

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

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CHAPTER 14

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Book 2 | Chapter 14

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CHAPTER 14

As soon as Merritt entered his bedroom, he felt the same pang of misery Belmont had described feeling when coming home to an empty house. He stripped down to his standard-issue boxer briefs, threw on a threadbare tank, and headed for the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face. Then he slid into bed, pulling his laptop from the nightstand onto his lap.

After firing up his trusty hacking tools, he opened his favorite South Sphere surveillance network—the only one he could trust to always let him in.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for. He told himself he was working on behalf of his sphere's security, but part of him just wanted to see other human beings. Going from Belmont's dinner table to his own empty bed was too jarring a shift, and he longed to fill the silence with someone's—anyone's—laughter and banter and lively conversations. These were the things he'd have been surrounded with if he still lived in the barracks.

He toggled through the feeds of the twelve cameras in the network, searching for any hint of life. Five minutes, then ten, then fifteen. Where was everyone? The streets seemed unusually desolate for a Saturday night. He tried to get into a café and then a bar, but the feeds glitched out. It looked like his options for the night would be limited.

Twenty minutes into his search, he spotted the silhouettes of two women approaching each other stealthily in an East Sphere back alley. Merritt recognized one of them immediately. She was Nora, a new South Sphere right hand who answered to Queen Freya. Merritt could barely make out her facial features as she passed the camera, but she was immediately recognizable by the two robotic legs that extended all the way up past the hem of her mini dress.

She, like the Queen she served, was an escaped West Sphere dog—still beautiful, but now with intense eyes and a terrifying edge that frequently came with the South Sphere’s brand of rehabilitation. Whatever her history, no one dared mess with her now.

Merritt couldn’t remember ever seeing a feed focusing on a South Sphere citizen’s conversation before. The South was the sphere conducting the surveillance, and they didn’t spy on their own. Their recording software had built-in algorithms to mute, rotate, or blur a camera whenever a bird—the slang term for a South Sphere citizen—entered the frame. He wondered if the glitches interfering with the interior surveillance feeds had also affected the cameras’ auto blur and rotate features.

The second woman in the alley was Pangolin, the East Sphere’s legendary soldier. Merritt felt a wave of dread when he saw her face, the same wave he always felt since his near-death encounter at her hands. He turned up the volume on his computer.

“It’s settled,” Pangolin said. “I have the East onboard. It took some doing, but they’ll support the embargo.”

“What are you withholding?” Nora asked.

“Anything and everything coming out of our farmlands. Imagine how that’ll hurt the West’s restaurant business.”

Nora shifted, folding her arms. “The only problem is they can still get genetically-modified produce from the North. This could even improve trade relations between the West and the North. If we can’t get the North to back us within the next few days, it won’t be enough. And we’ve been trying to work with them on this for months, if not years.”

“I don’t have any control over the North Sphere,” Pangolin said. She seemed mildly offended that Nora would waste her time talking about the North. “It’s enough of a miracle that I got my own sphere to back us. I’m a soldier, not a diplomat.”

“Never underestimate a soldier,” Nora said. “I had no doubt that you could do it.”

“That’s... generous of you,” Pangolin replied skeptically.

“I’m in a generous mood right now.”

“Are you guys withholding motorcycles, then?” Pangolin asked.

“Not just the bikes. The service too.”

“Ouch.”

Nora let out a harsh laugh. “This is nothing compared to the atrocities they’re committing every day. Their use of underage dogs has gone unchecked for too long. The fact that they’re still secretly exporting them to other spheres is sickening.”

“Not gonna argue with you.” Pangolin glanced at her phone. “I have to get back to the barracks. If you need anything else, you know how to reach me.”

“Same to you.”

They parted ways without another word, giving each other a wide berth as they passed in opposite directions. Merritt could tell even from the grainy video that they would have wanted nothing to do with each other if official business hadn’t brought them together.

He waited until both figures exited the camera’s range, then he logged out of the feed. He sat silently, trying to process what he’d just overheard.

It was about time someone in the underground stood up to the West and held them accountable for their use of underage dogs. Up until a few years ago, they’d routinely smuggled kids in from other spheres. Only after a brutal attack from the South did they finally stop. Queen Freya, herself a South Sphere native who’d been smuggled into the West’s dog trade as a teen, had led that attack, unleashing a decade’s worth of personal fury on the West.

Merritt’s palms tingled and his heart thumped as he remembered the countless nights he’d woken up to the rattle of a locked doorknob at the orphanage. He’d been too young and naïve to understand why the adult staff, and sometimes complete strangers, pulled children out of their rooms in the middle of the night—but he knew to be afraid.

One night at age twelve, he’d fought off an intruder, only to find Torrence missing after. Torrence had returned days later, pallid and bruised but otherwise unharmed, telling Merritt that he’d escaped and run away from the intruders but had hidden for days until they finally

gave up pursuing him. Still shaken, he'd told Merritt that he never wanted to talk about it again.

Merritt never found out who the intruders were. For all he knew, they could have been West Sphere hunters—the class of red-sash charged with bringing unwilling victims into the dog trade.

After Torrence's return, Merritt had gathered his roommates, and together they'd begun planning escape routes and practicing drills to fight off future intruders. After only a few months, his dorm room had developed a reputation among the adult staff at the orphanage, and the break-in attempts grew rarer. Merritt didn't lose a single roommate, which was more than most Norwood grads could say.

Those nightly drills were ingrained deeper in him than his Chem Ops drills. Sometimes he still woke up in the middle of the night ready to throw an uppercut or gouge an eye. He could only imagine the fear an underage dog faced in the West. For them, there was no fighting and no escape.

