

21

Know My Name

EMPIRE FALL

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

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

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

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

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

He turned to her with mock sympathy.

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

His face twisted, voice dropping into sudden fury.

"And EVERYONE has a price."

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

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

Vera, all nerves and survival instinct, spoke first.

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

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

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

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

He leaned forward, eyes glittering.

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

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

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

He shrugged, a theatrical afterthought.

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

Silence.

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

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

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

Rentoth locked eyes with him, unblinking.

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

Bandit's jaw tightened, but he nodded once.

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

He turned to Vera and Mads.

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

Rentoth burst out laughing.

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

"I can help."

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

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

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

"And I believe this leader could be you."

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

Bandit stood and went to his bandmates.

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

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

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

Rentoth rolled his eyes and turned to Oran.

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

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

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

Oran leaned forward, voice low.

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

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

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

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

Stephanie opened the door for him.

Rentoth grinned.

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

22 Eden

ORAN

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

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

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

Motherfucking moneyyyyyy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mads didn't look up.

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

Oran shook his head, grim.

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

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

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

Mads broke the silence first.

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

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

They agreed to meet the next day at the rehearsal

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

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

BANDIT

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

The door was open. A light burned inside.

He sprinted in.

He smelled iron before he saw her. Blood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And just like that, she was gone.

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

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

Rentoth's tone hardened.

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

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

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

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

His thumbs flew over his phone.

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

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

Bandit froze in the doorway.

"What happened now!?"

Mads looked up, eyes wet.

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

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

"They're gonna get him killed!"

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

"I'm calling Rentoth!" Bandit yelled.

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

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

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

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

"Someone came to my house — Sophie was there —

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

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

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

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

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

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

A text.

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

23 Incipience_1

EMPIRE FALL

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

At six a.m., Rentoth called.

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

Bandit exhaled hard, relief crashing through him.

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

He paused for effect.

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

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

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

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

Mads leaned forward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is the end of it all

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He paced like a caged animal, eyes blazing.

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

He jabbed a finger into the table.

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

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

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

Mads' phone buzzed. A text from Oran.

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

The three stared at the message. Everything was accelerating.

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

RENTOTH

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

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

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

BANDIT

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

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

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

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

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

"Coffee?" he asked flatly.

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

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

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

"I don't have a choice."

Rentoth smirked. "Good. Neither do I."

Bandit stood to leave, then looked back at him.

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

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

When Bandit returned upstairs, Sophie was out of

bed, dressed, and arguing with Vera.

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

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

24 Incipience_2

EMPIRE FALL

Everyone slept at Mads' that night.

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

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

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

or

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

But hey — at least he was being authentic.

They came back to Mads' house around lunchtime.

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

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

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

It was him. He recognized him instantly.

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

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

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

"And the Slums?" Vera asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was time.

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

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

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

After the song, Bandit took the microphone.

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

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

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

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

Bandit wasn't done.

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

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

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

"The Sworn are here."

25 Incipience_3

EMPIRE FALL

Pandemonium.

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

"Where the fuck is she?" Bandit yelled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She raised the megaphone higher and addressed the audience.

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

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

She stepped closer toward the stage.

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

Backstage, everyone was freaking out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rentoth cracked a forced, tense smile. He knew the

weight of his admission.

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

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

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

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

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

“You lying piece of shit!”

He evaded the punch narrowly and caught her arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You betrayed us.”

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

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

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

“Mads!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no coming back from this.

26 Lie

EMPIRE FALL

With Rentoth in shock, the bodyguard analyzed the room like a machine: the angle of the guards, the way the smoke crawled along the ceiling, the exact line where Bandit and Vera were pinned.

He flipped down his goggles.

The HUD shimmered to life, painting ghostly blue silhouettes through the fog — each labeled, tracked, pulsing with data.

Numbers scrolled along the lens edges as he mapped every target.

"I can get them in under a minute," he said flatly.

"Rentoth, you and the others stay put. We move after I blow the alarm."

