

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

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CHAPTER 26

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CHAPTER 26

Mercury's insufferable smirk gleamed from atop Belmont's deck of cards. "I won't let you have him," Belmont growled, glowering at the glossy print. He only wished his venomous glare could reach the man himself.

He set down his fountain pen and tore his newly scrawled note off the pad, then waved the scrap of paper in front of him until the ink dried. Across the room, the rock pigeon within the corner birdcage let out a low, rumbling coo as if to announce its readiness for another trip.

The day before, he'd received a confidential message, but he hadn't yet sent the bird back to the mailroom roost. It still sat in its temporary cage, pecking at its bowl of seeds. He slid his note into a secure capsule, then entered Balbo's ID number as the only recipient whose thumbprint could unlock the tube. He docked it within an electronic navigation harness and set Balbo's chipped tie as the destination.

The harness wasn't as hacker-proof as a pigeon's natural homing ability, but it was his only option. The pigeon's home was at headquarters, so any outgoing destination could only be reached through the magnetic fields and infrasound generated by a harness. He opened the cage and slipped the harness onto the docile pigeon, activated its navigation system, and sidled up to his office window with the bird.

He waited a few minutes until a flock of pigeons was released from the mailroom window below, and then he tossed his own bird out into its midst. The bird disappeared within the cloud of flapping wings, which rose up past the top floor of the headquarters building before the birds all took off in different directions. As they scattered, even he couldn't tell which one had flown from his window.

He returned to his seat. Mercury's enraging card portrait still peered up at him. He gave his desk a sharp shake and the king card slid askew, then tipped off the top of the pile.

"You get off on the power, huh? You get off on manipulating me? Manipulating Merritt? You enjoy watching us bow down to you?" He rose to his feet, tossed the card to the ground, and stepped on it. "Well, King *Damen* Mercury," he said as he unbuttoned his shirt, "I'm about to turn your wet dream into a nightmare."

Archer held Merritt's file at her side as if it were any mundane piece of paperwork, her eyes straight ahead as she walked the halls of headquarters. Her poker face was unyielding, her poise flawless. Her tie was knotted clean and tight, and her hair was swept perfectly into place. Neutral mouth, relaxed shoulders, soft knuckles. She would give no hint that this day was unlike any other.

It was just past five o'clock. At any moment, herds of headquarters workers would start filing out of their offices and into the hallways, but for now the crowd on this floor was sparse. As she neared the elevator, a tall figure carrying a messenger bag stalked off in front of her from the adjacent hallway. A tall, naked figure.

Belmont.

He swished past a pair of guards, pursued only by their stunned, wide eyes. Two servants and two IT workers also faltered as he crossed their paths. "What?" he asked the last guy, raising an eyebrow as he continued walking. Archer turned her still-neutral gaze to the guards, then to Belmont's bare backside as he headed confidently for the elevator.

Mercury hadn't breathed a word to Archer about his meeting with Belmont, but she was sure he'd confiscated Belmont's tie. However, he apparently hadn't told his guards to restrict Belmont's movements, and Belmont knew how to exploit any loophole to its fullest. An undressed person didn't have to wear their sphere identifier, and Belmont was just powerful enough to get away with sauntering through headquarters naked.

Belmont boarded the elevator, then did something he'd never done before: he held the door for Archer.

She knew he'd only done it to force her to ride in discomfort with him, but there was no smooth way to decline the offer. Maintaining her polite, neutral smile, she got on beside him. "Garage?" he asked as he pressed the button, squinting at her as if searching for a break in her poker face.

That had been Archer's plan—a discreet exit through the private garage at the bottom floor. But instead, she reached across Belmont and pressed the button for the first floor. Belmont flashed a split-second scowl as if he suspected she'd changed her plans on purpose, but he said nothing.

They rode down in silence.

The elevator doors opened to a crowd of blue-tie civilians milling about at the base of the grand stairway. They dropped their poker faces and fell silent, gaping and then glancing around at each other, stunned and unsure of how to react upon seeing the King's right hand naked in front of them. Belmont's poker face was solid—not that anyone was looking at his face.

Belmont waited for Archer to step out onto the first floor. She didn't.

The doors closed, then the elevator descended one more floor before opening into the garage. Belmont shot Archer a hateful glare before stalking off toward his motorcycle.