His adrenaline rushed all over again when he thought about the South Sphere's plans. He wished he could run out to that alley and join the cause. Why wasn't the North Sphere involved in the embargo? Nora had said that they'd tried to work with the North. Why hadn't they succeeded?

Merritt knew that this fell outside of his purview as a general. Mercury's board of advisors handled foreign relations up until a declaration of war. Only then would Merritt and his military get involved.

On the other hand, the matter was outside Pangolin's domain too, and yet she'd still managed to arrange a deal on behalf of her sphere. At the very least, Merritt could do some investigating into the nature of the North's involvement in the deal, or lack thereof. He'd start with Belmont tomorrow.

It was good to have a worthy cause to distract him from the day's events.

* * *

Officially, Sunday was Merritt's day off. Unofficially, he often found himself devoting the entire day to unforeseen issues and emergencies. Today, he tended to an urgent repair issue with the waterways drainage system and settled a training dispute between the colonels of the counteroffensive unit and the infantry. The lights in the underground's ceiling had already shifted to sunset colors before he caught a spare moment to call Belmont on his way out of Station 1.

"Can I see you?" Merritt asked. "There's a North Sphere matter I can't talk about over the phone."

"Is it urgent? I'll be seeing you tomorrow anyway."

"It's better to address this today. But I can come to you if it makes things easier. I promise it'll be a short conversation."

"I'm at Yackley's winning about six thousand dollars in cards right now. You can come and meet me, but if I'm in the middle of a game, you have to wait till it's over."

"Understood."

Merritt spotted Belmont's seat the moment he entered Yackley's even though he couldn't see Belmont himself. A massive crowd was gathered around a booth at the far end of the room below the wall-mounted television, yet no one was watching the screen. Bits of conversation traveled across the room, confirming that a card game was in progress. Above the steady chatter, he heard Belmont say, "I challenge," and then the entire crowd burst into cheers and raucous conversation.

A couple men near Belmont's opponent jostled each other in an attempt to lean in closer. A short, feisty teen hoisted herself onto a taller man's back to catch a glimpse of Belmont's hand, only to be shaken off moments later.

"What's there to challenge?" Belmont's opponent demanded. "My card's got eight ranks on yours. There's no room for negotiation."

"There is if your card's caught in a scandal."

This clearly piqued the interest of Belmont's audience. Merritt couldn't help but roll his eyes even as he admired Belmont's skills. As Merritt had learned during their game at the Brighton Rose, Belmont had an unparalleled knack for identifying scandal cards.

If an underground citizen was in the midst of a high-profile scandal that had the potential to disgrace them, their card's power would be limited. Even if the card won its face-off, the player could only collect one of the cards in the face-off instead of the usual two. Belmont knew how to work the system, not just by staying on top of the rumors but by wielding his persuasive power to start a scandalous rumor on the spot, thus turning a normal card into a scandal card even if it hadn't been one before.

Knowing it would be a long wait till the end of the game, Merritt took a seat at the bar. Yackley stood on the other side, drying a highball glass. "Long time no see, kiddo." He pointed toward Merritt's sleeves. "Enjoying the four stripes?"

Merritt ran a finger along the bands of his sleeve cuff that denoted his status as general. "I think I'm finally starting to settle in."

"Does that mean you're gonna start buying more expensive drinks?" Yackley asked with a grin.

"I don't know about that." When Yackley looked disappointed, Merritt smiled and said, "I'd rather save up to leave bigger tips, you know?"

"That's my boy," Yackley said, the grin returning to his face. "Today's special for Focus is in gin."

"Ah," Merritt said. "You know I can't do gin."

"You sure? It's imported from the West. Best stuff they make."

"No, gin makes me sick. I'll stick with Focus in water."

"Not even mineral water? Just *water* water?"

Merritt considered. "Actually, I could go for just plain water right now. Your tap water is always best on Sundays. They say that the purification schedule is optimized for the first Sunday of every—"

Yackley's mustache bunched up around his sudden comical scowl. "You're getting Focus in mineral water today."

Merritt opened his mouth to protest, but Yackley had already stalked off to retrieve a vial off the shelf. He mixed the drink and handed it over, chuckling at Merritt's disgruntled frown before disappearing through the bar-side curtained door to the VIP room.

Merritt remained at the counter, wishing he could get a better view of Belmont's card game but not wanting to approach the boisterous crowd. From the sound of it, Belmont had issued another challenge.

"I'm tellin' ya, there's no scenario on this planet where you can get Troy to beat Gray," Belmont's opponent argued. "Gray is a queen card—a fucking *right hand*. Troy's just a jack."

"And I'm telling *you*, Troy taught Gray everything he knows."

"That doesn't mean Troy can beat Gray."

"Not only does Troy beat Gray, Gray begs for more."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Belmont's tone turned confidential while simultaneously increasing in decibels. "Their relationship was more than just mentor and student, you know. I'm talking secret meetings in motel rooms. Troy's got Gray wrapped around his finger—or maybe more than just his *finger*."

"You don't know that," the man replied in a wavering voice.

"I booked the room next to them once, just to listen in. I swear to god, their headboard almost broke through my wall."

A chorus of horrified groans echoed through the crowd. "No," Belmont's opponent protested with barely concealed disgust. "Nuh-uh. No way."

"How much do you really know about Gray?" Belmont asked. "How much does anyone know about him? He just appeared out of thin air when Bardia named him *right hand*."

His opponent fumbled for words.

Merritt took a sip of his Focus and rubbed his temples, trying to rid himself of the mental image. The concept of Gray and Troy having a sexual relationship was the most ludicrous challenge Belmont could have possibly come up with to make his Troy beat his opponent's Gray. Merritt knew he was lying—he *had* to be lying—and yet... in a way it strangely seemed to fit.

