

# DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 2

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Chapter 2

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## CHAPTER 2

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“Soldiers! State your pledge.”

Merritt stood shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the Chem Ops Unit for their final training round—head high, feet together, and hands clasped behind his back. Flanking the vast group of privates on either side were their sergeants, along with Captain Balbo, Captain Fern, and Captain Palmer. At the head of the group stalked Colonel Harding, swinging his baton in a phallic display that may or may not have been intentional.

Pierce elbowed Merritt in the side, his voice a low grumble. “How many times in one day do we have to say our pledge?”

Merritt raised his voice in an attempt to obfuscate the insolent comment under his own recitation. He didn’t want Pierce to draw the colonel’s attention.

“I, Merritt, am a soldier of the Underground North, duty sworn to sphere and King. You, Damen Mercury, are my King. My life is yours to preserve and yours to take. My life is your property, and I grant you the power to use my life and my death to the benefit of our sphere. Live to serve my sphere, die to serve my sphere.”

After the soldiers completed their pledge, Colonel Harding glanced across the field. Merritt realized he was looking at the two-way mirror, behind which was an observation deck. “Say it again,” he commanded.

Merritt found it odd that they were being asked to repeat their pledge. Usually, they said it only upon waking in the morning. But he did as commanded, without a questioning glance.

Once the pledge was completed for the second time, Colonel Harding gave the soldiers a nod. “That’s right. Never forget that your life does not belong to you. Your life belongs to your King.”

“Who the fuck is he showing off for?” Pierce whispered.

Colonel Harding zeroed in on Merritt. “You got something to say to me, Private?”

Merritt’s eyes widened. “No, sir.”

“Repeat what you just whispered. Now.”

Merritt fought the urge to look at Pierce. No matter the consequences, he wouldn’t sell out an ally. “I was wondering who else might be in attendance, sir.”

Colonel Harding sneered at him. “Come here.”

Merritt took a short step forward.

Colonel Harding reached out, grabbing him by the tie and dragging him into the center of the ring. “*I said come here.*”

An audible gasp echoed across the grounds. Merritt’s heart dropped to the pit of his stomach at the feeling of his blue tie—sphere identifier and symbol of his citizenship—constricting around his neck. The blue tie was a tribute to the North Sphere’s corporate structure, leadership, and white collar criminal founders. It was to be treated with reverence. Not since childhood at the orphanage, with bullies yanking his tie loose a couple times a day, had anyone touched it without permission. To do it to an adult was asking for violence. But, for Merritt, there was no fighting back. Colonel Harding was his superior.

“Colonel, that’s unnecessary,” Captain Balbo said, her voice quiet but stern.

Colonel Harding shot her a warning glare, holding tight to Merritt’s tie. “What is it that sets us apart from the other three spheres of the underground?” he asked the soldiers in front of him. He began pacing back and forth, pulling Merritt along by the tie. Out of the corner of his eye, Merritt could see the looks of discomfort on the faces of a few of his fellow privates. The rest pointedly avoided eye contact. “Well?” Colonel Harding barked. “What do we have that other spheres

don't?" He dragged Merritt back to the center of the ring, standing at his side and turning toward his audience. "We have the North Sphere poker face. Nothing rattles us. The enemy can't read a single clue off our faces. We are cold and steady and ruthless. You ever talk to an East Sphere soldier? They're driven by emotion. Show 'em even the smallest slight, and they flip out. And what happens when your emotions get the best of you? You fuck up. You can't stay steady. You miss your target."

Colonel Harding gave Merritt's tie a sudden downward yank, dropping him to his knees. Again, a handful of soldiers in the audience flinched. "This one here? He's got no poker face." He pulled up on the tie so everyone could see Merritt's face. "You all can read exactly what he's thinking. You can see his fear and his panic. You know he can't keep his cool the way the rest of you can."

He gave another hard yank. Merritt fell face first to the ground, smacking his nose on the compact dirt, and Colonel Harding laughed at his startled grunt.

