



DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

BOOK 2

SHOBANA 'BOB' APPAVU

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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER I

I'm throwing you a party to celebrate your promotion. Yackley's VIP room, Friday night, 8pm. Who do you want me to invite? Archer? Meade? Send me your list.

The last thing Merritt's churning stomach needed after downing the mess hall's morning slop was an unexpected text from Belmont. He stared down at his phone screen, wondering how long he could get away with leaving a text from his new boss unanswered.

Send me your list. What a simple way for Belmont to zero in on anyone who was likely to support Merritt's promotion. How would he ultimately use that information?

On the other hand, it was a fair question, and if stonewalling wasn't an option, Merritt saw no harm in giving Belmont an answer that was already obvious. After half a minute's consideration, he replied, *Yes to Archer and Meade. Captain Balbo too if possible, and anyone from Chem Ops Corvus.*

Belmont sent a confirmation message minutes later, and Merritt returned his attention to the movers who were setting up the general's quarters to his specifications. He had few requests and few belongings, and he hadn't yet adjusted to the notion of having a one-person suite all to himself for the first time in his life.

The general's quarters were in a subterranean chamber below Station 1, connected to the main building by a reinforced tunnel circling up to the first floor cafeteria. His interim aide-de-camp would arrange for meals to be brought to him via this route. A second entryway tunnel branched off from the first, connecting to the outside and allowing for any house guests that were cleared by security. A third entrance, accessible only to those with the highest clearance, connected from a concealed door in the bedroom directly to one of Station 1's

protected back hallways via elevator, offering quick access to the control room and safe room.

His suite even had a kitchenette, which—according to Lieutenant General Meade—was in case he wanted to hire a domestic to cook for him. That option seemed ridiculous to Merritt. His basic food, housekeeping, and administrative needs would already be covered by low-level military staff. Domestic servants were seen as a status symbol for an elite, but as a soldier serving his sphere, Merritt had no use for such a thing, even if he could have afforded it. He was more excited at the prospect of using the kitchen himself—assuming he'd ever have the time for it.

The movers seemed at a loss for things to do, but there wasn't anything else Merritt needed. Aside from his perpetual duty weapons, laptop, a few pieces of civilian garb, and a four-thousand-dollar suit he wished he didn't own, he had no personal belongings to move into the late General Rhodes's old lodgings. Rhodes too had lived a minimalist life, and Merritt saw no reason to get rid of his scant selection of furniture. The kitchenette looked unused, and the cramped living room didn't have space for more than the sofa, coffee table, and ragged goat-hair rug already present.

The bedroom was similarly spartan, with a metal frame queen bed, steel end tables, and nothing else. The bathroom was simply a cube with a metal toilet, wall-mounted metal sink, and a shower head affixed to the wall.

“Bet you'll appreciate finally being able to take showers alone, sir,” one of the more gregarious movers had said while checking the plumbing. Merritt had nodded along even though his first impression of the bathroom was that it looked lonely. As reserved as blue-ties were, blue-tie soldiers still had their share of locker room horseplay. He would miss hearing the sounds of laughter after a grueling day of work. Even the officers' showers had felt too dead to him, and he'd usually opted to use the lower barracks locker room instead. Now a general, that option was far from appropriate.

On the other hand, his new bathroom's construction was of vastly better quality than anything he'd had at the barracks. And he

appreciated the stylistic nod to the fabled prison bathrooms once used by the underground's criminal founders on the surface.

The study attached to the bedroom was more challenging for Merritt to see in a positive light. It held a work desk and a computer that Merritt hoped to scrap, provided he could get the clearance to hook up his laptop and equip it with the necessary security and applications. The desktop machine was outdated and unreliable, with specs that couldn't even rival Merritt's custom build.

Wall-mounted monitors displayed the same information as the Station 1 control board, but they were grainy and prone to glitching—barely suitable for managing a military crisis in real time. Rhodes had often slept on a cot in the Station 1 control room to monitor urgent events instead of trying to work with his at-home equipment. Merritt suspected he'd be carrying on the tradition.

But he couldn't complain. He'd never imagined that he'd have an entire study all to himself. This was more than he ever would have been given as a private, and it was only by Mercury's good graces that he'd ever risen above that rank. Whatever his King chose to give him, he'd accept it and make the best use of it that he could.

Archer appeared at the subterranean front door at the same moment the movers began to filter out, exiting into the entryway tunnel. She wore a thin white trench coat over her usual suit and lab coat, and she carried a blank cardboard box. Merritt's grin overtook his face when he saw her.

"General Merritt," Archer said, returning his smile. "It has a nice ring to it."

"I never thought I'd hear those two words together." Merritt stepped aside and gestured for her to come in.

"This entrance was not easy to find, by the way," she said, sounding slightly breathless. "Do people really have to come in through the Station 1 cafeteria?"

"There's an alternate entrance that connects straight to the final stretch of tunnel. I'll show you later."

“They must not want you having a lot of visitors,” Archer said, and it took Merritt a moment to realize she might have been joking. To him, the discreet public entrance was a natural choice. North Sphere soldiers were at their best when they were doing their duty unseen—giving and serving without glory. Unlike the East, where citizens sought to be soldiers solely for the prestige that came with the job, a North Sphere soldier’s success was measured by how little their sphere’s civilians felt the burden of their presence. It was the proper role of Mercury’s general to be hidden from the public eye, passing the glory of his good decisions onto his King.

“I like it down here,” Merritt said. “It’s harder to bomb.”

“That’s fair,” Archer replied with her familiar practiced chuckle.

Merritt pointed to the box in her hand. “What’s that?”

