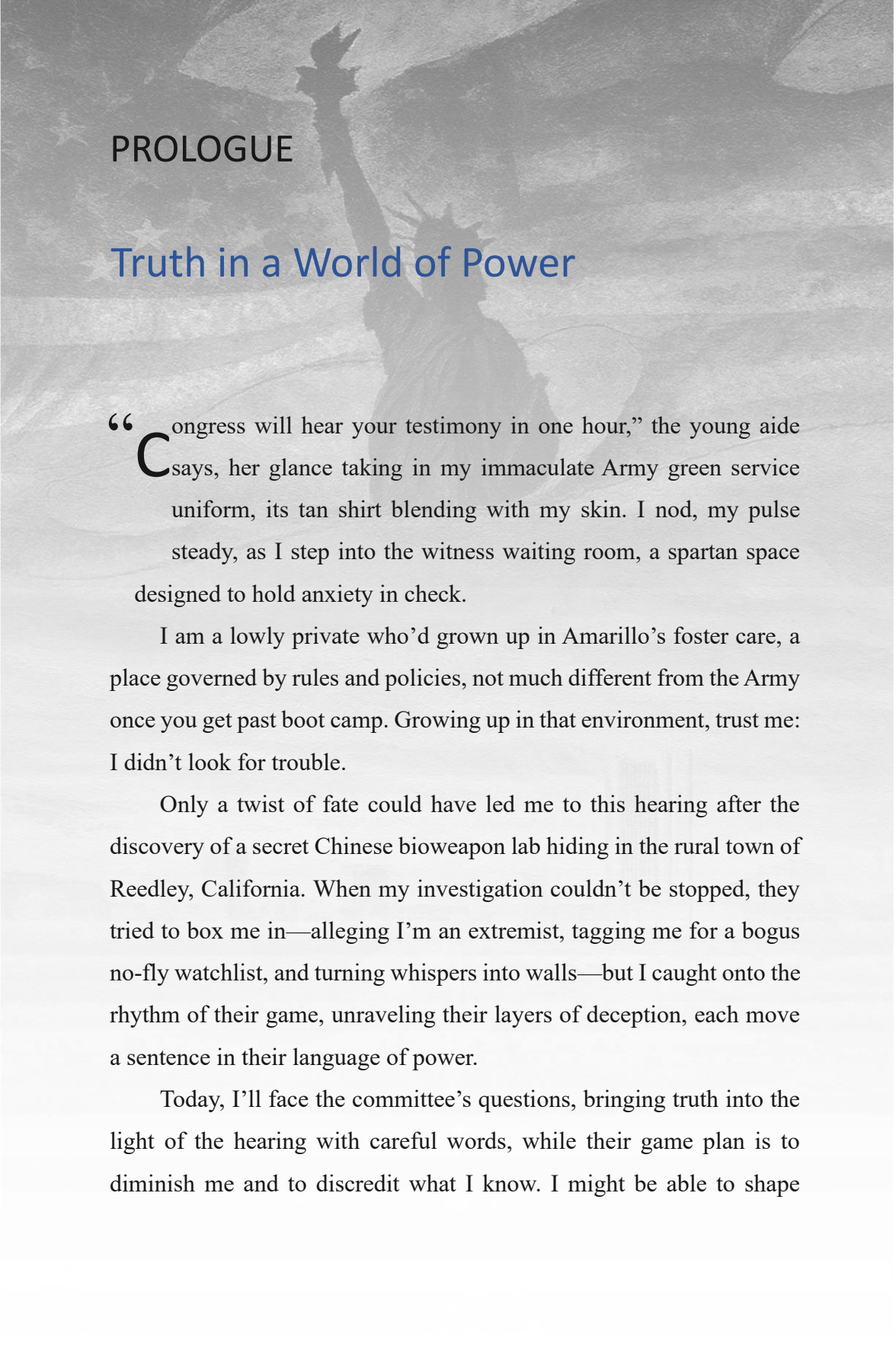


The background of the page features a faint, grayscale image of the Statue of Liberty. The statue is positioned in the center, with its torch raised high. The image is slightly blurred and serves as a subtle backdrop for the text.

PROLOGUE

Truth in a World of Power

“Congress will hear your testimony in one hour,” the young aide says, her glance taking in my immaculate Army green service uniform, its tan shirt blending with my skin. I nod, my pulse steady, as I step into the witness waiting room, a spartan space designed to hold anxiety in check.

