

# 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.*