"Think about our West Sphere enemies. You know how they operate. They'll try to needle you, try to get a rise out of you. But unless you're as pathetic as this one here, they'll fail. Because you're a North Sphere soldier. You're a blue-tie. And blue-ties don't get rattled."

Colonel Harding dragged Merritt back to his feet. Just when Merritt managed to regain his footing, Colonel Harding deftly untied his tie, balling it up and throwing it across the field. A gasp rippled across the sea of soldiers. Merritt raised a hand to his neck, stunned. It was more acceptable to be seen naked in public than it was to be fully dressed without one's sphere identifier.

Merritt made to retrieve it, but Colonel Harding caught him by the arm and then turned to their audience. "Now, I'll demonstrate to you the cost of getting rattled by the enemy. I'll let the private carry five practice syringe darts, and I'll face him with just a single neck knife. And I'll still beat him because he can't hold himself together."

Merritt's fists clenched. He wanted more than anything to get out of this demonstration, but talking back to Harding, even in the form of supplicating, would surely earn him a reprimand.

Harding pointed Merritt toward one end of the ring, and he took the opposite end. Without a blue tie, Merritt felt painfully exposed. But he forced himself to concentrate as he retrieved five spring-loaded syringe darts from his pack. In battle, the syringe darts would be stocked with lethal or debilitating poisons. During training, they contained a mild poison that caused temporary localized pain. He held all five darts in one hand, his muscles tense as he waited for Colonel Harding to call the start of the match. *Just let him prove his point and be done with it.*

"Don't hold back," Colonel Harding called, as if reading his mind. "Try your best to hit me with those darts. We'll pretend they're stocked with the lethal drug GUS-42. You've got five tries, which is pretty generous."

*Don't hold back?* Colonel Harding had been through advanced training, but his inheritance and political connections had sent him from the Academy to lieutenant without ever setting foot on the battlefield. Captain Balbo would have been a more dangerous opponent.

Or maybe Harding was counting on him miscalculating the dangers of this match. Maybe Harding was right and he was too rattled to think objectively.

He lowered himself into a ready stance. *Just follow his orders. Follow his orders, and it'll be over.*

Colonel Harding signaled to Captain Balbo. "Do the honors, Balbo."

Captain Balbo held a starter pistol in the air. She counted down from three, and then she shot the pistol.

Colonel Harding charged. He was much faster on his feet than Merritt had expected, catching Merritt off guard. Reflex took over, and Merritt dove to the ground, rolling past Colonel Harding and throwing all five darts at once. He didn't even have a chance to see where they landed before a blur passed his eyes and he was caught and tackled, pinned on his back with the weight of the colonel's body bearing down

on his chest. Merritt tried to fight free, but Colonel Harding adjusted, kneeling on his arms. It took only a moment's struggle for Colonel Harding to subdue him, a blunted blade digging into his throat.

"And that, privates, is how you lose a fight when you're rattled."

"Colonel," Captain Balbo called.

"If you don't have your North Sphere poker face, you don't have anything."

"Colonel," Captain Balbo said again.

He gave Merritt a nudge with the knife and sneered. "Maybe this one here needs to take some mood stabilizers so he can keep his head on straight during a fight."

"Colonel, you're already dead," Captain Balbo said.

Colonel Harding gave her an aggravated glare, but before he could get out a word, he gasped in sudden pain.

"If that had been GUS-42, you'd have fallen before you even had the chance to jump him," Captain Balbo said.

A murmur echoed across the crowd of soldiers. Merritt managed a glance at the two-way mirror, and finally, he could see what they could see. The five darts had all struck Colonel Harding in the back, in a perfect V-shape, the center dart aligned with the base of his spine.