“YOUR CHILDREN AREN'T SAFE. I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE A NINE, A TEN, EVEN A JACK—YOUR KIDS WILL FALL INTO WILSON'S HANDS IF WE DON'T SHUT HIM DOWN NOW!”

Belmont's magnified voice boomed from his compact megaphone, reverberating across the grounds of sub-Ravenswood's town square. When he'd first arrived five minutes ago, only a few straggling pedestrians had stopped, curious to see what the North

Sphere's right hand would do while standing naked atop a foldable podium in the middle of the Giddings Rock Garden. Now, a crowd of at least a hundred elites stood before him, listening to his speech.

It was nearly six o'clock in October. He knew he'd be losing simulated sunlight, so he'd lit the decorative torches around the rock garden for dramatic effect. He'd been tempted to hold one while he spoke so he'd have something flashy to wave around, but he dreaded the thought of falling embers while he was without pants.

According to Mercury, riots had already broken out in the sub-Norwood Park, sub-Lincoln Square, and sub-Albany slums. But aces had no power, even in great numbers. Mercury would use the Elite Border Guard to quickly and mercilessly quash any ace uprisings. Their protests would mean nothing unless the elite districts were willing to add their support to the cause—and *that* would take some coaxing.

The elite ranks were the only firewall between Mercury and the growing violent unrest in the slums. They had enough collective power to compromise Mercury's defenses and leave him vulnerable to attack. Any significant cracks in Mercury's support would make him sweat.

By now, Mercury surely knew Belmont had slipped out of headquarters, and Belmont had to assume he was being hunted. Mercury's men might not try to assassinate him outright—the backlash would be too powerful for Mercury to withstand, especially now that the news bomb had put him under fire. Belmont's web of connections was sturdy enough to ensnare Mercury if anything happened to him, and Mercury knew that.

But even if Mercury's men didn't dare to take Belmont out, they'd sure as hell do whatever they could to shut him up. Most likely, they'd try to apprehend him and take him back to headquarters.

Belmont had called in no fewer than forty favors to secure his path from headquarters to sub-Ravenswood. His first stop had been at the nearby flat of a former fling—a low-ranking bartender no one would think to surveil. With one call from the bartender's phone, he set all his key defenses into effect.

Captain Ashland now had his Elite Border Guard company flanking the Giddings Rock Garden, and Devon's crew was tracking

the Blackout Division to make sure they didn't try to approach sub-Ravenswood. Mannheim had tampered with the nearest tunnel checkpoints so that gate access would glitch and stall for anyone Belmont hadn't designated as an ally. Also courtesy of Mannheim, two secure cell phones were delivered to Belmont in a back alley by a masked motorcycle rider.

Around the perimeter of the sub-Ravenswood gathering stood news crews with cameras rolling. Belmont had called only the journalists he could rely on to cover him favorably, and he'd employed yet more allies to play the news and fuel the gossip machine in bars, restaurants, and hospital waiting rooms across the sphere.

His highest-ranking allies were assigned to flood Mercury with questions and demands about Wilson, purely to keep him busy. The more he could divide Mercury's attention, the better.

With Belmont's web built, it would be a challenge for Mercury to surreptitiously apprehend him. Any attempt to stop Belmont would be met with widespread questions and suspicion.

But Belmont couldn't get overconfident. If he wanted to get the elites to back him, he had to close the deal fast.

He assessed his audience. Most wore flawless poker faces. Some appeared skeptical. But a handful already looked terse and determined, as if ready to act out whatever he asked of them. This was promising.

"Wilson's child testing program is a force beyond the control of anyone in the North Sphere," he proclaimed. "It's bigger than you. Bigger than me. BIGGER THAN MERCURY! The only way we can stop him from snatching OUR ELITE CHILDREN is to shut down the program and put Wilson to death!"

A smattering of polite applause rippled through a section of the audience. Belmont held back an aggravated groan. *Polite clapping? Really?* Blue-tie elites just weren't cut out for riots the way the slums' aces—or citizens from other spheres—were. On the other hand, he knew that their rage was festering behind their neutral masks. They didn't need to riot the way aces did. After all, an elite blue-tie's viciousness was only amplified by their steely civility.

