

EMPIRE FALL

PROLOGUE

[VOLUME 0]



01. What Now_1

BANDIT

Bandit wakes up. He doesn't know it yet, but it's 6 PM. The usual. Nauseous, he's pretty sure he's about to puke. Flux has a way of doing that to you. Empty cartridges of it litter his poorly furnished shack. He runs to the bathroom. The commotion wakes up the girl who was sleeping in his bed. She quickly puts her clothes on and runs out the door without saying a word.

Bandit hears the front door close behind her, then proceeds to vomit for a couple of minutes.

Sweaty but relieved, he lies down naked on his bathroom floor, a smirk on his face. *I better check my phone.* He stands up, then starts walking towards his nightstand.

One unread message:

"Vera EF

Don't forget rehearsal today at 5:30. Mads and I will be coming straight from work."

"FUCK!" he yells.

I forgot it was Monday. My voice is shot. I'm gonna be so late, too. Mads is gonna give me shit again. And he's gonna be fucking right.

Bandit gets dressed, grabs a can of diet soda, and a stash of cartridges he's gonna try to sell after band practice. He jumps on his old, rusty bike and starts to haul ass. He's gonna be an hour late. Oops.

VERA

Vera wakes up at dawn. She likes to run early in the morning. The pollution in the Slums of Elderise is slightly more bearable then, making it easier to exercise outside. The early morning Slums crowd is also less sketchy than the evening one. The smell is hard to deal with (a distinct mix of piss, shit, rotting trash, and the occasional unclaimed decomposing human body), but she's used to it. After a nice 45-minute circuit, she does her usual Monday weights routine: pull day. Pull-ups, face pulls, rows, and bicep curls. Quick stretch. Shower time.

8.00 AM.

Time to walk to work.

Vera grabs her guitar, her lunch, and leaves. Mads is already waiting for her outside her place. They like to walk to work together.

"-Yo, V! I love this chord progression you sent me on Friday. I worked on it a bunch. I think I made a pretty cool track around it. Wanna hear?"

He texts her the track.

Vera puts her wired headphones in. The music for what would become "*What Now*" starts playing. She nods.

"-Fuck yeah, dude. I love this! That synth line is so catchy. And you read my mind about the post-chorus. That halftime groove is tough."

Mads is legit relieved.

"-Yeah? You dig it? I thought we could start almost like, bedroom pop, then build towards that big breakdown. Seemed pretty cool to me. I'm so glad you like it."

Vera laughs. Mads is always so insecure; he doesn't really know how talented he is.

"-Dude, you crushed it."

He smiles and looks away.

Their morning walks to work remind them of school. A very rare thing in the Slums, being able to go to school. These two did. But now they're here, on their way to a job they don't like while they try to get their band off the ground. They think they've finally found their singer... if he gets his shit together.

As her shift at the factory nears its end, Vera decides to text Bandit to remind him that they're rehearsing

tonight. She and Mads found this abandoned warehouse really close to work, where Empire Fall and a couple of other bands built a makeshift rehearsal space that also serves as a studio. They take turns using it. The gear they keep in there is pretty cheap, but it gets the job done: a drum set, an old guitar cabinet, a microphone, and a small PA system. The most expensive thing they got is probably the monster lock they put on the steel front door to try and deter anyone from breaking in.

3:55 PM. She texts Bandit. No response.

MADS

7.30 AM.

After breakfast, Mads kisses his mom, dad, and sister on the cheek, grabs his worn-out duffle bag with his laptop and drumsticks, then heads out the door. He keeps obsessively replaying the track he's been working on all weekend. Vera sent him a riff he liked, and he worked on it pretty much continuously.

I really hope she likes this.

These days, Mads is trying to stay cool, but inside, he's excited. He knows Bandit might be just the singer they need. He's already driving Mads crazy with his antics, though. If only he could take the intensity down like... 20%.

MEETING BANDIT

Vera and Mads met Bandit about a month ago, after work. B was trying to sell Flux to the workers leaving the factory after their shift, barely trying to hide it. It's okay. Cops rarely come to the Slums anyway. Vera found him amusing.

"-You really don't give a fuck, huh?"

"-What? Or yeah... no... never had any problems, haha. You want some?"

"-Nah, I don't touch that stuff. You shouldn't either. Shit's dangerous."

"-Is it??? Oh no! What am I gonna do!?! I had no idea." While his douchey sarcasm should have irked her, something about Bandit's demeanor made him quite endearing. He seemed like a kid trying to play the part of a badass. Didn't fool her.

That's when Mads walked out.

"Hey, V, ready to go?"

"-Mads, have you met our new local drug dealer?"

She points toward Bandit. He waves.

"Hey, Mads. I'm Bandit."

"Hi."

"Bandit? What are you, a dog? Hahaha. Sorry, I'm Vera."

"Maybe I am. God knows I ate lots of shit in my time." She laughs out loud. Mads smirks, then quickly gets

worried:

"Damn, man, you really shouldn't be selling this stuff here. The security guards will beat you up if they catch you."

"It's fiine. Gotta make a living, right?"

"You're telling us. Working here sucks."

The three of them ended up talking for a while. Music came up. Bandit admits he's always wanted to sing; he's been writing tons and tons of stuff on his own. The connection between the three of them felt very natural.

"You should come jam with us," says Vera.

Mads is not sure he approves. But before he can get a word out, Bandit answers.

"Really? I'd love to!"

He came by a couple of days later. Vera and Mads played him some early demos of songs like "*Victim*" and "*Everybody Sucks*."

Bandit started writing on the spot, right there in the rehearsal room, and the chemistry was obvious. Here's a guy who has stuff to say, they thought. He took the tracks home, and came back the next day with all the lyrics finished, asking Mads if they could track them asap. They did that night. Vera and Mads were impressed. They got together every day after that to work on more tunes. A couple of weeks later, the band was officially born. Bandit suggested the

name "*Empire Falls*." Because living in the Slums long enough will definitely turn you into an anarchist.

"I dig it. Maybe it's a tad generic?" says Mads.

Vera has an idea:

"Empire Fall. Drop the S."

Bandit's eyes widen.

"Oh, I like that! It's cleaner. Rolls off the tongue."

"Boom!" goes Mads.

"We have a name. Bandit, you sure you're gonna stay committed? I mean, I love your voice, your lyrics and your drive... I'm just not sure this is something you're gonna be serious about, you know?"

"Dude, I'm telling you, this is my favorite thing to do already. I got so much I wanna say. I'm barely scratching the surface. I'm gonna take it seriously, you'll see."

"Okayy." Mads wants to believe him. He's not totally convinced.

BACK TO TODAY

6.30 PM.

At the rehearsal space. Mads is pissed.

"-What's up with this dude, seriously? Already an hour late, no text, no nothing?"

"-I know, M. I agree. Something must have happened. He'll show up."

"-I'm not so sure. I think he inhales too much Flux. What if we get a gig? Is he gonna show up an hour late there too? He's been with us for a month, and he's already pulling that shit. This is not good."

Mads knows he's a little rigid, but that's because he's so driven. He wants to make it out of the Slums at pretty much any cost. And he knows Vera wants it just as bad as him. Now Bandit? It remains to be seen. And what's happening today is definitely a red flag. Another band is showing up to use the room at 10 pm. Every minute counts.

