

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

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CHAPTER 8

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CHAPTER 8

“Who could you *possibly* be texting that’s more important than me?”

Startled, Merritt shoved his phone into his pocket. He’d been too preoccupied to notice the opening of Belmont’s office door. He waited for an unfamiliar aide to pass Belmont on his way out of the room before saying, “I apologize. I thought you wouldn’t be out for a few more minutes.”

“Let me guess,” Belmont said, gesturing toward the phone. “The musician.” He gave a knowing laugh despite Merritt’s steel grip on his poker face. “Too late to hide it now, honey. I could tell it wasn’t Mercury because you didn’t have that annoying vacant look in your eyes. Nah, this time you had that ‘overprotective dad’ vibe.”

Merritt pointed past the door that Belmont held open. “I’m ready to discuss your plans for the battle simulator.” he said, eager to change the subject. Belmont took the hint and headed inside, but he carried his self-satisfied smirk all the way to his seat behind the desk.

Merritt should have considered himself lucky that Belmont had pulled him away from his phone. Despite repeated attempts to reach Torrence, his calls and texts had gone unanswered since the West Sphere invasion. He knew Torrence’s health hadn’t failed. According to Archer, who had connections at the medical office where Torrence worked, he’d been showing up to all his shifts for over a month. Merritt could only assume that Torrence was deliberately ignoring him again.

Merritt wondered if Torrence had blocked him after he’d become the North’s general. With his high-tech phone, he could find out. But he didn’t want to know. He wanted to believe that Torrence valued their friendship more than he despised the military.

Regardless, he couldn’t let it get to him. He had work to do.

“Here,” Belmont said, after Merritt took a seat in front of his desk. He finished jotting something on a notepad, tore off the top sheet, and slid it under Merritt’s nose. “Look familiar?”

The corners of Belmont’s inked letters glimmered in the bright glow of his office light before seeping into the linen fibers. Merritt lifted the paper off the table, recognizing the layout of a poison formula.

Belmont’s crisp North Sphere D&P shorthand could have passed for a textbook excerpt. He’d written the note in haste, but his lines carried a draftsman’s precision. Unlike the poison formulas Merritt had scribbled in his own notes and stored on his laptop, Belmont’s shorthand followed all the professional standards of proper Drugs and Poisons formula writing, without a single skipped parenthesis.

“Well?” Belmont prodded.

Right. Belmont hadn’t handed him the note just to show off his handwriting. Merritt took a closer look at the formula, and his eyes widened with recognition. “Where did you get this?”

“From you.”

Belmont had recreated one of the complex formulas he’d seen on Merritt’s laptop during their first meeting together as boss and direct report. He was surprised Belmont had even been able to read his handwriting. Compared to the neatness of Belmont’s recreation, Merritt’s original was as orderly as confetti after a sneeze. “But you only saw it for a second. How did you remember...?”

“You’re not the only genius in the room,” Belmont replied, shooting him a cocky smile.

Merritt returned his attention to the formula. In his notes, he’d labeled it “nociceptor sensitizing agent.” The poison was designed to agitate the target’s pain-sensing neurons while suppressing the body’s release of analgesic hormones and inducing localized skeletal muscle relaxation. At a low dose, the target would experience a vastly heightened sensitivity to pain and weakness at the location of the injection. A double dose would result in acute pain throughout the body at even the slightest stimulus, and triple would lead to even greater pain and near-total skeletal muscle paralysis.

Merritt had tested the formula on a biosimulator at Archer's lab. The results had convinced him to keep the formula to himself. After seeing the effects on the simulated target's body, he'd concluded that the poison was nothing short of torture. There could be no ethical application of such a substance by the North's military.

Meeting eyes with Belmont, he asked, "What do you want to do with this poison?"

Belmont leaned back, running the tip of his tongue obnoxiously over his teeth as if to clean them. "I thought it would be obvious."

Merritt forced himself to set aside his immediate concerns over the cruelty of the poison, reconsidering the formula in the context of their meeting.

"You want me to poison my soldiers," he murmured.

"Yep." Belmont pushed back in his rolling chair, flippantly kicking his legs onto the desktop and crossing them at the ankles. Cocking his head, he added, "You don't look anywhere near as impressed with my idea as you should be."

"I am impressed," Merritt replied without inflection, still staring at the formula with furrowed brows.

Belmont's solution was ingenious. Merritt wasn't sure why he didn't feel the weight lifting off him.

The pain of the poison would be temporary. His soldiers would recover from a single dose in a few hours and an overdose in one to two days. The poison could be administered to simulate specific localized injuries, then gradually increased to the point of total incapacitation without lasting damage. Not a single soldier would be maimed or killed.

