THORNS 231

Chapter 231 Reaping What You Sow

Inside the drafty warehouse down by the slum's murky canal, Rupee lay bound in rope on a beaten-up stained couch. Her ankles and hands were tied together, and a dirty cloth was stuffed into her mouth to muffle her frightened whimpers.

In the center of the dusty floor, two men were seated on rickety wooden chairs.

One of them suddenly scrambled to his feet, pacing back and forth in nervous strides. The second man, sitting casually with his boots propped up on a crate, grunted in annoyance as he chewed loudly on a strip of dry meat.

"Would you kindly sit your ass down, Dole?!" the seated man yelled.

"I can't help it, Dale! I'm nervous, alright?! Nervous as a cat on a hot-tin roof!"

Dale lowered his bag of jerky and glared at him with utter disdain. "What the fuck you so nervous for, huh boy?!"

"What chu mean, 'what'?! It's the Brotherhood! I'm nervous about finally meeting them high-and-mighty cult fella's! And hey – do not swear in front of the little lady! It ain't appropriate!"

"Ain't appropriate?!" Dale slammed his boots onto the floor and stood up so fast his chair fell back. "What the hell do you care about 'appropiate'?!"

He marched over to the couch and reached down to yank Rupee up by her hair. She let out a muffled cry as her tear-streaked face was forced upward.

"This here little lass is going to be dead real soon anyway! I hear them Brotherhood boys are some mighty freaks with the kids they take in!"

With a cruel chuckle, he shoved her head back down onto the stained cushions.

Dole rushed forward, shoving Dale’s shoulder aside and gently smoothing down Rupee’s tangled hair.

"Leave her be, Dale! I feel sorry for the girl! She were our neighbor not that long ago, always smiling and never missing a chance to greet us on the street! Don’t you feel a little sympathy for her?!"

"What chu tryna say, Dole? You want to free this here little lass? Because it sounds to me like yer tryna fuck us all over with yer pathetic sympathy!"

"Naw, Dale! I get it! I understand that giving her away to them Brotherhood fellas will bring us a whole heap of fortune! I’m just saying... you ought to treat her a little more kindly while she’s still breathing, is all!"

Dale stepped closer with a mean scowl. Dole’s eyes darted around nervously, but he forced himself to stand his ground, puffing out his chest with a fragile burst of false bravado.

Dale stopped right in front of him. For a second, a gentle, friendly smile spread across Dale’s weathered face.

Dole relaxed, smiling back. "See? I knew you’d–"

THWACK!

Dale threw an unexpecting sucker punch straight into Dole’s cheekbone.

"Argh!"

Thud!

"Don’t you ever tell me what I can and cannot say!" Dale shouted down at him, spitting on the ground. "I do whatever the hell I well please! Especially if the person I’m talking to is going to die for my and the community’s benefit! Fuck you, Dole! And fuck you, Rupee!"

He then turned toward the couch and pointed an accusatory finger at the sobbing girl.

"Lying there crying like a bitch... Yer lucky I ain't killed you – like we killed yer parents – for putting up that little fight when we snatched you at yer folks' place!"

Rupee's blue eyes went wide as her muffled cries hitched in her throat.

Dale grinned, thoroughly enjoying the horror on the child's face. "Oh, didn't you know, little girl? We helped them Brotherhood folk kill yer ma and pa! We even had ourselves a little fun with yer ma before we threw 'em in the ditch! Ain't that right, Dole?!"

Dole lay on the ground, keeping his face turned away, refusing to look.

Dale kicked his side hard.

THUD!

"OW!"

"I said, ain't that right, Dole?!"

"Y-Y-Yeah! That's right!"

Rupee's eyes welled up with fresh tears as her body shook and muffled her heartbroken screams into the cloth.

"Hahaha! That's what I thought!" Dale bent down, grabbed Dole by his thinning hair, and yanked his head around so he was forced to face the couch.

"Now say it to her! Say, ’Fuck you, Rupee!’"