I am a lowly private who’d grown up in Amarillo’s foster care, a place governed by rules and policies, not much different from the Army once you get past boot camp. Growing up in that environment, trust me: I didn’t look for trouble.

Only a twist of fate could have led me to this hearing after the discovery of a secret Chinese bioweapon lab hiding in the rural town of Reedley, California. When my investigation couldn’t be stopped, they tried to box me in—alleging I’m an extremist, tagging me for a bogus no-fly watchlist, and turning whispers into walls—but I caught onto the rhythm of their game, unraveling their layers of deception, each move a sentence in their language of power.

Today, I’ll face the committee’s questions, bringing truth into the light of the hearing with careful words, while their game plan is to diminish me and to discredit what I know. I might be able to shape

this—if I can gauge those seeking truth from those trying to hide it. One wrong step, though, and I'll find myself back on my heels, having to claw my way forward.

Winner, my matronly JAG attorney, assures me after the aide leaves. “You’re ready, Xavier. Trust what you know.” Her hand rests on my forearm, her gaze soft and protective. I stand there appreciating her

support, my shoulders back, unbowed by the weight of what is about to come. Before I know it, she's gone, her faith in me lingering as she slips away to take her seat.

It's a surprise to everybody that I'm here, since I am a nobody, and as it stands now, I'm holding on by a thread—only luck will permit an honorable discharge. Before the Army, I'd spent most of my childhood living in the same group home on Western Street in Amarillo, but now I'm in DC because I fought the Army. *And the Army lost.*

I say that tongue-in-cheek because I'm testifying at the request of the people who make the laws: Congress. It's the Army that hasn't followed the laws, or even those unofficial rules you may have heard about—"institutional norms."

Remember: I'm neither a troublemaker nor an outlaw. I know better than that. My problem is that the Army people who reached beyond the laws are still using their institutional norms to smear my until-then stellar Army reputation and force others to throw me out. Instead, all they've been able to do is put me on a bogus no-fly list, which they did by planting a news story that alleged I was an "extremist," as if it were a fact.

Fortunately, Congressman Costa heard about the discovery of the secret Chinese bioweapons lab in his district and called for a congressional investigation. Costa, one of the good guys who make the laws now, shined a spotlight on me for being involved in the discovery. His light was so bright that those who no longer made the laws had to back off. This situation has been going on now for more than two years, so don't mind if I come off as jaded and cynical. That's not me either, but let me slow down.

To understand how I've ended up in this waiting room, staring down both barrels of congressional testimony, you need to know how a kid from the foster system became caught between truth and power within the US government.

When the last threads of my mother's life dissolved, amid a messy unraveling, I had to grow up fast. The people in the foster care system called me their "number one ring-tailed tooter," an endearing way of saying I was a rascal who could get away with murder. I often heard, "The girls will like him," or "He's a cool Maverick." Too bad those labels didn't mask the emptiness I carried or indicate the struggles I'd face.

When I say I grew up fast, I'm speaking of showing confidence and strength even when I had neither. These formed the outer shell, essential for surviving the foster care system of group homes, just as a young tree planted in poor soil grows thick bark. How else does a nine-year-old

fend off the revolving cast of traumatized kids, the always-changing rotation of youthful residential aides, and the assembly line of hard-faced women in roles attempting, in the aggregate, to replace missing parents?

I faced a stark choice, shared by most of the boys, where force and fear were always nearby. I could build a shell of anger and resentment like mortar and brick, keeping others at bay, or accept what was offered while quietly looking for something more. I chose the latter path when I realized my shell didn't need to be rigid and tough; it could also be thick, cushioned, and adaptable. My progress was slow and likely would've stalled had I not been big for my age, willing to take risks, and able to quell the aggressive residents capable of upsetting life in our institutional home.

Beneath my cushioned shell was a hollow space; an emptiness waiting in the soft parts where joy, love, and hope might someday dwell. A gentle pull that didn't let me shut down like my two roommates, who refused eye contact, rarely spoke full sentences, and seldom left their cave-like bottom bunks. That pull was steady, and I later realized it stemmed from those rare, precious moments when my mother was sober and inclined to parent, sharing her college books and lecture notes from classes she never finished. Through her, I caught glimpses of a world I couldn't comprehend, one I'd only imagined in the vaguest terms. That was the pull, and it persisted. By my teenage years, that pull twisted into rebellion and resentment toward my mother for failing me. In the despair of those moments, I often dove into the internet's deep recesses, searching for adults whose young lives had also been shattered, seeking parallels and understanding.