Merritt cringed at the sight. With no time to think, he'd thrown a trick shot he often performed at parties instead of the practical shot he'd intended. The end result looked nothing short of obnoxious. *You've done it now, idiot.*

He met eyes with Colonel Harding's mirror image, and he flinched at the unbridled fury in the reflection. *So much for poker faces.*

Colonel Harding finally climbed off Merritt. He attempted to rise to his feet, but the pain from the practice darts made him stumble. Captain Palmer eased him up to his feet, acting as a crutch under his hefty arm. Captain Balbo, meanwhile, retrieved Merritt's tie and held it out for him. "Better to focus on the fight than to focus on your face," she said, loud enough for only him to hear it. "I've always known you to hide a cool head behind an emotive face. You wear your poker face

backwards. Strange for a blue-tie, but it's always served you well." A flicker of a frown. "I wonder if you should've let him win, though?"

"Thank you, Captain," Merritt said, taking the tie and immediately putting it on. After Captain Balbo turned away, he gritted his teeth. She had a point; why hadn't he thrown the match? In his gut, he felt it would have been dishonest to put in a half-hearted effort when he'd been told to give it his all. But he could only imagine how Colonel Harding would treat him now, after he'd been humiliated in front of his entire unit and the "special guest" on the other side of the mirror.

Colonel Harding managed to regain control of his poker face. Without another word to Merritt, he continued the session.

As usual, Merritt felt worn and battered by the time he made it back to the showers with the rest of the soldiers. On most days, the water temperature fluctuated, but today it held true. Merritt closed his eyes against the hot spray as it massaged his sore body. It was a rare and simple luxury he could only enjoy for a few brief minutes. By the time he arrived at the lockers with a towel wrapped around his waist, he felt refreshed.

The post-training, post-shower exhilaration was short lived. When he opened his locker, he was met with the hopping buzz of his phone. It vibrated against the metal surface like the clattering cymbals of a band member who'd waited far too long for his drum solo. Merritt slammed his hand atop it in an attempt to silence the clamor, but it had already drawn a few glances from the handful of nearby soldiers.

The drama of Colonel Harding's training session had diverted his mind from the string of insults and death threats that continued to pour in from his phone. He dreaded reading them, but he didn't want to risk missing a message from a friend or ally.

First, he retrieved his tie and, as was customary upon getting dressed, draped it around his neck so that it would be the first garment he put on even if it wasn't properly tied yet. Then he grabbed his phone and began reading through his newest texts.

The list started with *cant wait to see ur head on a pole* and ended with *would you rather be gutted or have your throat slit?* In the middle



was a text from Torrence. *Why's your face in the news? Is that article about you true?*

Merritt was about to thumb in a reply when Pierce said behind him, "Live to serve your sphere, die to serve your sphere. How long do you think you have before someone decides you'll serve us better being dead?"

Merritt didn't think Pierce meant it as a threat. He assumed Pierce was just being his usual unfiltered self. But it was hard not to be on guard after reading the hefty list of threats on his phone.

"If it's not someone in government who does you in, it'll be Colonel Harding. I've never seen someone rack up so many enemies in so little time."

"I racked up Colonel Harding years ago," Merritt said dryly.

With a sigh, Pierce whipped off his towel and tossed it atop a growing pile on the floor. Naked with only his blue tie draped around his neck, he rummaged in his locker. "Today was all bullshit, though. Especially Colonel Harding and his big speech about how our lives don't belong to us." He unearthed a stick of deodorant and started smearing it on. "As if any of us chose to be in the military."

"I think our pledge is inspiring," Merritt said.

Pierce gaped at him. "Is that sarcasm?"

The question had Merritt dumbfounded. He gathered his words. "No. I think it's the greatest honor we could have expected, given our circumstances. We live in a hierarchy from ace to King. We weren't the ones who decided that aces were low, but we have the opportunity to serve our sphere in a way that even a lot of eights and nines can't. I'm one of only a few people privileged to stand between my King and the enemy. How can I complain?"

Pierce didn't respond right away. After a long pause, he tossed his deodorant back into his locker and let out a sigh. "They sure have you brainwashed, don't they?"

"That's not really fair," Merritt said, rubbing his hair dry with a towel. "I don't get to choose where I serve, but I can choose whether or not I do the job well."

“But why would you even want to do it well? Look at the way your superiors treat you. Colonel Harding was dragging you around by the fucking tie in front of all of us.”

