

12. Heat_1

RENTOTH

He reread the letter. Again and again. Everything made sense to him. The Gemini Curse was real. Why they had given away his little brother. She even mentioned his real name. But the hardest part was that he had to keep it all to himself for now. Maybe forever. His mother said it herself at the end of her letter:

"Whatever happens, Rentoth: you shall never tell your brother the truth. He has to find it out himself. The fate of Elderise depends on it. He has to choose the light by himself. It's his cross to bear. And keeping this secret is yours."

As he was still digesting everything he was reading, Rentoth heard noises.

Fighting, shouting. He put the letter and the book back in the case, which closed itself instantly, and exited his safe. The noises were getting louder. As soon as the safe door locked, he started running towards the entrance to check on his bodyguards.

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The noises stopped a bit before he made it to the entrance. That's when he saw the blood. Then the bodies. His bodyguards, dead. Their throats slit. He let out a piercing scream and ran to check on them.
Before he could reach their still-warm bodies, he saw the squad of Sworn soldiers. And in front of them, the Priestess.
"Rentoth. You need to come with us. Master Zero requests your presence."
"You motherfuckers!" He choked on his words as he shouted, his tears and emotions making it hard to even speak.
As angry as he was, his survival instinct kicked in. He scanned the room for a way out. There was none. He was caught. He put his head down. Breathed deep. Fixed his hair. Then he spoke.
"Haaaaa, Priestess. Your voice is still as unpleasant and shrill as ever. Even behind this ridiculous mask. Funny enough, I remember seeing you without it. Come to think of it, I remember seeing you without any clothes at all. Once a whore, now a woman of faith. How cliché, my dear."
That jab earned him a serious beatdown. Worth it. Once they were done teaching him some manners, the soldiers cuffed him and threw him into the back of a Sworn truck. Destination: the Nowhere Level.

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Rentoth was surprised they didn't even try to get into his safe. Didn't even mention it. He was obliterated by the death of his companions, but he had no time to grieve. What could Zero possibly want?

When they finally got to the Nowhere Level through the forbidden elevator on the 99th floor, the soldiers dragged him to the hidden cages, a mythical prison where the most dangerous and important enemies of the various regimes were rumored to be kept. Rentoth remembered his father mentioning it, but he had never visited. He was about to now.

Along the rusty, dark corridors, he walked among the numerous cells. Most were occupied. He saw people he recognized. Old dignitaries from the Authority. Ministers and stars who had not bowed down to the Sworn. Then he saw Oran. Then he saw Stephanie.

Before leaving him in his cell, the Priestess wanted to say one more thing. "You've always been a spoiled brat. But we all thought you had conviction. We all thought you would lead us to where we're supposed to go, along with Zero. Turns out, you were just another rich kid with a daddy complex." She kicked him hard in the balls as she left.

Rentoth doubled over in pain. "Ouch! Glad to see

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you still can't resist reaching for my cock... Jane," he smirked.
She turned around one last time after the guards locked the door. "Talk all you want. You're gonna die soon. You, your brother, and all your friends."

EMPIRE FALL

The band decided to bring Jimmy home with them to the place they'd all shared since the coup. Vera threw a blanket on the couch for him. Jimmy said thanks. Nobody answered. Bandit stood in the kitchen doorway and watched him take off his boots. Carefully. Lining them up side by side like a soldier. His best friend's brother had killed the mother he didn't know he had (and his deadbeat, all-powerful father), and now that same guy was gonna sleep twenty feet from his bed. Bandit waited to feel something. Rage. Grief. Anything. All he got was a dull buzzing behind his eyes. He thought about calling Sophie, then remembered he'd fucked things up for good with her. There was no one to talk to about it. He also knew he didn't have time for all that. Bigger things.
Vera kept asking him if he was okay with all this. She told Bandit that she too didn't think they could trust

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Jimmy. "I only trust you and Mads. And Sophie. I'm not even sure about Aksel, to be honest... he was gone for a long time."

She didn't realize Mads could hear everything from the other side of the wall. He barged in. "I actually agree with you."

Vera was embarrassed. He told her she didn't need to be. "It's all good, V. The way I look at it, it's us three against all of Elderise. We have our families, our people, the Militia... but for all the big stuff, we can only trust each other."

They all acquiesced.

Vera was the first to wonder about Rentoth. He was gonna be a problem too. But she had grown to like him over time. She saw the human side of him, the one he tried so hard to conceal. She texted him, but her message didn't go through.

Strange, she thought.

Bandit said he needed time to think. He stepped outside.

A group of guys recognized him about thirty minutes into his walk. A wave of anger took over. He cursed and yelled at them, told them he wasn't in the mood. When one of the guys insulted him for being such an "accidentally famous little douchebag," he saw red. He took a step towards him. The guy stepped back.

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And then Bandit stopped. What the fuck was he doing?
He looked at the guy. Some random asshole he'd never met. He was ready to beat him to a pulp. For what? Calling him a douchebag?
He thought about Jimmy. His mother. His father. Rentoth. Sophie. All the people he'd hurt, all the people who'd hurt him. And Zero. Always Zero.
It hit him.
This dark force inside him. This anger. It was exactly what Zero wanted. Push him to the brink. Isolate him from his friends and everyone he knew. Turn him against the people he loved. It wasn't just about dividing the band. It was about him. Anger, to violence, to dissension, to destruction.
Bandit looked back at the guy, who was still staring at him. He almost laughed. He'd come this close to falling for it.
He started running home. He couldn't wait to run his theory by Vera and Mads.

However, he was met by a very different scene when he entered the house. Aksel was sitting listless in a corner. Sophie was there, consoling him. Mads and Vera were holding something. Pictures. Rentoth, Oran, and Stephanie in their cells. With them, a note:

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"If you want your friends to live, Bandit, and only Bandit, will come meet Master Zero tomorrow at 8 a.m. sharp. We will send a car."

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