

## 02. What Now\_2

### **BANDIT**

Bandit is shocked. He wasn't expecting that. Out his two new bandmates, he always thought Vera was the most chill. Not anymore.

She tears into him, her index finger inches from his face: "What the fuck, dude? I texted you early and everything. You show up an hour late without even apologizing? Mads and I have been up since fucking dawn, but YOU can't manage to show up on time?"

"I'm sorry, okay? I stayed up late. I thought today was Sunday, not Monday. I messed up. But as soon as I realized what time it was, I jumped on my bike and came as fast as I could."

Mads interjects:

"You know that's not it. You got too fucked up on Flux and lost track of time."

"YES, okay? So what? This is new for me—having to be places on time and shit. I'm sorry. I didn't realize it had gotten out of hand. I want to quit, eventually..."

Vera cuts him off.

"No. You're gonna quit today, or you're out."  
Even Mads is surprised. But he nods, agreeing.

"Brother, we love what we started. You're so talented. I can tell that you care, but this is too scary for us. Vera and I, we have no Plan B. This is it. We can't take any chances."

Now Bandit is pissed.

"In case you haven't heard, we live in THE. SLUMS. No rehab here! We're not higher-ups! I wanna slow down, but..."

"No but," Vera interrupts him. "You heard me. You're going cold turkey. Today."

Bandit looks at her in disbelief.

"Dude, that shit's not safe at all! I'm gonna get sick, I'll have withdrawals—I'm not ready for that."

"Then get some Anti!"

"I don't have any!"

Anti is the cheapest- and most common- Flux antidote. The epidemic is so bad in the Slums, most people who can afford it carry it on them at all times. For them, for a loved one, for a stranger on the street. It comes in handy so often. It can save users from overdosing, and help them through withdrawals.

Mads steps in:

"Vera's right, man. You can't keep going on like this."

Bandit shakes his head in frustration.

"Great. Thanks, guys. I can really feel the love here."  
He grabs a cartridge from his duffle bag.

Vera's hand snaps out, gripping his wrist.

"Don't do it, B. We love you. We wish you had a doctor, a therapist... all that good shit. But you don't. You've got us, though. We wanna help. I'm sure we can figure out how to get you some Anti."

Bandit's jaw clenches, his chest tight with anger. His eyes well with tears. He knows they're right, but he doesn't care. *Who the fuck are they to tell me what to do?* He sneers, mocking.

"Oh yeah? Help this."

Bandit rips open the cartridge and inhales the whole thing in one long, drawn-out sniff.

Silence.

The hit gives him a brief, fleeting satisfaction. He can feel the drug coursing through his veins, and then... nothing. Something's wrong. His vision blurs. Stomach churns. He can feel himself slipping. His body turns to lead, his limbs numb. It's happening too fast—his head is heavy, his mind is shutting down. He collapses.

Vera and Mads look on, horrified. Vera catches him as he falls, easing him down to the floor. Bandit's face goes slack, drool dripping from his mouth. His eyes

are half-open, unfocused. A weird, faint sound is escaping him, like a computer bugging out.

Vera starts yelling.

“Mads, what the fuck?! Is he overdosing? Is he dying?”

Mads kneels beside Bandit, watching closely.

“I don’t think he’s dying. It’s just a mild overdose.”

Worried but not panicking, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out an Anti patch.

Vera is stunned.

“How do you have Anti on you?!”

“My mom. She insists I never go anywhere without it. I think she’s secretly worried I might be doing Flux myself, and wants to make sure I’m safe no matter what.”

He sticks the Anti patch on Bandit’s Adam’s apple.

“Now we wait. He’ll wake up in an hour or so. Should we take him to the hospital to make sure he’s alright?”

“Oh, come on. None of us has that kind of cash, you know that. And they’ll call the cops on us as soon as they figure out why he’s like this.”

Vera makes a good point.

“Yeah, you’re right. Well, there goes our rehearsal.”

By the time Bandit regains consciousness, Vera and Mads are busy fine-tuning the new track. He feels like shit-head pounding, body sore.

His thoughts are foggy. He can feel the patch on his neck. He takes it off and glances at it. He realizes what happened.

"Guys..."

"It's okay," Mads interrupts, not even looking at him.

"We're glad you're alright. But don't come back here unless you're sober. We don't care how you make your money, but if you wanna keep doing Flux, this is as far as we go."

