



05. Eyefaychee_2

EMPIRE FALL

The crew started tending to Rentoth. He was pretty beat up. Blood stained his expensive clothes, his hair disheveled. He felt embarrassed too, though he tried not to show it. When Vera stepped closer to inspect his injuries, he pushed her hand away.

"I'm fine."

Rentoth stood up.

"Did any of you hear what he said? I'm assuming you heard the whole thing."

"No," said Mads. "Not really. Did you guys?"

Sophie and Vera shook their heads. They had no clue either.

Vera frowned. "You mean... Bandit thinks you're actually brothers?"

Rentoth let out a short, humorless laugh. "Apparently."

He walked to the kitchen and reached for the liquor cabinet. Scotch. He poured himself a stiff drink. Then another. As he lifted the glass, he began explaining

his theory.

"This was either the work of a lunatic... or the Sworn."

He took a slow sip.

"And my money is on the second option."

Vera stepped closer and placed a hand gently on his shoulder.

"But do you know if it's true?"

Rentoth laughed quietly.

"It's impossible."

He stared down into his drink.

"My mother would never have abandoned a child."

He paused, then added more quietly,

"If she had another son out there... she would have found him."

He swallowed the rest of the Scotch.

"My father... that's another story. Him getting a Slummer pregnant and pretending the kid didn't exist? That always sounded believable enough."

He scoffed.

"The great Lord Rabenath. Leader of the Authority Council. Man of the people."

He shook his head.

"What a joke."

He poured himself another drink.

"But my mother..." he continued more quietly.

"She would never have done that. It would have

eaten her alive.”

He paused.

“Unless...”

Mads frowned.

“Unless what?”

Rentoth pressed the cold glass against his bruised cheek.

“Unless the Sworn convinced her too.”

He looked up slowly.

“She was very pious, my mother.”

A long silence fell across the room.

“A perfect woman.”

Rentoth felt the anger rising in his chest.

“And she died because of me.”

The others looked at each other, not knowing what to say. They knew Rentoth felt responsible for her death, and frankly... they had all wondered the same thing.

Mads spoke first.

“I think we should give him some air. We all love Bandit, but he’s got to digest this on his own. If he wants to talk to us, great — we’ll be there. But if he wants to go on some suicidal, self-destructive quest, I’m not sure chasing him will help.”

Sophie wasn’t having it.

“Oh, so we should abandon him? When he needs us the most? Some friend you are, Mads.”

"Listen, Soph," Mads said calmly. "I love him as much as you do. But I know him. If we go after him right now, it'll have the opposite effect. He'll reject us. You saw what he just did to Rentoth."

He gestured toward the bruised aristocrat.

"Maybe the smarter move is to dig into this story ourselves. See if there's any truth to it. Rentoth — you know every powerful person in this godforsaken place. There's got to be something you can find."

Rentoth walked back to the table and sat down.

"Yeah... maybe. But I'm not exactly popular with the Elderise elite these days. Being stuck down here with the peasants doesn't exactly help."

"Aaaand he's back." Vera gave him the biggest eye roll.

Aksel had been quietly listening for a while. He wasn't one to talk unless he had something worth saying. He turned toward the window of the modest house they were all staying in. The Slums buzzed outside. Neon. Voices. Sirens somewhere in the distance.

"It's funny," he said slowly.

"When I studied the old folklore songs of Elderise... and the ancient symphonies too... I started seeing this strange recurring theme in the lyrics."

No one interrupted him.

"A lot of the old Sworn musical works talked about two brothers. Brothers who were going to change the world, for better or worse."

Rentoth frowned.

"What are you rambling about?"

Aksel shrugged slightly.

"I don't know for sure. But I think I might be talking about you. And Bandit."

The room grew quiet.

"I've worked with some of the most successful artists in Elderise. I lived a lavish life. I partied with everyone who's anyone. You don't remember me, but I remember you. I saw how people looked at you when we crossed paths up there," Aksel continued. "I heard how the most powerful people in the world talked about you. Zero especially. He always said you were important. That you had a role to play in the future of Elderise."

Rentoth's jaw tightened.

"And now suddenly you're discarded? Cast out?"

Aksel shook his head.

"I'm no politician... but something about that doesn't add up."

Rentoth leaned forward.

"So what are you saying?"

Aksel looked at him calmly.

"I'm saying maybe Bandit heard the truth."

The silence returned.

"And if your parents gave him up..." Aksel continued quietly.

"...maybe it wasn't their decision."

Rentoth stared at him.

"You think the Sworn forced them?"

Aksel didn't answer immediately.

He looked back out the window at the restless Slums. Then he said,

"I think someone out there wanted Bandit to learn this today."

No one spoke.

And for the first time since Bandit stormed out of the house, the idea occurred to all of them at once.

This might not have been an accident.

BANDIT

He still had the key to his old shack. He still knew where to find his old Flux supplier. He was kind of famous in the Slums now, but he didn't really care at this moment. He just wanted to get fucked up so he could stop feeling all this pain.

He bought enough Flux for a week-long bender. Locked himself in and got high. He wrote sometimes,

pages and pages of stuff. He went out for food a few times and got into a couple of fistfights with punishers who kept heckling him, begging for a reaction. He cried. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He texted Sophie that he loved her and that he was sorry, but he needed to be alone for a while. She replied, but he never even read any of her texts. Self-absorbed, fixated on the lie that was his life. He knew in his bones that the man had told him the truth. And if he survived this week, he was going to find out more about it all.

If he survived the week.

JIMMY

Life had been good to him since the coup. Now a high-ranking Sworn operative, he would become a priest in a few hours. It was one of the highest honors a member of the Sworn could receive. His pivotal role in eliminating the head of the Authority Council had accelerated things for him. It had done the same for the other Sworn members who had been with him that day, in that room.

Most of them were fanatics, and Jimmy kept rationalizing his position in all of this.

“I had to do it.” “What choice did I have?” “They would have killed me if I hadn’t done it.”

The truth was, he was still livid about it. But now wasn’t the time for self-pity. He was about to meet Zero, who personally officiated every ceremony where Sworn operatives were granted priesthood. He would then receive his first assignment. He was eager and nervous at the same time.

When the time finally came, he and the other lucky few walked into the immense Sworn cathedral on Level 92. It was packed with thousands of people. They were all chanting the words in unison.

IZE WAID SEH. Darkness is my light.

Zero appeared behind four guards armed to the teeth. How things had changed, Jimmy thought. Things had gotten more serious than he had ever imagined. There was no coming back now. You didn’t quit priesthood. It was a lifetime commitment. But money and power made it worth it, he thought.

The chanting slowly died down as Zero stepped forward. His voice carried effortlessly through the massive cathedral.

“You have served faithfully,” Zero said. “And today you ascend.”

One by one, the new priests stepped forward to receive their blessing. When Jimmy’s turn came, he

knelt.

Zero looked down at him for a long moment. There was something unsettling in his gaze, as if he were studying him rather than honoring him.

Then he leaned closer.

"Your first assignment," Zero said quietly, "will take you somewhere... familiar."

Jimmy frowned slightly.

"The Slums."

A murmur passed through the priests behind him.

Zero's lips curled into the faintest smile.

"There is a young man there," he continued softly.

"You already know him."

Jimmy's stomach tightened.

Zero's eyes darkened.

"The leader of the New Militia. His name is Bandit."