

11. AntiDivine_2

EMPIRE FALL

"You couldn't give us a fucking heads-up?!"

Vera was pissed.

"I didn't really think it through," Bandit admitted. "The idea came to me a couple hours before we went on. Besides, if Rentoth had gotten seriously pissed, you and Mads would've had plausible deniability."

Mads jumped in.

"That wasn't your call to make! We're a band. These decisions need to be discussed and taken together." He started pacing in a tight circle, staring at the floor. Then he stopped. His tone softened.

"Now... I gotta say... that was pretty dope, dude."

He came closer and mimed a punch to Bandit's jaw before pulling him into a hug.

"You mad genius."

Vera nodded in agreement.

"Gotta hand it to you, B. You gave me goosebumps out there. And *AntiDivine* was the perfect closer. When you sang the bridge and the audience started

singing along, I thought the roof was gonna blow.”

Humans die

Gods die

Regimes die

Art survives

As the band continued celebrating backstage, Rentoth entered the room, casually picking at a small container of fresh berries.

The energy shifted immediately. Quiet. Watchful.

Rentoth locked eyes with Bandit.

“People loved your set. And your little number at the end? Very entertaining. Walk with me.”

Bandit glanced at Vera and Mads. Hesitated. Then followed Rentoth out of the room.

Rentoth popped the last of the berries into his mouth and turned on Bandit, their faces inches apart.

“You think you did a cool thing, huh? You think I’m worried? No. That was GREAT. You looked like a real fucking rebellious rockstar up there. You stuck it to the man—aka me. Good boy!”

He gave Bandit a condescending tap on the nose. Bandit pushed his hand away aggressively, but before he could say anything, Rentoth kept ranting.

“What you don’t seem to grasp is that I own your career now. And the better you get, the cooler you

look, the more rebellious you act, the more I win. So go ahead. Make me your punching bag. As long as the crowd eats it up, I'm all for it. You think I give two shits what these imbeciles think of me? Awww. Cute little insects. I actually want them to hate me. All of them. I don't care. It serves my purpose."

Rentoth took a step back.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have real issues to deal with. Enjoy your night at the kids' table."

And just like that, he turned and walked away. Bandit didn't even get a word in. Whatever. He's clearly super ticked off.

Fuck him.

Bandit went back to his bandmates.

Vera and Mads inquired about the convo. Vera laughed.

"He was just trying to save face. You definitely pissed him off though!"

The band talked about the show—what went right, what didn't—and gave their share of the revenue to their newly appointed masked acolytes.

Mads wanted to make sure they all felt appreciated, but also made sure they kept their eye on the prize.

"Everyone did a great job tonight! I'll watch the film tomorrow and see what we can all do better or differently. But a fantastic first full-show as a six-piece!" Bandit couldn't resist.

“He’s gonna grind some tape! See, Mads, you DO like sports. Considering you think like a 55-year-old already, I’m not surprised.”

They all laughed, shared a few drinks, and never really cared about what was going on at the event. None of that was their concern. They had done their job. It was time to go home.

BANDIT

Sophie’s home was near Bandit’s, so he offered to walk her home, make sure she got back safe. She’d been focused on nailing the show all day, but as the night cooled and the noise died down, she started opening up. They laughed about Roman’s acrobatic stage jumps, about the sound guy who clearly hated the band, and about the sketchy pre-show energy drinks Riker swore by. All in good fun. Bandit told her how jealous he was of Sophie and the other masked Militia members for having such badass outfits while he, Vera, and Mads were stuck wearing street clothes.

He then went on and on about why they both admired Vera and Mads so much. He couldn’t stop talking about how he was learning from them every day, and how he aspired to be as good a person as

they were.

"I got a ways to go!"

Sophie retorted that he was "a pretty unique guy himself."

"Unique, yes. Good... I'm not so sure," he said.

They talked about books they liked (Bandit was working real hard on being "less of a moron," as he liked to put it, and was trying his best to read more), what songs moved them the most—all that stuff.

When they reached her door, Sophie reached out and touched Bandit's arm.

"You really were spectacular tonight, B."

Bandit hated compliments, but he liked this one.

