

# 16. Suffocating

## VERA

When she got home, Jimmy was there—sitting at the makeshift dinner table, talking to their dad.

“Jimmy!”

She ran to him. He stood up and caught her in a big hug. They stayed like that for a good thirty seconds, and Vera started tearing up.

“I can’t believe you’re here! So all I had to do was start making music people like, huh?”

“Oh shut up! I’ve just been so busy! Besides, I knew you’d reach out if things ever got really bad. Anyway—you look great. Shredded as ever. Still running obsessively, I take it?”

Vera started flexing her right arm. “I do weights too, motherfucker. I bet I can do more pull-ups than you!”

“No doubt there, sis! I don’t even think I can do one!”

Their dad interjected: “Seeing you two together always makes me so emotional. Your mother... I would give anything for her to see what amazing grown-ups you’ve become.”

Vera comforted him. “We know, Dad. And I’m convinced she’s looking at us from somewhere. She’s here now. I carry her with me wherever I go.” She pointed at her heart.

The family talked for a while. Vera was so proud of her big brother for making it to the higher levels. He showed them pictures of his condo on Floor 22, and of the club he worked at—even nicer than the one Empire Fall played their showcase at. Everything looked so modern and cool without being too flashy.

*I could live like this and be totally content, she thought.* Jimmy even let it slip that he’d bought his place cash, which really surprised her. She knew he was doing well—but not *that* well. Their dad, Mike, was beaming with pride.

After a few hours of shooting the shit, laughing, reminiscing, and crying, Mike went to bed. Jimmy and Vera went for a walk outside.

She wasted no time.

“So you bought your place cash, huh? That’s crazy. You could’ve helped Dad with some of that money, don’t you think? And you know he’d never ask. Meanwhile I’m out here buying groceries with the little advance we got from the band while you’re balling up there... I don’t know. It kind of annoys me.” “It’s not that easy. I didn’t *really* buy that place... It

was more of a gift, but I didn't wanna say that in front of Dad."

"A gift? From whom?"

## **MADS**

He kept looking back to make sure he wasn't being followed. The streets were dark, and Mads wasn't usually out this late in the Slums.

*These are Bandit hours.*

Something felt wrong in his gut. He hated lying to Vera. Bandit too, but to a lesser extent—Bandit had lied to him many times before, mostly about his Flux use.

When Mads finally arrived at the abandoned library, he got a text from Oran:

*See that green building right next to the library. Go in. Second floor.*

*Apartment 4. I'll be waiting. It's safe.*

Now Mads was really spooked.

Did Oran know that Rentoth had found out about their last meeting?

And if so, how?

*I'm really fucking out of my depth here.*

Still, he went in. Climbed the stairs. Knocked.

A young woman opened the door. Oran stood a few feet behind her.

"This is him."

She patted Mads down and checked under his shirt.

"He's clean."

"Thanks, Stephanie. You can leave us now."

She disappeared into another room. Oran gestured to the living room, where they sat at a rundown table scarred with graffiti and mold. The walls were filthy. The place looked like a Flux den.

"Thanks for coming, Mads. I know the secrecy's annoying—but it's for your safety."

"All good, man."

It wasn't. Mads was completely freaked out—but he was here now.

Might as well find out what this was all about.

"What's up?"

Oran leaned in.

"I know where Aksel is. He's alive. And he's doing well."

Mads's heart stopped.

"What?! How?"

His whole body started shaking.

"He's the one who gave me your number," Oran whispered. "He's working for us. He's a ghostwriter—"

on the very high levels—for one of the biggest pop stars in Elderise. I won't say who. He's rubbing elbows with the richest and most powerful every day. Collecting intel for the SRF."

"He knows about you. About Empire Fall. He's so proud. He's been wanting to contact you and your family for months... but we can't let him. The cause comes first. It comes before all of us."

Mads couldn't take it in. Couldn't breathe.

He thought he was going to puke.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!"

He stood, grabbed Oran by the collar, and slammed him into the wall. His voice cracked with rage.

"Why the fuck should I believe you?! Maybe Bandit's right about you, motherfucker!"

Oran pushed Mads off, voice still calm but rising.

"Let me show you pictures. Let me explain. Aksel loves you. And I love him. I miss him just as much as you do."

His eyes blazed.

"But this is for the cause. NOTHING is more important than that. You hear me?"

Mads stood there, trembling. He didn't know whether to feel joy or pain. Or both.

"So what, are you his boyfriend or something? And can you prove all this?"

Oran met his eyes.

"I was, yeah. Now... the cause has overtaken it all."

Oran reached for a small wooden box on the table and pulled out a stack of old photographs—him and Aksel, happy, smiling.

Mads didn't know what to feel.

He recognized his brother right away.

He saw the face he remembered from before Flux took him. Just a little older.

As Mads kept his eyes fixed on the pictures, Oran went on:

"I haven't seen Aksel in two years. We were friends at first. When I met him, he was in a bad way. I had just left my parents' place in the mid-highs to work in the Slums. I was volunteering for a nonprofit, funded by a rich philanthropist, trying to get Flux addicts off the streets and into rehab."

He let out a short, bitter laugh.

"Our success rate was awful, as you can imagine. But there was something about your brother. We were the same age. He had that 'wasted potential' look. Rehab worked for him. Really worked. After that, he came to live with my family up there, just until he was fully healed. My dad helped connect him to some friends in the songwriting world."

