

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 21

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CHAPTER 21

Merritt was walking into a trap, and he knew it. But if he didn't activate Belmont's trap, Torrence would. Private performance or not, Belmont had *something* planned. Merritt could see it in Belmont's unwavering, cocky smile. His only option was to try to get ahead of Belmont now while he had the benefit of time and protection.

His first move upon leaving the board meeting was to call Odell and ask her to add any threats against Torrence as an additional trigger for the fake news bomb. He hadn't wanted to name anyone other than himself. It would have revealed their importance to Belmont and put them at risk. But if the secret was already out, he'd do what it took to protect Torrence without holding back. He had nothing to lose except for the extra turnaround time it would take to make revisions. Because Odell's team had already moved onto other work, she'd told Merritt she'd need until seven in the evening to get the changes entered and the final confirmation email delivered.

But why had Belmont zeroed in on Torrence? Merritt and Torrence had a long history, but they hadn't spoken or seen each other in months. Anyone else would have assumed that he and Torrence weren't close enough friends to warrant using one as leverage against the other.

He needed to warn Torrence about Belmont. But five texts and two phone calls on his way to the headquarters parking lot brought him no answer. Why wouldn't Torrence just *talk* to him?

He'd have to go to Torrence's flat in person. Torrence might still refuse to let him in, but he'd crawl through a window or break down a door if that was what it took. Let Torrence be mad at him—let Torrence hate him—as long as he heard Merritt's warning.

Discreetly, he paged Chem Ops Squad 269 for backup. As a captain, he could have called in an entire company instead of a single squad, but he was already abusing his position by asking any soldier to assist him in a military capacity when there was no official military order in place. The squad he'd once led as sergeant was too loyal to say no to him even if he gave them an easy out. But Torrence's safety was on the line, and he wouldn't pull his punches. Belmont surely wasn't allowing himself to be constrained by ethics or protocol.

Ethical or not, the best he could do was warn his squad of the nature of their assignment. Their orders could potentially pit them against Belmont—a situation that could result in a treason charge if they threatened Belmont's safety or defied his orders. But Merritt wouldn't let the situation take that turn. He'd stay vigilant while issuing orders, and he'd protect his squad just as fiercely as they protected him.

Belmont was scheduled to be in meetings until six in the evening. With the poison trap project's deadline accelerated, Merritt couldn't get to Norwood any earlier than five. But at least he'd have an hour lead on Belmont.

He knew that he was the ultimate target, whether or not Belmont planned to go after Torrence. The threat against Torrence was bait to lure Merritt out into the open where he'd be less prepared and more vulnerable. But Belmont wouldn't expect Merritt to have the protection of a military squad.

As he rode through the main streets leading out of the military district flanked by his squad after five o'clock, Torrence's song played over and over in his head. Before, he'd only known the melody. Now for the first time, he heard it in his head with the lyrics Belmont had revealed to him. Of all the songs Torrence had written, that was the one that had always haunted Merritt, the one that made his throat feel tight whenever he thought too much about it.

They had been eighteen years old. Torrence had begun to shun Merritt in favor of romance with girls, and Merritt had numbed his wounded heart by signing up for perpetual duty. After Torrence had found out and confronted him, Merritt had lied that perpetual duty was basically the same as being a regular soldier aside from having to work a few extra hours.

Torrence had known better. He'd always had a keen interest in politics and knew exactly the level of freedom Merritt had opted to sacrifice. "You're smart enough that you could have found a way out of the military if you really wanted to," he'd said. "But instead, you decided to sign away your entire life to the same sphere—the same King—that would rather see all of us aces dead in the streets."

Merritt had tried to explain that Mercury wasn't the cruel leader Torrence imagined him to be, but his words had only driven a wedge further between them. It had been the longest time—the only time—they'd gone without speaking to each other, up until now.

For the following six months, Merritt had numbed himself with training and discipline while Torrence had buried himself in his music. As children and teenagers, Torrence had always found solace in Merritt's serene energy. But in the months after their confrontation, it seemed Merritt's presence had brought Torrence more anguish than comfort. Torrence had then turned to music—to that song—for relief. Merritt had only ever heard it muffled through walls and doors when Torrence had believed he was singing privately to himself.