He blushed. "Stop it, I'm just trying to keep up with all of you guys."

Sophie locked eyes with him and gave Bandit a kiss on the cheek.

"Have a good night. See you tomorrow at rehearsal. I'm afraid Captain Mads might tear us a new one!"

Bandit watched her disappear inside the modest home she shared with her family. For the first time in days, he didn't reach for a cartridge when he got home.

He just passed out peacefully. And slept better than he had in months.

VERA & MADS

Meanwhile, across the Slums, Vera sat at the Nakamura family table, nursing a chipped mug of tea. Mads leaned against the kitchen counter, arms crossed, his gaze flicking between her and the worn-out linoleum floor.

His mom was in the other room, humming to herself. Emma was out. The place felt strangely quiet.

"Your mom's cooking smells amazing," Vera said.

Mads smirked. "She would never let you leave without feeding you, you know that. Family takes care of family."

Vera smiled, then sighed. "How about Bandit, huh? I don't know. I feel like we might've underestimated him. He's just so raw, you know? But you're right—there's genius in him. We just have to make sure he keeps channeling it in a positive way. I worry about him sometimes... his mental state."

Mads nodded. "I agree. He's the spark. Without him, there's no us. And I'm starting to think he could be a great leader if he keeps his darkness at bay. You know he's still using Flux, by the way?"

"I assumed so, yeah. I saw a couple cartridges in the bathroom tonight. As long as he keeps it from interfering with the band, I say we shut up about it."

"I totally agree." Mads looked pensive.

"When Rentoth walked in tonight, I noticed something. Have you ever thought that, like... Bandit and Rentoth were kinda similar? At their core, I mean? I know they're very different, but I don't know... there seems to be this weird kinship."

Vera piggybacked on the thought.

"You're so right. First off... they both HATE authority. And they both enjoy testing the limits of everything. Do you think they secretly like each other?"

"I don't think B would ever admit it, but one hundred percent, I do. I'm not sure if we should be happy or worried."

"Me neither," concluded Vera.

"I gotta go home, Madsies. Pops will be waiting for me. Plus I gotta get more steps in before midnight strikes—I haven't reached my daily goal!"

"Okay, you lunatic. Be safe!"

As the door locked behind her, Mads got a text from an unknown number:

Hi Mads.

I saw you guys on stage tonight at the Militia Event. It was fantastic. My name is Oran, and I represent the Social Revolutionary Front (SRF). A mutual friend gave me your number.

We loved what you did—calling out Rentoth for his

devious ways and nefarious ambition.

I came by to see what he was really trying to do.

We believe the enemy is the Upper Level.

We think the Slums and the Mid Levels could maybe do something about it.

Would you guys be open to an in-person meeting?

Mads couldn't believe what he was reading.

I JUST WANNA MAKE GOOD MUSIC FOR FUCK'S SAKE.

I'm not dealing with this tonight.

He kissed his parents and sister goodnight and went straight to bed.

Tomorrow was gonna be a doozy—and he had film to watch.

He'd better rest up.

12. SILENCE

The next day, they were back in the rehearsal space. Mads stood at the front of the room, a whiteboard covered in song titles and set notes behind him. Sophie tuned her keys, Roman fiddled with his pedalboard, and Riker cracked jokes from the couch. Bandit leaned in a corner, unusually quiet. Vera stood, arms crossed, watching him.

Mads was still shaken from the message he'd received the night before. Oran. The name pulsed like a low drumbeat in the back of his skull. But he'd compartmentalized—just like he always did. First things first: the music.

He clapped his hands together.

"Alright, great work last night. We were tight. The transitions hit. Energy was up, crowd was with us. I'll go through the footage later, but preliminarily, I think this was such a promising set!"

Everyone murmured in agreement. Sophie smiled. Riker gave a mock bow. Roman tossed a pick into the air and caught it.

"You guys are killing it," Mads continued. "But we're asking a lot of you. And you're rising to it. So, sincerely—from all of us—thank you."

They nodded, appreciating the rare moment of vulnerability from Mads.

Riker couldn't help but bring up "the moment."