Archer set the box on the kitchenette counter and opened the top. She pulled out a deep green succulent plant in a round ceramic pot. The plant was no taller than the length of her forearm, with thick rounded leaves the size of Merritt’s thumb. She placed it directly into Merritt’s hands and said, “It’s a jade plant. I got it from the labs. They grow these on the surface too, but this one’s been modified to survive with no sunlight. It won’t ever grow larger than this, but it won’t die either—as long as you water it and refresh the synthetic soil’s nutrients.” She held up what looked like a prescription bottle. “Just pop one of these pills into the soil every six months. The casing will dissolve the next time you water it.”

Merritt stood without speaking, eyes wide and lips slightly parted as he ran his hand over the top of the plant. Finally, after a long stretch of silence, he said, “I... I love it. So much.”

“Merritt,” Archer said.

Merritt looked up at her.

“You’re petting the plant.”

Frowning, Merritt stopped. “I shouldn’t do that?”

With an amused smile, Archer replied, “At least not while people are watching.”

Merritt carried the plant across the room, setting it gingerly atop the coffee table. Then he sat on the rigid sofa so he could look at it. “It’s so cute.” When Archer raised an eyebrow, Merritt explained, “I’ve never owned something that was alive. It was never an option, living in the barracks.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Archer said. “I honestly didn’t expect you to like it quite *this* much. But it’s nice to see.”

Her words startled him. Halfway through her sentence, he’d been preparing to apologize for his show of emotion. But then he recognized something in her face that he hadn’t expected. She was happy to see him happy.

“I’ll take good care of it,” he said, wishing he had the words to adequately thank her.

“I know you will.” Glancing at her phone, she said, “I need to hurry back to work. Morning meeting.”

“Thank you for stopping by,” Merritt said. “And thank you for the plant.”

After saying goodbye to her at the door, he turned to take in the sight of his quarters. What would it mean to have all this space to himself when he probably wouldn’t have more than an hour a night to use it? How long would he be able to tolerate having no one to talk to after coming home from work?

He took a moment to remind himself that he’d just been promoted to General of the North Sphere Army. That was a *good* thing. He might just have to remind himself every now and then.

Five days on the job isn’t enough to already be disillusioned. Give it at least another week.

His shoes clacked on the bare concrete as he headed into the dim, empty bedroom. His weathered suitcase sat atop his bed, pressing a sad dent into the flimsy mattress. Now that he had privacy, he could finally unpack his most vital belongings.

In a tiny sleeve taped to the inside of the suitcase was his photograph of Damen Mercury. Pressing a bit of tack on the back of it,

he affixed it to the wall. Then he raised his hand to his heart and whispered his pledge into the silence.

“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.”

As it turned out, there were perks to having a bathroom to himself. For the first time in his life, Merritt could indulge in a third consecutive day of sleep enhancers without any witnesses to his resulting half hour of cold sweats and nausea and vomiting, nor to the following half hour of blinding stomach cramps and dry heaving beyond the point that there was anything left to purge from his body.

Lose an hour, gain four. It was worth the hour’s pain and the day’s jitters. Merritt only wished his body could handle a fourth consecutive night of sleep enhancers without the drug losing its effectiveness, but he’d take what he could get. As a private, he’d used sleep enhancers to fuel his nights of study in hopes that his mind could save him when his body inevitably failed. Now assigned to a job where only his mind was needed, he still couldn’t convince himself to forsake the physical training. His employment agreement only guaranteed one free hour every weekday for working out—in fact, the hour workout was a requirement for Mercury’s top officials—but an hour was only enough to maintain a civilian’s level of fitness. There would be no time for poisons drills or honing his marksmanship or running an obstacle course.

In the eyes of the North Sphere, a military general didn’t need to be useful in combat. But would Rhodes have been killed if he’d been trained as extensively as Merritt? This was a skill Merritt couldn’t afford to lose—not if he wanted to stay on the level of someone like Troy, a general who regularly marched into combat alongside his subordinates.

And, general or not, Mercury had not officially relieved Merritt of his perpetual duty. It was rare enough for perpetual duty soldiers to double as officers at all. Merritt had no idea why Mercury hadn't decided to take him off the job after making him the North's top officer. For all he knew, it could have simply been a detail that fell through the cracks during his transition. In accordance with procedure, he would only have to act in the absence of any other guards or perpetual duty soldiers, but he was by no means freed from his obligation. He would have to wait for a chance to discuss the matter with Mercury.

But now his top priority above physical training was his reading. A never-ending sea of reading. He had to catch up on decades' worth of top secret intel and protocols and data. His new position required him to work alongside Belmont, but Belmont had demanded that Merritt get himself entirely up to speed before their first scheduled one-on-one meeting the Monday after his move. In the meantime, Belmont would refer to Meade for any urgent military matters.

Lieutenant General Meade was the greatest colleague Merritt could hope for—steadfast in his loyalty to his sphere despite being passed over for a promotion, and every bit as intent on assisting Merritt as he had been on assisting Rhodes. Meade did his best to accelerate Merritt's transition, but Meade couldn't do the work for him.

Regardless, Meade seemed to be going above and beyond in hopes that Merritt would keep him on as lieutenant general. It was disturbing that Meade considered himself to be at Merritt's mercy. Merritt had sworn on day one that he had no intention of replacing Meade, but in a place like the North Sphere, Merritt couldn't blame him for still feeling insecure. Hopefully, Friday's party invite would help ease his mind.

By the time Friday arrived, Merritt had buried himself deep enough in records and paperwork that all thoughts of the party had slipped from his mind. It took a text from Belmont at half past seven to shoot him out of the seat at his desk and into his bedroom closet. He hurriedly threw on a civilian suit, fastened his perpetual duty packs, and rushed out the door.