“Colonel Harding took the same pledge to his sphere that we did. We’re allies.”

“But he’d sell you out the second you step onto the battlefield. He’d sell all of us out. It’s what North Sphere officers do. They bought their way out of the ‘enlisted’ ranks, and now they use us as human shields.”

“Look at Captain Balbo. She’s always had our backs. And in the end, we’re all after the same thing: to serve our sphere and King.”

Pierce held up his phone and waved it back and forth as if he’d suddenly remembered a damning piece of evidence. “That sounds mighty patriotic for a guy who hacked his own sphere.”

Merritt didn’t reply. It hadn’t occurred to him until today that his thesis could be seen as unpatriotic. In his paper, he’d described his motivations in depth, but apparently none of that was interesting enough to make it into the news articles. Judging from the death threats he’d received, he could deduce that the Intelligence Department and maybe even the general public viewed him as a traitor to his sphere. Now, he had to wonder if his fellow soldiers—the soldiers he’d take a bullet for—were thinking the same thing.

A cascade of doubts engulfed him, threatened to drown him, as he got dressed. He attempted distraction by focusing on minutiae. *What should I wear?* After stepping into a fresh pair of slacks, he sorted through the items in his locker. He considered returning to his usual cut-resistant tank and the standard issue fighting jacket that was modeled after a formal suit jacket. But it was the weekend, and he wasn’t required to wear his uniform. If he wanted to, he could wear civilian garb. He unearthed his sole civilian button-down dress shirt and pulled it on.

Before he could do the first button, someone behind him yelled, “Freeze! Hands above your head!”

He barely managed to lift his hands before he was jolted, and his cheek slammed the cold metal of his locker door. In the periphery, naked Pierce watched him with wide eyes.

At least three men in uniform surrounded him, pinning him to the lockers. He felt his arms being pulled behind him. Handcuffs snapped closed around his wrists, and he was dragged away from the lockers barefoot and shirt unbuttoned. His undone belt buckle flapped loosely as he stumbled between the men who held him. Even his pants were unbuttoned, riding low and lopsided, the hem of one leg flapping past his toes like a duck's foot.

He assumed the men to be high-level government operatives, judging by uniform. They stalked through the locker room at a pace too brisk for his entangled legs to keep up, forcing him to alternate clumsy steps with skidding on his shins. The last he saw of his fellow soldiers before being yanked across the threshold was a homogenous blur of startled, wide-eyed faces.

They were almost out of the building's main exit, in view of the street outside, when Merritt planted his feet. "Please, let me tie my tie before we go."

"Move it," one of the men barked.

"Please, I can't— If someone could even just tie it for me—?"

"Shut the fuck up and walk, or I'll take the damn thing off altogether."

Resigned to his fate, Merritt allowed the men to drag him out the door, across the parking lot toward a government issue cargo motorcycle. They righted his lopsided pants only so they could cleanly chain his ankles, and then they shoved him into the cargo hold without ceremony. The ride was rough and wobbly; without the aid of his hands and arms, he was tossed around by every bump and turn like laundry in a cheap washer. By the time they came to a stop, he felt more bruised and beaten than he had after training.

He'd expected to be brought out of the cargo hold and into a government building, but when an operative dragged him out, he found himself in the middle of an unpaved tunnel dotted with rocks and stalagmites. Two additional government motorcycles pulled to a stop

beside the cargo bike, and their riders approached with batons in their hands.

“We’re running fifteen minutes ahead of schedule,” the driver of the cargo bike said. “We got time to spare before we have to check you in. The boss doesn’t need to know about our little detour.” He gave a cocky glance to the other drivers. “Not that he’d care.”

Merritt looked from one man to the next, and the hairs rose on his arms. He was surrounded, defenseless, wrists and ankles chained. When the first man approached him and raised a baton, he could do nothing but attempt to duck. Another man grabbed him and shoved him to the ground.