The online world became my sanctuary. While others enjoyed sports leagues and debate clubs, this digital realm offered me a place where the constraints of foster care fell away, opening paths to unseen possibilities and allowing me to map the territories of my future self. Reddit and Quora became my meeting grounds, where I encountered people who'd experienced parental death and cared enough to share posts with me.

A precious few asked probing questions, forcing me to think in new ways. Even fewer organized their own experiences into insights that reflected my situation. These were the ones I listened to, taking their suggestions to heart and making them a practice. These experiences shaped what I came to think of as self-serve parenting.

One of the precious online few went on to achieve great acclaim. Only a few years older than me, Alain had a wit and analytical ability that could instantly strike at the heart of any topic. He claimed his father was a "terrible human being," and my online friend set out to prevent his future

from being defined by his dad. Alain suggested I do the same, his words carrying the weight of someone who was doing this for himself.

Our rapid exchange of messages became lessons in self-discovery. “Scale down the value you allocate to what others say and think about you,” Alain advised. “Pay more attention to learning who you are, what you’re good at, and what you enjoy. Let that be your North Star.” His words resonated with me, echoing the gentle pull from those shared moments with my mother.

Knowing his ambition was to send rockets to Mars, and that *Star Wars* was his defining movie, I replied with a modified Yoda quote: “Your path, you must decide.” Acknowledging that

I understood his message, he typed a short laugh, then promptly ended our chat. That was how I experienced my first acute, self-serve parenting, sparking the realization I’d become part of a generation of kids raised by people we’d never meet.

For better or worse, that was what I had, and I never again judged myself solely in relation to others. I pursued my task to carve out my own purpose and direction in life. What was once an indecipherable pull, the sole remnant of my mother’s life, transformed into a drive and a strategy for me to become more. I set out to make whole what was hollow.

Quora remained my mainstay, while Khan Academy expanded my horizons with the patient and polished explanations I savored. YouTube offered views into worlds unmentioned in school and foster care services. Eventually, X emerged as the platform that enabled everyone to speak their true minds, especially in the corner of X known as Spaces.

This area was where I began to fill the emptiness beneath my cushioned outer shell.

Although I held fast to my school, enjoying time with my schoolyard “friendlies,” the grinding machinery of foster care ruled out afterschool activities that demanded a predictable schedule. I found myself spending more and more time online, mapping and populating the territories of my future self. These digital lessons prepared me for the real-world thresholds I would later cross. This landscape was somewhere that no responsible parent would allow their child: unfettered access to the internet’s light and darkness.

But that is not my whole story. There are a few layers to go that reveal who I’ve become.

Looking back on my past, on the day of testimony, I feel the force of a crushing vise, the government’s jaws squeezing together truth and trust when the two don’t fit, both sides focusing on my involvement in the discovery of a secret bioweapon lab—one side demanding my silence and the other requiring public disclosure of an ugly and threatening reality. As unexpected as this

is, I find myself drawing on lessons learned in foster care, where survival often meant reading the dynamics of institutional power flowing within the system.

I can tell you this now: I learned a lot about navigating harsh institutional challenges, having lived on the margins—between foster care and the abyss, between institutional care and personal freedom, and between physical and digital realms.

Crossing from one side of a threshold to another brought lessons and opportunities. Each step, a quiet shift helped me adapt my behavior and spot the stepping stones to a wholesome life. It was a dance, not much different from a Texas two-step, where power represents leadership and survival requires adaptation. If everything goes smoothly at the dance, the after-dance is great.

As my testimony approaches, I decide to face the vise-like forces coming at me head-on: accept what's offered while quietly charting a path to something more. Only this time, I have X and its built-in AI tool, Grok, to help me leverage my many “mutuals,” people I follow and who follow me. I seize opportunities by viewing each as a form of information warfare, where truth serves as both a weapon and a shield, and the internet is my leverage.

In foster care, I believed that choosing my actions thoughtfully would result in profound, life-affirming outcomes, while choosing poorly was a mistake I carefully tried to avoid. In my desire to be more, to fill those empty spaces with meaning, I found the courage to accept the consequences of my choices. The skills, which once had helped me navigate the churn of people passing through the group-home hallways, began to serve a larger purpose. Each careful step, each measured response, drew upon that same instinct for survival, until it became a soldier's duty.

After aging out of the foster system, I stumbled along as a hot mess until the Army became my only viable option, another bureaucracy heavy with uncertainty. This was early in the COVID quarantine, which, in the end, worked to my advantage. The pace of work had slowed, and there were few urgent tasks, allowing me time to learn how to perform my role under the command of Master Sergeant Mono, the youngest soldier in Army history to hold that rank. He was an incredible role model and remains my close friend and confidant.