Vera agrees.

"Sounds like you've got some thinking to do, B."

Bandit is out of arguments.

"I know what I want. I don't need time to think about it. You pissed me off, and I acted out. I'm sorry. I'm willing to commit. I wanna quit Flux."

Vera locks eyes with him.

"Do what you want. Mads and I are gonna keep working on this track for a while. You should go home." She turns around.

Bandit knows he's let them down. He nods, defeated.

"Mads, will you send me the rough track when you're done?"

"Sure thing."

Bandit leaves. As he opens the door, he glances back.

Mads and Vera are locked in. They don't look back.

The door clicks shut behind him.

*I haven't felt this shitty in a while. Fuck.*

Back on the bike. Back to the shack.

As soon as Bandit gets home, he wants to rip open a new cartridge and take a hit.

*This is gonna be hard.*

He stares at the stash of Flux he was keeping for himself. Can't take his eyes off it. He would always set aside enough for his personal use when he bought from his wholesaler.

*Should I throw it away? Maybe I should just sell it all?*

To distract himself, he starts writing on his phone. His first sentence:

*How am I gonna be able to function without Flux?*

## **DISCOVERING FLUX**

Bandit remembers how it started for him. An older kid, who must have been 14 or 15, introduced Bandit to Flux years ago, when he was still living in Orphanage162. He remembers very clearly how he left when he opened his first cartridge: how he tore the film off the top and the distinctive smell reached his nostrils; How his whole brain rewired itself after his first sniff; How his body started shivering with excitement right away; How he felt like a kid again, which hadn't been the case in so long.

That night, he stayed up till morning, laughing and

talking with everyone who was tripping with him. It was the best time he ever had at the Orphanage. From that day on, he was hooked. Most of the other kids were taking Flux too. Most of the Orphanage staff as well.

Flux offers an escape from the loneliness of the Slums. Highly addictive, the drug provides its users with a unique high: it unplugs the dark part of your brain. It turns your attention outward. No more inner monologue, no more anxiety, no more fears. You feel peaceful, connected, euphoric. You're present, light, and unbothered. Time doesn't exist. Nirvana. In a place as hopeless as the Slums of Elderise, being high on Flux seems like a perfectly valid way to spend your days.

## **BACK TO TODAY**

Sitting on his dirty bed with no sheets, and desperately trying to distract himself from his need to use, Bandit can't stop writing.

*What's gonna happen if I quit? Am I gonna become a different person? Am I gonna lose my edge? Am I gonna lose what makes me me?*

At that point, he hears a notification on his phone.

“Mads EF

Here’s the track we’ve been working on. Let us know how you feel about it. Hope you’re doing ok.

Bandit starts playing the track. He’s digging it. He loops what he thinks is the chorus. He’s inspired right away. His brain accelerates. He quickly presses record on his phone and starts free styling melodies. He stands. Starts pacing around in circles. Singing gibberish at first, mostly notes and rhythm. But then he starts working his lyrics in. It clicks.

*“What now that I gave up, everything that makes me me?  
I’m trying to get better but I don’t know who to be  
I second guess my actions, over analyze my thoughts  
What now that I gave up, everything that makes me me?  
What now?”*

The last “what now” aligns perfectly with the slower, neck breaking post chorus that Vera and Mads sent him. Writing a hook is like solving a puzzle. And Bandit just did it in 10 minutes.

By the time he’s finished writing the verses and the bridge, the sun is up. He’s lost track of time, but it doesn’t matter. He wrote something he likes.



9 AM. Bedtime. Same as yesterday. Different reason, though.

He can't wait to show Vera and Mads.

Too wired to fall asleep, and with nothing to do anymore, Bandit's mind starts to wander. Soon, he begins to feel nauseous. Sweaty hands. Jonesing for Flux.

*Maybe it's ok if I do one more hit? Just to wind down. I gotta fall asleep somehow.*

He knows he shouldn't. He promised he would stop. But his brain craves it. His whole body. And he doesn't have any Anti. Probably a bad idea to just go cold turkey right now. *No one has to know...*

He's suddenly coming up with a million reasons why it would be ok to use. *One last time*, he tells himself.

Without much hesitation, he reaches for a cartridge, rips off the protection film and takes a big hit of Flux. The sweating and nausea stop almost immediately. A growing smile on his face. There's his peace. Bandit lays down and closes his eyes.