

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY



SHOBANA 'BOB' APPAVU

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Devoted: Merritt's Story | Chapter 1

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PART I

CHAPTER I

“ATTENTION!”

Sergeant Rush’s booming call crackled through Merritt’s limbs, rousing him from the edge of sleep. Reflex outpaced his lagging brain, launching him off his saggy mattress. Before his feet hit the ground, he snatched his North Sphere blue tie off the bedside rack and slung it loosely around his neck. By the time he was awake enough to recognize his surroundings, his body had already adopted the proper position: chin high, feet together, and hands clasped behind his back.

Across the barracks, the rest of his squad followed suit, some soldiers springing to their feet and others barely rolling out of bed. Merritt was no more well rested than the others. Against his better judgment, he’d snuck in an extra hour of computer work late the night before, and it was only the sleep enhancer pill he’d taken at bedtime that gave him the illusion of being refreshed the next morning.

He blinked to clear his bleary eyes, but he was still seeing double—two superiors across the room instead of one. A count to three with his eyes squeezed shut, and when he opened them again, his stomach gave a nauseating flip. Still two figures. Sergeant Rush was not alone as he’d expected. At his side stood Colonel Harding.

What is he doing here?

There had to be a reason, but neither sergeant nor colonel gave an explanation for the higher-up’s presence. Sergeant Rush cleared his throat. “Soldiers! State your pledge.”

Eyes shifting to the oval portrait of the North Sphere King on the far wall, Merritt plastered on his best poker face. He could feel Colonel Harding’s gaze dragging daggers across his skin.

He spoke in unison with the privates around him. “I, Merritt, am a soldier of the Underground North, duty sworn to sphere and King. You, Damen Mercury, are my King. My life is yours to preserve and yours to take. My life—”

Merritt’s cell phone buzzed on his nightstand.

“—is your property, and I grant you the power to use my life and my death to the benefit—”

Another buzz. Strange. Who would be texting him at this time?

“—of our sphere.”

Three more buzzes in rapid succession.

“Live to serve my sphere, die to—”

Two more buzzes.

“—serve my—”

Buzz.

“—sphere.”

Pledge completed, the room returned to silence, only to be broken three seconds later by another buzz from Merritt’s phone. He pursed his lips, wishing he’d stored it atop his folded socks instead of on the wooden nightstand where every buzz turned into a chaotic, echoing clatter.

He could still feel the colonel staring at him. Was he being rude to ignore it? Was he supposed to return the gaze?

Merritt met his eyes and immediately knew he’d made the wrong choice.

Colonel Harding passed Sergeant Rush, deliberately knocking into him with his hefty shoulder and forcing him to sidestep out of the way. He strolled so slowly his path appeared aimless, but his narrowed eyes remained on Merritt. After passing several rows of bunks, he stopped barely two feet short of Merritt. “Tell me, Private. What correspondence are you getting that’s so important it’s worth disrupting your pledge to the North Sphere?”

“I apologize, sir. No correspondence is important enough to disrupt my pledge, sir.”

Colonel Harding’s gaze seared into him, but he returned it unflinching. It wasn’t unusual or even considered disrespectful for a soldier’s cell phone to buzz during the pledge, as long as the soldier wholly ignored their phone and didn’t falter in their recitation. But by now, Merritt was no longer surprised to be singled out by the colonel.

“If it wasn’t important, then why did you look at your phone during your pledge?”

“I didn’t look at my phone, sir.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No, sir.”

“Then you’re the liar?”

“I’m not lying, sir.”

Colonel Harding took a step forward, inching so close that Merritt whiffed the smoky remnants of a chemical joint on his uniform. Down below, a hand as thick and veined as a cut steak grasped a baton. Merritt remained still, determined not to move his line of sight while he was being examined.

