

# 20 Another Dance

## EMPIRE FALL

Bandit woke up next to Sophie. She was still asleep. Sparse sunlight pierced through the skyscrapers — a rare sight in the Slums. For a fleeting moment, it felt like a perfect day.

He glanced at his stack of Flux and left it untouched. Sophie stirred awake and they did their thing. He thought he might be falling in love.

Then his phone buzzed. Vera. She never called — always texted. It had to be important.

“Hey B, sorry to call this early. But Mads just came by my place freaking out. Apparently Oran told him something crazy is about to go down on the higher levels, and he needs to see us right away. Can you come to mine? We’ll go together.”

Bandit didn’t hesitate. He told Sophie what was going on. She understood. He kissed her.

“You can stay at my place as long as you want. Just lock the door from the inside on your way out. I only have one key.”

He lied. He had a spare, but it was too early for all that. He kissed her again, harder this time, and ran out the door.

When he reached Vera's, she and Mads were already waiting outside.

"Does anyone know where exactly we're going?" Bandit asked.

Mads just said, "Follow me."

He led them toward the same hideout he'd visited a couple nights before. On the way, Vera kept trying to reach Jimmy but couldn't. She sent him another email: *Be safe. Stay vigilant.* No reply.

At the hideout, Stephanie frisked them again and had them drop their phones in a bowl. Only then did Oran invite them to sit. He looked preoccupied, pacing the room.

Bandit rolled his eyes but kept quiet. *Let's hear it.*

Finally Oran sat.

"Thanks for coming. The hour is later than we thought. Our sources confirm Zero and the Sworn are preparing to move against the Authority. It could be today, tomorrow, next week — but soon. They're keeping it close to the chest. Our people inside are risking their lives to get us this intel. I assume no one from the Sworn has reached out to

you? Probably because you've only just been sworn in." Vera cut him off, her voice sharp. "What do you mean? Do you think every member of the Sworn is going to be involved?"

"Everyone they have leverage on, yes. That's why they've been recruiting from all walks of life — politicians, doctors, celebrities, artists. This has been their plan all along. And the Militia events? That was their way of stirring the pot in the Slums, scanning for new recruits and standouts. People like you."

Vera's voice trembled as she stood. "My brother... Jimmy. He joined the Sworn. They bought him his house. I'm worried about him. And he just came down to see me? The timing doesn't make sense."

Oran didn't have to fake his empathy. "I'm sorry, Vera. His name doesn't ring a bell. But if they bought him a place, they'll want something in return. Have you heard from him today?"

"No. He never picks up the phone or responds to texts. Only emails. I wrote him one this morning. Nothing back."

Bandit and Mads exchanged a look — the weight of unspoken secrets pressing between them. Each carried knowledge that made all of this even heavier.

They pulled Vera into a circle, hugging her tight. "We love you," Bandit murmured.

Their eyes welled.

Then Mads blurted: "What about Aksel?"

Oran shot him a warning glare. "What do you mean?"

Mads snapped. "Stop the bullshit, okay? I don't care if they know. We're beyond that now." He turned to Vera and Bandit, chest heaving. "Aksel is alive. He's sober. He's working as a double agent for the SRF on the upper levels."

Oran shook his head in disapproval. "You're jeopardizing your brother's safety. What are you doing?"

"These people are my friends!" Mads barked. "I trust them with my life. They deserve to know."

Vera froze, her thoughts colliding all at once. Jimmy. Aksel. The Sworn. The coup. It was too much. Her mind was short-circuiting.

"Are you serious? Aksel is alive? He's... okay? Did you tell your family? Mads — I can't believe this. I'm so happy for you—"

Oran cut her off, voice sharp. "He didn't tell them. And he should never have told you. That was reckless. It puts all of us at risk."

Bandit was suddenly inches from Oran's face. "Who

told you you could talk to my friends like that?" Before he realized it, Stephanie was behind him. She twisted his arm into a lock, cold and efficient, and drew her gun. She aimed it at Mads and Vera without a word.

"Easy, Steph," Oran said quickly. "No need for this." She released Bandit and holstered the gun. Mads and Vera stood frozen. Bandit seethed.

Oran spread his hands, softening his tone. "She's here for my safety. She used to be Special Forces. That's all. Please — sit down. This is exactly what they want. The Sworn. Zero. Rentoth. Division is their weapon. That's how they win. I called you here because I trust you."

Bandit clapped back: "No. You called us because you need us. So why don't you spit it out?"

Oran allowed himself a thin smile. "Two things can be true at once. I do want you and your loved ones safe. I truly do." He glanced at Mads, then fixed his eyes on Bandit. "But yes — I need you. Rentoth isn't as involved in this coup as I expected. Something's changed. And since he's your best friend, I thought you might find out why."

Bandit was still in Oran's face, spitting the words. "You motherfucker."

Before Oran could answer, Stephanie's voice sliced

through the room.

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

Every head turned.

She was at the door, hand already on the latch. With a slow, deliberate motion, she swung it open.

Rentoth stood in the doorway, a smirk curling across his face.

"Evening, friends."