It was the perfect solution. But he couldn't shake his concern.

"What happens after the simulator overhaul?" he asked, stone-faced.

"What do you mean?"

"What will you do with the drug after our project is done?" Merritt pressed. Belmont looked taken aback, but Merritt persisted.

“You memorized the formula long before we had any plans to use it in the simulator overhaul. That means you have other plans for it.”

“Of course I have other plans for it!” Belmont cried, throwing his hands up in the air. “This is a great poison, Merritt. Why the hell have you been sitting on the formula?”

“Because it’s torture.”

“It’s not *torture*,” Belmont protested, drawing out the word as if he considered it hyperbole. “This is the military. You’re killing people, not nursing kittens.” He let out a long-suffering sigh. “And can we not get ahead of ourselves here? We were assigned to fix the battle simulator, so let’s start with that.”

“You’re right,” Merritt muttered, shaking his head. “This is just one assignment. Just one limited application. We’re not mass-producing anything yet.”

Belmont swung his feet back to the floor. With an odd tilt to his mouth, he opened a bottom drawer and pulled out a six-ounce vial, setting it on the desktop in front of Merritt.

It was the same style of bottle supplied to the military, complete with NSTech logo and printed instructions. The vial was labeled NSA-2 and bore the current month’s timestamp: January 2152. Belmont must have rushed the poison through testing and into production over the past five weeks.

“Well,” Merritt mused, his face blank. “So much for that.”

“We’ll talk ‘ethics’ another time, Merritt. For now, let’s just finish this simulator overhaul.”

“Got it,” Merritt said with a sigh. When he saw Belmont reach for the vial, he slipped his hand atop it and pulled it away. “On one condition.”

“*You* have a condition for *me*?”

Merritt’s gaze held steady. “I won’t ask my soldiers to do anything I’d refuse to do myself.” He held the vial in his fist. “If any soldier is going to take this poison and run the test course, let me be the first.”

Belmont sucked in an exasperated breath. “That’s just unnecessary.”

Merritt disagreed. He wouldn’t become another callous North Sphere officer, assigning anguish to his soldiers from the comfort of his office chair. If a double or triple dose was too much for a general, it was too much for a private. But he couldn’t make the determination without experiencing the poison firsthand.

“That’s my condition,” Merritt insisted.

“How do you expect to do your job when you’re laid up from the poison? Is that really how you want to use one of your precious sick days?”

“I can’t think of a better use for a sick day.”

Belmont grinned. “You could stay in bed and read one of my books.”

Merritt folded his arms, mustering a teasing half-smile. “I’ll take my chances with the poison.”

The Hamlin training facility was placed on restricted access, its thumbprint scanners blocking all but the handful of blue-ties cleared to enter. Cameras, 3D motion capture sensors, vital sign monitoring devices, and data processing software were fine-tuned in preparation for the test run. Ellis rescheduled all of Merritt’s meetings within a forty-eight hour window, and Belmont snagged five samples of NSA-2 from NSTech’s top secret production facility.

Only seven other people would be present for Merritt’s run-through of the test course. Three programmers from the Military Tech team manned the control room, monitoring the data output from the course. Colonel Balbo, Merritt’s most trusted officer, would stand in as his opponent in tests that required an evenly matched rival. Wells, still Squad 269’s medic, would monitor Merritt’s health and tend to any injuries. Ellis also stood by, ready to coordinate additional emergency aid and tend to any other personal needs that might arise for Merritt.

Merritt would run the courses with three doses of the nerve sensitizer to simulate the three levels of incapacitation Pratt and Evans required. The first dose would replicate a less severe gunshot, knife wound, or bone fracture. The second dose would sensitize his entire body, delivering pain with every touch in order to simulate a debilitating injury. The third dose would cause such pain as to render him virtually incapacitated. It was doubtful that he'd be able to take more than a few steps at that dose, but he couldn't ignore the demands of his military advisors.

Merritt wasn't sure why Belmont had insisted on attending the session, but there he was, sitting on a rickety bench in his crisp designer suit and looking overdressed for the rugged environment. With setup almost complete, Merritt wandered up to his side, hoping he passed for relaxed. He kept his hands in his pockets to hide their subtle tremor.

The awaiting pain didn't scare him. What scared him was having witnesses to his descent into helplessness. He'd seen the effect the poison had on the biosimulator's digital models. His soldiers—his subordinates—would see him in that same wretched state. The programmers would have video footage accompanied by a digital log of his screams, his cries, and his uncontrolled writhing.