There would be no hurled insults, no thrown punches. Instead, these elites would target Wilson and his allies through the avenues they controlled: cutting off power and water to their homes and offices, blacklisting their addresses from food and supply deliveries, ordering spontaneous construction on all the roads surrounding their houses, tracking and publicizing their whereabouts at every moment. Those roadblocks would be enough to impair the Elite Border Guard, the Blackout Division, and Mercury's personal bodyguards in their attempts to keep Mercury safe. All Belmont had to do was mobilize enough elites, and they could wreak enough havoc to twist Mercury's arm.

"He's just trying to get attention," someone in the front row sneered while gesturing to Belmont's bare body. She'd said it loudly enough for a good handful of blue-ties around her to hear.

"You're damn right I'm trying to get attention!" Belmont replied. "This matter *needs* our attention! We aren't going to fix anything unless we turn on the goddamn floodlights!"

The woman replied icily, "You're not wearing anything."

"I'm coming to you naked to show you that I have nothing to hide!" Belmont called, confidently locking eyes with a doubtful-looking man who stood beside the woman. "But those guys in D&P are covered up from head to toe. They're covering up more than just their sad old bodies!" He held up a full-page print of Merritt's face. "My subordinate, General Merritt, stumbled upon Wilson's testing program by coincidence, days before the news bomb went live. And now he's missing. What does that look like to me? IT LOOKS LIKE A COVER-UP!"

His proclamation was met with claps and even a few cheers. Encouraged, Belmont pumped his fist in the air. "WE WON'T REST UNTIL WE SEE GENERAL MERRITT ALIVE AND WELL! WE'LL GIVE EVERYONE AT HEADQUARTERS HELL UNTIL HE'S BACK IN FRONT OF US!"

The applause was more restrained this time. It'd take a miracle to get the North interested in the fate of a soldier. As pissed off as it made

him, he'd have to switch tactics to something his audience found more palatable.

“Why did I throw away my tie? I'll tell you why! By using our kids as guinea pigs, Wilson and his department are treating us like we aren't even elites—like we AREN'T EVEN BLUE-TIES! We've paid our dues to get to where we are. We've EARNED these ranks and ties! SO WHY AREN'T OUR KIDS BEING PROTECTED?”

Stronger applause this time. Belmont could read murder in the eyes of a nearby stone-faced woman. He knew he'd gotten through to her, even as she stood covering her daughter's eyes from Belmont's scandalous nudity.

“So here's what we're going to do!” he bellowed. “We're ALL going to cast off our blue ties! We'll take off our ties—hell, take EVERYTHING off if that's what we need to do—and we won't put a thing back on until that program is shut down, Wilson is dead, General Merritt is out walking in front of the cameras, and ALL OUR CHILDREN ARE SAFE TO GO OUTSIDE AGAIN!”

More polite applause, this time across at least a quarter of the audience. He knew blue-ties loved a good package deal. He'd bundle Merritt's freedom with the promise of their children's safety, and then they'd *have* to fight for him too.

He could feel the tension in the air. All he needed was one person backing him, and a wave would follow. That's how it always was with blue-ties. They were so overstuffed with pent-up energy that, once the seal was broken, they'd go wilder than any armband or red-sash would ever dare.

“Who here is going to be the first to take off their tie?” he called to the crowd.

He needed one person. Just one person.

“I will,” the skeptical man in the front row said at last, through gritted teeth. He tore the knot of his tie loose and cast the fabric aside. Belmont heard gasps ripple through the crowd, but moments later, a few more ties were thrown into the air.

“The power is in our hands!” Belmont cried. “We can’t let Wilson fool Mercury into going soft on him. Mercury will know that we won’t accept any compromise—not when it comes to our kids—to our *legacies!*”

Yes, *that* was the right word to bring in another chunk of supporters. He knew half the parents in the audience didn’t care about their kids; they only cared about the mark their kids would leave in their name. “We know of only a few elite kids who died, but who knows how many others were taken and tested on? What did it do to their poor developing minds? Maybe *that’s* why your son didn’t do as well on his exams as you thought he would. Maybe *that’s* why your adult daughter failed to reach the same elite rank you hold. We have no idea how many of our kids were RUINED by Wilson’s testing program!”

Yes, give them a scapegoat for their failed parenting. That’d reel them in as easily as a bottle of YCO-4 dangled in front of an addict. One by one, the eyes of the parents in the crowd narrowed with suspicion, then widened with realization.