The door cracks open. An out of breath, smiling, acting-like-nothing-is-wrong Bandit.

"Hey, guys! Sorry I'm late. What are we doing today?"
Not even an apology. Mads wants to fucking slap him. Good thing Vera beats him to it.

02. What Now_2

BANDIT

Bandit is shocked. He wasn't expecting that. Out of 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.

03. Brutal

MADS

As the rehearsal space's front door closes behind Bandit, Vera turns to Mads.

"What do you think? He's gonna use again, right?"

"Probably. As long as it doesn't mess with our work, it's not our problem," Mads replies casually.

"Don't be a prick!" Vera snaps. "He's our friend too. Quitting Flux is a tall fucking order."

"Vera, trust me. I know Flux addicts all too well. There's no getting through to them until they actually want to quit. Them. Not us. Addicts don't care about what their loved ones think or want. They'll steal and lie from anyone just to score. You know this! We've seen it so many times."

Vera takes a step back, clearly taken aback by his lack of empathy. Her eyes narrow.

"Why so cold?" she mutters under her breath. Then, louder, "Okay... well, he did seem sincere. Hopefully, he makes up for lost time and writes something cool to this new beat we made."

Mads shrugs. "I hope so."

But as Vera turns away, he feels a pang of guilt. He knows he's being too harsh, but he can't help himself. The truth is, Mads understands the devastation of Flux addiction all too well. Even though he doesn't always show it, he's fond of Bandit and doesn't want to lose him—not like he lost Aksel.

AKSEL

Mads' parents never told him exactly how they ended up in the Slums. He knows they grew up on the intermediate levels, went to good schools, played sports, got decent jobs. Normal people stuff. According to the "official version," his father, Daichi, lost his job as an executive chef when Mads was five. He never found another one. Mads doesn't remember much from back then. By the time his parents burned through their savings, his mom, Agnes, found work as a public school teacher in the Slums, forcing the family to move.

Daichi never mentally recovered from the change. Now, he runs a modest food truck that serves street food outside various Slum factories. At first, he was passionate—trying new things, exploring flavors—but over time, his enthusiasm dwindled. The menu is now

stale, though Daichi doesn't seem to care as long as he has customers.

Mads also has a younger sister, Emma, who's excelling in school. At just 15, she's determined to make it to college—an almost impossible feat for a Slummer, but not entirely out of reach.

Then there's Aksel, Mads' older brother. Or maybe "was" his older brother? No one knows where he is or if he's even alive.

Aksel taught Mads everything he knows about music. He'd sit beside Mads at the family's battered old computer, showing him production tricks, how to build instrumentals, and how to focus on the essentials. "If your melody is catchy, your chords are interesting, your lyrics tell a story, and your drums groove, your song has good bones. Then you can get cute with the production." Mads still applies those lessons today.

The brothers spent countless hours making music together. For Aksel, it was a way to escape, a shared passion that brought them closer. But by the time Mads turned 13, Aksel, barely 16, was already deep into Flux. He dropped out of school, disappearing for days at a time. Then weeks. And one day, he simply never came back. His name is now almost forbidden in the Nakamura household.

Aksel's disappearance shattered the family. Daichi, already struggling, became even more withdrawn, drinking heavily and spending half his earnings on booze. The nights were filled with shouting matches between Mads' parents, their voices ricocheting off the thin apartment walls.

Agnes did her best to hold everything together. She worked tirelessly, paid tuition for their subpar Slum school, and always managed to cook breakfast for her kids. Seeing the toll it took on her, Mads chose not to pursue college, even though he was one of the rare Slummers who could have. Music was his dream, and he could always pick up factory shifts to help with the bills.

MEETING VERA

Mads was 21, working at a plant assembling computer parts, when his supervisor introduced him to his new station partner one cold December morning.

"Hi, I'm Vera!" she said with a grin.

"Mads. Pleased to meet you," he replied.

It didn't take long for Mads to realize Vera was... different. She did push-ups and all sorts of weird workout movements during breaks, bragged about

beating her guy friends at chess and arm wrestling, hummed melodies way too loudly, and befriended everyone on the floor. She was magnetic—and clearly not someone to mess with.

A dude from a nearby station kept trying to flirt with her. She was not into it. He wouldn't get the hint. One night, a bunch of co-workers were hanging out after their shift at their usual spot. A cozy, unpretentious little dive bar called "Le Petit Mort". Vera and Mads were there. So was the guy.

He started getting a bit handsy with Vera, who kept telling him to stop. Nicely at first, then in a decidedly more stern tone. He still wouldn't get it. At some point, he put his wandering hands on Vera's shoulders and started to move them towards her chest.

Understanding what was going on, Mads stood up from his stool to intervene. There was no need.

Vera suddenly grabbed both of the guy's hands, pushed them away from her body, and kned him right in his balls.

"I told you to stop, motherfucker!"

As he crouched down in pain, she hit him straight in the face with her full pint of beer. He fell, out cold. Cuts all over his face. Blood and shards on the floor. Mads grabbed her and pulled her away from the

poor idiot's unconscious body. She kept staring at the dude, her eyes lit with hate, screaming:

"What are you gonna do uh? What are you gonna do now?!"

The guy's friends rushed to his side. One of them turned to her:

"Are you crazy? Look at him, you slashed his cheek open!

Vera was still ready to go, Even as Mads kept trying to hold her back.

"Oh shut up, he had it coming and you know it. You want some of this too?"

"No no, calm down, we're sorry he was acting like a loser. We all saw it."

The guys picked their friend up and left. None of them ever talked to Vera again after that.

The bar had gone completely silent.

Mads saw that she was calming down, and finally let her go. Vera gathered herself, let out a big sigh, then sat right back on her stool.

"Can I please get another beer?"

The bartender promptly poured her a fresh pint.

"This one's on the house, Vera. And remind me never to piss you off!"

"Thanks Mikey. Sorry about the mess. This asshole was asking for it."

She turned to the rest of the patrons:
“Who said we should stop the party? Not me!”
The place erupted in a loud cheer.
Incredulous and awestruck, Mads looked on, raised his glass, and joined the cheer.
That night, their friendship was cemented.

Vera and Mads started getting together after work to write songs. Vera would come to Mads’ place, hang out with Emma and the parents, stay for dinner, then work on instrumentals with Mads late into the night. Mads’ family loved her right away. She would brighten the mood every time she came around. Even Daichi would laugh at her jokes and crazy anecdotes.

While working with her, Mads quickly realized that Vera was a fantastic guitar player. She could play almost anything. Pop, jazz, rock... But her real passion was for Metal.

Mads liked a bunch of Metal bands but he wasn’t as into it before he met her. She taught him all about the intricacies of that kind of music, and how screaming and aggression were merely a tool to express one’s artistry, just like a melody or a chord progression. To Mads, this confirmed what Aksel had taught him: great songwriters can come from anywhere.

From the most brutal deathcore band to the most delicate jazz singer, all that matters is THE SONG. Does it make you FEEL things? Write a good song, and good things happen. The genre of the song is irrelevant. Its quality is what matters.