Belmont would see it all too. Belmont, who had finally grown to respect him, would see him torn down to his weakest state.

He hadn't thought this plan through. He hadn't considered the damage it could do to his reputation as a newly minted blue-tie leader who was expected to maintain self-control at all times. He only hoped that the allies he chose to help with the test would keep his confidence.

"Are you sure you want to stay and observe?" he asked Belmont in a faux casual tone. "It's going to get boring and repetitive."

"Any time one of my underlings decides to do something stupid and self-destructive, I clear out my schedule and make popcorn."

Merritt was about to laugh off the comment when Belmont reached into his messenger bag, pulling out a literal bag of popcorn. Merritt folded his arms, jokingly indignant.

Belmont held out the bag. "Want some?" Merritt gave him a slow blink, and he laughed. "I love that disgruntled look on your face."

Across the field, Merritt noticed Balbo break away from a conversation with one of the programmers, and he felt a sudden urge to reintroduce her to Belmont. He wanted Belmont to know her, to see her worth as a soldier the same way he'd finally learned to see Merritt's. "I'll be right back," he said to Belmont as he jogged up to catch her.

Moments later, he returned to the bench with Balbo at his side. He was relieved when Belmont stood to greet her; he'd half expected Belmont to maintain his usual insolent sprawl. "Belmont," he said, somewhat breathless from excitement. "This is Chem Ops Colonel Balbo."

"We've met before," Belmont said, his slight smile suggesting that he was humoring Merritt.

"No, you met Captain Balbo. But even then, she should have been Colonel Balbo."

Balbo gave a shallow bow. "Good to see you again, sir."

Belmont made a shooping motion with his hand. "It's Belmont. 'Sir' is for the bedroom, not the office."

Balbo lowered her professional façade, allowing a hint of her natural wicked smile to show through. Without missing a beat, she plucked at her climbing harness and replied, "I say the same about this thing, but the boss still makes us wear 'em."

Belmont shifted his gaze to Merritt's harness. His focus lingering, he said playfully, "You're giving me too many ideas too early in the morning, lady."

A blush crept up Merritt's cheeks, and he cleared his throat. "Anyway, Balbo isn't just a great strategist. She's also a great fighter. If there's anything you'll want to watch, it's our baseline sparring match."

"Oh, I already know what she's capable of." Belmont patted his messenger bag. "I read her file. We have her set as your 'evenly matched rival,' but the statistics team's data says she can kick your ass all the way into the South Sphere with a single punt."

"I know!" Merritt cried, beaming with pride for his ally. "Isn't she amazing?"

Belmont leaned toward Balbo and lowered his voice, more for show than for secrecy. “Has he always been this annoying when you try to insult him?”

“Since day one,” Balbo returned, and Belmont snickered.

Merritt continued to grin like a fool. He was thrilled to see Balbo and Belmont bonding, even if it was over a joke at his expense. He didn’t want Belmont to think he was exceptional. He wanted Belmont to see the value of all his soldiers. The more Belmont could be enlightened, the more he’d be willing to fight for them in the boardroom.

“Balbo,” Merritt said, “did you know that Belmont is also a poisons expert?”

“No, sir, I didn’t.”

“Belmont was instrumental in developing the GUS series of lethal poisons.”

“I didn’t know that.” Balbo turned to Belmont. “We use GUS-42 in battle all the time. It’s saved countless North Sphere lives.”

Belmont turned to Merritt. “I never told you I worked on the GUS series. I was only a student, so the credit went to the dean.”

“I’m sure you must have told someone about your contribution.”

“Damn right I did. I tell anyone who’ll listen, but they don’t pass the word on. This isn’t exactly the type of juicy gossip that gets spread around.” He narrowed his eyes knowingly. “You didn’t hear about this by word of mouth. What did you really do? Hack the College of Science and Medicine?”

“Not the whole college. Just their acquisitions department.”

Belmont folded his arms with mock exasperation.

“But anyway, ” Merritt said, “now the Chem Ops colonel herself knows that you’re the one who made it.”

Belmont raised an eyebrow at Balbo. “Tell all your Nerd Unit allies, would you? I couldn’t get the damn thing named after me, but

you can at least give it one of those crude military nicknames. One that'll make even a red-sash cringe."

Balbo flashed her wicked grin. "We'll call it Belmont's Juice. BJ for short."

"I love it," Belmont replied, beaming.

A soft alarm went off at Merritt's waist, and his heart rate quickened just a bit. "Looks like it's time to get started," he said, silencing the tinny hum. He took a steadying breath and headed toward the awaiting course.