Colonel Harding raised the baton, knocking it against the bone of Merritt’s hip. He slid it up to Merritt’s waist while scrutinizing his face for any sign of a reaction. Merritt put all his effort into maintaining his poker face. After a long pause, Colonel Harding lowered the baton. “If we all had to listen to your phone’s disruptive buzzing, we deserve to hear what the buzzing was all about.” He gestured toward the nightstand. “Go grab it.”

Anxiety brewed. Merritt had no idea who had been texting him so urgently. Was it Torrence, expressing gratitude that Merritt had accompanied him to the nightclub on the border despite wanting to stay home and read last night? Would he mention the guy who’d pulled Merritt onto the dance floor and later slipped a scrawled phone number into the waist of his pants? Of all the nights for Merritt to have tried to have a life beyond training and studying, why did it have to be last night? No one in the underground would have viewed Merritt’s

comparatively chaste behavior as scandalous—save someone who'd long held a grudge and was itching to use anything within reach as a weapon.

Colonel Harding noted his hesitation, his mouth twisting into a cruel half-smile. "Pick up your phone."

Merritt grabbed his phone.

"Turn it on and read the newest message you got."

Bracing himself, Merritt used his thumbprint to activate his phone. When he saw the newest message, his heart lurched. He blinked, wondering if he'd read it correctly.

"Who is the message from?" Colonel Harding asked.

Merritt wasn't ready to give an answer. He wasn't even sure if the message was meant for him.

"Answer me, Private."

"Anonymous sender, sir. Their identity is concealed."

"Then un-conceal it."

"No, sir, I mean the sender concealed their identity, so I can't see it."

"Don't talk to me like I'm stupid," Colonel Harding snarled. "This is the underground. We're all on the grid. We can't send anonymous texts."

"Anyone with high security clearance or sufficient hacking skills can obscure their identity, sir." This was common knowledge, and yet Merritt knew he'd made another mistake in checking his superior's challenge.

Colonel Harding swiped the phone out of Merritt's hand. He looked at the first message, and his mouth tilted into a smile that fell somewhere between confused, incredulous, and pleased. He scrolled through several messages before handing the phone back to Merritt. "Tell everyone what the newest message says."

Merritt swallowed, wetting his throat. "It's a photograph of a poison syringe dart."

“And what does the text say?”

“It says, ‘Watch your back, sweetheart.’”

Colonel Harding’s smile widened. “Read the next message.”

Again, Merritt swallowed. “Anonymous sender. ‘Fucking arrogant traitor, you’ll hang for what you did.’”

Oh. Suddenly, Merritt knew why he was getting these texts.

“The next,” Colonel Harding said.

“Anonymous sender. ‘You think you’re so smart. Your days are numbered.’”

“Next.”

“Anonymous sender. ‘Wait till I get you alone. I’ll...’”

“Read it.”

“‘Wait till I get you alone. I’ll break both your legs and—’” his cheeks flushed crimson, “‘—fuck your ass and then snap your neck and let the West Sphere pass around your dead body.’”

Colonel Harding let his satisfied smile linger on Merritt for an uncomfortable length before returning his attention to the other soldiers in the room. Pacing back down the narrow clearing between the two facing rows of bunks, he said, “Back to the matter at hand. Chemical Operations Privates, I will be leading an extra training session today at ten, in place of Sergeant Rush. We’ll have an important guest observing our session, so I expect you to give me your highest level of obedience. Anyone who dares to show signs of disrespect during our training will face severe consequences. Chem Ops is touted as the most talented unit in the North Sphere military. I expect you to live up to your reputation in front of our guest.” He shot an intimidating glare around the room. “Now, I’ll return you to your sergeant.” To Sergeant Rush, he gestured over his shoulder at Merritt and spat, “Keep that one in line, Rush.”

He was almost out the door when he turned his head. “One more thing.” His gaze flickered to Merritt and then back to the rest of the room. “Be sure you all read the news today.” As he disappeared through the doorway, he shot Merritt a fleeting, cruel wink.

Merritt watched the colonel leave, his cell phone gripped tight in his clammy hand. Sergeant Rush wrapped up the day's orders before leaving the privates to ready themselves for the day's training.

