10. I Believe_1

VERA

There he was. Jimmy, in the back of a bar in the Slums, sitting at a table with a drink in front of him.
He stood when he saw her. Thinner. Better clothes than anyone down here had a right to, and he'd tried to dress them down, and he'd gotten it slightly wrong: the boots were too new.
She was still shaking, but couldn't move.
She'd built him a grave. She had spent six months watching their father age faster in front of her, burdened by a type of loss that was becoming a bit too familiar to them.
Vera being who she was, she had done the work, she'd prepared herself for the possibility that her brother might be dead. Or that she might never know. And as much as it sucked, she was able to keep living her life with the pain.
The note that shook her world even more was still in her coat pocket. She'd read that one enough times too. The fold had gone soft as cloth.

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

Behind her, Bandit came through the door with blood dried from his nose to his jaw, with a grin that said I'm not sure you're gonna like this.
"Told you," he said. "Told you it was him."
Mads came in last and said nothing at all. He was floored, and worried for his best friend. He knew her better than anyone, and could feel the situation getting even more out of control by the minute.
Jimmy took a step toward her. Vera watched a hand come up flat between them, not yet realizing it was hers.
“Stop. Sit down”, she said.
He sat.
So did she.

JIMMY

He'd been building it since he was given his orders. Since the Cathedral.
Every night, he'd run it. The words. The pauses. Where his voice would break and where it would go flat. Which pieces of the truth to load in as ballast, because the whole thing floated better with weight in it. Zero had been specific about that. **I want you to mean it all.**
He had prepared for Bandit. For the Militia, for

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

interrogation, for a knife, for a room of hard men wanting proof. He had become a killer. He thought he was ready.

But sitting here, across the table from his sister who looked deeper into his eyes than anyone ever could, and who still hadn't said a word, he realized the magnitude of what he had done. There was now an ocean of distance between him and his little sister.

There was still blood under Jimmy's left thumbnail. He'd washed his hands in a puddle behind the warehouse, crouched in the dark with the bass still coming through the wall, and he hadn't gotten it all. He kept his hands under the table.

"You should've seen it," Bandit was saying. He hadn't sat down. Too wired, gesturing with a cartridge of Flux he hadn't opened yet. "Two of them. Sworn. They've got my arms, right, one of them cracks me right in the face —" he pointed at his own nose, proud of it "— and your brother pulls a gun and puts them both down. *_Both_* of them. Then he walks over to the one still moving and finishes him."

Vera didn't look away from Jimmy. Jimmy did the same. He knew everything hinged on this exact moment.

"He didn't have to do that," Bandit said. "I said I believed him, and I do, but I’m pretty confused. They

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

were his henchmen I thought. Whatever angle he's running, we should give him a chance to explain."
Her hands were on the table. Short nails, calluses across the fingertips of the left one, a nick on the knuckle that hadn't been there before. Guitar player's hands. He'd sat beside those hands for a thousand hours when they were kids — him on the piano, her working out something too hard for her, their mother singing over the top of both of them and their father laughing somewhere behind, always behind, always holding it down.
"Where's Dad living now?" he asked.
Vera's jaw moved just enough. "Why."
She'd made it not a question.
"Because I want to know," he said.
That was true. The trueness of it sat in his chest like something swallowed wrong.
"He's alive," she said. "That's what you get right now."
Then, quieter: "You told me you knew I'd reach out if it ever got really bad."
Jimmy said nothing.
"It got really bad."
Bandit finally sat. "V, come on. Let him explain. I'm not saying we should believe him, but we should definitely hear him out."

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

"Will you shut up? This here doesn't concern you. This is family. This is MY thing. I gotta process all this stuff, okay? And there's stuff you don't know, because you were too busy feeling sorry for yourself getting high like a fucking loser because your mommy didn't love you enough."

No retort. Bandit knew this anger wasn't really directed at him.

"Okay, I'll shut up. Do your thing. But I'm staying." He leaned back in silence.

"I left The Sworn," Jimmy said, and he let his voice do the thing he'd practiced, which was nothing. No push. "That part isn't a story. I'm not going back. There’s no version where I go back."

"No one leaves The Sworn. Not alive anyway." Vera said.

"I'm trying to be the exception."

"Then tell me. Why did you leave? Why the sudden change of heart?"

"Because of what they asked me to do." True.

"Details please."

"Because of who they asked me to do it to." Also true — grammatically, precisely, in a way she would never forgive if she ever got the tense right.

Vera reached into her coat. "I think it's pretty clear you would do anything to anyone as long as they

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

asked you to."
She set a folded piece of paper on the table. Didn't open it. Kept two fingers on it, the way you hold something down in wind.
"I got a note," she said.
Bandit looked at it. "What note?"
Neither of them answered him.
Jimmy looked at his sister's fingers on that fold and understood, with a kind of vertigo, that he had spent weeks preparing for a conversation that no longer existed.
"Vera—"
"Don't." Very quiet. Her eyes flicked to Bandit and back, half a second, and Jimmy watched her make a decision he would think about for a long time afterward. « Not here."
She put the note back in her pocket.
"Not in front of him."
Bandit laughed, uneasy. "Okay, that's — what is that? What's happening right now?"
"Family shit, like I said," Vera said. She let out a little smirk when she looked at Bandit and said: "You know how that goes better than anyone, I assume."
"Ouch," Bandit said.
Something in Jimmy's shoulders let go, and he was disgusted by how good it felt. The mission was alive.

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

She wasn't going to burn it in a bar in front of the man he'd been sent to own. Some clean, cold, working part of him logged that as an asset and moved on to the next problem.

The rest of him was doing something else entirely.

The rest of him was thinking about how he got here. How he joined The Sworn. About his condo on the twenty-second floor he'd never paid a Sol for, about the man who'd walked him through the paperwork he'd signed in blood with a hand on his shoulder, and about how nobody had ever once used the word debt out loud. But that was the icing. The other part was the cake. *If you give your life to The Sworn, your family will never want for anything again after you're gone. And we will never harm them. IZE WAID SEH.*

Outside, it had started to rain — the thin, greasy rain that came down through the vents on this level, the kind that never washed anything, just moved it around.

"So what happens now?" Bandit said.

Jimmy looked at his sister.

"That's up to her."

MADS

Mads hadn't said a word since he entered the bar.

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

He'd been doing what he always did, which was processing all the information.

A man walks up to Bandit and tells him the truth about his parents. Another man corners Rentoth in a bathroom and tells him his mother's killers disobeyed a direct Sworn order when they murdered her. Then a note turns up in Vera's coat with nobody's hand on it, telling her that Jimmy is one of those murderers. And finally, Jimmy turns up just at the right time. Add that to the fact that The Militia was basically being left alone in The Slums, its members free to live their lives like nothing had happened in Elderise. This all felt a little too coordinated. A little too perfect. Mads didn't know what it meant, but he knew it was big.

Aksel came back from the upper levels clean and unharmed. Oran had vanished. But Jimmy had gone deeper and further than any of them. And what he had done... Bandit and Rentoth didn't know it yet, but there was no coming back from that. He was beyond saving. So why was he here?

His two best friends in the world, Vera and Bandit, the two people he trusted more than family, were gonna be torn apart by the truth. Vera knew what Jimmy had done, but couldn't bring it up in front of Bandit yet. She needed to tell him, and fast.

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.

In a world of secrets and lies, the three of them couldn't have any with each other.
This was a matter of life and death.

© 2026 Empire Fall & EF Militia, all rights reserved.