Even the faintest hint of the melody gave Merritt chills. He wanted more than anything to hear the full song—but at the same time, it made his heart ache so badly that he wasn't sure if he could bear to hear it more clearly.

He shifted his attention back to the winding, unpaved road leading into sub-Norwood Park. After jumping a group of rocks in his path, he glanced over his shoulder to check on his squad. Nearest to him on his right was escaped West Sphere POW Sergeant Ellis, the wind whipping his dark, spiky undercut. Behind him was Wells, the slight young medic who'd all but gotten over his fear of blood since training under Merritt. A few feet past Wells, Privates Attrill and Page rode side by side.

Behind him to his left, Privates Oakley and Nicolet expertly dodged stalagmites and potholes. Bringing up the rear was Private Hoxie. In light of her poison blocker allergy, she wore a rare and expensive gas mask Merritt had cashed in another favor to get.

It felt good to be backed by the very same squad he'd once led as a sergeant. Chem Ops Captain Palmer had planned to send one of his low-performing sergeants to take over the squad after Merritt's promotions, but Merritt had instead put his spare time into extra training sessions with them until he'd felt confident in promoting former Private Ellis from within. Although they were reserved blue-tie soldiers who'd never reveal their emotion, Merritt knew his squad had appreciated his faith in them, and they returned it in kind.

The trip to Norwood was uneventful, but Merritt remained alert as he and his squad circled the block around Torrence's apartment. Several Elite Border Guard soldiers stood at attention in the distance. As a last resort, Merritt could potentially summon any of them for backup.

Merritt surveyed the grounds of Torrence's flat. Nothing looked out of place. He knew that Torrence, jumpy as he was, wouldn't take well to soldiers peering into his windows, so he motioned for his squad to stand back as he checked the windows himself.

The blinds were all shut. Merritt listened for any sign of movement coming from inside, but the grounds felt calm and still. Torrence had to be home. His motorcycle was parked out front, and it wouldn't have made sense for him to ride home from work, leave his bike, and then go elsewhere on foot.

When Torrence had first moved into the apartment, he'd cleared Merritt's thumbprint to open the front door. Merritt wasn't sure if he still had clearance; it had been months since he'd felt welcome to let himself into Torrence's home without warning.

He tried knocking on the door and ringing the bell. After a few minutes with no response, he flipped open the cover on the thumbprint panel and gave it a test.

The door unlocked. In the back of his mind, he felt a bit of happiness at the fact that Torrence hadn't gone so far as to lock him out of his house.

Cautiously, he eased the door open, checking the entryway before stepping inside. Nothing looked amiss. Torrence preferred to live lean, and other than a new computer setup in the corner, his sparsely

furnished apartment hadn't changed since the last time Merritt had been over. There were precious few areas where any intruder could successfully hide, and it wouldn't take long to do a basic search.

"Stand guard here," Merritt said to Ellis and his squad. He didn't want to startle Torrence with the unexpected military presence if it wasn't necessary.

"Yes, sir," Ellis replied, and Merritt entered the flat.

He gave the room a quick search. Behind a flimsy partition wall, he spotted a full size mattress on the floor with a Torrence-sized lump under the covers. Still on his guard, he approached and knelt beside the mattress. Torrence slept with his head underneath his blanket, but Merritt wished he could readily see his friend's face.

He forced himself to keep a cool head as he inched the blankets down to reveal the form beneath.

Torrence lay on his side with his eyes closed, facing away from Merritt. He appeared just as gaunt and pale as he had the last time Merritt had seen him, though thankfully not any worse. His breaths were a bit unsteady, and his eyelids twitched in sleep.

Gently, Merritt shook his shoulder. "Torrence," he whispered, his voice as soothing as he could make it.

Torrence didn't respond. Merritt gave him another shake, but he still didn't open his eyes. What was wrong with him? Why wasn't he responding?

"Torrence," Merritt whispered again. He patted Torrence's shoulder persistently. "Torrence, wake up."

