

07. NOISE

EMPIRE FALL

The city glittered above and below them like a kingdom of light, so far removed from the Slums that it might as well have been another planet. From the balcony of the level 14 club, Bandit leaned over the glass railing, drink in hand, watching the neon billboards and the towers that touched the sky. He'd collected a couple of phone numbers and entertained the thought of company for the night. But for now, he soaked in the view, feeling a rare sense of elevation.

Inside, the party thrived. A thumping, relentless four-on-the-floor electronic track pulsed through the air. The dance floor was a chaotic mosaic of:

Dancing.

Kissing.

Sweating.

Drinking.

Sniffing.

Bandit rejoined his friends in the quieter, VIP section of the club. Zero lounged in a leather armchair, a cigar resting between his fingers, surveying the scene like a chess master confident in his strategy. Rentoth, draped in his signature long coat, poured another round of deep amber liquor for Vera and himself.

"Enjoying yourself?" Rentoth asked, a smirk playing on his lips.

Vera grinned. "I could get used to this."

"You should." Rentoth handed her the glass. "This is what opportunity feels like."

Mads sat at the edge of a plush couch, barely sipping his drink. His gaze flicked between Rentoth and Zero. He wasn't naive. The entire night seemed orchestrated to make him, Vera, and Bandit crave this life, to make the Slums feel even smaller, even more inescapable. He could see it working on his bandmates—the glint in their eyes wasn't just from the alcohol.

"Why are we here?" Mads finally asked.

Rentoth raised an eyebrow. "To celebrate, of course."

"Celebrate what? We played a gig. That's it."

"It wasn't just a gig, my friend." Rentoth leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "It's momentum. It's a statement. It's proving you belong. And now, we ensure you stay on that trajectory. Our associates were very impressed, you know."

Mads glanced at Bandit and Vera. They weren't resisting. They weren't questioning. They were already captivated.

"So, you want to sign us or something?" Mads pressed.

Rentoth took a sip of his drink before responding. "Here's the deal. You want money? We'll ensure you have it. You want to record? We'll place you in the best studios. You want people to know your name? We'll spread your music across Elderise. No more bootleg cassettes, no more hustling just to survive. But we want to do all of that discreetly. No label or any of that nonsense. It has to appear as organic as possible. Very important."

Vera and Bandit exchanged glances, excitement evident. This was the break they'd been striving for. But Mads felt a knot tighten in his stomach.

"So, you want to fund us and do everything a good label does, but just... keep it a secret? Why? What's the catch?"

Zero chuckled, the sound deep and measured. "Smart boy."

Rentoth swirled his drink. "You play our Militia Events. All of them. That's nonnegotiable. As you grow, you'll help us make these events as big and meaningful as possible. But for that to work, it can't appear as though you have benefactors funding

anything. Especially from the top levels."

Vera's expression shifted. She looked at Mads; they shared the same unease.

"Wait... so you want us to deceive our audience? Lie? And you want us to perform at your weird unauthorized underground gatherings?"

Bandit interjected, "When I came to that one event, everyone wore masks except for you, Rentoth. I'm guessing it's to prevent retaliation from whoever you're hiding these meetings from. And I imagine you want us to perform without masks, right?"

"Correct. You three, anyway. If you add more members, they could wear masks. That would look sick, actually. But the people need to see you gorgeous faces!"

The atmosphere grew tense.

After a brief huddle, Mads addressed Rentoth, "We need to think about it."

"You have until tomorrow, 5 PM. The hotel rooms are yours for a couple more nights either way. But we need your decision quickly. We can't wait too long."

Bandit leaned forward, "You need to tell us what really happens at these events. Why the masks? Why call them 'Militia Events'?"

Rentoth's demeanor hardened. "Elderise is deteriorating. The Slums are poor, the top floors are

rich, but the middle... the middle harbors ambitions. Aspirations. They desire change. Progress. That's dangerous. We believe they should be more... grateful. They need reminding of their fortune, how close they are to real misery. And we want the Slums to serve as that reminder. Because to Slummers like you, the mid-levels are kings and queens. I mean... look at this club. You probably think it's a palace or something... to me, it's a shit hole."

Bandit remained puzzled. "So, you basically want us to agitate the Slums and help foment some kind of coup? Incite riots and stuff? This is insane, man."

"Well, let me decide what's insane and what's not, okay?"

"And why all the secrecy? What if we get arrested?"

"You won't get arrested in the Slums."

"It happens, dude, and you know it. It's happened to me before!"

Mads interjected, "Also... this whole 'the middle is getting too ambitious' reasoning feels off to me. You're telling us you're doing all this just to tame the mid-levelers?"

"Listen, smart guy, there's a lot more of them than there are of us. And we like it way up there. I know you're used to smelling urine and gasoline down below, but I like to smell the breeze when I wake up. I like to see the horizon when I eat my eggs *"a la coque"*.

They don't get that here. And they used to be fine with it. But now?!? Now they want what I have. What he has." Rentoth pointed at Zero. "And we don't wanna give it to them. So, we're going to remind them of how fortunate they are. But we gotta make it look like it comes from below. Optics, you know..."

Mads couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Why us?"

"Because you're good. Your songs are compelling. You're focused. I can hear the pain in your music. You want it. And you've got this ding dong over there." He gestured to Bandit. "He's a star. You'll draw crowds. You scratch our back, we scratch yours. You guys could become folk heroes even. If this works, the Slums will worship you."

"And the Mids will wanna kill us." Added Bandit.

The band exchanged uneasy glances.

Vera spoke next. "Well, thanks for your honesty, I guess. We'll return to our rooms and discuss."

Rentoth placed his empty glass on the shelf. "Great, let's meet here at 5 tomorrow then. Oh, and we've had our crew bring your gear down to your car. We assigned one of Zero's armed guards to watch over it, just in case someone tried to steal it."

"An armed guard? Dude what the fuck. I don't want someone with guns near our shit!" Vera was pissed.

“Relax lady. I just wanted to make sure no one was gonna mess with your stuff. Especially since I’m gonna start paying for it myself very soon.”

“We haven’t said yes yet!”, said Bandit as Rentoth and Zero were headed towards the door.

Rentoth turned back, smiling: “But you will.”