sorry! Uncle Kurt, I'm so, so sorry! I didn't mean to say all those things! I know how much effort you and Mr. Dominik put it in to keep it a secret from her! I know you did it to protect her! But she was being so... so..."

"Tristan," Kurt reached out and placed a firm hand on the boy's shoulder, stopping his panicked apologies. "It's fine."

"U-Uncle Kurt...?"

"One way or another... the truth would have come out eventually. I'm not angry at you. If anyone's to blame here, it's me. I'm angry at myself for thinking a lie like that could last forever. Or at least a really, really long time..."

He shook his head, pushing the guilt aside for now. "So tell me what happened after that. Why did she run away today?"

"A-After I told her that, she didn't want to speak to me anymore. But then today, she wouldn't stop annoying me. She got some of her friends to pick on me and call me a traitor. I got so angry that I pushed her on the grass. She got back up and... we started fighting. We fought until Ms. Maggie came and pulled us apart.

"When she did, Rupee ran up here and locked the door while I ran to the park. W-When we came back... she was gone. She took her clothes and pink backpack and ran away... Now I don't know what to do..."

Fresh tears began to spill down Tristan's cheeks again. "Uncle Kurt, I-I don't want to lose Rupee, too..."

"Listen to me, Tristan. You're not going to lose her. And I am going to bring her back. Do you hear me?"

Sniff "O-Okay..."

Kurt stood up and walked over to the open window behind the curtain. They were on the second floor, but running right alongside the window frame was an iron drainpipe leading all the way down.

"Is this how she got down?"

"Y-Yeah," Tristan said while wiping his eyes. "She's really good at climbing. Better than me."

"Hmmm... Is there any place you think she would have gone?"

Tristan squeezed his eyes shut, trying hard to think. "I... I don't know... She packed some of her clothes... So maybe she went to a friend. But she has lots of friends. M-Maybe she went... home?"

"Home? As in... the slums?"

Tristan nodded hesitantly. "She should know the way home. We used to walk from our old house all the way to the big church across the road from here when Mom and Dad was still alive."

Kurt stared at him for a long second before giving a nod.

"Yeah. There's a very strong possibility she went straight back to your old house."

He walked over to the door and placed his hand on the brass knob. "Tristan, I need you to stay here. As you already know, the slums are filled with dangerous people, many of whom are currently colluding with the Cult.

"You stay here at the orphanage where it's safe. I've got some strong friends with me today. We'll safely get your sister back, and then we can all make up... hopefully."

Tristan let out a tiny, relieved smile that broke through his tear-stained face. "Okay... T-Thank you, Uncle Kurt."

"There’s no need for thanks," Kurt smiled, opening the door.

He paused, looking back at Tristan with a mischievous wink. "Now wipe that moping face. Your girlfriend is waiting for you outside."

"G-Girlfriend?!" Tristan’s face exploded into a deep blush. "I don’t have a–!"

Before the boy could finish his outburst, Kurt pulled the door fully open. The blue-haired girl, who had stopped holding Maggie’s hand and had been pressing her ear flat against the wood to eavesdrop, lost her balance and slumped forward into the room with a startled yelp.

"Suzy?!" Tristan yelled. "W-Why were you listening at the door?!"

"I-I was just... I mean!" Suzy’s own face turned red as she stammered. "T-The wood was dirty, so I was inspecting it! D-Desu wa..."

Kurt patted the blushing girl on the head as he stepped past her.

"It’s all up to you now," he whispered to her with a chuckle, leaving the two flustered children alone as he sprinted down the hallway and made his way down the stairs.

Down in the lobby, Emelie and Reuben were standing by the front door alongside the anxious manager.

"And?" Emelie stepped forward. "You got the full picture? Did he give you anything to go on?"

"Yes, and yes. There’s a very strong possibility she headed for the slums. Back to their old family house."

Reuben raised an eyebrow. "The slums?"

"Mmhm. That’s where she and her family lived before her parents... well... died."