During the drive into neutral territory, he found himself wishing he'd had the nerve to ask Belmont to invite more of his friends and supporters. Torrence was off the table; even if he was healthy enough to attend, he would have wanted nothing to do with a party celebrating the North Sphere military. But Merritt could have asked for any number of fellow soldiers. In the moment he'd gotten Belmont's text, it had just seemed too difficult to navigate through the minefield of military politics, having to wonder which inclusions might give the appearance of favoritism and which exclusions might be unforgivable slights. His new position was too tenuous to withstand any early miscalculations, so it seemed wise to delay such a risky non-essential decision.

Still, it was a shame. In the weeks following the West Sphere invasion, he'd finally begun to bond with some of the other officers, including Border Defense's Colonel Green. If not for Merritt's actions during the attack, a good half of Border Defense would have been wiped out, and Green appreciated that Merritt had saved both his troops and his reputation as an officer. Green's acceptance trickled down to his captains and lieutenants and even spread out to the Counteroffensive Unit colonel who was Green's close friend.

On the other hand, Infantry Colonel Lyndale apparently had it in for Merritt. Merritt had gone over her head in commanding her troops to the border during the invasion. Although the infantry had done a stellar job, Merritt's involvement had robbed Lyndale of the glory that would have otherwise come with commanding a winning battle. But despite Lyndale's disdain for him, at least one of Lyndale's captains had gone out of her way to thank him and congratulate him on his promotion. Tilden was the unit's oldest and most experienced captain, and Merritt wondered if, in all her years of selfless service, she'd ever been invited into a VIP room. It would have been nice to give her that.

He could have also asked to invite any of the engineers or programmers who'd worked with him on the poison traps. Why hadn't he thought of them?

But he knew he would be satisfied with Belmont's guest list, no matter how limited it was. He preferred smaller, more intimate gatherings anyway. It felt strange enough to be attending a party in

celebration of his accomplishments, and he'd be happy to have even two or three friends in attendance.

When he arrived at Yackley's and tried to pass through the red velvet curtain into the VIP room, the bouncer stopped him with a hand on his chest. "Show me your card."

Merritt faltered. He dug his playing card, which doubled as an ID card, out of his pocket and handed it to the bouncer. It was a temporary card issued by headquarters until his new card portrait was completed. The card displayed his old portrait—clumsy smile and all—with his new rank: five of spades.

"You gotta be at least a nine to get in here," the bouncer said.

"I know, but the party in there is for me. I was just promoted to general."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout that."

"There's been news coverage," Merritt pressed.

"I don't watch news," the bouncer sneered, even as the wall-mounted television behind him displayed footage of Merritt emerging from headquarters moments after his promotion.

He wasn't going to waste his time arguing with a bouncer in the middle of a crowded bar. The last thing he needed was to create a spectacle. Frowning, he stepped away and pulled out his phone. He texted Belmont: *Bouncer won't let me in.*

Five minutes passed as he sat alone at a table reviewing old reports on his phone. A waiter brought him a glass of water, which he nursed for the next five minutes as he tried calling and texting Belmont again. After five more minutes, he followed up with another call and text. He texted Archer, but she didn't reply.

The first few minutes of waiting had been bearable. Merritt didn't mind the extra time for reading. But in between every few paragraphs, he had to fight back the rising irritation that sparked behind his eyes.

No one entered or exited the VIP room while he waited, but he could hear music and laughter from the other side of the curtain. This

was deliberate. Why had Merritt been so naïve to assume that Belmont would treat him with even the most basic level of respect?

After exactly thirty minutes, Belmont finally stuck his head out through the doorframe. “Merritt! You made it. Party started half an hour ago.”

“I texted you,” Merritt said evenly. “And I called.”

Belmont made a show of pulling his phone out from deep in his pocket. He looked at the screen. “Oh, look at that.” He turned to the bouncer, smiled, and turned back to Merritt. “I forgot you weren’t high-ranking enough to get into the VIP room, so I didn’t clear your name with the bouncer.”

Merritt pressed his lips together. “Of course you forgot.”

Belmont gestured behind him. “Well? Go on in. Everyone’s waiting.”

The sight on the other side of the velvet curtain hit him like a gut punch. Seated at the nearest table, Colonel Harding sneered at him from behind his oversize glass of gin. At his side, former captain Palmer stood with arms folded as he chewed on an hors d’oeuvre, a toothpick bobbing up and down from between his lips.

Merritt quickly averted his eyes, only for them to fall upon Mannheim, who’d been newly promoted to Director of Technology thanks to the strings Belmont had pulled as his best friend—and in spite of all the embarrassment Merritt had caused him when hacking the Intelligence Database a year and a half ago. Before Mannheim had met eyes with Merritt, he’d been chatting with two former programmers from the division, both of whom had lost their jobs thanks to Merritt’s hacking endeavor.

At the next table sat Pratt and Evans, Mercury’s military advisors. Evans didn’t even bother to look up from his phone to greet Merritt, while Pratt shot him a suspiciously welcoming half-smile.

There was no Archer, no Balbo, not even Meade. There was, however, Infantry Colonel Lyndale. She looked just as spiteful as always when Merritt briefly met her gaze. She sat at a table with a

handful of equally hostile lieutenants, captains, and colonels from across the North Sphere military.

Merritt descended further into the party from his nightmares, recognizing face after face from past disagreements and awkward encounters. He spotted his worst bully from the Norwood Orphanage—the sole ace in the room—who was taking full advantage of the free and never-ending supply of hardcore party drugs served in an array of tiny ceramic dishes.