"And kudos to Bandit for sticking it to the man!"

He, Sophie, Vera, and Roman cheered, and Mads let out a sincere smirk.

Vera added, "Our fearless leader drives me nuts sometimes, but I like to think he's the yin to Mads' yang. And I... I'm mother, watching from above in amusement."

The entire room burst out laughing.

After about an hour of granular debriefing—and another of shooting the shit—Mads asked to speak to Vera and Bandit privately. He had to tell them about Oran.

Once the door shut behind their bandmates (and after Vera noticed Bandit and Sophie exchanging a few sparkly looks), Mads turned to his two friends.

"I got a message last night. From a dude named Oran. He's part of a political group called the Social Revolutionary Front. Slum extremists, basically. He loved what you said, Bandit. Thinks we could help

their cause..."

"Are you serious? WHY should we care?" Bandit cut him off. "People suddenly think I'm some radical Slummer just because I told Rentoth to fuck off. I'm not. I'm an individualist. Maybe an anarchist. I don't even fucking know myself! But I do know this—NO ONE tells me how to act. I'm not gonna be someone else's bitch, no matter how 'good' the cause sounds. I just want to focus on us, our music, our lives. Empire Fall could be our way out. From zero to one. Who the fuck does this guy think he is? At least Rentoth gave us money."

"Alright, B. I was with you until that last bit," said Vera, crossing her arms. "If there's a chance to make things better for people in the Slums—on our own terms—I think we should at least hear the guy out."

Bandit wasn't letting go. "You're being naive, V. This guy's just using our buzz for his own gain. I haven't met him, but I already know him. He's slick. Dresses it all up in justice and revolution. But when has a band ever changed the world? We're just dumbass troubadours singing for our supper."

Mads let the back-and-forth play out before speaking.

"I say we meet him. Hear him out. Play it coy. Maybe there's something we're not seeing."

"Sure, let's add another thing to our already-too-full plate," Bandit muttered.

"Hey," Vera snapped, "I don't know about you, but I'm tired of living like this while Rentoth laughs about never holding a broom in his life."

Bandit sighed. "Fine. Let's meet him. Can we get back to writing songs now? I'm actually inspired."

They did.

Mads texted Oran soon after. The meeting was scheduled for next week, in the old abandoned National Library in the Slums.

Of course it is, Bandit thought, rolling his eyes.

A couple days later, they had to meet Rentoth about some marketing stuff. He booked them a nice suite back on Level 14—the same hotel as their first showcase.

Interviews on day one, photoshoot on day two.

"Can't wait to never use these pics," Vera joked when they heard they had to do the shoot. Mads and Bandit agreed.

At the meeting, Rentoth was his usual off-putting self.

"The press is loving your little number, Bandit. Sticking it to the man—me! Haha! Loved it. You little asshole. More money for me. Not that I need it, but

you get my point. Honestly, I couldn't have set it up better myself. You've got a couple interviews today at the hotel. No one reads them, but it keeps Empire Fall in people's minds. I'm hiring someone to handle this crap from now on—I'm not coming back down here. The air's toxic. I lose a year of my life every time I breathe it. Anyway, you're set. Interviews won't take long. I have a date—I gotta run. Enjoy your day, ding-dongs."

He left.

Vera was stunned, almost amused. "It's honestly impressive how much of a fucking douche this guy can be. Ten out of ten. A virtuoso of douchebaggery. The Mozart of money bros."

Mads nodded in agreement.

Bandit didn't respond—he was staring at his phone.

"Are you texting Sophie?" Vera asked, already knowing the answer.

Bandit tried to deflect, but eventually nodded.

"As long as you treat her right," Vera said. "She's a good friend."

"I don't even know if she likes me," Bandit muttered.

"She says she's not sure it's a good idea to hang out outside band stuff. I'm pretty bummed."

“Ohhh, Bandit’s smitten!” Vera teased. “Look at the bad boy all flustered. Adorable.”

“Shut up. I’m serious.”

Mads, ever the voice of reason, pointed out that Sophie was probably making the smart call.

Bandit didn’t care. Not really.