Merritt shook his head in frustration. How did Belmont always manage to pull it off?

He wanted to continue listening in on the game, but the swinging door out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Odell entered the bar, holding hands with her partner.

If any South Sphere civilian knew about the embargo Nora and Pangolin had discussed last night, it was Odell. She'd written some of the most scathing editorials on the West's use of underage dogs Merritt had ever read. Now was the perfect opportunity to ask her about it, if only she'd part ways with 75th.

75th, her partner and head of the South's surveillance department, harbored a more typical South Sphere attitude about inter-sphere relations than Odell. She believed no one from any other sphere could be trusted, and she often tried to discourage Odell from treating them with her usual benevolence.

Just as he'd hoped, 75th headed for the pool table while Odell approached the bar. When she saw Merritt, she gave him a warm smile. "First time seeing you in the general's uniform. At least the first time in person. I think it suits you well."

Merritt gave her an appreciative smile. "Who knew custom tailoring would make such a difference?"

"It's not so much the tailoring," Odell replied. "It's the way you carry yourself in it. You know you earned that suit, and it shows. You look good."

"Hey, what are you having?" Merritt asked, gesturing toward the bar. "Let me pick it up for you."

Raising a skeptical eyebrow, Odell replied, "It was just a compliment. You know we swing in opposite directions, don't you?"

Merritt laughed. “Yeah, I know. I was just hoping we could talk a little. I wanted to get your opinion on a rumor I heard.”

“Buying me a drink isn’t going to change whether or not I can answer your questions.”

“I know,” Merritt said. “But I still want to do it.”

“If you insist,” Odell replied with a chuckle.

Merritt ordered Odell’s Spark in white wine. She took a sip and looked to Merritt expectantly, waiting for him to ask his questions. Merritt cleared his throat and said, “I heard something about an embargo.”

Odell narrowed her eyes. “Oh?”

Clearly, she wasn’t going to share more until Merritt laid all his cards on the table. “I heard that the East and South were planning an embargo to protest the West’s use of underage dogs. They’re withholding produce and motorcycles. Is there any truth to this?”

“Why do you want to know?” Odell asked.

Fine, he’d be blunt. He wanted Odell to know his intentions. “I want the North to take part too. But there must be some reason we haven’t joined in, and I wanted to hear it from you before I talk to any of my people.”

“What do you think you can do about it?”

“It depends on what needs to be done. I’m the North’s general now. That does count for something.”

Odell turned in her seat, facing away from the counter as she leaned back with her elbows on its surface. “We’ve been trying to get Mercury to back us for months. He wants no part in it. He’s never been one to speak out against the sex trade. Look at how much he uses it for all your fancy parties.”

“I understand that I’m in the minority. The average person either likes the sex trade or doesn’t care. But underage dogs? Most people in the underground are opposed to *that*. I can’t imagine Mercury supporting it either.”

Odell shrugged. “I know you’re enjoying your new powers, Merritt, but we don’t need fighters for this job. No one is in the mood to fight a war over this, especially when we’re so close to accomplishing our goal without the need for bloodshed.”

Merritt took a sip of his Focus in mineral water. “I get it.”

Odell went silent, and Merritt expected her to get up and join 75th, but instead, she leaned further back in her seat. Merritt was startled when she leaned in so close to him her lips almost brushed his ear. “We kinda had a feeling you were the one hacking into our surveillance feed.”

The blood drained from Merritt’s face. *Damn it.*

“Nora set up that meeting with Pangolin last night to lure you in. She knew just the right cause to grab your attention. 75th ran the video of the meeting a few minutes after you breached the network, and she ran boring stock footage through the rest of the cameras so you wouldn’t have any other interesting feeds to turn to instead. And then Nora had me follow you here to see if you’d ask me about it.”

Merritt clenched his fists. Speaking as softly as Odell, he put up his poker face and asked, “So how much of that embargo story was true?”

“All of it.” Odell flashed a grin. “I figured if we were gonna net a hacker, we might as well put him to work at the same time.” Again, she leaned in close. “Listen, Merritt. We go way back. I think you’re a good guy. I’m inclined to go back to my ladies and tell them you played it cool and didn’t ask me anything. They’re ready for cyberwarfare. They want to infect your digital profiles so bad you won’t be able to do anything or go anywhere in the underground. Your thumbprint will set off alarms. Your most embarrassing surveillance footage will leak to the public. But I’m willing to give you another chance.”

Merritt returned Odell’s smile, matching her casual air. “What’s it going to cost me?”

“I have a very fair price for you. Just convince Mercury to join in on the embargo. Convince him by tomorrow and I’ll let you off the hook.”

“Tomorrow,” Merritt said, his smile slipping. “That’s barely enough time to have an initial conversation with him.”

“I think you’ll manage. You have a good mind, Merritt. You just need more opportunities to put it to the right use. All that effort you put into training so you could fight wars? Imagine if you put that same amount of effort into avoiding wars.”

Merritt gave a wistful laugh. “If only that was the world we lived in, I’d be a very happy man.”

“But it could be someday,” Odell replied. “If you don’t believe you can ever change things, then what are you even doing wearing a leader’s uniform?”

Odell’s words seared into his mind. Instead of responding, he shifted gears. “I take it you’re going to lock me out of your surveillance feed?”

“Absolutely.” Odell took a casual sip of her drink. “Once we figure out how.”

Merritt laughed softly, but his smile faded when 75th arrived at Odell’s side. She shot Merritt a look that he could tell was dirty even though her large sunglasses covered her eyes completely. He always wondered why she wore sunglasses in the underground, even indoors and away from the sun-simulating lights. He assumed it was so people couldn’t read her eyes.

