



02.

Putting On A Show

ORAN

The SRF was supposed to be dead.

Its leadership had vanished overnight. Executed, disappeared, erased so cleanly it felt deliberate. Safe houses burned. Channels went silent. By morning, the Sworn owned the streets, and anyone still breathing from the old network was a liability.

Oran was still breathing.

Which meant he was a problem.

He'd been moving nonstop since the coup. Midlevels only, never staying more than a night in the same place. Empty apartments. Borrowed rooms. Buildings waiting to be condemned. He slept in his clothes, kept his phone dark, memorized exits the way other people memorized prayers. His family had gone underground too. That part scared him more than the Sworn ever could.

The news called it liberation. A peaceful correction. An end to corruption and the reign of money. Oran knew better. You didn't need to call something holy

for it to start behaving that way.

Stephanie found him three days in.

She knocked once. Not even loud. Oran looked through the peephole and recognized her right away.

"I can see your shadow under the door, you ding dong. Don't worry, I come in peace. I'm a free agent again."

Perhaps foolishly, Oran opened the door. She stood there like she still belonged: same posture, same controlled calm. His former bodyguard. The woman who'd sold him out to Rentoth without blinking.

"I've been following you for a couple days. I thought right now might be a good time to let you know about it," she said, eyes already mapping the room.

"Of course you did," Oran replied. "You always were good at finding people who don't want to be found."

"Occupational hazard."

He didn't invite her in. She stepped past him anyway. They stood there a moment, the air thick with things neither of them needed to say.

"I'm sorry," she said finally. "For what it's worth."

"For what it's worth," Oran echoed, unimpressed.

"It was never personal," she continued. "I didn't care about Rentoth's ideas. I cared about his money. And only because it kept my father alive."

Oran tilted his head. "You're selling this very cleanly."

"I'm not selling anything. I'm explaining."

"Same thing," he said. "Different tone."

She exhaled through her nose. "I hate the Sworn. Same as you. Same as everyone who's paid attention."

"That didn't stop you from working for someone they tolerated."

"No," she said evenly. "It stopped me from pretending I had better options."

A beat.

"Why are you here, Stephanie?" Oran asked.

"Because you're hunted," she said. "And because you won't last long without someone who understands how this new order actually works. And because I don't trust Rentoth —" she paused, choosing the words carefully, "— and I trust the Sworn even less."

"And yet you followed the money."

"I followed my heart," she corrected. "My father needed that money. And I don't owe you an explanation. The world is different now. Adapt or die." Oran studied her. She wasn't asking for forgiveness. She wasn't offering loyalty.

That made her honest in the only way that mattered now.

"Why would I trust you?" he asked.

She didn't answer right away. When she did, her

voice was flat. "You shouldn't. But you should understand that if I wanted you gone, I wouldn't be standing here."

Silence.

Then: "Rentoth's hiding in the Slums," she added. "With the Empire Fall crew. Which means he's probably with Aksel. And that means we have a common goal. The cheap fuck still owes me half my money. And I'm sure you miss your little boyfriend."

That landed.

Oran let out a quiet, humorless laugh. "Yeah. I figured that we're all stuck down there together too."

She watched him carefully. "So?"

They didn't trust each other. They didn't particularly like each other. But they were running out of exits.

"You can stay," he said. "For now. Let's figure out how to get to them together."

VERA

Vera, Mads, and Aksel were working out a few kinks for one of the new songs. It had a guitar solo, which was fun for her. Empire Fall songs rarely had space for those, but here it felt appropriate. Aksel had come up with some really cool backing vocals for Bandit to sing when he got back in. Mads was really

proud of how he meshed real and programmed drums seamlessly. These tunes just felt so fresh. Mads and Aksel stepped outside for a bit while Vera stayed in, practicing her solo before tracking it. Then Rentoth walked in. A rare occurrence. He very rarely came outside — and to the studio? Never. Something was up. Vera got annoyed right away.

“Hey man, what’s up? I’m kinda working here.”

Rentoth looked disheveled, like he hadn’t slept in a couple days.

“What? I can’t come see how the sausage is made? After all, I paid for most of this shit.”

“Yeah, you did. And I want to protect your investment by politely asking you to let me work.”

“I don’t know how you guys do this. This studio shit seems so boring. But I guess it’s at least quieter than outside.”

He started walking around the studio, looking at pieces of gear with a weird mix of disdain and vague curiosity.

“You ever notice,” he said, voice dry, “how the Slums never shut up?”

She didn’t look up. “Sure. But like I said, I gotta practice, so you can leave.”

He scoffed. “That’s the thing though. I can’t.”

She let out a quick laugh. Even if he wasn't going about it the right way, she could tell Rentoth was restless. She put her guitar down and decided to humor him for a minute.

"So how are you adapting?" she asked. "Living down here, I mean. Must be quite the shock. And I'm really sorry about your mom... and your dad."

"It's okay," he said, trying to look like he was touched by her sudden empathy. "I mean, my dad was a piece of shit. He kinda had it coming. But my mom... I still can't believe it. I wanna kill them all. And I can't. Because I'm stuck here with no fucking money. How the fuck do you guys do it anyway? Living like dogs. Maggots, actually. We are living like maggots."

Before Vera could respond, Sophie stumbled inside the studio, breathless, eyes swollen, mascara streaked down her cheeks. She barely registered Rentoth's presence.

"VERA! It's Bandit, I can't find him. He got too high," she blurted out. "We fought. Bad. He said some awful shit, I said some awful shit, and then he just took off. It was hours ago. Now I can't reach him. I'm really worried. I saw him take a bunch of cartridges too."

Vera was already on her feet, gripping Sophie's arms. "It's okay. Let's go. Maybe we can drive around to look for him."

Sophie's hands were shaking now. "Something's wrong. This wasn't just a fight. He was already high when we started arguing. He kept saying he didn't belong here, that he wasn't the guy we all thought he was. That everyone was looking at him like he was some symbol and we were a bunch of idiots for believing that." She swallowed. "And then he said something about his dad. That he was already gone before he even had a chance to meet him. I didn't really understand what he meant."

Vera felt the weight drop into her gut.

Rentoth straightened behind them, all flippancy gone.

"How high?" he asked.

Sophie looked at both of them. "Very. I don't think I've ever seen him this bad."

Vera pulled Sophie into her chest, jaw set, mind racing.

"Okay," she said. "We're not panicking. Not yet. We're gonna find him, okay? Let's go. I know a guy who should let us borrow his ride."