Near the windows, Captain Ashland helped fill the glass pipe of a fellow Elite Border Guard captain. More Elite Border Guard captains occupied a curved sofa around a glass table, upon which they were snorting a powdered pink drug. Every single one of them had been present at Belmont's command at the altercation outside Torrence's house a few months ago.

At a corner table sat a distinguished older North Sphere man Merritt didn't recognize at first. Once their eyes met, a chill ran down Merritt's spine, and he remembered being in the stairwell at Yackley's with him over a year ago, on his knees. The man looked him up and down with a smirk before returning to his drink. He was one of the few guests who wasn't emanating malice, but his presence made Merritt's cheeks glow red with embarrassment.

Weaving in and out between all the hostile guests were West Sphere dogs. Several thousand dollars worth of dogs. More dogs than guests.

A hired photographer swooped in, flashing a blinding bulb in Merritt's face, and Merritt held up a hand to shield his eyes. He turned to Belmont, teeth bared, livid and horrified at the same time. "*What is this?*" he hissed.

"I think you mean, 'Thank you for the party, boss.'" Belmont gestured toward the bar and laid a hand on Merritt's arm. "Get you a drink?"

Merritt yanked his arm out from under Belmont's hand, more forcefully than he'd intended. "I'll get my own drink," he snapped, turning away before Belmont could comment on his outburst.

His hands were shaking by the time he got to the bar. Rage burned in his chest, spreading through his blood, and he couldn't contain it. As much as he chastised himself for his irrational rush of emotion, he was powerless to smother the fire.

Why was Belmont doing this? Was he showing off for the other elites in the room? Was he trying to establish dominance as Merritt's new supervisor? Was he just an asshole?

He braced himself against the bar, slowly breathing in and out as he counted to ten in his head. It would have been easier to calm down if the photographer hadn't followed him, continuing his onslaught of bulb flashes and obnoxiously raucous shutter-snapping. Merritt was high enough in status now that it made sense for journalists and photographers to want to track him, but the experience was jarring nonetheless. The fact that Belmont had invited the press to his party was unnerving in itself.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He glanced at the screen and saw that Archer had finally replied to his text. *What party? No one told me anything. I'm at the lab.*

Merritt shoved his phone back into his pocket.

"For someone who just got a promotion, you sure look miserable."

Startled, Merritt raised his head. Seated beside him at the bar was Troy, drinking something red. Aside from the West Sphere dogs, he appeared to be the only non-blue-tie in the room, and his presence blindsided Merritt.

Why would Belmont have invited Troy? Troy was on better terms with Merritt than he was with Belmont.

On the other hand, Merritt knew his promotion would change that. He and Troy were now rival generals of opposing spheres. Troy, despite wearing the warmest smile in the room, was now Merritt's most dangerous enemy.

"Sit down," Troy said, gesturing toward the seat next to him.

Recognizing Troy's command as an invitation to chat, Merritt glanced hesitantly at the lingering photographer out of the corner of his eye. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"You don't?" Troy chuckled. "For the first time in the history of the underground, I got a rival general I actually like. You think it's a bad thing for us to talk?"

"If talk can prevent a war, then I'm all for it," Merritt said. "But somehow I'm not anticipating diplomacy tonight."

Another laugh from Troy. "Yeah, but you gotta sit somewhere. Might as well be at the bar. I'm thinkin' you're gonna need the drinks."

It was a fair point, and Troy's energy felt more welcoming than that of any of the North Sphere citizens in his presence. Merritt took the seat.

"What are you having?" Troy asked.

"I don't know. Probably just water."

"Are you shitting me? It's an open bar, on Belmont's tab." Troy held up his glass. "I've been here half an hour, and this is my eighth drink."

Yackley approached from behind the counter, sporting his signature two-inch-long pigtails to compliment the curly white beard that extended midway down his chest. He squinted at Merritt over his tiny, rectangular glasses and offered a warm grin. "If you order more water, I'm going to have to kindly smack you upside the head."

"Get him Calm in white wine," Troy said before Merritt could protest. "You got Hegewisch today, don't you?" To Merritt, he added, "That's the best South Sphere white you can usually get at bars outside the South."

Yackley didn't wait for Merritt to confirm Troy's request. Merritt frowned, settling back in his seat. He'd been about to ask for his usual Focus in mineral water, but if he was being honest with himself, the Calm in white wine was probably a more apt choice. "Thank you," he said to Troy.

Troy leaned across the bar, his forearm spanning Merritt's share of the counter. "You wanna know something about Hegewisch grapes?" he asked.

Not really.

Troy was going to tell him either way. "The first month I was General of the East Sphere Army, I ordered Cannon's Elite Squad to invade sub-Hegewisch in the South Sphere. My soldiers were practically pissing their pants at the order because they knew the way the South retaliates any time you so much as breathe on their territory. But I said, 'I want to invade sub-Hegewisch, and I want to claim exactly one acre of their farmlands.' You know why? Because that's where they grow their Hegewisch Marble Crème grapes. They're one of the most expensive grapes in the South, but I still say they're underrated."

Troy spoke with the kind of confidence that could only come from someone who'd been taught since birth that his opinion mattered. As Merritt sat surrounded by people waiting for him to show his insecurity, he realized he could no longer get away with not being able to fake the same.

After a sip of wine, Troy slammed the glass down on the table as if it were a beer mug. It was a wonder he didn't break it. "See, those regions on the border—sub-Roseland, sub-South-Deering, the northern stretch of sub-Hegewisch—they're some of the only places where you can grow *really fucking good* produce using the underground's natural soil. And I wanted to start myself a South Sphere grape collection." He took another sip of wine and chuckled into his glass. "So I started a war with the South, and I took a one-acre notch out of sub-Hegewisch, and then I took one acre out of sub-Roseland, and then I took one acre out of sub-South-Deering. The South still hasn't retaliated, but when they do, it's gonna be *ugly*." He gave a hearty laugh and shook his head. "Anyway, I left the land exactly the way it was, and I hired some farm workers to take care of it. They bring a two-pound basket of grapes straight to my quarters every single morning."