They did the interviews. They went fine. Some dumb questions. Some surprisingly insightful ones. Another day at the office.

Afterward, Mads and Vera went out for food. Bandit stayed in.

He was exhausted.

The work. The shows. Rentoth. The pressure. The rising profile. Oran. Sophie. The argument with Vera. The quiet judgment in Mads’ eyes.

He double-checked the door. Made sure they were gone.

Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out a cartridge of Flux, ripped it open, and inhaled the whole thing right there on the hotel couch.

As he inhaled, he thought of a line: *All I want is silence. Every sound is violence.*

Exhale.

Euphoria.

Drowsiness.

Took a little too much.

Passed out.

Then, what felt like a mili second later, Bandit felt a hand on his shoulder.

13. Unholy Grace

EMPIRE FALL

He could smell her. It was Vera. Mads was probably here too.

They were going to see the Flux cartridge on the floor. He'd just gotten caught red-handed.

Still high, Bandit tried to explain and justify why he'd used. His voice was slow, syrupy, half-defeated.

"I'm so sorry, guys. It's just like... sometimes my anxiety literally chokes me from the inside. Flux—it helps. But I don't use it like before—"

Vera cut him off.

"It's okay, B. We're here. We love you. Let's talk about this later. Get some sleep. Maybe in your bed, not on the couch."

Mads patted him on the back.

Bandit started crying. He didn't say anything.

Mads and Vera both hugged him and helped him to bed.

Tomorrow was another day.

When Bandit finally woke up, Mads was working on his laptop with headphones on. Vera wasn't there—probably downstairs in the hotel gym, getting her workout in.

Strangely, the vibe was peaceful.

Is this what it feels like to have a family?

Bandit worked up the courage to speak.

Mads pulled off one earcup and listened.

"It's okay," Mads said. "Vera and I... we've known for a while that you were still using. We don't like it. But as long as you keep it under control, we're fine with it."

He paused.

"Just take care of yourself, okay? We need you at your best."

Uncomfortable but touched, Bandit nodded and looked away.

Soon after Vera got back, they all headed home to the Slums.

They joked about the trip—Bandit talked about Sophie and Flux, and they all took jabs at Rentoth. They talked about songs and tossed around new ideas.

A family, indeed.

Oran

A few days later, it was time to meet Oran.

They went together after rehearsal. Bandit was reluctant.

When they arrived at the library, Oran spotted them immediately and stood to greet them. He was tall and handsome, with glasses and a thick head of curly brown hair. He wore a wool coat and a heavy scarf—indoors—which Bandit immediately disliked.

They ordered coffee at the small stand outside the building. Oran paid.

Inside, they sat at one of the massive, graffiti-tagged wooden tables.

The place was eerie—a perfect metaphor for the Slums.

Once, this library had been a temple of knowledge: science, history, philosophy. Now? Just rows of empty shelves, syringes on the floor, and the occasional dead body. One turned up a couple times a year. Other than that? A great place to read.

Oran led the conversation.

“Guys, I’m a big fan. I was at the Militia event because I’ve been trying to figure out what the hell

Rentoth's doing—agitating the Slums like that. To what end? What's his actual goal? When they announced the band, I thought you were going to be a bunch of puppets, parroting his message. So you can imagine my surprise when you basically told him to go fuck himself in front of two thousand people."

Mads smiled.

"Well, thank you. Bandit was the mastermind behind that little moment on stage. We didn't even know he was going to say that. But the reaction? Undeniable." He glanced at Bandit.

"Also... we might have a little bit of insight into what Rentoth's actually trying to do. He told us. Flat-out." While Mads and Vera brought Oran up to speed, Bandit barely spoke.

He just stared at his phone.

Oran noticed. He tried to break the ice.

"Really loved what you did on stage, man. It took guts."

"Cool," Bandit replied, without making eye contact.

Oran moved on.

He had a bigger point to make.

"We at the SRF believe Elderise is at a breaking point. The rich are too rich, the Slums are too poor. We need the Authority to change things—radically. But they won't. And if you read our history—"

Bandit stood up.

He locked eyes with Oran, now just inches from his face.