"I see. Then let us make haste. The tournament matches will not remain paused indefinitely."

They all turned toward the entrance. Behind them, Maggie clasped her hands together. "Please... bring Rupee back safely."

"We will." Kurt called out over his shoulder as they pushed through the doors.

A moment later, the three of them launched into the air. Emelie enveloped Kurt in her telekinetic field, while Reuben effortlessly sky-stepped with his hand in his pockets right behind them, his cape rushing through the wind as they sped across the skyline toward the slums of Eldoria.

As they flew, Reuben's calculating eyes drifted toward Kurt's back, silently taking in the visible lines of anxiety and worry carved into his face.

He didn't say a word. He just analysed.

His gaze then shifted back straight ahead as the grand Victorian architecture slowly began to give way to rotting wooden roofs and smog-filled alleys.

It didn't take long for them to reach the ugly, neglected underbelly of Eldoria.

"I was hoping we'd catch sight of her on our way here," Kurt muttered as he scanned the narrow streets below. "Guess we weren't that lucky."

He gestured toward a rotting, two-story wooden house. "There. That's the place."

Emelie adjusted her trajectory, bringing them down for a gentle landing in the center of the dirt road. Reuben descended right beside them, his boots touching the filth without making a single sound.

The area around them was eerily silent. There were no children playing in the dirt, people going about, and no laundry hanging between the buildings. It was a ghost town.

"They’re watching us." Kurt pointed out.

"Yeah. Almost as if they were expecting us to show up." Emelie dragged the hood of her jacket over her head.

Reuben’s stoic gaze subtly flicked across the shuttered windows of the neighboring shacks. Through his advanced wind sensory magic, he could hear dozens of faint breaths holding still, accompanied by the distinct malevolent eyes locked onto their backs.

"Does that mean Rupee actually passed through here?" Kurt asked, looking around the eerie silence. "This feels way too setup. It’s fishy as hell."

"Yes, most likely." Reuben replied calmly, his hands still tucked away in his pockets. "So... Rossana. What do we do now?"

Kurt glanced at the duke out of the corner of his eye.

’What, is he testing me or something?’

Reuben remained perfectly stoic, offering no hints.

Kurt looked back at the front door of the main house. "Let’s check the inside first. If we immediately start going after the guys hiding in the shadows and interrogating them, it might set off a chain reaction and trigger an all-out brawl before we even know if Rupee is in there."

Reuben nodded once.

Stepping forward, Kurt reached out and – to his surprise – easily pushed open the creaking, unlatched front door.

Chapter 230 - Slum Massacre

Muddy footprints covered the area around the front door’s wooden planks.

"Not that I need to tell you guys, but stay cautious," Kurt murmured, leading the way.

They quickly searched the decrepit first floor, moving quietly from room to room.

When they reached the small kitchen near the back exit, Emelie knelt down, pointing a finger at the base of the rear doorframe. "Kurt. Over here. I found more."

Walking over to her, Kurt and Reuben inspected the floor. Printed clearly in the drying mud were small, childlike shoe prints.

"No doubt about it. She's definitely been here," Kurt confirmed. "Judging from these footprints, she came in through the back and went upstairs. However, no one was chasing her nor was she running. I'm guessing she came in, went upstairs, and that's when the people from the front entered.

"There were no visible small footprints at the front. So they either snatched her or hopefully, she's still here. Hiding somewhere."

"That's some observation skills you have, Rossana."

"Yeah, well... Let's just say I'm used to hunting rabbits."

"Hmm."

Without wasting more time, they hurried up the creaking staircase to the second floor.

"Take a room each," Kurt ordered softly.

They split up. Emelie used her telekinesis to open the jammed door leading to the bathroom. "Bust. Nothing in here."

Reuben stepped into the children’s bedroom. His sharp eyes swept over the overturned, bunk beds and mattresses. Searching through the entire room, he came up with nothing.

Kurt took the last; the master bedroom.

The room was completely trashed, from the peeling wallpaper to the damp walls. Beside the destroyed bed frame stood the giant broken hole in the wall where Kurt had previously fought off a cultist’s ambush.