"That's a lot of grapes," Merritt said, his face blank. He had no idea where Troy was going with this story. At first he wondered if Troy was signaling his willingness to attack another sphere unprovoked, but he seemed to care more about the grapes than the battle that won them.

Either Troy wanted Merritt to recognize his grape collection as a status symbol—something not so uncommon among the underground’s elite—or he just really liked grapes. “What do you do with all of them?”

“Eat ‘em. Give ‘em as gifts. Preserve ‘em and use ‘em as decorations. Send ‘em out to make small batches of wine. It’s not the same as the South’s, but a lot of the people I gave it to say they like my wine better.” He cocked his head. “I’ll bring you some grapes from my collection sometime. I think you’d be impressed by how fresh they are.”

Before Merritt could reply, Yackley returned with his white wine, served alongside a test tube full of Calm. He lifted the test tube from its metal holder with a pair of tongs and poured it into the wine, turning it Calm’s characteristic blue.

“Yackley!” Mannheim called from the opposite end of the bar. “Get me another Spark in vodka.”

Yackley hurried across the bar to tend to Mannheim. Merritt was sad to see him go; his was the only presence in the room that was purely comforting.

A pair of dogs, male and female, passed by close enough to catch Troy’s attention. As Troy’s gaze followed them unobtrusively, Merritt took a quick glance around the room. Mannheim and his fellow programmers sat closest to the bar. Like most of the other party guests, their attention seemed to be on their drinks and drugs. But after a moment of being watched, a couple of the programmers shot Merritt dirty looks and leaned in close to whisper something to each other.

“You know,” Troy said as Merritt took a sip of his drink, “I didn’t tell you to sit here just so I could tell you about my grapes.”

Really? You had me fooled.

“You got something on your mind. I can see it in your face that you want to ask me something, but you’re trying to avoid it.”

Merritt’s frown deepened. There *was* something; it had been lingering in the back of his mind for months now. But it troubled him that Troy found him so easy to read.

Merritt had been promoted to general due to his handling of the West's attack, but his mission with Troy at the Montclare border had paved the way. The waterways mission had led to his promotion from sergeant to lieutenant.

A jump from enlisted soldier to officer was nearly unheard of in the North, and if he hadn't become an officer then, he never would have been in a position to become the North's general now. If he was going to face Troy on an equal footing as General of the North Sphere Army, he had to know what Troy had done for him in the past.

He took a sip of his drink. The Calm really was doing wonders for him. He felt steady and level-headed again as he turned to face Troy. "I was given a lot of fortunate opportunities this past year, and I count our mission in the waterways as one of them." He met Troy's ice blue eyes, trying to read them while he asked his question. "You said something to Belmont and Balbo after the mission, didn't you? Something positive that led to my promotion."

"I didn't tell them anything that wasn't already in my written report to Mercury."

Mercury. Of course. Merritt felt a rush of warmth in his chest.

But that still didn't answer his question. "Why would you tell Mercury, though?"

Troy narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"We were soldiers in rival spheres. What I did to you during the mission was embarrassing for your sphere, and it would have been in your best interest to keep it as low key as possible. So why would you tell Mercury the truth? Why would you give me the glory?"

With a careless shrug, Troy said, "'Cause you deserved it. You're better than any other soldier the North Sphere's got."

"Better?"

"Yeah. Smarter, stronger, braver, more well rounded. You're a *real* soldier. Like what we have in the East." He flashed a smile that looked rough but felt genuine. "You're the kind of soldier I respect."

Merritt fought the immediate urge to stand up for his fellow North Sphere soldiers; he couldn't risk derailing the conversation. "But I'm the enemy. If you believed I was strong, wouldn't you want to prevent me from reaching a position of power? Wouldn't you want to weaken the North's military?"

Troy snickered. "You're looking way too much into this, kid. All I did was write an honest report of our mission and give it to Mercury. It was one of the conditions of our agreement. And then after that, I told your CO you did a good job. It was worth it just to see Belmont get all pissy about it." He gestured dismissively with his hand. "But that's all I did. I'm not the one who promoted you."

It was odd for someone like Troy to decline to take credit for anything, much less something he'd obviously done. But he didn't have to take credit. He knew what he'd done for Merritt, and he knew that Merritt knew. To refuse to acknowledge it was a taunt; he was subtly flexing his muscles, goading Merritt about a favor that only the two of them knew Merritt owed him.

Merritt couldn't start off his new career indebted to Troy. He couldn't put his sphere at risk like that.

"I heard you tried to trade for me."

Troy's formerly relaxed smile gave an odd twitch. "Where d'ya year that from?"

"An old friend at Yackley's."

"Who?"

Merritt sensed that Troy was looking for someone to discipline. "I don't remember. It was a group conversation on a crowded day, and the subject happened to come up."

Troy raised a skeptical eyebrow, turning back to his drink. "Yeah, I tried to trade for you. It wasn't a big deal. I put down my bid to take you, but the North's bid to keep you was higher."

That wasn't what Swann had told him. She'd said that it was a done deal until Mercury took Merritt's card out of the running. But nothing good would come from confronting Troy about it.

“What was your offer?”

Troy stalled, but he appeared less than confident in withholding the information. Perhaps he thought Merritt already knew. After a pause, he said, “I offered Pardus. The guy who fucked up during the Montclare mission.”

“*Oh.*”

Troy frowned, apparently put off by the knowing tone of Merritt’s response. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I understand now. I see why you talked me up.”

