



06. Sore Winner

EMPIRE FALL

The band was adapting to the new normal. Bandit would show up at rehearsals, write lyrics and melodies about intense subjects that everyone loved, but that was it. The fire he had in him to grow the Militia and stick it to the Sworn was gone. He hadn't broken up with Sophie officially, but he hadn't hung out with her in a couple weeks. She understood what he was going through, so she was giving him space... to a point.

Rentoth was growing closer to the group. He embraced his new situation, even though he hated being poor, and even found himself enjoying the company of some of the members — Aksel and Vera especially. They would often have dinner, the four of them, discussing their old lives, with Aksel going on and on about his writing session anecdotes with the rich and famous, and Rentoth realizing he knew or hung out with 90% of the people he mentioned. Elderise's elite was a small, degenerate bunch.

Mads stayed more guarded. He would often warn Vera and his brother not to confide too much in Rentoth. This is a guy who plotted to have his father killed, he thought. Can't trust a man who did that, no matter his reasons. They listened. They knew he was right. But what else was there to do in the closed-off Slums? Conversations with Rentoth were as good a pastime as any.

Bandit had become good at being left alone. He used his songs to work out most of his feelings, practiced, and showed up at Militia gatherings.

But then, when night came, he would go out and work out his feelings in other ways.

More Flux than ever before. Alcohol. He was resisting women, for now, because of Sophie, but he loved brushing up against disaster — to stand at the edge of the precipice, one foot in. In this time of great sorrow, that was his happy place.

The problem was, he was kind of famous now. His drug “friends” started talking. People were taking pictures of him passed out in disgusting places.

At this point, his bandmates knew better than to confront him directly. They knew, and he knew that they knew, but no one ever addressed the elephant in the room. You could tell in the songs too.

Bandit showed up to rehearsal with one called

“Eyeeefaychee” (which stands for I Fucking Hate Everybody), and he was now working on a very angry number that Vera and Mads had started. It was probably Empire Fall’s heaviest song to date. It was like the band was fighting through music. Vera’s riffs were angry and spiteful, Mads’ drumming was raw and epileptic in parts, mechanical and slow in others. Bandit said he wanted to write a song about how the band’s early success wasn’t making him nicer — it made him angrier. Mads and Vera told him he was still probably processing what he had learned, but he cut the conversation short.

Sophie tried to tell him pretty much the same thing, but he wasn’t having it either.

They all loved the song anyway, so they let it go.

It was called *Sore Winner*.

Try to speak

Nothing’s coming out

Backed in a corner

Paralyzed by doubts

Work work work work, work it all away

They can’t ignore what is in their way

*Look at me
I'm a sore winner
I don't quit
I just get better
Look at me
I'm a sore winner
I don't quit
I just get better*

*And everybody wants it insane
So sick and tired of the mundane
Crowning the cruel, praising the inhumane
Yeah everybody wants to numb pain
Unplugged the only way to feel sane
Reveal the face of the arcane*

*Look at me
I'm a sore winner
I don't quit
I just get better
Look at me
I'm a sore winner
I don't quit
I just get better*

*I'm the root that grows from shit
Your rejection was a gift
Built a kingdom out of spit
Can you feel the seismic shift
I'm the root that grows from shit
Your rejection was a gift
Built a kingdom out of spit
Can you feel the seismic shift*

*Try to speak
Nothing's coming out
Backed in a corner
Paralyzed by doubts
Work work work work, work it all away
They can't ignore what is here to stay*

*Look at me
I'm a sore winner
I don't quit
I just get better
Look at me
I'm a sore winner
I don't quit
I just get better*

*I don't quit I just get better
I don't die, I don't die
I come back meaner*

The day he recorded that song in the studio with Mads and Vera, Bandit felt like his old self again. They went out with the rest of the group after. He didn't have any Flux. He felt lighter for a bit. Sophie and his bandmates felt like home again.

Roman, Aksel, and Riker joined the fun. They closed out the bar like in the old days. Bandit went home with Sophie. He slept better than he had in weeks.

Rentoth

Rentoth didn't come with them that night. He stayed home, which wasn't unlike him, but the reason was different this time. That afternoon, while the band was recording, just like Bandit, a Sworn agent had approached him — in a public bathroom while his two bodyguards waited outside — and told him that the Sworn knew the identity of the people who killed his mother.

“She was never supposed to be killed.”

The agent claimed the members who were tasked

with killing Lord Rabenath disobeyed direct orders when they also decided to kill his wife. The agent told Rentoth that if he wanted to find out their identities, he should find a way to reach out to Zero to make amends.

Rentoth told the agent to fuck off and came out yelling.

“From now on, you’re pissing with me!” he yelled at his guards.

He spent the night pacing in his room, not sure what to do next. Or who to tell.

Vera

After the night out, Vera came home with her friends and had a nightcap with the crew. Small talk, loud laughs, too many drinks, and a sense of belonging none of them had felt in a while.

She went to bed happy.

As she started to undress, she noticed a piece of paper in her pocket. She didn’t remember putting it there. It was a handwritten note. What it said made her heart stop.

“Your brother killed Lady Rabenath. And he’s in the Slums right now, looking for Bandit.”