

15. Calling Me Away_2

EMPIRE FALL

Vera had had a couple errands to run (guitar strings and stuff), so she got to the rehearsal space/makeshift studio a tad late. She was so excited to tell Bandit and Mads about Jimmy!

When she walked in, she found them discussing a new hook about the people they loved and missed. Bandit called it *Calling Me Away*. It felt so eerie that it stopped her in her tracks. The universe has a funny way of trying to tell you things, she thought.

"Hey V!" they both shouted at the same time.

"Bandit wrote some beautiful words to this track we've been working on."

She was excited to hear them but couldn't wait.

"OK, I can't wait to read them BUT I gotta tell you something first... Jimmy is coming down tonight! To see me and my dad!"

Mads couldn't believe it.

"Oh my God, V, this is amazing! How? Why? Tell me everything!"

He ran to hug her. So did Bandit. That felt good. Vera started getting teary-eyed.

"I just... I emailed him this a.m. I don't even have his phone number. I said I missed him. And he replied right away! He said he knew about Empire Fall! He saw some live videos, and people know about us up there. A few of them do at least. I'm euphoric!"

Waterworks. Bandit and Mads were so happy for her they forgot for a second that they both were gonna have to lie to the band about their plans for the night. Bandit, barely holding back tears, handed her his lyrics. It felt crazy—he'd written them before knowing Jimmy was coming.

*I made an effigy
Of everyone I miss
For when I'm staring down at the abyss
I reminisce
A phantom presence
Guiding me up to the top
But even there the waters are too rough
It's not enough*

*I built a maze out of memories
So I could keep them beside me
How could I ever feel lonely still?*

*I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away*

*A sea of faces, I remember every name
They sing a song of love and lust and shame
I'll take the blame*

*I built a maze out of memories
So I could keep them beside me
How could I ever feel lonely still?*

*I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away*

They're calling me away

*Yelling my name
Don't leave me here, please say it again
Yeah, I know, we all go through the same stuff
Some days are fine, but I think I've had enough
And everybody that could cheer me up
Is no longer with us*

*I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away
I hear the voice
Of those I lost along the way
'Long the way
Beyond the void
Their love is
Calling me way
Me away*

Vera was stunned.

"B... this is really, really great. Wow. I know you don't like to talk about your childhood at and before Orphanage162, and I'm gonna respect that, but

damn. These are really powerful."

"There's nothing to talk about really. My first memories are from that godforsaken place. They told me my parents were dead. I didn't have a name. Everyone said I picked one more suited for a dog. Which, by the way, is a joke that YOU made, Vera, when we first met. Not very original, and, might I add, pretty bully-like of you!"

Mads looked at Vera and jumped at the chance to seize the moment, now that Bandit seemed a little more open about his past.

"So tell us. How did you really meet Rentoth? We deserve to know now."

"Yeah B, we really do. And sorry for saying your name sounded like a dog's! I love dogs!"

Bandit sighed. He knew he owed them something. He wasn't about to tell them about tonight—but the rest? They deserved to know. Well... the relevant parts at least.

"Okay guys. Here goes. When I was a teenager, I got in all sorts of trouble. Bad stuff. Me and a couple other kids found a way to sneak into a faulty elevator north of Orphanage162. We found a printed access code one night while we were drunk on the Slum streets. We figured shit, let's try it out, see if we can sneak up in there..."

Mads stopped him.

"How did you circumvent the two-factor authentication? The code by itself is useless, it needs to be matched with one's ID..."

"Dude, will you let me finish? We waited for the night security team's shift to start and tried a few elevators. None worked, because of just that. We got chased down by a few security guards, but the night teams are always slow and tired. No one caught us. We heard rumors that some elevators didn't require the ID when they didn't get updated to the latest software for some reason. Don't ask why, I have no fucking clue. So we kept trying. Mind you, we were a bunch of HAMMERED kids. Dumb as fuck.

And then... I try another one. My friends are on the lookout. I'm the only one in. And of course... it works. I zoom all the way up. It opens. And I can't believe my eyes. Blinding city lights. It's like a whole new world up there. The people look different. They dress different. They all look like beautiful fit statues. The AIR feels different. I wandered around for a while until this dude, only older than me by a couple years, notices that I don't belong. It was Rentoth. We talked, we hung out, and I could tell he was meeting a slummer for the first time. It was entertaining to him. He got me dinner at this very

fancy place. He asked me where I lived. I told him. He gives me a couple hundred Sols before walking me back to the elevator. Since then, he's come down a few times, bought me a meal here and there, even got me out of trouble a couple times. But I hadn't seen him in at least a year when he pulled up behind us at the bar that one night."

Mads and Vera sat there silently.

"And that's the whole story?" she asked.

"Yes, I promise."

Mads decided to believe him. "Ok then. Well, thanks for being upfront. That story is kinda heartwarming!" Bandit's face tightened. "Still. Don't trust that guy. I've seen him do fucked up shit."

The band worked on *Calling Me Away* for the rest of the day. They did good.

Before the end of the session, they started talking about their evening plans. Vera had already talked about hers. Mads said he was gonna work on the track more. Lies. Bandit said he was gonna write lyrics for some other song. Also lies.

Mads walked Vera home, but veered off a block from her place, wanting to give her space to reunite with her brother. He turned the corner, then headed for the abandoned library.

Bandit texted Sophie that he needed to work on lyrics—same lie he told the band.
Then headed for Elevator340.

Three roads. Two lies and a truth.