Because she came from Metal, Vera could sometimes get caught up in the intricacies of her riffs, forgetting about the bigger picture; Mads would teach her how to write riffs that still left space for vocals, guitar parts that would allow the song to breathe... And she would listen. To her, Mads seemed like a savant, wise beyond his years, a person who understood production and arrangement on a higher level than almost anyone she knew. Which is saying a lot, considering where she came from.

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.

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 (Muscle 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.

06. On The Run

EMPIRE FALL

After Rentoth's visit, the band worked harder than ever. Their sound was becoming more unique yet more digestible—things were falling into place. The mix of real drums with programmed ones, the big riffs paired with pop licks, the screams stacked against soaring melodies... it all finally *made sense*. Bandit and Vera were producing almost as much as Mads now, and their ideas were solid. Mads, by far the most disciplined member, no longer hesitated to tell Bandit when a line could be better or a melody could go somewhere unexpected. Their chemistry was undeniable, and they were damn proud of these songs.

Their fans started noticing, too. The bootleg cassette tapes they were selling on the streets were spreading. Young fans were making copies for their friends. Soon, people from the neighborhood started hollering at them when they saw them outside. Empire Fall began selling merch as well. They were

still broke as hell—every cent they made went straight back into the band—but they could feel things moving in the right direction.

As much as they (especially Vera and Mads) hated to admit it, Rentoth's words had struck a chord. They were pushing harder than ever. They had a goal.

They worked tirelessly to tighten their set, finish new songs, and figure out how to bring them to life on stage. Mads, ever the perfectionist, took on the role of Musical Director, triggering samples and backing tracks from a MIDI pad next to his drum kit so Vera and Bandit could roam the stage like the maniacs they were. Bandit, never one to shy away from theatrics, started getting wild ideas. "What if I do muscle-ups on stage? That would be sick, right?"

Mads gave him a blank stare. "I don't even know what those are, dude."

"You know, when you do a pull-up, then lift yourself above the bar so your waist reaches it."

"Absolutely not. That's corny as hell. Just sing the song and move around a bit."

"Fine. But I'm gonna do more than *move around*. I'm going *apeshit*."

Vera smirked but stayed pragmatic. "I'm gonna do that too, but let's *nail* the performance first—then we can go crazy. Priorities."

Bandit sighed, conceding. "Okay, Mom. You're right,

I guess.”

They locked in their set. Every song hit hard, but their latest, *On The Run*, felt *different*—like a turning point.

BANDIT’S GHOSTS

Bandit never openly discussed his past, but his lyrics did the talking. He had been selfish. He had lied, cheated, and manipulated. He did whatever the fuck he wanted. Until one day, he realized he was just being *a piece of shit*. So he tried to be better. He really did. But ever since he got *almost* sober, the ghosts of his past wouldn’t let up. Shame. Self-hatred. Depression.

On The Run was his reckoning with it all.

The melody was deceptively simple—just four chords—but the intervals, the math behind it, the way it felt *familiar yet completely unique*... it stood out. He even sampled his own voice, chopping it up into an anthemic post-hook. He built the whole thing in one night.

The next morning, when he played the demo for Vera and Mads, they couldn’t believe their ears. They loved it. They built out the instrumental together, each adding their own piece to the puzzle. By the time it was finished, Bandit was ecstatic. “Rentoth is gonna *shit* when he hears this!”

THE UPPER LEVELS

A few weeks passed. They told Rentoth they only wanted to travel on the day of the showcase. Staying a couple extra nights up there might be too distracting

before the show. The day soon arrived.

They packed up Mads' mom's car and headed to the Great Elevators. Bandit showed the credentials he had gotten from Rentoth. Mads and Vera showed their ID cards—no problem. But Bandit? He never had an ID. He didn't even know his *real* last name, let alone his birthday. Rentoth must have had serious pull because as soon as the guards saw the digital pass on Bandit's phone, they let him through.

The guards were stern: "You'll need to drive your car inside Great Elevator C. That's the one we use for all the big stuff." The band obliged.

Vera and Mads tried to prepare Bandit for what life was like up there. Clean, well-lit streets. Cops patrolling regularly. *Selling Flux? Absolutely not happening.*

"It's no joke," Vera warned. "Just stay on your best behavior."

Bandit waved her off, but as the elevator ascended, he fell silent. When the doors opened, the sheer opulence of the Upper Levels hit them like a punch to

the gut. The cars. The storefronts. The clothes. The *beautiful people*.

Everything screamed **MONEY**.

Mads swallowed hard. Vera adjusted her jacket, suddenly aware of how out-of-place they looked. Bandit caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror—his patched-up blue jacket, his worn-out sneakers, the faint bruises under his eyes. A *nobody* in a place like this.

He shook it off. *I'm the fucking man. I'm gonna show these motherfuckers.*

THE SHOW

They arrived at the venue, and Mads and Vera got their gear set up with the house engineer. Halfway through soundcheck, Rentoth appeared.

"Looking good and sounding good up there. How's my favorite junkie feeling?"

Everyone rolled their eyes.

Bandit smirked. "Not as good as your mom after I left her this morning."

Vera groaned. "Alright, *children*, let's cut the shit." She was laser-focused. This was an *opportunity*, and she wasn't about to fuck it up.

Rentoth explained that some important people were coming—higher-ups who could *actually* move the

needle for the band.

Vera was too wired to sit still. She went for a run after soundcheck. Mads stayed in the zone, checking and rechecking everything. Bandit, meanwhile, shot the shit with Rentoth for a while, then slipped into the bathroom to take a quick hit of Flux.

No harm, no foul, he told himself.

By showtime, the room was packed with a hundred suits.

The band *crushed* it.

As they wrapped up *With You Always* with an apocalyptic final note, Rentoth smirked from the back of the room. His plan was working perfectly.

His guests were impressed.

One of them, an older man in a suit too expensive for Level 14, exhaled a plume of cigar smoke. "I was wondering why you dragged me down here. This place is a dump... but you *might* have found something. And you say the kids in the Slums like them?"

"They do. And there's something about Bandit. He's got an edge. We might be able to tap into that. He's got a *kamikaze mindset*."

The old man smirked. "Perfect. And I love that band name. Empire Fall. Almost *too* perfect."

Rentoth's eyes gleamed. "Let's fund them. Quietly. Get their music out there. Especially to the higher

floors.”

Meanwhile, Vera, Mads, and Bandit worked the room, beyond thrilled with the opportunity Rentoth had given them.

Again.

How clueless.

Rentoth led them to dinner to celebrate. The older man joined them.

“Guys, this is my friend. He’s my financial partner, and he thought you were great. He’s a very important man.”

Mads extended a hand. “Pleased to meet you. And you are?”

The man took a slow drag from his cigar. “To you, I’m Zero.”

Bandit raised a brow. “Zero? What, like nothing?”

Mads and Vera exchanged a glance. Something about him felt ominous from the get-go.

07. NOISE

EMPIRE FALL

The city glittered above and below them like a kingdom of light, so far removed from the Slums that it might as well have been another planet. From the balcony of the level 14 club, Bandit leaned over the glass railing, drink in hand, watching the neon billboards and the towers that touched the sky. He'd collected a couple of phone numbers and entertained the thought of company for the night. But for now, he soaked in the view, feeling a rare sense of elevation.