Torrence gave a soft moan but didn't wake up. He trembled a bit, as if he was cold or in pain. Even after a harder, almost jolting shake, he remained asleep.

Either he was exceptionally tired or he was drugged.

Merritt spotted a small pill bottle lying on its side next to the mattress. He leaned over Torrence and reached out, but before he could grab it, Torrence's bony fingers closed around his wrist.

“Hey,” Torrence croaked, his eyes still closed. “What are you doing?”

“Torrence, it’s me,” Merritt said, surprised and relieved. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Torrence rolled over, eyes still closed, and pulled the blanket back up over his head. “Why?”

“I couldn’t wake you up.”

“You *did* wake me up.”

“It was really hard, though. I thought maybe you—”

“I took a sleeping pill,” Torrence grumbled. “Because I wanted to *sleep*.”

That was good news. Merritt reached again for the pill bottle at Torrence’s bedside, rolling it over and glancing at the label. “This is some pretty heavy stuff.”

“Couldn’t afford more painkillers. So all I can do is knock myself out for the bad spells.” Merritt could hear the strain in his voice, as if he was fighting back as much pain as he could handle.

“What do you need?” Merritt asked. “I can get it for you.”

“I just want to sleep.”

“If you need medicine, I can—”

“Merritt, don’t.” Torrence pulled the blanket closer around himself.

Merritt wished he could get Torrence to tell him why he was so adamant in his refusal of any kind of help, but he knew it wasn’t the time. Torrence was barely conscious enough to string words together, and Merritt had more pressing matters to deal with. He gave Torrence’s shoulder another shake through the blankets. “Torrence, just one more thing.”

Torrence grunted in response.

“Did you see Belmont yesterday? Did he ask you to give him a private performance?”

An affirmative grunt.

Merritt swallowed. “Did you agree to do it?”

Torrence pulled down the blanket just enough to reveal one sunken eye. “You think I’m stupid?” Then he pulled the blanket back up over his head.

Merritt felt the urge to hug the disgruntled lump under the blankets, but he held back, instead giving a smile that Torrence couldn’t see. Despite all of Merritt’s protective instincts, Torrence had always proven himself to make smart decisions even at his most desperate moments. He was better at watching his own back than Merritt had ever given him credit for.

But did it matter if Torrence had declined Belmont’s invitation? That wouldn’t stop Belmont from coming after him. *I know where he lives*. That was Belmont’s threat.

Merritt needed to meet with his squad. He hadn’t yet decided on his next move.

He stepped around Torrence’s mattress, peeking under the corner of the curtain covering the back window. The coast was clear. He checked the north and south windows—both clear. Past the curtains of the front-facing window, he could see his squad still standing at the ready.

He stepped out onto the landing, closing Torrence’s door behind him and turning to face Sergeant Ellis. But before he could ask a question or issue a command, a wave of motion to the north caught his attention.

Ellis followed his line of sight. “Looks like an EBG squad, sir.”

Ellis was right; it was the Elite Border Guard. But they were approaching too fast for their presence to feel benign.

Merritt’s eyes widened. He recognized the movements of the soldiers coming at them. “Code 12!” he shouted.

Despite the seemingly absurd order, every soldier in Merritt’s squad except the gas-mask-wearing Hoxie retrieved their SYN knockout blockers. With an ease that could only come from years of

practice, they injected their blockers intravenously and retrieved their weapons.

Hoxie scanned the area and took a startled step back. “Oh—shit....”

Merritt’s blood ran cold. Surrounding them and approaching from every angle was what appeared to be the full force of the region’s Elite Border Guard—no less than a thousand soldiers on battle motorcycles with weapons at the ready, led by five captains. Moments later, the distinct smell of the knockout drug SYN-12 filled the air.

“They’re fuckin’ attacking us?” Attrill cried.

“Stand down!” Ellis called into his phone intercom. “Sergeant Ellis, Chem Ops! Stand—”

“Ellis, stand down,” Merritt ordered.

Ellis gave Merritt a look of confusion.