Merritt wanted to check the news feed on his phone before heading to the showers, but before he could turn his phone back on, a voice beside him asked, "Make any enemies lately?"

Merritt turned toward Pierce, the private who slept in the neighboring bunk. Trying not to stare at his haphazardly strewn blue tie, Merritt replied, "Who knows? This is the underground. I'm surprised it's taken me twenty years to get my first anonymous death threat."

Pierce grabbed his towel and toiletries without further question, and they followed the throng of soldiers toward the showers. As they stalled behind the crowd, Merritt snuck a glance at his phone. By now, he had a good idea of what might be in the news, but he had no way of predicting the specifics.

He scrolled past the underground's main feed and clicked on the North Sphere's local news. At the top of the list was a breaking news article highlighted in red. His heart pounded.

Technology Professor Implicates Student in Intelligence Database Hack

Beside the headline was his photograph.

"Did you check the feeds?" Belmont asked as he slid into the booth seat across from Damen Mercury. "Big news. *Scandalous* news."

Mercury set his fork down beside his half-eaten eggs, dabbing his mouth with a napkin. He took a brief glance around the crowded café before turning his attention to Belmont. "Normally, Belmont, I'd admonish you for your constant need to embellish and exaggerate every piece of gossip that brushes your ear. But this time—"

"So you *have* checked it," Belmont said with a grin.

“The North Sphere’s Intelligence Database gets hacked, the culprit is revealed, and you’re asking me if I read about it in the news? What kind of a King would I be if I let a dozen journalists uncover these developments before me? That’s not how I lead my sphere.” He raised an eyebrow. “And you, Belmont—normally, you’d be the one bringing this event to light. But when Higgins and Coulter and I were closing the investigation at four in the morning, you were nowhere to be seen.”

Mercury’s icy gaze dissolved the grin from Belmont’s face, but Belmont didn’t falter. “I was pursuing another angle. You’ll love it once I tell you about it. Mannheim got his entire team to—”

Mercury set down his cup of coffee, the *clunk* interrupting Belmont’s sentence. “Mannheim is lucky I’m letting him live. He’s my intelligence director. This security breach falls on his shoulders.”

Belmont resisted the momentary urge to stand up for his childhood friend; it was better the blame fell on Mannheim than on Belmont. “What about the hacker?”

“We’re picking him up today.”

“I thought you would have already picked him up.”

There was a subtle tug at the corner of Mercury’s mouth. Belmont couldn’t tell what it meant, and Mercury said nothing.

Belmont turned to the waitress hovering a few feet away and pointedly ordered the exact same breakfast as Mercury, deviating only for Charisma-infused coffee rather than the Calm infusion. Mercury gave him a sideways glance but made no comment.

“I’ve already started on damage control,” Belmont said. “That’s what I was working on this morning. I assigned a team to dig into the hacker’s background and find anything we can use to smear him. We were told that this kid was a student at the School of Technology, but get this: he isn’t even a legitimate student. He’s a soldier. He’s *offal*. He didn’t have the money, the lineage, or the connections to get into that school, but that didn’t stop him from hacking the registration records and sneaking into whatever classes he wanted.”

Belmont searched for any hint of a reaction on Mercury's face. Nothing.

"Can you imagine?" he continued. "An elite school being infiltrated by offal? The guys in Tech were pissed when they found out. They were already sending him death threats by the time I left the lab. I wouldn't be surprised if they take justice into their own hands before we get a chance to arrest the kid."

At last, Mercury responded with a raised eyebrow. "You're telling me this as if it's favorable news."

"Isn't it? It's the perfect distraction from the *monumental embarrassment* we have on our hands. What will our sphere think—what will the other spheres think?—when word gets out that a halfwit soldier from the slums was able to break through the security system designed by our sphere's top tech masterminds? If we make sure everyone knows he snuck into multiple elite schools, sat in on their classes, and *stole* information intended only for elites, people will crucify him instead of ridiculing us."