Kicks and baton strikes rained down on him, pelting him with such ferocity that he couldn’t even tell who was launching what attack. Each *thwack* was accompanied by jeers and taunts, a chorus of voices calling him a traitor and promising more gruesome punishment. A baton strike to his cheek made him yelp, but when he attempted to take cover, the men pummeled whatever they could reach—shoulder and arm, back and thigh. He was rolled to his side and kicked in the liver. Then he was rolled onto his stomach and stomped.

When the blows finally ceased, he was dragged back to his feet and carried toward the cargo hold. He blinked, trying to concentrate and assess his condition. His body throbbed in the wake of the beating, but his mind was surprisingly cool. He was all right. If he hadn’t been chained, he could’ve probably walked or even run. His reflection in the chrome of the cargo hold’s exterior showed minimal marks to his face. He noticed a pattern to the early bruising on the exposed skin of his body. The raining blows hadn’t been as blind and unfettered as Merritt had thought. These men, he realized, were studied in the ways of inflicting pain without doing damage.

*You’re fine. You’re not hurt. You could probably fight tonight if you had to.*

His neck, however, felt disconcertingly bare. “My tie,” he gasped before they could throw him back into the hold.

One of the men gave an exasperated sigh. He located the tie on the ground, draped it haphazardly around Merritt's neck, and then shoved Merritt into the hold.

After ten minutes of driving, Merritt could tell that they were back on paved roads in inhabited areas of the underground. He sighed, leaning back against the wall of the cargo hold and taking solace in the smoother ride. With a few steady breaths in and out, he willed himself to clear his mind. His fate was out of his hands for the time being, and worrying would do him no good. Whatever awaited him, he was trained to handle it.

The breathing exercises kept him steady for the remainder of the ride. When they finally pulled to a stop, he could see through the high barred windows of the cargo hold that they were outside of the North Sphere's military prison.

The cargo hold was unlocked, and the driver dragged him outside, lengthening the chains at his feet just enough to allow him to shuffle forward. Moments later, the drivers of the backup motorcycles arrived at either side of him.

He expected to feel dread or fear upon seeing the military prison looming ahead, but instead, he felt unabashed awe. He'd only ever seen pictures of the building before. It was a towering brick beast, exactly as imposing as he'd imagined it to be. He spotted several surveillance cameras dotting the outer walls. Looking into the nearest one, he almost smiled. It really was a fascinating establishment.

The operative pulled him up to the entryway, using his thumbprint to open the gate. Merritt watched the machine in action, captivated. When he lingered too long, the operatives jerked him impatiently across the threshold.

He was led into an intake facility, where his wrists were briefly released before being fastened into cuffs above his head. He was thoroughly patted down, which he thought was enough. But when one of the operatives reminded the other two that he was a trained soldier with access to weapons, they escalated their pat-down to a full strip search. Merritt distracted himself from his discomfort by observing

their technique, making a mental note of which areas they scrutinized and which they brushed past.

When the operatives judged him not to be sufficiently cowed, they progressed to a cavity search, again citing his unrestricted access to weapons. His matter-of-fact assertion that he was not stockpiling rifles in any of his orifices earned him an extra jab clearly meant more for punishment than excavation. He could tell that the men were being rougher with him than protocol dictated, but he counted on them getting bored in due time. At last, they removed their gloves and tossed his clothes back onto him even more haphazardly than they had been before. Cuffing his wrists behind him again, they led him down a nearby corridor.

They traveled to the west end of the facility, down a series of winding corridors that ended in a single metal door. One of the operatives activated its thumbprint sensor and opened the door, leading Merritt inside.

The floor was slick like marble, fitted with a metal drain and stained with old brown blood. Along the walls were rows of tools Merritt didn't recognize, but some of them looked suspiciously like implements of torture. At the center of the room was one of the creepier chairs he'd seen. It was made of rigid metal, with thick leather straps on the armrests, legs, and back.