“It’s no use,” Merritt said. “They’re probably acting on Belmont’s orders.” Gritting his teeth, he glanced at his soldiers. “They threw SYN. They want us unconscious, not dead. Don’t counter unless they attempt a kill. If you instigate an attack, they’ll arrest you for treason and throw you into the Shield Squad. I’m the one they’re after, so let me handle this.”

Something buzzed past his ear. A syringe dart. *Shit, they’re not joking around.*

Another syringe dart flew, aimed perfectly for Ellis’s neck. With lightning speed, Merritt caught it in midair inches before it could strike. He squirted a drop on his tie and sniffed it. “SYY-4,” he said to his squad.

“Those fuckers,” Ellis muttered under his breath.

The only time Merritt had ever encountered SYY-4 was during Archer’s poison project. The knockout poison was used exclusively by the Elite Border Guard, and only they had access to its blockers. SYY-4 served one purpose—for the Elite Border Guard to attack ally soldiers from other units that they considered to be engaging in acts of

rebellion. Since it was so rarely used, it was last on the list of Merritt's antitoxin treatments—still a few months away in Archer's schedule.

"Fan shields up," Merritt commanded. He whipped out a thin, collapsible shield from his pack, and his soldiers followed suit. He and his squad dodged and deflected the incoming syringe darts, but the stream of projectiles was never-ending, and the Elite Border Guard continued to advance from all sides.

Wells went down, followed by Oakley and Page. Then Attrill fell, and Nicolet fell a moment later. By the time the guard closed in, only Ellis and Hoxie remained standing beside Merritt.

The Elite Border Guard's Captain Ashland sat atop his motorcycle at the head of his unit, his poker face perfect as he stared Merritt down. Aiming his pistol at Merritt's heart, he said, "Surrender, Captain Merritt."

"Why did you attack my squad?" Merritt demanded, shield still in hand even though he knew it couldn't ward off the bullets of a thousand soldiers. "Whose orders are you following?"

A lone elite model motorcycle snaked out from within the crowd of soldiers. Belmont sat sidesaddle atop it, clearly for dramatic effect. He rode in a wide circle around Merritt and his squad, clucking his tongue at the soldiers who lay unconscious.

"Merritt won't surrender that easily," he said to Ashland after circling to the front. "You'll need to restrain him."

A throng of foot soldiers surrounded Merritt, their pistols trained on him. Fighting back would be pointless, but Merritt refused to hold up his hands in surrender even if all one thousand of them threatened to shoot.

He was grabbed and pushed to his knees. Someone pinned his arms behind him, and he felt the mouths of no less than four pistols pressed against his head.

"You two," Belmont said, gesturing carelessly toward Ellis and Hoxie. "Take your friends and go."

Merritt heard no movement behind him. He had his squad's loyalty even above the sphere's second in command. But he wouldn't let them sacrifice themselves. "Ellis. Hoxie. Do as you were ordered."

He heard the shuffling of bodies somewhere behind him, followed by retreating footsteps. He plastered on his poker face so Belmont wouldn't see his relief that his squad was being spared.

Belmont turned back to the soldiers holding Merritt. "Throw me his weapons and his phone."

Merritt felt his attackers unbuckling his packs and holsters before handing them to Belmont. Someone else pulled his phone out of his pocket and tossed it to Belmont as well. Belmont caught it and slid it into his own pocket. Then he climbed off his motorcycle and slowly approached, his dress shoes clacking across the hard pavement. One of the men pulled Merritt's head back by the hair, forcing him to look up at Belmont.

"Don't say you didn't ask for this," Belmont said.

Merritt glared up at Belmont. "You don't think this is a little excessive?"

"I'm not stupid, Merritt. If it takes a thousand soldiers to subdue you, I'll bring a thousand. I could have brought the entire army if I wanted. I could have turned your own unit against you."

Merritt forced a smile. "You must find me really threatening."

"Not at the moment," Belmont said, returning his smile. He reached out, grabbing Merritt by the chin. "You look sufficiently powerless right now."

Merritt's poker face held steady. "Looks can be deceiving."

