

14. Calling Me Away_1

EMPIRE FALL

Vera, Mads, and Bandit knew they wanted the same things, fundamentally. The band was their priority. They were pulling in the same direction—a real team with a singular focus and undeniable chemistry. Sophie, Roman, and Riker were stars in their roles too. But the outside world was the problem. That's where they disagreed.

Mads liked Oran. Bandit recognized the opportunities that Rentoth brought. And Vera was willing to give them both the benefit of the doubt as long as it helped the band.

For now, these differences were still manageable.
For now.

BANDIT

“How are you holding up?”

That night, Sophie reached out to Bandit. They talked about the meeting with Oran. She came over. She

shared how relieved she was that Vera approved of this *thing* between them. She also confessed that Bandit scared her a little—a brilliant but volatile mind, with deep-seated issues.

“Can’t argue with you there,” he said, grinning. That made her laugh.

They talked about philosophy and books and movies and how fucked up Elderise was. Bandit explained that he felt so much anger sometimes, he didn’t know where to put it. Songwriting helped the most. It gave him a sense of purpose, he said. Working out was a nice distant second. And Flux... well, Flux helped unplug his brain. Pass the time. That’s why he loved it so much. It made him feel light. At peace. Relaxed. Content.

He offered her some, and Sophie declined. She asked him to maybe abstain for one night. Bandit thought about it—and threw the cartridge away.

They kissed.

They went to bed together.

When he woke up in the middle of the night, Sophie was asleep beside him—one hand curled near her face, the slow rhythm of her breath filling the room like a lullaby.

Bandit stared at the ceiling. He felt... good. Almost

too good.

And that scared the shit out of him.

A voice in his head whispered: *You'll ruin this. You always do.*

He didn't move. Just kept staring upward, frozen between peace and panic.

Then he noticed Rentoth had texted him a storm.

He opened the thread, scrolled for a second, and quickly closed it before he could read it all.

He shifted closer and wrapped his arm around Sophie, pulling her against his chest like an anchor.

I really like this girl, he thought.

Please let me not fuck this up.

VERA & MADS

That same night, Mads and Vera were hanging out at the Nakamura household. Emma, who looked up to her brother and Vera so much, was in total disbelief.

"I can't believe the SRF reached out to you guys! This is so exciting! My big brother the rockstar! They barely acknowledge its existence in school, but everyone knows they're a real thing."

Vera and Mads shared a concerned look. He put his arm around his sister, nudging her toward her room.

"Alright, don't you have homework to do? Let the

grown-ups talk."

"Lol, some grown-ups! You're barely older than me!" she said as she headed toward her room. "See you, V!"

"See you soon, Emma."

Vera waited till the door closed.

"Dude... how are we in this mess? I just want us to be able to have a career, you know? Why are all these people trying to fuck with our business?"

Mads had a pensive look.

"I don't know, V. But I'm definitely worried about it all. And Bandit... he scares me sometimes. But I somehow trust he's gonna figure a way out of this. His instincts are always on point, it's like knowing how to navigate all this stuff is in his blood or something. We just gotta make sure he doesn't lose the plot completely. His love/hate thing with Rentoth concerns me."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Maybe we should ask him how they actually met. He's always so evasive about it all."

"So true. Let's do that at rehearsal tomorrow."

BANDIT

In the morning, Sophie woke him up. She had to leave to take her little brother to school. They kissed

and hugged and said see you later.

They both had the kind of facial expression that says: *this could be something good*.

Something Bandit hadn't really felt in a long, long time.

Bandit finally mustered up the courage to look at Rentoth's message dump. He called him. To his surprise, Rentoth picked up the phone right away.

"Finally. You little fuckhead. Don't ever make me wait like this again."

"Good morning to you too, dickwad."

"You need to come see me. Alone. Tomorrow night. My place on the 99th floor. My assistant will pick you up at the entrance of Elevator340 in the Slums. It's the closest one to your piece-of-shit house. Gotta go."

He hung up.

Bandit didn't really know what hit him. But he knew he had to go.

And he wasn't sure he should tell the others.

MADS

After breakfast, Mads started working on a couple of track ideas. But his head wasn't in it. The rarest of occurrences for someone as organized and hardworking as Mads.

He had to admit it. The stress was getting to him. He kept thinking about Aksel and how much he wished he was around right now. He would be the perfect seventh member. The missing piece. And surely, he would know what to do with this entanglement the band was finding themselves in. That's when Oran called.

Without even thinking about it, Mads picked up.

"Hey Mads. Thank you so much for coming yesterday. I was wondering if you guys had time to discuss my proposal?"

"Hey man. Not really, and to be honest we're all a little overwhelmed. Six months ago I was working at a factory doing music as a hobby, and now we feel like all these big entities are pulling us in different directions."

"I get that. I might not have been totally honest about how I got your number. But I can't discuss this over the phone. I think we should meet. Just you and I. How's tomorrow night, same spot?"

Mads was intrigued, his imagination running wild with theories.

"Okay, I guess. Can I tell the others, though? I hate secrets."

"I can't tell you why, but you really shouldn't. Don't tell your family either. Come alone. It'll be safer for

you and your friends.”

Mads agreed reluctantly.

“Sure thing. We have rehearsal until 8 PM. I can come after.”

“Great. Let’s say 10. See you then. Bye, Mads!”

Awesome.

Mads now had to hide the truth from Bandit—and from his closest friend in the entire world, Vera.

I kinda miss my old life right now. I was bored, but I wasn’t this stressed out.

VERA

On her way home from her morning run, Vera found herself missing her brother too.

She emailed him from her phone:

Hey J. I just wanna say I understand your choices. But I really miss you right now. I could use a big brother. I got so much to tell you.

–V

She put her phone in her back pocket and kept walking.

Soon, she felt a vibration on her butt cheek.

Could it be...?

Jimmy had already responded. She was stunned.

Hey V. I've been meaning to reach out. Sorry, it's been pretty hectic up here. My friend played me your band. I watched the bootleg live videos. You guys are incredible.

I know I owe you a visit. I was thinking of coming down tonight, hang out with you and Dad. What do you say?

15. Calling Me Away_2

EMPIRE FALL

Vera had had a couple errands to run (guitar strings and stuff), so she got to the rehearsal space/makeshift studio a tad late. She was so excited to tell Bandit and Mads about Jimmy!

When she walked in, she found them discussing a new hook about the people they loved and missed. Bandit called it *Calling Me Away*. It felt so eerie that it stopped her in her tracks. The universe has a funny way of trying to tell you things, she thought.

"Hey V!" they both shouted at the same time.

"Bandit wrote some beautiful words to this track we've been working on."

She was excited to hear them but couldn't wait.

"OK, I can't wait to read them BUT I gotta tell you something first... Jimmy is coming down tonight! To see me and my dad!"

Mads couldn't believe it.

"Oh my God, V, this is amazing! How? Why? Tell me everything!"

He ran to hug her. So did Bandit. That felt good. Vera started getting teary-eyed.

"I just... I emailed him this a.m. I don't even have his phone number. I said I missed him. And he replied right away! He said he knew about Empire Fall! He saw some live videos, and people know about us up there. A few of them do at least. I'm euphoric!"

Waterworks. Bandit and Mads were so happy for her they forgot for a second that they both were gonna have to lie to the band about their plans for the night. Bandit, barely holding back tears, handed her his lyrics. It felt crazy—he'd written them before knowing Jimmy was coming.

*I made an effigy
Of everyone I miss
For when I'm staring down at the abyss
I reminisce
A phantom presence
Guiding me up to the top
But even there the waters are too rough
It's not enough*

*I built a maze out of memories
So I could keep them beside me
How could I ever feel lonely still?*

*I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away*

*A sea of faces, I remember every name
They sing a song of love and lust and shame
I'll take the blame*

*I built a maze out of memories
So I could keep them beside me
How could I ever feel lonely still?*

*I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away*

They're calling me away

*Yelling my name
Don't leave me here, please say it again
Yeah, I know, we all go through the same stuff
Some days are fine, but I think I've had enough
And everybody that could cheer me up
Is no longer with us*

*I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away
I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away*

Vera was stunned.