She looked at Odell’s drink. “You said you were picking up drinks for both of us.”

“I decided to get a head start,” Odell said, grinning. “What do you want? Calm or Focus?”

75th glanced at Merritt and said, “Actually, I could go for gin right now.”

Merritt felt like her comment was aimed at him, but she hadn’t even been in the bar when Merritt had told Yackley that gin made him sick. He wondered if he’d been under surveillance at Yackley’s or if this was something 75th had known about him for a long time.

A second bartender arrived to take 75th's order. She did indeed order gin. Taking the hint, Merritt rose and headed across the room to avoid the smell of the drink.

He glanced at Belmont's table. The game had apparently ended, but the crowd remained. People often said that the most exciting part of an underground card game was what happened in the five minutes after the winner was declared. At least no one got shot this time.

After a few minutes, the crowd around Belmont finally began to dissipate. Before anyone else could approach him, Merritt hurried to his side.

"Hey," Belmont said, a wide grin on his face. He held up a stack of money, flipping through it so Merritt could see how thick it was. "It's been a good day. Don't ruin it."

"Troy and Gray?" Merritt asked with a subtle smirk.

"He bought it."

"If that rumor takes off, they're both going to come after you."

"Ah, but isn't it worth it?" Belmont leaned forward. "It wasn't all bull, you know. The two of them really are pretty tight."

"If you say so," Merritt replied doubtfully.

Fanning Merritt with his stack of money, Belmont said, "How about I buy you two thousand glasses of Focus in mineral water?"

Merritt examined Belmont. "How high are you right now? I needed to talk to you about something important."

"How *dare* you? I'm not high at all!"

He was higher than Merritt had realized at first glance. He'd hoped they could drive elsewhere to talk, but that looked to be out of the question for now. "This is a sensitive matter. We can't talk out here." He pointed across the room. "We can go to the stairwell."

"You're inviting me to the stairwell with you?" Belmont asked with a devious grin. "Can I bite you this time, or are you going to body slam me and dislocate my arm?"

"No biting. Just talking."

“Imagine the rumors when people see us going into the stairwell together.”

“I’m not worried about rumors.”

Merritt waited for Belmont to peel himself out of his chair and get to his feet, and then they headed to the stairwell together. Once they were alone with the door closed, Belmont groaned, turning away from Merritt as if trying to conceal something. “You go to the stairwell, you’re supposed to have sex. I’m like Pavlov’s dog here.”

Realizing what Belmont was saying, Merritt blushed. “Do you need a minute?”

“Nah. Just start talking business. That should take care of it.”

Merritt took a moment to organize his thoughts. “The South and the East are planning an embargo against the West to try to stop them from using underage dogs. What do you know about Mercury’s involvement in this?”

“I know he has none. They’ve been hounding him for months, but he’s not interested.”

“Why not?”

“How should I know? It’s one of his secret Mercury reasons.”

“I’ve never seen him with an underage dog. Have you?”

“Nah, he likes ‘em older. But even if he was going for the kids, you wouldn’t see him doing it. The people who do that know how to be discreet. It’s not illegal in the West, but it won’t win you friends in any other sphere.”

“That’s what I don’t understand,” Merritt said. “Sleeping with underage dogs is already frowned upon in most of the underground. Mercury has nothing to lose by supporting the embargo. You really have no idea why he objects?”

“Nope. No idea.”

Merritt narrowed his eyes. Folding his arms, he said, “You’re lying.”

Belmont seemed about to protest, but either the drugs were outwitting him or he just wasn't in the mood to argue. Finally, he turned to face Merritt. "Why do you always want to stir up shit, Merritt? Don't you ever just want to take the easy road?"

"Why doesn't Mercury want to join the embargo?" he pressed.

Belmont let out a heavy sigh. "I've never talked to him about it. But if you want my guess? I'd say there are two things." He reached into his pocket and retrieved his glass pipe, then frowned and put it away again after seeing that it was empty.

"Two things," Merritt prodded. "What's thing one?"

"Political pressure," Belmont replied. "I know the company Mercury keeps. The guys up high. Mercury doesn't mess with the youngsters, but he's got no problem getting close with guys who do."

Merritt's eyes widened. "Like who?"

With a smirk, Belmont said, "Knowing wouldn't do you any good. You're just looking for juicy gossip now."

"That's not what it is." Frowning, Merritt turned away. "Fine. What's thing two?"

"Thing two is the bigger one, but it's also more complicated," Belmont said. "Ugh, if I knew when you called me that you were going to be asking questions like this, I would have planned to blow you off. Or maybe just blow you." He raised an eyebrow. "Can I? Do you want to? We're already in the stairwell."

"Belmont," Merritt cut in before he could let himself be tempted.

"You're impossible," Belmont muttered. "One of these days, you're going to want me to suck your dick, and instead I'm just going to stand here and talk politics."

"Thing two," Merritt pressed.

"Ugh." Belmont shook his head with exasperation. "Thing two: it'll make us look bad, getting involved in this."

“Look bad how? We’d look worse if we didn’t get involved. No one likes underage dogs. We don’t want to be the only sphere condoning it.”

“If Mercury gets on other spheres about the way they treat their kiddies, he’s opening the door to that same kind of criticism for the North.”

“Criticism for what? We don’t turn our kids into dogs.”

“Maybe they’d be better off if we did.”

Merritt’s eyes widened with horror. “How could you even say something that disgusting?”

“Hey, calm down,” Belmont warned. “You don’t know what you’re playing with here.”

