

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTERS 23-27

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Chapters 23-27

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CHAPTER 23

News of Coulter's murder spread quickly throughout the underground. Merritt's name never seemed to come up during discussions of the event, but this did nothing to assuage his guilt. Belmont had manipulated him so easily, and he hadn't seen it coming. It was humiliating.

The guilt still gnawed at him as he rode into the Norwood slums a week later. Not only had Coulter died on his watch—he'd died as a direct result of Merritt's actions. As a perpetual duty soldier, Merritt had failed to guard one of Mercury's closest allies. He'd have confessed to Mercury and taken the blame if he thought Mercury would care to hear it. But Merritt remembered how he'd treated Higgins's death. The last thing he wanted was to see Belmont get another pat on the back for a job well done.

Belmont was always three steps ahead of him, not because of superior strategic ability but because he was willing to breach boundaries Merritt considered inviolable.

How many times had Archer chastised Merritt for his insistence on clinging to fanciful ideals of justice and loyalty? How many times had she warned him that it was his personality, and not his aptitude, that was holding him back? He hadn't wanted to believe her, but her advice grew harder to refute with each passing day.

Just when he thought he'd finally found a way to hold Belmont off, Belmont had ducked under his defenses and swept his feet out from under him.

Mercury had once confessed to believing that Merritt lacked killer instinct. And Mercury was right. Merritt was a decorated soldier with countless kills under his belt. And yet he didn't know how to fight. He was only ever capable of summoning the will to fight when he

had something he needed desperately to protect. Without that, he was nothing.

His protective instincts were worthless against Belmont's coldblooded offense.

Could he throw them away? Could he cast aside everything he'd ever fought for and pick up Belmont's weapons instead?

Yes. He could. He *had* to, if he wanted to retain a position where he had Mercury's ear and an occasional seat in board meetings. But was it worth it if it meant having to compete in a race to the bottom against Belmont? Maybe he'd be better off retreating from the spotlight, accepting his position as an average military captain, and just following orders.

He had to retreat, or he had to become like Belmont. Otherwise, his time in Mercury's good graces would be limited. Sooner or later, Belmont would find a way to get him on the chopping block.

Even as he berated himself for his useless protective instincts, he continued his trek toward Torrence's flat. He could suppress his instincts and become ruthless like Belmont—but only after making his final offering to the first person he'd ever felt the urge to protect.

A bottle of pills rattled in his pack as he rode the treacherous, unpaved roads into sub-Norwood Park. After a week of failed attempts at hacking all the major pharmaceutical companies, he'd bit the bullet and asked Archer for help getting some high-quality painkillers. It was a last resort; at this point, he owed Archer so much he didn't know if he'd ever be able to break even with her. The disparity in their rank had made requesting another favor all the more daunting.

As generous as Archer had been with Merritt, he knew she didn't enjoy doling out favors. Rarely did an hour go by without someone calling or texting or stopping her in the hallway to ask for a special perk that only she could give—access to a new drug, a bump in a hospital waiting list, a job referral. It took no less than a verbal lashing to get the most persistent fellow elites to respect her “no,” but the lashing was usually vicious enough to ward off any future requests.

Merritt didn't want to be like everyone else who selfishly badgered her. But when he'd tentatively told her about Torrence's need

for painkillers, prefacing his request with a list of services he could perform as compensation, she'd shooed away his offer and told him she'd help him regardless. "I know he's important to you," she'd said. Then, with a laugh, she'd added, "Just don't make a habit of asking me to supply you with drugs."

He didn't know why she'd been willing to help him when she'd shut down three such requests from other people that very day. She seemed genuinely disinterested in keeping track of whatever he owed her. Maybe she already had enough people in her debt to make any potential offering from him seem inconsequential.

She'd gotten him enough painkillers to last Torrence six months. They were worth more than the total sum of money Merritt had ever made in his life.

Parking outside Torrence's flat, he hurried up the crumbled pathway and knocked on the door.

He shouldn't have been surprised to be met by silence. Again, he knocked.

After a few minutes with no response, he sent Torrence a text and then made a phone call. No answer.

With a resigned sigh, he flipped open the thumbprint sensor and pressed his thumb against it. After hearing the tinny click of the lock releasing, he let himself in.

He froze. Aside from a few scattered empty boxes and a bare mattress, the flat had been cleaned out. Gone was Torrence's new computer setup. His guitar case and chest of clothing were nowhere in sight.

There was a piece of paper on the bare mattress. Feeling queasy, Merritt approached and picked it up. The paper was folded in half, and his name was written on the outside.

Merritt,

I'm staying with friends for a little while. Don't worry about me. I don't know when I'll be back, but I'm okay.

Torrence

He didn't buy it. Not after Belmont's parting words at the Brighton Rose a week ago.

He snatched his phone and called Torrence twice, leaving an urgent voicemail on the second try. After one more missed call, he sent a text.

Call me, Torrence. I read your note. I won't believe you're okay unless I can hear your voice.

After sending the text, he looked around helplessly at the empty room. What the hell was going on?

He dropped down to the edge of the mattress, uneasily taking a seat and resting his head in his hands. How long would he be willing to wait for Torrence to call him before giving up? Was there any hope at all? Even if Torrence was miraculously okay, he'd long since stopped returning Merritt's calls. It was about time he accepted that Torrence wasn't going to—

His phone buzzed in his hand. Torrence's number. Immediately, he accepted the call. "Torrence?"

There was a brief pause before Torrence's raspy voice replied, "Hey."

It was him. It was really him. He sounded weak and tired, but not distressed.

"Torrence, what's going on? Why is your place cleared out?"

"It's... just temporary," Torrence replied. His voice was shaky and a little slurred, probably from the combination of pain and sleeping pills. "I thought it would be best for everyone."

"Best for everyone how?"

Another pause. "I can't have the entire Elite Border Guard surrounding my house again."

Merritt cleared his throat. "I didn't know you knew about that. I thought you were asleep."

"People notice... when a thousand soldiers come marching into their town." He paused to catch his breath, as if getting out that

sentence had been an enormous effort. “It’s all anyone’s been talking about.”

“Okay, I get it. But the thing with Belmont and me is settled. He should leave you alone now.”

“Maybe,” Torrence replied, a tremor in his voice. “But it’s better if I stay away for a while.”

Torrence had a tendency to be overly cautious and distrustful, but Merritt couldn’t fault him this time. Belmont was a real threat. “When will you be back?”

“I don’t know. Sometime.”

“The place you’re staying now—how safe is it?”

“Safer than home.”

That was barely a detailed answer, but Merritt wouldn’t push his luck. Torrence was already talking more openly with him than he ever would have anticipated. He didn’t know what it would take to accidentally shut down their communication again.

And he could hear Torrence’s pain in his short, strained words. With every sentence he spoke, it became clearer that the conversation was taking a toll on him.

“I got you some painkillers,” Merritt said. “Northern Chem Formula 68. I wanted to give them to you. That’s why I came over.”

Torrence took a few seconds before replying. “How did you get those?”

“I pulled some strings. I might not ever be able to do it again, but at least I could do it this time. I know you probably don’t want me trying to help, but....”

“Who gave them to you?” Torrence pressed.

Torrence was a diligent blue-tie; Merritt knew what he was getting at. “It’s a sealed container straight from the factory. I picked it up in person. No one else touched the pills, and no one knew who I was ordering them for.”

“Oh... okay.” Torrence sounded satisfied, but he still paused to consider. “Hold on a second.”

The line went still, and Merritt assumed he’d been put on hold.

After half a minute, the line clicked back on, and Torrence said, “You can leave them at the flat. There’s a loose floorboard below my mattress with an empty lockbox underneath.” He paused for a shaky breath. “You can put the pills in there. Someone will pick them up later.”

Merritt wanted to give Torrence the pills himself. He wanted to see him, to feel his energy. But he could understand Torrence’s caution, and in a way, he was glad Torrence was vigilant to the point of paranoia. It made him that much harder for Belmont to target.

“All right,” he said at last. “I’ll leave the pills.”

“Thank you,” Torrence said. His voice sounded odd and heavy—as if he meant the thank-you even more than the words implied.

Maybe Merritt was reading too much into his tone. But there was something there.

“Who are you staying with?” Merritt asked.

“Just a friend.”

“A girl... friend?”

A pause. “Merritt....”

The words came out before Merritt could stop them. “The song Belmont heard you sing—when I used to hear you sing it through the walls, I thought maybe it was about a girl you liked. But Belmont said it was about me.”

Torrence’s silence was excruciating.

Fuck. “Sorry. Never mind. Pretend I didn’t say that.”

Merritt was about to hang up when Torrence said, “I never had a problem with you... being a....” He cleared his throat. “...being a guy.”

“But you *do* have a problem with me?”

Another silence that pierced his heart.

“It’s not because you’re a guy,” Torrence said at last. His voice was so soft it was barely audible. “It’s because you’re a sol....”

A soldier.

Merritt squeezed the phone tight. He couldn’t find words.

Why does that matter? Why does that change anything between you and me? Why do you keep drifting away from me? Just tell me what I can do to fix all of this!

When Torrence spoke again, his voice was unsteady. “You sold your soul to them.”

“That’s not fair, Torrence.”

“You’ll never question them.” Torrence’s tone grew more heated. “You’ll just do whatever you’re told—you’ll just play their game—until there’s nothing left of you.”

It had been years since he’d last had this argument with Torrence. He’d thought they’d reconciled and moved on. Why was it suddenly coming back to the surface now?

Maybe Torrence was just hurting because of his illness. Maybe he was just overwhelmed by his pain, and he was lashing out in whatever way he could.

That was it. Merritt could hear how volatile Torrence was. Torrence had always been emotional for a blue-tie, but this was intense even for him. Merritt wouldn’t take it personally.

But damn, he didn’t want to have this conversation over the phone. He couldn’t see Torrence’s face, couldn’t read his body language. He couldn’t reach out to comfort Torrence.

“I want to see you,” Merritt said at last. “Why can’t we talk about this face to face?”

“It’s too late for that.” Torrence’s voice broke, and Merritt could tell he was on the verge of tears. “They’re going to take away everything that’s good about you.”

Merritt didn't know how to deal with Torrence when he was like this. There would be no talking rationally to him as long as he was overwhelmed by pain and unable to think straight. But Merritt couldn't just dismiss him either.

"Torrence, please. I don't know what you want from me."

A heavy, shuddering breath. "I just don't want you to change."

Merritt's first instinct was to insist that he hadn't changed, and that he never would. But the lingering thoughts about his feud with Belmont rendered him silent. After a pause, he said, "But I *have* to change. I'm not doing anyone any good the way I am now. I have to become better."

"You mean worse."

Merritt gritted his teeth. "I always tried so hard to protect you, but I could never do it right. You said so yourself. Everything I did always made things harder for you."

Torrence's reply was barely a whisper. "But it was still the best thing about you."

The lump in Merritt's throat threatened to cut off his voice. Even if he knew what to say to Torrence, he wasn't sure if he could make a sound. Part of him wanted to keep arguing that he needed to change, all the while knowing that it would hurt Torrence. The other part of him couldn't bear to let go of Torrence's words.

The best thing about you.

"I need to go," Torrence said at last, his words coming out thick and slow. "Pill's starting to work."

"Oh. Okay." Merritt swallowed. He wished he had something more meaningful to say, but if Torrence's sleeping pills were kicking in, then maybe it didn't make a difference whether he had any eloquent words at his disposal. "Sleep well, Torrence."

Merritt slowly lowered the phone from his ear. He pushed the cold mattress aside and felt around for the loose floorboard. After lifting it up, he located the lockbox and stowed the bottle of pills. Then

he set the floorboard back in place, covered it with the mattress, and headed for the door.

For a moment, he lingered in the threshold, staring back at the bare mattress in the empty room. It took all his effort to turn away and close the door behind him.

CHAPTER 24

“Been a quiet night,” Balbo said with a secretive smile as she entered the deserted officers’ quarters. She raised her arms over her head and bent backward, sighing as she stretched. “The officers’ quarters are feeling just a little less... musical than they have over the past three weeks.”

Merritt, seated cross-legged on his bed with his computer in his lap, tilted his head in realization. “You’re right. It’s nearly midnight, and I haven’t heard a single honk from Ashland’s trombone.”

“Maybe he got tired of it,” Balbo said, casually falling onto her back across her mattress. “Or maybe the trombone is flattened to a pancake out in the parking lot.”

Merritt’s mouth fell open. After the initial shock, he let out a disbelieving laugh. “No.... Did you...?”

“*Me?*” Balbo asked. “I didn’t do a thing. Lucy, on the other hand....”

Lucy. Balbo’s battle motorcycle. A wide grin stretched across Merritt’s face, and he shook his head. “I owe you, Balbo.”

“The favors are piling up,” Balbo teased.

This was nice. Being on speaking terms with Balbo again meant more to Merritt than he could have realized. In the world of commissioned officers, she felt like his only ally—apart from perhaps General Rhodes.

“What are you up to, anyway?” Balbo asked.

“Spying.” Merritt flashed his grin again. “On the East Sphere.”

Her interest piqued, Balbo sprang off her mattress and hurried to his side. “How...? How are you doing this?”

“I hacked the South’s surveillance system. Well, just a tiny part of it that processes incoming videos. But it’s something.”

“You *what?*” Balbo sputtered. “How is that even possible? It’s the *South Sphere!*”

Merritt sucked in a nervous breath, raising a finger to his lips. “I don’t want a lot of people knowing about this. If they think I can do it regularly, they’ll start demanding it. But the procedure is hit or miss. And it’s only a matter of time before the South discovers what I’m doing and locks me out.”

With a nod, Balbo sat on the mattress beside Merritt, leaning in and speaking softly. “What is that? The training grounds?”

“Yeah. For the Explosives Unit. You should see them train; it’s crazy. They’re like acrobats, flipping and jumping and juggling grenades.”

“How long have you been spying on the East Sphere?”

“Hmm... It’s November now, so I guess that means it’s been almost a year.” He chuckled. “I can’t believe it’s already been that long.”

Merritt had known for years that the East Sphere’s military culture was different from the North’s, but he’d had no idea how deep the differences ran until he’d started watching the South’s surveillance videos. Merritt had once watched in stunned disbelief as Pangolin led her troops through a series of drills designed to replicate backtracking through enemy territory to retrieve an injured comrade. This attitude of selfless loyalty was so at odds with the values of the underground that at first Merritt had thought it was a hoax.

Outside of battle, East Sphere soldiers were no more loyal or trustworthy than the citizens of any other sphere. But battle was their ritual. From the moment the operation commenced to the moment it ceased, the soldiers came together as one. The most senior officers even fought alongside privates—something that only happened in the East.

Betrayal in the underground was commonplace, but in the East Sphere, betrayal on the battlefield was punishable by death. It was one of the few instances in which an underground state government held

individuals accountable for murder instead of relying on vigilante justice.

