

14. Calling Me Away_1

EMPIRE FALL

Vera, Mads, and Bandit knew they wanted the same things, fundamentally. The band was their priority. They were pulling in the same direction—a real team with a singular focus and undeniable chemistry. Sophie, Roman, and Riker were stars in their roles too. But the outside world was the problem. That's where they disagreed.

Mads liked Oran. Bandit recognized the opportunities that Rentoth brought. And Vera was willing to give them both the benefit of the doubt as long as it helped the band.

For now, these differences were still manageable. For now.

BANDIT

"How are you holding up?"

That night, Sophie reached out to Bandit. They talked about the meeting with Oran. She came over. She

shared how relieved she was that Vera approved of this *thing* between them. She also confessed that Bandit scared her a little—a brilliant but volatile mind, with deep-seated issues.

“Can’t argue with you there,” he said, grinning. That made her laugh.

They talked about philosophy and books and movies and how fucked up Elderise was. Bandit explained that he felt so much anger sometimes, he didn’t know where to put it. Songwriting helped the most. It gave him a sense of purpose, he said. Working out was a nice distant second. And Flux... well, Flux helped unplug his brain. Pass the time. That’s why he loved it so much. It made him feel light. At peace. Relaxed. Content.

He offered her some, and Sophie declined. She asked him to maybe abstain for one night. Bandit thought about it—and threw the cartridge away.

They kissed.

They went to bed together.

When he woke up in the middle of the night, Sophie was asleep beside him—one hand curled near her face, the slow rhythm of her breath filling the room like a lullaby.

Bandit stared at the ceiling. He felt... good. Almost

too good.

And that scared the shit out of him.

A voice in his head whispered: *You'll ruin this. You always do.*

He didn't move. Just kept staring upward, frozen between peace and panic.

Then he noticed Rentoth had texted him a storm.

He opened the thread, scrolled for a second, and quickly closed it before he could read it all.

He shifted closer and wrapped his arm around Sophie, pulling her against his chest like an anchor.

I really like this girl, he thought.

Please let me not fuck this up.

VERA & MADS

That same night, Mads and Vera were hanging out at the Nakamura household. Emma, who looked up to her brother and Vera so much, was in total disbelief.

"I can't believe the SRF reached out to you guys! This is so exciting! My big brother the rockstar! They barely acknowledge its existence in school, but everyone knows they're a real thing."

Vera and Mads shared a concerned look. He put his arm around his sister, nudging her toward her room.

"Alright, don't you have homework to do? Let the

grown-ups talk."

"Lol, some grown-ups! You're barely older than me!" she said as she headed toward her room. "See you, V!"

"See you soon, Emma."

Vera waited till the door closed.

"Dude... how are we in this mess? I just want us to be able to have a career, you know? Why are all these people trying to fuck with our business?"

Mads had a pensive look.

"I don't know, V. But I'm definitely worried about it all. And Bandit... he scares me sometimes. But I somehow trust he's gonna figure a way out of this. His instincts are always on point, it's like knowing how to navigate all this stuff is in his blood or something. We just gotta make sure he doesn't lose the plot completely. His love/hate thing with Rentoth concerns me."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Maybe we should ask him how they actually met. He's always so evasive about it all."

"So true. Let's do that at rehearsal tomorrow."

BANDIT

In the morning, Sophie woke him up. She had to leave to take her little brother to school. They kissed

and hugged and said see you later.

They both had the kind of facial expression that says: *this could be something good*.

Something Bandit hadn't really felt in a long, long time.

Bandit finally mustered up the courage to look at Rentoth's message dump. He called him. To his surprise, Rentoth picked up the phone right away.

"Finally. You little fuckhead. Don't ever make me wait like this again."

"Good morning to you too, dickwad."

"You need to come see me. Alone. Tomorrow night. My place on the 99th floor. My assistant will pick you up at the entrance of Elevator340 in the Slums. It's the closest one to your piece-of-shit house. Gotta go."

He hung up.

Bandit didn't really know what hit him. But he knew he had to go.

And he wasn't sure he should tell the others.

MADS

After breakfast, Mads started working on a couple of track ideas. But his head wasn't in it. The rarest of occurrences for someone as organized and hardworking as Mads.

He had to admit it. The stress was getting to him. He kept thinking about Aksel and how much he wished he was around right now. He would be the perfect seventh member. The missing piece. And surely, he would know what to do with this entanglement the band was finding themselves in.

That's when Oran called.

Without even thinking about it, Mads picked up.

"Hey Mads. Thank you so much for coming yesterday. I was wondering if you guys had time to discuss my proposal?"

"Hey man. Not really, and to be honest we're all a little overwhelmed. Six months ago I was working at a factory doing music as a hobby, and now we feel like all these big entities are pulling us in different directions."

"I get that. I might not have been totally honest about how I got your number. But I can't discuss this over the phone. I think we should meet. Just you and I. How's tomorrow night, same spot?"

Mads was intrigued, his imagination running wild with theories.

"Okay, I guess. Can I tell the others, though? I hate secrets."

"I can't tell you why, but you really shouldn't. Don't tell your family either. Come alone. It'll be safer for

you and your friends.”

Mads agreed reluctantly.

“Sure thing. We have rehearsal until 8 PM. I can come after.”

“Great. Let’s say 10. See you then. Bye, Mads!”

Awesome.

Mads now had to hide the truth from Bandit—and from his closest friend in the entire world, Vera.

I kinda miss my old life right now. I was bored, but I wasn’t this stressed out.

VERA

On her way home from her morning run, Vera found herself missing her brother too.

She emailed him from her phone:

Hey J. I just wanna say I understand your choices. But I really miss you right now. I could use a big brother. I got so much to tell you.

–V

She put her phone in her back pocket and kept walking.

Soon, she felt a vibration on her butt cheek.

Could it be...?

Jimmy had already responded. She was stunned.

Hey V. I've been meaning to reach out. Sorry, it's been pretty hectic up here. My friend played me your band. I watched the bootleg live videos. You guys are incredible.

I know I owe you a visit. I was thinking of coming down tonight, hang out with you and Dad. What do you say?