"I don't want anyone touching the hacker. Not before I have a chance to talk with him." Mercury looked up from his coffee. "The School of Technology didn't teach this student how to hack the Intelligence Database. He got in and out without leaving a trace in the security logs. We only knew there had been a breach because he'd left deliberate evidence."

According to the reports, the hacker had replaced the entire department's computer desktop images with a looped video of a raven reeling up a piece of meat dangling from a string. On top of the video, he'd superimposed an excerpt of the faulty code he'd exploited to get in. Belmont couldn't make sense of it.

Mercury took another sip of coffee. "I want to know how this kid pulled it off. I want to know why he did it. And I want to hear it straight from him."

"I get it, I get it. But I hope you're not telling me to pull back on my smear campaign. This kid might not have damaged the database, but he's done who-knows-how-much damage to our sphere's reputation. The best way to regain that respect is to destroy him, either

literally or figuratively. Once I'm done establishing him as a public enemy, no one will even remember that the Intelligence Department fucked up." Belmont leaned back in his seat, almost casual. "It's a genius plan if you think about it. And hopefully it'll ease your mind until you get a chance to talk to the hacker yourself."

"Why would you think my mind needs easing?"

"Because I've never seen you drinking Calm before."

Mercury had been about to take another sip of his coffee; his eyes gave the tiniest sideways flicker before disappearing behind the rim of his mug. Belmont let slip a sly half-smile.

North Sphere specialty chemical drinks were typically served in a test tube alongside their mixer, but only clear or alcoholic drinks changed color to match the added infusion. Mercury had emptied his test tube into a cup of coffee showing no sign of Calm's telltale blue tint.

"The quickest way to know how a man thinks is to know how a man drinks," Belmont said. "I'm your top advisor for a reason. Maybe someday soon I'll be your right hand—once you see that old man Higgins isn't pulling his weight."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Mercury said, his poker face flawless.

Belmont shrugged off the dismissal. He was content to have gotten Mercury's attention. Mercury didn't need to know that he'd bribed a waiter on the way to the table in order to find out what his King was drinking.

Bribes aside, Belmont had already known that the news of the student hacker would be weighing on Mercury. The North Sphere prided itself on the scientific and technical excellence of its elite citizens. Mercury was more likely to forgive a physical attack from a rival sphere's military than an attack on the perceived intellectual capabilities of himself and his closest allies. The hacker hadn't destroyed or taken any data; what he'd done could only be interpreted as a taunt aimed at the Intelligence Department. This was a greater insult than if the hacker had infected the system with malware, and

Belmont was surprised that Mercury was even interested in talking to the kid rather than putting out an immediate hit on him.

The database had been hacked two days ago—an event that had left the Intelligence Department scrambling to cover their asses before the news spread throughout their sphere and possibly beyond the borders. Once word got out, there would be no hope of containing it. The underground’s rampant gossip culture guaranteed that news of the breach would reach the farthest recesses of their isolated little world.

Even on those exasperating days when the mechanisms of gossip worked against him, this was still Belmont’s favorite part of living in the underground. It kept him on his toes.

Although the breach had been in the news for a couple of days, it wasn’t until the early morning hours that the hacker’s identity was made public by his professor. Apparently, the student had hacked the Intelligence Database for his thesis. The professor, after giving the student an A for his successful project, did what he was required to do in allegiance to his sphere leadership. He reported the breach to the authorities. However, despite his student’s clear culpability, he insisted that the student be praised for his skill rather than reviled for what many would surely perceive as an act of treason.

The gossip was already spreading by way of the hacker’s classmates—uncontainable, like a drop of ink on wet paper. But Belmont had a skilled enough hand to coax its direction.

“This is no small matter,” Mercury acknowledged after a long pause. “Our sphere’s programming capabilities put the East and West to shame. The rest of the underground envies us for our technological skills, and the South is constantly trying to poach our experts. The fact that a student could have breached security in such a flawless and undetectable manner—and for a school project, no less—means that either the Intelligence Department is cutting corners or the student is an unmitigated genius. I want to find out which.”