"Oh? I beg to differ." Belmont retrieved a single syringe of MYGG-2 from his pack, lowering it until it was level with his crotch. Then, suggestively, he slid the shaft of the needle across Merritt's lower lip.

"Seriously?" Merritt asked, unimpressed, through still lips.

"Come on, Merritt. Have a sense of humor."

Merritt gave a slow, stone-faced blink.

Belmont's voice turned serious. "This is my sphere, Merritt. I earned my place in it. And I won't have you making a mess of everything I've worked for." He set a hand on top of Merritt's head. "Now, you and I can live peacefully together in this sphere, as long as you're willing to learn your place. You can do that, can't you?"

"I know my place. I'm a Chem Ops captain and perpetual duty soldier. I protect my sphere, its King, its citizens, and its soldiers. You need to stop trying to stand between me and my duty to our King."

"Did you think this was a negotiation?" Belmont asked in a biting tone. "Higgins is dead. I'm your general's boss now. Your entire military answers to *me*."

"Not if your order contradicts our King's. Not if you try to undermine our King."

"I'm giving you a simple choice, Merritt. You can learn your place and pledge that you'll show me the same obedience you show Mercury, and you and I can live in blissful, beautiful harmony. Or...." Belmont gestured toward a soldier behind him, who dismounted his motorcycle and retrieved a coil of rope from his pack. "We can take you for a little joyride."

Merritt made no move, his eyes still locked coldly on Belmont as he processed the threat. He knew what Belmont meant by "joyride." It was a common form of punishment used by low-level North Sphere drug dealers in which their target was tethered to the back of a motorcycle and dragged through the unpaved back alleys of the underground for hours—a ride no human could survive. The practice was barbaric—barely suitable for a blue-tie at all, let alone a blue-tie soldier whose training only allowed for precise, calculating, and necessary violence.

"Well?" Belmont asked.

Merritt remained unfazed. "Well, what?"

Belmont raised an eyebrow. "That's not the kind of attitude that'll get you option number one."

“My duty is to Damen Mercury. I’ll support and obey him without question. If your vision is the same as Mercury’s, then you’re right—we can live in harmony. But if you don’t support Mercury’s vision, then you’re not doing your job as Mercury’s right hand. And I’ll make no deals with you.”

Belmont clenched his fists; his mouth was a tight, thin line. Merritt felt the resistance, and he could tell with no ambiguity that Belmont didn’t *want* to follow through on his threat. Belmont only wanted the surrender.

“This is a big decision, honey,” Belmont said after a pause. “I’ll give you a minute to think it over.”

Merritt’s gaze didn’t waver.

Belmont waited in silence. Behind him, a few Elite Border Guard privates fidgeted as the uncomfortable moment dragged on.

Belmont glanced impatiently at his watch, a deep scowl on his face.

Merritt made no move, his eyes still locked on Belmont.

After a minute passed, Belmont finally asked, “What’s it going to be, Merritt?”

Eyes narrowed, Merritt replied, “I, Merritt, am a soldier of the Underground North, duty sworn to sphere and King. Damen Mercury is my King. My life is his to preserve and his to take.” Belmont’s nostrils flared, his lips tightening with anger, but Merritt only glared back at him harder. “My life is his property, and I grant him the power to use my life and my death to the benefit of our sphere.” He held Belmont’s gaze, unwavering in his conviction. “Live to serve my sphere, *die to serve my sphere.*”

Belmont gritted his teeth as if in frustration, but then his scowl slowly turned to a cruel half-smile. He took a step back, gesturing toward the Elite Border Guard private behind him. “Then I guess we’ll be going for a ride.”

The men holding Merritt yanked him up to his feet and dragged him toward the private’s motorcycle. He was shoved to his knees beside it, where one man pinned his wrists behind him and another tied

them with the rope. A few other soldiers tied down his arms and then his ankles.

Belmont watched, the smirk still on his face, as the soldiers fastened the rope from Merritt's ankles to the back of the motorcycle. "It's not too late to change your mind," he said. "Better to do it now while you're not covered in blood."