“Every sphere has its creeps. I grew up in an orphanage; I know that. But the West Sphere is abusing kids on an entirely different level. You can’t refute *that*.”

For a moment, Belmont seemed entirely intent on refuting it, but then he shook his head. “Listen, all I’m going to say is that this underage dog thing is a West Sphere problem. It doesn’t even affect us. Why do you care so much?”

“Why don’t you care?”

“How many people do you want me to care about? If you’re asking me to add someone to the list, it’s not going to be a red-sash. This isn’t our problem.”

“Yes it is.” Merritt clenched his fists. “Yes it is.”

Belmont leaned against the wall, his arms folded over his chest as he waited for Merritt to explain himself.

“That mindset—the one that makes people think it’s okay to own another person, to break their will, to lord over them—is not a West Sphere problem. It’s an underground problem. If you read enough above ground books, you’ll understand how bad it is down here. Adults do it to children, elites do it to aces. Our founders brought it down with them in their twisted prison culture, and it’s infected everything from the sex trade to the military.”

Belmont opened his mouth, and Merritt braced himself for a callous, dismissive response. But Belmont hesitated. Finally, he tilted his head and said, “Something you want to tell me about the military, General Merritt?”

Merritt fell silent. He’d opened the door to that question, but now he wasn’t sure if he wanted to walk through it. He didn’t want to get off topic, and Belmont’s ears were the least secure place in the underground to leave sensitive information. But he felt compelled to tell Belmont anyway. He wanted Belmont to know, and he trusted him to hear it.

He opened his mouth, but the words didn’t emerge. He examined Belmont’s red, watery eyes and unfocused gaze. Belmont was clearly not at his sharpest, or at his most dangerous. If ever there was a time to tell him, it was now.

“I was never supposed to be promoted above private. I had two marks against me when I was eighteen. But I suppose you already knew about that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Belmont replied. He wiped a sheen of sweat off his brow and rubbed his temples, trying to concentrate. “After the hacking incident, I looked at your file. There were marks against you for insubordination and intoxication. Now that I know you, I can’t imagine how you would have gotten either of those. I asked around, but no one gave me a solid answer.”

Merritt paced toward the stairs. “I don’t remember when it all started. At first, Harding just watched me train like he watched all the other Chem Ops soldiers. But after a few weeks, he started paying closer attention to me, telling me “good job” on my way to the showers and giving me little tips for improvement.

“Then one night, he called me into his office. He had my first year’s college transcripts on his desk, and he said my course load and grades were ‘ambitious for a soldier.’ He knew I was a private because I had no inheritance, and he asked me if I wanted to be a lieutenant someday. I said I’d serve wherever I was placed, but he pushed, and I admitted that, yes, I wanted to be a lieutenant.”

Merritt swallowed as he paced back toward the door. He'd begun to lose his nerve. Belmont's gaze burned into him, growing more lucid despite his high.

After a slow breath, he found his voice again. "Harding looked at me kind of funny. And then he pulled a bottle of gin out from a desk drawer, and he poured two glasses and told me to take one and sit down. I said I thought it was against the rules, and he said that as my superior officer, he made my rules. And he told me to drink." Merritt's gaze lowered to the ground. "And I drank until he gave me permission to stop."

He chanced another look at Belmont, but Belmont's eyes gave no hint at his thoughts.

"He said that raw talent would only get me so far in the military, and I needed one of two things to bridge the gap. Money or connections. He knew I had no money, so he told me to start working on my connections." Taking refuge behind his poker face, he whispered, "And then he said I had beautiful lips."

Belmont's mouth twitched in a vague frown. He clearly knew where the story was going, but he didn't stop Merritt from telling it.

"He kept asking me questions, and each one was more personal than the last. I was really drunk by then. By the time he came around to my side of the desk and got me out of my chair, I could barely see straight. I tried to do what he wanted, but when I realized I was kneeling in front of him, I panicked. I froze. I just knelt there with my teeth clenched, and he got more and more frustrated trying to get me to do what he wanted. But I was just... in another place. At some point, he finally gave up. He gave me an open-handed slap in the face, and he called me 'useless fucking offal' and threw me out of his office. And then he called the military police to arrest me for getting drunk and propositioning him."

Belmont pressed his lips together, arms still folded. He continued to listen without judgment. He might have even looked sympathetic. Encouraged, Merritt continued.

"It took me years to wrap my head around what happened. I practically started stalking Harding, trying to get him one on one so I

could prove to him that I was in fact capable of taking orders without freezing up. It wasn't until I was the one handing out promotions that I realized Harding was the problem. What he did to me, I'd never have done to my soldiers. But they thought I would. When I told my aide I was promoting him, he looked devastated. We knew each other for years—we fought alongside each other—and his first reaction after hearing my offer was to start taking off his clothes. Every time I gave my soldiers promotions, I saw fear in their eyes—because they thought they'd have to do something extra to earn the promotion.”

Belmont remained against the wall, still silent. He'd stared at Merritt throughout his story, but Merritt hadn't had the will to fully meet his eyes. Only now did he finally dare. “So that's why I care. Because I know what it looks like when other people hold your fate in their hands and use it to get something out of you that you don't want to give. Maybe growing up an elite, you never had to see that. But for everyone else, there's always someone a few ranks above us waiting for a chance to abuse their power.”

Belmont broke out into a laugh. Merritt went rigid, his shock rendering him silent. His ears went hot, and he felt sick. Of all the reactions Belmont could have given him, laughter was the worst case scenario.

Belmont laughed for a good half a minute before he finally regained control of himself. With a pitying smile, he turned to Merritt. “Oh, Merritt. Honey. How do you think I got my first job out of college?”