“Say it with me!” Belmont cried, raising both fists in the air. “WE WON’T LET WILSON STEAL OUR LEGACIES ANY LONGER!”

A sea of royal blue flashed across the crowd as ties were suddenly cast into the air. A suit jacket flew above the crowd, then a pair of pants. More pants, more ties. An older woman in the front row pulled out a cell phone, and Belmont could hear just enough to tell that she was arranging to shut off internet service to the building where six of Wilson’s assistants worked. The young man beside her followed her lead and called for Wilson’s motorcycle to be impounded.

The dubious woman who’d first questioned Belmont still didn’t look convinced, but she now stood surrounded by tie-less blue-ties, outnumbered five to one. Reluctantly, she reached for her own tie and loosened the knot.

More ties went airborne. The crowd was chanting and cheering, growing louder as Belmont egged them on. He could barely even hear himself above them anymore.

As the crowd turned more and more chaotic, Belmont quickly hopped off his portable podium and folded it flat. He set his messenger bag atop a pile of strewn ties and stowed away the podium and megaphone. When he picked up the bag, he subtly snatched one of the ties underneath it and shoved it into the bag's back flap. He knew he'd eventually need one, even if he had an excuse not to wear it for now.

He slung the bag over his shoulder and headed for his motorcycle. By now, Balbo had surely gotten his message and was ready to meet him in the uncharted neutral border tunnels. He didn't want to keep her waiting.

"I'll be honest," Balbo said as she dismounted her motorcycle. "I was tempted to ignore that pigeon you sent. I wasn't sure it was really from you. But Merritt called me with an equally cryptic message this morning, and he said I should be prepared to answer to you if necessary. Then on the way here, I saw a crowd of elites throwing their blue ties in the river." She squinted into the darkness of the tunnel, apparently noting Belmont's lack of a tie. "Can you tell me what this is about?"

Belmont examined Balbo as he brushed off the suit he'd hastily donned at the mouth of the tunnel. He suspected she knew more than she was letting on. Back when Merritt had been chasing leads on the orphan kidnapping, Belmont had noticed soldiers near the areas he'd recently left. If Merritt had called in his comrades to watch his back, Balbo had probably been in on it. But she didn't trust Belmont. She was playing dumb and protecting Merritt's secrets.

Balbo was acting as a true ally to Merritt. That was a good sign. But Belmont couldn't take her loyalty for granted.

"There's not much I can tell you," he replied, playing his cards equally close to his chest. He climbed off his motorcycle and took a few steps forward. "All I can say is that Merritt's in danger. He was poking around in this orphan kidnapping scandal and he found out things he shouldn't have found out. And now he's being held somewhere—maybe in the military prison. I'm trying to get him out,

but until then....” He swallowed and grimaced. He didn’t even want to say the words. “Until then, I need you to stand in for him—unofficially. I need you to be the contact between me and the military, even if Mercury names someone else to take Merritt’s place.”

Balbo’s poker face was as solid as Merritt’s was faulty. She stood silently for a moment as if mentally dissecting Belmont’s words. Belmont couldn’t read her, but he suspected she was trying to decide whether or not he was acting in Merritt’s best interest.

“He told me to go to you, you know,” Belmont added. “He knew the trouble he was uncovering, and he said that if I ever needed a new general, it should be you. That’s the reason I’m asking you—because *he asked me.*”

He caught a flicker in Balbo’s eyes, and he knew she could tell he’d spoken the truth. She pressed her lips together for one more reluctant moment, then let her tense shoulders soften. “I’ll do whatever you need.”

With a subtle, satisfied sigh, Belmont reached into his messenger bag. “This is a secure phone,” he said, handing it over. “It’s the same model Merritt used. I’ve already programmed your ID into it, and my secure line is programmed into your contacts. Use it any time we’re taking care of unofficial business. Continue to conduct all your standard business on your regular phone, or they might notice you’re using it less.”

“Noted.”

Belmont glanced at his watch. “I have to go. I have another elite neighborhood to rile up.” He pointed at the phone. “Keep that on you at all times.”

“Will do.”

“Good.” He flashed her a split-second smile—just enough to let her know he appreciated her help without looking needy. Then he mounted his motorcycle and shot off down the tunnel.