Trust fostered bravery, and distrust between officers and enlisted soldiers was one of the North Sphere military's greatest weaknesses. Blue-tie soldiers expected that they would be sold out by their superiors, and every mission was assumed to be a suicide mission. Merritt had always had his soldiers' backs, but his observations of the East's methods gave him new ways of demonstrating his reliability to them, and ways of encouraging them to do the same for each other. Just as he'd give his life to protect his King, so too would he give it to protect his subordinates—and he'd devoted the past months to making sure they knew that.

"But you're not gonna spend your entire Friday night doing this, are you?" Balbo asked, pointing to the surveillance video on Merritt's screen.

"I don't have anything else planned tonight," Merritt replied.

"Palmer and the guys are going to Yackley's. They talked me into going along. You should come too."

Merritt doubted Palmer would want him to tag along. They'd never been on great terms.

"Well," Balbo said in response to the silence, "I need to clean myself up before I head out anyway. Ten, fifteen minutes. Meet me in the locker rooms if you decide to come."

Merritt watched her go, wondering if he should suck it up and join her. He'd been spending too many of his off hours in front of his computer lately. It was easier than thinking about all the ways he was falling short as a fighter, all the ways he'd fallen short for Torrence, all the ways he'd fallen short against Belmont.

After five minutes of staring with unfocused eyes at his computer screen, he realized that he needed to see real people. He'd go to Yackley's with Balbo and the others. If things were tense with Palmer, he could branch off on his own. On a night like tonight when he couldn't shut down his thoughts, a stop in the Yackley's stairwell sounded especially appealing.

He shut down his computer and stowed it before grabbing his packs and holsters and heading for the officers' locker rooms.

As he opened the door, Palmer's voice floated around the corner. "Five fucking thousand dollars!" he was ranting. "That's what she saw on the deposit slip. A five-thousand-dollar bonus for someone who's only been a captain for less than three months? How many months would it take *us* to make that much?"

"The poison traps were a pretty big deal, though," came Balbo's reply. "We Chem Ops captains and higher are the only ones who even know about it. He was working directly with Belmont and Mercury. I don't know of any other captains who've done that. If he did a good job, he did a good job."

Merritt's momentary excitement over the prospect of a five-thousand-dollar bonus was interrupted when Palmer snorted and said, "Yeah, well. Maybe if I sucked dick as good as Captain Merritt, I'd get a five-thousand-dollar bonus too."

Merritt's skin went cold. Was *that* what the officers had been saying about him behind his back all these months?

"What are you even talking about?" Balbo muttered over the sound of running water.

"He shouldn't be an officer. He *wouldn't* be an officer if he didn't do something extra for it. It didn't work on Colonel Harding, but it must have worked on someone higher up."

"Yeah. No." The water turned off. "Merritt's been working his ass off. It's not that complicated. And you're way off base about Harding."

"I don't even care what happened with Colonel Harding," Palmer replied. "It's old news. But you look me in the eye and tell me you don't think he's getting preferential treatment *now*."

Merritt felt a sharp pang in his chest when Palmer's question was met with no answer.

"General Rhodes refuses to even hear any complaints about him," Palmer continued. "And I heard someone say he's been calling Mercury 'Damen.' What has he done that's gotten all of them fawning

over him? What has he done that any of us couldn't do?" When Balbo didn't respond, he added, "And how are *you* gonna feel once he's promoted above you?"

After a long pause, Balbo finally said, "Nothing's fair in the underground. I never expected it to be."

"How long have you been a captain?" Palmer pressed. "How long have you had to work at it? You're probably the best strategist we have in the entire military. Better than Merritt. Has Mercury ever even talked to you?"

"I know where I stand, Palmer," Balbo snapped. "You're not enlightening me."

Merritt couldn't hide in the hallway forever. He opened and closed the door again, louder this time, to give Palmer and Balbo warning. Then, bracing himself, he walked into the chilly silence.

Balbo stood in front of the mirror, spreading a bit of gel over her wild curls. Palmer undid and redid the knot in his tie. Merritt approached the nearest sink and washed his already clean hands.

The sound of running water wasn't enough to drown out the deafening tension in the room.

After the silence grew too uncomfortable to bear, Palmer turned to Balbo in an attempt at small talk. "So Lieutenant Steuben finally turned up again after being MIA for two days."

"When did he turn up?" Balbo asked. "Where?"

"Thumbprint registered at the border earlier today," Palmer replied. "I'd head across town to kick his ass myself if I didn't already have plans tonight. I'll just have him work it off next week." He chuckled. "Dump all my paperwork on him."

"Whatever works," Balbo muttered.

Palmer glanced at the clock on the wall. "You gonna fix your hair forever or what?"

"I'm done," Balbo said, giving her hands a quick rinse.

Merritt couldn't stop himself. As desperately as he tried to keep his mouth shut, he already felt himself turning to face Palmer. "You had a lieutenant missing for two days?"

Palmer turned his poker face on Merritt, but Merritt could feel the animosity emanating from behind it. "Yeah. It happens. You'll find that out once you get more than three months under your belt as a captain."

"He was gone for two days and showed up at the border?" Merritt pressed. "He could have easily been compromised in that amount of time. Shouldn't you have revoked his clearance after he went missing?"

"He was just out partying and getting laid. I've been texting him, and he's been texting back." Palmer's face was as cold and hard as stone. "Officers need to blow off steam sometimes. We don't *all* get to do it at Mercury's elite parties."

"He should have been stopped at the border and escorted in for questioning," Merritt persisted. "It's protocol."

"Oh my fucking *god*," Palmer groaned, clutching at his head. "You fucking PDS's with sticks up your asses. *This*," he sneered at Merritt, "is why they shouldn't make perpetual duty soldiers into officers. There's more to being an actual good soldier than just following every rule to the letter." Lowering his voice, he took a step toward Merritt and cocked his head. "Is there any rule you don't obey without question? Is there *any* order you wouldn't take from a superior? Any order you don't respond to with a 'yes, sir' and puppy dog eyes?"

You'll never question them. You'll just do whatever you're told—you'll just play their game—until there's nothing left of you.

Merritt shoved aside the memory of Torrence's words, returning Palmer's sneer with cold, narrowed eyes. "His clearance should be revoked until he's brought in for questioning. If you won't revoke it, I will."

"He's not your fucking lieutenant," Palmer snapped. "I've been a captain for five years. Who do you think you are, telling me how to do my job?"

"Probably should revoke it, though," Balbo cut in. "Just as a precaution."

Palmer turned to her as if she'd betrayed him. Then, tossing his hands up, he cried, "For fuck's sake, *fine*. I'll get to it later." He headed for the door, stopping after opening it a crack. "You coming?"

"I'll meet you in a minute." Balbo watched as Palmer stepped outside; then she turned back to Merritt. After an awkward pause, she said, "You can still come. Palmer can't exactly forbid you from going to Yackley's."

"It's not worth it," Merritt said with a shake of the head.

Balbo's brows furrowed. For a moment, she examined Merritt. "You heard us talking before you came in, didn't you?"

"A little," Merritt confessed.

"Well. Palmer doesn't know what he's talking about. I know better than anyone that you earned your spot. You did it the hard way, even when an easy path was presented to you. You said no to Colonel Harding, and I respect you for that. How many other people would have had that kind of integrity?"

Merritt lowered his gaze. *Oh, Balbo. If only you knew how little integrity I had.*

"I never asked for preferential treatment," he said at last. "And you're right. I never did anything to deserve it. I spent the past year being in the right place at the right time, and that was it." He leaned back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. He didn't want to be having this conversation. His voice hard, he muttered, "I only ever wanted to serve my sphere. I can do that just as well on the battlefield as I can in the boardroom. From now on, I'll keep my head down and just do the work. If I'm offered something I didn't earn, I just won't accept it."

Balbo gave an odd frown. "I never said you didn't earn it. If you'd had an inheritance, you would have been made a captain years ago." She squinted at him. "What's with the angst, anyway? I never hear you talk like this."

Embarrassed to have let slip such a blatant show of emotion, Merritt shook his head. "Probably just need to catch up on sleep," he said, though he knew his problems were bigger than that.

Before Balbo could reply, a bout of static issued from their phones, signaling that they'd entered intercom mode. General Rhodes's voice crackled through the speakers. "Reds Breach at Section 7B, Corridor 4. All units respond to breach at Section 7B, Corridor 4. Commence Formation 402A."

Balbo met Merritt's eyes. "Shit," she muttered. "So much for Yackley's."

The door swung open, knocking into Balbo, and Palmer hurried into the room. "Hey. West Sphere's invading. Call in your troops. We gotta go!"

Balbo pulled out her phone, preparing to issue orders to her soldiers. Palmer made a dash for his locker and began strapping on his packs. After donning his holsters, he turned to Merritt. "What are you waiting for? We got orders!"

"Section 7B, Corridor 4," Merritt said, brows furrowed as he considered the command. "That's Hamlin."

"So?"

Merritt took a few steps across the room, speaking more to himself than to Palmer. "Why would Rhodes call for reinforcements at Hamlin? We just put in poison traps."

"The West doesn't know that. It's not like they'd avoid breaking through at Hamlin because of the traps."

"We put in traps so we wouldn't have to send troops. Why would he have us send *everyone* there?"

Palmer crossed in front of him, close enough to bump his shoulder. "For fuck's sake, Merritt, just do your job and call in the order." Curling his lip, he added, "*It's protocol.*" Then he stalked back across the room, throwing the door open and rushing outside.

Balbo raised her phone to her mouth, but then she paused, examining Merritt's face. For a moment, she stared at him without speaking. Then she lowered her phone. "You know more about these poison traps than I do. If you of all people are hesitating to follow this order, I want to know what's up."

If time wasn't of the essence, Merritt would have found some way to express his gratitude to Balbo for giving him a chance. Instead, he radioed to the general's quarters at Station 1. Never before had he questioned a superior officer's battle command. But something felt strange. "General," he said urgently. "Section 7B, Corridor 4 is already secured. Can we spare troops for a second location?"

"All units," came Rhodes's voice again. "All units respond to breach at Section 7B, Corridor 4."

The line went dead. Brows furrowed, Merritt looked down at his phone. Something was off about Rhodes's correspondence. At the very least, Merritt would have expected him to sound piqued after his orders were questioned, instead of just repeating the order word for word and hanging up.

"Hey," Balbo said. "Wasn't Belmont scheduled to meet with Rhodes tonight at military headquarters to discuss waterways renovations? Isn't he with Rhodes at Station 1 right now?"

Merritt's eyes widened. "You're right."

"If both of them were involved in issuing the command, then it's probably justified."

That wasn't the conclusion Merritt had come to.

It's sabotage. He's trying to do something to the traps. Or maybe he already did something to the traps, and that's why they have to be reinforced with soldiers.

Mercury was in the South Sphere for a high-profile meeting with the three Queens. He was scheduled to be out until at least ten in the evening. If Belmont wanted to get away with something as big as sabotaging an entire military operation, he'd do it when Mercury was far, far away.

Rhodes answered directly to Belmont. Even if he knew it was sabotage, he'd have no choice but to obey Belmont's order.

Was there even really a West Sphere invasion?

It'd be too dangerous to assume there wasn't. But he still couldn't shake the suspicion that something had gone horribly wrong.

As the point person for the poison trap project, Merritt had been granted clearance to remotely view the traps' system status from his secure phone. Quickly, he loaded the program.

As of now, the traps were all stocked and on standby—no errors or anomalies on the charts. Whatever may have gone wrong tonight, it wasn't the traps. But that made Rhodes's order even stranger.

He held the phone to his mouth and radioed to his sergeants. "Chem Ops Corvus: Reds Breach. Report to Section 7B, Corridor 4. Corvus 269 and 270: Report to Section 1A, Station 1 and stand by for orders."

Balbo's eyes widened. "You're not sending all of them?"

"I sent almost all of them. But I need two squads for backup." He gritted his teeth. "I'm going to Station 1."

Balbo looked hesitant, but she didn't challenge him.

Merritt knew he was pushing his limits with her, but he had to be direct. As he headed for his locker to retrieve his battle packs and rucksack, he asked, "Balbo, can you take all of yours to the Division Corridor?"

"Division?" Balbo asked. "Why?"

"If there's really a West Sphere invasion, we can't afford to leave Division unguarded. It's the most vulnerable entrance, and it leads directly into the business district. We installed the poison traps specifically so we'd have the option of sending more manpower to protect the business district."

"You want me to throw away the general's order and send *all* my soldiers to Division when we only have a reported breach at Hamlin?"

Merritt understood her hesitation. She was the best strategist in Chem Ops; she knew his argument held water. But if he was wrong, she would be on the line for ignoring a superior's command. This was no small favor he was asking of her. "Hamlin will have the rest of Chem Ops, all of Infantry, Border Defense, *and* a poison trap. I'm telling you, we don't need anyone else there." He held up his phone. "Don't tell me I'm the only one who thought Rhodes sounded weird."

Balbo bit her lip. “Almost like the way you see ‘em talk in a hostage video. Like he was reading off a card.”

Merritt strapped his battle pack of vials, blockers, syringes, and syringe darts around his abdomen under his reinforced fighting jacket, a few inches below his smaller perpetual duty pack. He double-checked the two additional perpetual duty packs strapped to his thighs to make sure they were fully stocked with ammunition, tools, and first aid supplies. When he was finished, he turned to Balbo. “Will you do it, then?” he pressed. “Send them to Division?”

Balbo gave a reluctant nod. “Fine. I got you. But you better be right about this.”

With a grateful nod, Merritt slung his rucksack over his shoulder and sprinted out the door.

Coming from the barracks only a minute away from Station 1, he arrived well before his troops. Even if he was overreacting and everything was fine with General Rhodes, the detour would likely only cost him a few minutes.

From the outside, nothing at military headquarters looked amiss. The staff parking lot housed the same number of motorcycles as usual, and Merritt saw no one suspicious wandering the grounds outside. He spotted a familiar pair of blue-tie guards standing at the main gate. “Is Belmont inside?” he asked one of them.

“He went in about two hours ago, sir,” one of the guards replied. “Hasn’t come back out yet.”

“Have you spotted anyone suspicious on the grounds?”

“No, sir. Just blue-tie soldiers.”

With a nod, Merritt passed through the gate and headed for the main entrance. The ground floor corridor was guarded by a thumbprint-encrypted metal door. Merritt took a moment to peer through the inset window. The corridor appeared empty aside from a handful of guards, which was typical for a Friday night.

He took the stairs up to the second floor. If there truly was a West Sphere invasion, General Rhodes would be in his control room, most likely with his staff and supposedly with Belmont too.

The second floor was protected by another thumbprint-encrypted door. Merritt pressed his thumb against the scanner and entered the upstairs corridor.

