

# 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."