"That's how it started. He and I got obsessed with the

SRF together. We were both just... furious about how fucked up Elderise is. The system. The silence. We couldn't look away. And I guess... somewhere in the middle of all that... we fell in love."

Oran swallowed hard.

"He wanted to reach out to you. But the deeper he got into the mission, the harder it became. He got pulled into the cause. So did I."

Mads was shaking his head.

"Oh my god, if you say 'the cause' again I swear I'm gonna lose it, dude! He couldn't just send one message? Tell his family he was alive? Do you even understand what his disappearance did to us? To my parents? To Emma?"

"I can only imagine," Oran said quietly. "And for that, I'm truly sorry. But listen—"

He leaned in, eyes fierce now.

"We can heal later. Right now, we have to act. Because if we don't—and Rentoth or Zero win? There won't be a world left for any of us. No Empire Fall. No career. No you, no me, no Aksel. We might all be dead."

## **BANDIT**

He texted with Sophie for a while after rehearsal, saying how much fun he'd had the night before. She

reciprocated. They were both smitten.  
But still—he lied to her too.

*I'm just gonna work on some lyrics tonight. Maybe we  
can hang tomorrow?*

*Sure thing! Hit me up and we'll figure something out.*

*Alright Soph. I'm gonna lock in for a bit.*

He slipped his phone into his pocket. Elevator340  
stood right in front of him. Some guy he'd never  
seen before approached.

"You must be Bandit. I'm Rentoth's assistant."

"Oh... okay. Guess he changes assistants more often  
than he changes shoes—which is already a lot."

"I wouldn't know anything about that, sir."

That guy has a stick up his ass, Bandit thought.

They zoomed up to the 99th floor. Bandit hadn't  
been there in a long time—but he'd been there more  
often than he liked to admit.

A sleek black car waited just outside the elevator.  
The moment he stepped in, it felt like another world.  
Another planet.

Everything was crisp. High definition.

The buildings—brutalist monsters from below—now  
looked modern, almost ancient, like cathedrals  
carved by machines. The architecture felt unified,



like it had been composed by a single hand. Nothing here was random. Everything played a role in establishing this beautiful—yet cruel—aesthetic.

And the people?

They were as he remembered: tall, beautiful, impossibly fit, undeniably rich.

The car pulled up in front of the most expensive looking building around. Even among the elite of the 99th floor, this one stood out.

Rentoth's home.

Two separate security guards patted him down.

Then the assistant led him through the doors and into Rentoth's master suite.

It was massive—twenty-foot ceilings, its own living room, a ridiculous bathroom, and a 360-degree view of Elderise.

It felt like they were hovering over the entire ecumenopolis. If gods existed, this is what they would see when they looked down.

Rentoth was standing upright, overlooking the skyline, drink in hand. Whiskey, neat. Probably obscenely overpriced.

*What a poser.*

Bandit got straight to business.

"Hey dude. You know I don't like to come up here, and I REALLY don't like lying to my friends. First off...

do I have a tail? Are you following me?"

"Of course I am! And guess what? We also have a tail on that Oran fella. The SRF is becoming a respectable foe. Seems like everyone wants the Authority Council to fall—but for different reasons. These are the end days."

"Looks like it. But all that shit is way over my pay grade. Who knows—if I didn't know what to do with all my money, maybe I'd start my own little movement too. Seems like it's a very popular hobby these days."

"Ha! Funny little guy. Yeah. Although... I'm not sure Zero is the ally I was hoping for. We don't seem to agree on much lately."

"Yeah, that's because he worships money. While you... well, you just wanna watch Elderise burn. Because you're mad at your daddy. Typical rich kid throwing a tantrum."

Rentoth turned around.

"Yeah, I'm mad at him. But that's not really it. Because while I loooooove money, chaos is even more fun. Chaos is progress. Chaos... is an essential part of life. There is no rebuild without destruction. No good without bad."

"Spare me your mall-level philosophy, okay? I'm about to fall asleep. Why am I here?"

"I think you should go ahead with whatever plan Oran has. Earn his trust. See what's up with the SRF. Your buddy Mads seems to like him. In fact... I believe he's meeting with him right now. Behind your and Vera's back."

"Bullshit! Mads wouldn't lie to me. And he would never lie to Vera."

"Wake up, ding dong. He is."

"You know what? Even if he is, I don't give a shit. Fuck you. Fuck Oran. Fuck Zero. Fuck every single one of you. Dickheads with a little bit of power trying to play us all against each other. If Mads is meeting with this asshole, he must have a good reason."

"Maybe. I don't know what the reason is though—which is certainly unpleasant."

"You know what, dude? I'm going home. You're crazy and vindictive and I don't want to deal with you anymore. Thanks for the money, but from now on, send one of your lackeys to deal with me and the band. I want nothing to do with you."

"That's not your call to make, Bandit. We have a bond, you and I. I wish we didn't— but since my imbecile drunk of a father decided to fuck your slum whore of a mom and didn't have the foresight to fucking pull out, I AM STUCK WITH YOU. WE. ARE. BLOOD. Never forget that!"

Rentoth smashed his glass on the ground.

"Remember when I tracked you down? Found you in that disgusting brothel they called an orphanage? I bet you never told your friends that. I bet you made up some story about how we met on accident. What would they say if they found out the truth?"

He stepped closer.

"You're gonna do as I fucking say. I own you. You insignificant maggot."