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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."