"B... this is really, really great. Wow. I know you don't like to talk about your childhood at and before Orphanage162, and I'm gonna respect that, but

damn. These are really powerful."

"There's nothing to talk about really. My first memories are from that godforsaken place. They told me my parents were dead. I didn't have a name. Everyone said I picked one more suited for a dog. Which, by the way, is a joke that YOU made, Vera, when we first met. Not very original, and, might I add, pretty bully-like of you!"

Mads looked at Vera and jumped at the chance to seize the moment, now that Bandit seemed a little more open about his past.

"So tell us. How did you really meet Rentoth? We deserve to know now."

"Yeah B, we really do. And sorry for saying your name sounded like a dog's! I love dogs!"

Bandit sighed. He knew he owed them something. He wasn't about to tell them about tonight—but the rest? They deserved to know. Well... the relevant parts at least.

"Okay guys. Here goes. When I was a teenager, I got in all sorts of trouble. Bad stuff. Me and a couple other kids found a way to sneak into a faulty elevator north of Orphanage162. We found a printed access code one night while we were drunk on the Slum streets. We figured shit, let's try it out, see if we can sneak up in there..."

Mads stopped him.

"How did you circumvent the two-factor authentication? The code by itself is useless, it needs to be matched with one's ID..."

"Dude, will you let me finish? We waited for the night security team's shift to start and tried a few elevators. None worked, because of just that. We got chased down by a few security guards, but the night teams are always slow and tired. No one caught us. We heard rumors that some elevators didn't require the ID when they didn't get updated to the latest software for some reason. Don't ask why, I have no fucking clue. So we kept trying. Mind you, we were a bunch of HAMMERED kids. Dumb as fuck.

And then... I try another one. My friends are on the lookout. I'm the only one in. And of course... it works. I zoom all the way up. It opens. And I can't believe my eyes. Blinding city lights. It's like a whole new world up there. The people look different. They dress different. They all look like beautiful fit statues. The AIR feels different. I wandered around for a while until this dude, only older than me by a couple years, notices that I don't belong. It was Rentoth. We talked, we hung out, and I could tell he was meeting a slummer for the first time. It was entertaining to him. He got me dinner at this very

fancy place. He asked me where I lived. I told him. He gives me a couple hundred Sols before walking me back to the elevator. Since then, he's come down a few times, bought me a meal here and there, even got me out of trouble a couple times. But I hadn't seen him in at least a year when he pulled up behind us at the bar that one night."

Mads and Vera sat there silently.

"And that's the whole story?" she asked.

"Yes, I promise."

Mads decided to believe him. "Ok then. Well, thanks for being upfront. That story is kinda heartwarming!" Bandit's face tightened. "Still. Don't trust that guy. I've seen him do fucked up shit."

The band worked on *Calling Me Away* for the rest of the day. They did good.

Before the end of the session, they started talking about their evening plans. Vera had already talked about hers. Mads said he was gonna work on the track more. Lies. Bandit said he was gonna write lyrics for some other song. Also lies.

Mads walked Vera home, but veered off a block from her place, wanting to give her space to reunite with her brother. He turned the corner, then headed for the abandoned library.

Bandit texted Sophie that he needed to work on lyrics—same lie he told the band.
Then headed for Elevator340.

Three roads. Two lies and a truth.

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."

17. The Fall Of Me

BANDIT

"I guess we'll see if I'm so insignificant... huh, brother?"

Bandit started walking toward the exit.

Rentoth didn't move. He drummed his fingers against the marble tabletop, amusement curling at the corners of his mouth.

"You moron. Maybe you don't understand what I'm saying. You took the True Vow. You and your little friends. You're one of the Sworn. And Zero owns you." He stepped closer.

"They don't care about your little clandestine meetings with the SRF. Or your antics—for now. Because it serves them. You're getting popular. Powerful. But you took their money. You joined them. And no one leaves the Militia alive."

A pause. Then a smirk.

"Unless... you're as powerful and rich as them. And almost nobody is. Except for me."

He gestured to the shattered glass on the floor,

annoyed at his own temper flare.

"The Sworn have controlled Elderise for millennia. Hidden in the shadows. Pulling the strings. They've survived regime changes, revolutions, nuclear events. They appointed the Authority Council sixty years ago—after the Last Great War. When it became clear that weapons had gotten too sophisticated... too lethal. Elderise couldn't survive another global conflict. So they created a stabilizing force. But they made sure to keep it on a tight leash. Like a dangerous dog."

His voice cooled.

"And now? The Council's gotten too powerful—in their eyes, anyway. And Zero and his little friends have decided they've had enough."

Rentoth leaned in, eyes lit with determination.

"You think you're alone? You think *Empire Fall* is special?"

A dry laugh. He got even closer, inches from Bandit's face.

"Zero has many puppets. Just like you. Artists. Influencers. Politicians. At every level. There's no place in this world his web doesn't reach."

He stepped back into the low light, breath steady.

"I thought he might be a useful ally. But I'm not so sure anymore."

Bandit felt it now. The weight of it.

What the fuck did we get ourselves into?

Still, he wasn't gonna let Rentoth have the last word.

He stepped forward, voice steady, razor-sharp.

"You sure talk a lot, big bro. Maybe Zero owns us. Maybe we don't have money like you. But we possess something neither of you do."

A beat.

"Passion."

"These people who come to our shows? These kids copying our cassettes, watching our live shows—they connect with us. With what we're saying. And you gave me a megaphone. I'm gonna use it. Because what you don't get is this—people hate all of you. You, Zero, Oran... anyone who's never had to fight to put food on the table. Levels 1 or 99, it's all the same to us. We're the fucking toilet of Elderise. Where all the shit from above gets dumped to rot. The sewers."

His voice was calm. Focused. Measured.

"We're gonna come for all of you. And by the time the snowball reaches your floors, it'll be way too big for you to stop it."

Rentoth burst out laughing.

"You are so naive, little brother! But I gotta say—it's

refreshing.”

He clapped once, slowly.

“You want chaos? So do I. I guess we’ll see whose kind prevails.”

He turned back to the window.

“Anyway. I’m hungry. I’ve got some friends coming over. You should stay. You can be my minstrel for the night. Or my buffoon. Or both. What do you say?”

“I’m good, Rentoth. But enjoy your evening. Sounds... constructive.”

“Haha! Look at this little junkie giving life lessons. Fine. See you later, peasant.”

Bandit left.

On his way down, he felt reflective. Not angry. Just... tired. He didn’t bring Flux with him, and he was really regretting that decision.

He’d known for a while now that he was one of the Council member’s bastard sons.

Lord Rabenath. Obscenely rich. Beloved by the public. Seen as generous, loving, and wise.

But to Bandit? He was just a ghost. A name he could never say without getting laughed at.

When Rentoth first came to see him at Orphanage162, Bandit must’ve been about nine.

Rentoth was fourteen. Angry. Hurt. But still... surprisingly kind.

He hadn't always been this hard to like.

Back then, Rentoth seemed torn—between his rage at his father and this strange, unexpected affection for the little half-brother he didn't know he wanted.

He came back three more times that year.

He'd bring Bandit stuff from the upper levels: food, toys, clothes, books. He didn't say much. Just sat with him on the cracked concrete steps in silence. As they got older, he showed Bandit around the cool places he knew in the Slums, and their bond grew. They shared one thing above all: a hatred of control. Anything expected of them? They did the opposite.

But then it all stopped.

One day, Rentoth came to tell Bandit that his mother had found out about his little visits to her husband's bastard son. She forbid him to see him again. Just like she forbid Lord Rabenath to ever meet Bandit. And when lady Rabenath spoke, everyone listened. She came from one of the oldest and most powerful families in all Elderise. Some said her generational wealth was instrumental in building Lord Rabenath's fortune.