*Heh. This doesn't look good.*

Merritt's chains and cuffs were undone before he was led to the chair and strapped in. The operatives exited the room, leaving Merritt alone. Tentatively, he tested the straps that bound him. They held tight. He wondered if he had enough wiggle room to reach any of the straps with his teeth, but he didn't want to risk testing it out. He remembered the myriad of video cameras he'd passed during the trek to his final destination, and he had a feeling he was still being watched. If the first thing his watchers saw him do was attempt an escape, it would ruin his chance of gaining their trust.

The room seemed to be well soundproofed. He couldn't hear any activity from any neighboring rooms, even though he knew they must have been stocked with numerous war criminals. The military prison

typically housed POWs and war criminals from other spheres, though “traitors to the North”—usually in the form of blue-tie activists and protesters—surely occupied a good portion of the cells.

After nearly ten minutes of sitting in silence, Merritt heard the doorknob rattle. The door opened, and a tall, shadowed figure entered.

It was Damen Mercury, King of the North Sphere. Immediately, Merritt dropped his head in a bow. “King,” he said, his tone reverent.

Mercury didn’t respond. He stood in silence several feet away, examining Merritt from head to toe.

Suddenly aware of his undone blue tie, Merritt’s face burned with shame. The neatness of one’s knot was a reflection of a citizen’s pride in their sphere. It was only acceptable to wear an undone tie when in a state of undress, in bed, or in the privacy of one’s own home. “King, I apologize for the condition of my tie.”

After Mercury remained silent, Merritt chanced a glance up at him. Despite the circumstances, he felt surprisingly star-struck. He’d idolized his King since the moment he’d elegantly dispatched the North’s previous leader and taken the throne for himself.

After another long stretch of silence, Mercury said, “I’d like to know what’s going through your mind right now.”

Merritt hesitated, assuming that Mercury had asked a rhetorical question. There was nothing to read in his tone, no inflection in his voice, no emotion on his face. Merritt marveled at his King’s composure. The coldness of the North was on display in his steady eyes: keen, perceptive, evaluating in silence while revealing no hints of their own.

Then, a deliberate twitch of the eyebrow. Mercury was waiting for an answer to his question. What was the question? Right. “I’m just really glad to meet you, King. Granted, I would have preferred different circumstances, but still...” He shook his head. “I’ve been fighting in the military for almost five years now, and it’s such an honor to serve you.”

“You do realize you’ve been arrested for committing a crime, don’t you?” Mercury asked. “You were arrested for an attack against the government’s security.”

“It wasn’t meant as an attack, King,” Merritt said. “I didn’t cause any harm, and I didn’t keep any files. I didn’t even read them.”

“You hacked a top secret government database and then posted the exploit on the desktops of everyone in the department.”

Merritt didn’t reply. It didn’t seem proper to talk back to his King without invitation.

“Explain yourself,” Mercury said.

“I posted the exploit so the programmers could see the bug. No one outside of the department would have seen it or understood it.”

“You took a significant risk for no reward. If you didn’t plan to compromise the system or take restricted information, then why did you do it?”

Merritt shrugged and gave a clumsy smile. “The subject came up when I was meeting with my professor to finalize my thesis. I was past the deadline and I hadn’t come up with a concept, so I joked that I wanted to hack the Intelligence Database. I assumed he’d know I was joking because it seemed like such a far-fetched idea. He said it couldn’t be done, and he challenged me to prove him wrong. So I took the challenge. As it turns out, he did know I was joking, and he was joking back, but I didn’t realize it because his poker face was so good. But by then, I’d already finished the project, so....” He gave a high, uneasy laugh.

Mercury’s stern face didn’t break. Merritt fell silent.

After another long pause, Mercury retrieved a chair from the corner of the room and set it down across from Merritt. He took a seat, leaning forward and examining Merritt’s face.

Merritt returned his gaze, meeting Mercury’s deep brown eyes. Those laugh lines. Those heavy black lashes. He felt a prickling rush of blood in his cheeks, and he cursed himself mentally.



