

12. SILENCE

The next day, they were back in the rehearsal space. Mads stood at the front of the room, a whiteboard covered in song titles and set notes behind him. Sophie tuned her keys, Roman fiddled with his pedalboard, and Riker cracked jokes from the couch. Bandit leaned in a corner, unusually quiet. Vera stood, arms crossed, watching him.

Mads was still shaken from the message he'd received the night before. Oran. The name pulsed like a low drumbeat in the back of his skull. But he'd compartmentalized—just like he always did. First things first: the music.

He clapped his hands together.

"Alright, great work last night. We were tight. The transitions hit. Energy was up, crowd was with us. I'll go through the footage later, but preliminarily, I think this was such a promising set!"

Everyone murmured in agreement. Sophie smiled. Riker gave a mock bow. Roman tossed a pick into the air and caught it.

"You guys are killing it," Mads continued. "But we're asking a lot of you. And you're rising to it. So, sincerely—from all of us—thank you."

They nodded, appreciating the rare moment of vulnerability from Mads.

Riker couldn't help but bring up "the moment."

"And kudos to Bandit for sticking it to the man!"

He, Sophie, Vera, and Roman cheered, and Mads let out a sincere smirk.

Vera added, "Our fearless leader drives me nuts sometimes, but I like to think he's the yin to Mads' yang. And I... I'm mother, watching from above in amusement."

The entire room burst out laughing.

After about an hour of granular debriefing—and another of shooting the shit—Mads asked to speak to Vera and Bandit privately. He had to tell them about Oran.

Once the door shut behind their bandmates (and after Vera noticed Bandit and Sophie exchanging a few sparkly looks), Mads turned to his two friends.

"I got a message last night. From a dude named Oran. He's part of a political group called the Social Revolutionary Front. Slum extremists, basically. He loved what you said, Bandit. Thinks we could help

their cause..."

"Are you serious? WHY should we care?" Bandit cut him off. "People suddenly think I'm some radical Slummer just because I told Rentoth to fuck off. I'm not. I'm an individualist. Maybe an anarchist. I don't even fucking know myself! But I do know this—NO ONE tells me how to act. I'm not gonna be someone else's bitch, no matter how 'good' the cause sounds. I just want to focus on us, our music, our lives. Empire Fall could be our way out. From zero to one. Who the fuck does this guy think he is? At least Rentoth gave us money."

"Alright, B. I was with you until that last bit," said Vera, crossing her arms. "If there's a chance to make things better for people in the Slums—on our own terms—I think we should at least hear the guy out."

Bandit wasn't letting go. "You're being naive, V. This guy's just using our buzz for his own gain. I haven't met him, but I already know him. He's slick. Dresses it all up in justice and revolution. But when has a band ever changed the world? We're just dumbass troubadours singing for our supper."

Mads let the back-and-forth play out before speaking.

"I say we meet him. Hear him out. Play it coy. Maybe there's something we're not seeing."

"Sure, let's add another thing to our already-too-full plate," Bandit muttered.

"Hey," Vera snapped, "I don't know about you, but I'm tired of living like this while Rentoth laughs about never holding a broom in his life."

Bandit sighed. "Fine. Let's meet him. Can we get back to writing songs now? I'm actually inspired."

They did.

Mads texted Oran soon after. The meeting was scheduled for next week, in the old abandoned National Library in the Slums.

Of course it is, Bandit thought, rolling his eyes.

A couple days later, they had to meet Rentoth about some marketing stuff. He booked them a nice suite back on Level 14—the same hotel as their first showcase.

Interviews on day one, photoshoot on day two.

"Can't wait to never use these pics," Vera joked when they heard they had to do the shoot. Mads and Bandit agreed.

At the meeting, Rentoth was his usual off-putting self.

"The press is loving your little number, Bandit. Sticking it to the man—me! Haha! Loved it. You little asshole. More money for me. Not that I need it, but

you get my point. Honestly, I couldn't have set it up better myself. You've got a couple interviews today at the hotel. No one reads them, but it keeps Empire Fall in people's minds. I'm hiring someone to handle this crap from now on—I'm not coming back down here. The air's toxic. I lose a year of my life every time I breathe it. Anyway, you're set. Interviews won't take long. I have a date—I gotta run. Enjoy your day, ding-dongs."

He left.

Vera was stunned, almost amused. "It's honestly impressive how much of a fucking douche this guy can be. Ten out of ten. A virtuoso of douchebaggery. The Mozart of money bros."

Mads nodded in agreement.

Bandit didn't respond—he was staring at his phone.

"Are you texting Sophie?" Vera asked, already knowing the answer.

Bandit tried to deflect, but eventually nodded.

"As long as you treat her right," Vera said. "She's a good friend."

"I don't even know if she likes me," Bandit muttered.

"She says she's not sure it's a good idea to hang out outside band stuff. I'm pretty bummed."

“Ohhh, Bandit’s smitten!” Vera teased. “Look at the bad boy all flustered. Adorable.”

“Shut up. I’m serious.”

Mads, ever the voice of reason, pointed out that Sophie was probably making the smart call.

Bandit didn’t care. Not really.

They did the interviews. They went fine. Some dumb questions. Some surprisingly insightful ones. Another day at the office.

Afterward, Mads and Vera went out for food. Bandit stayed in.

He was exhausted.

The work. The shows. Rentoth. The pressure. The rising profile. Oran. Sophie. The argument with Vera. The quiet judgment in Mads’ eyes.

He double-checked the door. Made sure they were gone.

Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out a cartridge of Flux, ripped it open, and inhaled the whole thing right there on the hotel couch.

As he inhaled, he thought of a line: *All I want is silence. Every sound is violence.*

Exhale.

Euphoria.

Drowsiness.

Took a little too much.

Passed out.

Then, what felt like a mili second later, Bandit felt a hand on his shoulder.