Dole closed his eyes tight and shook his head. "No, Dale... come on, man..."

Dale grabbed him by the upper eyelids and pried them open forcefully with his filthy fingers. "Say it! Say it right now or I swear to the Almighty Goddess I’ll cut yer throat and leave you in the canal!"

"Alright! Alright! I’m sorry, Dale! I’ll do it!"

With a cruel smirk, Dale released him and casually walked back to his chair. He kicked it upright, sat down, and pulled out another strip of dried meat, watching Dole like a hawk while he chewed.

Dole wiped the blood from his nose, swallowed hard, and looked at the weeping girl on the couch.

He took a deep breath, puffed out his chest, and shouted at the top of his lungs: "FUCK–"

"Don’t. Move."

The cold, deadly edge of a steel blade pressed firmly against the front of Dole’s throat.

Dale sat up so fast his boots kicked his own chair over again. "Who the fuck are you?"

Dole shrieked at the top of his lungs without moving his neck an inch. "How the hell could you let him sneak past you?!"

"Sneak past me?! I ain’t seen shit! I was looking right at you the whole damn time! He just came out of nowhere!"

"Well clearly he didn’t come out of nowhere if he’s holding a knife to my damn throat! He would’ve had to come from right behind me, and you were sitting right behind me!"

"I said I ain’t seen shit, you idiot!"

While the two screamed at each other, Kurt ignored them and looked at the terrified little girl on the couch.

"Hey, Rupee. I’m here to save you."

Rupee’s muffled sobs broke out anew. Recognising him, she began squirming against her ropes, trying with all her might to inch closer to him.

"Hey!" Dale shouted. "You stay right where you are, little girl!"

"No... you stay right where you are," a smooth female voice echoed from directly behind him.

Dale spun around, his heart leaping into his throat as he came face-to-face with a young woman with silver hair and green eyes. "Yer... Yer that famous gal, Emelie Herst!"

"Bingo. And you’re royally f, u, c, k, e, d."

Dale took one look at her, looked at Kurt, and looked at the exit. "This shit ain’t worth it!"

He bolted right past Emelie, who didn’t even bother to raise a finger to stop him, and sprinted toward the giant sliding doors of the warehouse exit.

Dole watched his partner abandon him in disbelief. "Yer just going to leave me here?! Traitorous bastard!"

"Sorry, Dole! But this is a bust!"

"DALE!!!"

THUD!

Outside the wooden doors, Dale ran full-tilt into what felt like a solid wall. He bounced off the impact and crashed hard onto the dirt, landing butt-first in a puddle.

He slowly looked up.

Standing in the frame was Reuben, whose arms were folded, and his expression as stoic as ever.

Inside the warehouse, Kurt looked down at Dole, then up at Reuben, when a mischievous idea popped in his head. Exaggerating his tone, Kurt slipped into a terrible mocking drawl:

"Well now, Duke... would you be so mighty kind as to show that there fella out the door? I reckon we only need one of these fine gentlemen, and this here fella I have in my grasp seems real keen to cooperate. Ain't that right, mister?"

"Y-Yes! Yes, sir! I'll cooperate! I'll tell you whatever you wanna know! Just please don't kill me!"

Outside Dale scrambled backward in the puddle, screaming at Dole, "Traitorous scum!"

Reuben stepped forward, grabbed Dale by the back of his vest like a misbehaving stray cat, and dragged him away into the darkness. Dale's high-pitched screaming slowly faded into the distance.

Emelie walked over to the couch and undid Rupee's bindings, gently pulling the cloth out of the child's mouth.

The moment her lips were free, Rupee let out a loud wail. "UNCLE KURT!"

She threw herself off the couch and threw her small arms around his leg, burying her face in his trousers as she sobbed hysterically. "Uncle Kurt! They killed them! They killed Mommy and Daddy!"

Kurt pulled his knife back from Dole's throat and bent down, scooping Rupee up into his arms. He held her close against his chest, gently rubbing her back as she cried into his shoulder, her tiny hands clutching onto him for dear life.