Searching the room, however, there was no sign of Rupee anywhere.

"Dammit!"

BAM!

Kurt slammed his fist into the side of the old broken cupboard as frustration boiled over in his chest.

Coming up completely empty-handed, the three of them regrouped back downstairs in the living room.

"Now what?" Reuben asked him.

"Now? Now there’s no choice left." Kurt’s eye burned with a dangerous intensity. "We’re going to have to go outside and give the neighbors a very warm hello."

Before he could even take a step toward the door, both Reuben and Emelie snapped their heads toward the front.

"LOOK OUT!"

Emelie leaped in front of them both, thrusting both of her hands forward. A barrier of dense, translucent telekinetic force enveloped all three of them in a glowing sphere when suddenly–

BOOM—CRASH! BANG—BOOM!

A split second later, the entire front wall, the wooden roof, and every window of the house violently disintegrated.

A deafening barrage of heavy metal crossbow bolts, explosive fireballs, and streams of electrical elemental magic blasted through the structure from every single angle imaginable.

The sheer devastating force of the ambush tore the second floor to shreds, collapsing the wood into a massive pile of splinters and burning debris.

A dense wall of grey smoke and pulverized dust hung over the street, completely obscuring the remains of the two-story house.

All along the street and subsequent opposite road, dozens of figures leaned out from second story framed windows, stepped onto rotting rooftops, and poured out of narrow doorways.

The entire avenue was packed with men and women clutching crossbows, jagged pitchforks, rusted iron cleavers, and crude magical staffs.

They squinted through the haze, straining to see past the smoke and ambers.

"... Did *gulp* D-Did we get ’em?"

"Of course we got ’em! No one survives a barrage like that and comes out alive! Haha! Now the Brotherhood is sure to reward us with–"

"Die."

A cold, razor-sharp voice cut through the fog.

SHING!

A flash of crimson light pierced the darkness. A clean, single red arc traced a line through the haze, revealing the menacing figure of Reuben standing amid the floating embers. His signature crimson blade was fully drawn, shining with a terrifying aura.

Before anyone could even blink, a massive, shockwave-inducing wind-blade exploded from the red steel.

The concentrated wave of compressed wind sliced diagonally across the entire street, carving through wood, stone, and flesh without losing a fraction of its momentum.

WOOSH—BOOM! CRASH! SPLAT!

Bodies were cleanly bisected before the victims could even scream.

Entire rooflines, upper halves of neighboring houses, and stone chimneys were sheared in half, launching high into the sky by the force of the vacuum.

The surviving slum-dwellers stared at the catastrophic sight in paralyzed horror. The air was dead silent for one dreadful second.

Then, the screams erupted.

"AAAAHHHHHHH! MONSTER! HE’S A MONSTER!"

Suddenly, the severed half-houses, falling debris, and dismembered bodies suspended in the air froze mid-flight.

They hung motionless against the clouds, surrounded by a glowing translucent green aura crushing telekinetic mana.

Emelie stepped through the clearing smoke beside Reuben. With a cold flick of her wrist, she brought her hand slamming downward.

BOOOOM!

The piling debris slammed into the street like a falling mountain.

The impact shattered the stone street, pulverizing the remaining attackers on the street underneath tons of crushing weight. Panicked shrieks of pure terror rang out from every corner of the slums as the survivors scrambled over one another to escape.

Through the clearing fog where Reuben and Emelie stood, a third figure launched forward.

CLACK! CLACK!

Metallic snaps of twin brass knuckle switchblades echoed sharply through the smoke. Moving with the predatory efficiency of a huntsman, Kurt blurred across the fog.

Within seconds, the street was filled with the blood-curdling screams of pure agony.

Kurt moved like a phantom through the chaos, leaving crimson streaks across the grey stone and dismembered bodies in his wake. His single blue eye glowed with an unholy, lethal rage. Anyone holding a weapon was dismantled before they even realized he was standing next to them.