“We don’t give a fuck about Elderise’s history. And I *sure* don’t give a fuck about your cause. I see how you talk. I see how you dress. You’ve got a mid- or high-level education. Your family’s probably loaded. Must be nice—to have political opinions while we, the Slummers, fight not to starve. Now three kids from down here finally have a shot, and you show up like some vulture in a scarf, trying to sink your claws in?! Nah. We’re not Rentoth’s lackeys—but we’re not gonna be yours either. I’ll be outside. I gotta make a call.”

Mads blinked, stunned by the sudden heat.

Vera didn’t move. She knew Bandit too well to be surprised.

But Oran wasn’t going to let Bandit big-time him.

He stood up and grabbed Bandit’s arm.

Bandit turned, surprised.

“Dude. Don’t fucking touch me.”

Oran let go. But he wasn’t done—not by a long shot.

“Listen, man. You’re right. I do come from money. And maybe that’s *exactly* why I know the system’s broken. I know the rules are different depending on where you’re born—and I want to change that. Don’t you?”

He took a breath.

"This stuff Rentoth is pulling? It's terrifying. And I can tell you agree. Just because I rub you the wrong way doesn't mean I'm wrong."

Vera grabbed Bandit's hand.

"B... you have our best interests at heart. We know that. But you pleaded for Mads and me to hear Rentoth out. So let's hear Oran out too, okay?"

Bandit closed his eyes, breathing deep.

The anger softened.

He sat back down.

"Okay. Speak." Oran nodded.

"Alright. You want specifics? Here's what I propose." He leaned forward, voice low and deliberate.

"You keep doing what you're doing. Grow your fanbase. Spread your music. Build your careers. Keep Rentoth and his friends happy. And when things start to really get crazy in the Slums—and they will, because you can't keep your foot on people's throats forever—we, the SRF, will take it from there." He looked at each of them, eyes sharp behind his glasses. "You don't have to become political mouthpieces. Behind the scenes, we'll let our allies—and yes, we have some in very high places—know that you're with us."

"So... you're asking us to basically keep doing the exact same thing?" Mads asked, confused.

Oran cracked a smile.

"Something like that."

Vera crossed her arms. "And what do *you* get out of it?"

Oran didn't blink.

"We keep expanding our network. Because to do what we're planning, we're going to need an army."

He turned to Bandit, who'd been watching him like a wolf watching a preacher.

"You're worried about your career," Oran said. "But if Rentoth gets his wish? No one will even *have* careers anymore."

That landed.

Oran sat back and let the silence stretch.

"You've seen what he's building. You've felt the pressure already—the candlelit vows, the masks, the posturing. Rentoth doesn't want a movement—he wants a *cult*. And he wants Empire Fall at the center of it, acting as his puppet. Doing his dirty work."

He let that hang in the air a beat longer.

"Just think about it. You don't owe me anything. But I think you know this train's going off the rails."

Bandit looked off into the distance for a while. Then he spoke.

"And this guy you're describing—this manipulative, evil, powerful oligarch, Rentoth... you sure you wanna antagonize him? You could start a war."

Oran smirked.

"The war's already started, kid. I'm just trying to win it." That shut everyone up.

As they all stood to leave, Mads turned to Oran one last time.

"And what about Zero? Aren't you worried about him?"

"Oh, I am," Oran said. "But we'll deal with him later. Rentoth might be dangerous—but Zero is on another level. I can't believe you actually met him. For now, let's just go step by step."

Bandit lingered, wanting to be crystal clear.

"Well... that's pretty fucking scary. Also—I just wanna make sure you understand we haven't made any decisions yet."

"Of course," Oran said, smiling slightly. "I'll be in touch in a few days. You can tell me where you stand then."

As Bandit, Vera, and Mads started walking home from the meeting, they furiously debated all the ways this could go wrong—trying to play both sides, trying to stay somewhat sane.

Then Bandit's phone buzzed. A text. From Rentoth.
So now you're meeting anarchist leaders behind my back, uh? Lol. Cute. I see all.

Bandit almost dropped his phone.

He looked around. No one he recognized.

How the fuck did Rentoth find out about Oran?

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."