Inside, the party thrived. A thumping, relentless four-on-the-floor electronic track pulsed through the air. The dance floor was a chaotic mosaic of:

Dancing.

Kissing.

Sweating.

Drinking.

Sniffing.

Bandit rejoined his friends in the quieter, VIP section of the club. Zero lounged in a leather armchair, a cigar resting between his fingers, surveying the scene like a chess master confident in his strategy. Rentoth, draped in his signature long coat, poured another round of deep amber liquor for Vera and himself.

"Enjoying yourself?" Rentoth asked, a smirk playing on his lips.

Vera grinned. "I could get used to this."

"You should." Rentoth handed her the glass. "This is what opportunity feels like."

Mads sat at the edge of a plush couch, barely sipping his drink. His gaze flicked between Rentoth and Zero. He wasn't naive. The entire night seemed orchestrated to make him, Vera, and Bandit crave this life, to make the Slums feel even smaller, even more inescapable. He could see it working on his bandmates—the glint in their eyes wasn't just from the alcohol.

"Why are we here?" Mads finally asked.

Rentoth raised an eyebrow. "To celebrate, of course."

"Celebrate what? We played a gig. That's it."

"It wasn't just a gig, my friend." Rentoth leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "It's momentum. It's a statement. It's proving you belong. And now, we ensure you stay on that trajectory. Our associates were very impressed, you know."

Mads glanced at Bandit and Vera. They weren't resisting. They weren't questioning. They were already captivated.

"So, you want to sign us or something?" Mads pressed.

Rentoth took a sip of his drink before responding. "Here's the deal. You want money? We'll ensure you have it. You want to record? We'll place you in the best studios. You want people to know your name? We'll spread your music across Elderise. No more bootleg cassettes, no more hustling just to survive. But we want to do all of that discreetly. No label or any of that nonsense. It has to appear as organic as possible. Very important."

Vera and Bandit exchanged glances, excitement evident. This was the break they'd been striving for. But Mads felt a knot tighten in his stomach.

"So, you want to fund us and do everything a good label does, but just... keep it a secret? Why? What's the catch?"

Zero chuckled, the sound deep and measured. "Smart boy."

Rentoth swirled his drink. "You play our Militia Events. All of them. That's nonnegotiable. As you grow, you'll help us make these events as big and meaningful as possible. But for that to work, it can't appear as though you have benefactors funding

anything. Especially from the top levels."

Vera's expression shifted. She looked at Mads; they shared the same unease.

"Wait... so you want us to deceive our audience? Lie? And you want us to perform at your weird unauthorized underground gatherings?"

Bandit interjected, "When I came to that one event, everyone wore masks except for you, Rentoth. I'm guessing it's to prevent retaliation from whoever you're hiding these meetings from. And I imagine you want us to perform without masks, right?"

"Correct. You three, anyway. If you add more members, they could wear masks. That would look sick, actually. But the people need to see you gorgeous faces!"

The atmosphere grew tense.

After a brief huddle, Mads addressed Rentoth, "We need to think about it."

"You have until tomorrow, 5 PM. The hotel rooms are yours for a couple more nights either way. But we need your decision quickly. We can't wait too long."

Bandit leaned forward, "You need to tell us what really happens at these events. Why the masks? Why call them 'Militia Events'?"

Rentoth's demeanor hardened. "Elderise is deteriorating. The Slums are poor, the top floors are

rich, but the middle... the middle harbors ambitions. Aspirations. They desire change. Progress. That's dangerous. We believe they should be more... grateful. They need reminding of their fortune, how close they are to real misery. And we want the Slums to serve as that reminder. Because to Slummers like you, the mid-levels are kings and queens. I mean... look at this club. You probably think it's a palace or something... to me, it's a shit hole."

Bandit remained puzzled. "So, you basically want us to agitate the Slums and help foment some kind of coup? Incite riots and stuff? This is insane, man."

"Well, let me decide what's insane and what's not, okay?"

"And why all the secrecy? What if we get arrested?"

"You won't get arrested in the Slums."

"It happens, dude, and you know it. It's happened to me before!"

Mads interjected, "Also... this whole 'the middle is getting too ambitious' reasoning feels off to me. You're telling us you're doing all this just to tame the mid-levelers?"

"Listen, smart guy, there's a lot more of them than there are of us. And we like it way up there. I know you're used to smelling urine and gasoline down below, but I like to smell the breeze when I wake up. I like to see the horizon when I eat my eggs *"a la coque"*.

They don't get that here. And they used to be fine with it. But now?!? Now they want what I have. What he has." Rentoth pointed at Zero. "And we don't wanna give it to them. So, we're going to remind them of how fortunate they are. But we gotta make it look like it comes from below. Optics, you know..."

Mads couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Why us?"

"Because you're good. Your songs are compelling. You're focused. I can hear the pain in your music. You want it. And you've got this ding dong over there." He gestured to Bandit. "He's a star. You'll draw crowds. You scratch our back, we scratch yours. You guys could become folk heroes even. If this works, the Slums will worship you."

"And the Mids will wanna kill us." Added Bandit.

The band exchanged uneasy glances.

Vera spoke next. "Well, thanks for your honesty, I guess. We'll return to our rooms and discuss."

Rentoth placed his empty glass on the shelf. "Great, let's meet here at 5 tomorrow then. Oh, and we've had our crew bring your gear down to your car. We assigned one of Zero's armed guards to watch over it, just in case someone tried to steal it."

"An armed guard? Dude what the fuck. I don't want someone with guns near our shit!" Vera was pissed.

"Relax lady. I just wanted to make sure no one was gonna mess with your stuff. Especially since I'm gonna start paying for it myself very soon."

"We haven't said yes yet!", said Bandit as Rentoth and Zero were headed towards the door.

Rentoth turned back, smiling: "But you will."

08. END OF THE WORLD

EMPIRE FALL

By the time they got back to the hotel, the band was deep in a heated argument. Bandit was adamant—they couldn't afford to pass on this opportunity. To him, chances to leave the Slums didn't come to people like him. He didn't give a shit about the Middle Class. If you had a roof over your head, a job, some time off, and could feed your family? You were rich.

Mads and Vera felt differently. They *came* from up there. Vera's brother lived on the Upper Levels. And if there was any chance Aksel—Mads' long-lost brother — was still alive, it stood to reason he had made it out too. The idea of becoming the face of a radical, rebellious, and *illegal* movement terrified them.

But Vera saw the appeal.

"Maybe we play ball for a year or two," she reasoned. "Then we break free. Fame is power. Money is power. And right now, we have neither. I'm not even sure it's possible to make it organically, not without help. Has it

ever happened? I doubt it. It might literally be impossible to build a career on our own."

Mads wasn't angry at them. He was angry because she was right. The band had no leverage. Without Rentoth's backing, their ceiling would be barely higher than the rooftops of the Slums. But if they took the deal... they'd be signing a pact with the devil. All bets would be off.