The door to the control room was closed. Merritt pressed his ear against it, listening. He heard nothing.

As a precaution, he deployed his fan shield and retrieved a vial of SYK-21. SYK-21 was the improved wide-range knockout formula from Archer's poison project, and the one knockout drug he'd already been immunized against, so he didn't need to worry about administering a blocker first.

"General," he called through the closed door, pressing his thumb against the sensor. "It's Captain Merritt."

No answer.

"I'm coming in."

Holding onto his shield and poison vial, he lowered the door handle with his elbow and pushed the door open.

At the center of the room, General Rhodes sat slumped over the control board, unresponsive. Behind him stood three blue-tie soldiers who looked concerned to see Merritt enter the room armed but remained calm.

Merritt lowered his vial and shield but didn't put them away. He examined the three blue-tie soldiers. Two privates and a lieutenant. They all wore Chem Ops emblems on their jackets, but Merritt didn't recognize them. "Names," he commanded.

"Lieutenant Steuben, sir."

"Private Short, sir."

"Private Felton, sir."

Steuben. That was the name Palmer had mentioned. Merritt didn't know all of Palmer's privates, and Steuben was newly graduated from the academy, so Merritt hadn't met him yet. These three faces didn't ring a bell at all.

Poker face up, Merritt glanced at General Rhodes. “What happened?” he asked. “Is he dead?”

“Passed out, sir,” Steuben said with an uncomfortable glance in Rhodes’s direction. “Musta happened right after he sent out his orders.”

“What are you three doing here, and how did you find him?”

“We were delivering privileged information from Captain Palmer, sir,” Steuben said. “So we were already in the area.”

“What information?”

“It’s classified, sir.”

“My clearance matches Palmer’s. His intel is my intel. What’s the information?”

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s classified.”

Merritt’s poker face remained. He couldn’t tell whether it was Palmer or these soldiers who were up to something, but there was no procedural justification for withholding the information.

“Where’s Belmont?” Merritt asked.

“We haven’t seen him, sir,” Steuben replied.

“He was scheduled to be in a meeting with Rhodes right now,” Merritt said.

Steuben glanced at the two privates, who shrugged and shook their heads with uncertainty. Turning back to Merritt, he said, “We just got here, sir. He must have left before we arrived.”

Narrowing his eyes, Merritt gestured toward Rhodes. “Did you check him?”

Steuben appeared hesitant to go any closer to the prone general. “He’s not injured. Just unconscious, sir.”

Merritt reached into his pack, pulling out a syringe of the lethal poison GUS-42, its contents clear by color and number. He tossed the syringe to Steuben. “Did you consider he might have been poisoned? Try that antidote.”

Steuben looked down at the syringe. Then he approached Rhodes, grabbing his arm and extending it.

Merritt immediately threw the vial of SYK-21. It shattered inches from Steuben's feet. The three soldiers barely had a second to flinch before their eyes rolled back in their heads and they crumpled to the ground unconscious.

Hurrying across the room, Merritt retrieved the syringe of GUS-42 and stowed it in his pack. Any blue-tie soldier, no matter how new, would have recognized that syringe as a lethal poison and not an antidote. Merritt returned to Rhodes, extending his arm and checking for a pulse.

Nothing. Rhodes was dead.

Merritt observed his fallen general with cold detachment. There was no time for emotion; he had to plan his next steps. If Rhodes was dead, someone had killed him. If Rhodes was dead, someone would have to issue orders in his stead. Merritt hoped his staff hadn't been killed too.

He headed for the soldiers who lay on the ground and pulled back Steuben's suit jacket. It was an authentic North Sphere fighting jacket, but underneath it, Steuben's arms were marked with West Sphere tattoos.

Merritt cursed under his breath. How had three West Sphere soldiers gotten into the general's quarters unchecked?

Something caught his eye. He grabbed Steuben's hand and flipped it over. Around his thumbprint was an odd seam. He took a closer look.

A skinned thumbprint glued to his thumb. Merritt gritted his teeth, letting the impostor's hand fall to the floor.

They must have forced Rhodes to order the troops to Hamlin before killing him. They might have even recorded his order and played it over the intercom. That would explain why Rhodes was only able to repeat his order verbatim when Merritt called.

What was Belmont's role in the invasion? This was extreme even for him.

The three impostors would need to be held for questioning, but SYK-21 would only keep them down for an hour. Merritt retrieved three syringes of CJ-486 and injected each invader, buying himself an additional five hours.

Retrieving a handful of zip ties from his pack, he proceeded to restrain all three men. Then he dragged their prone bodies into an adjacent storage room, locking the door manually from the outside.

He rolled Rhodes's chair into the corner of the room and returned to the control board, standing at the helm. Already on the screens in front of him were security feeds from all of the North's major access points. He navigated through them, searching for signs of an invasion. As he suspected, he saw incoming West Sphere soldiers at the Division Corridor. Rather than try to sneak into the sphere undetected, the fake Steuben, Felton, and Short had attempted to divert all North Sphere troops to the Hamlin Passage in order to clear the way for their invasion at Division.

Thankfully, Balbo's troops were there to defend. Otherwise, the incoming West Sphere soldiers would have likely slaughtered the outnumbered Border Defense squads and made it into the business district, with all the North's civilians at their mercy.

But Balbo's company was still comparatively scant in numbers. They wouldn't last long without more blue-ties to back them up.

Merritt tried to switch on the intercom. It didn't work.

He opened the system status panel. Someone had put a block on all incoming and outgoing communications from the grounds and then locked all settings. Even standard cell phone calls to or from headquarters were blocked.

Only a top-level secure phone like Mercury's or Belmont's or Rhodes's—or the one Higgins had given Merritt—had the ability to override the block and change any settings. Merritt gave Rhodes a quick search; it appeared his phone had been taken, and it hadn't been with the three West Sphere invaders. It would have to be tracked down, but there was no time for that now.

Merritt docked his own phone to the control panel. It synced with the system, overriding the admin login and allowing him full access.

According to the equipment overview on the top right screen, both Hamlin's and Oakley's poison traps—labeled on the menu only by project code number—were still up and running with no issues. As long as the traps were functional, those two corridors could get by with just their standard Border Defense squads.

He reviewed the history log on the middle right screen. Rhodes's order sending everyone to Hamlin had gone out as a standard alert instead of a red alert. Mercury would not have known there was a West Sphere invasion taking place.

Activating the control board's large center screen, he scanned through the building's internal security system.

A squad of West Sphere soldiers appeared to have gained entrance to the first floor within the past couple of minutes. Bold and undisguised, their red sashes billowed at their waists as they charged the blindsided blue-tie guards. Two blue-ties at the far end of the corridor already lay dead, and another took a bullet to the forehead seconds after Merritt activated the feed.

On the adjacent corridor's security feed, administrative staffers just managed to shut themselves into the safe room before the invading red-sashes could enter. Immediately, the reds attempted to ram their way through the reinforced door. Dead blue-tie guards scattered the corridor, and Merritt suspected they'd sacrificed themselves to get the staffers to safety.

The safe room looked surprisingly full, and Merritt assumed many of its occupants had arrived not via the main corridor but through the hidden back passage connecting to the cafeteria and staff dormitories. Rhodes's lieutenant general was among those inside; clearly, he was unavailable to issue commands in Rhodes's wake. Face grim, he was trying persistently to wake the safe room's unresponsive control panel. If his control panel was offline and he couldn't override it, Merritt would be unable to contact him.

The first floor guards were being slaughtered. Merritt prayed that the safe room door would hold until his Chem Ops squads could make it inside.

Where were his squads? He navigated through the security feeds, finally locating them at the east-facing entrance. They were surrounded by red-sashes; it looked like they'd been ambushed. He saw no fallen soldiers, but Squads 269 and 270 had both taken cover behind a reinforced barricade, where their offensive options were limited. They would have to slowly pick off the enemy soldiers if they wanted to make an escape or prevent more reds from entering the building. Otherwise, the reds would eventually overtake the barricade.

Using his phone's credentials, he disabled all thumbprint access to all doors at military headquarters. That would put a stop to the red-sashes spilling in on the first floor. The fake Felton, Steuben, and Short had apparently set the system to approve all thumbprints. It was probably one of the last things they'd done before Merritt had announced his presence outside the control room door.

Merritt's hack would unfortunately revoke thumbprint access for any real blue-ties too, but Station 1's thumbprint system was complex, and he didn't have time to sort out the permissions.

Back on the main screen, he activated red alert mode. Anything he said while the mode was active would reach both Mercury and Belmont via an emergency alert on their phones, along with all blue-tie officers. Merritt also included his company's sergeants on the alert. He was playing lieutenant, captain, and general all at once, and he knew there was no other officer ready to issue commands to his troops.

“Corvus Corax reporting. Code 1134, Reds breach. Chem Ops Sus: to Section 16, Corridor 2. Chem Ops Hyaena: hold position, on guard. Chem Ops Corvus: to Section 1A, Station 1. Chem Ops Corvus 269 and 270: hold position, on guard. Infantry: to Section 16, Corridor 2.”

Code 1134 was an alert that General Rhodes had been killed. With the number of red-sashes at the Division Corridor, Merritt had sent Palmer's Chem Ops company and the Infantry to back up Balbo's troops and Border Defense. He'd ordered the remainder of his own company to military headquarters to back up Squads 269 and 270.

It was a big risk. Only Rhodes and Lieutenant General Meade were cleared to issue such broad-ranging commands without first

receiving orders by the King or right hand. Perhaps he should have first contacted Mercury and asked for orders. But that would have required a lengthy explanation of the current situation and the status of all troops, and he knew from the video feeds in front of him that his soldiers had no time to lose.

Balbo's voice was the first he heard echoing through his phone speaker to confirm his order, followed by a breathless confirmation from Squad 269's Sergeant Ellis in the midst of ringing gunshots. As more captains and colonels responded to the command, he returned to the surveillance feeds, checking back on the staffers. They were still protected within the safe room, but Merritt could see their panic growing. More staffers had arrived at the hidden back entrance to the safe room and were begging to be let in, but those inside refused to open the door. With their systems down, they had no way of knowing that the people on the other side of the door were fellow blue-ties. If the invaders found their way into the secret back passage, the unconcealed blue-ties would be sitting ducks.

Outside, Squads 269 and 270 tried to take down any red-sashes attempting to enter the building, but the numbers were growing too large for them to contain. Merritt's heart thumped uneasily when he spotted Sergeant Ellis among the crowd. This was Ellis's first West Sphere encounter since his escape from their hands as a POW a year and a half ago. Even through the security feed, Merritt could read the tension on his face.

He'd spent months conditioning Ellis to be confident that he was better than anything the West could throw at him. Ellis had come a long way, but Merritt had never quite succeeded in purging that haunted look from his eyes. The West relied on intimidation over skill; they instilled crippling fear in their opponents to mask their strategic shortcomings. Every soldier's worst nightmare was to fall into West Sphere hands—but if they let their fear compromise their performance, they'd be giving the West exactly the advantage it wanted.

“Hold it together, Ellis,” Merritt murmured to himself as he watched Ellis take a glancing bullet to the upper arm. “Your squad is counting on you to lead them.”

Mercury's name popped up on his phone's screen. He forced himself to turn away from the battle footage and immediately answered the call. "Damen."

Mercury's voice was calm but serious. "I got the red alert. Can you speak freely?"

"Yes, King."

"Give me details."

"It looks like three red-sashes disguised themselves as blue-tie soldiers to gain access to Station 1, where they killed General Rhodes and opened the doors to the rest of their soldiers. They had Rhodes send all North Sphere military to Hamlin so they could invade through Division."

"Does that mean we've lost the business district?" Mercury asked, as collected as if he was asking if Merritt had picked up eggs at the market.

"No. I was suspicious of the order to guard Hamlin, so I asked Captain Balbo to send her company to Division while I investigated Station 1. Her troops are holding off the reds at the border."

"I tried reaching 45, but the call failed. I suspect his phone has been wiped. Do you know where he is?"

"45" was the atomic number for rhodium—Rh—and code for Mercury's right hand.

Merritt wouldn't tell Mercury any of his suspicions about Belmont. They would be nothing more than slander until they were proven. "A guard told me he got here two hours ago, but there's no sign of him now. Most of the Station 1 staffers made it to the safe room, but I didn't see 45 among them. I haven't finished reviewing all the security feeds."

"Keep me updated," Mercury said. "You know how to reach me."

"Yes, Damen."

Mercury hung up, and Merritt returned his attention to the security feeds. Quickly, he cycled through the six meeting rooms on the second floor.

Empty. Empty. Empty. Empty. Empty.

The video was black for the sixth room—apparently disconnected—but the audio was still working. Merritt pulled up the feed’s network settings, trying to locate a failed connection.

A rough voice echoed through the speakers as he searched. “How ‘bout one more photo with our pretty hostage?”

Another male voice replied, “You don’t think the video was enough?”

“Is anything ever enough?” the first man asked, followed by the laughter of what sounded like three or four men.

Footsteps. Shuffling fabric. The sounds of a struggle, and a muffled grunt. “Don’t give us trouble, now,” one of the men warned.

The telltale zap of a West Sphere stun gun crackled through the speakers, followed by a weak groan. “That’s more like it,” the man said. More shuffling noises, another muffled grunt, and a chorus of laughter and cheers.

“Ooh, that’s a good one,” one of the men said. “We’ll have to send it to Gray once we enable outgoing signals again.”

Merritt finally found the connection settings for the sixth meeting room. It looked like someone had attempted to disable the security feed but hadn’t realized the video and audio controls were listed separately.

“I think it’s time to end this,” one of the men said, followed by more laughter from the others.

Merritt tapped to enable video then returned to the security feed.

The sight on the screen hit him like a wrecking ball to the chest, leaving him breathless.

Belmont knelt on the ground near the wall of the meeting room, surrounded by red-sashes. His wrists were extended above his head, wrapped in chain and bound to the elbow of an exposed pipe. More

chain secured his ankles to a pipe near the ground. His jacket and vest were cast aside, his dress shirt unbuttoned nearly to his waist and saturated with blood. Bruises and blood marked his face, and he was gagged with his tie.

Merritt clenched his cold, clammy fists. Dread rose from his chest up to his throat.

Five red-sashes hovered over Belmont. One—a man with a long, ratty blond beard—had a hand wrapped under Belmont’s chin, pinning his head while holding a knife to his throat. Belmont stared up at the man with something that looked like rage.

“—four, three, two, one.”

The man dug in with the knife and dragged. Merritt’s heart stopped.

The man pulled past the edge of Belmont’s throat then held up the knife. He pushed on it, revealing a trick blade, and all five men burst out in cruel laughter. Belmont gritted his teeth, his livid gaze still searing into the man who held him.

