

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.