Rentoth managed to come back a couple more times over the years, but the brothers' relationship had been irrevocably fractured after that.

Bandit used to tell the staff at the orphanage that Lord Rabenath was his father. He told the other kids. Over and over.

No one believed him.

Who could blame them? In the Slums, survival takes all your time. No one has room for side quests.

The elevator buzzed quietly. Then a ping. A text from Sophie.

"How's the writing going? :) »

Bandit stared at the message.

He hated how her sweetness made him feel filthy. Like he was tracking mud through her clean little world. He closed his eyes. Typed:

"Good. Just finished some lyrics for this new song. Pretty excited! I'll show them to you tomorrow."

As he put his phone back in his pocket, he felt his anger mounting. *I'm such a piece of shit. Just like my brother. But at least he's upfront about it.*

18. With You Always

VERA

Jimmy was hesitant.

But he knew his sister.

She wasn't gonna let up until he gave her an answer.

"Well... it's complicated. But The Sworn have this program where they support artists from the lower levels financially. I didn't want to tell you or dad back then, but... That's how I got my job. Over the years, I had to prove my worth more and more. Eventually, they financed a downpayment on my condo at a ridiculous rate."

Vera was stunned.

"You... You took the vow? You said the words?"

Jimmy nodded, then held up the metal horns symbol and sang, half-joking,

"IZE WAID SEH, sister."

He forced a smile.

"That's how I first heard about you. Guys from the order told me about Empire Fall. And I recognized you right away. I heard you joined too."

Vera looked away.

"We did. Because we had no choice. Rentoth and Zero made us do it."

Jimmy's eyes widened. "Wait—you met Rentoth and Zero? For real? I don't believe you."

"You should believe me, dude. And I didn't like what I saw. Rentoth's your typical rich kid grown bad—but his anger worries me. And Zero? Zero's an enigma. Which is even scarier."

Jimmy lit a cigarette, voice low. "You should be scared, sis. Word is... Zero's the leader of the Sworn. His bloodline is ancient. The guy's *really* powerful. I've heard some crazy stories about him."

"Like what?"

Jimmy looked around, nervous. "I don't really wanna say. But he's not just some dude. He's... *real*. You don't mess with him. Or you might end up dead."

Dead?

Vera's stomach twisted.

She was starting to realize how naive she, Mads, and Bandit had been. They were meddling with forces far beyond their pay grade. And what the fuck was this order they'd aligned with?

How had she never heard of it before?

She was smart. Educated.

But apparently not enough.

As they walked back home, they tried changing the subject, talking about music, sharing anecdotes... And Vera couldn't stop gushing about their bandmates. "I feel like I can really trust them, you know?"

RENTOTH

After Bandit left, Rentoth had his aforementioned friends over for a decadent feast. They laughed, drank, and did a bit of *Powder*.

Unlike Flux, this exclusive designer drug came with minimal side effects. Some said it just turned the user into a bigger douche than they already were—but no one on the Ultra High Levels had a problem with that. If anything, it made things more entertaining.

But before they could get to dessert, Rentoth's assistant barged in—white as a ghost.

"M-m-m... Master Rentoth," he stammered, his whole body shaking. "Sir Zero is here."

Rentoth, mid-makeout on a white leather couch, pushed Freida aside with annoyance.

"Where? On my phone? Give it to me."

"No, sir. He's here. In the lobby. In person. Waiting for you."

Rentoth sobered up instantly.

What the fuck is Zero doing here?

The man never showed up unannounced. Hell—he barely showed up *announced*. He told everyone to clear out. Fast.

After a quick trip to the bathroom to splash water on his face and compose himself, he made his way downstairs.

Zero was standing there. Calm as ever.

"Hi, mister," Rentoth said, forcing a casual tone. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," Zero replied. "Let's go to your office."

Rentoth waved his assistant off.

"You can go home for the night. And please tell our guests it's time to go."

Once the office door closed, Zero wasted no time. He lit up a giant, luxurious cigar and started talking.

"The Order has spoken.

We—the Sworn—are about to make our move against the Authority Council. It'll happen in the coming days."

Rentoth was flabbergasted.

"What? Already? I thought we had more time."

"I know you did. But we can't wait any longer.

The streets are ready. We've spent years canvassing

every corner of Elderise. The new generation of founders and business visionaries? They're with us. So are the alternative media sources. And the artists. Tastemakers. Creators. We own the culture now, Rentoth. The old guard—the dinosaurs and their tired money—have grown weak. The resistance is mounting. *The Cause*, as they call it, is gaining traction. It's a feeding frenzy. Everyone's fighting over the carcass of the old system. But before we seize power, we have to kill it first."

Zero stepped closer. Voice flat, eyes gleaming.

"So I came to ask you directly. Are you with us, like you've been claiming? Or are you going to crawl back to your daddy?"

Rentoth snapped.

"This is not the question, Zero! We've been building the Militia for years. Fomenting dissension—so when the time came, it would look like the uprising came from below, not from the top!"

Zero remained unbothered.

"We *will* make it look like it came from there. Like a group of militants teamed up with the SRF and organized this coup. *They* will take the blame. The Sworn, as always, will remain in the shadows—right where we belong. Now, you still haven't answered me. Are you with us?"

Rentoth knew he was cornered. Whatever his real feelings, there was only one answer possible. He nodded once.

"I am, Zero. *IZE WAID SEH.*"

Zero smiled faintly.

"*IZE WAID SEH*, brother. Also... I assume you know what this means, right? For your father—and everyone else on the Council?"

Rentoth didn't hesitate.

"I do. That fucker's had it coming for a while anyway."

Zero sat down in Rentoth's leather chair, sucking slowly on his cigar.

"The Sworn doesn't save. It decimates."

He waited a good while before speaking again.

"By the way, dear Renney... should I start to worry about your little bastard brother and his band? He seems quite defiant—which I don't mind. Rebellious artists have always been a welcome addition to The Sworn.

But he's charismatic. He's cunning. He's talented... and he hates us all. He could become a problem down the road if we let him roam free. I'm not sure he can be bought."

Rentoth wanted to crush his dumb face in a million pieces.

"You let me deal with Bandit. I'm not sure which yet, but he's got an important part to play in all of this."

Zero stood up and headed for the door.

"I agree. And that is exactly what I'm worried about."

19. Bad1

EMPIRE FALL

The next day, Vera, Mads, and Bandit gathered for another scheduled writing session at the studio. The vibe was tense. Everyone picked up on it, but they all assumed it was because of their own shitty night. Vera spoke first. She told them everything about Jimmy and The Sworn—about his condo, about the vow.

Mads and Bandit exchanged uneasy looks. On the surface, they were glad for Vera—her brother had finally come down. But the rest of it? The timing made his visit feel suspicious.

Mads spoke first.

“This shadow order is starting to creep me out. Even the name. *The Sworn*. It just feels so ominous. Like a spider spinning a web. Why buy out artists? What’s the purpose?”

Bandit interjected.

“You know the purpose. Control. Moneyyyy. Money rules all. A sol for your soul.”

Mads nodded weakly. He wanted to tell them about Aksel so badly it hurt. His fists clenched under the desk, his mouth dry. Oran's warning kept replaying in his head:

Not a word. Not to your family. Not to your bandmates. Especially not to Bandit. You'd put your brother's life in jeopardy.

He wasn't an expert liar—never had been. His palms were sweaty, his eyes evasive, his body folding in on itself. Vera noticed something was off, but she chalked it up to the chaos they were all drowning in. Then Bandit, who had been brooding in the corner, stood abruptly. His voice was sharp, reckless.

"I've got a confession. Last night, I saw Rentoth. His idea. I won't get into details, but I'm convinced—we're being used. We're not special. We're pawns. We took their money, and they'll use us to destabilize the Slums and the lower-mids. And I'm convinced they've got people just like us on every level. The Militia? It's bullshit to them. Just one of a dozen clandestine fronts. Hell, for all we know, they've planted people inside the SRF too."

