

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.