“Damn, you’re nowhere near as fun as I thought you’d be,” the man said. “Where’s the begging? Where are the tears? I thought you’d at *least* piss yourself.”

Belmont gave no response.

The bearded man released Belmont and turned to the bald red-sash beside him. “What do you think?”

The bald man grabbed the back of Belmont’s head, shoving Belmont’s face against his crotch and grinding. Above the hooting of his fellow red-sashes and Belmont’s startled groan, he called, “Maybe we need to take him for another ride.”

Merritt turned away from the screen before his rising fury could heat him past the boiling point. He couldn’t get distracted. He had to focus.

Any amount of time that a blue-tie—especially a high-ranking blue-tie—was in West Sphere hands was too long. Merritt couldn’t

count on them not to torture or maim or kill a hostage without warning. Before anything else, he had to protect Belmont.

What was the clearest path from the control room to meeting room 6? He swiped the meeting room's security video up into the top left screen, using the center screen to navigate through the hallway and exterior video feeds.

Still playing in the upper left screen, the bearded man gestured toward a lanky red-sash standing at the opposite corner of the room. "Any update on his phone?"

"Motherfucker wiped it clean."

"How?" the bald man asked. "When?"

"Musta done it the second Poros—I mean *Steuben*—grabbed Rhodes."

"But they grabbed Belmont at the same time."

"I guess he's got good reflexes." The lanky man tossed the phone to the bearded man across the room. "I'm telling you, it's wiped clean."

"At least we have the general's phone," one of the other men said.

"Yeah, but it's only good for connecting to the control board. He had barely any actual information stored on it."

The bearded man cursed under his breath before shaking his head. "Doesn't matter. Getting the info off Belmont's phone would have been easier, but—" he gave Belmont's hair a too-familiar tousle, "—they can wring that exact same information out of him once we get him across the border." He bent Belmont's head back, leaning in close with his next words. "Maybe they'll include some of the torture footage along with his execution video."

Merritt forced himself to ignore the sickening chatter coming from meeting room 6, instead redirecting his attention to the feed of the hallways. The halls were vacant at the moment, but he knew they wouldn't stay that way. There had to be a stealthier option than just strolling through the meeting room's front door.

He used the control panel to navigate through his phone's files, locating a folder of detailed scans and blueprints of military headquarters. Pulling up the files, he flicked through them until he reached the scans for the building's ventilation system.

As he'd hoped, the air duct in the ceiling of the control room connected to meeting room 6.

He crossed his fingers, hoping his squads would be able to hold out without their captain for the next few minutes. Then he muted his phone and stowed it in his pocket. His rucksack wouldn't fit in the vent with him, so he stashed it in a discreet cabinet behind a laptop charging cart. He grabbed a nearby chair, carrying it across the room and setting it on the ground beneath the air duct. Standing atop it, he retrieved a compact toolkit from his pack and unscrewed the air vent's cover, setting it quietly on the ground. Then he wrapped his hands around the opening and hoisted himself up into the vent.

CHAPTER 25

He crawled through the dark, dusty shaft, heading east. Meeting room 6 was the closest meeting room. He would only have to pass some restrooms and a supply closet on his way to it.

As he drew nearer, the faint echo of voices grew louder.

“You got no grounds for negotiation,” one of the red-sashes was saying.

Belmont’s weak but confident voice replied, “I’m telling you—you give me a guarantee that I get out of this alive, and *I’ll give you Mercury.*”

Merritt stifled the urge to speed up his crawl; if he went any faster, the reds might hear him. Teeth clenched, he continued his excruciatingly slow slither.

“And how are you gonna do that?” one of the red-sashes pressed.

“We government and military blue-ties all have tracking chips in our ties. Even Mercury has one in his, so he can be located in case of an emergency. But he can’t be tracked by just anyone.”

Merritt tensed. Belmont’s words were true, but classified. If Belmont was really on the verge of giving the West Sphere the means to track Mercury, Merritt would have to stop both him and the red-sash soldiers.

“If you have access to his tracking data,” Belmont continued, “you can see when he’s alone and unprotected, and you can target him then. You could even intercept him tonight when he comes back to the North Sphere.”

Merritt could see a square of light shining upward into the vent shaft. He was so close to the meeting room, but still a few yards away.

“So how do we track him, then?”

“Take off these chains and I’ll tell you everything.”

There was a brief shuffling noise, then Belmont took in a sharp, pained breath. “*You got no grounds for negotiation,*” the red-sash repeated. “*Tell. Us.*”

His voice breaking, Belmont muttered, “I’m going to need a second now.” A smacking noise echoed down the vent shaft, and Belmont cried, “*Fuck!*”

“We don’t have all day,” one of the red-sashes barked. “Tell us *now!*”

“Give me your word that you’ll let me go, and I’ll tell you!”

Another scuffle, and another pained groan from Belmont. “Fine. We’ll let you go—if what you say about Mercury pans out. That good enough for you?”

“Perfect,” Belmont wheezed.

“All right.” A pause. “Tell us.”

“There are mobile tracking devices,” Belmont replied, his voice still tinged with pain. “There’s one in each meeting room at military headquarters, and one in the control room.”

That was news to Merritt.

“See that, over there?” Belmont asked. “The last panel next to the row of cabinets. It doesn’t look like it opens, but it does. There’s a locked safe inside. The tracking device is inside the safe.”

Oh.

There *was* a locked safe inside the cabinet panel, but the only thing inside the safe was a pressurized canister of a SYN-12 knockout compound, set to automatically spray upon opening the door.

Merritt let out a soft sigh of relief as he inched closer to the open vent. Belmont wasn’t trying to sell Mercury out. That was good news. SYN-12, being a sister drug to SYK-21, was covered under Merritt’s immunization, but Merritt had no idea if Belmont was immunized or if he’d taken a blocker. If he knocked himself out in the process of taking

down the enemy, he'd be that much harder for Merritt to transport to safety.

"Which panel, now?" one of the red-sashes asked.

"That one. All the way on the end."

Merritt heard the faint clunk of the cabinet door just as he got close enough to peer through the opening of the vent. Below him and just a couple feet further was the top of Belmont's head. Four red-sashes still surrounded him, but the bearded man stood at the far end of the room, next to the now-open cabinet panel.

"Well, would you look at that?" the man mused. "There's a safe inside, just like you said. Now, what's the code?"

"Two-two-four-six," Belmont said.

"Hmm." The red-sash knelt beside the safe, keying in one number, and then another. After pressing the third number, he slowly rose to his feet, returning to Belmont's side. He knelt in front of Belmont and swiftly grabbed his throat. Then he growled into Belmont's ear, "*We know about the safe.*"

He kned Belmont hard in the gut, then cut off Belmont's resulting gasp with a brutal punch that sent his glasses bouncing off the nearest wall. He followed up with a shock from his stun gun that left Belmont hanging limp.

"You lost your chance," the bearded red-sash hissed. He grabbed a crumpled handkerchief off the ground, shoving it into Belmont's mouth before gagging him again with his tie. Holding him by the chin, he leaned in until his lips brushed Belmont's cheek. "I think we need to shoot another video," he whispered, "since you obviously didn't learn your lesson from the first one."

Belmont stared straight ahead, stone-faced.

"How much longer till the guys get here to take him back to the West?" one of the other men asked.

"About twenty minutes," the bearded man replied. "We got time to kill. We could do a quick video while we wait."

“Let’s give it a couple minutes,” the other man said. “I need to get my energy back up.”

Whatever they had planned, Merritt couldn’t give them a chance to do it. If he poured another vial of SYK-21 through the vent opening, everyone in the room would be out cold in seconds. But he needed to guard Belmont against it first.

He could load a SYK blocker into a syringe dart and shoot Belmont with it. But if Belmont showed any reaction, or if the reds saw the dart fly, then they might find a way to protect themselves or harm Belmont before the vial was thrown.

He had to get Belmont’s attention and give him advance warning.

As he waited for Belmont to recover from the shock, he retrieved a vial of SYK blocker and an empty syringe dart, piercing the blocker tube’s lid with the needle and filling the dart. Then, just as quietly, he retrieved his canteen and filled a standard empty syringe with water.

He waited for the red-sashes to shift their attention away from Belmont. After a minute, all except one had stepped away from his side. “Should we ask Poros to allow calls to and from the building again?” one of them asked.

“Just to send the videos over faster?” the bearded man scoffed. “Sounds like a bad idea to me.”

“No, I mean so we can find out what’s going on outside of here. I want to hear how many blue-ties are getting annihilated in the business district.”

“Still too risky,” the bearded man replied. “If we can communicate with the outside, that means the blue-ties can too.”

“Eh, I guess.”

As the red-sashes continued to converse, Merritt wriggled forward and squeezed one arm up toward the vent opening. His range was limited; he had to prop his syringe against the edge of the vent cover in order to aim through the slats. Zeroing in on Belmont’s bound hands, he carefully squirted a few drops of water through the vent opening.

The first drops hit the pipe above Belmont's head. The second landed on his knuckle with no reaction. After a third well-aimed squirt, Belmont reflexively flicked his long fingers. With a fourth squirt, he scowled through his gag and squinted up at the ceiling, probably expecting the typical rusty, leaky pipe overhead.

On the other side of the vent cover, Merritt waved a hand.

Belmont's eyes met Merritt's and kept going. Merritt couldn't tell if he'd noticed and was playing it exceptionally cool, or if he hadn't noticed at all. Maybe he couldn't even see that far without his glasses.

After a few seconds, Belmont smoothly and casually leaned back as if to rest his head. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, taking in a slow breath, then opened his eyes in the direction of the air vent. His gaze lingered on Merritt's.

Merritt gave him a nod of acknowledgement. Then he held the syringe dart and SYK-21 vial up to the vent opening. He tapped the dart against his inner elbow to signal that it was a blocker.

Belmont looked away, glancing at the bearded red-sash, then the bald one, then the still-open cabinet door. Finally, he looked back up at Merritt and gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

Merritt waited, watching the red-sashes who surrounded Belmont. As long as their eyes were on Belmont, he couldn't throw the dart.

"Let me see his phone again," the bearded man said a minute later.

The lanky man pulled Belmont's phone out of his pocket and handed it over.

"Even if it's wiped clean, there might still be a way to get in and connect to some North Sphere networks."

"I don't think you can unless you're logged in."

"Just give me a second to try it," the bearded man snapped.

Perfect. They were now all paying attention to the bearded man and Belmont's phone. The man closest to Belmont's right arm had even

taken a step forward, clearing Merritt to throw the blocker behind his back.

Narrowing his eyes, Merritt let the syringe dart fly. It struck Belmont perfectly in the inner elbow. Belmont didn't flinch.

Merritt wouldn't give the reds a second to notice it. He poured the vial of SYK-21.

In seconds, all five red-sashes fell to the ground.

Merritt couldn't unscrew the vent cover from the inside, but after repositioning himself within the shaft, he was able to unseat the cover with a few firm kicks. Once the opening was clear, he lowered himself through it and dropped to the ground.

He knelt beside the fallen red-sashes, retrieving a handful of GUS-42 syringes. Before injecting the first soldier with the lethal poison, he looked over his shoulder to see if Belmont wanted any of the men kept alive for questioning. Belmont gave him an impatient nod, and he accepted the silent order, delivering a dose to the first man's inner elbow.

As soon as he was finished with all of them, he hurried to Belmont's side and undid his gag. "Are you all right?" he asked urgently, already beginning to knot the tie around Belmont's neck.

"Just get these chains off me," Belmont replied, his voice cold.

Merritt finished tying Belmont's tie. Then he rose to his feet and examined the chains binding his wrists. They were held in place by a padlock.

Belmont gestured across the room with his head. "Key's on the bald guy."

Merritt knelt beside the bald red-sash, searching his pockets. Once he found a set of keys, he returned to Belmont and unlocked the padlocks at his wrists and ankles.

Belmont sprang to his feet, stumbling away from the pipes and running a hand over his newly knotted tie. He spotted his glasses on the floor across the room and grabbed them, examining them before sliding

them back on. Then he turned to Merritt and held out a hand. His voice shaking, he said, "Give me one of your pistols."

Merritt was taken aback. Belmont had seemed stoic and collected just a few seconds ago, but the moment he'd asked for the gun, his voice had turned white hot. Suddenly, he no longer appeared calm enough to handle a gun.

"They're all already dead," Merritt said.

"*Give it to me.*"

Belmont was Merritt's superior. Merritt couldn't refuse the order. He pulled his left pistol free and passed it to Belmont.

Belmont flipped the bearded red-sash onto his side, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a West Sphere cell phone and tossed it to the ground. Then, with pinpoint precision, he emptied the pistol into the cell phone. By the time he was finished, all that was left on the ground were tiny, scattered fragments of glass and metal.

Lips pressed tight together, he shoved the pistol back into Merritt's slack hand. Then he turned away and stalked across the room.

Merritt silently reloaded and stowed his pistol while Belmont picked his vest up off the floor and his jacket off the counter. Belmont retrieved his wiped cell phone from the lanky man's corpse. He turned away and buckled his undone belt. When he made to button his shirt, he paused at the sight of the copious red stains.

"How the fuck am I supposed to get all this dried blood out of my diamond-encrusted buttons?" he snarled. He appeared to try to collect himself for several seconds. Then he abruptly smacked a nearby chair with his palm, sending it toppling to the ground.

"Where are you hurt?" Merritt asked, his voice calm. "Let me see."

"It's not deep," Belmont muttered. "Son of a bitch just decided to drag his knife down my chest for shits and giggles." He turned away, slamming his fist on the table. "Fuck. I need to go back to my office at headquarters. I got healing cream there. I can't spend the rest of my life with a *fucking scar down my chest!*"

“You can’t put healing cream on an open wound,” Merritt replied evenly. “Let me see the cut.”

Belmont glared at Merritt over his shoulder. “What? You think you can heal it with your eyes?”

“I can give you first aid. We’ll have to get out of this room through the vent I came in from. I need to treat your cut at least enough so that you can travel with it.”

For a moment, Belmont stood silently, his jaw muscles tense. Then, finally, he turned to face Merritt. “Here it is,” he said, arms outspread and lip curled. “Happy?”

Merritt doubted that the aesthetic value of Belmont’s injury was really the main cause of his agitation, but he knew better than to press the matter. A brutal, bloody battle was being waged just outside their walls. With every second that Belmont resisted him, another soldier could fall. He needed Belmont’s cooperation—and fast. But he couldn’t afford a misstep.

He held tight to his poker face, knowing that any reaction to the cut had the potential to push Belmont over the edge. “You’re right, it looks shallow. If it’s not a severe injury, that means I need touch permission in order to treat it. Will you grant it?”

Blowing out an aggravated breath, Belmont said, “Just do what you need to do.”

Merritt gestured with his head toward the nearest chair. “Please sit down.”