"Fuck. I don't know what to do," he said, pacing. "Is it even okay to admit that I'm scared? Are we gonna become terrorists now? Get arrested? Go to jail? Is Rentoth gonna help us then? This is some serious shit. I just wanna make music..."

Bandit stepped in, grabbed Mads gently by the cheeks, locked eyes with him.

"Look at what we've done in just a few months. Vera's right. None of us are *comfortable* with this. But maybe we just play ball until we gain leverage. Once we're more established, we can distance ourselves from Rentoth, from Zero, from all of it. I know they're dangerous. But this... this is a shot we can't afford to refuse."

Vera jumped in, firm now. "If we play this right, we'll have more control than they do. Eventually."

Mads and Bandit stared at her.

"Think about it. If we become the *face* of this Militia...

We can steer the movement. Shape it however we want. If we build a following, they'll listen to *us*—not Rentoth."

Lightbulb.

Bandit's mind was racing. "You're so right. Whatever plans Rentoth has for the Militia and Elderise? We don't have to follow them. We just nod along for now. Do what we do best: write great songs. Grow. And then..."

"...And then we're free," Vera said, finishing his thought.

Mads took a long beat.

"You're both right. If we take the deal, and we focus on building the band the right way... we'll eventually have a say. We'll be able to push—or *not* push—whatever agenda we choose. But if we don't take it... we never matter. And we never get free. I can't believe I'm saying this, but... we have to do it."

The decision was unanimous.

It was 4 a.m. Much to Bandit's dismay, no bars were open. "It's fine," Vera said, yawning. "We're beat anyway." They popped open the overpriced bottle of room service champagne in Bandit's suite—"Rentoth's paying anyway"—and toasted. The hotel room felt surreal: plush carpeting, complimentary toiletries neatly placed on a marble countertop, a

stunning view of glittering city lights through sheer curtains—luxuries completely alien to them. They sat cross-legged on the floor, half-drunk and stunned at what they'd accomplished, feeling worlds away from the cramped shacks they called home. This moment would stay with them forever. There's something sacred about firsts. Your first love. The first time you eat the food that becomes your favorite. Or the first time you sign a record deal. The people you share that moment with? You'll always be connected. It's an unbreakable, immaterial bond. Vera, Bandit, and Mads didn't realize how deep that bond would run yet.

MADS

Back in his room, Mads felt the adrenaline wearing off, replaced by a jittery anxiety.

How was he going to tell his parents? Would they freak out? Kick him out? Would he have to quit his job? He pictured his mom's disappointed eyes—the same look she gave Aksel whenever he messed up. He swallowed hard. *That won't be me.*

But beneath the anxiety... something else. A strange, buoyant excitement.

He knew Bandit—especially Bandit—might need to

be reined in. But that was to be expected. He'd always been good at rationalizing, at making sense of chaos. He saw what giving up had done to his father. That *wouldn't* be him.

If this works, maybe I can move them out of the Slums. Maybe I'll find Aksel. If he's alive.

That thought alone made the risk worth it.

He brushed his teeth, pulled on his neatly folded pajamas, shut off the lights, and went to sleep—heart racing, but hopeful.

VERA

Vera couldn't sit still. The second her door shut, she dropped to the floor and banged out a quick set of push-ups. Then another. Of course she brought her resistance bands. Traveling was no excuse to let fitness slide.

Her thoughts swirled as she trained. The opportunity. The danger. The *thrill*.

She imagined running into her brother. Maybe he'd see her name on a billboard one day. Maybe he'd finally come down to see her play.

And maybe, just maybe, she'd get a chance to look her uncle in the eye again.

See what I've become, asshole? Huh? How does it feel to

know I'm more successful than you ever were?

She knew she was being irrational. After all these years, why should she care what he thought? Yet somehow, she still did. The anger propelled her through the final brutal set. Afterward, she stretched, breathed deep, and let it all go.

Shower. Bed. Night night.

BANDIT

After Mads and Vera left, Bandit immediately reached for one of the cartridges of Flux he'd stashed in his bag. He downed it in a long, practiced inhale.

His adrenaline was still pumping. He started texting the girls he'd met after the showcase, seeing who might be down to come over.

He couldn't help but grin.

An orphan from the Slums. Signing a record deal.

When does that ever happen?

He felt like the man. Untouchable.

But the smarter, quieter part of his brain whispered:
You haven't done shit yet. And you didn't do this alone.

He loved Vera and Mads. Deeply. And he *knew* how dangerous this could get. He'd been to those Militia events. He hadn't lied to them. They knew what they were getting into. But still... he felt protective.

Responsible.

The high dulled the weight of that guilt. A girl replied.
She was coming over.
She knocked on the door.
He'd get very little sleep tonight.

EMPIRE FALL

Late the next morning, as agreed, Bandit texted the Rentoth-EF group chat:

"Hey hey douchebag. We're in."

Rentoth replied instantly:

"That's great news! Let's meet to sign the deal—then we party. Zero and I went home. Couldn't stand staying in this two-star dump of a level any longer. I'll text you the address and time. Level 18. My crew will keep an eye on your gear.

Also, I'm sending you to a tailor I know to get some proper clothes for tonight. You gotta dress nice for this one. Follow his lead.

It'll be a night to remember. See you tonight."

Vera raised an eyebrow at her phone.

Wait... did he just say he picked out clothes for us? What are we, a boy band?

It'd turn out to be a bit more intense than that.

09. POSSESSED

VERA

Up at 7 AM, she hit the hotel fitness room, then texted Mads: "Will you wake Bandit up? I'm still wrapping up here, and I'm pretty sure he's still asleep." She showered, got dressed, and was out the door by 9. They had to be at the tailor's by 10:30, and Bandit insisted on eating breakfast at the hotel beforehand ("free protein!").

MADS

After checking emails and fulfilling a few orders from their online merch store (his mom had offered to send the packages while Mads was away), Mads reviewed the tracks he'd been working on and made a few adjustments, coffee in hand. He couldn't believe there was a coffee maker in his room—or a fridge stocked with actual milk!

Even here, just like back home in the Slums, Mads loved to wake up early and work on tracks, ideas, and

mixes. No distractions. No noise. A clear head. Perfect setting.

After calling Bandit's room (texting would definitely not wake him up), he took a quick shower and got ready.

BANDIT

After getting Mads' call, he noticed the girl who'd spent most of the night had already left. No idea when. Empty Flux cartridges littered the floor, and a half-empty bottle of bourbon sat on the nightstand. Rentoth's dime—who gives a shit?

EMPIRE FALL

The band met up on time and enjoyed a delicious breakfast together—real eggs, crispy bacon (though not for Mads, vegan of course), and fresh-pressed orange juice. Vera and Mads reminisced about their earlier days eating like this regularly, while Bandit marveled at how good everything tasted. "OJ in the Slums is literal cat piss. Burns my insides. With this fresh-pressed stuff, I can actually feel the nutrients entering my body. I could get used to this." Vera leaned back and shot Bandit a mischievous

smile. "So B, tell me... I think I heard some strange noises from your room last night. Did you have a visitor?"

Bandit blushed. "Oh yeah, I mean... I did, heheh. One of the girls from the party came by, and we had a good time. But wait... did you, like, hear everything?"

