

11. AntiDivine_2

EMPIRE FALL

"You couldn't give us a fucking heads-up?!"

Vera was pissed.

"I didn't really think it through," Bandit admitted. "The idea came to me a couple hours before we went on. Besides, if Rentoth had gotten seriously pissed, you and Mads would've had plausible deniability."

Mads jumped in.

"That wasn't your call to make! We're a band. These decisions need to be discussed and taken together." He started pacing in a tight circle, staring at the floor. Then he stopped. His tone softened.

"Now... I gotta say... that was pretty dope, dude."

He came closer and mimed a punch to Bandit's jaw before pulling him into a hug.

"You mad genius."

Vera nodded in agreement.

"Gotta hand it to you, B. You gave me goosebumps out there. And *AntiDivine* was the perfect closer. When you sang the bridge and the audience started

singing along, I thought the roof was gonna blow.”

Humans die

Gods die

Regimes die

Art survives

As the band continued celebrating backstage, Rentoth entered the room, casually picking at a small container of fresh berries.

The energy shifted immediately. Quiet. Watchful.

Rentoth locked eyes with Bandit.

“People loved your set. And your little number at the end? Very entertaining. Walk with me.”

Bandit glanced at Vera and Mads. Hesitated. Then followed Rentoth out of the room.

Rentoth popped the last of the berries into his mouth and turned on Bandit, their faces inches apart.

“You think you did a cool thing, huh? You think I’m worried? No. That was GREAT. You looked like a real fucking rebellious rockstar up there. You stuck it to the man—aka me. Good boy!”

He gave Bandit a condescending tap on the nose. Bandit pushed his hand away aggressively, but before he could say anything, Rentoth kept ranting.

“What you don’t seem to grasp is that I own your career now. And the better you get, the cooler you

look, the more rebellious you act, the more I win. So go ahead. Make me your punching bag. As long as the crowd eats it up, I'm all for it. You think I give two shits what these imbeciles think of me? Awww. Cute little insects. I actually want them to hate me. All of them. I don't care. It serves my purpose."

Rentoth took a step back.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have real issues to deal with. Enjoy your night at the kids' table."

And just like that, he turned and walked away. Bandit didn't even get a word in. Whatever. He's clearly super ticked off.

Fuck him.

Bandit went back to his bandmates.

Vera and Mads inquired about the convo. Vera laughed.

"He was just trying to save face. You definitely pissed him off though!"

The band talked about the show—what went right, what didn't—and gave their share of the revenue to their newly appointed masked acolytes.

Mads wanted to make sure they all felt appreciated, but also made sure they kept their eye on the prize.

"Everyone did a great job tonight! I'll watch the film tomorrow and see what we can all do better or differently. But a fantastic first full-show as a six-piece!" Bandit couldn't resist.

“He’s gonna grind some tape! See, Mads, you DO like sports. Considering you think like a 55-year-old already, I’m not surprised.”

They all laughed, shared a few drinks, and never really cared about what was going on at the event. None of that was their concern. They had done their job. It was time to go home.

BANDIT

Sophie’s home was near Bandit’s, so he offered to walk her home, make sure she got back safe. She’d been focused on nailing the show all day, but as the night cooled and the noise died down, she started opening up. They laughed about Roman’s acrobatic stage jumps, about the sound guy who clearly hated the band, and about the sketchy pre-show energy drinks Riker swore by. All in good fun. Bandit told her how jealous he was of Sophie and the other masked Militia members for having such badass outfits while he, Vera, and Mads were stuck wearing street clothes.

He then went on and on about why they both admired Vera and Mads so much. He couldn’t stop talking about how he was learning from them every day, and how he aspired to be as good a person as

they were.

"I got a ways to go!"

Sophie retorted that he was "a pretty unique guy himself."

"Unique, yes. Good... I'm not so sure," he said.

They talked about books they liked (Bandit was working real hard on being "less of a moron," as he liked to put it, and was trying his best to read more), what songs moved them the most—all that stuff.

When they reached her door, Sophie reached out and touched Bandit's arm.

"You really were spectacular tonight, B."

Bandit hated compliments, but he liked this one.

He blushed. "Stop it, I'm just trying to keep up with all of you guys."

Sophie locked eyes with him and gave Bandit a kiss on the cheek.

"Have a good night. See you tomorrow at rehearsal. I'm afraid Captain Mads might tear us a new one!"

Bandit watched her disappear inside the modest home she shared with her family. For the first time in days, he didn't reach for a cartridge when he got home.

He just passed out peacefully. And slept better than he had in months.

VERA & MADS

Meanwhile, across the Slums, Vera sat at the Nakamura family table, nursing a chipped mug of tea. Mads leaned against the kitchen counter, arms crossed, his gaze flicking between her and the worn-out linoleum floor.

His mom was in the other room, humming to herself. Emma was out. The place felt strangely quiet.

"Your mom's cooking smells amazing," Vera said.

Mads smirked. "She would never let you leave without feeding you, you know that. Family takes care of family."

Vera smiled, then sighed. "How about Bandit, huh? I don't know. I feel like we might've underestimated him. He's just so raw, you know? But you're right—there's genius in him. We just have to make sure he keeps channeling it in a positive way. I worry about him sometimes... his mental state."

Mads nodded. "I agree. He's the spark. Without him, there's no us. And I'm starting to think he could be a great leader if he keeps his darkness at bay. You know he's still using Flux, by the way?"

"I assumed so, yeah. I saw a couple cartridges in the bathroom tonight. As long as he keeps it from interfering with the band, I say we shut up about it."

"I totally agree." Mads looked pensive.

"When Rentoth walked in tonight, I noticed something. Have you ever thought that, like... Bandit and Rentoth were kinda similar? At their core, I mean? I know they're very different, but I don't know... there seems to be this weird kinship."

Vera piggybacked on the thought.

"You're so right. First off... they both HATE authority. And they both enjoy testing the limits of everything. Do you think they secretly like each other?"

"I don't think B would ever admit it, but one hundred percent, I do. I'm not sure if we should be happy or worried."

"Me neither," concluded Vera.

"I gotta go home, Madsies. Pops will be waiting for me. Plus I gotta get more steps in before midnight strikes—I haven't reached my daily goal!"

"Okay, you lunatic. Be safe!"

As the door locked behind her, Mads got a text from an unknown number:

Hi Mads.

I saw you guys on stage tonight at the Militia Event. It was fantastic. My name is Oran, and I represent the Social Revolutionary Front (SRF). A mutual friend gave me your number.

We loved what you did—calling out Rentoth for his

devious ways and nefarious ambition.
I came by to see what he was really trying to do.
We believe the enemy is the Upper Level.
We think the Slums and the Mid Levels could maybe do something about it.
Would you guys be open to an in-person meeting?
Mads couldn't believe what he was reading.
I JUST WANNA MAKE GOOD MUSIC FOR FUCK'S SAKE.
I'm not dealing with this tonight.
He kissed his parents and sister goodnight and went straight to bed.
Tomorrow was gonna be a doozy—and he had film to watch.
He'd better rest up.