Master Sergeant Mono spotted me during boot camp, saw my promise compared to other recruits, and made me his assistant and protégé. He was a golden child among enlisted soldiers, and I benefited from residing in the glow of his halo. The two of us worked well together, introducing new technology to better look after thousands of Army bases, facilities, and related

structures. Soon, I was helping him run the Army's operational underbelly. When all was said and done, Master Sergeant and I brought acclaim to a part of the Army that was generally overlooked.

At the time, my highest-profile assignment was creating a security approach that we named the NeverCry Security Guide. The system was designed to protect the Army's barracks, ammunition depots, and other structures from cyber, drone, and bioweapon attacks. We shared the guide with building inspectors in cities surrounding Army bases. The guide encouraged inspectors to look for specific signs of vulnerability and threats.

What happened next blew the lid off much that the master sergeant and I held to be true, revealing realities we hadn't anticipated. I received a call from the building department in Reedley, California, a small, rural town of twenty-six thousand residents. The first surprise was the discovery of military-grade bioweapons in a privately owned building, and the second shocker was that they weren't *our* bioweapons. They were being developed in the United States for use *against* American citizens.

Then came the biggest shocker of all: this discovery became a source of heated contention among us, Army personnel, and the civilian bureaucrats, who, according to Master Sergeant Mono, had gained increased standing in the Army. These were the bureaucrats, power wrapped around them like invisible armor, who were already unhappy with soldiers who were reluctant to receive COVID vaccinations despite the common belief that twenty-year-olds were not at high risk of severe illness.

You may remember those days when questioning the official COVID narrative was considered offensive. At the time, the push to vaccinate military personnel or face discharge led to the exodus of thousands, haunting the hallways of every Army base. Now, the same people behind the vaccine policies were resurfacing in meetings about Reedley's secret bioweapon lab, their presence echoing the controversy of the past. They insisted that I cut off further communication with the town officials and refrain from discussing what I had seen, even after I explained that the lab was located near two military bases and still held the lethal viruses.

These shady civilians, often working at the periphery of the Army, mocked me with disdain when I suggested that I could refer Reedley officials to them.

Their words bore the weight of institutional authority, a weight I knew all too well. They referred to my desire to question their judgment as my "rebel-mindedness." A little later, they branded me an "extremist" and placed me on the no-fly list without any warning or notification.

From then on, Master Sergeant Mono would remind me that I'd joined company with Majors Pete Hegseth and Tulsi Gabbard, who later rose to the highest levels of the federal government. He then mentioned that I might be discharged along with eight thousand other service members who got sideways with the federal government, mostly for refusing the COVID vaccine.

Naturally, many of those former soldiers formed shadow discussion groups, connecting online to share experiences they had never expected to have. When I joined them, the news about the Reedley bioweapon lab grabbed their attention. They were just as perplexed as I was, but then they were happy to find out that I shared my relationship with Alain, who, by this time, was starting to attract attention inside Washington, DC.

Despite my ongoing discussions about the bioweapons lab, the bureaucrats continued to show no concern for the lives of soldiers and civilians should a dangerous leak occur, like what happened in Wuhan, China, or during a burglary. Their true interests remained sketchy, but their disdain was crystal clear. Remember: Who was I? A mere private. My impression was that these people believed they had the power necessary to stand their ground, their certainty as solid as the institutional walls I'd grown up within.

Yes, I was ill-equipped to defend against the powerful forces aligning against me. I was particularly struck by the education, sophistication, and motivation of those actively suppressing me with total indifference to my opinions, convictions, or well-being. Their level of indifference scared and intimidated me. This was all so ominous that it caused a new and different tug, this one pulling me back toward that tiny world where survival was my greatest concern. It was a weak tug, compared to the one connected to my mother, strengthened by Alain, and now under the full tutelage of Army wunderkind, Master Sergeant Mono. I was daunted but not deterred.

With this pressure mounting against me, Master Sergeant showed the kind of personal care I'd imagined a parent might, if I'd ever had one. He and I bonded over our vow to be upstanding and honorable men, perhaps he more than I. Neither of us sought conflict, yet we adamantly refused to perpetuate the lies of others. This principle was our bedrock, which I increasingly embraced as my testimony approached.

