

04. ICantWaitToForget

VERA

After the colorful rehearsal, Vera walks home. Gotta get those steps in. When she arrives, she finds her dad putting together a modest dinner.

“How did it go, V?”

“Well... Bandit is either gonna be our ticket outta here, or he’s gonna end up dead in the streets.”

“Uh-oh... Is it Flux?”

“Yup.”

“V... I told you, you gotta stay away from —”

“I know, Dad, you don’t need to tell me.” She cuts him off with a smile. She enjoys her dad’s company but misses the rest of her family terribly.

Vera still remembers the day everything changed. She was ten when her mother’s body gave out. The sickness had eaten away at her, reducing the warm, laughing woman who used to sing lullabies at the piano to a husk of herself. Her father held steady, never letting the grief break him. He worked tirelessly, playing gigs in dingy clubs, scraping together

whatever he could to keep food on the table. Even after losing everything, he refused to crumble.

Before her mother got sick, their lives were full of music. Her mother was the singer, her father the bass player, and Jimmy, her older brother, the pianist. They spent long nights at her uncle's house—her mother's brother, a famous singer who lived in the Upper Levels of Elderise. Those nights were legendary. Good food, deep conversations, a little too much wine for the grown-ups, and live music. Everyone was a musician. Her cousin played sax, her aunt was a pitch-perfect backup singer, another cousin was a trumpet wizard. They would jam late into the night in her uncle's home studio.

Then her mother died. And everything stopped. Her uncle stopped returning calls. No visits. No invitations. "Maybe we remind him of her," they thought. The medical bills had already bled them dry, forcing them from their home to the Slums. The warmth of those nights was replaced by silence.

But Vera wouldn't let music go. Neither did Jimmy. They practiced at all hours, even if it meant skipping school. Their father never stopped them—he was proud of their passion. But then Jimmy left. He landed a job as a musical director at a fancy club in the Upper Levels. He sent money and emails, but Vera

hadn't seen him in two years. Slummers weren't allowed up there, and Jimmy rarely came down. Her father was so proud of him, and so was Vera... but she just missed him.

After Jimmy left, Vera became angry. She got into fights —mostly with guys— regularly ending up in trouble with the cops. She needed an outlet. Her dad had some dumbbells at home, so she started lifting obsessively. Then she found metal. She loved learning intricate riffs, blasting the most aggressive bands while she trained. It became her lifestyle. Soon, she asked her dad to help her build a custom 8-string guitar. He did. That guitar became Vera's most precious possession.

When she met Mads at work, it was like finding another version of Jimmy —someone who understood, who had the same fire.

Mads was her brother now. And Bandit? Bandit was something else entirely. She could see it, even if he couldn't.

That unnameable thing that separates the great from the good. That certain kind of presence that couldn't be taught. When he was locked in, when his mind wasn't clouded by Flux, he could light up a room just by walking in. His voice was good, but his sense of melody and charisma were second to none.

That's why she fought so hard for him. She wasn't stupid—she knew addicts. She knew the risks. But she also knew talent like his didn't come around often. And maybe, just maybe, this band was the thing that could save him.

The next day, the energy at the rehearsal space was palpable. Bandit was already there when Mads and Vera showed up, grinning.

"I wrote something," he said.

Mads raised a brow. "You actually slept?"

Bandit waved him off. "Doesn't matter. Just record me!"

Mads plugged in his laptop, turned on his cheap sound interface, and queued up the instrumental for what would become "What Now."

Bandit put on his headphones, pulled out his phone to read the lyrics, and started singing.

As soon as the chorus kicked in, Mads and Vera got goosebumps. They couldn't believe how good this little fucker sounded. And that melody? Insanely catchy. Vera tried to stay quiet, but soon she was jumping up and down behind him, unable to contain her excitement.

Then the bridge hit, and it blew their minds. Bandit screamed his guts out. His lyrics cut deep.

"My confidence has crumbled I don't know how to cope I can see the noose at the end of my rope."

Everyone in the Slums had felt sorrow. But Bandit's pain was different. Raw, untamed, woven into his entire being. And he could write about it.

As soon as the song ended, before Bandit could even take off his headphones, Vera jumped on his back, and Mads let out a victory yell.

They recorded all night, layering harmonies, tweaking parts, refining every note. By the time they were done, they were exhausted but euphoric. They knew they had something special. No one mentioned the overdose from the night before. The word "Flux" wasn't even uttered.

After locking up the rehearsal space, they wandered into their usual dive bar, running on adrenaline and the high of creation. Drinks flowed, laughter filled the air, and for a few hours, they let themselves believe they were already out of the Slums.

Then something odd happened.

As the now-empty-bar was about to close, a guy pulled up behind them.

"Hi, Bandit. Didn't think I'd find you in a place like this," he said, his voice smooth, edged with something neither friendly nor hostile.

Bandit turned, his body tensing. "Rentoth."

Vera's instincts flared. Rentoth. The name meant nothing to her, but the weight it carried in Bandit's posture said enough.

Rentoth smiled. "I heard you've been busy."

"You could say that."

Rentoth nodded, glancing at Vera and Mads. "You must be the band."

Vera said nothing. Mads gave a slight nod.

Rentoth exhaled. "Word travels fast. I was surprised to find out you weren't dead, honestly. You still a junkie?"

Bandit rolled his eyes. "Shut the fuck up, dude. And for your information, I quit Flux."

"Oh... again? I kid, I kid."

Rentoth smirked and leaned back. "You know, I've been keeping busy myself. Maybe I should stop by your rehearsal space one of these days, listen to some tunes. If I like what I hear, maybe I could throw some money your way."

Vera's stomach turned. "What's your deal, anyway?"

By now pretty drunk, Bandit smirked. "Rentoth here has rich-boy daddy issues. His family's old money, real old money. His papa sits on the Authority Council. And he fancies himself an anarchist or whatever. Or is it a communist? See, I told you guys I was too stupid. Anyway... Some left-wing Militia shit. I gotta piss."

Mads stiffened. The Authority Council—the twelve ruling elites of Elderise. Oligarchs who ran the city

like kings. People no one from the Slums ever got close to, let alone dealt with.

Rentoth shrugged. “Guess that means I have a little more free time than most.”

Mads and Vera exchanged glances. Rentoth wasn't just some rich kid slumming it. If he was connected to the Council, then getting involved with him was dangerous. And if Bandit was right—if Rentoth truly wanted to overthrow them—then he wasn't just dangerous.

He was lethal.