

13. Heat_2

EMPIRE FALL

Vera and Mads had begged Bandit not to go. They said there was another way. But he knew they had no clue. They just wanted to protect their friend. He had let them down so much recently. Sophie too. Even through all the drama, she still cared about him.

“I really think you should stay,” she had told him, her throat strained by the emotions she was trying to contain.

Even Aksel, distraught by the sight of a captive and emaciated Oran, had joined the choir.

“It’s too risky to go alone. They might just put you in a cage and throw away the key.”

Jimmy realized this was probably Zero’s plan all along. And now that he had served his purpose… what use was he going to be to the Sworn moving forward? He had given them everything, and for what?

Bandit sat next to him with a smirk.

Well, I guess it’s time for the big boys to start talking

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to each other, huh? Thanks for being a middleman. But hey, at least it's not like you did anything bad to get there, right? Not like you killed my mom or anything!"

Bandit stood up, and Jimmy didn't even retort. In that moment, Jimmy was feeling more alone and lower than he ever had. There are things you don't come back from, he thought to himself. Vera watched the interaction from a distance with sadness in her eyes. Jimmy knew he had disappointed her more than anyone.

BANDIT

Bandit had made his mind up. He was gonna go meet Zero. It was his mission. What happened after didn't really matter. Now, for the first time since the world he knew had collapsed around him, and he became the reluctant symbol of the fight against the Sworn, he had clarity of purpose. Which honestly felt pretty good.

The Sworn had come at 8 a.m. sharp like the note said. Bandit was seated like a VIP, not a prisoner. The car stopped at a massive steel gate that was heavily guarded. The gate was as high as the Slums, maybe taller. It pierced through the upper floors so Bandit

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couldn't know for sure. Once the gate opened, he understood why: The car entered a massive, secret elevator. Within two minutes, they had arrived on the Nowhere Level. Bandit had heard all kinds of stories about this place growing up. None of them came close. The Sworn fortress was a giant glass dome sitting on a floating disc, with a whole little city inside, its tallest spire stabbing at the sky. Underneath, a single stem plunged down into the clouds, like the whole thing had grown out of Elderise and kept going. A storm was raging all around it. Lightning cracked every few seconds. Below, the ecumenopolis had almost disappeared. Only the tops of the tallest towers poked through the clouds, their lights barely flickering. It was beautiful. It also made him want to puke a little. But Bandit felt surprisingly cool as the car drove him through the compound.

The car stopped at the foot of the main fortress, the tallest building under the dome. Four guards pulled him out and walked him in through the main entrance. For once in his life, he was being taken through the front door. He had no idea his brother had been dragged in through the service entrance. They marched him through endless white marble halls, up one flight of stairs, then another. Sworn

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agents stopped whatever they were doing to watch him walk by. Some looked at him like he was a celebrity. Others looked at him like he was already dead. Nobody said a word.

They stopped in front of a strangely out-of-place old wooden door. The Sworn seal was engraved in the doorknobs. It looked ancient, with a majestic and intriguing quality. Almost menacing too.

In front of it stood the Priestess. Bandit recognized her right away. She approached him.

“Master Zero will see you now.”

The guards on each side popped the door open.

“You enter alone,” she said.

“Good.”

Bandit walked in.

The room was nothing like the door. No wood, no relics, nothing ancient. Just space. A huge, empty hall with walls made entirely of glass, the panes meeting at sharp angles like the inside of a diamond. The storm was growing louder. From up here, the whole city looked like it was drowning. The floor was white marble, cracked with dark veins and inlaid with long lines of gold. They ran in parallel stripes and curved into half-circles, like a track or a pattern meant to lead you somewhere. Bandit's footsteps echoed. There was almost no furniture. Just a desk and two

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big, dark chairs facing the glass, throwing long shadows across the marble. And standing next to them, arms crossed, watching the storm, was a small figure.

Zero.

“Here he is at last. The prodigal fake orphan. The folk hero.”

Bandit tensed up at the sight of the man. He was trying to hide the fact that his whole body was shaking. The nerves were taking over.

“Whatever, man. What do you want?”

“I want what you want. For Elderise to prosper. Beyond you, me, your brother, the defunct Authority. Everything I do, I do for Elderise’s sake.”

“Like murdering my parents?”

“You mean the ones who abandoned you, disowned you, and denied your very existence while your brother enjoyed the perks of the most privileged life you could buy in Elderise? These parents? Anyway, none of this matters. Lord Rabenath is dead, and the Authority is no more. But here’s the deal. I don’t want to rule Elderise. I am merely a Vessel, guiding it through a very important transition.”

Bandit wanted to scream. He made a joke instead.

“Oh yeah, you strike me as the real ego-less type.”

“I like your sense of humor. It’s a little rustic, but

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that is to be expected from someone who grew up in the Slums. Besides, the people love that. Makes you relatable. They love being force-fed relatability by an unknowingly privileged figure. Keeps them in line."
"Get to the point. Where are Rentoth and the others?"
"How heartwarming... He cares about his brother now. The traitor. The man-child who dreamed of power but let his remaining shred of humanity cloud his ambition. I'd say your brother is a disappointment, but that wouldn't be honest. He did exactly what he was supposed to do. Which was to lead you back to me. Why don't you relax? Your friends and your brother are fine."
Zero turned on the monitor on his desk and flipped it towards Bandit, revealing several views of a live feed from the cells. Over the built-in microphone, he asked the guards equipped with body cams to show him Rentoth, Oran and Stephanie. Bandit saw them. They looked okay. He sat down. Zero sat across from him and carried on.

"See, my friend, you have a part to play in all of this. What if I told you that it is you, not Rentoth, and definitely not power, that I had been after? You are our future. YOU shall lead Elderise to prosperity. But

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you have a treacherous road ahead." He paused, stood up, and turned around again, looking over the clouds and the city.
"But so far, you've aced every test."

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