Vera cut in sharply.

"Who's *they*, though? Rentoth? Zero? The Sworn?"

"Yeah... though I don't think Rentoth and Zero are as close anymore. But forget Rentoth—he's just a rich

brat with daddy issues. The Sworn though... They scare the shit out of me. A clandestine order that goes back thousands of years? Sponsoring the culture *and* the counterculture? There's a missing piece. Something bigger we're not seeing yet."

He started pacing, eyes wild, voice quickening with feverish conviction.

"So what do we do? We reclaim the Militia. Make those events ours. Most of our buzz is coming from the Slums, the lower-mids, and the Militia shows, yeah? Then fuck it—*let's be* the Militia. Because fame is currency. It's leverage. If we just hole up here and make music? It won't be enough."

He stopped, breath heavy.

"Without fame or money, you're a target."

He sat back down. Something clicked in all of them. Secrets, different agendas—none of that mattered. Not right now.

Vera spoke first.

"Bandit... you're out of your mind. But maybe that's exactly what we need. We gotta keep working on our craft. Keep getting the word out. Use their dirty money to our advantage. And I agree—we make these Militia events ours. Maybe it's a facade to them, but that's a weakness we can exploit."

"A point of entry. Toward the belly of the beast."

Bandit added, staring at his bandmates. A smirk spread across all their faces. They had a plan.

Maybe it was the adrenaline, maybe it was the guilt, but Mads couldn't hold it anymore. At least some of it. In that moment, he and Bandit weren't so different.

"I'm all in. But guys... I have something to confess. I've been talking to Oran."

Bandit barked a bitter laugh. "Why am I not surprised?"

Mads went on to explain his visit to the SRF hideout, justifying it by saying Oran thought he was the most receptive to his message, that he wanted to plead his case through him. He left the Aksel part out completely.

"I can't believe you lied to me!" Vera gave him a playful shove, though her strength still made it sting. Then she softened. "I get it though. We've got bigger fish to fry."

"Honestly, I kinda saw that coming anyway. I'm just glad you're telling us," Bandit added, pulling Mads into a hug. He grabbed Vera too, forming a tight huddle.

"But listen. Something bigger is going on. We can't trust anyone but ourselves. Vera's right—we focus on the music. Raise our profile until we can meet

these rich dickheads on their level. And the Militia? That's us now. We take it over. Rentoth, the SRF, the Sworn—they've got a million things to worry about. We don't. We've got one. Laser focus. I say we figure out how to set up the next Militia event ourselves."

They talked for hours about how to pull it off, agreeing they'd push Rentoth, force his hand if they had to. He knew the right people.

Vera shook her head in disbelief.

"I can't believe this asshole might end up being the lesser of all these evils."

Mads frowned.

"I don't know about that. My money's on Oran. I definitely identify with *The Cause* more than whatever this douche stands for. But yeah—Rentoth has his uses."

Vera rolled her eyes. "Listen to you! 'The Cause'! Spoken like a true SRF choir boy."

"Shut up!"

Bandit, pacing again, turned back to them.

"They all have their uses. They're cards we can play. But the trust circle stops here. It's us against them. All of them. March-or-die time. They think they can play us? We'll play them."

Mads and Vera didn't like to admit it, but Bandit

inspired them like no one else ever had. Wild, erratic, but when he was locked in—he was magnetic.

They had their plan. They knew where they were going. Whatever was in front of them, they'd be ready. Three nobodies from the Slums.

And so they went ahead. Always the realist, Mads pulled them back to reality:

"Alright. Now that we know how we're gonna save Elderise... should we work on that new song?"

"Yeah, we should." Bandit took out his phone, and opened the lyrics he wrote after his late-night trip upstairs.

"It's an angry one. But I think it's fire. It's called Bad1. Here's the hook:

*You wanna push me to the edge?
I'll throw you over
You wanna hit below the belt?
Watch me go lower
And I tried to be nice
But you're wasting my time
You're looking for a fight
You're getting it tonight
I'm gonna finish what you started
I'm the bad1 now "*

No one argued. The song felt perfect. Very on the nose. Vera let out a laugh.

"Damn B, who pissed you off?"

They'd taken *The Vow* once before, not even knowing what it meant. But this—this felt like the real vow. You wanna push *them* to the edge? They'll throw you over.

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."

21

Know My Name

EMPIRE FALL

Everyone was stunned. Oran's brain short-circuited. How? How did he know? About the hideout, about the meeting? How had he flipped Stephanie? Or had she been with him all along?

Before anyone could speak, Rentoth strolled to the center of the room. He glanced around at the decor.

"Yeah... this looks pretty shitty, even by Slum standards. Can't say I'm surprised." He raised his hands in mock reassurance. "Before anyone freaks out, please know — I came as a *friend*." He bent his fingers in exaggerated air quotes around the word.

"Bandit, I've been tracking your phone for a while. And I've got people and video systems following you all. It didn't take long to find this place. I'm sure Zero could do the same. Maybe he already has. But no one followed me here. That, I can promise. Oh, and Stephanie... well, she used to work for a private security company my father owns. I keep tabs on all his employees, especially the ones who try to

disappear. After she quit to come work for you, it didn't take long for me to find her — and offer triple what you pay to get her to spy for me."

He turned to her with mock sympathy.

"Don't be mad at her, though. Her daddy's very sick, and she couldn't afford his treatment. You know the saying... *a Sol for a Soul*."

His face twisted, voice dropping into sudden fury.

"And EVERYONE has a price."

Oran's heart hammered in his chest. His fingers drummed against the tabletop, eyes fixed anywhere but Rentoth. This could jeopardize the entire SRF. And everyone's safety.

Bandit was fuming, but part of him was curious to hear what Rentoth had to say. He knew his brother wouldn't reveal their secret. Not now. It wasn't time to play that card.

Vera, all nerves and survival instinct, spoke first.

"You sure like to make an entrance, lil' Rennie. Okay. We'll bite. Since you seem to know it all, why don't you enlighten us?"

Rentoth laughed, threw his feet on the table, and leaned back on two legs of the chair, balancing carelessly.

"Well, my dear Vera, I shall. I know about Zero's

plans. He and I have been building toward this for years. It's been in the works a long time. But lately... I don't know. We don't see eye to eye anymore."

He leaned forward, eyes glittering.

"I don't wanna watch *all* of Elderise burn. Just the little people. And the little people who think they're not so little. Those piss me off even more. Mid-Levelers are the worst. Journalists. Demands. Petty jealousies. They want what I have but won't admit it. Stuck in mediocrity."

Vera cut in, sharp. "You sound just like Zero. He hates everyone. You're not so different."

Rentoth smirked. "I'm just a rich boy who enjoys chaos and freedom. He's an ideologue, a cult leader. I thought I could rein him in... but I was wrong, I guess."

He shrugged, a theatrical afterthought.

"Anyway. I may have underestimated the scope of what the Sworn plan to do. They want to wipe the slate clean. Like your intellectual friend already told you, Zero is pushing for a very ambitious coup. And I don't want him to succeed. So..." He spread his arms wide, taunting, "here I am. Trying to see if we can form an alliance. For the time being."

Silence.

Oran's stomach turned. He could already see the dangers of associating the SRF with Rentoth. But those endless pockets... *Fuck me.*

Bandit shoved Rentoth's feet off the table and sat down across from him, eye to eye.

"Okay, buddy. First off — tell me who actually owns the rights to Empire Fall. Is it you? Zero? Both? I'm done being someone's pawn."

Rentoth locked eyes with him, unblinking.

"I do. Zero is just an investor in the label I set up for you. He knows how to handle artists through his Sworn connections. I thought he'd bring value. But fear not, you all belong to me."

Bandit's jaw tightened, but he nodded once.