Rentoth didn't answer — grief and guilt had frozen him in place.

Sophie and Mads exchanged a look.

"So... neutralize means kill, right?" Sophie asked, voice small.

"Got a better plan?" the bodyguard replied.

She shook her head.

"Then let me do my job."

He outlined the plan with surgical calm. "I'll take out the soldier holding the cuff keys first, then toss a stun as I close in. My goggles cut through the fog — finding them's the easy part. I'll free your friends, bring them back here, and then we haul ass."

"Master Rentoth," he added, turning his head slightly. "Are we good with this?"

Silence. Rentoth didn't move. Sophie finally whispered, "Do it."

He did.

Fast, clean, invisible. No one saw him coming.

Two minutes later, he returned with Bandit and Vera, dragging them through the haze as the distant screams of the Sworn rose and broke like waves. The sound, somehow, felt reassuring — proof they were still alive.

Bandit's eyes locked on Rentoth.

"I'm so sorry," he said, voice shaking.

Rentoth looked up, hollow and unblinking.

"Don't be," he murmured. "This is all my fault."

Vera watched them both. The parallels with her own life hit too close to ignore. She would've given

anything to hug Jimmy right now.

She was still angry at Bandit — but it all felt like a past life, something that belonged to a different world. This was about survival now. And Rentoth, in all his ruin and with all of his flaws, had chosen to stay.

He was, somehow, becoming one of theirs.

One of the bodyguards stepped forward. “We have a fallback,” he said. “A safe house. We set it up before the show, just in case something went wrong. Rentoth approved it himself.”

The words seemed to pull Rentoth back to reality. He nodded faintly. “Yeah... it’s close. Just a couple of blocks from Mads’s family home. My men stocked it for a week.”

The bodyguard tapped his earpiece. “Unit Two, regroup. Bring everyone from the house — parents, siblings, anyone connected to the band. Coordinates incoming. We’re heading to fallback point Alpha.”

A faint crackle answered. “Copy that. Moving now.” “Families should already be on the way,” Rentoth said quietly.

That was all they needed to hear. They followed the bodyguard into the smoke.

They reached the safe house hours later. It looked barely habitable — an abandoned maintenance hub

carved into the side of a collapsed sector. The walls were blackened by fire and graffiti, the floor warped from years of leaks. A single industrial lamp buzzed above the main room, casting a weak orange cone over a cluster of mattresses and scavenged chairs.

The air smelled of rust, disinfectant, and wet concrete. Old pipes hummed overhead like a dying heartbeat. Someone had rigged a cracked purifier to a car battery in the corner; it rattled every few seconds, coughing out filtered air that never quite lost its metallic tang.

Yet amid the decay, there was warmth — blankets, food wrappers, a makeshift stove. A few of Rentoth's remaining guards had turned the chaos into shelter. Mads spotted them first — his parents, his sister, Aksel. He sprinted forward. They collided in a tangle of arms and tears.

Vera and her dad cried in each other's arms. Sophie called her little brother and parents, who were safe. One of the bodyguards was already on his way to bring them here. Roman had no family; Riker hadn't spoken to his (on the mid levels) in years.

They were almost whole. Almost.

Bandit sat beside his brother, staring at his disconnected phone — no network, no signal, all accounts inaccessible. Rentoth was stuck here. His

whole life turned inside out.

Bandit put his arm around him. Rentoth broke again, sobbing into his shoulder.

A few days passed. Still no word from Jimmy. Vera forced humor to keep the air from collapsing.

"Well, I guess he's our enemy now," she said, cracking a sad smile. "He chose the Sworn over us."

Never one to be outdone, Rentoth smirked through the exhaustion. "Hey, at least you didn't get your mom killed."

"I mean... she was already dead, so..."

"Fair. But you can't really be mad at your brother for choosing *anyone* over you."

They laughed — thin, brittle laughter, but laughter nonetheless.