Seeing the one-eyed man occupied with the child, Dole scrambled across the dirt toward a crossbow lying near his chair. He dived for the weapon and shrieked, "I'll kill you!"

Before his fingers could even graze it, the crossbow suddenly lifted off the floor on its own and floated high in the air.

"What in tarnation–?!"

"Nuh uh uhhh~" Emelie casually twirled her finger in the air as she tutted playfully.

With a flick of said finger, the floating crossbow spun 180 degrees in mid-air, pointing its loaded bolt straight at Dole's lower body.

Pew—STAB!

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!" Dole shrieked in agony as the iron bolt shot forward straight through his thigh.

He fell onto his back, clutching his bleeding leg and weeping like a baby.

Footsteps echoed near the main entrance as Reuben stepped back inside the warehouse. He was calmly adjusting his black gloves, pulling them snug over his fingers.

"The loud one has been dealt with. Before his demise, he mentioned that a unit from the Brotherhood is scheduled to arrive at this location in approximately ten minutes. He tried to make it sound like a threat. It was not."

He then stopped and looked over at Kurt. "What is your plan, Rossana?"

Kurt looked down at the sobbing girl in his arms, then shifted his gaze to the groaning thug bleeding on the floor.

He whispered softly into Rupee's ear. "Rupee... I need to take care of one last thing here, and then we can go right back to the orphanage, alright?"

Rupee pulled her face back slightly. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her tiny lips trembling, but she gave a small, resolute nod.

"Cool."

He walked over to Emelie and gently set the little girl down beside her. "You two stay back and hide at a good vantage point. You too, Reuben. Take the high ground."

"And what exactly do you intend to do?"

Kurt turned around, walking over to the couch. He reached down, grabbed the whimpering Dole by his collar, and threw him onto the couch. He then casually sat down on the right beside him, resting his elbows on his knees and popping his knuckles with a dangerous grin.

"The two of us are going to sit right here and politely wait for whatever cultists show up. Once they walk through those doors, you two ambush and incapacitate them. Once we have them wrapped up, we hand them straight over to the Prefects and go home. Bada-boom, bada-bing. Mission complete."

Chapter 232 Safe And Sound

With his arms spread long across the top edges of the couch and his legs crossed, Kurt leaned back like a king lounging on a throne.

"–I wish that we could lose this crowd...♫"

Sob "P-Please.... *sob* my leg hurts..."

"Maybe, it’s better this way♫"

"It’s not better, Mr. One-eyed Man. *Sob*"

"We’d hurt each other with the things we want to say♫"

"Please... I’m the one who’s hurting..."

"We could have been so good–"

"Would you mind... shuttin’ yer trap!? Yer singin’ is giving me a headache, on top of me bleedin’ to death...! *Sob*"

Kurt paused his song, casting an amused glance sideways. "Bleeding to death? Please. Looking at you, Emy intentionally missed your main artery. You’ll live long enough to stand before the king, so stop whining."

Suddenly, Kurt’s ears twitched.

Through the ambient silence of the warehouse, the faint sound of multiple boots crunching against the wet cobblestones outside drifted through the walls.

"Get ready, Dole," Kurt murmured as he uncrossed his legs. "Looks like your precious cultist friends are right on time. It’s time to dance."

BOOM!

Before Dole could even gulp, the large sliding doors of the warehouse were violently blown off their hinges. Wood splinters rained down into the dark room. Kurt smoothly pushed himself off the couch, stepping out into the open center floor with a wide-open greeting posture.

"Hello, friends! That's quite the dramatic entrance! You know, the door was actually unlocked–"

"PREFECTS! EVERYONE ON THE GROUND! DON'T MOVE!"

A blinding flash of light magic shined through the shattered entrance, illuminating the gloomy warehouse like the midday sun.

