

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."