



EMPIRE FALL

VOLUME I



01. Rain

JIMMY

His hands were still bloody.

He had tried to wash them. Once. Twice. Again. The water ran hot enough to sting, but the red clung to the creases of his skin, caught beneath his nails. He scrubbed harder than necessary, as if pain might loosen memory.

It didn't.

The room wouldn't stay still.

It came back in fragments — the smell first, then the sound. A woman's breath hitching. Not screaming. Not yet. Just the sharp intake before realization. He remembered her eyes most clearly. Not pleading. Confused. As if she was still trying to understand how this was happening.

They had given him her.

He hadn't known her name then. She'd just been a body pushed forward, a role assigned.

He learned it later.

Lady Rabenath.

He remembered the knife sinking into her stomach, once, then again — the resistance, the warmth, the way her hands clutched at him before losing strength. He remembered thinking, absurdly, that she was lighter than he'd expected.

Somewhere behind him, there were other sounds. Shouting. Movement. A man protesting too loudly, too late. He hadn't turned around, but he knew what was happening. He didn't need to see it to know how it ended.

The Lord would be dead — Lord Rabenath, his throat cut by hands steadier than his.

That was the division of labor.

They told him it was necessary. That mercy was a weakness bred by comfort. That obedience was the only language power understood.

They told him he'd done well.

A hand on his shoulder. A nod. No ceremony. Just approval.

That was the bridge.

He sat down hard, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. Something inside him recoiled — not at the killing itself, but at the fact that he hadn't frozen. That he'd followed through. That some part of him had accepted the task when it was given.

He thought of Vera then.

His sister. Her face unguarded when she laughed. The way she still believed people could be better if given room. He imagined her learning what he'd done — who he'd done it to — and felt something twist deep in his chest.

He thought of the Slums. Damp concrete. Flickering lights. Hunger that never shut up. The long humiliation of being poor and invisible. The years he'd spent telling himself he'd do anything not to go back.

He wasn't going back.

Whatever this cost him — whoever it cost — it had to be worth it.

It had to.

ZERO

Since the successful coup six months ago, things had changed on Elderise.

Zero had gone down from the Nowhere Level and made the Authority Chambers his official residence for the time being. From there, he reigned with an iron, yet shadowed, fist.

You know what they say about the greatest trick the devil had ever pulled...

As the new leader of Elderise, he had installed a new

regime. A clean slate. The Sworn were out and proud. It was a badge of honor to have fought for the purification of the old ecumenopolis. To have helped end the reign of the Authority.

Rampant capitalism was over. The reign of money was no more.

It was a renaissance.

Art, culture, philosophy, music, movies — all were going to flourish more than ever before. An idyllic vision. An Eden where anyone could express themselves freely.

At least, that's what the Sworn were trying to sell.

Behind the scenes, remaining opponents were executed without trials. The SRF had been decapitated, its leaders killed or disappeared. Oran was still alive, hiding somewhere in the mid-levels. And the Slums... the Slums were completely shut out from the rest of Elderise.

The elevators were modified to prevent any way in or out. The Sworn had a few workarounds, of course. They needed to keep an eye on them — particularly the Empire Fall crew. Particularly Rentoth and Bandit.

The Gemini.

The two-headed curse that could threaten what the Order had built over millennia.

While a few of Zero's most trusted underlings knew about the Gemini Curse, only he knew all its details and intricacies. The prophecy had been passed down from one Sworn Grand Priest to another, each bound to secrecy when it came to the nuts and bolts of it all.

No one else could ever know.

To ensure it, each leader cast a dark, arcane spell on their appointed successor upon revealing the truth. If broken, death would soon ensue for the guilty and everyone around them — families, children, advisors, friends, even distant acquaintances.

As for the spell's efficiency, it was never formally proven. Still, some said a Grand Priest, his inner circle, and his entire family had been wiped out a couple hundred years ago. The story persisted as a whisper among high-ranking Sworn members — a boogeyman that kept everyone in line.

Zero couldn't kill Bandit or Rentoth just yet.

The curse had to play out a little longer.

For now, his role was to spearhead the Elderise Renaissance, funding it with the proceeds of the very regime he condemned publicly — and to let the Gemini become who they were supposed to be, from a watchful distance.