* * *

Merritt had expected the guards to turn on the lights when they'd ushered him into a pitch-black, concrete-walled cell in the military prison the day before. Instead, they'd used headlamps while binding him with a single wrist cuff to the headboard of a metal-framed bed. They'd conducted their work in silence and left, shutting the solid metal door behind them.

He'd managed to scope out the cell in the glow of the headlamps before the guards had vacated. There hadn't been much to see—his cell was a bare rectangle with only a bed and toilet-sink combo inside. The chain attached to his left wrist gave him just enough length to reach the toilet directly beside the bed and the sink built into its tank. His pancake-thin bed ran the full length of the cell. His only floor space was beside the bed, between the tip of the toilet and the cell door. It wasn't even enough space for him to lie flat.

How long had he now been in this cell? He'd been up for hours in the darkness, then slept for what he presumed was a few more hours. It had to be Tuesday morning, nearly twenty-four hours from when he'd met with Mercury.

He wore the threadbare prison uniform he'd been given the day before—a drab, loose shirt and slacks in synthetic fibers, and no shoes. He wasn't sure if he'd be allowed out for a shower, but he wasn't counting on it. If not, he might have to tear strips off his pants to give himself sponge baths.

For all he knew, the guards could release him from the cell that very night—maybe to another unit in the prison, or maybe to execution. But for now, he would operate under the assumption that he'd be placed in isolation for a long stretch of time. The worst thing he could do was presume he'd be released soon and not do enough to maintain his mental and physical health until it was too late and the trials of isolation had already consumed him.

He'd found a box of ten meal bars under his bed. He couldn't imagine the guards giving him ten bars at a time unless they planned to leave him alone for days or weeks. He had no way of knowing when another set would come, so he'd have to ration them.

He was well versed in the dangers of isolation and sensory deprivation. The subject wasn't part of his official military training, but he'd studied it independently from above-ground ebooks after becoming a captain, and he knew it was one of the North's preferred methods of breaking enemy soldiers. As part of his self-prescribed training, he'd mapped out several daily routines for if he was ever imprisoned, with variations depending on the conditions. He already had a plan for just this scenario: isolation in total darkness with barely any space to move.

He'd start every morning with calisthenics. Not only would he keep his body toned, but his routine was so familiar that he could use it to track time. Then he'd wash up at the sink. Next, two hours' worth of mental exercises—fact recitation, math problems, coding an imaginary program out loud. Then two hours of physical exercises that made use of every inch of space he had. He allotted time for wiping down his exercise area and doing laundry in the sink, and for holding imagined conversations with every person he might have normally encountered in a day. Throughout his activities, he would remain focused on his senses—touching the items around him, listening for sounds and making his own, analyzing the scent of his surroundings, the taste of his meal bars and the water from the sink.

The threat of long-term isolation was daunting. It would be a simultaneous physical and mental assault that could leave him broken for years. But he was ready for it.

Let Mercury try to break him. Merritt wouldn't make it easy for him.

Mercury's brow was unusually glossy in the dim glow of his private office lights. Archer sat with her hands clasped loosely atop the table, examining her King as he read her assessment of Merritt. He had a stone cold poker face, but Archer could see signs of stress peeking through the edges of the mask: the slight sheen of sweat, the deepening creases at the corners of his mouth, the stiffness of his neck. The window beside the table offered an aerial view of a growing

congregation of elite North Sphere protesters encircling the headquarters building. They were quiet and calm by all outward appearances, but they wore no blue ties. A few of them wore nothing.

Archer knew why Mercury was sweating. These weren't nameless, faceless protesters. Many prominent individuals were recognizable even from several stories up. All day long, news reels had replayed Belmont's megaphone tirade at the Giddings Rock Garden. The news outlets had already dubbed it the Stolen Legacy Speech—as if it had been some meaningful, high-minded oration instead of a desperate rant by a naked man on a foldable podium he probably bought from a campus gift shop.

But, as crass as the event had been, Archer couldn't deny that Belmont was successfully putting pressure on Mercury, even while Mercury believed him to be powerless. It would be up to Archer to close the deal.

Mercury stood beside the table as he read, and Archer suspected it was partially so he could keep one eye on the growing crowds outside and partially so he could look down on Archer. As he reached Archer's verdict at the end of the first page, he eased up on his poker face and allowed a disapproving frown to show through. Fixing her with his narrowed eyes, he said, "You chose retraining."

