

26 Lie

EMPIRE FALL

With Rentoth in shock, the bodyguard analyzed the room like a machine: the angle of the guards, the way the smoke crawled along the ceiling, the exact line where Bandit and Vera were pinned.

He flipped down his goggles.

The HUD shimmered to life, painting ghostly blue silhouettes through the fog — each labeled, tracked, pulsing with data.

Numbers scrolled along the lens edges as he mapped every target.

"I can get them in under a minute," he said flatly.

"Rentoth, you and the others stay put. We move after I blow the alarm."

Rentoth didn't answer — grief and guilt had frozen him in place.

Sophie and Mads exchanged a look.

"So... neutralize means kill, right?" Sophie asked, voice small.

"Got a better plan?" the bodyguard replied.

She shook her head.

"Then let me do my job."

He outlined the plan with surgical calm. "I'll take out the soldier holding the cuff keys first, then toss a stun as I close in. My goggles cut through the fog — finding them's the easy part. I'll free your friends, bring them back here, and then we haul ass."

"Master Rentoth," he added, turning his head slightly. "Are we good with this?"

Silence. Rentoth didn't move. Sophie finally whispered, "Do it."

He did.

Fast, clean, invisible. No one saw him coming.

Two minutes later, he returned with Bandit and Vera, dragging them through the haze as the distant screams of the Sworn rose and broke like waves. The sound, somehow, felt reassuring — proof they were still alive.

Bandit's eyes locked on Rentoth.

"I'm so sorry," he said, voice shaking.

Rentoth looked up, hollow and unblinking.

"Don't be," he murmured. "This is all my fault."

Vera watched them both. The parallels with her own life hit too close to ignore. She would've given

anything to hug Jimmy right now.

She was still angry at Bandit — but it all felt like a past life, something that belonged to a different world. This was about survival now. And Rentoth, in all his ruin and with all of his flaws, had chosen to stay.

He was, somehow, becoming one of theirs.

One of the bodyguards stepped forward. “We have a fallback,” he said. “A safe house. We set it up before the show, just in case something went wrong. Rentoth approved it himself.”

The words seemed to pull Rentoth back to reality. He nodded faintly. “Yeah... it’s close. Just a couple of blocks from Mads’s family home. My men stocked it for a week.”

The bodyguard tapped his earpiece. “Unit Two, regroup. Bring everyone from the house — parents, siblings, anyone connected to the band. Coordinates incoming. We’re heading to fallback point Alpha.”

A faint crackle answered. “Copy that. Moving now.” “Families should already be on the way,” Rentoth said quietly.

That was all they needed to hear. They followed the bodyguard into the smoke.

They reached the safe house hours later. It looked barely habitable — an abandoned maintenance hub

carved into the side of a collapsed sector. The walls were blackened by fire and graffiti, the floor warped from years of leaks. A single industrial lamp buzzed above the main room, casting a weak orange cone over a cluster of mattresses and scavenged chairs.

The air smelled of rust, disinfectant, and wet concrete. Old pipes hummed overhead like a dying heartbeat. Someone had rigged a cracked purifier to a car battery in the corner; it rattled every few seconds, coughing out filtered air that never quite lost its metallic tang.

Yet amid the decay, there was warmth — blankets, food wrappers, a makeshift stove. A few of Rentoth's remaining guards had turned the chaos into shelter. Mads spotted them first — his parents, his sister, Aksel. He sprinted forward. They collided in a tangle of arms and tears.

Vera and her dad cried in each other's arms. Sophie called her little brother and parents, who were safe. One of the bodyguards was already on his way to bring them here. Roman had no family; Riker hadn't spoken to his (on the mid levels) in years.

They were almost whole. Almost.

Bandit sat beside his brother, staring at his disconnected phone — no network, no signal, all accounts inaccessible. Rentoth was stuck here. His

whole life turned inside out.

Bandit put his arm around him. Rentoth broke again, sobbing into his shoulder.

A few days passed. Still no word from Jimmy. Vera forced humor to keep the air from collapsing.

"Well, I guess he's our enemy now," she said, cracking a sad smile. "He chose the Sworn over us."

Never one to be outdone, Rentoth smirked through the exhaustion. "Hey, at least you didn't get your mom killed."