Belmont sat, his body as tight and rigid as a coiled spring. Merritt pulled up a chair beside him, taking a seat on the edge and gently pushing aside the bloodstained fabric of his shirt.

It was an unsightly cut, running from Belmont’s collarbone down to the level of his navel—but as Belmont said, it wasn’t too deep. Nevertheless, its length made Merritt hesitant to hoist Belmont up into a dusty air vent and instruct him to snake his way through on his stomach.

As Merritt used a disinfecting cloth to clean his hands, he said, “I’m going to clean the cut and seal it with some skin glue.”

Belmont didn't reply. He looked furious, but at least his irritated gaze was aimed at the floor instead of at Merritt.

Merritt pulled out his first aid kit and unearthed a North Sphere antiseptic. "This is going to sting," he warned.

"*Fuck*," Belmont muttered as the liquid made contact.

Merritt finished as quickly as possible and patted the wound dry with a sterile cloth. Then, pinching the cut closed, he slowly applied the skin glue. The formula adhered immediately, zipping the wound shut from top to bottom.

"It's good to be a blue-tie," Merritt said with a smile. "We get the best skin glue."

Belmont shook his head as if he couldn't believe how lame Merritt was.

"This should be good enough for now," Merritt said as he dressed the wound. "You'll still want a doctor to check you out later. After the wound is closed, you can fade the scar with as much healing cream as you want." He began redoing the buttons on Belmont's shirt. Belmont wasn't lying; they really were diamond encrusted.

He reached for Belmont's tie, intending to redo the knot over the fabric now that Belmont's shirt was properly buttoned, but he hesitated and withdrew, letting Belmont tend to it himself.

Belmont pulled the knot of his tie loose and redid it. Then he rose to his feet and slipped his vest and jacket back on. He already seemed to be in better spirits with his wound no longer in plain sight.

Merritt retrieved Rhodes's phone from one of the dead red-sashes before he began pulling their bodies across the room. Keeping in mind the areas that weren't visible from the ceiling-mounted cameras, he lined the bodies up underneath the central row of meeting tables. He doubted that any other red-sashes could get into the control room, but this would buy him some time in case any of them found another way to tap into the security feed.

Belmont watched him work but said nothing.

After Merritt was finished, he grabbed a chair and placed it underneath the ceiling vent. Pointing upward, he asked, “Are you ready?”

Belmont nodded.

“Do you think you can pull yourself into the vent on your own?”

“Of course,” Belmont said, sounding a little offended.

“All right. Then I’ll go in first, and you can follow me.”

Merritt pulled himself into the vent shaft and crawled forward a few feet. He waited for Belmont to lift himself in before continuing.

When they reached the control room vent, Merritt eased himself back through the opening, landing on the chair he’d left underneath. He waited for Belmont to follow, offering a hand as he climbed down from the chair. Belmont was steady enough on his feet not to need the help, but he accepted the hand nonetheless.

Belmont spotted Rhodes across the room, and his face tensed. “They didn’t tell me they killed him.”

“He was already dead when I got here,” Merritt replied. He replaced the vent cover and moved the chair back to its original position, hoping to leave behind as little evidence of his movements as possible in case the room was breached again. “What happened?”

Belmont slowly crossed the room, his gaze lingering on Rhodes’s body as he spoke. “I was in here with Rhodes, and three blue-tie soldiers came to the door saying they had a report from their captain. Neither of us had any reason to think they weren’t who they said they were. But then they whipped out their West Sphere stun guns and got both of us.” He shook his head with disgust, as if it pained him to admit what had happened. “At least I had my phone set to automatically wipe itself if it gets hit with enough voltage, so they weren’t able to get any information from it. But we were both pretty fucked up from the shocks. One of them took me into the meeting room while I was mostly out cold, and those other reds showed up a few minutes later. I didn’t know what happened with Rhodes after that.” He looked around. “What happened to those three? Did they get away? How did they even get in?”

Merritt pointed toward the closet. “They’re in there. Down from CJ-486 and zip-tied. As for how they got in, I think they got their hands on a blue-tie lieutenant. We won’t know if he’s still alive until we can question the reds, but I don’t have high hopes.” He shook his head as he headed toward the control panel. “They forced General Rhodes to order all troops to Hamlin, and then they sent their own troops to invade through Division.”

“Are you serious?” Belmont asked, horrified. “How deep have they gotten?”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” Merritt said, docking his phone to the system. “I knew something was wrong with Rhodes’s order since we just put in the poison traps. Captain Balbo sent her company to Division and I brought mine here.” He pulled up the border feeds, squinting. “They’re still fighting. Looks pretty bloody, but they’re holding their ground.”

He returned to the main system status screen to make sure nothing had changed. Apparently, the rooftop security camera had been knocked down—it was now displaying only an extreme close-up of the rocky ground at a ninety-degree angle—but all else looked the same.

He switched to the outdoor view of Squads 269 and 270. They were holed up against an exterior wall and facing as many red-sashes as they could handle.

Where was the rest of his company? He unmuted his phone and radioed to his absent sergeants. “Corvus Corax. Chem Ops Corvus, what’s your status?”

“Pica Nuttalli, held up with reds on the way to Station 1,” came the reply from Squad 274’s Sergeant Lorel. “Three special ops squads with heavy gear and gas masks. They drove us backward several miles, and we’ve only just managed to put them all down. We’re at Section 4B, Corridor 2 now.”

Shit. Her squad was half an hour away. Merritt wasn’t sure if Squads 269 and 270 could wait that long for backup.

The reds at Station 1 apparently hadn’t expected much resistance, and most red squads could only afford one or two sets of anti-poison gear. But if more elite West Sphere squads were coming in with full

gear and masks, Chem Ops would be at an even greater disadvantage. Soldiers with gas masks could be shot or their masks pierced, but Chem Ops carried more poisons than bullets or blades. Would he have to bring in some Infantry squads too?

He pulled up the tracking map showing the locations of all of the North's sergeants. None were closer to Station 1 than the cluster of Corvus squads he'd just called.

"How are so many reds making it all the way to headquarters?" Belmont asked. "They'd have to get across the entire sphere. Did we get crushed at Division?"

Merritt switched over to the feed at Division. "They're still holding strong. I'm guessing the red troops at headquarters are guys 'Lieutenant Steuben' snuck across and had on standby in the region until he got a chance to open up thumbprint access to the grounds. They might have spent the past few days hiding out in vacant tunnels until their operation commenced. But we won't know for sure until we get a chance to review all the video footage."

"Got it. Either way, Mercury's going to be pissed."

Suddenly remembering his promise to Mercury, Merritt quickly gave him a call.

Mercury answered on the first ring. "Merritt."

"Damen, I'm calling to report that Belmont is safe."

"That's good news," Mercury replied, his voice betraying no emotion. "Where is he?"

"I'm here," Belmont cut in before Merritt could reply.

"Belmont, you were with Rhodes. Tell me what happened."

"Three reds disguised as blue-tie soldiers came into the control room. They hit us with stun guns and separated us; then they left me in a meeting room where there were five other reds waiting. I was able to fight them off, but it took a little while. Then Merritt came in through the air vent and found me."

Belmont's gaze lingered on Merritt as he told the brazen lie. Merritt silently bit his lip.

“All right,” Mercury said. “Merritt. Give me an update on the borders.”

Merritt flipped to another video feed. “Just now, we’ve got about a hundred reds heading into the Oakley trap.”

“Are the traps active?”

“Yes, Damen.”

Belmont leaned in next to Merritt. “I gotta see this.”

“Stay on the line,” Mercury said. “Monitor the deployment and tell me what you see.”

“Yes, Damen,” Merritt said. “They’re entering the trap now, and—”

His phone switched into intercom mode, and Sergeant Ellis’s voice crackled through, cutting into the call with Mercury. “*REDS BREACH, STATION 1 ROO—*”

A deafening boom thundered overhead, followed immediately by a second boom and a rain of plaster and debris from the ceiling. Belmont let out a startled curse before Merritt grabbed him and dove to the ground. His body felt tense, as if his first instinct was to fight Merritt, and Merritt prepared to subdue him if necessary. But by the time he pulled Belmont under the control board and shoved him into a concealed corner behind a row of drawers, Belmont appeared to have shifted from instinct to rationality. Poker face up, he looked to Merritt for their next move.

The phone. After signaling for Belmont to stay still, Merritt scrambled out from under the desk. Still on his knees, he reached up and hit the emergency disconnect button, ending the calls with Mercury and Ellis. Before he could dislodge the phone from the control board’s port and get back under the desk, someone large and heavy leapt from the new hole in the ceiling onto his legs.

It was a West Sphere soldier twice his size. Merritt’s legs had yet to register pain from the crushing impact when the red-sash grabbed them, dragging him forward. Merritt slipped his legs free and rolled onto his back, kicking the man a few steps away. His legs felt weak from the earlier impact, but they were at least enough to keep his

opponent at bay. Merritt's foot hit the man's hand, and he dropped a knife Merritt hadn't seen him carrying.

When the red-sash attempted to dive back on top of him, he threw an up-kick from his position on his back. His heel struck square on the man's chin as he was lunging forward, the force of the collision snapping his head back. The blow stunned him, possibly knocking him out. Without giving him a chance to recover, Merritt pulled out a GUS-42 syringe and delivered a stab to the man's neck.

More footsteps approached overhead. Before the life had even drained from his red-sash attacker, Merritt pulled the body under the desk, hoisting it in front of him as a cover. His flimsy hiding spot wouldn't hold up under scrutiny, but it was better than nothing.

Commotion erupted all around him as more red-sashes spilled in from the ceiling. Unable to get in through the doors, they must have gained access to the building through the roof. They'd likely detonated the thumbprint-encrypted rooftop entrance and then the third floor directly overhead. Judging by the movement and voices and footfalls in the room, he estimated a couple dozen men.

Behind him, Belmont remained still and silent. Merritt could just barely hear an occasional breath from him. The West Sphere men were talking to each other, taking note of the absence of Felton, Steuben, and Short without realizing that Merritt and Belmont were in the room.

Merritt ducked as low as possible, squinting out from underneath the feet of the desk to count the West Sphere soldiers. There were twenty in all.

As dire as the situation was, Merritt didn't want to throw another vial of SYK-21 if he could avoid it. Knockout vials were expensive and always in short supply. He only had two left, and chances were he'd need them later on.

He had no vials of lethal poison that he could throw in Belmont's presence, but he had syringe darts that could be thrown with more stealth than a gun could be fired. If he couldn't take out all twenty armed men at once, he could at least cull their numbers until he was left with something more manageable.

Still huddled behind the prone body of the downed red-sash, he pulled out ten syringe darts of DRL-8, a delayed release lethal poison. The victim of the poison would begin to weaken after one minute, fall unconscious at two minutes, and be dead at three minutes. He prepped the tip of the first syringe dart with a numbing agent, and he tied a string around the plunger's shaft just below the flight.

Belmont, seeing what Merritt was doing, grabbed a few of the syringe darts on the ground nearest to him and began tying string. Merritt gave him a nod of acknowledgment before resuming his work.

From his position behind the dead red-sash, he had just a big enough gap to throw syringes from a few different angles.

A pair of legs came into view. Merritt waited for them to come closer. The man began rummaging through debris in search of something. While he was distracted, Merritt threw his first dart. The spring-loaded syringe struck the man in the back of the knee and immediately administered the poison. As soon as Merritt could tell the syringe was empty, he pulled back on the string, retrieving the dart so no evidence was left behind.

In two minutes, the soldier would fall.

"Why would Poros and the others abandon the control room?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Maybe because of the blue-tie squads outside, holding off our lead squad. They might have gone back out to join the fight."

"That'd be stupid, though," came the reply. "We needed someone here to man the controls."

"I never said they weren't stupid."

Merritt inched forward to get a better visual. Most of the invading men stood clustered at the far end of the room. A few of them looked to be approaching the desk. Merritt ducked back behind the dead body, steeling himself.

A few sets of footsteps approached. One of them stopped short, apparently spotting the dead body. "Ugh. Looks like Crius didn't make the landing." He began to duck down.

Merritt froze still, praying that the hefty West Sphere body was big enough to conceal him from view.

“Leave him,” another man said. “We don’t have time.” He stepped up to the desk and began fiddling with the control panel.

Would they notice Merritt’s cell phone? Would they think it was out of place or assume that it was Belmont’s or Rhodes’s? As long as it was docked, the men would have full access to the control panel settings and more. At least Merritt had managed to hit the emergency disconnect button. Until he hit it again, any other incoming calls would continue to be blocked.

The man standing closest to Merritt was only an arm’s length away. He was close enough for Merritt to simply stab him in the leg with a syringe. Waiting another moment for his foot to slide under the desk, Merritt stuck him just above the cuff of his boot.

Two down, eight to go before he ran out of pre-loaded DRL-8.

Through a gap next to Crius’s neck, Merritt threw a dart at the man who had been about to check him out. He managed to reel it in again without being spotted.

The poison would need extra time to take effect. From Merritt’s tight spot under Crius, he had only the rare split second to throw darts unnoticed, relying on speed and the debris scattered around the desk to conceal his longer throws. There was barely time to put effort into proper aim, and none of his throws were gaining clean hits to a vein or artery. At this point, the best he could hope for was simply to pierce flesh.

“Whoa,” one of the men said. “Lucky, take a look at this.”

Another man approached the desk, and Merritt quickly injected him. “What?”

“Look at Hamlin.”

There was a stunned pause. “What the fuck? What happened to all our men?”

“No idea. They’re all just dead. I don’t even see any blue-ties around. And there were supposed to be a *lot* of blue-ties around.” The man called across the room, “Matton, look at this.”

Another target came into view, followed by yet another. Merritt injected both. Six down.

“What’s going on at Division, then?” Matton asked.

The man at the controls pressed a few buttons. “There’s a lot more blue-ties than we were counting on. How do they have so many soldiers there?” He leaned forward against the desk, gasping. “Shit. I can barely see straight.”

“I thought it was just me,” a voice said from across the room. “You think they released a poison in here?”

“I feel fine,” another man said. “Do we have video of the squads just outside the building?”

“You find it,” the man at the controls said. “I can’t... ugh....”

Another pair of legs crowded the opening under the desk, and Merritt stabbed with another syringe dart. “It looks brutal out there. The blue-ties are surrounded, but they’re still holdin’ out. I don’t think they’ll last very long, though. It’s three to one.”

“Good. If we just...” The man at the controls collapsed.

“What the fuck?” The nearest red-sash attempted to pick up his fallen comrade, only to be interrupted by the sound of another body falling near the door.

“Shit,” Matton said. “It must be some sort of poison. We better get out of here.”

Merritt narrowed his eyes as he watched them. They wouldn’t be able to exit as long as the thumbprint sensors were disabled. Matton tried the door. “Fuck!”

“Lemme try,” a red-sash said from across the room.