Dozens of armored figures poured through the doorway in a swift breaching line. Through the blinding glare, the Prefect Captain swung his glowing staff forward, his eyes locking onto the scene in the center of the room: an intimidating, one-eyed man casually standing with his arms wide open and a bright smile, towering over a bleeding, terrified civilian on the couch.

Within a split second, a full squad of fifteen Prefects formed a semi-circular perimeter, pointing their enchanted crossbows and magic staves straight at Kurt's chest.

"DROP YOUR WEAPONS! HANDS WHERE WE CAN SEE THEM! WE HAVE THIS WAREHOUSE COMPLETELY SURROUNDED! YOU'RE UNDER ARREST, CULTIST!"

"Are you freaking kidding me right now?" Kurt slowly raised his hands to shoulder height. "You guys aren't the Cultists. God, you being here practically ruined my trap..."

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH!" the captain barked, taking a step forward with his sword drawn. "STEP AWAY FROM THE CIVILIAN IMMEDIATELY!"

"Civilian?! He's not a civilian! He's an accomplice to child trafficking and murder–"

"Y-YES! ARREST HIM!" Dole suddenly shrieked at the top of his lungs, thrashing on the couch and pointing a frantic, trembling finger at Kurt.

"HE’S A CULTIST, I TELL YA! HE HAS TWO MORE ACCOMPLICES WITH HIM! ONE’S HIDING UP IN THE RAFTERS AND ANOTHER ONE IS HIDING INSIDE THE STORAGE ROOM WITH THE LITTLE GIRL THEY KIDNAPPED!"

The captain’s eyes narrowed. "Squad Two! Search the rafters! Squad Three, clear that storage room–"

"There is no need for such excessive shouting," a deep, calm voice echoed from directly above them.

A shadow detached itself from the darkness of the ceiling. With his hands in his pockets, Reuben casually leapt down through the air and landed next to the Prefect Captain.

The entire squad gasped in panic at the unknown figure.

"REAR GUARD! TARGET BEHIND US! DON’T MOVE, CULT–"

The words died in the prefect’s throat.

The bright light magic reflected off the crest on Reuben’s chest, the crimson hilt at his hip, and the chilling aura of high nobility radiating from his stoic face.

Simultaneously, the creaking door of the side storage room swung open.

Emelie stepped calmly out into the light, holding the small hand of Rupee. The little girl was practically glued to her side, holding her pink backpack tightly against her chest.

"Lower your weapons, boys. You’re embarrassing yourselves."

All prefects present stood frozen with their jaws hanging open as they slowly realised they had just pointed their weapons at Duke Reuben Valentine and Eldoria’s rising star, Emelie Herst.

The captain’s face turned from aggressive red to a sickly, ghostly pale. He almost tripped over his own steel boots as he scrambled backward, snapping into the most rigid and sweat-drenched formal salute of his career.

"M-MY LORD! MS. HERST! WE... WE HAD NO IDEA–!"

Reuben tilted his head slightly, his gaze locked onto the hyperventilating officer. "What exactly are you doing here, Prefect? You have just compromised our sting operation."

"I... I deeply apologise, Lord Valentine! We... We received an urgent report about an hour ago! A priest from the church brought us a letter regarding the zealots!"

Kurt raised an eyebrow, stepping closer. "Oh really? And? What did the letter say?"

"Th-The letter was delivered to the church by an anonymous messenger," the captain explained, desperately trying hard not to look Reuben in the eye.

"It stated that a group of people from these slums had successfully kidnapped a six-year-old girl with blonde hair and blue eyes and were holding her in this exact canal warehouse for a Brotherhood exchange!

"S-Since the Saintess recently cleansed all churches in Eldoria, there are virtually no Cultists left amongst them. T-The priest – who was mistaken for a zealot by the slum dweller – was so terrified of being implicated that he immediately ran the letter straight to the station!

"At the exact same time, reports of a massive explosion in the slums reached our desk, so we mobilised every available squad to storm this location!"

Kurt let out a drawling sigh, running a hand over his face. "So... There are no zealots coming here at all. The people who our friend here was waiting for were a part of Tobias’ fake priest org. Great. And here I thought we’d get a new lead..."

