



I Believe_2

BANDIT

No one said anything else for a while. Bandit was looking at Vera's fingers, still pressed against that note in her pocket. At Mads, who hadn't moved from the bar. At Jimmy's hands, which hadn't come out from under the table once. Jimmy and Vera were staring at each other. Her angrily, him nonchalantly. Bandit had spent half his life reading rooms. From stages, from street corners, from orphanage bunk beds. This room was full of shit.

"V. What's in the note?"

"I said not now, B."

He didn't look at her. He looked at Jimmy. "Okay. Then you tell me." His voice was low, almost friendly. "What did you do to piss off your sister so much, bro? I mean, it's gotta be pretty bad, since I saw you murder your two henchmen like it was no biggie." Jimmy let out a smirk. "You have no idea." For a second, the smirk slipped. "Half the time, neither do I."

VERA

She was lost. Completely out of her depth. She looked at Mads for a second, and he knew she needed help. He came over, sat down, and took over.

"Jimmy, I think you need to give us some time, just the three of us, okay? We're gonna step outside because V and I need to talk to Bandit. It shouldn't take us more than 30 minutes."

"30 minutes?" Bandit stared at his bandmate, incredulous.

"Trust me, B. It's a biggie." Mads put his hand on Bandit's shoulder.

"Take your time, I'm not going anywhere." Jimmy waved at the barkeep. "Can I get a pint of whatever you have on tap? I'm thirsty."

The three bandmates stepped outside. Vera and Mads hugged Bandit. They told him they loved him. Now he knew this was really gonna be something bad. He'd been treating everyone, especially his best friends, like pure shit for the past few weeks.

Vera reached for the note. Her hand was shaking. She didn't read it to him. She just held it out. Bandit took it. Unfolded it. The paper was so soft it barely held its shape.

Your brother killed Lady Rabenath. And he's in the Slums right now, looking for Bandit.

He read it twice. Then a third time. "Your brother," he said.

"Jimmy," Vera said. "Jimmy did it, B. Him and a few others. Both of them. Your mom and your dad."

Bandit nodded slowly, like she'd told him the time. He tried to picture her. Lady Rabenath. His mother. He'd been trying for weeks. Nothing came. No face. No voice. He'd never even said her name out loud. He folded the note back along its crease and handed it to Vera. Neat. Careful. Like it belonged to someone else.

Then he laughed. One short, ugly sound that didn't belong to anything. "The guy who killed my mom just bought me a drink."

He took a hit. Then another. Mads took his hand and didn't let go. Jimmy killed the parents he never knew he had.

He sat down on the curb. Vera and Mads sat down next to him, putting their arms around him. No one said anything for a good while. The rain kept coming down through the vents. Thin. Greasy. It never washed anything, just moved it around. The same dirt, from one corner to another. Over and over. Like somebody was arranging it. Bandit watched it for a

long time.

Then he stood up. He was high. But maybe also clairvoyant.

"Forget all this stuff. Look at the big picture. At first, I thought we were cannon fodder. Then I thought we were puppets. Now I'm realizing... we're actors." He threw his Flux cartridge on the ground. "And I don't know about you guys, but I'm not letting anybody else write my fucking script. Let's go talk to your brother."

Bandit ran back in. Vera and Mads followed. He sat across from Jimmy, who was still working on his pint. His voice was quiet but determined. "Alright, deserting murder boy. Looks like you killed my parents. Nice job. Guess that's gonna make things a little awkward between Vera and I, huh?"

Jimmy frowned. He knew Bandit called Rentoth his brother. He'd figured it was street talk, or some half-blood thing.

Vera added context. "Bandit is Rentoth's brother. His real brother. The Rabenaths gave him up, but he was their kid."

"Damn," said Jimmy. He watched Bandit carefully as he said the next part. A test.

"Bandit really is the perfect name for you, huh? The little mutt nobody wants."

Bandit let that go. He didn't care. Or at least he didn't seem to. "Yeah yeah, heard it all a million times. Cool story, bitch boy. Now tell me. Why did you?"

"Because I was following the Sworn's direct orders. There was a bunch of us in that room. We were told to kill both Rabenaths, which honestly surprised us all since we originally thought only the Lord was gonna get the axe."

Vera remembered what Rentoth had told her. "You're fucking lying. One of your 'brothers' told Rentoth you disobeyed a direct order and you were supposed to only kill him."