“You don’t see anything,” Troy said, his voice dismissive but his eyes apprehensive.

Merritt leaned forward, slowly swirling the wine in his glass. “You knew I was valuable enough to the North that you couldn’t trade sergeant for sergeant. You had to offer your best. But any trade you requested would have had to be approved by your superiors—Cannon and Samsid. If you wanted them to sign off on trading an Elite Squad officer for someone like me, you would have had to make me look appealing enough to offset the cost. An average North Sphere sergeant wouldn’t be tempting to the East, even if they knew about my hack of the Intelligence Database. That’s not a skill that’s valued in the East. But after I got the upper hand against the East’s Elite Squad in battle? That’s another story. You let the word out and gave me that moment of glory so Cannon and Samsid would approve your trade.”

Troy’s bald brow ridges furrowed with displeasure. Merritt didn’t know whether or not his guess was correct, but the logic was sound enough that Troy couldn’t readily refute it.

Merritt gave Troy a subtle smile. “I accept that you didn’t intentionally contribute to my promotion. You’re right; that was Mercury’s doing. As for the West’s recent invasion of the North, we both know that it was retaliation for the aid we gave you in your attack at the West’s Montclare border. We paid a steep price on your sphere’s behalf. I’m sure you recognize that.”

A momentary scowl flickered on Troy’s face. He seemed to understand that the leverage he’d thought he had over Merritt was

slipping through his fingers. In an attempt to recover, he gave a casual laugh and said, “Yeah. But your sphere’s still standing, isn’t it?”

“Of course,” Merritt replied. “We made sure of it. But there were losses.”

Clearly trying to reset the tone of the conversation, Troy said, “It’s too bad that trade fell through, though. You’d be happier in the East Sphere military.”

Merritt tilted his head, skeptical. “Why would you say that? I’ve just been promoted to general.”

“General in the North is nothing compared to even a mid grade officer in the East. You know that. And besides, you don’t strike me as the type who’d be happy sitting in an office with a bunch of charts and maps and stats. You’d want to be on the ground, fighting. In the East, everyone in the military fights. Even me. Not every battle. Not the ones where my eyes are needed up high. But I still get my hands dirty. Those days are over for you.”

Merritt shrugged. “You’re right; I do like being on the ground. But don’t be concerned for my happiness. All I require is the opportunity to serve my King.”

Troy laughed again, shaking his head. “You’re something else.” He reached out, giving Merritt’s shoulder an invasively affectionate squeeze, which was followed by a camera flash and the snap of a shutter somewhere behind Merritt’s head.

Belmont swept in as if summoned by the flash of the camera, wrapping one long arm around Troy’s shoulders and the other around Merritt’s. “You two sure are looking cozy. I hope I’m not interrupting anything especially steamy.”

“Get your arm off me or you’re gonna lose it,” Troy snapped.

Belmont’s expression didn’t shift, but he backed off as requested. “I hope you’re enjoying all the free drinks,” he said, a bit of a bite in his tone. “I had Yackley special order the Hegewisch and the Edgewater vodka. I figured I’d splurge,” he leaned in close to Troy and gave an infuriating smile, “since I know you guys can never afford this kind of quality in the East.”

“I get Hegewisch all the fucking time,” Troy barked. “I got my own Hegewisch *grapes*. You blue-ties got nothing, and your flavorless lab-grown imitation grapes suck.”

“Baby, you only *wish* you could suck my grapes.”

Merritt took an awkward sip of his Calm in wine.

Clearly uninterested in continuing that line of conversation, Troy shook his head. Gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb, he said, “Hey, your buddy Mannheim over there tells me he’s your director of technology now. How did you get Mercury to sign off on that? Wasn’t Mannheim the poor fucker overseeing the Intelligence Department when this one—” he grabbed Merritt’s shoulder again, “—hacked the database? I thought his chances at ever being promoted were shot.”

With a faux casual shrug, Belmont said, “You’d be surprised how easy it is to elevate someone when you’ve got a video of their boss getting spanked.”

Troy shook his head again. “Why did I even ask?”

“Belmont!” Pratt called from somewhere behind them. “Come take a hit off this pipe. It’s got that pineapple base that you like.”

Belmont looked reluctant to leave the conversation, but apparently Pratt’s offer was too tempting to refuse. “I’ll be back,” he said before heading across the room.

After Belmont was out of earshot, Troy looked around the room, gesturing toward the other guests. “Seriously—what’s the deal with this party? You hack the Intelligence Department, and Belmont invites ten guys from the Intelligence Department. You tell me you want to dismantle the dog trade, and Belmont orders forty dogs. And then he invites all the colonels who were bypassed for your new job.” Troy laughed into his wine glass. “I take it Belmont still has it in for you.”

Merritt didn’t reply, but Troy’s blunt reminder set his blood boiling again in spite of the Calm. *Why* did Belmont still have it in for him? Hadn’t Merritt done enough by now?

He’d only been doing his duty when he’d protected Belmont during the West Sphere invasion. There was no debt owed to him, and he didn’t expect any reciprocation from Belmont. But when they’d sat

together in the aftermath, when Belmont had lowered his voice and spoken words he wouldn't have spoken to anyone else, Merritt had been sure something had changed. He'd felt a change, and he'd thought Belmont had too.

And now Belmont was acting like that moment had never happened. Merritt wanted to grab him and shake him and demand to know why.

Troy followed Merritt's gaze to Belmont. Leaning casually against the back of his barstool, he asked, "What did you do to get on his bad side?"

"About a hundred things and counting," Merritt replied, his voice surprisingly steady in contrast to the emotion he failed to wipe from his face.