"Every word," Vera teased.

Mads piled on, grinning. "Same here."

Bandit covered his face in embarrassment. "Oh my god, guys, I'm so sorry! I was... lost in the moment, I guess? I didn't realize the walls were so thin."

"It's all good, my friend," Mads laughed, tapping him reassuringly on the back.

"Glad you had fun."

Their bond was deepening. They were beginning to feel like family. Were they different? Yes. Could they drive each other crazy? Also yes. And it would get far, far worse—but also better.

A car was waiting for them outside the hotel, whisking them away to Rentoth's tailor. The tailor turned out to be as insufferable as the man himself. Situated in a sleek, minimalist boutique far removed from the gritty charm they knew, he circled the band, appraising each of them with practiced disdain.

"Black suits, impeccably tailored. Sharp lines. Elegant yet authoritative," the tailor recited monotonously. "The lady will wear a blazer—fitted precisely. Confidence is key. I expect perfection tonight."

Bandit rolled his eyes. "Seriously? We're gonna look like investment bankers."

Vera scowled, tugging irritably at the sleeve of the blazer thrust upon her. "I hate this... But damn, I do look hot." She nodded approvingly at her reflection.

Mads adjusted his cufflinks awkwardly. "We look like we're going to court for fraud, not a party."

Bandit chuckled darkly. "Maybe that's not far off."

The tailor cleared his throat pointedly. "Less complaining, more compliance. This isn't a negotiation. Mr. Rentoth's orders."

Vera muttered under her breath, "Rentoth can choke on his cufflinks."

Still, they complied. Dressing in tense silence, the awkward excitement was palpable, punctuated occasionally by snarky remarks and bitter laughs. Each felt a strange, intoxicating thrill beneath their discomfort.

Fully dressed, they stood awkwardly in front of a floor-length mirror. Bandit finally broke the silence. "We clean up nice. Look at my handsome best friends!" He tapped them both lightly on the

shoulder. "Alright, let's go get sacrificed!"

Vera snorted, smirking at Bandit's reflection. "Not funny!"

With one final glance in the mirror, each silently questioning what exactly they were stepping into, they headed for the waiting car bound for Level 18.

EMPIRE FALL

Level 18 was surreal. The towering structure loomed above them, bathed in a crimson hue that pulsed rhythmically, almost as if the building itself had a heartbeat. Bandit tugged awkwardly at his crisp, tight collar.

"You look perfect," Rentoth greeted them smoothly at the entrance, silver hair shining eerily under the red glow. His eyes lingered on each of them, satisfied yet calculating. "Tonight matters. Don't embarrass me."

Inside, the space unfolded like a dark cathedral. Candlelight danced on stone walls etched with strange, ominous symbols, and shadows flickered as masked figures drifted silently about, draped in luxury that screamed danger. The air was thick with incense—cloying, seductive, oppressive.

Mads leaned close to Bandit. "This isn't a fucking

party. This looks like a religious mass or something." Bandit's reply was a tight smile. "I've seen something similar at Militia events, but nothing this... intense." Rentoth overheard, stepping in calmly. "Relax. It's theater. Don't take it too literally."

As the trio moved deeper inside, an imposing figure in a gilded mask took the stage. His resonant voice filled the hall with themes of rebellion, ambition, power—words designed to stir the soul and twist the gut. Bandit's stomach churned, adrenaline mingling uneasily with the Flux he'd discreetly inhaled earlier. Rentoth leaned toward them, voice low yet sharp. "It's your turn."

Vera blinked hard, disbelief etched clearly on her face. "Our turn? What are you talking about?"

"You didn't come to watch. Tonight, you take the vow." Rentoth's voice was deceptively casual. "It's symbolic but essential. Everyone here has done it."

Mads' jaw tightened. "This is more than what we signed up for."

Rentoth's demeanor shifted subtly, steel beneath silk. "No. This is exactly what you signed up for. No vow, no deal."

Bandit hesitated, glancing at Vera. Her eyes burned with conflicted determination; his pulse quickened. They'd crossed a line, a threshold beyond which there

was no turning back. His pride and ambition roared louder than his doubt. "Let's do it," he said quietly.

Vera nodded slowly. Thoughts of her uncle's dismissive smirk and her selfish brother twisted through her heart, fueling her resolve. "Fine."

Mads stood rooted, his brother Aksel's spirit whispering warnings in his ear. He looked at his friends, felt their desperation mirroring his own. "Let's just get this over with," he said finally, voice barely above a whisper.

They stepped into the spotlight, candles flickering around them. A masked figure in ancient-looking robes solemnly addressed them:

"Do you swear to dedicate yourselves, body and spirit, to the Militia—to rise from obscurity and seize greatness at any cost?"

Bandit spoke first, his voice defiant but strained. He could still taste the Flux on his breath. Deep down, he knew he wasn't just speaking for himself—he was dragging his friends into this too. But this was the only path he could see. "I do."

Vera followed. Her throat was tight, but her voice was steady. She thought of her uncle, of being erased from her family's story, and of the chance to rewrite it all. "I do," she said, more for herself than anyone else. All eyes shifted to Mads. He hesitated. Aksel's face

flashed in his mind—then his mother's, then Emma's. He felt like he was betraying all of them. This vow wasn't just words; it was a line. And once he crossed it, there was no going back. His voice came out low, uncertain. "I do."

The masked figure raised his hands.

"Now repeat the ancient words after me. Once you say them aloud, you are bound to our cause forever."

"IZE WAID SEH."

The three exchanged uneasy glances. Then, together:

"IZE WAID SEH!"

Cheers erupted around them, thunderous and hollow. None of them smiled.

The somber atmosphere quickly shifted into hedonistic revelry.

In the shadows, Rentoth and Zero observed silently.

"They bought it," Zero murmured, taking a slow drag from his cigar. "But can we trust their loyalty?"

Rentoth's eyes narrowed coldly. "We don't need trust. Ambition is their leash now. They're already possessed by their hunger. They think they're free—but they're ours."

Zero exhaled slowly, watching the band. "What happens when they realize it?"

Rentoth smirked, unbothered. "By then, they'll have already done exactly what we need them to."

Back amidst the revelry, Vera, Bandit, and Mads sat together, needing to stay close among the weirdness around them.

Mads asked, "Do you guys know what we even said? I don't know what language that was."

"No clue," said Vera.

"We should really start being more careful," added Mads.

Bandit said, "Careful isn't how we got here, guys," trying to reassure his friends... and himself.

Rentoth soon joined and explained that IZE WAID SEH was the creed of the Militia. It was written in the Ancient Elderise language, one that had been dead for millennia. The meaning? *Darkness is my light*.

Rentoth jumped on a table and demanded the room's attention. He spoke of rebellion and faith and judgment day. He said Empire Fall was now an intricate part of the Militia, and that Bandit, Vera, and Mads were to be granted immunity for whatever trouble they would run into in the Slums and the Mid Levels. He concluded by shouting, "The Militia Rises!"

Shocked by the evening, and not really knowing what had just happened, the band went back to their rooms soon after. Bandit didn't feel like texting anybody. They all slept in Mads' room, needing to stay close. What had just happened felt so foreign to them.