For the first time in a while, Jimmy didn't know what to say. Why would someone from the Sworn tell Rentoth such a lie? What purpose would it serve? He was to continue with his mission regardless, but doubt started creeping in. "I'm telling the truth. I'm here, aren't I? Why would I lie now?"

Bandit thought about it for a bit. "You're not lying. Somebody lied to Rentoth. Because that's what he wants... Zero wants to divide us. That's the screenplay."

RENTOTH

He actually enjoyed the challenge that trying to

reach the higher levels presented to him. The Slums were sealed, supposedly. But Rentoth knew that money opened all doors. A Sol for a soul.

Speaking of which, he needed to access some funds urgently. He knew his bodyguards' patience was wearing thin, and he needed money to work around the blockade of the Slums. He had cash lying around, but it was in his place on the 99th floor.

He reached out to some of his connections in the Slums to finagle his way up to the 14th floor. There, one of the club owners he used to frequent helped get him and his bodyguards to the 27th. On the 27th, he begged one of his old "girlfriends" to take him back to her parents' house on the 56th. She threatened to call the cops when she first saw him, but by the time they made it to her folks' home, they were furiously making out in the bushes on the side of the house. His bodyguards pretended they weren't there. They had seen way, way more graphic stuff go down with this guy.

From the 56th, one of his drug dealers took him up to the 85th, to one of his other clients Rentoth had partied with a few times. Finally, he met up with his stupid cousin, who'd been disowned by the family years ago for being a total fuckup. Nobody bothered watching him anymore, which made him perfect.

He'd always put Rentoth on a pedestal and would do anything he asked of him. Together, they went up to the upper-est level.

When he finally made it to the 99th, his face largely covered by an oversized hoodie, he couldn't believe his eyes: Nothing had changed. The same people in the streets, the same sense of opulence and *légèreté*. Sure, he could see Sworn agents at pretty much every street corner, now fully out, proudly wearing their insignias. But no one was visibly armed or tense. The coup orchestrated by Zero (and himself, in a past life it seemed) had already been accepted and digested. A whole regime had died, but the financial system had remained the same.

Things were vastly different for him now, though. He was trying to avoid being recognized, his hair in a strict ponytail tucked into the back of his hoodie. In the past, he would never have been caught dead wearing gray sweatpants and sneakers outside his home. But this was a new day.

His old palatial place now stood out like a sore thumb. While it once stood out for its incredible architecture and beautiful raw materials, it now did for different reasons: his front door had been busted open. The place had obviously been ransacked and vandalized. "TRAITOR," "DEATH TO THE INFIDEL,"

and other charming statements were tagged all over his interiors.

Rentoth walked among the debris, looking into the distance. This is all my fault. I got my parents killed and fucked my whole life up in the process. He shook his head to refocus on what was important. "Stay here!" he told his musclemen. Alone, Rentoth walked into his bedroom, which looked even more like a war zone than the rest of the place. But the important part remained untouched. His giant, floor-to-ceiling titanium safe door stood as pristine as the day he left. He'd had the safe custom-made a few years ago. A giant indestructible box, nested in the upper section of his residence. If someone were to nuke the towers of Elderise, and everything collapsed, that giant box would fall all the way to the Slums, intact. Its contents were more precious than anyone knew.

Rentoth grabbed the key he wore on a necklace that never left his body. He put the custom-made, four-inch-long key in its hole with his right hand, while his left entered a twelve-number combination only he knew. His mother's birthday followed by the day he met Bandit down at the orphanage. As he clicked the last number, he simultaneously twisted the key. The giant door opened for a few seconds, then closed

behind him.

In the safe, piles of bags of cash. More Sols than he would ever need in the Slums. Only one or two bags would suffice. Besides, more would draw too much attention and envy.

He then turned his attention to the small, discreet safe at the center of the room. A black box with a particular aura. He looked at the center of the box, then said his name out loud. "Rentoth Rabenath." The safe scanned his eyes with a blue laser and made a clicky sound. The top of the box opened up, revealing a very old book.

The pages were moldy and yellow. On it, the Sworn insignia.

As he lifted it to take it with him, his eyes opened wide: Underneath was a sealed envelope with his name on it. He recognized the seal and the handwriting right away.

It was from his mother.