"Heh." Troy took another sip of his drink. "Good luck with that. I bet he's gonna get even more aggressive now that you're reporting directly to Mercury."

"I don't report to Mercury."

"You don't?" Troy asked, although Merritt assumed that he knew exactly who Merritt's new boss was. After all, he was familiar with the North's military structure. He was probably still pushing the idea that Merritt would have been happier in the East, where—like every sphere except Merritt's—the general reported directly to their sphere leader.

"I report to Belmont," Merritt said evenly. "He has no reason to treat me as a threat."

Troy smirked. "Either way, the guy's gonna destroy you."

Merritt was surprised to feel a surge of indignation. "That's what you think? You believe he can destroy me, just like that?"

"If that's what he wants to do, yeah."

Merritt rose from his seat, setting his glass down on the table. "Then you don't respect me as much as you say you do."

Merritt only caught a split-second glimpse of Troy's curious gaze as he turned his back on him. He wouldn't sit fuming by himself any longer. He would get an explanation from Belmont.

Belmont sat on a low sofa beside Pratt and Evans, overselling his faked geniality as he laughed at a joke from Evans and took a hit off the glass pipe in Pratt's hand. Pratt leaned in close to Belmont, his dress-pant-clad thigh brushing Belmont's as he whispered something in Belmont's ear. Belmont cackled and gave Pratt a playful shove, and Merritt's aggravation spiked.

Their conversation turned to immediate, uncomfortable silence the moment Merritt stepped into the vicinity. Merritt gave Pratt and Evans a restrained, respectful nod before turning to Belmont. "Belmont, can I have a word in private?"

Pratt and Evans glanced at each other with raised eyebrows, as if Merritt's request had been unforgivably uncouth. Belmont leaned back, as cocky as ever. "Why the serious face? Work doesn't start till nine tomorrow. Come and sit down." He gestured toward the pipe in Pratt's hand. "Have you ever tried angel's jizz?"

Merritt nearly recoiled before realizing that was the name of the chemical concoction in Pratt's pipe.

"You know why they call it that, right?" Belmont asked. "It's because of the pineapple. You smoke it before someone goes down on you, and it makes your cum taste—"

"*Can I have a word in private?*" Merritt repeated, his voice strained.

As if it were a major inconvenience, Belmont sighed as he rose to his feet. Pratt looked thoroughly annoyed that Belmont had chosen to entertain Merritt's request. He slumped back in his seat, a pout on his sultry lips, looking every bit like the moody fashion model he was rumored to have been before landing a job at headquarters.

Belmont followed Merritt to the opposite end of the room, accompanied by the continued flash of the photographer's camera. Merritt stopped at a corner occupied only by a few straggling dogs and turned to face Belmont.

"All right," Belmont said, still overly casual. "You wanted to talk?"

Merritt stepped in close, meeting Belmont's eyes. He stared intensely, searching for that same glimmer he'd seen in them after the West Sphere invasion.

He couldn't find it. He stared deeper, harder, until his chest started to ache. Belmont's casual façade slipped just enough to show a hint of discomfort at Merritt's fervency.

His voice hard, Merritt whispered, "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" Belmont asked flippantly. "You got promoted, so I threw you a party."

Merritt gestured toward the room behind him. "Is this how it's going to be, then? We haven't even worked one day together, and you're already trying to cut me down?"

"Hey, why are you making a big deal out of this?" Belmont asked. "You've never been hazed by your coworkers before? This is your initiation."

"I have a duty to my sphere, and I don't treat it like a game. I'm asking you to be upfront with me. You were able to do that once before."

Belmont's irreverent façade remained, but his gaze turned cold within his smiling face. "You obviously haven't had enough to drink tonight. Have another drink. Smoke something. Sniff something. Suck something. Just enjoy your party."

There was no point; Belmont wasn't going to budge.

Merritt clenched his fists. He wouldn't accept it. He couldn't accept it. He'd caught a glimpse of Belmont's respect—of his humanity—and he refused to believe that it was now gone.

You can't make me go back to the way things were before.

The shrill clink of silverware against crystal pierced his ears. It began in the vicinity of Pratt and Evans and then spread across the room, accompanied by calls of, "Speech! Speech!"

Dread filled the pit of Merritt's stomach. He expected Belmont to nudge him toward the clearing at the front of the room, but Belmont stepped forward first. "All right, all right," he called, suddenly acting

more intoxicated than Merritt knew he was. “I know you all want to hear from our man of the hour, but first I’d like to say a few words.” He set a hand on Merritt’s arm. “Merritt, come over here. Join me.”

Merritt had no choice but to follow him despite the dueling anger and dread in his chest.

Belmont cleared his throat in a loud, exaggerated manner. “General Merritt has only been an officer in the North Sphere military for a year. Has it even been a year? I guess not, but he’s certainly made his mark already. Every success he’s had in the military, no matter how petty or insignificant, has gained the attention of our King. Maybe it’s his combat skills, or maybe it’s his hacking expertise. Raise your hand,” he gestured pointedly toward the gathering of former intelligence officers across the room, “if you remember the time Merritt publicly shamed the entire Intelligence Department for a minuscule bug in their code and then accepted a promotion while the people he humiliated got fired. That took a good set of balls, am I right?”

Merritt could feel the weight of the former Intelligence Department members’ eyes on him, but he refused to cower. He was too angry to feel any guilt over what he’d done a year and a half ago.

“But hacking expertise alone won’t get you promoted to general. No, sir, Merritt isn’t your stereotypical nerdy programmer. He knows the importance of networking. While his comrades in the military trained, he was rubbing elbows with the elite. Going to elite parties, sitting in on board meetings. He’s even been invited inside Mercury’s suite. Alone.”