The next day, when they finally got back to the Slums, they felt like they had aged ten years on that trip. They now had meetings set up with accountants, money guys, touring agents, and visual artists. The price they had paid for this opportunity seemed more than fair. For now.

10. AntiDivine_1

EMPIRE FALL

Back in the Slums, things moved quickly. Rentoth and Zero sent the band a contract, which they signed without hesitation (no lawyers in the Slums). Mads received the money fast. He still had a bank account—another rare Slum feat—from his time in the upper levels. Vera had one too, but the band trusted Mads to handle the finances. They received an advance of 50,000 Sols. A fortune in the Slums, but a modest sum by upper-level standards. They had to be smart. Mads, always the thinker, had a few directives: “No new gear, no crazy clothes... I don’t even think we should quit our jobs for the time being. Let’s be smart with this. Let’s invest in merch and stuff. Maybe a couple plug-ins, but that’s it.” They agreed.

Over the next couple of months, the band wrote more songs and played shows in the Slums that kept getting more packed. Word about Empire Fall spread

fast. People even started traveling down from the upper levels to see them. The band consistently sold out their limited cassette pressings. Mads and Vera began helping their families with their modest earnings.

Their bond was deepening.

Bandit stayed exceptionally focused—working on his craft, studying the art of songwriting with his bandmates, reading books, watching films.

“Maybe I’ll stop being a dumbass,” he said one day at rehearsal.

“Not a chance,” Vera shot back, half-kidding.

His Flux use had become a “don’t ask, don’t tell” situation. Mostly at night, to unwind. He was still dealing, but people were starting to recognize him. He knew he had to stop soon, but couldn’t afford to just yet.

Mads, always thinking ahead, was getting frustrated with their live setup. He had an idea.

“Do you guys think we should get some other musicians to help us thicken the sound on stage? I hate relying on backing tracks. Maybe we could ask a couple friends? Imagine a second guitar player, a bassist, maybe some keys/synths/laptop guys... everything played and sung live. That could be epic.

I hate all these backing track bands. This could give us an edge."

"Oh dude, I'd love that! But... I don't know how I feel about bringing other people into this weird mess we got ourselves into. Also—is Rentoth even gonna let us do that?"

"Fuck what Rentoth thinks!" Bandit stood up from the couch, fired up. "I say we make them anonymous. We put masks on them. Everyone at these Militia events is gonna wear masks anyway. That way we protect them. Plus, it'll look sick as fuck. Us with a bunch of masked degenerates headbanging?!! Woohoo! Pandemonium! Cataclysmic shit!"

Vera and Mads nodded, intrigued.

Vera lit up.

"My friend Sophie is a pretty dope keys player. She can sing too. You guys met her a couple times."

"Oh yeah, she's good," Mads said, his head already spinning with ideas. "Do we know anyone else? I don't... but we can run ads and ask around."

Within a week, they had recruited Sophie (keys/backing vocals), Riker (bass), and Roman (second guitar). All were ecstatic to join, even after being told they were hired guns—just for the live show. 100 Sols a night wasn't great, but it beat any other job in the Slums.

The Rentoth/Militia stuff didn't seem to faze them, even after the band warned them how weird it might get.

You don't get out of the Slums. Ever. These new live members were willing to risk everything for the chance.

Mads, Bandit, and Vera still hadn't found their "laptop guy." That role required serious technical chops—almost like a second musical director (after Mads, of course). No one they'd auditioned nailed it. Mads knew who would be perfect. If he was still alive. Aksel.

The first rehearsal as a six-piece was wild. The songs sounded even more dangerous. The energy between the members was electric.

The masks were ominous and projected the exact feeling Mads was after—"anything could happen on stage." Vera and Bandit fed off the chaos, jumping around like maniacs. Sophie was not only a proficient keyboardist and backing vocalist—she could scream her ass off. A perfect support for Bandit when vocal lines overlapped.

Roman and Riker went as hard as Vera, headbanging in sync.

And they were tight. Really tight. Everyone could play. Everyone had frustration to burn.

Perfect combo.

About a week after that rehearsal, Bandit had an idea during one of his Flux-fueled creative sessions.

He waited until the next day to tell the others.

“What if we called the masked guys ‘Militants’? And gave them numbers? Like, technically, we’d be Militants 1, 2, and 3, right? Then we call them 4, 5, and 6. We add an S in front, for ‘Slums.’ So Roman becomes S004, Riker is S005, Sophie is S006?”

They loved it. The flair, the anonymity—it all fit Empire Fall’s vibe. With one caveat: Sophie wrinkled her nose. “Can I be S007 instead of S006? Seven’s my lucky number.”

Bandit blinked. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “Always has been. I just... don’t vibe with six.”

Vera shrugged. “Fine by me.”

Bandit smirked. “Cool. We’ll save S006 for our missing laptop guy, then.”

Rentoth, surprisingly, was into the idea. To him, it seemed like the band was embracing the “Militia” concept—folding it into their lore. He didn’t realize what Bandit was really doing.

No one did.

He was getting sharp. Even for a druggie.

A few weeks later, Empire Fall played their first Militia Event.

Huge warehouse in the Slums. Probably a couple thousand people. Empire Fall had never played for more than a hundred.

Masked people—clearly from the upper levels—were everywhere. Slummers too.

Were they here for the band? For the politics? Because there was nothing else to do? Yes. All that.

Dark, gothic music blasted through the speakers. The vibe was less political gathering, more decadent underground rave. A few rooms had people talking politics, others were filled with drums, sex, noise.

Decadence. Opulence and poverty, crashing against nature.

Vera gathered the troops backstage. They huddled like a sports team.

“Guys. Let’s ignore the weirdness. This is our shot to show what we’re capable of. Fuck Rentoth—” (he was standing behind her and cracked a smile) “—fuck everything but US. Do your part. And don’t forget to have fun.”

Bandit nodded silently.

Empire Fall blew the roof off.

The energy was primal. The crowd roared after

every song. They had them.

When the masked Militants took the stage with them, the crowd's curiosity spiked. People murmured, pointed. Phones came out.

Who were they? Were they part of the Militia? Was this a statement or a gimmick?

The mystery only made it more thrilling.

Before the final track, Bandit stepped up to the mic.

"We are Empire Fall. We are the Militia. No one else is. Don't believe anything you hear. These," he gestured to the masked players behind him, "are the TRUE MILITANTS. Not these rich assholes trying to tell us how to rebel."

Then he turned to Rentoth, standing near the stage.

"I have the mic and you don't. Never forget that."

He grinned. "This last one is called *AntiDivine*, and it's dedicated to fuckhead Rentoth."

The crowd exploded.

Mads blinked, stunned. Vera let out a short, sharp laugh—half thrill, half panic.

They hadn't planned that.

But damn... it felt good.

Rentoth just smiled.

Look at this little guy, he thought. Maybe I underestimated him.

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.

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.

13. Unholy Grace

EMPIRE FALL

He could smell her. It was Vera. Mads was probably here too.

They were going to see the Flux cartridge on the floor. He'd just gotten caught red-handed.

Still high, Bandit tried to explain and justify why he'd used. His voice was slow, syrupy, half-defeated.

