

# 06. On The Run

## EMPIRE FALL

After Rentoth's visit, the band worked harder than ever. Their sound was becoming more unique yet more digestible—things were falling into place. The mix of real drums with programmed ones, the big riffs paired with pop licks, the screams stacked against soaring melodies... it all finally *made sense*. Bandit and Vera were producing almost as much as Mads now, and their ideas were solid. Mads, by far the most disciplined member, no longer hesitated to tell Bandit when a line could be better or a melody could go somewhere unexpected. Their chemistry was undeniable, and they were damn proud of these songs.

Their fans started noticing, too. The bootleg cassette tapes they were selling on the streets were spreading. Young fans were making copies for their friends. Soon, people from the neighborhood started hollering at them when they saw them outside. Empire Fall began selling merch as well. They were

still broke as hell—every cent they made went straight back into the band—but they could feel things moving in the right direction.

As much as they (especially Vera and Mads) hated to admit it, Rentoth's words had struck a chord. They were pushing harder than ever. They had a goal.

They worked tirelessly to tighten their set, finish new songs, and figure out how to bring them to life on stage. Mads, ever the perfectionist, took on the role of Musical Director, triggering samples and backing tracks from a MIDI pad next to his drum kit so Vera and Bandit could roam the stage like the maniacs they were. Bandit, never one to shy away from theatrics, started getting wild ideas. "What if I do muscle-ups on stage? That would be sick, right?"

Mads gave him a blank stare. "I don't even know what those are, dude."

"You know, when you do a pull-up, then lift yourself above the bar so your waist reaches it."

"Absolutely not. That's corny as hell. Just sing the song and move around a bit."

"Fine. But I'm gonna do more than *move around*. I'm going *apeshit*."

Vera smirked but stayed pragmatic. "I'm gonna do that too, but let's *nail* the performance first—then we can go crazy. Priorities."

Bandit sighed, conceding. "Okay, Mom. You're right,

I guess.”

They locked in their set. Every song hit hard, but their latest, *On The Run*, felt *different*—like a turning point.

## **BANDIT'S GHOSTS**

Bandit never openly discussed his past, but his lyrics did the talking. He had been selfish. He had lied, cheated, and manipulated. He did whatever the fuck he wanted. Until one day, he realized he was just being *a piece of shit*. So he tried to be better. He really did. But ever since he got *almost* sober, the ghosts of his past wouldn't let up. Shame. Self-hatred. Depression.

*On The Run* was his reckoning with it all.

The melody was deceptively simple—just four chords—but the intervals, the math behind it, the way it felt *familiar yet completely unique...* it stood out. He even sampled his own voice, chopping it up into an anthemic post-hook. He built the whole thing in one night.

The next morning, when he played the demo for Vera and Mads, they couldn't believe their ears. They loved it. They built out the instrumental together, each adding their own piece to the puzzle. By the time it was finished, Bandit was ecstatic. “Rentoth is gonna *shit* when he hears this!”

## THE UPPER LEVELS

A few weeks passed. They told Rentoth they only wanted to travel on the day of the showcase. Staying a couple extra nights up there might be too distracting

before the show. The day soon arrived.

They packed up Mads' mom's car and headed to the Great Elevators. Bandit showed the credentials he had gotten from Rentoth. Mads and Vera showed their ID cards—no problem. But Bandit? He never had an ID. He didn't even know his *real* last name, let alone his birthday. Rentoth must have had serious pull because as soon as the guards saw the digital pass on Bandit's phone, they let him through.

The guards were stern: "You'll need to drive your car inside Great Elevator C. That's the one we use for all the big stuff." The band obliged.

Vera and Mads tried to prepare Bandit for what life was like up there. Clean, well-lit streets. Cops patrolling regularly. *Selling Flux? Absolutely not happening.*

"It's no joke," Vera warned. "Just stay on your best behavior."

Bandit waved her off, but as the elevator ascended, he fell silent. When the doors opened, the sheer opulence of the Upper Levels hit them like a punch to

the gut. The cars. The storefronts. The clothes. The *beautiful people*.

Everything screamed **MONEY**.

Mads swallowed hard. Vera adjusted her jacket, suddenly aware of how out-of-place they looked. Bandit caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror—his patched-up blue jacket, his worn-out sneakers, the faint bruises under his eyes. A *nobody* in a place like this.

He shook it off. *I'm the fucking man. I'm gonna show these motherfuckers.*

## THE SHOW

They arrived at the venue, and Mads and Vera got their gear set up with the house engineer. Halfway through soundcheck, Rentoth appeared.

“Looking good and sounding good up there. How’s my favorite junkie feeling?”

Everyone rolled their eyes.

Bandit smirked. “Not as good as your mom after I left her this morning.”

Vera groaned. “Alright, *children*, let’s cut the shit.” She was laser-focused. This was an *opportunity*, and she wasn’t about to fuck it up.

Rentoth explained that some important people were coming—higher-ups who could *actually* move the

needle for the band.

Vera was too wired to sit still. She went for a run after soundcheck. Mads stayed in the zone, checking and rechecking everything. Bandit, meanwhile, shot the shit with Rentoth for a while, then slipped into the bathroom to take a quick hit of Flux.

*No harm, no foul*, he told himself.

By showtime, the room was packed with a hundred suits.

The band *crushed* it.

As they wrapped up *With You Always* with an apocalyptic final note, Rentoth smirked from the back of the room. His plan was working perfectly.

His guests were impressed.

One of them, an older man in a suit too expensive for Level 14, exhaled a plume of cigar smoke. "I was wondering why you dragged me down here. This place is a dump... but you *might* have found something. And you say the kids in the Slums like them?"

"They do. And there's something about Bandit. He's got an edge. We might be able to tap into that. He's got a *kamikaze mindset*."

The old man smirked. "Perfect. And I love that band name. Empire Fall. Almost *too* perfect."

Rentoth's eyes gleamed. "Let's fund them. Quietly. Get their music out there. Especially to the higher

floors.”

Meanwhile, Vera, Mads, and Bandit worked the room, beyond thrilled with the opportunity Rentoth had given them.

Again.

How clueless.

Rentoth led them to dinner to celebrate. The older man joined them.

“Guys, this is my friend. He’s my financial partner, and he thought you were great. He’s a very important man.”

Mads extended a hand. “Pleased to meet you. And you are?”

The man took a slow drag from his cigar. “To you, I’m Zero.”

Bandit raised a brow. “Zero? What, like nothing?”

Mads and Vera exchanged a glance. Something about him felt ominous from the get-go.