"Good. Then here's how it's gonna be. We're taking over the Militia. You set it up as a sham to scout talent for the Sworn? Fine. We'll make it what the people think it is — a real organization that stands for the liberation of the Slums and beyond."

He turned to Vera and Mads.

"And we become its official heads. A movement that you, buddy, will bankroll."

Rentoth burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! I love your naiveté. You think you can run a revolutionary organization? Hilarious."

"I can help."

Oran's voice cut through, steady this time. He pulled up a chair and joined the table.

"We can set up synergies between the Militia and the SRF. We have operatives everywhere. We have experience. What we do not have is a charismatic, popular leader."

He placed a hand on Bandit's shoulder, leaning in.

"And I believe this leader could be you."

Away from the table, Vera and Mads exchanged a worried look. But they knew the only way out was forward. They couldn't get cold feet. Not now. Not with Aksel and Jimmy stuck somewhere up there.

Bandit stood and went to his bandmates.

"Guys, how are we feeling about this? I don't wanna do this without you. We're family."

Mads answered for both of them, leaning forward, fists clenched.

"We want to do this. For ourselves. For Empire Fall. For our families. For the Slums. And one more thing, Rentoth — you don't own shit. You bought paper. The people made this band. And they'll be the ones to decide what it means."

Rentoth rolled his eyes and turned to Oran.

"Now you and your little Cause. I hope you know I despise everything you represent. Your ideals, your

vision, your self-righteousness — everything, really. But right now... I'm worried about the Sworn more than I hate you. We're gonna have to work on your vetting, though. Stephanie was very easy to flip... weren't you, sweetie?"

She shot him an angry look but didn't utter a word.

Oran leaned forward, voice low.

"Careful, Rentoth. Regimes fall when they underestimate the power of ideas. Money buys loyalty — but only for so long."

"Oh wow you are so wise! Listen genius, it's grown-up time. Talk to your bosses at the SRF and tell them about our little plan. See if they want to be partners."

He stood and headed for the door. Right before he left, he turned back to his audience.

"My channels tell me the coup will happen a week from today. I'm trying to gather more information. You let me deal with Zero. Bandit, Oran — I'll be in touch. We need to set up a Militia event in the next few days, before the coup, so we can prepare your people."

Stephanie opened the door for him.

Rentoth grinned.

"It's showtime now, my friends. Elderise is about to go up in flames. Let's see who will be alive to dance on its grave."

22 Eden

ORAN

After Rentoth left, Stephanie followed him outside. She paused in the doorway, voice low, almost apologetic.

"I'm leaving too, Oran. Sorry. *A Sol for a Soul*. I had to take his offer. I believe in the Cause... but I love my family more. And if the bosses come after me? I'm a pretty good shot. I'll see them before they see me." She closed the door.

Oran collapsed into a chair. His body felt heavy with the same old truth: money always wins. Over loyalty, over love, over principle. Louder than any cause. Drowning out everything.

Motherfucking moneyyyyyy.

As most intellectuals from the upper-mids, he never cared about it much. His parents prized culture and travel more than wealth, hauling him all over Elderise before he was a teenager. He'd seen people content with "enough."

He'd seen people destroyed chasing "more." And

Elderise? Elderise was a machine of more. Always more. Until it devoured itself.

Bandit leaned against the table, studying him with a gentle but mocking grin.

"Well... you just got sonned by the biggest douchebag I know. Happens to the best of us."

He dropped into the chair beside Oran and slung an arm across the backrest.

"Bet you're tempted by his proposal though, huh?"

Then, right in front of everyone, Bandit pulled a Flux cartridge from his pocket, cracked it open, and inhaled deep.

"If the world's ending, I might as well get high. You guys want some?"

Vera slapped his hand away, fury in her eyes. This wasn't the time. She still couldn't reach Jimmy. And Mads — Mads was staring at the floor like he could see straight through it.

"Sorry, cool guy," Vera snapped. "Some of us still give a shit about family. Mads? You okay? You're not saying anything."

Mads didn't look up.

"Oran... I think it's time you contact Aksel. Bring him home. It's too dangerous up there now. We need everyone close. Tight circle." He hesitated. "Also... what do you think about Rentoth's proposal?"

Oran shook his head, grim.

"I don't know, Mads. I'll run it up the flagpole. Maybe it makes sense. But think about it — allying with Rentoth means partnering with the very symbol of everything broken about the upper levels. The gluttony. The rot. And for what? To save Elderise? To protect the status quo? I'm not sure that's even worth saving. But Zero, the Sworn? They're worse. We can't let them win."

They talked longer, voices circling the same impossible choices. In the end, they promised to keep each other updated, to decide by tomorrow.

As Bandit, Vera, and Mads walked home, the air between them felt brittle. Vera still hadn't heard from Jimmy.

Mads broke the silence first.

"So... I say we play along. What options do we have? Oran — yeah, I like him. The Cause is fighting for something right. And Rentoth... as much as I hate to admit it, he's been useful." He paused, looking at Bandit. "And honestly? I think he really likes you. It's like he's always looking out for you. Maybe that's good for us."

Bandit could have spoken then. Vera had been honest. Mads too. But he still couldn't. Not yet.

They agreed to meet the next day at the rehearsal

space with Sophie, Riker, and Roman. The hug they shared before parting felt warm — but uncertain. Too much unsaid still lingered.

Bandit walked faster than the others, excited. Sophie was waiting at his shack. She'd promised to make him her "world-famous grilled cheese."

BANDIT

As soon as he neared his shack, Bandit smelled it. Something was wrong.

The door was open. A light burned inside.

He sprinted in.

He smelled iron before he saw her. Blood.

Sophie lay crumpled on the floor at the foot of his bed, barely conscious. Her face was swollen, bruised, bloodied.

Bandit dropped to his knees, gathering her head in his hands.

"What happened? Sophie — what the fuck happened?"

She tried to speak, but her lips were too swollen. No words came out.

Bandit's hands shook. He didn't think. He just dialed Rentoth.

"That's the Sworn's doing, baby brother," Rentoth said instantly. His voice was cool, almost rehearsed. "Sit

tight. I'll send my private med unit. Best people. Highly vetted. They'll take care of her. You have my word."

Bandit didn't argue. He just clutched Sophie tighter until the unit arrived — shockingly fast. Two masked medics loaded her onto a stretcher, their movements efficient, clinical.

"We're taking her to a private hospital on the 98th," one of them said. "She'll be fine. We'll take good care of her. You can see her tomorrow."

And just like that, she was gone.

Bandit stood in the doorway, shirt soaked with her blood, shaking. He called Rentoth back.

"What the fuck, man? Did you tell them where I live? Did you tell them about Sophie?"

Rentoth's tone hardened.

"Of course not. But the Sworn have their ways. They find things out. Always. Listen to me: don't sleep there tonight. Go to Vera's, or Mads'. Lock your doors."

Inside, Bandit's place had been ransacked. Nothing stolen — just violated. Smashed drawers, clothes scattered everywhere. A message, not a robbery.

He stuffed a couple Flux cartridges and a change of clothes into a bag and headed for the door. His fury sharpened into a single thought:

Fuck them all. But fuck Zero the most. I'll take him out myself.

His thumbs flew over his phone.

Group text: *Meeting at Mads' place. Now.*

By the time he got there, no one had responded to his message, but Vera was inside. She was in Mads' arms, crying.

Bandit froze in the doorway.

"What happened now!?"

Mads looked up, eyes wet.

"It's Jimmy. He sent Vera and her dad an email saying goodbye. The Sworn have called on him to fulfill his duty. He wrote like... like he's never coming back."

Vera tore herself from Mads' arms and let out a violent shriek.

"They're gonna get him killed!"

It was obvious to all of them. The Sworn was moving their pawns across the board. Attack mode.

"I'm calling Rentoth!" Bandit yelled.

"Fuck no, you're not!" Vera snatched the phone from his hands. "I won't let you or your asshole friend jeopardize my brother's life, B."