Merritt's comrades in arms kept photos of their most recent flings tacked to the wall above their beds. Above Merritt's bed, he kept a photo of Damen Mercury. The other soldiers teased him for it, but he could imagine no romantic relationship as steadfast as his devotion to his King. Now, with Mercury's face only inches away from his own, he realized that even the charming photo in the barracks didn't do justice to his strong jaw, or the deep, dark eyes cast in intriguing shadow from his heavy brow ridge. Merritt's gaze traveled from his slicked dark hair to the rough stubble dotting his chin. Maybe it would feel coarse like sandpaper if it were to scrape Merritt's fingertips or cheek.

Suddenly realizing where his train of thought was heading, he blinked and refocused on Mercury's calculating eyes. For a moment, it almost looked like Mercury was smiling. Then his poker face returned. "You aren't acting as nervous or as guilty as you should be."

How nervous and guilty should he have been? To be cut down by an opponent would be tragedy. But to surrender his fate to his King? The deal had been made years ago.

"I'm just so honored to be in your presence. You're my King. I've vowed to serve you."

Mercury held Merritt's gaze, and despite feeling intimidated by the weight of it, Merritt didn't want to break eye contact. Mercury's presence was powerful. Magnetic. Merritt wondered if there was anything Mercury could command of him that he would refuse.

"You act like you don't have anything to hide," Mercury said.

"I don't, King. You're entitled to anything you wish to know about me."

"Don't be snide."

Merritt's eyes widened. "I'm not, King. I'm being honest."

After another long, examining pause, Mercury chuckled. "It appears you are being honest. Your colonel humiliated himself today, but he was right about one thing. You've got no poker face."

Merritt didn't reply. He felt a twinge of shame.

“I was on the observation deck watching your training session. Your skills are respectable. And your attitude is reverent. So tell me: Why does Harding hate you so much?”

The conversation had gone in exactly the direction Merritt was hoping to avoid. He’d already promised to be forthright with his King. Now what? “We’re allies, King. I’d like to believe that he doesn’t hate me.”

“I don’t care what you’d like to believe. I want to know what you *do* believe. And I want to know what’s true.”

Merritt felt the bite in Mercury’s tone. “I try to do my best work for him, and he tries to get the best out of me, King. He’s my superior, so I accept whatever tactics he chooses to use.”

“You have two black marks against you. If you got a third mark, you’d be demoted to the Shield Squad. You’d be standing unarmed in the front lines to absorb enemy bullets. But that threat didn’t stop you, did it? Two black marks, and now you hack a government agency. Clearly, you have a problem with discipline.”

“I made some mistakes, King. I see that now. But it’s always my intention to honor my command.”

“I read your disciplinary report. You had one mark against you for intoxication and one for insubordination.”

“That’s correct, King.”

“According to the report, you approached Harding in his office while you were drunk, and you offered him oral sex in exchange for a promotion to lieutenant. And when Harding refused, you got unruly, and he had to call the military police to escort you out.”

Merritt chewed his lower lip.

“Is this correct?”

“Yes, King, that’s what the report states.”

“I didn’t ask what the report states. I asked what happened.”

“It was a misunderstanding, King. We were talking about my future in the military and potential opportunities for growth. It was late

at night after a long day. Both Colonel Harding and I were only trying to do our jobs, but our wires got crossed. I regret the miscommunication, I regret my actions, and I accept the consequences.”

Mercury examined him with those same narrowed eyes again, and he hoped Mercury wouldn't ask any more questions along this line. After a long pause, Mercury leaned back in his seat. “Two black marks. That means you'll never be promoted above your current position at the bottom of the military. If what you were originally after was a promotion, that must be a hard pill for you to swallow.”

“I'll serve my sphere in whatever position I'm given, King,” Merritt said.

“Even in the Shield Squad?”

Merritt choked on the rush of anxiety that shot up to his throat. *This is your King. Your fate is his. But....* “I... I would hope that I'm serving effectively enough for my life to be more valuable to you than my death. But if you command it, then yes, I would serve in the Shield Squad.”

No reaction from Mercury. Merritt would have expected no less from the coldest man in the underground, and on any other day, he would have reveled in the master class Mercury was giving him on poker faces. But at this moment, he yearned for even a single hint that his words had made a mark. If he could only prove that he wasn't a threat or a traitor, maybe Mercury would see fit to lower the mask. But without any clues from Mercury, Merritt didn't know where to aim.