Master Sergeant accepted my desire to fill my hollowness in ways I hadn't expected to find in the military. Unlike the virtual connections of my online world, his guidance carried the weight and substance of spending long days together, each conversation adding another layer to the

foundation I was missing. He transformed what Alain and I had discussed in abstract terms into what he called “teachable moments.”

For example, I struggled to estimate the completion date for removing munitions from an ammunition depot. Master Sergeant sat across the desk and suggested we list all of the events and activities associated with the project. Then we fed that list to Grok, the X AI tool I’d shown him. With that done, we requested that Grok identify thirty assumptions that would help us estimate the project’s completion.

This is just one example of his patient mentoring, and over time, I began to understand what I truly wanted and how to achieve it. The vague pull that had propelled me since my mother’s death crystallized into something more concrete: a deep desire to become the kind of man worthy of marriage, capable of creating the tender home life I’d never known and properly raising children in the stable environment I’d only imagined. This resolve became my life goal, a realistic pathway I could see stretching out before me.

Master Sergeant had a vision for my future, both practical and profound. He showed me I could become a professional property manager, explained how this work could be applied to large properties that could easily support a family. Drawing from his own father’s experience, he mapped out a business strategy that felt within my reach: start small with a few contracts to provide trade services and use technology as a differentiator to help salespeople increase revenue by winning customers from competitors. He instilled in me his father’s method of growth, explaining how one business could acquire another when that owner wants to retire, even describing how retiring owners might finance the purchase themselves—no bank loan required.

Each detail he shared was another piece of the puzzle, another step toward my understanding and confidence. He had watched his father repeatedly buy other companies this way, building something substantial from modest beginnings. “This path,” he told me, his voice carrying the quiet certainty of someone who had witnessed it firsthand, “is open to anybody—even an orphan with a high school diploma and an honorable discharge from the Army.”

Master Sergeant Mono gave me something I’d never fully had before: hope, uncomplicated and uncompromised. His guidance, filling the emptiness within me, began to fill with possibility and the linchpins for distinguishing right from wrong, good from bad, and valuable from frivolous. I’d found my path, one that led toward the kind of life I had only glimpsed in other people’s stories.

For the first time, I felt the growing formation of a vision for my future filling me as it drove out the gnawing despair of the hollow, inconsequential life I had known.

Despite all of my rigorous training, none of it prepared me for the subpoena I received directly from the US Congress. It was delivered personally, at 5:00 a.m., by a military police officer accompanied by a captain I recognized from boot camp and a nondescript civilian. They intercepted me as I was exiting the latrine, along with a hundred other soldiers.

The civilian, who turned out to be a process server, handed me a subpoena, saying, “You’ve been served,” which caught the attention of passing soldiers. The captain matter-of-factly ordered me to comply with the subpoena’s instructions. My heart sank, feeling the teeth of the second jaw, which reminded me of my insignificance. Four weeks of additional boot camp would have felt better, and the judgmental looks from the other soldiers didn’t help.

I spent countless hours with Army legal advisers and a matronly Judge Advocate General attorney, Winifred Scott, “Winner,” for short. She was a thick-set woman in a tight-fitting uniform, making a poor first impression. When she spoke, my assessment of her did not improve much, except that she effortlessly clarified my name, saying, “It’s spelled with an *X*, and pronounced with a *Z*.” I took heart in this hint of her competence, giving her a small nod, waiting and hoping to discover more. She assured me that I had the support of my master sergeant and that he had sufficient influence to keep my command officers on my side. Proceeding along a path that was invisible to me, I sensed her will to live up to her nickname. She effortlessly navigated subtleties that others might avoid explaining to me. She had a dogged focus, explaining why the complaints raised against me were weak.

Despite my initial impressions, Winner assured me that I could come out of this no worse off than I was at that moment. She added, “I say this only because your master sergeant gave you high praise and promised me you would do your homework and perform well before Congress.” She explained that the law was on my side and that if she and I performed well, there was little they could do other than keep a lingering target on my back.

Winner directed two young legal advisers with the same precise care she had shown me. She helped them understand the nuances of legal and political evidence, explaining that this was a hearing, not a court of law—a distinction that carried worlds of meaning. Like a master cartographer mapping treacherous territory, she helped them identify three stakeholder groups and their interests, each a potential ally or adversary in the intricate landscape ahead.

Her intense eyes found mine. “Only say what is verifiable,” she instructed, her words carrying the weight of hard-won wisdom. “There will be few facts and no focus on evidence at this point, so you must avoid speculation or exaggeration, or they will catch you out.” Turning back to the advisers, she directed them to “rehearse him on how to be brief and clear and not offer unnecessary details. When he is ready, he and I’ll prepare for the partisan angles.” Each instruction was another piece of armor she was putting in place.