"I did, King."

"I expected more from you, Archer. I expected you to be able to exhibit impartiality. I thought you had the capacity to be cutthroat. Instead, you're showing weakness."

Archer remained steadfast. "My judgment is sound, King. The reasons for my decision are spelled out on the next page. Please continue reading."

Skeptically, Mercury flipped the page. He read Archer's writing out loud. "In fact, the subject's only fault is that he is an exemplary soldier and servant, just as we need him to be. The mistake lies not in the subject's judgment, but in his commander's. Belmont, while acting against the interest of his King, exercised his authority over the subject and encouraged his insubordination. The subject, understandably, could not compete on an equal footing with Belmont's superior intellect and

was therefore an easy target for manipulation due to his innate drive to honor the command of his superior. It is my recommendation that the subject be separated from his current commanding officer. With an opportunity for retraining in an environment free of Belmont's influence, the subject should quickly return to his former state of unquestioning servitude."

Archer examined Mercury for any sign that he saw through her lies. She'd hated to aim such damaging words at Merritt, but it had been the only way. As much as she'd racked her brains, she could conjure up no other argument that would lead to Mercury letting Merritt live.

She hated every letter on the page. She didn't believe any of it. Worst of all, she suspected Merritt would have chosen final dismissal for himself. Retraining could put him in a position of acting against everything he'd ever valued. It would crush his soul.

But as long as he was *alive*, he had the chance to fight back, to break free. Archer couldn't deny him that chance.

"General Merritt is a rare and unique asset that the North cannot afford to lose," Mercury continued reading from Archer's report. "He exhibits high intelligence for a soldier while retaining all the servility expected of one. These qualities, coupled with his considerable sway over the East's General Troy and his amicable relations with several powerful South Sphere women, make him a formidable weapon. But these benefits can only be utilized if the subject is kept alive, remains in his current military rank, and retains enough of his cognitive ability to be functional at the highest level. The process of retraining should be used not to break him entirely but to recalibrate his mind so that he is once again obedient to the correct leader, instead of the leader's right hand. It is my recommendation that, when his retraining is completed, he be made to report directly to his King.

"Moreover, it is already known across the underground that General Merritt was investigating Wilson's test program before he was taken into custody. Allowing him to live and undergo retraining will sidestep the undesirable optics of having him executed so soon after word of Wilson's actions have gone public. With rising unrest in the elite districts, our best approach is to show the subject mercy. The act

of promoting General Merritt to the King's direct report will serve as a symbol that we are taking the rogue actions of Wilson's department seriously."

Mercury stared relentlessly at Archer as if waiting for a break in her composure. But she sat steady, waiting for him to speak in his own words.

"I dislike your use of the word 'mercy.'"

"As I said, it's only symbolic," Archer replied.

"I am not a King who lets his subjects twist his arm. Elite or not, they have no power over me. I won't sacrifice my plans just to appease them."

"I must challenge the notion that we're sacrificing. Keeping General Merritt—a retrained, ruthless, obedient General Merritt—is a gain, not a sacrifice."

"Hmm." Mercury didn't look at her. Instead, he glanced out the window.

Archer suspected she'd already convinced him, but he was buying time before admitting it. He didn't want her to think she'd won him over too easily. She waited, indulging him.

She watched the last glimmers of the sun simulating lights fade out, replaced by the soft blue glow and pinpoint star lights of nighttime. Bright streetlamps illuminated the relentless crowd of protesters as they marched and chanted in a manner so restrained that it was menacing in its own right.

At last, Mercury turned back to her. "We'll retrain him. I believe your assessment is correct. We stand to gain more by keeping him alive—for now." He set the report down on the table and gave Archer an appraising half-smile. "You've earned your promised promotion, but just barely. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

"I'll give you my best, King."

"I'm sure you will."

Archer nodded in acknowledgment. "Is there anything else you need from me?"

“Yes,” Mercury replied, raising an eyebrow. “You will be the on-call doctor overseeing Merritt’s retraining.”

His words hit her like a kick to the solar plexus. She should have seen them coming. As much as she wanted to believe it was better for Merritt to be under her watch than anyone else’s, she knew she’d have little choice in what was done to him, and having to supervise it would be its own kind of torture. This was the very reason Mercury had assigned her the task—to see if she too would break. But she wouldn’t.