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Life in the Slums was weirdly easier than before. They were completely cut out from the rest of Elderise. The elevators were blocked by piles of rubble, rendered unusable. On each of the upper levels, guards were instructed to shoot any intruder on sight. No one could go up. No one could come down. Everything was offline. No phones. No web. The giant TVs at the foot of the towers showed only Official Sworn-approved footage of the coup. All communication with the upper levels was impossible.

But in the Slums, people managed.

They grew their own food and cattle wherever they could. Bartering replaced currency. Sols were slowly becoming obsolete. What began as necessity was becoming a new normal.

The Empire Fall crew was no different — except they were now heralded as living folk heroes.

Mads' family was elated to finally be reunited. Vera's wasn't so lucky. There was still no news of Jimmy. Vera and her father feared the worst, but with no way to track him down, fear hardened into assumption.

In her mind, if her brother was still alive, he was one

of them anyway.

Jimmy the enemy.

Bandit and Sophie were madly in love, his shortcomings seldom getting in the way. The darker corners of his mind still occupied a lot of real estate, but he kept them mostly under control.

Flux had become harder to come by, and its potency had changed significantly since communication with the rest of Elderise was cut off. The streets called the new, inferior strain deFlux — a joke poking fun at the drug's loss of quality and purity.

Bandit maintained his "high-functioning" addiction, though it interfered less with his daily activities. Any attempt by his entourage to get him to quit completely was shut down quickly. Sophie's family weren't his biggest supporters, but they tolerated him. Bandit liked being a good guy. It improved his self-esteem. Balance and selflessness centered him, brought him happiness. But the quiet murmur of temptation was always there, observing his every move.

And he wasn't the only one feeling the beat of the black drum.

Rentoth, depressed and poor for the first time in his life, struggled to cope with his vertiginous fall from grace and the guilt he felt over his parents' deaths.

He had wanted the Lord gone for all the hurt he'd caused him, but now realized he wished he could have just talked to him.

A confrontation might have yielded better results.

And then there was his mother.

Rentoth couldn't even utter her name.

He was angry at the Sworn. Angry at Zero — now his mortal enemy.

With everything offline, Rentoth couldn't access any of his money or assets. His palatial penthouse on the 99th floor felt like a distant fever dream. His two bodyguards stayed loyal, and he promised them triple back pay once things returned to normal.

But what was normal now?

Rentoth found distraction where he could. Excess. Compulsion. Bodies. A steady flow of willing company drawn in by handwritten promises of future compensation. He secured a modest house near Bandit's shack. People came and went.

Bandit noticed. He gave his half-brother endless shit for it — partly out of concern, partly out of jealousy he didn't bother denying.

In the Slums, Empire Fall had become major political leaders.

The band and their entourage now governed the Militia. At public events — shows or ideological

gatherings — masks were still worn by Roman, Riker, Sophie, and the audience. Not for anonymity, but to honor the movement's tradition and growing importance.

The Slums survived.

By design, probably.

Everyone else on Elderise was now governed by the Sworn. But the Slums belonged to the Militia. What Zero and Rentoth had once intended to control and weaponize had become a beacon of independence.

Bandit flourished in his new role. Always the magnetic speaker, he became the de facto face of the Militia. Mads and Vera were happy to let him lead. Sophie acted as a consigliere, helping soften his sharp edges and temper his anger.

Rentoth watched from a distance — detached on the surface, quietly proud, increasingly aware of the Slums' raw deal.

Roman and Riker were mostly excited about the music.

And that part was exciting.

Cut off from the world, forced into limitation, the band wrote a new batch of songs inspired by the coup. With cloud-based tools inaccessible, Mads and Aksel stripped things back. Fewer plugins. Less polish. More grit. More emphasis on skill and

performance.

A raw, analog sound for a raw, analog time.

What was recorded had to be played live. No backing tracks. No tricks.

The band loved playing the new songs. They felt fresh. Somehow, in these grave times, music became the perfect antidote to chaos and uncertainty. The shows were packed, often paired with Militia events. Empire Fall would play, then discuss the political situation with audience members afterward.

They knew the Sworn were probably watching, spying somehow — but they didn't care.

They were steady. Focused. Taking it day by day.

Everything was going exactly as the prophecy predicted.