Merritt didn't reply. He could see the frustration growing in Belmont's eyes.

"You know what I think?" Belmont finally asked. "I think it's too lonely to go for a ride all by yourself. I wouldn't want you to be lonely, Merritt. Are you lonely?"

Merritt's heart pounded, but he made no movement.

"A road trip just isn't complete without your best friend riding along behind you. Right?"

Merritt felt the heat rising under his shirt, but he clung to his poker face with all his effort.

Belmont turned to the nearest Elite Border Guard squad, then to Captain Ashland. He pointed toward the door to Torrence's flat. "You in the mood to break down a door?"

"Whatever you command, sir," Captain Ashland replied.

Merritt twisted his wrists against his bonds, struggling even though he knew he had no hope of breaking free. "Belmont," he said, his voice betraying the tiniest hint of a break.

"Yes, Merritt?" Belmont asked, the smile widening on his face.

The only thing Merritt could do was stall for time. When he opened his mouth, the words emerged before he even knew what he was asking. "What was the name of the song?"

Belmont gave him a quizzical look. "What's that, now?"

"The song. The one you sang in the hallway at headquarters. What was the name of it?"

"Hell if I remember," Belmont replied.

“You remember,” Merritt pressed. “If you remembered the entire refrain after hearing the song once, you remember the name. What’s the name?”

“Oh, Merritt, don’t act like you don’t already know the name of the song,” Belmont said. “Considering it was *so obviously* written about you.”

Merritt’s poker face nearly fell before he managed to catch it and hold it back up. *The song was about...*

A line of soldiers gathered at Torrence’s door. “Ready for orders, sir,” the man at the front said to Belmont.

Belmont was about to reply when Merritt called, “Wait!”

Belmont turned, aiming his aggravating half-smile at Merritt. “Unless you’re telling me your last wish, I’m not interested in hearing anything more from you.”

Merritt needed more time. He could try to fight free just for the sake of distracting the soldiers, but with so many to fend off, how much time could that tactic gain him? No, it wouldn’t work.

Thinking fast, he locked eyes with Belmont and raised his pierced brow. “I do have a last wish.”

“Do you,” Belmont replied, more as a statement than a question.

Merritt had no way of knowing what time it was, but he was almost positive it had been over two hours since he’d contacted Odell. “You have my phone,” he said to Belmont. “If I have any new emails, would you read them for me?”

“You want me to read you all your new emails?” Belmont asked incredulously. “Now you’re just stalling for time.”

“Not all of them,” Merritt replied. “Just whichever one you think seems the most interesting.”

Belmont eyed him skeptically before reaching into his pocket. “All right, Merritt. I’ll play with you.” He tossed the phone to one of the soldiers closest to Merritt. “Use his thumb to unlock it.”

The soldier knelt beside Merritt, sliding the phone under his bound hand and pressing his thumb against the screen. Once it was unlocked, he handed the phone back to Belmont.

“Hmm,” Belmont said, navigating through Merritt’s phone. “Looks like you only have one new email... from....” He squinted. “...Rush Subs on Sub-Rush.” He gave Merritt a curious glance. “Isn’t that a sandwich shop?”

Damn it.

“Dear Mr. Merritt North,” Belmont read from the screen. “Thank you for contacting Rush Subs on Sub-Rush. Your feedback is important to us. While we obviously pride ourselves on the quality of our sandwiches, we have never before received such glowing and enthusiastic praise for our tap water. In regards to your question, unfortunately we are not at liberty to share the name of our supplier. But you can be confident in knowing that our water is sourced from one of the cleanest springs in the North Sphere.” Belmont returned his gaze to Merritt. “Satisfied?”

Merritt didn’t reply.

“Oh, come on, Merritt. Surrender already! The underground just wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Do I have any more new emails?” Merritt asked evenly.

“It’s been fifteen seconds.”

“Do I, though?”

Belmont shook his head disapprovingly. “You’re getting desperate, Merritt. It’s not a good look.”

“I just think you’re missing a great opportunity,” Merritt replied. “You have my unlocked phone. You can look at anything you want on there. You can dig up any secret you think I have. You can look at every text I’ve ever sent to Higgins. Or Mercury.”