Merritt narrowed his eyes, watching silently as Belmont stepped away from the wall and began to approach.

“You think I never saw that shit because I'm an *elite*? Don't be naïve.” His dress shoes clacked on the floor with each step he took. “I went to the College of Science and Medicine, the most competitive school in the underground, and I graduated number two in my class. But because I wasn't number one, dear old daddy wouldn't pay the bribe that every elite needs in order to book a job interview. I tried for months to line up work in chemistry or medicine, but without my parents, I didn't have any money or standing on my own. I was completely locked out of the system. I might as well have been an ace.

So I had to find another way to open those doors.” He narrowed his eyes at Merritt, a startling intensity in his gaze. “It’s all well and good if you’ve got too much pride to suck dick for a promotion, but not everyone is willing to be poor and powerless their entire lives.”

Merritt was dumbstruck. He could see the pain in Belmont’s eyes. How had he never realized what Belmont had gone through, or even suspected it? He should have known.

He wanted to respond calmly, but Belmont was in combat mode, and Merritt had no choice but to match him. “Was that how you wanted it to be?” he challenged. “Was that how you wanted to open those doors?”

“Of course not,” Belmont snapped, startling Merritt with his intensity. “You think I *wanted* to give a blow job to that disgusting, greasy old man? You think that blow job was even enough for him?” The fire in Belmont’s eyes grew so hot that Merritt had to look away, but Belmont continued to spew heat through his words. “That first year at headquarters was the worst time of my fucking life. But I did it, and I opened that door. Complain all you want, Merritt, but you can’t blame the system for your unwillingness to work within it.”

Merritt shook his head, staring back at Belmont with horror. After a long, heated pause, he finally said, “You really are a product of your sphere.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Belmont demanded.

Merritt stepped forward, getting closer to Belmont than he knew he should have. “You’re Mercury’s right hand. You have all the power in the world. You could *change* the system if you wanted to. But you don’t want to.”

“You have no idea what a judgmental little prick you are,” Belmont snarled. “I did every ugly thing you refused to do. And it only gets uglier the higher up you get. But I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished. I know what it cost me. And now you’re treating me like I’m a monster for not wanting to break the ladder I worked so hard to climb?”

Merritt’s fists softened, and he paused to consider his words. “You’re not a monster,” he replied quietly. “You suffered. But you’re a

blue-tie, so you can never admit that you suffered. The only way you can make anyone else understand what you went through is by making them suffer like you did. That's why you don't want to improve things down here. It would hurt too much to see someone else have it better than you had it."

Belmont's lip curled, and Merritt recognized that his rage-filled theatre mask concealed pain. "Oh, *fuck* you, Merritt." He leaned in, daring Merritt to hold his gaze. "You want me to admit I suffered? Fine. I suffered. But I paid my dues, and I got to a point where now I'm the one standing tall. *You*, on the other hand..." He stepped back and waved emphatically. "You were handed all your promotions on a silver platter. You never had to give up your dignity. But you're still kneeling because you owe your entire existence to Mercury. He lifted you up for nothing in return, and now he owns you. Well, *I'm* not going to be owned by anyone, *ever*. When Mercury gave me his double-banded blue tie and asked me for my pledge, I didn't get down on one knee like I was supposed to. I stood and kissed his ring without even lowering my head. He'll hate me forever for that. But I got my first job on my knees, and *I'll never kneel for anyone again.*"

Merritt couldn't find his voice. He swallowed once, then twice, before finally summoning his words. "I'm a soldier in a sphere that sees me as offal. I've hemorrhaged dignity every day of my life, and I think you know that. But *I* know that I don't have to put my soldiers through the same things I went through. Wherever I have the power to stop it, I will. You could do the same if you wanted to." Merritt took a step forward. "Maybe I'm judgmental. Maybe I'm naïve. But I do what I say I'm going to do."

"Well, good for you," Belmont said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Too bad you need Mercury's permission before you can fly off and save the world." He glanced at his watch. "You told me this was going to be a short conversation. And you told me you wouldn't ruin my day. So much for doing what you say you're going to do."

Merritt refused to lower his gaze.

"Are you done?" Belmont asked, turning away.

Merritt didn't reply. He watched Belmont approach the exit, wishing he knew what to say. He didn't want to leave the conversation on that note, but he doubted Belmont would tolerate any more pushing from him. He stood silently in place, letting Belmont's words echo in his head.

Belmont reached for the doorknob.

Merritt's eyes suddenly widened. "Disgusting, greasy old man," he repeated.

Belmont paused, his hand hovering over the doorknob.

"You were talking about Higgins. That's what you used to call him."

Belmont's hand still lingered in place. He stood still, blinking a few times. After an excruciating pause, he sighed and turned around, leaning back against the door. "Looks like your brain finally kicked in. Too bad it's been absent up until now."

Merritt took a tentative step forward. He considered reaching out for Belmont, maybe touching his arm or his hand, but he thought better of it. "Look, I'm sorry about what you had to do."

"Save it." Belmont folded his arms, putting up an unaffected front. "He got what he deserved in the end."

Clearly, Belmont didn't want to go into any further detail about his own experience, and that was fine with Merritt. It already felt like the air had somehow cleared between them. Belmont, after saying what he needed to say, no longer seethed with resentment. As heated as their argument had been, Merritt's final statements seemed to release a pressure valve that had long been in danger of bursting.

