

# 08. END OF THE WORLD

## EMPIRE FALL

By the time they got back to the hotel, the band was deep in a heated argument. Bandit was adamant—they couldn't afford to pass on this opportunity. To him, chances to leave the Slums didn't come to people like him. He didn't give a shit about the Middle Class. If you had a roof over your head, a job, some time off, and could feed your family? You were rich.

Mads and Vera felt differently. They *came* from up there. Vera's brother lived on the Upper Levels. And if there was any chance Aksel—Mads' long-lost brother — was still alive, it stood to reason he had made it out too. The idea of becoming the face of a radical, rebellious, and *illegal* movement terrified them.

But Vera saw the appeal.

"Maybe we play ball for a year or two," she reasoned. "Then we break free. Fame is power. Money is power. And right now, we have neither. I'm not even sure it's possible to make it organically, not without help. Has it

ever happened? I doubt it. It might literally be impossible to build a career on our own.”

Mads wasn't angry at them. He was angry because she was right. The band had no leverage. Without Rentoth's backing, their ceiling would be barely higher than the rooftops of the Slums. But if they took the deal... they'd be signing a pact with the devil. All bets would be off.

“Fuck. I don't know what to do,” he said, pacing. “Is it even okay to admit that I'm scared? Are we gonna become terrorists now? Get arrested? Go to jail? Is Rentoth gonna help us then? This is some serious shit. I just wanna make music...”

Bandit stepped in, grabbed Mads gently by the cheeks, locked eyes with him.

“Look at what we've done in just a few months. Vera's right. None of us are *comfortable* with this. But maybe we just play ball until we gain leverage. Once we're more established, we can distance ourselves from Rentoth, from Zero, from all of it. I know they're dangerous. But this... this is a shot we can't afford to refuse.”

Vera jumped in, firm now. “If we play this right, we'll have more control than they do. Eventually.”

Mads and Bandit stared at her.

“Think about it. If we become the *face* of this Militia...

We can steer the movement. Shape it however we want. If we build a following, they'll listen to *us*—not Rentoth."

Lightbulb.

Bandit's mind was racing. "You're so right. Whatever plans Rentoth has for the Militia and Elderise? We don't have to follow them. We just nod along for now. Do what we do best: write great songs. Grow. And then..."

"...And then we're free," Vera said, finishing his thought.

Mads took a long beat.

"You're both right. If we take the deal, and we focus on building the band the right way... we'll eventually have a say. We'll be able to push—or *not* push—whatever agenda we choose. But if we don't take it... we never matter. And we never get free. I can't believe I'm saying this, but... we have to do it."

The decision was unanimous.

It was 4 a.m. Much to Bandit's dismay, no bars were open. "It's fine," Vera said, yawning. "We're beat anyway." They popped open the overpriced bottle of room service champagne in Bandit's suite—"Rentoth's paying anyway"—and toasted. The hotel room felt surreal: plush carpeting, complimentary toiletries neatly placed on a marble countertop, a

stunning view of glittering city lights through sheer curtains—luxuries completely alien to them. They sat cross-legged on the floor, half-drunk and stunned at what they'd accomplished, feeling worlds away from the cramped shacks they called home. This moment would stay with them forever. There's something sacred about firsts. Your first love. The first time you eat the food that becomes your favorite. Or the first time you sign a record deal. The people you share that moment with? You'll always be connected. It's an unbreakable, immaterial bond. Vera, Bandit, and Mads didn't realize how deep that bond would run yet.

## MADS

Back in his room, Mads felt the adrenaline wearing off, replaced by a jittery anxiety.

How was he going to tell his parents? Would they freak out? Kick him out? Would he have to quit his job? He pictured his mom's disappointed eyes—the same look she gave Aksel whenever he messed up. He swallowed hard. *That won't be me.*

But beneath the anxiety... something else. A strange, buoyant excitement.

He knew Bandit—especially Bandit—might need to

be reined in. But that was to be expected. He'd always been good at rationalizing, at making sense of chaos. He saw what giving up had done to his father. That *wouldn't* be him.

If this works, maybe I can move them out of the Slums. Maybe I'll find Aksel. If he's alive.

That thought alone made the risk worth it.

He brushed his teeth, pulled on his neatly folded pajamas, shut off the lights, and went to sleep—heart racing, but hopeful.

## **VERA**

Vera couldn't sit still. The second her door shut, she dropped to the floor and banged out a quick set of push-ups. Then another. Of course she brought her resistance bands. Traveling was no excuse to let fitness slide.

Her thoughts swirled as she trained. The opportunity. The danger. The *thrill*.

She imagined running into her brother. Maybe he'd see her name on a billboard one day. Maybe he'd finally come down to see her play.

And maybe, just maybe, she'd get a chance to look her uncle in the eye again.

*See what I've become, asshole? Huh? How does it feel to*

*know I'm more successful than you ever were?*

She knew she was being irrational. After all these years, why should she care what he thought? Yet somehow, she still did. The anger propelled her through the final brutal set. Afterward, she stretched, breathed deep, and let it all go.

Shower. Bed. Night night.

## **BANDIT**

After Mads and Vera left, Bandit immediately reached for one of the cartridges of Flux he'd stashed in his bag. He downed it in a long, practiced inhale.

His adrenaline was still pumping. He started texting the girls he'd met after the showcase, seeing who might be down to come over.

He couldn't help but grin.

An orphan from the Slums. Signing a record deal.

When does that ever happen?

He felt like the man. Untouchable.

But the smarter, quieter part of his brain whispered: *You haven't done shit yet. And you didn't do this alone.*

He loved Vera and Mads. Deeply. And he *knew* how dangerous this could get. He'd been to those Militia events. He hadn't lied to them. They knew what they were getting into. But still... he felt protective.

Responsible.

The high dulled the weight of that guilt. A girl replied. She was coming over. She knocked on the door. He'd get very little sleep tonight.

## **EMPIRE FALL**

Late the next morning, as agreed, Bandit texted the Rentoth-EF group chat:

**"Hey hey douchebag. We're in."**

Rentoth replied instantly:

**"That's great news! Let's meet to sign the deal—then we party. Zero and I went home. Couldn't stand staying in this two-star dump of a level any longer. I'll text you the address and time. Level 18. My crew will keep an eye on your gear.**

**Also, I'm sending you to a tailor I know to get some proper clothes for tonight. You gotta dress nice for this one. Follow his lead.**

**It'll be a night to remember. See you tonight."**

Vera raised an eyebrow at her phone.

*Wait... did he just say he picked out clothes for us? What are we, a boy band?*

It'd turn out to be a bit more intense than that.