The first round of tests was routine enough. Merritt only had to navigate through the course to the best of his ability. He performed six different speed tests, starting with a three-mile obstacle-laden sprint and ending with a climbing, diving, and swimming course.

With only enough recovery time to slow his heart rate, he moved onto his armed and unarmed sparring matches with Balbo. He couldn't remember the last time he'd sparred with such a buildup of adrenaline. A fight for his life wasn't as nerve-racking as an attempt to impress Belmont, and his performance suffered a few points. He had great success with long range poisons and scraped by with a technical win in the close combat poisons and boxing matches, but Balbo bested him in grappling and firearms, and they tied on the remaining challenges.

Overall, his baseline tests still fell within the average range of his past evaluations. Half of Belmont's popcorn remained in the bag.

They broke for an early lunch, during which Merritt replenished his energy with a brown brick of nutritionally balanced military rations. He followed up the meal with a proprietary blend of water, electrolytes, and combat drugs designed to speed up recovery from exertion. During the meal, he sat with his three fellow soldiers, talking with them as naturally as he could given their new disparity in rank. It was a relief that they could still reminisce and share laughs without awkwardness.

He tried his best not to glance across the field at Belmont every two minutes. Belmont carried out his usual business, making phone calls and issuing orders in between bites of a thirty-dollar meal bar. Merritt recognized the wrapper from the Headquarters vending machines. The flavor of the bar, according to the label, was "Success."

After the break, Wells approached Merritt hesitantly. In his hands was a single-dose syringe of NSA-2. Ellis stood at his side to observe. Though his poker face was mostly intact, Merritt noted the slight cheek creases bracketing his taut mouth.

The first round was a limited localized injection designed to simulate a rib injury. Merritt lifted his shirt to bare his abdomen. Tapping his right serratus muscle, he said, "Here goes nothing."

He turned away from the spectators' bench, hoping Belmont wouldn't notice as Wells administered the drug.

The pain struck him almost immediately, but he managed to conceal it behind gritted teeth. Steeling himself, he proceeded to the speed tests. The pain was nauseating, but he'd experienced worse.

He ran the course, his abdomen pulsing with every step. The pain shortened his breaths and blurred his vision, but he maintained his laser focus on every upcoming obstacle. At the end of the second speed course was a stack of twelve motion sensor lasers stretching horizontal lines across a narrow passageway. The top lasers were stacked one foot apart, with the gaps between lasers growing further apart the closer they got to the ground. To get through the course, a soldier had to retrieve a retractable stick from their pack and pole-vault through a gap in the lasers. The higher the vault, the tighter the gap, and the better the soldier's score would be.

New Sergeant Hoxie and Merritt's replacement Captain Lorel were the only two Chem Ops soldiers talented and diminutive enough to clear the top gap. Merritt managed to clear the second gap for his baseline test, but he skimmed one of the lasers during his first attempt on the poison. His ribs pulsed too hard to want to chance another miss, so he aimed his retry for the third gap and cleared it.

Balbo trounced him in nearly all of the combat matches, giving him a win only in long range poisons. He took pride in at least making it to the end without a knockout or submission. There were a great many soldiers Merritt could defeat even with an injury. Balbo wasn't one of them.

He didn't want to know the results of his first NSA-2 test, but one of the programmers took the initiative to tell him after the round was

complete. “Your baseline was in the 99th percentile. With an injury, you’re still in the 70th. Not bad.”

“Thank you,” he replied, not knowing what else to say. *Please don’t tell me my percentile for the next round.*

He chanced a look over his shoulder. Belmont sat with rapt attention, a quarter bag of popcorn on the bench beside him.

After another break, Wells and Ellis approached again with grim faces and a syringe of NSA-2. Merritt took the injection in silence, but the resulting pain nearly buckled his knees. He reflexively grabbed Ellis’s arm to steady himself. “*Fuck*,” he groaned, his breaths quick and shallow. The injection site pulsed like scalding firecrackers. The dull, almost unnoticeable ache from a recent mild shoulder injury escalated to searing agony, and his sore shoulders and lats from yesterday’s strength training suddenly felt like they’d been doused in acid.

“Sir?” Ellis asked hesitantly. He seemed startled by the poison’s stark effect.

“At ease,” Merritt breathed, willing himself to loosen his vice-like grip on Ellis’s arm. “It’s working as intended.”

He had to acclimate to the new level of pain. Through breathing and focus, he would steady himself until the sustained burn receded like background noise.