"You remember what I said about the company Mercury keeps?" Belmont asked. "Higgins used to cross the border all the time to spend the night with underage male dogs. He was at it for a good long time until the South zeroed in on him and blackmailed him into changing his ways. After that, he moved onto newly hired associates and new graduates looking to get in. He never really got off on kids *because* they were kids. He got off on having absolute, unchecked power over whoever he was with. And he had as much control over those new hires

as he did over the West Sphere teens he used to rent.” Belmont laughed. “It’s kind of hilarious how flattered and grateful you were for all the attention he was giving you. You would have changed your tune if he’d lived a few months longer. The rest of us on the board, we all saw the way he was buttering you up, and we knew what was coming. A good thirty percent of us had been there before.”

Sickness rose in Merritt’s gut. He’d seen Higgins as an ally. He’d interpreted his smile as fatherly. Higgins had invited him over, given him a secure phone where they could talk in private, offered to mentor him—and he’d never thought to question any of it.

He remembered a joke between Belmont and Pratt from months ago that had gone over his head. Pratt had challenged Belmont to recall the slimiest guy with the worst pickup line he’d ever heard, and Belmont had replied with, “Have you ever thought about getting involved in politics?” Finally, Merritt knew why that line had sounded familiar. It had been the same question Higgins had asked Merritt after their first board meeting together.

“There are so many things about the North Sphere that you don’t know,” Belmont said. “You need to start asking yourself if you might be better off not knowing. Because I warned you, it only gets uglier the higher up you get.”

Merritt locked his eyes on Belmont’s. “I’m not scared. Are you?”

“It’s not about me. I’ve got nothing to lose. I’m past caring about anyone or anything in the underground, and that’s what makes me invincible. But you have people who matter to you. You should think about them.”

“I *do*. I think about you guys all the time. That’s why I can’t turn away from this. That’s why I want to make the underground better.” He stared longingly into Belmont’s eyes. “Don’t you think we can make it better?”

Belmont returned Merritt’s gaze for several seconds before suddenly shaking his head and turning away. “Don’t look at me with those eyes, Merritt. I’m too high for this.”

Again, Merritt felt the urge to grab Belmont's hand. But instead, he ran a finger over the cool metal of his tie clip and waited for Belmont's response.

Belmont finally turned back to face him, more collected than before. "Here's the thing, Merritt. You can either be obedient or you can have strong convictions. You can't do both. Not in the North Sphere, not as long as you're trying to please Mercury. You won't change his mind on this embargo if you insist on deferring to his authority." Belmont narrowed his eyes in challenge. "If you want to make things prettier for everyone else, you're going to have to let yourself get a little bit ugly. You think you can do that?"

Merritt considered Belmont's words. Maybe he had a point. But then he remembered his phone call with Torrence before the West Sphere invasion. Torrence, more than anything, wanted Merritt to stay who he was instead of lowering himself to his enemies' level.

Belmont seemed to read his doubtful gaze. "I'm not asking you to be me. I'm just asking you to stop being so fucking rigid. If you don't learn to bend, you're going to break. And I don't want to have to watch that."

Merritt felt a bit of warmth in his chest, and he wasn't sure why. He waited for Belmont to continue.

"Do you remember what we talked about when we were working on the battle simulator? I told you that the best way to serve your sphere was to be the best general you could be and to do whatever it takes to get results, whether or not that involved following orders to the letter. You were resistant. But now it's time you try it out for yourself." He took a moment to examine Merritt's face. "If you care enough about this embargo, if you think joining it is the best thing for your sphere, you'll find a way to make it happen. Right?"

"Hmm."

"So?" Belmont asked again. "You think you can do that?"

Merritt gave Belmont a tentative smile. "Yeah. Okay. I can do it."

With only three hours to spare before his deadline with Odell, Merritt called Mercury on Monday night and requested a meeting. Mercury told him to stop by his suite at ten and let himself in.

When Merritt stepped into Mercury's suite, he was startled to see him seated on the edge of the kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee and reading something from a paper file. He wasn't wearing his jacket or vest. His dress shirt was un-tucked and unbuttoned, and his undone blue tie was draped loosely around his neck. When he saw Merritt, he raised his head and smiled. "Right on time, as usual."

"I wouldn't keep you waiting," Merritt replied. "And I'll try not to take too much of your time."

"What's on your mind, Merritt?"

"I recently received word of a planned embargo involving the East and South Spheres, targeting the West Sphere. I'm sure you already know the details."

Mercury raised an eyebrow. "I do."

"I've come to request the North's participation."

Mercury pushed himself off the kitchen table and slowly turned to face Merritt. "And why are you requesting this?"

"Because I believe it's a cause worthy of the North's attention. The West's use and export of underage dogs is a serious ethical breach, and they've gotten away with it for too long."

The muscles in Mercury's jaw tensed, and Merritt had seen it often enough in board meetings to recognize it as the precursor to a reprimand. "Let me rephrase," Mercury said, his voice so hard Merritt nearly flinched. "How would participating benefit the North Sphere?"

Merritt hurriedly recalled his talking points. "It would strengthen relations with the East and South."

"That's not a priority," Mercury said. "The West is the sphere whose relations with us are the most precarious, thanks to the East's

waterways project and their recent invasion. Maybe you don't realize, being just a soldier, that we depend on the West's trade relations in order to keep our sphere running."

Merritt knew better than to acknowledge Mercury's insult. "I'm not proposing that we cut off all trade to and from the West. The East is withholding produce, and the South is withholding vehicles and vehicle service. If we only backed up the East by also withholding produce—"

"Withholding even one thing will result in our economy taking a hit, with no measurable benefit. The West's problem with underage dogs is just that: the West's problem. It has no bearing on us in the North, and involving ourselves would only be a detriment."

"I don't think this is the type of problem we can look at expecting a direct payoff. It's about fixing a broken part of our culture. And over time—"

"Merritt, I'm disappointed."

Merritt fell silent. Cold sweat began to collect on his forehead.