As she packed to leave, she assessed me with a gaze that felt both professional and nurturing. “We can never predict exactly what we’ll receive on hearing day. Luckily, you convey a strong presence. We may argue that your work has made the Army proud and that you deserve recognition for ensuring the safety of our soldiers and citizens. However, that might be too much to expect. Work hard to get ready, Xavier, and I’ll do the same. Remember, stay true to the plan, and we’ll both come out as winners!”

I watched her walk out the door, yet another government-sponsored adult hired to guide me through life. Unlike the parade of guardians before her, Winner’s now visible competence and commitment felt substantial and fearless.

Still, as her footsteps faded down the hallway, I wanted to believe I could control my destiny, avoiding the unwelcome tension between accepting help and remaining independent. Fortunately, I embraced Winner’s strength, letting it remind me of those few times my mother had been fully present.

Now, on testimony day, Washington feels like enemy territory, not exactly what you want a soldier to feel. The Capitol building looms like a foreign, yet familiar, fortress, its gray marble cold and forbidding. Inside, the hearing room is filled with more than a hundred powerful faces, perched above in shiny suits. I know some will be genuinely shocked and appalled by my revelations, while others will respond with denials and open hostility—and somehow get away with it.

Here I am, a big guy in an Army green service uniform with a tan shirt, making a better first impression than Winner, who stands behind my chair, prohibited from speaking to me during my testimony. I am also a small-town man with a high school education and, officially, little more, suddenly thrust into the spotlight for reasons that will make everyone in this room uncomfortable, one way or another.

Some people will accept the news and the discomfort it warrants, with a few faces already showing the first ripples of recognition that truth often brings. A few others, acting as government guard dogs, will deny and decry the news, trying to discredit me and shift the focus away from the truth. I can almost see them circling; their practiced dismissal techniques and my doubt feeling all too familiar, knowing the institutional defenses I witnessed throughout most of my young life.

Winner's words come back to me, her earlier coaching taking on a renewed urgency in that moment. She explained we couldn't afford to be distracted by worrying about why the guard dogs were attending or who they were protecting. The political chess game behind their presence wasn't my concern.

"Just know," she said, her voice carrying both warning and faith, "you are facing the full weight of a government willing to consume an earnest and law-abiding young soldier—that's you." Her eyes held mine, conveying what she couldn't say out loud, before adding, "So, focus on yourself and rely on your hours of practice to guide you through the day's battle. You're good at this."

The phrase echoes in my mind, recalling moments in foster care when I faced insurmountable challenges. *You're good at this*. Not just empty praise, but recognition of my hard-won skill: the ability to navigate powerful forces while holding onto my truth. Even in my early days in the group home, I was able to remain centered amid anger, bluster, and chaos, speaking an undeniable truth without being distracted by the reaction it might provoke.

At the witness table, I feel the pressure of every eye, camera, and microphone. When asked to introduce myself, I draw once again on my high school drama class—clearing extraneous thoughts to fully embody my character, which, in this case, is myself. I take a measured breath and survey the room without seeing my audience, refusing to rush, knowing this is my only chance to speak without interruption. The room seems to shake when I state, "I am the son of a DACA woman, who died tragically shortly after cartels in Del Rio, Texas, annihilated her family. I grew up in foster care, knowing my grandparents had legally entered this country seeking better opportunities. I'm a patriot because of that legacy." Each word carries the weight of my history, each pause filled with unspoken stories of loss and dedication.

"I enlisted in the Army as a bewildered boy, willing to sacrifice my life in the line of duty," I continued, allowing the import of that statement to fall upon the ears of those in front of me. "I demonstrated that commitment when I entered the lab filled with lethal viruses and dead mice, for

each of you, even those who seek to silence me.” I scan the room as I add, “I am alerting you to undeniable preparations for an attack on US citizens, and perhaps the military.”

I let those words settle before continuing: “I’m the only surviving member of my family in this country—perhaps on earth—and serve with the rank of private first class in duties that demand skill, responsibility, and accountability. I shirk none of those as aide-de-camp to the youngest master sergeant in Army history. Together, we’re modernizing the management of Army facilities across the Midwest and parts of the Southwest, applying technology innovatively while maintaining an all-of-government approach.”