"More prefects are currently securing the slums." The captain quickly added. "The entire district is locked down."

Realising the grand trap was a bust, Kurt walked over to the couch, grabbed the weeping Dole by his collar, and unceremoniously shoved him forward into the arms of two prefects.

"Here. Take him."

One of the younger prefects holding Dole squinted at Kurt's face and single blue eye. His eyes went wide.

"Wait... Captain! Isn't he... isn't he Diana Vallentine's lover. Remember yesterday!? The one from the arena incident? He's also been making a lot of waves recently; including retrieving the body of the previous Saintess!"

Reuben's stoic face went slightly wide eyed at that piece of news he hadn't heard of.

The captain stared at Kurt as the memory finally jogged in his mind. "Ah! Yes, yes, I remember now. You're... you're Kurt Rossana! Commander Dominik's friend!"

"Yes. That's me."

"Forgive us! We had no idea you were conducting an operation with the duke and Ms. Herst!"

"It's fine," Kurt waved his hand dismissively. "You guys were just doing your jobs. But since you're here, you might as well take this trash's confession. Go ahead, Dole. Tell the nice Captain what you and your dead friend were bragging about a few minutes ago."

Dole, realizing that no cult brotherhood was about to rescue him anytime soon, broke down into hysterical tears.

"I'll talk! I'll tell you everything!" Dole sobbed, clutching his wounded leg as the guards held him up.

"It was Tobias! Before he died, he put out a massive bounty to all the people in the slums! He promised us fortune if we brought him young children with blonde hair and blue eyes! We... we saw Rupee walking near her old house yesterday..."

Dole hung his head in utter shame, avoiding Rupee's tear-filled gaze.

"We helped the Brotherhood ambush her house weeks ago... we were the ones who helped them murder her parents... and when we saw her back in the neighborhood, we grabbed her to collect the bounty..."

The Prefect Captain's face hardened into a scowl of pure disgust. "Disgusting trash."

He turned to Reuben, Emelie, and Kurt. "I give you my absolute word, My Lord. This man and every surviving person in these slums will face immediate trial for treason, murder, and child trafficking. After doing a full sweep, the zealots branch in these slums will be officially dismantled as of today."

"Hm. See that it is done thoroughly," Reuben commanded smoothly.

"Understood! Men! Haul him away! Get a medic to plug that wound so he doesn't bleed out before the magistrate sees him!"

The prefects quickly dragged the guilt-ridden Dole out of the warehouse, clearing the room of armored soldiers within moments.

Once the heavy boots faded into the distance, a small pair of arms suddenly wrapped tightly around Kurt's waist.

Looking down, Rupee buried her wet face against his hip, holding onto him as if he were the only solid thing left in the world.

Kurt's expression softened. He dropped to one knee on the dirty floor, reached out, and gently scooped the small girl up into his arms, pulling her close against his chest.

Rupee wrapped her small arms tightly around his neck, sniffing softly against his shoulder. "Uncle Kurt... is it true? Is Mom and Dad really gone? W-What about the adventure...?"

"I... I'm sorry, Rupee... I should've told you from the start..."

Rupee cried quietly into his shirt, but she didn't pull away. She squeezed him tighter.

Emelie stepped up beside them, placing a comforting hand on Kurt's shoulder. Reuben stood near the ruined doorway, his stoic gaze softening ever so slightly as he watched the quiet moment unfold.

"Come on." Kurt said softly. "Let's get you back to the orphanage. Tristan is waiting for you, and he's been worried sick."

Rupee rubbed her swollen blue eyes with her tiny fists, and gave a small, hesitant nod. "Okay..."

Safe in Kurt's strong arms, flanked by Emelie and Reuben, the group stepped out of the gloomy warehouse and into the late afternoon sun.

It was time to return to the orphanage – where two heartbroken siblings could finally reconcile, heal, and face the difficult truth together.