“What, you think you can open a door that I can’t?”

“Just get out of the way.” Another red-sash came into view. Merritt wanted to throw another dart, but with everyone clustered in the area, Merritt doubted he could make the attack unnoticed.

The man tried the door, with no luck. “See?” He tried to take the door down with a kick, but it was too sturdy. “Someone must have turned thumbprint access back off after Poros turned it on.”

“Check the control panel,” Matton said. “See if there’s a way to disable the lock.”

The man who’d kicked the door approached the desk. Merritt threw a dart the moment he was close enough. The man typed something and hit a few buttons. “This control panel is complicated as fuck. There are about a million screens.” He growled. “See, this is why Poros was supposed to stay in the control room. He’s the one who actually knows his way around this shit.”

Merritt heard the sound of two more men crumpling to the ground. The nearest soldiers spun around, drawing their weapons. “What the fuck is happening?” one of them cried.

Two more fell.

Merritt took in a steadying breath. Two injected soldiers remained standing, and he still had two syringes.

When the soldiers crowded around the door to try to break it down, Merritt knew he had to relocate. He couldn’t throw darts toward the door from his hiding spot. He signaled with his hand for Belmont to stay still; then he slipped out from under the desk and ducked behind a large pile of debris barely a foot away. He listened for any signs that he’d been spotted. After hearing nothing, he peered out from behind a massive sheet of plaster.

A few of the soldiers held their shirts over their noses and mouths as they searched the room for exposed pipes. A red-sash with a black braid pointed at the ceiling vent and yelled, “I bet it’s coming in from there!”

Most of the red-sashes ignored him, but one approached, his shirt held up to the bridge of his nose. As the two soldiers turned away to examine the vent, Merritt crawled behind another pile of debris on the

right side of the desk to get closer to them without becoming exposed to the mass of soldiers on the desk's opposite side. Quickly, he unleashed his remaining two DRL-8 syringes on the men, reeled them back in, and ducked back behind the sheets of broken plaster.

He saw a flash of movement by the desk, followed by a rustle and a *thunk*. The movement also caught the eye of one of the red-sashes by the door, who let out a warning cry and fired his pistol.

"That's just fucking Crius," one of the other men barked, elbowing him in the side. The West Sphere corpse, no longer held up by Merritt, had finally slumped to the ground. It now had two gaping bullet holes to complement the discreet GUS-42 puncture wound.

The man with the pistol shook his head. "Nah, dead bodies don't move on their own. I'm checking." He headed toward the back of the desk, followed by the two men who had previously been examining the vent.

Merritt thought fast. If the red-sashes started inspecting under the desk, they'd find Belmont. Why hadn't he at least thought to give Belmont a weapon before leaving him alone?

The massive desk still sat between Merritt and the group of soldiers. If he stayed low and close, he could remain concealed while throwing darts. But Belmont was on the verge of being discovered. He had to divert their attention from the desk, even if it meant revealing himself.

He remembered the trick shot he'd used against Colonel Harding during their special training session. He'd never used it in battle, and now was a hell of a time to test its efficacy against multiple live targets. But all he needed was to draw the reds away from Belmont without getting shot. All the better if he could take down a red or two in the process.

One of the men began moving broken sheets of plaster on his way to the desk, and Merritt grabbed five syringe darts of GUS-42 from his pack in preparation. As the sounds of shifting debris concealed his movements, he dive-rolled out from his hiding place, throwing all five darts the moment his feet left the ground then landing on the back of his shoulder behind the laptop charging cart.

After righting himself, he peered through the ventilation holes in the steel cart. Four of the five syringes had struck their targets. The fifth had clinked off the metal door and fallen to the ground. Merritt knew he'd been spotted during his leap—he'd seen two or three heads turn his way—but apparently none of those men had lived to tell.

He'd wanted a distraction. Had he really just thrown the darts so successfully that his plan had failed?

"Someone's here!" the man nearest the desk yelled as his allies fell. "I told you!" He dashed back toward the door, and Merritt breathed a sigh of relief. "Look—syringe darts!"

The other soldiers looked, and Merritt took the split-second opportunity to throw another handful of GUS-42 darts, focusing less on precision than on speed. He'd miraculously managed to hold onto his cover until now, and he wouldn't blow it without good reason. He needed the darts to fly fast enough that the reds couldn't discern their origin.

The darts shot through the air so swiftly that they sang. Four earned sloppy hits, but one struck a soldier already too weak from DRL-8 to dodge it. The fifth missed entirely, but moments later, another soldier fell from DRL-8.

Five of twenty soldiers remained standing, which meant that two of the five would eventually succumb to their DRL injections. None of the five were clustered tight enough for Merritt to take them out together with his trick shot.

"Search the room," one of the men said. "Open fire on anything that moves."

The men scattered, and Merritt held his breath. He knew he'd be discovered; he just needed to count on having faster reflexes than his opponents.

Gunshots sounded, and Merritt's breath caught. Had they spotted Belmont?

"Heh, nothing behind *that* pile of plaster," one of the men mused before taking three more shots. "That one's clear too."

Footsteps approached.

Another step closer, and another. Merritt held his syringe dart at the ready.

The nearest red-sash's diffused shadow came into view before the red-sash himself. Merritt let the direction of the shadow guide his aim, throwing the dart even before the man appeared in front of him. He heard a startled gasp, and the man crumpled to the ground, finally entering Merritt's line of sight.

The remaining four men reacted. Two of them opened fire. A shard of steel blasted off the corner of the computer cart, slashing half an inch above his eye as it flew past his face, and another bullet perforated the metal panel inches from his shoulder. He dove around to the other side of the cart and threw two more darts. One hit a target. He felt a flash of pain across his thigh, but he kept moving until he reached a chunk of concrete debris large enough to cover him.

He was too close to the desk now, and he prayed that the soldiers had good enough aim not to hit it by accident.

Across the room, a red-sash collapsed in the midst of firing his gun, succumbing to his DRL injection.

One of the two remaining soldiers had close-cropped brown hair. The other had a black braid. Merritt recognized the braided man; he'd been injected with DRL-8. Merritt only had to take down his comrade.

Bullets whittled away at the edges of his concrete cover. Praying that the block would hold for just another second, he grabbed a GUS-42 syringe dart with his right hand. With his left, he retrieved a vial of FTS-2, a chemical compound that, when exposed to air, would produce enough heavy smoke to obscure the room for at least three minutes.

Ducking out from behind the fallen rubble, he threw the syringe dart. It struck the nearer soldier in the neck. As soon as Merritt saw that he'd landed a clean shot, he threw the vial of FTS-2. He'd be just as obstructed by the smoke as his opponent, but all he needed was to outlast the already-poisoned red-sash.

The red-sash cursed, firing his gun blindly into the billowing black fog as it grew to overtake him. Merritt scuttled across the room, keeping low. He remembered another pile of concrete rubble nearby and attempted to crawl toward it.

The deafening gunshots ceased, and Merritt suspected the soldier had run out of bullets. He might have been reloading. By the time Merritt's ears stopped ringing, it was too late for him to recognize the sound of footsteps barely a foot away. The full weight of a body descended upon him.

He rolled over, ready to fight off his back, but the body atop him only flopped lifelessly in response to his movements.

The red-sash hadn't jumped him. He'd simply died on top of him.

Merritt let out a delirious laugh before catching himself. By his math, every red-sash in the room should have been dead, but he didn't want to reveal his location in case more arrived through the hole in the ceiling.

The fog was clearing faster than usual, thanks to the expansive hole above. Merritt waited for visibility to return before circling the fallen bodies. He examined each one to make sure it was solidly dead.

Once he was satisfied, he returned to the desk, ducking down and motioning for Belmont to crawl out. "It's all clear," he said.

Belmont pushed himself up to his feet, eyes wide as he stared at the scattered dead red-sashes throughout the room. "I can't believe you just... killed *all* of them... without even using a poison vial. But I would have rather not had to sit through a goddamn gunfight." He narrowed his eyes. "And was that you *giggling* a minute ago? I was about ready to come out from under the desk and kick your ass for that."

Merritt's attention had already shifted to the control panel. It was a good thing the latest batch of red-sashes couldn't figure out how to navigate through the maze of menus and windows. All the settings were exactly as Merritt had left them, and none of the equipment was damaged from the fight. Merritt ended the emergency disconnect and radioed to Ellis and Mercury. "Corvus Corax reporting, reds breach in control room contained. Twenty reds down."

After receiving confirmation from Ellis and silence from Mercury, he returned his attention to the active security feed. It showed massive West Sphere casualties at both Hamlin and Oakley. The bulk

of the North Sphere troops at Division were faring well, but Merritt's squads outside Station 1 were still surrounded.

Merritt wouldn't be able to go to their aid until he got Belmont to safety. He returned to the first floor security feeds. It looked like the red-sashes had given up on trying to break through the door to the safe room, but they still occupied the hallway.

"Belmont." Merritt gestured toward the computer screen. "I'm going to escort you to the safe room. It'll be a risk. There are red-sashes all around, but not more than I can handle. If you're willing to follow my lead, I can get you there."

Belmont didn't respond. His gaze was fixated on the control board monitor, and Merritt could see something in his eyes akin to horror or panic.

"What is it?" Merritt asked.

After a strained pause, Belmont muttered, "I didn't realize you had a feed of the meeting room."

Merritt looked at the control board, noticing for the first time that the minimized feed of meeting room 6 was still active in the upper left screen. He felt Belmont's dread echo within his own body when he remembered the discussions he'd overheard through the feed.

"It was just audio when I got here," he said in an attempt to placate Belmont. "They'd disabled the video."

"It's video now."

"I hooked it up after I got here. It's how I found you. The video's only been recording for a few minutes."

Belmont didn't look convinced. If anything, his jaw muscles went even harder. "We need to erase that," he said adamantly. "The rest of the footage is fine, but we need to clear that room."

"It's part of the official record," Merritt protested. "There are at least three military and government branches that are going to need to review it."

"*Merritt!*" Belmont stepped forward, barely inches away from Merritt. "As your superior, I'm ordering you to erase that feed."

Merritt gritted his teeth. “The thing is, I don’t actually have the clearance for that. Even with my secure phone, I can’t access the raw video files themselves.”

“You can hack into it.”

Maybe he could. But they didn’t have that kind of time.

“My soldiers are out there fighting. I don’t know how long they can hold out without backup. And more reds can come in through the ceiling at any second.”

“I’m *asking* you....” For the first time all night—for the first time ever—Merritt heard desperation in Belmont’s voice. “Just erase this, and then go out to your squad. You don’t need to escort me to the safe room.”

“I really do, though.”

Belmont grabbed Merritt’s arm, squeezing it in a manner that felt more distressed than threatening. “If you have to choose between escorting me and erasing the feed, erase the feed.”

Merritt clenched his fists. There was no ignoring the odd, anxious energy that emanated from Belmont.

He needed to do it all. He’d erase the feed, get Belmont to the safe room, and then return to his squad. It was his duty, and he’d find a way. But if he wanted even a remote chance at succeeding, he couldn’t argue any longer.

He set to work at the control board, using his phone’s security tools to override the administrator login for the video database. Behind him, Belmont watched his actions with rapt attention.

He kept one eye on the combat feeds as he worked, knowing that time was tight. Fortunately, the credentials stored in his phone gave him direct access to the raw files, and the only hacking he had to do was to prevent those credentials—and any file changes—from being recorded by the system. The video files were broken up into half-hour chunks and sorted by identification number. Merritt couldn’t tell at a glance which number corresponded to which camera.

When he opened a video to see which room it covered, Belmont's grip bit into his shoulder. "Why can't you delete the files without actually watching them?"

"I just need to see which group of videos goes with meeting room 6. I'll only need to watch a few seconds."

Belmont didn't reply, but his grip on Merritt's shoulder remained sharp.

At last, Merritt opened a video that showed the empty meeting room 6. "Found it," he said.

Once he closed the video, Belmont let out a heavy breath and released his shoulder.

"What time frame do you want me to clear?" Merritt asked.

"Do the past two and a half hours."

Merritt selected the five files, deleted them, then purged the deleted files. There was no turning back now.

"And just to be clear," Merritt asked, "you're okay with us keeping all the footage from the control room?"

Belmont snickered. "How about you clear out the part where you hack the control panel and start deleting security footage?"

"I suppose I can do that," Merritt replied wryly. He located the currently active feed for the control room. "I'm going to use a virus to corrupt the file. It'll look like it just got corrupted by chance. We can justify the missing files for the meeting room, but I think it'd look too suspicious if we deleted this one outright." He transferred the malicious file from a folder on his phone, infecting the video.

"All right. That's it." Finally, he reversed the changes he'd made to the database permissions and closed out of the system. Back on the control board, he swiped through the security feeds to make sure they were all still active.

He went cold with dread when he saw his squads surrounded by more red-sashes than they could ever dream of holding off. They were about to lose their barricade and were fighting for their lives.

He clenched his fists. “I need to help them. But I still need to reinstate thumbprint access and get you to the safe room and—”

Belmont pointed to the hole in the ceiling overhead. “Can’t you just go out through there?”

“Yes, but I need to get you to the safe—”

“For fuck’s sake, just leave me here,” Belmont said. “If you have a few poison vials to spare, I should be able to defend myself for a while.” When Merritt looked hesitant, Belmont added, “You want me to make it easier and *order* you to leave me here?”

Taking the hint, Merritt rummaged through his packs. “Will you be okay with just vials, or do you want darts too?”

“Vials are fine. Maybe a gun if you can spare one. And some standard syringes. I don’t know how to work syringe darts.”

Merritt pulled out a handful of five-milliliter glass vials, setting them atop the counter and sorting them by type. He counted out the vials he had to spare and slid them a few inches over. “One vial of SYK-21 and one blocker. Two vials of SRX-4 and one blocker. Six syringes of GUS-42.” He pulled a pistol free from his holster. “Here. I should be all right with just one.”

Belmont frowned at the stockpile of weapons on the counter. “You can really afford to give up that many?”

Merritt wasn’t sure. He was giving Belmont more vials than he had left for himself. He was handing over his only SRX blocker. But he couldn’t leave Belmont unprotected. “I’ve got plenty more,” he said.

With a nod, Belmont took the gun and poisons.

“The only way anyone will get in here is if they come in through the ceiling,” Merritt said as he retrieved his rucksack. “I’ll do whatever I can to make sure no one gets past me.”

He took his phone and got ready to hoist himself atop the edge of the control board counter, but before he could climb up, Belmont grabbed his hand. Merritt turned to him, brows furrowed.

Belmont opened his mouth to speak but apparently thought better of it. He continued to hold Merritt’s gaze, but his lips remained pressed

tight. Finally, he gave Merritt's hand a hard, yearning squeeze. "Don't get yourself killed."

Merritt squeezed back. "Same to you."