Genius? Belmont felt an immediate surge of jealousy, but he hid his reaction. “Well. You can’t say our schools aren’t driving their students to be ambitious. Hacking the Intelligence Database for your thesis? Whatever happened to just writing a fluff paper?”

Mercury raised an eyebrow. “I seem to recall rumors that you developed a new poison and killed your dean for your thesis at the College of Science and Medicine five years ago.”

Belmont grinned. “I got an A for that too. My prof *hated* the dean.”

Mercury’s phone buzzed. He retrieved it and glanced at the screen. “It’s my chief investigator. He’s confirmed the location of the hacker.” He rose to his feet, tossing several dollar bills onto the table.

At first, Belmont was disappointed that he wouldn’t have more time to schmooze or glean information off his King. Then he remembered that it was Saturday, and he had the day off. He rose and followed Mercury to the door. Mercury gave him another raise of the eyebrow, but he didn’t shoo Belmont away.

The café had been unusually busy even for a Saturday morning, and nearly the entire parking lot was filled with motorcycles—the standard transportation for citizens of the Chicago Underground given the short, narrow tunnels they often had to traverse. Having VIP access, both Mercury and Belmont had parked in the reserved spots nearest the café’s entrance. They mounted their motorcycles, and Belmont followed Mercury out of the lot and down the paved streets of the North Sphere’s business district, residing at the southern tip of the North Sphere and along the North-Neutral border. Just a few meters overhead was the Chicago Loop—so close, yet entirely inaccessible to citizens of the underground.

They traveled nearly all the way to the opposite end of the sphere, stopping one district south of headquarters. If they’d been on the surface, they’d have been just south of Rogers Park. The military district was markedly rundown compared to headquarters, the business district, or any elite residential districts. The roads were cracked and crumbled like the dregs of a battered bag of chips, butting up to brick buildings streaked green with mold. The pungent scent of impure water was inescapable.

Belmont hated dealing with the military. Even high-ranking officers still had that persistent dank smell to them.

They passed the Military Academy—the only school where the student hacker was a legitimate attendee. No self-respecting elite saw much value in the curriculum offered by the Academy. The classes were rudimentary at best and frequently interrupted by battles that the students had to fight. The underground was lucky if it saw even a month of peace between its four spheres, and schooling took a backseat to combat from the moment a soldier turned fifteen. Soldiers only served one purpose: as human shields between the elite and the enemy. The less educated they were, the better.

On this, Belmont and Mercury agreed. Mercury's philosophy was that the brains belonged in the executive office, not in the field. Unlike the East Sphere, which was run by its military and which lauded its soldiers, there was no prestige in being a North Sphere soldier. Orphans and low-ranking children were automatically funneled into the military. They fought not because they were great fighters, but because they lacked the greatness to do anything more.

Belmont hated that Mercury was giving this hacker so much latitude—and so much attention. It was *annoying*. Mercury had investigated the security breach for two days straight, but for some reason he'd stopped short of hauling the hacker out of bed and into the military prison for immediate questioning. Instead, he was taking time out of his day to casually observe the kid during training.

Mercury, the reputed “coldest man in the underground,” was known to have a soft spot for young male prodigies. He scented them out like a bloodhound, giving them prestigious government jobs, mentoring them on his lunch breaks, and molding them in his image. Belmont had been there, done that, and lived out his own glory days under Mercury's wing. But Belmont had never had to commit treason to get Mercury's attention. And Belmont wasn't offal.

Despite Mercury's many criticisms of Belmont's lack of obedience, he appeared fascinated by this delinquent hacker. The fact that the kid had seen fit to attend additional courses beyond what was offered at the Academy should have been a red flag to Mercury. What made the student hacker believe he was entitled to an elite level education?