"You have a compassionate streak that drives you to make illogical decisions. You've been fortunate that circumstances have worked to your favor so far, but that won't always be the case. It was interesting to listen to your quirky philosophies back when you were a sergeant. But you're a general now. You're making real decisions that affect our sphere on a broad scale. I need a general who can harden his heart and be ruthless in order to accomplish our goals. It's starting to look like you're not that person."

Merritt said nothing. It took all his effort to maintain his poker face.

"If you can't immediately prove to me that you can be that person, then I advise you to return to your quarters without another word."

Mercury turned away, heading toward the corridor leading to his bedroom.

Merritt clenched his fists. For a moment he lowered his head, staring fixedly at the ground as he willed himself to do what he'd come

to do. Peaceful discussion hadn't worked. He knew it wouldn't. So now....

He raised his head, locking his eyes on Mercury. Just before Mercury could get out of earshot, he said, "I worry for your reputation if you don't join the embargo."

Mercury paused, turning just enough for Merritt to see his profile. It looked like he was debating whether to ignore Merritt, chastise him, or listen. Merritt continued without giving him a chance to decide.

"The rest of the underground is almost unanimously opposed to the use of underage dogs. It seems suspicious that you're unwilling to join the effort to shut it down. There has been talk about your political affiliations. The company you keep. You've even had a right hand who regularly crossed the border to sleep with underage dogs."

Mercury's poker face turned just a bit too hard.

"People might say you refused to take part in the embargo to shield your allies from scrutiny. You frequently employ dogs for North Sphere functions. Do you review every purchase order? Have underage dogs slipped in under your watch?" Merritt narrowed his eyes. "Have you used their services yourself?"

Mercury's poker face remained, but Merritt could sense the heat behind it.

"These are the questions people will ask if you don't participate. Between your purchase orders and the South's surveillance feeds, it wouldn't be difficult for your enemies to discover damaging evidence—or to create it. That sort of bad press would be disastrous for your approval rating among your sphere's citizens, and bad approval brings uprisings and rebellions. It would take minimal hacking skills to generate a digital trail of underage dog purchases under your name. Even for a novice hacker, it would be easy." Merritt raised an eyebrow and flashed a subtle smile. "I know how easy it is because I already did it."

Mercury stared at Merritt without a word, and Merritt sensed that he was caught off guard. After a long stretch of silence, he slowly approached. Merritt felt a pang of fear, remembering the time Mercury strangled one of his advisors with his tie, and he steeled himself.

Your life belongs to your King.

He told this to himself in an effort to stay calm while facing his fate, but instead his heart pounded harder.

Mercury stopped only inches away from him, staring down into his eyes. Merritt returned his gaze unflinching.

“Do you know what you look like right now?” Mercury asked.

Merritt remained silent.

“You look like you did in the surveillance videos during the West’s invasion. Outside of confrontation, you’re soft. But when you’re on, you’re on. This is the strongest you’ve ever looked.”

Merritt willed himself to retain his composure. He wasn’t sure if Mercury was being genuine or if this was an attempt at manipulation. “So you’ll join the effort?”

Mercury’s face shifted just enough to signal a surrender. “We’ll withhold produce. Only produce.”

Merritt dared a smile. He was aiming for something cool and subtle, but the moment he allowed his mouth to relax, it stretched into a wide, round grin. “Thank you, Damen.”

Mercury remained stone-faced. “I won’t forget this stunt, Merritt. But for now, you’re dismissed.”

“No. *No way.* You did *not* say that to him!” Belmont let out an incredulous laugh and slapped his hands on the private booth table at Fleming’s, nearly toppling his glass of water. “Did you really say that to him?”

“Mm-hmm,” Merritt said as he chewed a piece of coho salmon sushi.

“Merritt.” Belmont grabbed Merritt’s wrist and gave his fork-wielding hand an excited shake. “You just fucking blackmailed your King. Welcome to the big leagues.”

“Did I really blackmail him?” Merritt asked, only half joking. “That’s kind of an unflattering word for it, don’t you think?”

Belmont snorted behind his hand as he struggled to contain his laughter. After finally collecting himself, he said, “He could have killed you for that. I’m surprised he didn’t.”

“I only did it to prove a point.”

“That’s even better! Your heart wasn’t even genuinely in it, but you still sold *blackmailing Damen Mercury* convincingly enough that he agreed to join the embargo. You’re a legend.” He returned his attention to his lunch for a moment before adding, “I have no idea how you can go from a goofy marshmallow to a cold-blooded soldier without any stops in between.”

Merritt shrugged.

“I think you got away with it because Mercury still doesn’t take you seriously. He doesn’t see you as a threat. But you’re going to have to tread that line carefully because the moment you cross it, he’ll be on you. No mercy.”

Merritt slowly chewed his food as he considered Belmont’s words.

“You know,” Belmont continued, “you and I make a pretty lethal team. I clued you in on Higgins, and not only did you turn that information into a weapon, you stabbed Mercury in the neck with it.”

At this, Merritt lowered his fork. He stared at the surface of the table, contemplating. “It was never my intention to hurt my King. I’m just trying to serve my sphere the best way I can.”

“Oh, please. Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts.” Belmont leaned in. He lowered his voice as if telling a secret, but the smirk on his face suggested he was being facetious. “This might come as a shock, but Mercury isn’t always right. He is, in fact, a human being.” He leaned back again with a shrug. “He’s also stubborn as hell, so sometimes it takes a strategic approach to get him to see the light.

You were right: getting in on the embargo will be good for us, and Mercury needed that push. You were good, Merritt.”

Merritt gave Belmont a grateful smile before turning back to his food.