

# 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.*