Soldiers in the underground were said to be unruly, self-serving, and disobedient, especially compared to what Belmont had read of soldiers on the surface. He was willing to bet this hacker was the worst of the lot. It was the type of entitlement an elite like Belmont could get away with due to the greater contributions he made to his sphere, but it should never be excused when coming from the lowest ranks of the North.

Mercury pulled to a stop outside the military training grounds, and Belmont stopped alongside him. They climbed a half flight of stairs and entered an observation deck overlooking a vast open field, which was divided among several different military units training on different equipment.

The North Sphere's offensive specialty was poisons and chemical warfare, as reflected in the techniques on display across the training grounds. In the distance, the Waterways Unit swam laps and performed diving drills. Border Defense rotated through a firearms course.

Currently, the mobile observation deck was stationed in the midst of the Chem Ops Unit's soldiers. One group of men and women threw practice syringe darts at moving targets, while another group positioned several stories up threw dummy vials of wide-range poisons at a massive target on the ground. Yet more soldiers utilized a climbing wall and obstacle course.

Lincoln, the chief investigator, stood waiting inside the observation room, which was equipped with multiple cameras and computer monitors on both desks and walls. A pair of technicians manned a vast control panel to track multiple angles of action and provide replays. Facing the training grounds on the one wall not adorned by video monitors was a wide two-way mirror. It offered a live view of the nearest squad as they trained in hand-to-hand combat barely ten feet away. The squad had no way of knowing when they were being watched, and by whom.

One of the sparring fighters caught Belmont's eye. He looked to be barely twenty years old, his spiky blond hair bouncing with each airy step he took. Shirtless and wearing only boxing gloves and threadbare trunks, his agile form was on full display. Lean and lithe, precise and technical—his session could have passed for a

choreographed dance. Belmont observed the appealing sheen of light sweat on his abs as they flexed and twisted with each movement. He followed the shimmer up the sinews of the fighter's neck and then to his face—handsome, and barely hard-edged enough to pass for a fighter's face.

“You got my attention, honey,” Belmont mused.

As he watched, the rival fighter took a swing, but the blond parried the blow, rushed him, knocked him to the ground, and rolled him into a leg lock. Their sergeant immediately broke them apart, and the other fighter winced and rubbed his knee. The blond got back up, bouncing on the balls of his feet as if he were still in the middle of a fight. As he drew nearer, Belmont could see that his eyes were blue—and frustratingly pretty.

“Oh, shit,” he muttered, the realization hitting him. He dug his cell phone out of his pocket and pulled up the article that had been released that morning about the hacker. He looked at the photo and then back at the fighter with the pretty eyes.

It was him. Belmont hadn't previously examined the hacker's headshot too closely, and he certainly hadn't expected the hacker—who sported a nerdy, awkward smile in his photo—to be so captivating in person.

“That's him,” Belmont said to Mercury before Lincoln could steal the glory of the revelation from him.

Mercury's gaze followed the path of Belmont's gesture, his eyes narrowed.

“Nice body, right?”

Mercury gave Belmont a sideways glance that might have been one of irritation. He said nothing, and Belmont didn't press the issue even though he knew Mercury would have agreed. For a supposedly straight guy, Mercury sure had a tendency to surround himself with attractive men.

“So he really is military,” Mercury said at last, turning to Lincoln.

“He is,” Lincoln said.

“Age?”

“Twenty. Like everyone else, he was drafted as a reserve soldier in his mid-teens, but he’s only been on full-time active duty for two years. According to his file, he’s still taking classes at the Academy, and he’s only a handful of credits away from a four-year degree. Not that he’d have any use for one.”

“What is this about him sneaking into classes at elite colleges?”

“He’s taken several courses at the School of Technology and the College of Science and Medicine.”

“How are his grades?”

“At the Academy or at the colleges he crashed?”

“Both.”

Lincoln glanced at his file. “Perfect grades at the Academy, but that means nothing. Those classes are remedial. He got a handful of A’s at the other colleges, but he withdrew from several courses too. His professors mentioned he wore cheap clothing and didn’t always show proper etiquette, and he occasionally dozed off in class or didn’t even bother to show up. But he performed well on his tests and projects, so they never had reason to suspect he wasn’t a legitimate student. Non-elites just don’t have that level of mental ability.”