Each word, each phrase, I intend as another stone in the foundation of credibility I need to build, in hopes of countering the guard dogs who will soon try to discredit me. With my introduction complete, I turn to the heart of the matter: “Due to recent increases in cyberattacks, drone threats, and now biological warfare, I followed my leadership’s orders to develop security guidelines for protecting Army bases and surrounding facilities, including vulnerable neighboring structures owned by civilians.”

The words flow with a clarity that brings me pleasure and confidence, each detail precisely placed as Winner coached. “This project has benefited from an online exchange of information with hundreds of military installations and local governments. In preparation for this exchange, Reedley, California, was identified as a community within 150 miles of two military installations. One is a naval air station, thirty miles away, and an Air National Guard base, twenty miles away.

“The city manager’s office of Reedley, California, received an early version of the NeverCry Security Guide for Building Systems. The NeverCry Guide, now in its third edition, receives updates based on feedback and suggestions from those who received it.” I concluded my personal introduction by stating that “this project is less than a year old and has already produced significant results, including one that brings me here to testify before you.”

The committee chairman’s subtle support steadies me as he grants three minutes to open my testimony about the Chinese biolab. I remind the legislators seated before me that hundreds of Reedley citizens fill the town council meetings, their faces etched with desperate fear and hopeful concern. With military precision, I then outline the timeline: “I had no personal contact with Reedley, the biolab, or Inspector Julia Belavacqua before her May phone call. Since receiving Congress’s subpoena, I’ve maintained zero contact with Reedley officials.” The silence of the

committee members presses against me as I continue, each word measured against Winner's coaching about pace and clarity.

"Inspector Belavacqua reached out after discovering our NeverCry Security Guide. She reported finding a noncompliant industrial-style business building that the CDC and FBI later identified as having been converted to a secret biological weapons laboratory." I pause, allowing the implications to do their work.

My next words cut through the institutional silence like a knife: "Federal agencies waited four months after receiving Reedley's notice of discovery before they conducted their first on-site investigation. They found over a thousand refrigerated containers labeled as infectious agents—Ebola, tuberculosis, HIV, COVID, malaria."

The room's collective intake of breath is quiet but audible. The CDC and NIH each declined to confirm the contents of those containers matched the labels.

"Lab notes, written in English and Chinese, detailed experiments on small animals using these infectious agents. Those notes indicated the existence of sister facilities elsewhere," I reported, reminding myself to stay within Winner's guidelines. "Using a personal AI app, I confirmed both the Chinese language content, including the nature of the experimental work, and the existence of other unspecified locations." The questions come like waves breaking against a rock—some seek truth, while others aim to erode my credibility. A senator with eyes as sharp as flint leans into her microphone for four grueling minutes, painting a picture of chaos and fear that my "unverified claims" could provoke. Her words drip with practiced condescension. "Private First Class," she says, emphasizing my rank with apparent disdain, "do you understand the gravity of suggesting federal agencies might be... negligent?" She pauses, letting the word hang. "Or are you perhaps, as your placement on certain watchlists suggests, simply out of your depth?"

I feel Winner's earlier coaching soothing my nerves. The Senator isn't seeking the truth—she is building a narrative.

She spends another minute questioning my authority to communicate with Reedley officials, leaving me sixty seconds to respond. I recognize the trap: rush to defend myself and appear defensive, or stay silent and seem guilty.

I let ten seconds pass, meeting her gaze. "Thank you for your request for clarity, Senator," I say without a hint of sarcasm. "As stated previously, I conducted my duties under direct orders to

gather and organize security guidelines against nontraditional threats of attack. My authorization regarding the laboratory remains specific and documented.”

She attempts to interrupt, but I persist with measured calm: “What I’m reporting here is completely verifiable. I’d be happy to provide documentation of my authority, communications, and findings.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she says, her voice rising in volume, but the chairman cuts her off. The irony isn’t lost on me: sworn to tell the whole truth, then given sixty seconds to do so. Some committee members lean forward, eager to hear the facts I’ve held onto, while others recoil, clearly aligned with those seeking to suppress it. I seize the first opportunity to explain how the lab represented one piece of a strategic foundation for launching coordinated attacks across multiple locations.

I then identify a multimillion-dollar, six-story-tall, Chinese-built transformer, also installed near an Army base, that contains secret components enabling remote-controlled shutdown—one that would terminate electrical power for an entire county.