"I won't. For this type of stuff, we can trust him. I swear to you. He just helped me with Sophie."

Mads and Vera stared at him like he was on drugs. He knew that look.

"I didn't have time to tell you," Bandit blurted.

"Someone came to my house — Sophie was there —

they beat her up. It wasn't a robbery, it was a warning. I called Rentoth. He sent a med unit. They took her to the 98th. She's alive, but..."

"What? What are you talking about?" Mads was pale, confused.

Bandit explained everything. Vera listened, trembling, then finally nodded.

"Fine. We call him. If he can help Jimmy, we don't have a choice."

Rentoth's reply was curt. They were to stay put and take turns standing watch until morning. He'd send instructions then — and let Bandit know when they could check on Sophie.

As soon as Bandit hung up, Mads' phone buzzed.

A text.

Oran: Aksel is coming down. He'll be there in a couple days. I'll keep you posted.

23 Incipience_1

EMPIRE FALL

Bandit, Vera, and Mads slept on the floor of the kitchen-living room in Mads' parents' house. Vera's dad had come too — she'd insisted — stretched out on the couch so he would be safe. Bandit refused to sleep anywhere but by the window, keeping watch on the empty street below.

At six a.m., Rentoth called.

"Hey, little shit. Your girl's gonna be fine. They say you can see her later — I'll text you an access code. Straight to her room, ninety-eighth floor hospital."

Bandit exhaled hard, relief crashing through him.

"But listen," Rentoth went on, voice sharpening. "The Sworn are planning to take out the Authority Council in two days. You need an answer from Oran and the SRF this morning. I'm setting up a last-minute Militia event tonight. Once Zero hears, he'll know I've betrayed him. Which means I'll have to hide too. And since they obviously know where you live..."

He paused for effect.

"... I suggest you all come hide at my place on the One-Hundredth. I'll send details about the event once it's locked. Can you play? Hiding in plain sight might be the safest move you've got."

Bandit didn't answer right away. His mind spun: Sophie in a hospital bed, Roman and Riker still in the dark about everything, Vera's family in danger.

When he told the others about Rentoth's proposal, Vera bristled.

"I get the logic, sure. But this is getting too real, too fast. We're middlemen now — between forces that could crush us without blinking. We just wanted to play music, B. That's it."

Mads leaned forward.

"And that's what we're going to keep doing. Let the factions fight their wars. We stick to our values. We play for us. For the Slums." He met Bandit's eyes. "Tell Rentoth we're staying here. Go see Sophie, of course. But then come back down. With us. With your family."

The irony wasn't lost on Bandit. His so-called family — Rentoth, Rabenath — was poison. But this? Vera. Mads. Sophie. Jimmy. This was blood he chose. He rose to his feet.

"Of course I'm coming back down. You guys are my family. We all are. And Vera — we'll do everything we

can to find Jimmy. As for the show..." He smirked.
"I've got an opener in mind. Mads, remember that
super-aggro track you sent me last week? I wrote
lyrics to it last night. It's called *Incipience*."
He read them the words.

*I'm gonna dig through the teeth of the monument
Scratch my name in the bone, leave an omen in it
I feel a pulse in the ground where the dead still sing
I'll take the crown from the hands of your hollowed kings*

*Like a dog on a rope
I'm not letting go
Drag the world through the fire
Just to watch it glow
It's turn of events that will crack your neck
What did you expect?*

*Witness the birth
The incipience
Our arrival is your death sentence
We grew like a parasite
Darkness has become our light
Witness the birth
The incipience*

This is the end of it all

*Every vow that we speak is a curse in bloom
Every step that we take is a march to doom
We were born in the Slums where the saints won't tread
Where the prayers rot black and the angels fled*

*Like a dog on a rope
I'm not letting go
Drag the world through the fire
Just to watch it glow
It's turn of events that will crack your neck
What did you expect?*

*Witness the birth
The incipience
Our arrival is your death sentence
We grew like a parasite
Darkness has become our light
Witness the birth
The incipience
(Incipience)*

*There's no coming back
There's no coming back from this
There's no coming back*

There's no coming back from this
There's no coming back
There's no coming back from this
There's no coming back
There's no coming back from this
There's no coming back
There's no coming back from this
No
No
Just like a dog on a rope
I am never letting go

Witness the birth
The incipience
Our arrival is your death sentence
We grew like a parasite
Darkness has become our light
Witness the birth
(There's no coming back from this)

Before Vera or Mads could react, Vera slammed her hand on the table.

"We're being dragged into their war! We're not soldiers, B — we're musicians. How the fuck are we supposed to fight the Sworn?"

Bandit erupted. His voice filled the kitchen, louder than the lyrics, louder than reason.

“Because FUCK THEM ALL. Darkness is OUR light. Not theirs. There’s no sun down here. We grew up in the dirt. We’re the ones connecting with the people. Yeah, we don’t have the money, the knowledge — but we can acquire those things. They can’t acquire what we have.”

He paced like a caged animal, eyes blazing.

“At the end of the day, the Sworn are just another rich-people club deciding what’s right for everyone. And Rentoth? The SRF? Same story, smaller scale. So here’s what I say: first, we take down Zero and his cult. Then we don’t stop. We keep going. We keep growing. The Militia is OURS. And we’re gonna cement that tonight.”

He jabbed a finger into the table.

“You can only fight power with power. We won’t kneel for anyone. Sure, we’ll take allies when it suits us — for now. But my loyalty ends here. With this house. With our band. With Sophie. With Jimmy. With the Slums. That’s it.”

His voice dropped, but the conviction in it shook the room.

“This is the incipience. The beginning. And there’s no coming back from it.”

Mads' phone buzzed. A text from Oran.

Aksel is coming down today. Things are moving faster than we thought. Keep it secret from your family. The higher-ups are leaning toward Rentoth's offer. They'll contact him directly.

The three stared at the message. Everything was accelerating.

They agreed to keep each other posted on every front. Then they split up: Mads stayed home, while Bandit and Vera headed to the 98th to see Sophie.

RENTOTH

Rentoth knew this was no joke. Setting up an event without clearing it with Zero was betrayal. Punishment for something like that? Death. And Rentoth quite enjoyed life.

He didn't much care if his father, Lord Rabenath, went down in the coup. The man deserved it. The whoring, the drinking — all of that was one thing. It was the hypocrisy that burned. Publicly, Rabenath was a loving philanthropist, a champion of social mobility and the poor. Privately, he was a shrewd, dishonest killer. His family lived in fear of him. Especially his wife — Rentoth's mother, the only person he'd ever truly adored.

Rentoth was convinced that if Rabenath was gone, life would finally get easier. She had suffered enough. Chaos was coming, and Rentoth saw opportunity in it. He doubled his security detail, solidified his agreement with the SRF, finalized the Militia event for the evening, then left for the hospital to meet Bandit, Vera, and Sophie.

BANDIT

On the 98th, Vera and Bandit rushed to Sophie's side. She looked battered — face swollen, eyes darkened — but she was awake. Relief hit him so hard his knees almost buckled.

She tried to smile. "Couple of masked guys. They wrecked the place, roughed me up. And then one leaned down and said" — her voice cracked — "*Tell your boyfriend the Sworn says hi.*"

Bandit's jaw clenched until his teeth ached. Rage burned hot in his chest.

But Sophie was alive. That was enough for now. He kissed her forehead, whispered he'd be back soon, then stepped into the hallway.

Rentoth was waiting by the elevators, two bodyguards in tow. His posture was casual, but his eyes scanned every corner.

"Coffee?" he asked flatly.

They went down to a sterile café in the lobby. Rentoth lit a cigarette he wasn't supposed to, and no one dared stop him.

"See, brother," he said between drags, "this is what happens when you poke the Sworn. Zero doesn't forgive, and he doesn't forget. Which means we don't have time. Tonight's event isn't just a show. It's a declaration of war. You have to inspire them. Otherwise the people won't rally, and nothing changes. The Sworn will carry out their coup and we'll all be fucked. Are you ready for that? Are your bandmates?"