He brushed aside a pile of debris and climbed atop the control board's side counter. With a high jump, he grabbed onto a ceiling beam and pulled himself up into a vacant third floor storage room.

Being empty and unused, none of the third floor rooms were thumbprint-protected. He stepped out of the storage room and into the main corridor.

The path to the rooftop exit was barely a few feet away, but it was blocked by heavy chunks of stone and concrete from the explosion. He'd have to take the corridor that circled the floor and come at the exit from the opposite side.

Halfway down the path, deafening gunshots erupted. At the first hint of West Sphere soldiers emerging from around the corner, Merritt dove behind a nearby pillar and held his pistol at the ready. Bullets chipped the sides of the pillars and punched holes in the wall behind Merritt. He took aim, shooting down two red-sashes before a bullet tore through his reinforced metal fiber suit jacket and nicked his arm. It was just a surface wound, but it was enough to get his attention.

He took cover behind the pillar, waiting until he knew he could fire effectively before leaning out and taking aim. Two more reds went down.

He ran out of bullets. Rather than reload, he grabbed a handful of his preferred syringe darts. The men were expecting bullets at this point. He threw the first dart, hitting the red-sash clean in the neck.

The last enemy soldier stood around the corner, out of Merritt's direct line and firing off rounds as if he were spraying a garden hose on a hot summer day. Merritt knew just the shot to take him down, but it was another trick shot he'd only ever performed at bars. He waited for a lull in the gunfire then threw his dart like a boomerang at the nearest window. The dart hit the glass and ricocheted, earning a dirty but effective strike to the arm. The red-sash fell, and the deafening roar of gunfire finally ceased.

Merritt took the moment of silence to reload his pistol and fill a few new syringes. Then he continued down the hall. At last, he approached the back ladder leading up to the roof. From this side, he could reach it.

Switching his phone to intercom, he said to his squads, “Code 12 in 60.” This was a warning to them that he was about to deploy a vial of the SYK-21 knockout drug, and that they’d need to protect themselves with a blocker. They’d been in battle for a while and had undoubtedly already thrown plenty of SYK themselves, so chances were they’d already taken blockers. But the warning was protocol.

Merritt climbed the ladder, peering out through the hole that had been blown in the heavy metal hatch overhead. Within the limited visual scope available to him, he saw no movement and no signs of enemy soldiers. He retrieved a small mirror from his tool pack to check the areas behind the hatch. All appeared clear. He stowed his mirror and opened the hatch.

The moment he emerged onto the roof, he was slammed to the ground and pinned by the weight of a heavy body. Disoriented, he looked up at the West Sphere soldier who straddled him with a knife drawn.

Merritt had no idea where he’d come from. He’d possibly been hiding behind the nearby HVAC unit, but Merritt had no time to give it a second look. Merritt caught his wrist before he could strike with the knife, but he landed two clean jabs with his other hand and followed with a hook that Merritt only partially blocked.

Merritt managed to wrench the man’s wrist hard enough to loosen his grip on the knife. Once he was disarmed, Merritt elbowed him hard enough to leave a gaping cut across his cheek. The man’s gun was within easy reach in his holster, but Merritt didn’t dare grab for it. If he hadn’t used it to shoot or shock Merritt the second he’d climbed onto the roof, it was probably empty or damaged.

Merritt tried to land another blow, but the man used the opportunity to slip past his guard and mount his chest.

With unfettered access to Merritt's face, he rained down blows from above. Merritt blocked a few, but one of the blows struck the cut above his eye and opened it wider. He blinked away blood.

As long as the red-sash was sitting on his chest, he couldn't reach his poison packs. But the red-sash's knife still lay on the ground—a weapon the red-sash apparently hadn't thought to grab since he believed he was easily winning the fight.

Merritt reached above his head, grabbing the knife and swinging in a clean arc toward the red-sash's throat. The blade slashed the palm of the red's hand as he blocked. Merritt followed up with a second jab, this time sinking the blade into the red's gut. The enemy soldier fell to the ground, wheezing and sputtering.

It was a potentially lethal blow, but Merritt wouldn't leave the red-sash to die slowly—or to survive. He followed up with a GUS-42 syringe and watched the soldier's eyes glaze over.

Adrenaline lifted him to his feet despite the latent aches and pains running from head to toe. His pants leg was soaked with blood, but he could barely remember when his left thigh had been wounded. He ignored it.

After checking to make sure no more West Sphere soldiers hid on the roof, he ran to the front of the building. Without exposing himself to the enemy, he peered carefully over the edge of the roof, surveying the area below.

Blood continued to trickle past his eyelashes. He wiped it with the back of his hand and blinked to clear his vision.

The vast crowd of West Sphere soldiers had Merritt's squads backed against Station 1's outer entrance. Squads 269 and 270 appeared to have just lost their hold on the barricade and been forced to flee with no protection other than their fan shields. Private Attrill took a bullet to the leg, and Merritt suppressed his flinch.

He narrowed his eyes at the enemy troops, thinking to himself how unwise it was for them to group themselves together so closely when they were up against the North Sphere. Judging by the number of West Sphere bodies strewn about on the lawn, he suspected his squads had already exhausted their supply of wide-range knockout vials, but

Merritt still had one left, and its active radius was enough to cover the bulk of the crowd.

“Code 12!” he cried over the intercom as he threw the vial down into the center of the crowd. It hit an exposed patch of concrete between the feet of three soldiers. The vial shattered, and moments later, the West Sphere soldiers in the crowd began to fall.

Merritt pulled out his phone, remotely accessing the control board and re-enabling thumbprint detection. Then he spoke into his phone. “Corvus Squads, thumbprint access to Station 1 has been enabled. Enter, deploy FTL-4, follow with DRK-10, and report to the roof. Corvus Enca, Vultur Gryphus, Felis Nigripes: report to control room and guard 45. Code 4 in 60.”

Merritt watched as his soldiers entered through the back door. From his position on the roof, he picked off any remaining reds who tried to follow his troops and gain access to the building. A few blue-ties quickly gathered spare munitions off the ground to replenish their supplies before catching up with their fellow troops at the door. Once all his blue-ties were inside, he tossed a vial of SRX-4—a lethal poison with an extremely short range and short life—into the center of the pile of unconscious red-sashes. The single vial would be enough to wipe out the entire unconscious group without reaching his own soldiers, and it would dissipate in minutes. Merritt had given his only blocker to Belmont, but at his elevation, he would be safe from the poison’s effects.

Shortly after, Merritt’s soldiers began to emerge through the rooftop entrance, led by Sergeant Ellis. Ellis had a bad gash across his cheek, and one of his sleeves was soaked with blood, but he appeared strong and lucid. “Long-lasting fog trap and delayed release knockout poison have been set for the first floor corridor, sir,” he reported, taking his spot by Merritt’s side. “We also killed seven reds standing guard in the corridor.”

“Good,” Merritt replied. “And 45?”

“SSA,” Ellis replied.

Merritt breathed a sigh of relief. Belmont had been safe, secure, and alone when the Corvus troops had found him.

He watched as his soldiers continued to file in through the rooftop entrance. Some were weak and worn, some badly injured, but aside from the three he'd ordered to guard Belmont, all were miraculously accounted for.

At Merritt's direction, they took offensive positions along the perimeter of the roof, weapons at the ready. As they rained bullets, darts, and poison vials upon the scant remaining West Sphere soldiers on the grounds below, Ellis said with a tilted grin, "You came out of nowhere, Captain. I didn't expect you to be able to back us up."

"I was hoping to make it out here sooner, before there were any casualties."

"We tried to guard Station 1's entrance, but a few red squads made it past our defenses. We nearly lost three privates from 270." He pointed to the rooftop entrance, where Wells and Carroll were administering first aid to the three most gravely injured soldiers.

"We won't lose anyone," Merritt said with determination as he fired a shot into the crowd below.

At Merritt's other side, the bruised and bloodied Private Nicolet gave him a grateful smile before turning her attention back to the West Sphere soldiers.

After the last red-sash in sight went down, Merritt and his squads stood guard for several more minutes. No more enemy soldiers appeared.

"Do you think we got them all?" Nicolet asked.

In the distance, Merritt spotted motorcycle headlights, and he tensed. But when the vehicles came into view, he recognized his Chem Ops company's familiar bikes and uniforms.

"Our backup is finally here," Ellis said wryly.

"I need to go back to the control room to monitor the troops at the borders." Merritt wiped another trickle of blood from his eye. "269 and 270, hold your position on the roof."

"Yes, sir," Ellis replied. "We got it covered from up here."

“I have no doubt,” Merritt said, shooting Ellis an encouraging smile as he circled back to the rooftop entrance.

CHAPTER 26

Nothing brought Merritt more satisfaction than the sight of West Sphere soldiers retreating. Red-sashes were known for their tenacity, and it took an especially humiliating defeat to send them running. Shortly after Merritt's Chem Ops company secured Station 1, Balbo's company—with the help of the reinforcements Merritt had initially sent from the Station 1 control room—managed to overpower the invaders at Division. The Hamlin and Oakley poison traps wiped out so many red-sashes that the West Sphere didn't dare to send any more troops to either corridor.

After the fog trap and knockout poison had cleared from the first floor, the Station 1 staff was finally permitted to open the safe room door. Blue-tie specialists met them inside, assessing their condition and administering first aid as needed. Several squads stood guard around the perimeter of Station 1, with more remaining on the roof and yet more working to temporarily secure the holes that had been blown open by West Sphere soldiers.

The bodies of fallen red-sashes were tossed unceremoniously from the building—to be returned as ashes to the West Sphere via their water supply—while the bodies of Rhodes and the fallen blue-tie guards were moved temporarily to a basement holding room. The injured soldiers and civilians were taken into the onsite infirmary and stabilized, and the civilians who weren't hurt congregated in the first floor cafeteria. Merritt handed the control room over to Lieutenant General Meade then stopped by the infirmary to check on his wounded soldiers.

He poked his head through the door. Near the center of the room, a medic fished a bullet out from Attrill's thigh. Attrill met Merritt's gaze, and they exchanged a nod.

At the cot nearest the entrance, Wells was stitching a bad gash on Sergeant Ellis's arm. Ellis was watching him work with detached curiosity. When they spotted Merritt, they greeted him with victorious grins.

"Hey there," Merritt said, returning their smiles with his own gleeful flash of teeth.

"We got them to *retreat*, sir," Ellis said. "How often do you see red-sashes retreat?"

"They'll be reeling from this for months, if not years," Merritt replied. "The poison trap casualties alone will be difficult for them to recover from. And the way you held them off outside Station 1 was even more impressive. They outnumbered you, and they were still crushed. The West will be embarrassed."

"They sucked every bit as much as you always said they did," Ellis replied, a secretive glint in his eye. Merritt had to fight back the urge to hug him.

"May I look at your injuries, sir?" Wells asked.

It took Merritt a moment to realize Wells was talking to him. He'd forgotten he was injured at all. "It's just a few minor cuts," he said. "Please tend to everyone else first."

"They don't look so minor, sir," Hoxie said as she entered the infirmary behind him. She held out a hand as she passed, which Ellis slapped in greeting. "We *lived!*" she called—the customary chant for blue-tie soldiers in the infirmary after a battle. Her comrades cheered in response and returned the chant.

"I can clean and dress your cuts after I finish with Sergeant Ellis, sir," Wells said after the commotion died down. "We don't want to risk infection."

Merritt was tempted to decline again, but as his adrenaline continued to fade, the aches and cuts and bruises began to overtake his attention. Giving Wells an acquiescent nod, he took a seat on a spare stool beside Ellis.

After Wells finished with Ellis, he thoroughly washed up and began treating Merritt, starting with the wound above his eye. Merritt

remembered his first day as Wells's sergeant, when Wells had passed out at the sight of a fellow soldier's bloody nose in training. Now, he sewed Merritt's wound shut without a flinch.

"I didn't think we'd get out of this one, sir," Wells said as he worked. "When we were backed up against the door, I thought it was the end. We were out of SYK and SYN, and we didn't want to throw any lethal vials because some of us had run out of blockers. My job right now would look a lot worse if you hadn't come out to help us."

"I'm glad I could have your backs. But you all held your own beautifully in the meantime. I couldn't have asked for more."

Ellis leaned against the wall, arms crossed, a contemplative look on his normally intense face. "I wonder what Mercury will do about replacing General Rhodes."

Merritt frowned, the realization hitting him like a lead weight. Having been focused on his duty to protect Belmont and his troops, he'd barely processed the fact that General Rhodes was dead.

Rhodes, a loner who'd devoted his every waking hour to his work, thankfully wasn't leaving behind any close loved ones outside the military. But his soldiers would feel the loss. Merritt would feel the loss. In the months that they'd begun to work more closely with each other, Merritt had grown to respect him in new ways. Rhodes had been a true ally to him.

Another ally. Another person up high who'd had Merritt's back, and now he was gone. Merritt had no idea who would take his place, but he couldn't even imagine a scenario that would work out in his favor. Unless Balbo was offered the job—which was unlikely since she was only a captain—the spot would likely be filled by someone who saw Merritt as an unworthy squatter among commissioned officers.

His position in the military had only been bearable in the past months because he'd been cleared to bypass Harding and go straight to Rhodes. What if Rhodes's replacement had as much disdain for him as Harding? What if it was Harding himself? The last thing he needed was to be stuck with another boss who had it in for him.

There was no point worrying about it now. The matter was out of his hands, and he still needed to make sure the recovery effort was going smoothly.

After his wounds were patched, he thanked Wells and headed for the cafeteria to check on the uninjured civilians. It was past two in the morning and most had already gone home, but some lingered, and Merritt felt the need to assess their mental states. For some of them—low level servants, cafeteria cooks, administrative assistants, new hires—this might have been their first time facing a life-threatening attack on the job.

He was relieved to see most of them seated casually at the dining tables, chatting and smiling and laughing over their late dinners. None appeared to be terribly shaken by the evening's trauma.

“Hey,” someone called behind him. He turned to see a middle-aged man wearing an expensive suit. “You were the one giving orders up in the control room, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Merritt replied. He wasn't sure if the man was about to say something complimentary or insulting.

“They better give you a big fat raise after that,” he said. “We'd probably all be dead if you weren't up there.”

“Thank you, sir,” Merritt said with a warm smile. “I'm just glad everyone is safe.”

He continued into the room, scanning the area for anyone who looked like they needed aid. It wasn't until he squinted past the half-open door into the elite dining room that he spotted Belmont, seated on the floor with his back against the wall. He was staring fixedly across the room at nothing.

Merritt knew the look on his face. He'd seen it on the faces of his comrades after their worst battles. He'd seen it countless times on Ellis during their one-on-one training. Belmont was likely playing the day's events over and over in his head, drowning in a swirl of memories and regrets.