She’d done what she’d come here to do. She’d kept Merritt alive. Nothing else mattered. If she had to suffer a bit of discomfort to see to his health and safety, it was a small sacrifice. She’d handle whatever Mercury threw at her.

Would she? How far would she be willing to go to tear Merritt down? How long would she be able to watch his torment in silence, with no allies at her side?

Belmont was trying to free Merritt too. Archer’s meeting with Mercury had only gone smoothly because he was under pressure from Belmont’s revolt. But even so, she couldn’t afford to open herself up to him in search of an alliance. He’d turn on her in a flash. He wouldn’t hesitate to go to Mercury to implicate her in Wilson’s outing, especially if it meant getting his double-banded blue tie back.

She’d have to face this alone. No one would know she was on Merritt’s side, not even Merritt himself. Merritt might even come out seeing her as the enemy—but that would be nothing compared to the losses Merritt himself would face.

She ignored the tightening of her throat. She was a blue tie. Nothing would shake her. “Thank you, King. I’m honored to take on the responsibility.”

“Good.” He squinted at her. “One more thing.”

“Yes, King?”

“I understand you’ve been working on a medical treatment for the test subjects?”

Archer’s skin went cold. How could Mercury have known this? She couldn’t imagine anyone on her team, or her contact in quality

control, breaking confidentiality. She had to assume they'd been caught by surveillance. Without a slip in her tone, she replied, "That's correct, King."

"Why were you working on this?" he asked with a subtle, critical tilt of the head.

"Disaster preparedness, King. It's always vital to have a solution before you have a problem. Should any elite children fall ill, we'd need to have treatment immediately available."

There was no sign of movement in Mercury's eyes. "Send me the formulas."

She had no choice but to comply. She wished he'd tell her what he planned to do with the formulas, but she at least had confidence that he couldn't prevent the drugs from being made. Her team had a contingency plan. If Mercury tried to kill the project, the formulas were set to leak online as the result of a supposed data breach, and then the black market could take over production. "I'll send them immediately, King," she said.

Mercury didn't reply. After giving her a long, scrutinizing stare, he finally seemed to accept that she wouldn't flinch. He raised his chin and gestured toward the door. "Thank you, Archer. You're dismissed."

Thirty-six hours. Merritt was fairly confident of his timekeeping as he wrapped up his evening exercises. It was probably around ten o'clock Tuesday evening.

He felt strong and steady, but he couldn't get cocky, nor could he allow himself even a moment to dwell on the unknowns ahead of him. *Stick to the routine.*

He ate another inch of his first meal bar.

Mental exercises next. He had to keep his brain sharp. Some captured enemy soldiers started hallucinating in less than a day of isolation and sensory deprivation.

From memory, he continued reciting the list of contacts stored in his phone. He'd only gotten through the first few B's at the end of the previous session, after a series of coding exercises. As he picked up from where he left off, he tapped rhythmically on various surfaces within the room to help keep track of the passing time.

He reached the fifth on his list. "Belmont. Full name Grant Belmont. Right hand to Damen Mercury, King of the North Sphere. Rank: Queen of Spades. Lodging: Station 0 Headquarters, seventh floor. Phone number: 889-886. Age: twenty-nine. Height: six feet, four inches."

He felt a sting in his chest.

"Hair color: brown. Eye color: green. Wears glasses. Wears...."
Damn it.

"Last conversation. I... He...."

Don't talk to me. That's what Belmont had said. After all they'd shared, why was his mind suddenly fixating on that sentence?

He clenched his fists.

"Beverly. Full name Beverly North. Assistant to Archer, Director of Surgery...."

"I know you're in here!" Belmont bellowed as he pounded on the door to Archer's suite. "OPEN THE DOOR! NOW!"

No answer. He knew it was past midnight, but when he'd approached the building and counted the windows to her unit, her lights had been on.

"You *better* not be in there sleeping like a baby!" he yelled. "Not after *what you just did!*"

At last, the intercom beeped on, and he heard Archer's patronizing voice. "I'm in the bath. I can open the door in fifteen minutes."

“I’m not waiting fifteen minutes,” Belmont barked back. “I can open this door if I want. I can override your security system.”