Bandit's hands shook under the table. He was exhausted, wired, terrified. But his voice came out steady.

"I don't have a choice."

Rentoth smirked. "Good. Neither do I."

Bandit stood to leave, then looked back at him.

"You should come down to the Slums tonight. Bring your detail. It'll be safer. And after all... we're family too."

For once, Rentoth cracked a genuine smile. "Maybe I should."

When Bandit returned upstairs, Sophie was out of

bed, dressed, and arguing with Vera.

"I'm going with you," Sophie snapped. "There's no way I'm missing tonight. And I'm playing, too."

Vera tried to calm her down, but Sophie brushed past, limping toward the door. Bandit and Vera scrambled to follow. Rentoth and his bodyguards fell in around them. Headed in the same direction.

24 Incipience_2

EMPIRE FALL

Everyone slept at Mads' that night.

The next morning, the band — plus Rentoth — met with Roman, Riker, and Sophie at the rehearsal space. They told them it was okay if they wanted out. But it was unanimous. Everyone was in. For themselves, and for the Slums.

Rentoth spent most of the morning — and half the night before — on the phone, setting up the Militia event. He also managed to squeeze in a few of his usual tasteful remarks:

"Haven't slept on a floor since I fucked that Slummer girl at her parents' place back in college."

or

"Mads, maybe I should get your dad to sniff some Powder. He looks like he's about to kill himself."

But hey — at least he was being authentic.

They came back to Mads' house around lunchtime.

Then came a commotion outside. Shouting. Heavy footsteps. Rentoth's security barking orders for someone to get on the ground.

Mads froze. He recognized one of the voices immediately — Oran.

But the other... the other one made his heart stop. He ran for the door.

It was him. He recognized him instantly.

"AKSEL!" Mads shouted. "AKSEL'S HERE!"

Everyone came running out — his parents, his sister, Vera, Bandit — even Rentoth, who had to yell at his bodyguards to stand down.

Tears. Hugs. But there wasn't time to lose in nostalgia. Aksel had come early because the SRF feared the Sworn might move sooner than anyone expected. Oran explained it fast and clipped — no room for sentimentality: the SRF was spreading weapons and operatives across mid- and upper-mid levels; the highest floors were on their own. The surge was overwhelming.

"And the Slums?" Vera asked.

Oran shook his head. "Exposed. Spread too thin. We can't spare manpower down here without abandoning key positions up the chain."

Mads turned discreetly to Aksel. Up close, his brother looked older, sharper, but worn down — eyes that had seen too much light and too little sleep.

"You really made it back," Mads said quietly.

Aksel, still holding his sister and mother in his arms, smiled faintly. "For now. I couldn't let you face this alone."

Mads pulled him into a quick, fierce hug. "Don't die on me again."

"I'll try," Aksel said, voice rough but steady. "But if I do, at least make it count."

"I'll help secure the Slums," Rentoth interjected, smoothing his jacket. "My guys are coming down with arms. But the Militia's rotten with Sworn plants — Zero's fingerprints are all over it. We can't trust half the roster."

He ruffled Bandit's hair with a smirk. "This little shithead already figured out the only move that makes sense. You three," he pointed at the band, "you're the face the Slums believe in. So tonight, you make it official. You take the Militia back. What started as a psyop becomes the real thing. You gotta make people understand that if they don't fight, things are gonna get even worse than they already are for them. Much, much worse."

Sophie, barely recovered from the beating she took the night before, grabbed Bandit's hands and brought them to her face. "You can do it. I believe in you. We all do."

He couldn't help but hear this little nagging voice in his head. *Really? They trust me? The lying drug addict who'd rather be snorting Flux than being here right now? Why? Do they all have a death wish or something?*

But he shut it out. Not today. He kissed Sophie and stepped in front of everyone.

"I wanna make this clear. I'm not doing this for the SRF, I'm not doing this for you, Rentoth. I'm doing this for MY PEOPLE. The ones that are here, and the ones that live in this garbage can of a place. Elderise will have to reckon with how they've treated us down here. WE are the Militia. And tonight, we rise!"

Cheers. Claps. More hugs. Showtime was almost here.

It was the same warehouse as before. But there was a palpable tension in the air. An aroma of danger. Blood in the atmosphere. The venue was packed. Empire Fall merch was everywhere. Mostly kids, many high on Flux, ready to let their frustrations out.

Oran had gone back to the mid-levels to do his duty. Aksel, proud as hell of his little brother, promised him he would share the crazy stories he'd gathered during his time helping the rich and powerful write songs. But for now... he had another idea. Just because the world might end tonight didn't mean they couldn't have fun.

"I noticed you guys need a musical director guy manning the laptop... maybe I could help?"

Vera yelled, "YES!" before anyone could respond.

"Listen, I'm freaking out because I haven't been able to reach Jimmy, and even though we just met, I feel like I've known you as long as I've known Mads. I'm so glad at least one of our older brothers is here with us tonight. Mads would talk about you all the time. Plus... I gotta see if you're really as good a musician as he says you are!"

Aksel burst out laughing. "Well, I'm just gonna push some buttons tonight! But hey, if we survive the night, maybe you and I can jam one of these days. I heard you can shred pretty hard, too."

Bandit nodded in approval and raised his water bottle. "A sober toast to the Slums, and to us — Empire Fall! I guess we found our seventh member!" They all cheered. They felt closer than ever before. Like troops right before leaving for the front.

Rentoth's guards were gonna stay near the stage in case something happened. He was never gonna tell anyone, but he was starting to wonder. Was Zero really about to murder his father and wipe out the Authority Council?

Even though he disliked the man, he hated the idea that Zero could murder him even more. Discreetly, he had sent Stephanie to the highest levels to keep an eye on Lord Rabenath and his mother. Rentoth was worried about her. And about how real things had suddenly gotten. Life comes at you fast, yada yada.

It was time.

Aksel didn't have a proper EF mask yet, so he put on one of his brother's hoodies and a face mask he found at the house earlier. The music started playing. Then Vera started playing the intro riff to *Incipience*.

Bandit grabbed his mic. "Let's get filthy!"

The place erupted. The energy was palpable. This was more than a show.

After the song, Bandit took the microphone.

"I don't know if you've heard, but the higher levels suck. Not only did they push us down here like one

pushes a good shit down the toilet, but nothing is ever enough for these people. I'm told some, on the mid levels, have our best interests at heart. Maybe, maybe not. I don't trust them. Fuck 'em all. Because you know what? We have it worse than all of them. You're sad because you don't have any savings? Bitch, we don't even have enough Sol to buy food down here!"

The crowd erupted in approval. "You know what we have in the Slums? We have THIS." He pulled out a Flux cartridge. "THIS is how we cope, down in Elderise's sewers. We get fucked up because our reality sucks. We don't give a shit about what goes on up there. THEY WANNA WIPE US OUT OR SOMETHING? THEY WANNA TRY US? WE ARE THE MILITIA, AND TONIGHT, WE RISE!"

The crowd started smashing anything they could get their hands on. The temperature was rising. Vera looked at Mads, worried. Rentoth was loving it.

Bandit wasn't done.

"Before we play our next song, let me tell you something. I'm a fuck-up. I'm a liar, a drug dealer, and an addict. BUT I have found my purpose, right here, in the Slums, with THESE PEOPLE." He pointed at the band. "And I would DIE for them, you hear me?"

They say the Sworn are coming for us. Well, guess what, motherfuckers? We're coming for you!"

Right as he finished his sentence, a huge explosion shook the building. It was coming from outside. Then another. Then another. Panic. Screams. Rentoth ran to Bandit from the side of the stage.

"The Sworn are here."

25 Incipience_3

EMPIRE FALL

Pandemonium.

