

13. Unholy Grace

EMPIRE FALL

He could smell her. It was Vera. Mads was probably here too.

They were going to see the Flux cartridge on the floor. He'd just gotten caught red-handed.

Still high, Bandit tried to explain and justify why he'd used. His voice was slow, syrupy, half-defeated.

"I'm so sorry, guys. It's just like... sometimes my anxiety literally chokes me from the inside. Flux—it helps. But I don't use it like before—"

Vera cut him off.

"It's okay, B. We're here. We love you. Let's talk about this later. Get some sleep. Maybe in your bed, not on the couch."

Mads patted him on the back.

Bandit started crying. He didn't say anything.

Mads and Vera both hugged him and helped him to bed.

Tomorrow was another day.

When Bandit finally woke up, Mads was working on his laptop with headphones on. Vera wasn't there—probably downstairs in the hotel gym, getting her workout in.

Strangely, the vibe was peaceful.

Is this what it feels like to have a family?

Bandit worked up the courage to speak.

Mads pulled off one earcup and listened.

"It's okay," Mads said. "Vera and I... we've known for a while that you were still using. We don't like it. But as long as you keep it under control, we're fine with it."

He paused.

"Just take care of yourself, okay? We need you at your best."

Uncomfortable but touched, Bandit nodded and looked away.

Soon after Vera got back, they all headed home to the Slums.

They joked about the trip—Bandit talked about Sophie and Flux, and they all took jabs at Rentoth. They talked about songs and tossed around new ideas.

A family, indeed.

Oran

A few days later, it was time to meet Oran.

They went together after rehearsal. Bandit was reluctant.

When they arrived at the library, Oran spotted them immediately and stood to greet them. He was tall and handsome, with glasses and a thick head of curly brown hair. He wore a wool coat and a heavy scarf—indoors—which Bandit immediately disliked.

They ordered coffee at the small stand outside the building. Oran paid.

Inside, they sat at one of the massive, graffiti-tagged wooden tables.

The place was eerie—a perfect metaphor for the Slums.

Once, this library had been a temple of knowledge: science, history, philosophy. Now? Just rows of empty shelves, syringes on the floor, and the occasional dead body. One turned up a couple times a year. Other than that? A great place to read.

Oran led the conversation.

“Guys, I’m a big fan. I was at the Militia event because I’ve been trying to figure out what the hell

Rentoth's doing—agitating the Slums like that. To what end? What's his actual goal? When they announced the band, I thought you were going to be a bunch of puppets, parroting his message. So you can imagine my surprise when you basically told him to go fuck himself in front of two thousand people."

Mads smiled.

"Well, thank you. Bandit was the mastermind behind that little moment on stage. We didn't even know he was going to say that. But the reaction? Undeniable." He glanced at Bandit.

"Also... we might have a little bit of insight into what Rentoth's actually trying to do. He told us. Flat-out." While Mads and Vera brought Oran up to speed, Bandit barely spoke.

He just stared at his phone.

Oran noticed. He tried to break the ice.

"Really loved what you did on stage, man. It took guts."

"Cool," Bandit replied, without making eye contact.

Oran moved on.

He had a bigger point to make.

"We at the SRF believe Elderise is at a breaking point. The rich are too rich, the Slums are too poor. We need the Authority to change things—radically. But they won't. And if you read our history—"

Bandit stood up.

He locked eyes with Oran, now just inches from his face.

“We don’t give a fuck about Elderise’s history. And I *sure* don’t give a fuck about your cause. I see how you talk. I see how you dress. You’ve got a mid- or high-level education. Your family’s probably loaded. Must be nice—to have political opinions while we, the Slummers, fight not to starve. Now three kids from down here finally have a shot, and you show up like some vulture in a scarf, trying to sink your claws in?! Nah. We’re not Rentoth’s lackeys—but we’re not gonna be yours either. I’ll be outside. I gotta make a call.”

Mads blinked, stunned by the sudden heat.

Vera didn’t move. She knew Bandit too well to be surprised.

But Oran wasn’t going to let Bandit big-time him.

He stood up and grabbed Bandit’s arm.

Bandit turned, surprised.

“Dude. Don’t fucking touch me.”

Oran let go. But he wasn’t done—not by a long shot.

“Listen, man. You’re right. I do come from money. And maybe that’s *exactly* why I know the system’s broken. I know the rules are different depending on where you’re born—and I want to change that. Don’t you?”

He took a breath.

"This stuff Rentoth is pulling? It's terrifying. And I can tell you agree. Just because I rub you the wrong way doesn't mean I'm wrong."

Vera grabbed Bandit's hand.

"B... you have our best interests at heart. We know that. But you pleaded for Mads and me to hear Rentoth out. So let's hear Oran out too, okay?"

Bandit closed his eyes, breathing deep.

The anger softened.

He sat back down.

"Okay. Speak." Oran nodded.

"Alright. You want specifics? Here's what I propose." He leaned forward, voice low and deliberate.

"You keep doing what you're doing. Grow your fanbase. Spread your music. Build your careers. Keep Rentoth and his friends happy. And when things start to really get crazy in the Slums—and they will, because you can't keep your foot on people's throats forever—we, the SRF, will take it from there." He looked at each of them, eyes sharp behind his glasses. "You don't have to become political mouthpieces. Behind the scenes, we'll let our allies—and yes, we have some in very high places—know that you're with us."

"So... you're asking us to basically keep doing the exact same thing?" Mads asked, confused.

Oran cracked a smile.

"Something like that."

Vera crossed her arms. "And what do *you* get out of it?"

Oran didn't blink.

"We keep expanding our network. Because to do what we're planning, we're going to need an army."

He turned to Bandit, who'd been watching him like a wolf watching a preacher.

"You're worried about your career," Oran said. "But if Rentoth gets his wish? No one will even *have* careers anymore."

That landed.

Oran sat back and let the silence stretch.

"You've seen what he's building. You've felt the pressure already—the candlelit vows, the masks, the posturing. Rentoth doesn't want a movement—he wants a *cult*. And he wants Empire Fall at the center of it, acting as his puppet. Doing his dirty work."

He let that hang in the air a beat longer.

"Just think about it. You don't owe me anything. But I think you know this train's going off the rails."

Bandit looked off into the distance for a while. Then he spoke.

"And this guy you're describing—this manipulative, evil, powerful oligarch, Rentoth... you sure you wanna antagonize him? You could start a war."

Oran smirked.

"The war's already started, kid. I'm just trying to win it." That shut everyone up.

As they all stood to leave, Mads turned to Oran one last time.

"And what about Zero? Aren't you worried about him?"

"Oh, I am," Oran said. "But we'll deal with him later. Rentoth might be dangerous—but Zero is on another level. I can't believe you actually met him. For now, let's just go step by step."

Bandit lingered, wanting to be crystal clear.

"Well... that's pretty fucking scary. Also—I just wanna make sure you understand we haven't made any decisions yet."

"Of course," Oran said, smiling slightly. "I'll be in touch in a few days. You can tell me where you stand then."

As Bandit, Vera, and Mads started walking home from the meeting, they furiously debated all the ways this could go wrong—trying to play both sides, trying to stay somewhat sane.

Then Bandit's phone buzzed. A text. From Rentoth.
So now you're meeting anarchist leaders behind my back, uh? Lol. Cute. I see all.

Bandit almost dropped his phone.

He looked around. No one he recognized.

How the fuck did Rentoth find out about Oran?