He remembered Belmont's fervent insistence that he erase the security video from meeting room 6. The intensity in his voice hadn't

been that of someone who just didn't want their boss to catch them in a lie.

It wasn't his place to ask what was going on in Belmont's head. But he knew by looking at Belmont's face—he *knew*, more than anything—that he couldn't leave Belmont alone to be consumed by his thoughts.

After grabbing a wrapped sandwich from the buffet counter, he braced himself and headed into the elite lounge. Belmont glanced up at him as he stepped inside, his eyes looking more tired than Merritt had ever seen them.

Merritt took a seat beside him, saying nothing as he held out the sandwich.

Belmont stared at it, and Merritt half-expected him to curl his lip and deride the peasant-quality food, but instead he said neutrally, "I already ate."

Another expertly delivered lie. But Merritt would give him an out. "No one says you can't have two dinners," he replied with a clumsy smile.

After a moment of staring at Merritt with narrowed eyes, Belmont finally shook his head and grabbed the sandwich. "Why the fuck are you like this, Merritt?"

Merritt hoped Belmont would unwrap the sandwich and eat it, but he just held it in his hand.

Belmont's gaze shifted over Merritt's hands and legs and feet, as if to avoid looking into his eyes. "I don't get how someone as soft as you can be so good in battle."

"Soft?" Merritt asked.

Leaning forward, Belmont crossed his arms and propped his elbows on his raised knees. "You could have let them kill me, you know. *You* could have killed me, and said it was them. It would have solved all your problems."

Merritt shot him a playful grin. "Kind of narcissistic to assume you're the cause of *all* my problems."

“Well, what other problems do you have?”

Merritt leaned back and stretched out his legs in front of him. “Pigeon crap on my motorcycle every morning. Burnt food at the mess hall. Hangnails.”

Again, Belmont shook his head. “You’re such a fucking nerd.”

Merritt couldn’t argue. But at least he seemed to be succeeding at distracting Belmont. When Belmont finally began peeling the plastic wrap off his sandwich, Merritt felt a rush of joy so strong it caught him off guard.

Halfway through eating, Belmont slowly lowered the sandwich. Staring across the room, he said in a deceptively casual manner, “I’ll probably be out of a job now.”

Merritt waited silently for him to elaborate.

“If Mercury finds out what happened, he’ll never want to keep me on.” A heavy sigh. “He wouldn’t consider me worthy of the job anymore.”

It took Merritt a moment to find his words. He hadn’t expected Belmont to be so candid with him. “I don’t think that’s true,” he said at last. “You were ambushed. And you managed to survive. Not everyone did.”

Belmont blew out a disdainful puff of air. Clearly, he wasn’t convinced.

“When you were in the meeting room and I heard you say the thing about the tracking devices, I thought you were ready to sell Mercury out. But you had his back after all. I think Mercury would have recognized that, if he’d had a chance to see it.”

With an abrupt laugh, Belmont shook his head and said, “Believe me, I would have sold out Mercury in a heartbeat if I thought there was any way to get an honest guarantee of safety from a red-sash. Mercury knows that.”

Merritt didn’t reply. He wasn’t sure if Belmont was genuine or if he was just putting up a front to avoid appearing subservient.

Belmont leaned his head back against the wall, closing his eyes for a few seconds. When he spoke again, his voice was soft, almost reluctant. “I’m right hand to a fucking *King*. I’m the second most powerful person in the North Sphere. I’m one of the ten most powerful people in the entire underground. I thought....” He cleared his throat then gave a hollow laugh. “There are certain things—certain dangers—I thought I wouldn’t have to worry about anymore.” He let out a heavy sigh and opened his eyes. “I guess you just can’t ever let your guard down in the underground.

“I think you can,” Merritt said. “Maybe not always. But little moments here and there, I think you can.”

He almost said, “Like now,” but he caught himself. Treacherous as the North was, every blue-tie deserved to confide in *someone* without fear of betrayal. Merritt wasn’t sure what it would take for that fear to resurface in Belmont and shut down their conversation.

Belmont gave him a subtle sideways glance as he continued eating his sandwich.

He’d just finished and crumpled the empty plastic wrapping in his hand when a long, broad-shouldered shadow spilled across the threshold. Mercury stepped into the room, his suit as perfectly pressed as ever, without a hair out of place.

Merritt sighed in relief at the sight of his King, safe and unharmed. He rose to his feet to greet Mercury. Belmont remained seated, staring up at Mercury in a manner casual enough to seem rude.

“Damen,” Merritt said, eyes wide. “I’m glad to see you’re all right.”

“I had quite the hefty guard detail to escort me back to the North.” He cocked his head. “Likewise, I’m glad to see you’re all right. The odds seemed stacked against you.”

“It’s what we’re trained to handle,” Merritt replied.

“You were badly outnumbered, though.”

“Calculated use of poisons will always beat reckless brute force.”

Mercury gave an approving smile. "I couldn't have said it better myself. Regardless, I'm impressed with your handling of the situation."

"It was an honor to serve," Merritt replied.

"Of course." Mercury glanced at Belmont. "I'll look forward to reviewing the security feeds to see how you pulled it off. In the meantime, we have extra crew coming in ten minutes for cleanup. We'll want to get military headquarters back in working order as soon as possible." To Merritt, he said, "By the way, we have enough military here that you can go home and get some rest. Meade already passed the word along to your company after the reinforcements arrived. I'd venture to guess you all had a long day."

Merritt nodded with gratitude. "Thank you, Damen. If my services are no longer needed for the night, I'll head home."

Gazing down at Belmont, Mercury said, "Emergency board meeting at nine tomorrow morning. We have a lot to talk about. You'll be there."

It wasn't a question, but Belmont said, "Yeah, I'll be there."

"Good." Giving each of them one last glance and nod, Mercury left the room.

Merritt watched him go, wondering if he should go back through the cafeteria to check on the civilians again. From his view through the half-opened door of the elite lounge, he could see that there weren't many people left. The cafeteria had really cleared out in the last few minutes, and Merritt couldn't blame the staff for wanting to get home. He'd have expected even the last stragglers to leave sooner.

He could check on his soldiers, but it had barely been a few minutes since he'd last seen them, and he didn't want to hover over them. With recovery efforts going unexpectedly well, it was hard to know who was the most in need of his help.

"So you're going back to the barracks now?" Belmont asked from his seat on the floor.

Merritt hesitated. He wasn't expecting the question. "Are you going back to your suite?"

“It’s either that or I sit here and stare at the wall for another hour.”

Merritt spotted a slight shift in Belmont’s gaze.

There was his answer. He knew where he was needed.

“I wouldn’t mind staring at the wall a little more,” he said.
“Staring at the wall sounds nice.”

He dropped back to his seat beside Belmont.

CHAPTER 27

If Merritt's troops had ever doubted his claim that he'd have their backs in battle, they now had proof. In the days after the West Sphere attack, they seemed more dedicated than ever to giving Merritt their best performance in training. His company had survived its most difficult battle to date, and they'd come out of it stronger than ever.

Balbo's and Palmer's companies both fared well, but Palmer couldn't be excused for having failed to account for his lieutenant's absence. Colonel Harding, who'd always favored Palmer and had apparently fought to let him keep his job, lost the fight in the end. As a last courtesy, he gave Palmer a choice of either demotion to private or leaving the military. Palmer chose to leave, and one of his remaining lieutenants was promoted to captain.

Tensions between North and West eased after the battle. The North was satisfied that their victory had taught the West a lesson, and the West, still reeling from their massive losses in the poison traps, seemed intent on avoiding further confrontation at all costs. According to the gossip Merritt overheard at Yackley's a few days after the battle, even the East was on alert. Never before had they taken the North's military so seriously.

On Wednesday morning, two and a half weeks after the battle, Merritt was called to the boardroom at North Sphere Headquarters. Merritt knew no details about the nature of the meeting. All he had was a standard automated alert on his phone requesting that he confirm the date and time.

He arrived outside the glass wall at nine, just in time to see Mercury's advisors filing out of the room. Pratt and Evans turned up their noses at him as they passed, which wasn't anything new. Merritt waited for them to clear the way before stepping inside.

The only people left in the room were Mercury and Belmont. They sat side by side at the far end of the table. Behind them, projected on the wall, was a still video surveillance shot from the Station 1 control room on the night of the West Sphere attack. Merritt could see himself in the midst of diving out from behind a pile of rubble to throw a handful of syringe darts.

He couldn't help wondering if he was in trouble, if perhaps Mercury was upset with him for having made a mistake or breached protocol. Had Mercury found out that Merritt had cleared some of the video footage?

"Merritt," Mercury said. He gestured with his head toward a chair on the opposite side of the table. "Sit."

Merritt pulled out the chair and took a seat. He looked back and forth between his sphere leaders. Mercury sat with his fingers laced together, an almost pensive look on his face. Belmont was slouched in his seat, looking as obnoxiously relaxed as he could get away with in Mercury's company. After his ordeal at Station 1, he seemed to be back to his old self, at least by all outward appearances.

He looked like he was holding back a smile. More than ever, Merritt knew that he was in trouble. He could think of nothing else that would make Belmont look so happy.

Had Merritt's efforts to protect Belmont meant nothing? Had their quiet moment in the elite dining room amounted to nothing? Merritt couldn't read Belmont's expression.

"How are your soldiers?" Mercury asked. "Recovered?"

"We still have three from Chem Ops Corvus in the infirmary, but the rest are back on their feet."

"Good." Mercury gestured toward the projection behind him. "We just wrapped up a meeting about you."

Merritt swallowed, waiting for Mercury to continue.

"I showed my advisors the security footage of the West Sphere attack at Station 1. Your assumptions about how the invaders got in undetected seem to be supported by the video evidence. Unfortunately,

we're missing about two and a half hours of footage from the meeting room where Belmont took cover. Any idea what happened to it?"

Belmont's smile faltered.

Merritt felt the heat build up inside his shirt. *I'm about to lie to my King. I can't believe I'm about to lie to my King.*

What troubled him the most was that he knew he was going to do it. There was no debate in his mind. Any doubt he'd felt was pushed aside at the sight of Belmont's tight lips and shifting eyes. "I believe the red-sashes were intending to use the room as their home base. When I reviewed the security feeds, I found that they'd disconnected the video for meeting room 6. Once I had the chance, I went through the controls and enabled the feed again."

"I see." He glanced at Belmont out of the corner of his eye. "Then I suppose we only have Belmont's account of what happened over there. Unless you're able to provide any additional details?"

"I'm sorry, Damen. I wasn't present inside the meeting room until after the reds had fallen. Belmont knows far more than I do about what happened before that."

Technically, he hadn't lied. Being inside an air vent wasn't quite the same as being in the room. But his conscience—and his sweat glands—failed to recognize the distinction.

"Ah." Mercury's face showed no reaction. After a pause, he glanced at Belmont then back at Merritt. "I had to make a difficult decision today, Merritt. And I feel it's prudent to inform you that I do not have the full support of my advisors, but I do have the support of my right hand. I don't know how your comrades in arms will take the news. I doubt my decision will gain their full support either. But it is my decision to make." He narrowed his eyes at Merritt.

Merritt blinked uneasily, like a lizard trying to keep still under the watchful eye of a hungry bird.

"Merritt. I'm naming you General of the North Sphere Army."

Merritt's eyes widened. He couldn't possibly have heard right. "I'm sorry?"

Mercury looked mildly amused by Merritt's stunned response, but he continued speaking with no change in tone. "Your performance on the field—both physical and tactical—was flawless. You stood in for Rhodes and issued orders to our entire military that brought us a significant win with relatively few casualties. I don't think there are many other captains, or even colonels, who could have done the same."

Merritt could barely wrap his head around Mercury's announcement. *I just lied to your face, and now you want me to be your general?* He resisted the urge to glance at Belmont, but he could see out of the corner of his eye that Belmont's subtle cocky smile had returned. "Damen... I'm concerned that I lack the experience that some of our more seasoned commanders possess."

"Experience is all well and good, Merritt, but what I want is someone who can take our military to the next level. Rhodes had a lot of good things to say about you before his unfortunate demise. Your unit's performance has excelled due to your willingness to experiment with new training techniques. And your performance against the West was first rate. Most importantly, you're still malleable. You have the potential for growth on the job. And if you're short on experience, there are plenty of military advisors and commanders available to you for consultation. One of your strengths is the ability to seek input from your superiors and work with them to achieve the best results possible. That much was proven with your poison trap project."

"Balbo's company also had an amazing victory," Merritt said. "I think she—"

"Merritt," Mercury cut in, eyes narrowing. "I'm naming you my general. This is an order I'm giving you as your King. Do you accept it?"

Merritt swallowed. "Yes, Damen."

"Good." Mercury cracked a smile. It was relaxed and genuine, and it immediately put Merritt at ease.

Mercury rose to his feet and extended a hand. Merritt rose and shook it, sealing the deal. At last, he felt relaxed enough to smile back at Mercury. If he dared to let himself think about it, his promotion was actually a wonderful thing.

As the North's general, he'd no longer be a peasant in the eyes of the board. He'd be a true part of the team. He'd be one of the people making top level decisions in the best interest of his troops. Maybe he'd even be one of the people Mercury would smile at and talk to almost as a peer—the way he did with Belmont, and the way he had with Coulter and Higgins.

Still standing, Mercury said, “Merritt, I’m sure you’re familiar with the chain of command. As general, you will report directly to my right hand. Belmont.”

Merritt's breath died in his throat. His smile fell away, and he gaped at Mercury in shock. He couldn't feel his heartbeat.

Belmont's previous half-concealed smirk was now a full, wide grin of victory. He rose to his feet, holding out his hand for Merritt. “I’m looking forward to having you as my direct report, Merritt.”

Merritt stared down at Belmont's hand. He was hesitant to shake it, but he could feel Mercury's gaze burning into him. Holding his breath, he finally took the hand, accepting Belmont's hard squeeze.

For a split second, he remembered Belmont grabbing his hand in the control room and saying, meaningfully, “Don't get yourself killed.” This squeeze of his hand felt like that one. Did it carry the same intent? Or was Belmont back to his old self now that he no longer depended on Merritt for safety? Merritt couldn't tell.

But *something* wasn't the same as before. He knew that much.

“Well, Merritt,” Mercury said, circling around the table on his way to the exit, “you'll want to start packing your belongings. I've already arranged to have the general's quarters prepared for you. The announcement of your promotion will go out this afternoon.”

Merritt nodded vacantly. He was still stunned.

“We'll be in touch,” Mercury said. Giving Merritt a congratulatory pat on the shoulder, he headed out toward the elevators.

Belmont said nothing as he passed Merritt, giving no hint of his intentions. He simply shot Merritt a fleeting half-smile as he followed Mercury out the door.

Merritt waited until they were both out of sight before slumping into the nearest chair and lowering his face into his palm.

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