The Sworn, masked and armed, stormed the venue. They yelled for everyone to stand down, beating those who didn't listen and even shooting the most combative attendees. Screams, cries, gunshots — the most hellish soundscape anyone had ever heard. Aksel ran to Mads behind his drum kit, and the brothers, along with Riker and Roman, dove for cover backstage. Vera scanned the scene for Sophie, but her friend was nowhere to be seen.

"Where the fuck is she?" Bandit yelled.

"I don't know, but we gotta go backstage, dude!" She grabbed his arm and dragged him along.

Rentoth followed close behind. Vera's dad and Mads' family were in the makeshift green room too. Almost everyone was here.

Bandit couldn't take it. "Fuck this." He ran back onstage and grabbed the mic.

By that point, the Sworn had everyone in attendance on the ground. A few unlucky ones were lying there bleeding — some dead, some soon to be. They looked up at him. Defiant. Courageous. Fucking crazy. Bandit pulled out his phone, the camera already rolling. His hand was shaking, but he aimed it at the crowd.

"What are you guys gonna do, huh? Shoot me on stage? We're filming this, you know! You won't get away with it!"

A tall, athletic figure stepped forward through the bodies, megaphone in hand. Her mask glinted under the stage lights. Vera and Bandit had met people like her at the ceremony a while back. No doubt she was a Sworn Priestess.

"No one is gonna see this footage," she said, voice flat and amplified. "Because no one gives a shit about the Slums."

She raised the megaphone higher and addressed the audience.

"The great cleansing wave is here! We are the Sworn, and we will purify Elderise — drain it of its sin, dirt, and decadence. You Slummers might be the worst offenders of them all. Freeloaders, rejects, failures, and losers. Drowning your misery in cheap drugs and a life of imbecility. Consuming the slop the higher

levels give you, reveling in your mediocrity. Nothing more than stray dogs. Insects. VERMIN. You bring NOTHING to this world. And we will cure it of you — and everyone who isn't worthy."

She stepped closer toward the stage.

"But this man up there — him, his band, and his half-brother — well, they are even worse than all of you. They are traitors. They took The Vow. They said The Words. And they betrayed it. Made a mockery of it. And while we will spare most of you... WE. SHALL. KILL. THEM. ALL."

Backstage, everyone was freaking out.

"Brother? What does she mean?" someone cried.

Vera started putting two and two together. She gave Rentoth a glaring stare.

"Is it you? Are you Bandit's brother? Have you guys been hiding this from us this whole fucking time?"

Her voice was shaking with rage, pain, and hidden fear.

Mads and she exchanged an incredulous look. Of course. It made so much sense now. But Bandit — why would he lie to them? For all his flaws, they had always felt safe around him. But this — this was going to change everything.

"Ehhhhh... well... I mean, half-brother, really."

Rentoth cracked a forced, tense smile. He knew the

weight of his admission.

“My dad fucked a million Slum whores. Whores on every level, really. And I guess one of them spawned lil’ shithead over there.”

Vera swung at him — clocked him good, too. Rentoth fell flat on his ass. She’d had enough.

She started running toward the stage to confront Bandit. Her dad, Mads, and Aksel tried to stop her. She stiff-armed them all.

She didn’t give a shit. Jimmy was nowhere to be found, and now one of her two closest friends in the world had just lied to her about something huge. The way she saw it then — who cared if she got shot?

Bandit heard the commotion behind him and turned around to see Vera lunging at him.

“You lying piece of shit!”

He evaded the punch narrowly and caught her arm.

“Vera! Calm down, okay! I just — I didn’t know how to tell you... I...”

That’s when they heard the Priestess’s voice.

“Take them alive. We need to bring them up to the Nowhere Level. Master Zero wants their punishment to be televised.”

She turned to the crowd, still lying down and held at gunpoint by the Sworn soldiers.

“Let this be a lesson to all of you. The Militia dies

today. Revolutions are our thing — since the dawn of Elderise. The Sworn eradicates. It purifies.”

A few of the soldiers got onstage, cuffing and restraining Vera and Bandit. Having been arrested a few times, Bandit noticed these guys had no real idea what they were doing. They were clumsy, shaky. He realized they were just regular people, caught in the Sworn’s web — like they once were. Like Jimmy. Vera, hands tied behind her back and tears in her eyes, kept her gaze fixed on Bandit.

“You betrayed us.”

Bandit was overflowing with emotions. And where the fuck was Sophie?

In the meantime, backstage, two of Rentoth’s bodyguards had found their way to the main group. They were all trying to figure out how to escape. Rentoth tried calling for reinforcements, but his phone wasn’t working. Zero’s doing, no doubt. The group was stuck in the green room. No way out. Unless...

Mads heard it first — a faint voice coming from above. He looked up and froze. “Wait. Shh. You hear that?” Everyone went quiet. There it was again — a muffled whisper cutting through the hum of the emergency lights.

“Mads!”

He dragged a chair to the back wall and climbed up. The giant vent grille loomed above him, screwed tight into the metal frame. Through the slats, a pale face came into view. Sophie.

“Anybody got a screwdriver?” he shouted down. “Sophie’s here! I think we can get out through the vent!”

No one did. But Roman held up one of his thick bass picks. “These’ll do.”

He climbed up next to Mads, wedged the pick into the screws, and started turning. One by one, the bolts clattered to the floor — each sound deafening in the silence that had replaced the gunfire.

When the grille came loose, a gust of cold air hit them. Sophie reached through and pulled.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Hurry. They’re sweeping the halls.”

Aksel boosted his brother up first. Then Roman, Riker, Vera’s father, Mads’s family — one by one, they disappeared into the vent, crawling toward the faint glimmer of light ahead. Rentoth came last, with his two bodyguards pushing him up. The metal groaned under their weight.

Inside, the air was dry and thick with dust. They shuffled forward on hands and knees. Somewhere

below, boots thundered through the corridors — Sworn soldiers barking orders. Sophie moved fast, never hesitating. Every few meters, she stopped and looked back to count them.

They dropped out onto a fire escape behind the warehouse. No one in sight. No Sworn patrols. Just distant gunfire echoing through the city.

"These people are amateurs," Rentoth muttered, brushing off his jacket. "Thank our lucky stars. But I did ruin my pants up here."

The line broke the tension; a few of them actually laughed, shaky and terrified. They ran across the alley and into an abandoned building half a block away. It smelled like rust and ash. There, Mads took charge.

"Aksel, Roman, Riker — take the parents and my sister back home. One of Rentoth's guards goes with you. No stops, no noise. You move fast."

They nodded. The rest — Mads, Sophie, Rentoth, and the other guard — stayed behind, catching their breath, already planning.

Back inside the venue, the Priestess sent her soldiers to the green room — only to find it empty.

"We need them all," she hissed. "But we need Rentoth above all. Alive."

Her soldiers fanned out into the streets, their formation loose, desperate.

Outside, Bandit and Vera were shoved into the open, wrists bound, floodlights burning their eyes. They froze — everyone did. On a giant, rusted screen above the square, the news was playing. The Sworn had taken control. Decades of planting their seeds in every strata of civilization had finally paid off. Even the news crew was with them. Death was everywhere. Executions. Bodies. Smoke.

And then — the anchor's voice changed, grave and ceremonial.

"Today, we also cured Elderise of its most dangerous virus: the Authority Council. All of its members have been eliminated, including their leader, Lord Rabenath."

The feed cut to his corpse — beaten, bloodied, eyes open and empty.

Beside him laid a woman, her features softened by death. Rentoth's mother.

Bandit turned to Vera, both of them stunned beyond speech.

From the abandoned building, Rentoth watched too — his dead parents displayed for the world to see. He let out a sound that didn't belong to any language — a raw, animal scream. His mother was

never supposed to be in danger. This was a message. This was Zero punishing him for his betrayal.

Mads clamped his hand over Rentoth's mouth, trying to silence him.

Sophie and the remaining guard held him down as he thrashed.

There was no coming back from this.

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."