

# 03. Brutal

## MADS

As the rehearsal space's front door closes behind Bandit, Vera turns to Mads.

"What do you think? He's gonna use again, right?"

"Probably. As long as it doesn't mess with our work, it's not our problem," Mads replies casually.

"Don't be a prick!" Vera snaps. "He's our friend too. Quitting Flux is a tall fucking order."

"Vera, trust me. I know Flux addicts all too well. There's no getting through to them until they actually want to quit. Them. Not us. Addicts don't care about what their loved ones think or want. They'll steal and lie from anyone just to score. You know this! We've seen it so many times."

Vera takes a step back, clearly taken aback by his lack of empathy. Her eyes narrow.

"Why so cold?" she mutters under her breath. Then, louder, "Okay... well, he did seem sincere. Hopefully, he makes up for lost time and writes something cool to this new beat we made."

Mads shrugs. "I hope so."

But as Vera turns away, he feels a pang of guilt. He knows he's being too harsh, but he can't help himself. The truth is, Mads understands the devastation of Flux addiction all too well. Even though he doesn't always show it, he's fond of Bandit and doesn't want to lose him—not like he lost Aksel.

## **AKSEL**

Mads' parents never told him exactly how they ended up in the Slums. He knows they grew up on the intermediate levels, went to good schools, played sports, got decent jobs. Normal people stuff. According to the "official version," his father, Daichi, lost his job as an executive chef when Mads was five. He never found another one. Mads doesn't remember much from back then. By the time his parents burned through their savings, his mom, Agnes, found work as a public school teacher in the Slums, forcing the family to move.

Daichi never mentally recovered from the change. Now, he runs a modest food truck that serves street food outside various Slum factories. At first, he was passionate—trying new things, exploring flavors—but over time, his enthusiasm dwindled. The menu is now

stale, though Daichi doesn't seem to care as long as he has customers.

Mads also has a younger sister, Emma, who's excelling in school. At just 15, she's determined to make it to college—an almost impossible feat for a Slummer, but not entirely out of reach.

Then there's Aksel, Mads' older brother. Or maybe "was" his older brother? No one knows where he is or if he's even alive.

Aksel taught Mads everything he knows about music. He'd sit beside Mads at the family's battered old computer, showing him production tricks, how to build instrumentals, and how to focus on the essentials. "If your melody is catchy, your chords are interesting, your lyrics tell a story, and your drums groove, your song has good bones. Then you can get cute with the production." Mads still applies those lessons today.

The brothers spent countless hours making music together. For Aksel, it was a way to escape, a shared passion that brought them closer. But by the time Mads turned 13, Aksel, barely 16, was already deep into Flux. He dropped out of school, disappearing for days at a time. Then weeks. And one day, he simply never came back. His name is now almost forbidden in the Nakamura household.

Aksel's disappearance shattered the family. Daichi, already struggling, became even more withdrawn, drinking heavily and spending half his earnings on booze. The nights were filled with shouting matches between Mads' parents, their voices ricocheting off the thin apartment walls.

Agnes did her best to hold everything together. She worked tirelessly, paid tuition for their subpar Slum school, and always managed to cook breakfast for her kids. Seeing the toll it took on her, Mads chose not to pursue college, even though he was one of the rare Slummers who could have. Music was his dream, and he could always pick up factory shifts to help with the bills.

## **MEETING VERA**

Mads was 21, working at a plant assembling computer parts, when his supervisor introduced him to his new station partner one cold December morning.

"Hi, I'm Vera!" she said with a grin.

"Mads. Pleased to meet you," he replied.

It didn't take long for Mads to realize Vera was... different. She did push-ups and all sorts of weird workout movements during breaks, bragged about

beating her guy friends at chess and arm wrestling, hummed melodies way too loudly, and befriended everyone on the floor. She was magnetic—and clearly not someone to mess with.

A dude from a nearby station kept trying to flirt with her. She was not into it. He wouldn't get the hint. One night, a bunch of co-workers were hanging out after their shift at their usual spot. A cozy, unpretentious little dive bar called "Le Petit Mort". Vera and Mads were there. So was the guy.

He started getting a bit handsy with Vera, who kept telling him to stop. Nicely at first, then in a decidedly more stern tone. He still wouldn't get it. At some point, he put his wandering hands on Vera's shoulders and started to move them towards her chest.

Understanding what was going on, Mads stood up from his stool to intervene. There was no need.

Vera suddenly grabbed both of the guy's hands, pushed them away from her body, and kned him right in his balls.

"I told you to stop, motherfucker!"

As he crouched down in pain, she hit him straight in the face with her full pint of beer. He fell, out cold. Cuts all over his face. Blood and shards on the floor. Mads grabbed her and pulled her away from the

poor idiot's unconscious body. She kept staring at the dude, her eyes lit with hate, screaming:

"What are you gonna do uh? What are you gonna do now?!"

The guy's friends rushed to his side. One of them turned to her:

"Are you crazy? Look at him, you slashed his cheek open!

Vera was still ready to go, Even as Mads kept trying to hold her back.

"Oh shut up, he had it coming and you know it. You want some of this too?"

"No no, calm down, we're sorry he was acting like a loser. We all saw it."

The guys picked their friend up and left. None of them ever talked to Vera again after that.

The bar had gone completely silent.

Mads saw that she was calming down, and finally let her go. Vera gathered herself, let out a big sigh, then sat right back on her stool.

"Can I please get another beer?"

The bartender promptly poured her a fresh pint.

"This one's on the house, Vera. And remind me never to piss you off!"

"Thanks Mikey. Sorry about the mess. This asshole was asking for it."

She turned to the rest of the patrons:

“Who said we should stop the party? Not me!”

The place erupted in a loud cheer.

Incredulous and awestruck, Mads looked on, raised his glass, and joined the cheer.

That night, their friendship was cemented.

Vera and Mads started getting together after work to write songs. Vera would come to Mads' place, hang out with Emma and the parents, stay for dinner, then work on instrumentals with Mads late into the night. Mads' family loved her right away. She would brighten the mood every time she came around. Even Daichi would laugh at her jokes and crazy anecdotes.

While working with her, Mads quickly realized that Vera was a fantastic guitar player. She could play almost anything. Pop, jazz, rock... But her real passion was for Metal.

Mads liked a bunch of Metal bands but he wasn't as into it before he met her. She taught him all about the intricacies of that kind of music, and how screaming and aggression were merely a tool to express one's artistry, just like a melody or a chord progression. To Mads, this confirmed what Aksel had taught him: great songwriters can come from anywhere.

From the most brutal deathcore band to the most delicate jazz singer, all that matters is THE SONG. Does it make you FEEL things? Write a good song, and good things happen. The genre of the song is irrelevant. Its quality is what matters.

Because she came from Metal, Vera could sometimes get caught up in the intricacies of her riffs, forgetting about the bigger picture; Mads would teach her how to write riffs that still left space for vocals, guitar parts that would allow the song to breathe... And she would listen. To her, Mads seemed like a savant, wise beyond his years, a person who understood production and arrangement on a higher level than almost anyone she knew. Which is saying a lot, considering where she came from.