Mads eventually sat beside Bandit. He told him he forgave him. Tragedy had a way of putting things in their proper order. But they needed to be honest — fully, brutally honest — from now on.

The Militia wasn't dead. Not yet. If anything, what happened had forced them to grow up overnight.

Bandit agreed.

They started to organize — what remained of Rentoth's guards, the band, the stragglers. The Sworn had won the battle, but the rebellion was far

from over. The SRF was in shambles. Aksel was worried about Oran but still hopeful his lover had survived the uprising.

All communication with the Upper Levels was cut. Phones were dead. The Slums were severed from the rest of Elderise, save for the flickering state broadcasts on the giant screens outside.

Each night, the bodyguards took turns patrolling. Their tech gave them the edge.

And soon, they confirmed the truth:

The Sworn had left the Slums.

The elevators were broken.

They were trapped here.

Soon, the Slums started to show signs of life again.

People started walking the streets. Stores reopened.

Food was sparse, but production was ramping up.

Empire Fall and the Militia were on everyone's lips.

They had become heroes. Of course, rumors twisted the truth into legend:

how Bandit had wrestled ten Sworn soldiers barehanded,

how Vera had stared down an entire army and laughed,

how the band kept playing while the city burned around them.

None of it was true, at least not exactly.

But down in the Slums, stories didn't need to be true. They just needed to give people something to believe in.

Flux felt like a thing of the past to Bandit now — well, for the moment.

But music still mattered. More than before. *Art survives.*

He wrote a song from Rentoth's perspective called "**Lie**". It was about his mother.

Mads and Vera built a track around it on Mads's old laptop. There was no guitar at first, but one of the bodyguards raided the ruined warehouse and came back with Vera's, half-scorched but playable.

They started jamming in one of the side rooms of the safe house.

One day, they decided to go back to their old rehearsal space. Roman, Riker, Sophie, Aksel, Rentoth, and one of the bodyguards tagged along.

It was wrecked — half the roof collapsed, carpets still wet from rain, the smell of smoke and rust hanging in the air. The speakers looked terrible, but they still worked.

Vera slung her guitar and started the chords of *Lie*. Bandit came in with the vocals, low and worn but steady. Sophie sat next to him, leaning on his

shoulder as she sang the harmonies, her voice soft enough to almost disappear into his.

Mads sat behind the rusty drum kit and played the groove he'd programmed. Roman and Riker joined in, watching Vera's hands to catch the changes. Aksel picked up a small MIDI keyboard lying on the floor, connected it to his brother's laptop, and started playing the chords by ear just for fun.

Rentoth sat off to the side, listening to the song his brother had written for him. He was feeling it deep in his bones. No funny joke, no gratuitous insult.

The remaining bodyguard stood in the doorway, keeping quiet watch on the street below.

Outside, passersby had started gathering, putting two and two together. One kid asked the guard "Are Bandit Mads and Vera really in there?"

Things were different now.

But it felt right.

Dissension had become harmony.

ZERO

On the Nowhere Level, suspended in the atmosphere far above the 100th Floor, the leader of the Sworn pondered what he had done. The Authority Council was no more. The SRF was

defeated. The Slums were totally isolated, cut off from the rest of Elderise.

But he wasn't interested in power.

He was interested in the prophecy.

He wanted salvation.

In his gigantic, sheer-walled office, he looked down on the ecumenopolis, a cigar in his mouth. The Priestess who had almost caught Bandit walked in.

"I'm sorry I failed you, master. I did not retrieve the boy."

"It's alright, Priestess. It wasn't time. Destiny will deliver him and his brother to us exactly when it's meant to. Destiny doesn't make mistakes. We will need them both, and soon — but we can wait a little longer. He will become stronger, more powerful, and the brothers will grow closer. This is all good news."

He sat back in his ancient leather chair. It looked like a throne.

"Soon, the Gemini Curse will be fulfilled. Rentoth and the boy will become the very thing they've spent their whole lives trying to escape. Then, and only then, will we all be saved."