

22 Eden

ORAN

After Rentoth left, Stephanie followed him outside. She paused in the doorway, voice low, almost apologetic.

"I'm leaving too, Oran. Sorry. *A Sol for a Soul*. I had to take his offer. I believe in the Cause... but I love my family more. And if the bosses come after me? I'm a pretty good shot. I'll see them before they see me." She closed the door.

Oran collapsed into a chair. His body felt heavy with the same old truth: money always wins. Over loyalty, over love, over principle. Louder than any cause. Drowning out everything.

Motherfucking moneyyyyyy.

As most intellectuals from the upper-mids, he never cared about it much. His parents prized culture and travel more than wealth, hauling him all over Elderise before he was a teenager. He'd seen people content with "enough."

He'd seen people destroyed chasing "more." And

Elderise? Elderise was a machine of more. Always more. Until it devoured itself.

Bandit leaned against the table, studying him with a gentle but mocking grin.

"Well... you just got sonned by the biggest douchebag I know. Happens to the best of us."

He dropped into the chair beside Oran and slung an arm across the backrest.

"Bet you're tempted by his proposal though, huh?"

Then, right in front of everyone, Bandit pulled a Flux cartridge from his pocket, cracked it open, and inhaled deep.

"If the world's ending, I might as well get high. You guys want some?"

Vera slapped his hand away, fury in her eyes. This wasn't the time. She still couldn't reach Jimmy. And Mads — Mads was staring at the floor like he could see straight through it.

"Sorry, cool guy," Vera snapped. "Some of us still give a shit about family. Mads? You okay? You're not saying anything."

Mads didn't look up.

"Oran... I think it's time you contact Aksel. Bring him home. It's too dangerous up there now. We need everyone close. Tight circle." He hesitated. "Also... what do you think about Rentoth's proposal?"

Oran shook his head, grim.

"I don't know, Mads. I'll run it up the flagpole. Maybe it makes sense. But think about it — allying with Rentoth means partnering with the very symbol of everything broken about the upper levels. The gluttony. The rot. And for what? To save Elderise? To protect the status quo? I'm not sure that's even worth saving. But Zero, the Sworn? They're worse. We can't let them win."

They talked longer, voices circling the same impossible choices. In the end, they promised to keep each other updated, to decide by tomorrow.

As Bandit, Vera, and Mads walked home, the air between them felt brittle. Vera still hadn't heard from Jimmy.

Mads broke the silence first.

"So... I say we play along. What options do we have? Oran — yeah, I like him. The Cause is fighting for something right. And Rentoth... as much as I hate to admit it, he's been useful." He paused, looking at Bandit. "And honestly? I think he really likes you. It's like he's always looking out for you. Maybe that's good for us."

Bandit could have spoken then. Vera had been honest. Mads too. But he still couldn't. Not yet.

They agreed to meet the next day at the rehearsal

space with Sophie, Riker, and Roman. The hug they shared before parting felt warm — but uncertain. Too much unsaid still lingered.

Bandit walked faster than the others, excited. Sophie was waiting at his shack. She'd promised to make him her "world-famous grilled cheese."

BANDIT

As soon as he neared his shack, Bandit smelled it. Something was wrong.

The door was open. A light burned inside.

He sprinted in.

He smelled iron before he saw her. Blood.

Sophie lay crumpled on the floor at the foot of his bed, barely conscious. Her face was swollen, bruised, bloodied.

Bandit dropped to his knees, gathering her head in his hands.

"What happened? Sophie — what the fuck happened?"

She tried to speak, but her lips were too swollen. No words came out.

Bandit's hands shook. He didn't think. He just dialed Rentoth.

"That's the Sworn's doing, baby brother," Rentoth said instantly. His voice was cool, almost rehearsed. "Sit

tight. I'll send my private med unit. Best people. Highly vetted. They'll take care of her. You have my word."

Bandit didn't argue. He just clutched Sophie tighter until the unit arrived — shockingly fast. Two masked medics loaded her onto a stretcher, their movements efficient, clinical.

"We're taking her to a private hospital on the 98th," one of them said. "She'll be fine. We'll take good care of her. You can see her tomorrow."

And just like that, she was gone.

Bandit stood in the doorway, shirt soaked with her blood, shaking. He called Rentoth back.

"What the fuck, man? Did you tell them where I live? Did you tell them about Sophie?"

Rentoth's tone hardened.

"Of course not. But the Sworn have their ways. They find things out. Always. Listen to me: don't sleep there tonight. Go to Vera's, or Mads'. Lock your doors."

Inside, Bandit's place had been ransacked. Nothing stolen — just violated. Smashed drawers, clothes scattered everywhere. A message, not a robbery.

He stuffed a couple Flux cartridges and a change of clothes into a bag and headed for the door. His fury sharpened into a single thought:

Fuck them all. But fuck Zero the most. I'll take him out myself.

His thumbs flew over his phone.

Group text: *Meeting at Mads' place. Now.*

By the time he got there, no one had responded to his message, but Vera was inside. She was in Mads' arms, crying.

Bandit froze in the doorway.

"What happened now!?"

Mads looked up, eyes wet.

"It's Jimmy. He sent Vera and her dad an email saying goodbye. The Sworn have called on him to fulfill his duty. He wrote like... like he's never coming back."

Vera tore herself from Mads' arms and let out a violent shriek.

"They're gonna get him killed!"

It was obvious to all of them. The Sworn was moving their pawns across the board. Attack mode.

"I'm calling Rentoth!" Bandit yelled.

"Fuck no, you're not!" Vera snatched the phone from his hands. "I won't let you or your asshole friend jeopardize my brother's life, B."

"I won't. For this type of stuff, we can trust him. I swear to you. He just helped me with Sophie."

Mads and Vera stared at him like he was on drugs. He knew that look.

"I didn't have time to tell you," Bandit blurted.

"Someone came to my house — Sophie was there —

they beat her up. It wasn't a robbery, it was a warning. I called Rentoth. He sent a med unit. They took her to the 98th. She's alive, but..."

"What? What are you talking about?" Mads was pale, confused.

Bandit explained everything. Vera listened, trembling, then finally nodded.

"Fine. We call him. If he can help Jimmy, we don't have a choice."

Rentoth's reply was curt. They were to stay put and take turns standing watch until morning. He'd send instructions then — and let Bandit know when they could check on Sophie.

As soon as Bandit hung up, Mads' phone buzzed.

A text.

Oran: Aksel is coming down. He'll be there in a couple days. I'll keep you posted.