



03. Everybody Else

BANDIT

Bandit didn't know where he was going. That wasn't new. The Slums slid past him in streaks of rust and flickering light, neon signs buzzing overhead, half-dead slogans stuttering through words no one remembered agreeing to. The air tasted like oil and damp concrete. Same as always. Home. His legs moved on muscle memory alone, years of walking these paths without thinking, but something had shifted, like the ground itself had tilted a few degrees and never bothered to warn anyone. The Flux was already climbing again — not the clean lift he liked, but something jagged and uneven, too much, too fast, his thoughts no longer stretching but fracturing. And the drugs hadn't even been the first thing to rattle him that day. Not even the fight with Sophie. No. It was before all of that.

That had happened in the morning, on his usual run. Same hour, same route, the one stretch of time he

protected before everything else started demanding pieces of him. He'd been halfway through, lungs burning, counting miles like always, when the man stepped out from between two buildings like he'd been part of the route all along. He didn't block the path or rush him, just matched Bandit's pace for a few strides, easy and practiced. Then he raised a hand, not to stop him, just enough to be seen. Bandit, annoyed, slowed and pulled his headphones off.

"You're very consistent," the man said.

"That's how people find you."

Bandit scoffed, breath ragged. "Who are you?"

The man regarded him calmly. No insignia. No uniform. Nothing memorable.

"Someone who knows your family," he said.

Bandit frowned. "I don't have one."

The man nodded once, like he'd expected that answer. "Lady Rabenath was your mother," he said, tone unchanged. "Lord Rabenath was your father."

Bandit stumbled — not enough to fall, just enough to feel it.

"You weren't an affair," the man continued. "You weren't a mistake. You were born with the same claim as their other son."

Bandit stared at him, heart pounding in his ears.

“You weren’t hidden,” the man said after a pause. “You were refused.”

Bandit took a step forward. “That’s bullshit.”

The man didn’t argue. “Ask your brother,” he said simply. “Ask him why no one ever came. Ask him how he found you. See what he tells you.”

Then he stepped back, already retreating, letting the distance open like the conversation had ended because it was never meant to continue. By the time Bandit gathered himself enough to follow, the man had disappeared behind the nearest corner.

Bandit was shaken. He stood there longer than he realized, chest heaving, trying to decide whether anger or disbelief was winning. Why would someone lie about something like that? Just to fuck with him? And yet — he had no memories of his mother. No face. No voice. Just absence. Doubt crept in despite himself. Not belief. Just the possibility of belief. Enough to poison everything.

He got high when he got home. Then Sophie got on his nerves. Then he exploded.

Now, hours after the fight with his lover, Bandit was even more lost. He let out a sharp laugh that startled even him. He passed a group of kids sitting on milk

crates, trading knockoff cards, arguing about whose deck was better. One of them recognized him, eyes lighting up, grin spreading.

“Yo — Bandit!”

He didn't slow. The grin faltered. The kid didn't call again. Good. He didn't want the looks tonight, didn't want the weight of expectation, the borrowed pride, the way people stared at him like he was proof of something clean and solid, like he belonged. They loved things that made sense. They loved things that stayed. He shoved his hands into his pockets, fingers brushing empty Flux cartridges he'd forgotten to toss, feeling suddenly exposed, like someone had peeled a layer off him without asking.

Just as legitimate as Rentoth.

That was the part that wouldn't let go. Not lesser. Not outside. Equal — and still unwanted. His whole life rearranged itself around that fact, orphanage and silence snapping into a shape he finally recognized. Not because they couldn't. Because they chose not to.

He stopped without realizing it, boots skidding slightly on wet pavement. One of the old towers loomed above him, its lower levels hollowed out and blind. He'd climbed it once when he was younger — stupid dare, stupid height — remembered the

vertigo, the way the city looked small from up there. Insignificant. For a flicker — just a flicker — he thought about climbing again. Not to jump. Just to see. A laugh bubbled up, louder now, edged with something close to hysteria.

“Get a grip,” he muttered. *You fucking pussy*, he thought.

He turned and nearly ran straight into Vera. She grabbed the front of his jacket and yanked him back hard enough that his teeth clicked, eyes sharp and furious as she scanned him.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” she snapped.

Behind her, Sophie hovered, pale and tight, arms wrapped around herself like she was holding something together by force.

“Whoa,” Bandit said automatically, forcing a crooked grin. “Are you about to kick my ass?”

Vera was furious. “My brother is missing. Possibly dead. And you decide now is the moment for another disappearing act? To make your girlfriend cry? You’re such a tough guy, uh.”

Her grip tightened. She was shaking — not weak, not frantic. Controlled. Like a live wire.

“I just needed some air,” Bandit said.

“Bullshit.” Sophie stepped closer, voice quiet but tight. “You scared me. You were already high when

you left. You wouldn't answer."

Bandit opened his mouth. Closed it again. He hadn't rehearsed this part.

"What is it this time?" Vera demanded. "Another crisis of meaning? Another revelation about how the world's unfair to you?"

Something twisted hot in his chest — not at the words, but at how close they landed.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Then explain it," Vera said. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're pulling the poor me routine while the rest of us are trying to keep people alive."

Bandit laughed, harsh and sharp. "You think this is about me feeling sorry for myself?"

"Then what is it about?" she shot back. "Because you don't get to implode every time something shakes your self-image. Not anymore."

He dragged a hand through his hair, fingers catching.

"You ever find out," he said slowly, "that everything people believe about you is just... convenient?"

They stared. "That you weren't an accident. You weren't a fluke. You were exactly what you were supposed to be — and they still didn't keep you."

Sophie sucked in a breath.

"And?" Vera said. "Welcome to Elderise. You think

you're the only one who's been discarded?"

"That's not —"

"What the fuck are you even talking about?" Vera cut in, voice flat and lethal. "It does not get to matter more than Jimmy."

"Vera... I didn't say that," Bandit said. "I just needed some air, okay? I don't even know how you found me."

"You're more predictable than you think, my friend," she said. "Down to the places you go when you want to be alone."

He laughed weakly. She smirked.

He looked at Sophie, tears climbing up his eyelids.

"I'm sorry, babe. I just... it's a lot. And I'm too high."

He dropped to one knee and vomited onto the pavement.

"Ugh," he said after a moment. "I feel better."

He stood, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I need to talk to Rentoth. Can we go home?"

Vera frowned, sensing that something deeper and darker was moving beneath the surface. "Okay," she said. "My friend's ride is right over there. Let's go."