With three minutes of meditation, he grounded himself enough to face the task ahead of him. His feet ached dully as he walked toward the speed courses.

With the blow of the starting whistle, he took off down the initial stretch of track. The soles of his shoes could have been lined with needles, and the impact of each stride felt like someone taking a baton to his knees, but he sprinted through the pain without allowing himself to decelerate.

At the end of the second speed course, he successfully pole-vaulted through the third gap in the motion sensor lasers, but when he crashed to the mat on the other side of the laser beams, he felt like he’d dropped to the bottom of a rocky cliff. Had he shattered every bone in his body?

The clock ticked, and he couldn't get up. Wells stood at the side of the mat with his kit, ready to administer aid the moment Merritt or Ellis issued the command. But neither did, and Wells retained his white-knuckled grip on his kit.

Merritt rolled onto his knees with a groan. His arms gave way underneath him, and he had to push himself up to his knees a second time.

Come on, get up! You're losing time.

He raised his head. Across the field, Belmont still sat on the bench. But he was not lounging with his legs crossed and tossing popcorn into his mouth as Merritt expected. Face tense, he sat perched on the edge of the bench, nearly hovering as if ready to spring into action. The quarter bag of popcorn sat neglected at his side.

Merritt willed his muscles to support his weight. With all his effort, he pushed himself to his feet. Balbo gave him a cheering hoot, and Wells hesitantly echoed it.

The third speed course included one of the soldiers' least favorite obstacles: the bullet tunnel. Merritt would have to run through two quarter-mile stretches of tunnel while dodging and deflecting plastic bullets shot from holes in the walls. With the aid of his fan shield, he was usually able to clear the tunnel without a hit. But when a bullet struck, it stung like hell and left a hideous bruise.

He cleared the first tunnel by being slow and measured. But the second tunnel was rigged to shoot faster the longer a soldier took to clear it. With blinding pain buzzing through his body, he lacked the speed to dodge every bullet.

He was barely halfway through the second tunnel when a bullet struck. It caught his right shoulder, slinging him back a foot and making his hand go slack. The pain stunned him for a moment, and his fan shield clattered to the floor. When he tried to dive for it, another bullet grazed his back and forced him to reroute.

The bullets were coming too fast. He kicked the fan shield down the path ahead of him and sprinted after it. Once it skidded across the threshold of a two-foot-long shelter, he took cover and retrieved it.

His leg gave way, and he dropped to one knee. He'd lose points by lingering in the shelter for longer than fifteen seconds, but he needed to catch his breath.

He took a minute and a half. He'd never seen a Chem Ops soldier cower in the shelter for a minute and a half. What must Balbo be thinking right now, watching him curled over his knees as bullets whizzed by on either side?

With gritted teeth, he willed himself back to his feet. One steadying breath, then another, and he sprinted for the finish.

Just as he reached the final three feet of tunnel, a bullet caught his thigh, taking it out from under him. In a last-ditch effort, he twisted his body as it fell. He struck the ground rolling, just barely clearing the finish line.

Balbo's cheers reached his ears, coaxing a smile onto his stricken face. But no matter how much his team supported him, he felt crushed by the weight of reality. He couldn't possibly make it through three more speed courses, let alone the combat rounds.

But one thing was for certain. He wouldn't quit. He'd move until his body couldn't carry him another inch.

It took him ages to drag himself through the remaining courses, but he continued nonetheless. He trudged through his allotted dinner break; he couldn't have stomached even a liquid meal.

It was nearly nine in the evening when he closed in on the sixth speed course. Through sheer strength of will, he managed to climb to the top of the cliff at the end. The final drop to the water was going to hurt. Like the dives in the waterways, the dizzying height demanded perfect form, or else weeks-long bruises and torn skin, and maybe some broken bones.

He couldn't make the dive. He knew better. He lacked the strength to hold perfect form, and without it, he could break his neck with the landing. He'd have to rappel halfway down, costing valuable points.

Lacing his rope through his harness and securing it to a heavy rock at the cliff's edge, he lowered himself down toward the water. The

harness felt like knives slicing into his waist and thighs. He could barely breathe through the pain.

At the halfway point, he judged the remaining distance. He was still a long way up, but time ticked away. Could he jump from here?

He needed to get closer.

Another few yards, and he checked again. He was barely higher up than a pool diving board. No self-respecting blue-tie soldier would lower himself by rope any further before taking a dive.

With a deep breath, he unhooked his carabiner and surrendered to the drop.

The surface of the water hit him like concrete. Pain shot across his body for only a moment before his vision went black.