One man – a gangly thug with a crude iron dagger – dropped his weapon and scrambled frantically through the ruins of a half-destroyed house.

He clawed at the splinters, tears streaming down his face as he screamed at the top of his lungs. "SAVIORS! BROTHERHOOD! HELP ME! HEEELP!"

Whoosh!

A hand shot out from the dust, clamping around his face like a vice.

CRASH!

Kurt slammed the man’s head down through a wooden table, pinning him to the floorboards.

He then leaned his face inches from the terrified thug’s. "WHERE IS SHE?!"

"H-HELP–!"

THWACK!

Kurt raised his right hand, equipped with blood-stained brass knuckles, and brought it slamming down into the man’s jaw. Blood and spit sprayed across the floorboards.

"WHERE IS RUPEE?!"

"W-Who– R-Rup–"

THWACK!

The brass knuckles slammed down again. Yellowed teeth flew across the room, bouncing off the cracked floor.

"LITTLE GIRL! BLONDE HAIR, BLUE EYES! SHE HAD A PINK BACKPACK! WHERE IS SHE?!"

"R-Rueee! Y-Yesh! I-I shorry! I knowsh! I knowsh! Pleash don’t hit me–"

Seeing the brass knuckles raised high above his head for a fourth strike, the thug shielded his face and shrieked. "AAAHHHH–!"

CRASH!

The blow missed his broken face by a millimeter. The metal knuckles smashed straight through the wooden floorboards, embedding into the dirt foundation beneath.

"G-Gack!" The man gagged as Kurt grabbed him by his collar.

He dragged the weeping thug out of the ruined house and back onto the street. The man's boots scraped helplessly against the stone, occasionally bumping against dead bodies, severed limbs, and thick pools of fresh blood.

He sobbed uncontrollably, whimpering out slurred, barely coherent pleas for his life since his jaw was fractured and half his teeth were gone.

Thud!

"Eurgh!" The thug tumbled forward onto the cobblestones as Kurt tossed him like a sack of trash.

When the man looked up, he froze.

The heavy smoke had split sideways, clearing the avenue. Standing before him were Emelie and Reuben.

Emelie was calmly dusting off her jacket, her green eyes icy and detached, while Reuben stood with his hands tucked casually back into his pockets, his crimson sword now sheathed at his hip.

The thug scrambled to turn around and crawl away, only to bump into Kurt blocking his way.

"Talk. And I might just let you go."

"D-Down... d-down the shouth end of the shlumsh!" the man sobbed out, his broken jaw causing every word to slur into a desperate mess.

"Th-There’sh a warehouse! With a canal that leadsh to the open shea! I-Inshide the warehouse... th-that’sh where the girl ish!"

Kurt reached down and grabbed the man by the collar with one hand, lifting his entire upper body off the ground.

"Why? Why did you kidnap her?!"

"I-It’sh for Tobiash! He’sh... he’sh collecting children like her for money! We shent word to the Brotherhood that we got one... and to meet ush there!"

Kurt’s eye widened. A furious shock rippled through his chest. He clicked his tongue sharply as he felt a bitter rage settle into his bones.

"Tobias is dead..."

"H-Huh...?"

"I said Tobias is dead, you bastard!"

"AAHH–!"

THWACK!

Kurt threw a full-powered left hook straight into the man’s temple.

The brass knuckles connected with a sickening crunch, instantly shutting the thug's lights out. The man went completely limp, collapsing onto the cobblestones in an unconscious heap.

Standing over him, Kurt unclasped the brass knuckles and shook his hands to fling the lingering blood off the metal before slipping them back into his holster.

Behind him, Reuben took a step forward, looking down at the unconscious thug with a subtle raise of his eyebrow. "You're not killing him?"

"No. Didn't you hear what he just said? These trash are still communicating with the Cult. He's a lead, alongside the people we're about to meet. We're not done with him just yet."

He then turned his head, looking toward the southern district where the canals cut through the city.

"Now, let's Rupee."