"I'm so sorry, guys. It's just like... sometimes my anxiety literally chokes me from the inside. Flux—it helps. But I don't use it like before—"

Vera cut him off.

"It's okay, B. We're here. We love you. Let's talk about this later. Get some sleep. Maybe in your bed, not on the couch."

Mads patted him on the back.

Bandit started crying. He didn't say anything.

Mads and Vera both hugged him and helped him to bed.

Tomorrow was another day.

When Bandit finally woke up, Mads was working on his laptop with headphones on. Vera wasn't there—probably downstairs in the hotel gym, getting her workout in.

Strangely, the vibe was peaceful.

Is this what it feels like to have a family?

Bandit worked up the courage to speak.

Mads pulled off one earcup and listened.

"It's okay," Mads said. "Vera and I... we've known for a while that you were still using. We don't like it. But as long as you keep it under control, we're fine with it."

He paused.

"Just take care of yourself, okay? We need you at your best."

Uncomfortable but touched, Bandit nodded and looked away.

Soon after Vera got back, they all headed home to the Slums.

They joked about the trip—Bandit talked about Sophie and Flux, and they all took jabs at Rentoth. They talked about songs and tossed around new ideas.

A family, indeed.

Oran

A few days later, it was time to meet Oran.

They went together after rehearsal. Bandit was reluctant.

When they arrived at the library, Oran spotted them immediately and stood to greet them. He was tall and handsome, with glasses and a thick head of curly brown hair. He wore a wool coat and a heavy scarf—indoors—which Bandit immediately disliked.

They ordered coffee at the small stand outside the building. Oran paid.

Inside, they sat at one of the massive, graffiti-tagged wooden tables.

The place was eerie—a perfect metaphor for the Slums.

Once, this library had been a temple of knowledge: science, history, philosophy. Now? Just rows of empty shelves, syringes on the floor, and the occasional dead body. One turned up a couple times a year. Other than that? A great place to read.

Oran led the conversation.

“Guys, I’m a big fan. I was at the Militia event because I’ve been trying to figure out what the hell

Rentoth's doing—agitating the Slums like that. To what end? What's his actual goal? When they announced the band, I thought you were going to be a bunch of puppets, parroting his message. So you can imagine my surprise when you basically told him to go fuck himself in front of two thousand people."

Mads smiled.

"Well, thank you. Bandit was the mastermind behind that little moment on stage. We didn't even know he was going to say that. But the reaction? Undeniable." He glanced at Bandit.

"Also... we might have a little bit of insight into what Rentoth's actually trying to do. He told us. Flat-out." While Mads and Vera brought Oran up to speed, Bandit barely spoke.

He just stared at his phone.

Oran noticed. He tried to break the ice.

"Really loved what you did on stage, man. It took guts."

"Cool," Bandit replied, without making eye contact.

Oran moved on.

He had a bigger point to make.

"We at the SRF believe Elderise is at a breaking point. The rich are too rich, the Slums are too poor. We need the Authority to change things—radically. But they won't. And if you read our history—"

Bandit stood up.

He locked eyes with Oran, now just inches from his face.

“We don’t give a fuck about Elderise’s history. And I *sure* don’t give a fuck about your cause. I see how you talk. I see how you dress. You’ve got a mid- or high-level education. Your family’s probably loaded. Must be nice—to have political opinions while we, the Slummers, fight not to starve. Now three kids from down here finally have a shot, and you show up like some vulture in a scarf, trying to sink your claws in?! Nah. We’re not Rentoth’s lackeys—but we’re not gonna be yours either. I’ll be outside. I gotta make a call.”

Mads blinked, stunned by the sudden heat.

Vera didn’t move. She knew Bandit too well to be surprised.

But Oran wasn’t going to let Bandit big-time him.

He stood up and grabbed Bandit’s arm.

Bandit turned, surprised.

“Dude. Don’t fucking touch me.”

Oran let go. But he wasn’t done—not by a long shot.

“Listen, man. You’re right. I do come from money. And maybe that’s *exactly* why I know the system’s broken. I know the rules are different depending on where you’re born—and I want to change that. Don’t you?”

He took a breath.

"This stuff Rentoth is pulling? It's terrifying. And I can tell you agree. Just because I rub you the wrong way doesn't mean I'm wrong."

Vera grabbed Bandit's hand.

"B... you have our best interests at heart. We know that. But you pleaded for Mads and me to hear Rentoth out. So let's hear Oran out too, okay?"

Bandit closed his eyes, breathing deep.

The anger softened.

He sat back down.

"Okay. Speak." Oran nodded.

"Alright. You want specifics? Here's what I propose." He leaned forward, voice low and deliberate.

"You keep doing what you're doing. Grow your fanbase. Spread your music. Build your careers. Keep Rentoth and his friends happy. And when things start to really get crazy in the Slums—and they will, because you can't keep your foot on people's throats forever—we, the SRF, will take it from there." He looked at each of them, eyes sharp behind his glasses. "You don't have to become political mouthpieces. Behind the scenes, we'll let our allies—and yes, we have some in very high places—know that you're with us."

"So... you're asking us to basically keep doing the exact same thing?" Mads asked, confused.

Oran cracked a smile.

"Something like that."

Vera crossed her arms. "And what do *you* get out of it?"

Oran didn't blink.

"We keep expanding our network. Because to do what we're planning, we're going to need an army."

He turned to Bandit, who'd been watching him like a wolf watching a preacher.

"You're worried about your career," Oran said. "But if Rentoth gets his wish? No one will even *have* careers anymore."

That landed.

Oran sat back and let the silence stretch.

"You've seen what he's building. You've felt the pressure already—the candlelit vows, the masks, the posturing. Rentoth doesn't want a movement—he wants a *cult*. And he wants Empire Fall at the center of it, acting as his puppet. Doing his dirty work."

He let that hang in the air a beat longer.

"Just think about it. You don't owe me anything. But I think you know this train's going off the rails."

Bandit looked off into the distance for a while. Then he spoke.

"And this guy you're describing—this manipulative, evil, powerful oligarch, Rentoth... you sure you wanna antagonize him? You could start a war."

Oran smirked.

"The war's already started, kid. I'm just trying to win it." That shut everyone up.

As they all stood to leave, Mads turned to Oran one last time.

"And what about Zero? Aren't you worried about him?"

"Oh, I am," Oran said. "But we'll deal with him later. Rentoth might be dangerous—but Zero is on another level. I can't believe you actually met him. For now, let's just go step by step."

Bandit lingered, wanting to be crystal clear.

"Well... that's pretty fucking scary. Also—I just wanna make sure you understand we haven't made any decisions yet."

"Of course," Oran said, smiling slightly. "I'll be in touch in a few days. You can tell me where you stand then."

As Bandit, Vera, and Mads started walking home from the meeting, they furiously debated all the ways this could go wrong—trying to play both sides, trying to stay somewhat sane.

Then Bandit's phone buzzed. A text. From Rentoth.
So now you're meeting anarchist leaders behind my back, uh? Lol. Cute. I see all.

Bandit almost dropped his phone.

He looked around. No one he recognized.

How the fuck did Rentoth find out about Oran?