

19. Bad1

EMPIRE FALL

The next day, Vera, Mads, and Bandit gathered for another scheduled writing session at the studio. The vibe was tense. Everyone picked up on it, but they all assumed it was because of their own shitty night. Vera spoke first. She told them everything about Jimmy and The Sworn—about his condo, about the vow.

Mads and Bandit exchanged uneasy looks. On the surface, they were glad for Vera—her brother had finally come down. But the rest of it? The timing made his visit feel suspicious.

Mads spoke first.

“This shadow order is starting to creep me out. Even the name. *The Sworn*. It just feels so ominous. Like a spider spinning a web. Why buy out artists? What’s the purpose?”

Bandit interjected.

“You know the purpose. Control. Moneyyyy. Money rules all. A sol for your soul.”

Mads nodded weakly. He wanted to tell them about Aksel so badly it hurt. His fists clenched under the desk, his mouth dry. Oran's warning kept replaying in his head:

Not a word. Not to your family. Not to your bandmates. Especially not to Bandit. You'd put your brother's life in jeopardy.

He wasn't an expert liar—never had been. His palms were sweaty, his eyes evasive, his body folding in on itself. Vera noticed something was off, but she chalked it up to the chaos they were all drowning in. Then Bandit, who had been brooding in the corner, stood abruptly. His voice was sharp, reckless.

"I've got a confession. Last night, I saw Rentoth. His idea. I won't get into details, but I'm convinced—we're being used. We're not special. We're pawns. We took their money, and they'll use us to destabilize the Slums and the lower-mids. And I'm convinced they've got people just like us on every level. The Militia? It's bullshit to them. Just one of a dozen clandestine fronts. Hell, for all we know, they've planted people inside the SRF too."

Vera cut in sharply.

"Who's *they*, though? Rentoth? Zero? The Sworn?"

"Yeah... though I don't think Rentoth and Zero are as close anymore. But forget Rentoth—he's just a rich

brat with daddy issues. The Sworn though... They scare the shit out of me. A clandestine order that goes back thousands of years? Sponsoring the culture *and* the counterculture? There's a missing piece. Something bigger we're not seeing yet."

He started pacing, eyes wild, voice quickening with feverish conviction.

"So what do we do? We reclaim the Militia. Make those events ours. Most of our buzz is coming from the Slums, the lower-mids, and the Militia shows, yeah? Then fuck it—*let's be* the Militia. Because fame is currency. It's leverage. If we just hole up here and make music? It won't be enough."

He stopped, breath heavy.

"Without fame or money, you're a target."

He sat back down. Something clicked in all of them. Secrets, different agendas—none of that mattered. Not right now.

Vera spoke first.

"Bandit... you're out of your mind. But maybe that's exactly what we need. We gotta keep working on our craft. Keep getting the word out. Use their dirty money to our advantage. And I agree—we make these Militia events ours. Maybe it's a facade to them, but that's a weakness we can exploit."

"A point of entry. Toward the belly of the beast,"

Bandit added, staring at his bandmates. A smirk spread across all their faces. They had a plan.

Maybe it was the adrenaline, maybe it was the guilt, but Mads couldn't hold it anymore. At least some of it. In that moment, he and Bandit weren't so different.

"I'm all in. But guys... I have something to confess. I've been talking to Oran."

Bandit barked a bitter laugh. "Why am I not surprised?"

Mads went on to explain his visit to the SRF hideout, justifying it by saying Oran thought he was the most receptive to his message, that he wanted to plead his case through him. He left the Aksel part out completely.

"I can't believe you lied to me!" Vera gave him a playful shove, though her strength still made it sting. Then she softened. "I get it though. We've got bigger fish to fry."

"Honestly, I kinda saw that coming anyway. I'm just glad you're telling us," Bandit added, pulling Mads into a hug. He grabbed Vera too, forming a tight huddle.

"But listen. Something bigger is going on. We can't trust anyone but ourselves. Vera's right—we focus on the music. Raise our profile until we can meet

these rich dickheads on their level. And the Militia? That's us now. We take it over. Rentoth, the SRF, the Sworn—they've got a million things to worry about. We don't. We've got one. Laser focus. I say we figure out how to set up the next Militia event ourselves."

They talked for hours about how to pull it off, agreeing they'd push Rentoth, force his hand if they had to. He knew the right people.

Vera shook her head in disbelief.

"I can't believe this asshole might end up being the lesser of all these evils."

Mads frowned.

"I don't know about that. My money's on Oran. I definitely identify with *The Cause* more than whatever this douche stands for. But yeah—Rentoth has his uses."

Vera rolled her eyes. "Listen to you! 'The Cause'! Spoken like a true SRF choir boy."

"Shut up!"

Bandit, pacing again, turned back to them.

"They all have their uses. They're cards we can play. But the trust circle stops here. It's us against them. All of them. March-or-die time. They think they can play us? We'll play them."

Mads and Vera didn't like to admit it, but Bandit

inspired them like no one else ever had. Wild, erratic, but when he was locked in—he was magnetic.

They had their plan. They knew where they were going. Whatever was in front of them, they'd be ready. Three nobodies from the Slums.

And so they went ahead. Always the realist, Mads pulled them back to reality:

"Alright. Now that we know how we're gonna save Elderise... should we work on that new song?"

"Yeah, we should." Bandit took out his phone, and opened the lyrics he wrote after his late-night trip upstairs.

"It's an angry one. But I think it's fire. It's called Bad1. Here's the hook:

*You wanna push me to the edge?
I'll throw you over
You wanna hit below the belt?
Watch me go lower
And I tried to be nice
But you're wasting my time
You're looking for a fight
You're getting it tonight
I'm gonna finish what you started
I'm the bad1 now "*

No one argued. The song felt perfect. Very on the nose. Vera let out a laugh.

“Damn B, who pissed you off?”

They’d taken *The Vow* once before, not even knowing what it meant. But this—this felt like the real vow. You wanna push *them* to the edge? They’ll throw you over.