“Do it,” Archer replied in a voice so calm it sent a chill down Belmont’s spine.

He clenched his teeth, fuming. He didn’t dare, knowing what he knew about her. He could only imagine the booby traps she’d probably set as a backup. “Fine, I’ll wait,” he muttered. “But hurry the fuck up!”

After ten minutes of patient waiting and ten more minutes of pounding and yelling, Belmont finally heard a beep on the other side of the door, followed by the turn of a heavy deadbolt. The door swung open to reveal Archer across the threshold, dressed in her day’s work attire, her hair and skin bone dry.

“How was your bath?” Belmont snapped.

“Invigorating.”

Belmont elbowed past her into the suite without waiting for a formal invitation. He stalked across the lounge, then paced back and forth a few steps as he waited for Archer to catch up. Once she’d closed the door and followed him to the lounge, he stalked toward her and shoved a file in her face. “*What. Is. This?*”

Archer shoved the file back at him with barely a glance. She lowered her poker face just enough to shoot him a toxic glare. “This is me saving your boyfriend’s life.”

Belmont wouldn’t let her get off that easy. “You ordered for him to be brainwashed! To be made into Mercury’s fucking slave!”

Her poker face returned in a flash, along with her soft, condescending voice. “Did you think Mercury would ever let you have him back as your direct report, after what you did?”

Belmont tossed Archer’s report to the floor as if it was garbage. “But what the fuck gives *you* the right to decide that?”

“Mercury gave me the right.” She tilted her head upward, as disdainful as ever. “You’re looking at the new director of science and medicine, and Mercury’s top advisor.”

Belmont could have vomited in his mouth. He stood silently, nearly wheezing from the invisible blow to his gut. “He... named *you*....”

Archer pulled a playing card out of the breast pocket of her lab coat. “He’s already had my card rushed through the printers.”

Jack of spades. Belmont’s old rank. Archer was now a face card.

No, he couldn’t take it. He could handle a face card like Wilson. But not her. She had too much power as it was. She was too devious, too ruthless.

He narrowed his eyes, suspicion overwhelming his anger. Archer noticed the shift in his expression, and her steely eyes turned even colder. He looked her up and down, then folded his arms. “You’re coming out of this *extremely well*, aren’t you?”

“How so?” Archer asked, as if it wasn’t already obvious.

“Merritt went to see you at the chem lab, and then a few hours later he suddenly had every bit of incriminating evidence he needed to get the South to drop a news bomb. He never could have hacked into the databases and sifted through millions of old emails just to find those gems. You gave him that information. And then *you had him take the fall for you*.”

“I asked nothing of Merritt,” Archer replied coldly.

“I bet you dangled the bait. You probably told him you’d lose your job if you went public—because you knew he was exactly the type of guy who’d swoop in and do the dirty work. You knew he’d throw himself on the chopping block just so his *friend* wouldn’t get so much as a paper cut.”

“Are you agreeing with my assessment of Merritt, then?” Archer asked, gesturing toward the stapled stack of papers on the table. “You believe he’s subservient, easily manipulated, has no free will of his own, and can only be molded through retraining and Mercury’s leadership?”

It took all Belmont’s willpower not to give her an open-handed slap. He might have been tempted if he didn’t already know how likely he was to catch a syringe of GUS-42 in his palm instead of her face. All

he could do was stand there, seething. “You’re just a worthless, mindless, heartless servant to Mercury, aren’t you? You’d do anything that helps him as long as it helps you too.”

“And yet you’re here yelling at *me*. The only reason to confront a servant is if you don’t have the strength or standing to confront the master. If you’re really still Mercury’s right hand, you’d be taking the matter up with him directly.”

Belmont took a step forward, waving a finger in her face. “If anything happens to Merritt...” But he couldn’t finish the sentence. His voice had started to shake too much. Fuck, he was losing control of himself, in front of Archer of all people.

He had to get out of Archer’s stifling suite, away from her ice cold gaze. He turned away and headed for the door. Only once he reached the threshold did he pause, finally finding his words.

He glared across the room at Archer, scalding her icy veneer with the heat of his gaze. “Merritt is better than you think he is,” he whispered, his voice breaking mid-sentence. “He won’t let Mercury steal his soul the way you let him steal yours.”

Just before he turned away, he saw the faintest fissure in Archer’s poker face.