“Then he really is a genius,” Mercury mused.

“Or he’s just a halfwit soldier taking enough brain-enhancing drugs to make his eyeballs twitch out of his skull,” Belmont said. “No way can anyone keep that kind of schedule unless they’re downing sleep enhancers every night and drinking Focus every morning.”

“His chemistry professor said he sometimes came to his weekend classes too jittery to hold a pencil,” Lincoln supplied. “Probably excessive use of sleep enhancers.”

Belmont turned to Mercury as if to say “I told you so,” but Mercury’s eyes were on Lincoln. “Drugs can give him the extra hours, but not the aptitude. And let’s be honest, we all use them. This kid isn’t a halfwit. But if he’s that smart, what’s he doing in the military?”

“He was an orphan from a low-ranking family, so he was funneled into the military automatically. Orphans with a big enough inheritance can usually bribe their way into the commissioned ranks, but he probably had nothing. For what it’s worth, his captain says he’s a damn good fighter.”

“So he’s good at everything, then?” Belmont asked, rolling his eyes.

“Apparently not good at dressing himself,” Lincoln said, pointing as the hacker got his head stuck in the sleeve hole of a shirt he was trying to put on.

Mercury turned around to examine the hacker again. “What’s his name?”

“Merritt.”

“This captain you speak of—where can I find him?”

“Her,” Lincoln corrected. “She revised her gender records six months ago. Balbo, Chemical Operations Captain. We were speaking just a moment ago.” Lincoln scanned the area and then spotted the soldier he was looking for. He gestured for her to approach. “King, this is Captain Balbo.”

The captain gave a brief bow of the head to show her respect.

“Balbo, the King has some questions about one of your fighters. Private Merritt.”

Captain Balbo must have known about the latest news, but she had an excellent poker face. “How can I serve you, King?”

“Tell me about Merritt.”

“He’s my best,” Captain Balbo said without hesitation. “Smart, athletic—he puts in the work and follows orders without question. I’ve never had a problem with him, and I trust him with my life on the battlefield. No one throws a syringe dart as clean as he does.”

Mercury took the file from Lincoln and thumbed through it. After a pause, he returned his gaze to Captain Balbo. “It says here that he has two black marks on his record.”

Captain Balbo shifted uncomfortably, but her poker face remained.

“You claim he’s the ideal soldier, but two black marks? That’s the most severe disciplinary action one can get without being booted to the Shield Squad. With these marks, he’d be barred from ever rising above the rank of private.”

“That’s true, King,” Captain Balbo said, looking guarded.

Mercury skimmed the file in his hand. “It says here he received the marks for intoxication and insubordination. That hardly sounds like the obedient soldier you described.”

“I believe the disciplinary marks were given in error, King,” Captain Balbo said.

“They were given by your commanding officer. Colonel Harding.”

“That’s correct, King.”

“You disagree with your superior?”

Captain Balbo raised a defiant eyebrow. After a long pause, she finally said, “Yes, King. I do.”

Mercury and Belmont exchanged a glance.

“Colonel Harding will be heading a special training session with the Chem Ops Unit today, King,” Captain Balbo said. “He’s scheduled to start any minute now. I understand you planned to stay and watch the session, and I’m glad. I’m sure it will be revealing.”

On the other side of the two-way glass, the fighters toweled off and changed into their formal training gear in preparation for their special session with the colonel. Belmont watched the hacker emerge from behind a low partition, having switched out his trunks for a crisp pair of pants. He donned a clean fighting jacket and North Sphere blue tie over the cut-resistant tank he’d previously wrestled his way into. The uniform suited him well.

Lincoln turned to Mercury. “What do you want me to do, King?”

Mercury observed the hacker for a few more seconds, a slight smile on his face. “Let them finish their training session. And then arrest him.”