“I could look at it just as easily after your ride.”

“But where’s the fun in that? I know you’re only doing all of this to get a reaction from me.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Why else are you doing it, then?”

For a moment, Belmont looked like he was struggling to find a response. Then his lips tightened in aggravation. “Nice try, Merritt. You got in another minute of stalling. But now you’re out of time.” He turned to the soldiers at Torrence’s door. “Go ahead and break—wait.” He looked back at the phone. “Look at that, you actually do have a new email now. From newsbomb-at-South-Sphere-dot....”

Yes.

Merritt watched Belmont’s face intently as he opened the email and began to read it silently. The once cocky smile gradually faded to a straight line, then a twitching frown, then a barely restrained scowl.

After several minutes of silence, the soldiers began to creep closer to Torrence’s door. Belmont spotted them and called, “Wait.” Pulling his own phone from his pocket, he scrolled through his contacts and then tapped the screen. After a few seconds, he said, “Yeah, Odell? Did you know there’s some North Sphere dweeb trying to fake a news bomb using your name and email address?” A pause. “Yeah, he’s a hacker. Merritt North. He got into your account and sent an email from it so I’d think you were planning to launch a news bomb against me.” Another pause, longer this time. Belmont’s face turned so hard it looked like it could crack. “Why the fuck would you do that, then?” Whatever answer he got apparently wasn’t what he’d hoped to hear. His fist tightened so hard around his phone that the protective case creaked in protest. “Well, you damn well better *not*—Odell? Odell!”

He lowered the phone, teeth gritted, nostrils flared. The soldiers standing at attention watched him silently, waiting for his command. At last, he turned to them with barely restrained fury. “My order is withdrawn. We’re not going in.”

The soldiers stepped away from Torrence’s front door, a few of them shooting each other secretive glances that betrayed their curiosity.

Belmont gestured toward Merritt. “Untie him.”

With a few more curious glances at each other, the soldiers untied Merritt and stepped away. Merritt rose slowly to his feet, determination

in his eyes. His voice low and deliberate, he asked, “Do I still look sufficiently powerless?”

Belmont whipped the phone back at Merritt hard, his scowl deepening when Merritt caught it without effort.

“You should let these soldiers get back to their posts,” Merritt said. “The nearest elite border is completely unprotected. You wouldn’t want any aces sneaking into those fancy restaurants or good hospitals, would you?”

Lip curled, Belmont turned to Captain Ashland. “Take your men back to the border.”

“Yes, sir,” Captain Ashland said. He called out orders to the rest of the unit, and the troops quickly began to move out. Merritt gathered his packs and weapons, keeping an eye on Belmont as he armed himself.

Once no more soldiers remained within earshot, Belmont turned to Merritt. “This is only buying you a little bit of time, you know. People will forget about Higgins soon enough. They’ll stop caring. And once they do, that news bomb won’t protect you anymore. I’ll come after you—*both* of you.”

“You think that news bomb is the only trick I’ve got?” Merritt asked. “My contacts were able to dig up videos of you wiping down Higgins’s glasses with poison. You saw them in the email. What other things have you done that you don’t want anyone else to know about? What other South Sphere videos do you think I can get my hands on and turn into a news bomb?”

“Bullshit,” Belmont spat. “You don’t have more South Sphere videos. You had exactly one trick at one convenient time, and now there’s nothing else left in your arsenal so all you can do is bluff. Next time I come for you, you’ll be defenseless.”

When Belmont turned toward his motorcycle, Merritt retrieved his wallet and pulled out one of his spare playing cards from the ID sleeve, casting it like a throwing star at Belmont’s motorcycle. It landed upright, its corner stuck cleanly in the seam running across the top of the fuel tank with Merritt’s portrait facing Belmont. As Belmont pulled

it out and looked down at it, Merritt called, “You can keep that. In case your old card... got dirty.”

Belmont glared over his shoulder at Merritt, his eyes betraying a hint of begrudging respect before he took off down the street.