“You don't seem to understand the gravity of your situation,” Mercury said. “Do you realize why you're here?”

“I'm here because I hacked the Intelligence Database, King.”

“You committed treason.”

“It wasn't treason, King. I did this for the sake of our sphere. That's why I left evidence of my hack for the department to find. It's why I showed the code I used to get in. My intention was to alert the North Sphere government to a vulnerability in their most sensitive database. If I could find a way in, I'm sure the South Sphere isn't far

behind—if they haven’t already found a way in.” His words took on a pleading note, and he struggled to flatten his tone. “It was always my intention to alert the authorities to any problems I found.”

“And you just happened to find this vulnerability? If no one in the Intelligence Department found it, it couldn’t have been that obvious of a flaw.”

“No, King, it wasn’t an obvious flaw.”

“Then how did you find it? You’re just a soldier. How did you even know where to look?”

Merritt shrugged, his movement constricted by his bonds. “I’ve always liked taking things apart and seeing how they work. I learned the basics at the School of Technology last year, and I discovered that I really enjoy working with code.”

“They taught you the basics.”

“Yes, King.”

“One of the most prestigious schools in the North Sphere—in the *underground*—a school well beyond your means—taught you the ‘basics.’”

The first hint dropped from Mercury, and it was bad. Mercury was offended. Merritt rushed his next words. “What I meant was that they gave me a foundation. I had no formal training before attending.”

“And what took you from foundation level to a level where you could dismantle the work of my top programmers?”

Merritt wasn’t sure how to answer. But he had to say something. Whining or pleading would only show weakness to a King who demanded stoicism. But Mercury was on track to condemn him, and staying silent was as good as a surrender. “King, I... I just...” He met Mercury’s eyes. “I like computers.”

*I like computers?* Merritt gave himself another mental kick.

For a fleeting moment, it almost looked like Mercury lost a grip on his poker face, but the lapse wasn’t long enough for Merritt to decipher his true reaction. It felt like Mercury had made his decision. Merritt braced himself, waiting for judgment.

“Tell me again: What’s your position?” Mercury asked.

“Chem Ops Private, King.”

Mercury’s eyes narrowed. “Not anymore.”

Mercury’s words punched him in the gut. This was his third mark. His demotion to Shield Squad. He lowered his gaze, wanting more than anything to hide his anguish. If his King commanded it, he would serve in the Shield Squad. *Live to serve my sphere, die to serve my sphere.*

Mercury rose to his feet and stepped up to Merritt’s side, undoing the straps that bound him to the chair. Merritt rose as soon as he was freed, but his head remained lowered. He couldn’t look Mercury in the eye.

“It’s almost midnight,” Mercury said. “You better head back to the barracks, Sergeant.”

Merritt faltered. He opened his mouth and stuttered for a moment. Then he shook his head. *Sergeant?* “Huh?” His voice squeaked like a rubbed balloon.

“I’ll have the order sent to your captain tomorrow,” Mercury said. “We’ll make the promotion official. Part of me thinks you might be better off in the Intelligence Department than you would as a soldier.” He gave a charismatic, almost teasing smile. “They like computers too.” Tucking away his smile, he continued. “They could use a mind like yours. But frankly, Merritt, you haven’t made yourself any friends in the department with this stunt. You’d be lucky if they didn’t poison your morning coffee your first day at work.”

Merritt was still reeling, disoriented. “I thought you were demoting me to Shield Squad.”

“Maybe I should. Not all of my subjects will approve of my decision. But it *is* my decision. I see potential in you, and I want to learn what that potential is before I risk squandering it.” He turned toward the door. “So, sergeant it is.”

“King. Thank you. I... I don’t even....”

“Your belongings will be waiting for you at the front desk. Ask the receptionist to arrange for your transportation.” That same charming smile surfaced again. “As for you and me? We’ll be talking soon.”