I have one more round in my chamber, waiting for the murmuring to die down, when I add that I also identified Chinese-owned farmland in the same area, where small swarms of drones were observed flying. After explaining how these three Chinese-linked assets could be used in warfare, I remind the committee of the lab notes indicating sister locations that remain unspecified. I don’t mention that the chairman of the committee asked witnesses at prior congressional hearings to share their knowledge with me about the transformers and the farmland. I believe his support during the hearing indicates he wants me to disclose the connection between the lab, transformer, and farmland, all artifacts of the CCP’s aggression toward America.

More questions come rapid-fire—some from those seeking answers, others, like the senator, still trying to bury me and place the dangerous truth within a cloud of uncertainty. By the end, my testimony sounds more like a thriller plot than a soldier’s report on military buildings.

The room falls silent after my final comments as I am ushered out of the hearing room. Winner appears in the buzzing outer lobby, her presence a welcome anchor after two grueling hours in the congressional spotlight. Maternal pride lights up her face. “Sergeant Mono was right,” she says, stepping closer, “You represented the Army and yourself wonderfully. That was a snake pit in there.”

Before I can respond, she wraps her stocky arms around me in an affectionate, motherly embrace. The genuine warmth of her hug catches me off guard—it feels nothing like the mechanical hugs I received in foster care. When she kisses my cheek, I find myself returning the gesture, surprising us both. Looking into her eyes, I sense her pride and understanding. Her big heart embraces both the soldier’s success and the hollow boy who grew up quickly, alone in the world. My voice catches as I thank her, emotion spilling over as I hug her again, longer this time, allowing myself to be supported and my vulnerability seen.

The aftermath strikes me as I pass the Washington Monument, a pointed obelisk indifferent to the truths and deceptions that take place beneath the Capitol dome. A chill runs through me as my phone buzzes with a flood of messages, ranging from support to veiled threats. Anonymous voices reach through the digital void, leaving me to wonder how these strangers have obtained my number.

The media coverage fractures like light through a prism: The *Army Times* praises the young soldier’s “unflinching dedication to security.” At the same time, *The Washington Post* questions my “unorthodox methods and unsupported claims.” CNN debates my credibility in split-screen segments, and social media erupts with conspiracy theories from both sides.

The New York Times publishes an editorial about “overzealous servicemen” and “institutional boundaries,” while military blogs celebrate a “new breed of warrior.” Absent from every headline, every chyron, and every heated panel discussion is the threat of a biological attack. How have I become a distraction when death and disability are so close at hand?

That night in a DC motel, sleep eludes me as I think about the protesters outside: What exactly are they protesting, if not the CDC’s negligence? Yet none of their signs condemn China or the lab’s threat, nor do they warn of a viral outbreak. Where is the outrage over biological weapons right here in America? Why is it absent? How can I be so out of touch?

The day after my testimony, I go back to the base, seeking a path through the chaos swirling inside me. My barracks mates look at me with a mix of awe and concern, their glances carrying echoes of my early days in foster care as a ring-tailed tooter. Master Sergeant’s first words as I round the corner into his office are “You’ve stirred up a hornet’s nest.” Those words settle into my bones as a harsh truth, reminding me that some battles, once started, never really end.

If Inspector Belavacqua hadn’t seen the NeverCry Security Guide, my story might have taken a more straightforward path, one filled with the tranquility Master Sergeant describes: steady and

unburdened. I would have pursued that wholesome life we'd mapped out together, steering clear of the people I saw at the hearing who track their enemies. I would have directed my energy toward becoming the kind of man worthy of the family I wanted to build, establishing myself as relationship-ready for a woman I'd yet to meet. Instead, I'd just added serious baggage to an already-heavy load.

Then again, as Alain suggested in a brief late-night exchange of messages, I can embrace what I perceive as baggage or as an expanded horizon. He believed that my empty spaces were no longer so empty—what was once a void now held purpose and direction. His words led me to see this as my opportunity to become more. By amplifying each truth I dare to speak, I become something greater than myself. By crossing that threshold, there would be a man who would embrace truth as vital.

Looking back on that conversation now, I'm still uncertain whether I was ready then, or even if I'm worthy.

My testimony marks the end of one battle, igniting a war that has been brewing since the last days of my mother's life. It is the same story that began in foster care, with me finding ways to survive while improving my circumstances, and Master Sergeant who demonstrated a wholesome life. That persistent pull of my mother's last remnant is still leading me, it seems, toward something larger than myself.

In that marble-columned hearing room, I'd found myself standing between truth and power, between what is and what should be.

It's a precarious position, this commitment to being both a voice of truth and filling a home life with children capable of understanding courage and comfort. To succeed, I must discover ways to blend the light and shadows that connect these seemingly opposing forces.

This is my story.