

# 05. Control

## EMPIRE FALL

Over the next few weeks, the band went on a tear. They wrote so many songs—pretty much all of *Abundant Lawless Maelstrom (Muscled Up)*. Ideas were flowing from everyone: Bandit with a sharp lyric or raw theme, Vera with killer riffs and chord progressions, Mads with forward-thinking, boundary-pushing tracks. Bandit and Vera even started learning production, becoming surprisingly good at it.

Since Bandit quit Flux—at least as far as the band was concerned—he seemed to have replaced his addiction with relentless workaholicism. He stayed at the studio after hours, alone with his crappy little laptop, sleeping there most nights. He only left when other bands needed the space or when he had to sell Flux to make some money. His energy was contagious. Mads and Vera, already hard workers, pushed even harder. The focus was sharp, the momentum unstoppable, and the songs? They felt really fucking good.

Bandit began opening up more—about his past, his failures, the ghosts he carried. He was turning a corner. But the addiction never really left. Hidden. Controlled. Secret. He was ashamed. He used way less, but he still needed Flux to unwind, to fall asleep, to party on the rare nights out.

He started seeing himself differently: a broken being, too hard on himself and, therefore, even harder on others. A selfish asshole, but also a gentle, sensitive person who could be the nastiest, most confrontational prick in the room. He wanted to be better. And he was—most days.

Bandit also threw himself into fitness. Training with Vera, but also alone. He'd always been athletic, but this was different. The structure, the routine—it grounded him. Flux was still part of that routine, though. Until the band made it big, selling was still his most reliable income.

As Empire Fall's sound evolved, so did their circle. Friends started coming to rehearsals—one, then two, then a crowd. Eventually, Mads set a rule: guests only once a week. Every other session was just the band. These "public rehearsals" turned into mini shows, perfect for tightening their live set.

They began selling cassette tapes of their songs. *Abundant Lawless Maelstrom* and its deluxe "double EP" version (*Muscled Up*) started making waves in the

Slums. A supervisor at Mads and Vera's job bought a copy—his teenage kids loved it. Then a few of their co-workers did too. Word of mouth spread. They couldn't upload their music, not with Elderise's strict internet regulations, but maybe, just maybe, a distributor or label might find them. Their friends loved their music. Their friends' friends did too.

About two months after that first encounter at the bar, Rentoth showed up again. This time, it was at their rehearsal space.

He was waiting outside, smoking a cigarette, draped in his signature all-black, extra-long trench coat. His silver-bleached hair spilled from under an obsidian beanie.

"What's up, guys?"

"What's up, dickhead," Bandit shot back, clearly not thrilled to see him.

"Hey dude, still alive, huh? Looking buff too! Did your new girlfriend drag you along for her workouts? How cute."

"She's not my girlfriend. She's my bandmate. I don't sleep with every girl I meet."

"I mean, you certainly used to."

"Shut up! And stop embarrassing me in front of my friends, you fuckhead."

Mads and Vera exchanged a look. Did these two love each other or hate each other? Probably both.

Vera jumped in. "When you guys are done jerking each other off, maybe Rentoth can tell us what the fuck he's doing here?"

"Ohhh, she really is feisty! Tough! I'm so scared," Rentoth mocked.

Mads cut through the noise. "She's right. What do you want? And how did you find out where we work?"

"Calm down, white knight. I just wanted to check you guys out. The streets are talking about Empire Fall. Someone even gave me your cassette tape. It's pretty good, all jokes aside. I'm impressed you got Bandit to focus this much. The lyrics are cool, too—who knew that ding-dong had it in him?"

Bandit scowled. "Alright, what do you *really* want? Besides annoying the shit out of me?"

"I want you guys to play one of my events."

Vera laughed. "*Your* events? Like we're supposed to know what those are?"

Bandit's face darkened. "Oh, I know what they are. Illegal rebel gatherings in the Slums. They talk about overthrowing the Authority. I've been to a few. Last one had, like, two thousand people from all over Elderise. Everyone had to wear a black mask before entering. Rentoth (the only person there without a mask) and some other important people preached about starting over—bringing down the towers, killing

the oligarchs, ditching tech, farming, living like our ancestors, whatever. They've got detailed plans. Honestly, I was probably out of my mind at the time, I'd

mostly go there to pick up chicks and sell Flux. All the speakers wore masks—except for him. They threaten snitches trying to report these gatherings to The Authority with death. Some people disappeared after meetings. Whatever he's offering, we're NOT playing those."

Mads and Vera nodded. This was so far removed from what they knew.

Rentoth smiled thinly. "But what's life without a little danger, my friends? Aren't you a rock band? Aren't you supposed to be punks? Anarchists? All I see is a bunch of—"

"We're not pussies," Mads snapped. "We just don't want to be mixed up in your bullshit. Above our pay grade."

Rentoth shrugged. "Fine. How about this? A showcase for some of my industry friends on the upper levels. No strings. I'll cover your trip, hotel for three nights. It won't be the top floors, but higher than any of you rubes have ever been. A little fee to cover missed work. If I like what I hear in rehearsal."

The band huddled. They were more intrigued than they let on. They knew their music was good. People

liked it. And Rentoth? He could open doors—some very dangerous ones, sure, but doors nonetheless. Vera spoke for all of them: "Fine, we'll let you set up ONE showcase for us, but we're not doing anything illegal and we're definitely not playing any clandestine revolutionary gatherings."

They played a set. Rentoth's poker face never cracked, but he was impressed.

Vera's rage, Mads' quiet strength, and Bandit... Bandit was a force. His performance was raw, aggressive, vulnerable—possessed. Rentoth had always seen something in him, but this? This was next level.

When they finished, Rentoth simply said, "I'll set it up. How's next month? Can you play 45 minutes?"

"Fine. Yes," Vera replied. "You know good venues up there?"

"And the PA? You providing a sound engineer?" Mads added.

Rentoth smirked. "I'm not dealing with this tedious stuff. I'm busy trying to conquer the world... Or destroy it, depending on how you look at it. Bandit, I'll put you in touch with someone who handles the details. I'll send dates soon."

A few days later, Bandit got the text:

*March 30th. Level 14. Hotel from March 28 to April 2. Maybe some meetings if the show goes well. Don't make*

*me regret this, fuckwad. Let's hang on the 29th.*

Bandit forwarded it to Vera and Mads. They went out that night to celebrate what felt like a breakthrough. They were cautious, a tad scared to get involved with Rentoth, but they were also excited.

Mads and Vera asked Bandit again if they should worry about anything.

"As long as we just stick to the showcase and play nice with him and his friends for a couple days, we should be good. But don't let him talk you into ANYTHING else. Oh, and let's make sure we don't get separated while we're up there."

Mads was still a little worried. "B, you never told us exactly how and when you met Rentoth."

"It's better if I don't. Some other time maybe. Just trust me that I wouldn't waste our band's time with someone who couldn't help us move the needle. And you guys are my friends, I wouldn't let anyone fuck with you."

Bandit didn't know it yet, but he was vastly underestimating Rentoth.

These poor kids had no idea what they were getting themselves into.