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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.