"I mean... she was already dead, so..."

"Fair. But you can't really be mad at your brother for choosing *anyone* over you."

They laughed — thin, brittle laughter, but laughter nonetheless.

Mads eventually sat beside Bandit. He told him he forgave him. Tragedy had a way of putting things in their proper order. But they needed to be honest — fully, brutally honest — from now on.

The Militia wasn't dead. Not yet. If anything, what happened had forced them to grow up overnight.

Bandit agreed.

They started to organize — what remained of Rentoth's guards, the band, the stragglers. The Sworn had won the battle, but the rebellion was far

from over. The SRF was in shambles. Aksel was worried about Oran but still hopeful his lover had survived the uprising.

All communication with the Upper Levels was cut. Phones were dead. The Slums were severed from the rest of Elderise, save for the flickering state broadcasts on the giant screens outside.

Each night, the bodyguards took turns patrolling. Their tech gave them the edge.

And soon, they confirmed the truth:

The Sworn had left the Slums.

The elevators were broken.

They were trapped here.

Soon, the Slums started to show signs of life again.

People started walking the streets. Stores reopened.

Food was sparse, but production was ramping up.

Empire Fall and the Militia were on everyone's lips.

They had become heroes. Of course, rumors twisted the truth into legend:

how Bandit had wrestled ten Sworn soldiers barehanded,

how Vera had stared down an entire army and laughed,

how the band kept playing while the city burned around them.

None of it was true, at least not exactly.

But down in the Slums, stories didn't need to be true. They just needed to give people something to believe in.

Flux felt like a thing of the past to Bandit now — well, for the moment.

But music still mattered. More than before. *Art survives.*

He wrote a song from Rentoth's perspective called "**Lie**". It was about his mother.

Mads and Vera built a track around it on Mads's old laptop. There was no guitar at first, but one of the bodyguards raided the ruined warehouse and came back with Vera's, half-scorched but playable.

They started jamming in one of the side rooms of the safe house.

One day, they decided to go back to their old rehearsal space. Roman, Riker, Sophie, Aksel, Rentoth, and one of the bodyguards tagged along.

It was wrecked — half the roof collapsed, carpets still wet from rain, the smell of smoke and rust hanging in the air. The speakers looked terrible, but they still worked.

Vera slung her guitar and started the chords of *Lie*. Bandit came in with the vocals, low and worn but steady. Sophie sat next to him, leaning on his

shoulder as she sang the harmonies, her voice soft enough to almost disappear into his.

Mads sat behind the rusty drum kit and played the groove he'd programmed. Roman and Riker joined in, watching Vera's hands to catch the changes. Aksel picked up a small MIDI keyboard lying on the floor, connected it to his brother's laptop, and started playing the chords by ear just for fun.

Rentoth sat off to the side, listening to the song his brother had written for him. He was feeling it deep in his bones. No funny joke, no gratuitous insult.

The remaining bodyguard stood in the doorway, keeping quiet watch on the street below.

Outside, passersby had started gathering, putting two and two together. One kid asked the guard "Are Bandit Mads and Vera really in there?"

Things were different now.

But it felt right.

Dissension had become harmony.

ZERO

On the Nowhere Level, suspended in the atmosphere far above the 100th Floor, the leader of the Sworn pondered what he had done. The Authority Council was no more. The SRF was

defeated. The Slums were totally isolated, cut off from the rest of Elderise.

But he wasn't interested in power.

He was interested in the prophecy.

He wanted salvation.

In his gigantic, sheer-walled office, he looked down on the ecumenopolis, a cigar in his mouth. The Priestess who had almost caught Bandit walked in.

"I'm sorry I failed you, master. I did not retrieve the boy."

"It's alright, Priestess. It wasn't time. Destiny will deliver him and his brother to us exactly when it's meant to. Destiny doesn't make mistakes. We will need them both, and soon — but we can wait a little longer. He will become stronger, more powerful, and the brothers will grow closer. This is all good news."

He sat back in his ancient leather chair. It looked like a throne.

"Soon, the Gemini Curse will be fulfilled. Rentoth and the boy will become the very thing they've spent their whole lives trying to escape. Then, and only then, will we all be saved."