Merritt heard a murmur from the nearby table of captains and colonels.

“Now, I’ve asked around, and there’s fierce debate over what we all consider Merritt’s greatest strength. What do you think it was that got Merritt to his current position? Was it his bravery? Clap if you agree.”

No one clapped.

“Was it his hacking expertise?”

No response.

“Was it his lack of gag reflex?”

Laughter echoed across the room, slowly building before breaking into scattered claps. Merritt clenched his teeth.

Belmont squeezed Merritt’s shoulder and gave him a shake. “Oh, don’t be so serious. I’m just having a little fun with you.” Back to the audience, he continued, “Now, I know what you all are thinking, especially those of you in the military.” He glanced at Troy then back at the blue-tie soldiers across the room. “You watched Mercury take a kid who’s only been an officer for ten months and put him in the *highest position in the North Sphere military*—passing over colonels who’ve been in service for decades—and expecting people twenty and thirty years his senior to follow his command without any resistance.

“You might look at Mercury’s belief that a kid with ten months of experience can do the job just as well as someone with twenty years of experience, and you might assume that Mercury doesn’t respect his military. But you’d be wrong. Mercury *loves* his military.”

Across the room, Pratt and Evans exchanged knowing smirks.

“You see, Merritt is just that good. Merritt isn’t only smart—he’s a genius. A prodigy. And Mercury knows that a kid like Merritt, with ten months of experience, would *never* make a silly mistake on the job. Mercury knows that Merritt would *never* be overwhelmed by the jump from captain to general.” Belmont gave the gathering of captains and colonels a discreet wink. “And we all know that Merritt’s junior officers, who used to be his senior officers, would *never* disrespect him, or—god forbid—disobey his command.

“Now, I have the ability as Mercury’s right hand to override Merritt’s decisions if I so choose. But I won’t do that. With everyone here as witnesses, I give you my word that I will support Merritt’s command of the military, and I will not override him. And I hope our two military advisors feel the same. Mercury has chosen Merritt out of respect, and I’ll honor Mercury’s judgment. I have *absolute faith* that Merritt can make sound decisions on behalf of our entire military—based only on ten months as an officer. And thus it is my duty to allow him to rise—or fall—all on his own.” Belmont looked to Pratt and Evans. “Agreed?”

Pratt and Evans raised their glasses. “Agreed.”

Raising his own glass, Belmont said, “It will be a pleasure to watch him lead the way.”

The rest of the party guests raised their glasses, the gesture anything but supportive.

Belmont finally withdrew his arm from around Merritt’s shoulders. “Now,” he continued, “I’d like to give our new general a chance to address the crowd.”

“Yeah, I have a question,” Colonel Harding called from across the room before Merritt could speak.

Merritt swallowed. “All right, Harding. Go ahead.”

“I want to know, Merritt, what’s the first decision you’re going to make as general? And how are you even going to make any decisions when you’ve only ever known how to follow orders?”

Merritt’s grip on his poker face had never been stronger. “Well, Harding, you ask an interesting question. And I—”

“Wait, wait,” Belmont said. “Merritt, are you really going to ignore the way Harding just addressed you by name instead of title?”

Merritt narrowed his eyes at Belmont in challenge. “Harding broke no rules. Junior officers have to address their superiors by title, but civilians have no such obligation.”

A flicker of recognition crossed Belmont’s eyes, but before he could respond, Merritt turned to address the crowd. “It’s my honor to be surrounded tonight by people whose lives I’ve apparently touched so profoundly. Your presence here means the world to me. Belmont has made my job that much easier by gathering this particular crowd here today. Thank you, Belmont, for making this moment possible.”

He scanned the area, noting all the military officers in attendance before returning to Harding. “Harding, you asked me what my first decision would be as general. My answer? Personnel overhaul. For the sake of our sphere’s security, it’s imperative that I have officers who will honor my command just as I have pledged to honor the command of our sphere leaders.” He raised his chin, casting his eyes across the

gathering of captains and colonels before him. “To all North Sphere officers currently in attendance, it has been a pleasure serving alongside you. You are all dismissed, effective immediately. I wish you great success and happiness in your new civilian lives.”

Stunned silence filled the room. Merritt felt Belmont go rigid at his side. At the bar, Troy met his gaze, giving him a subtle smile of approval.

“Unfortunately, I have an early morning tomorrow, so I’m going to have to cut this appearance short. But before I go, I’d like to thank my new commander, Belmont, for this thoughtfully prepared party.” He turned to Belmont. “I’m sure your guests enjoyed it exactly as much as I did.” With a final nod toward the crowd, Merritt turned and headed for the red-curtained exit.

No one followed him out of the VIP room and across the vast common room. He remained alone as he stepped out under the street lamps and headed down the sidewalk toward the guest parking lot.

He was half a block down the street when an expensive North Sphere motorcycle cut through the alley leading out of the elite parking garage, blocking his path. Belmont jumped off the bike and approached him with long, quick strides, only stopping after he was close enough for Merritt to feel his breath. “What the fuck did you just do in there?” he growled.

“My job,” Merritt replied, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

Belmont hovered too close, but Merritt didn’t cede an inch. “You can’t just fire twenty ranking officers all at once.”

“I’ve read the procedural handbook. I’m quite sure I can.”

“And how are you going to find anyone to replace them?”

“We have more than enough talented soldiers who are only held back by their lack of a bribe. Those slots will be easy to fill.”

“You have no idea what you’ve just done, Merritt. And once you find out...”

“I know what I’m doing,” Merritt said heatedly, leaning in close. “You’re my commander, and I will honor your authority. But I *will not*

let you sabotage me. Your goal was to withhold your support and just stand back and watch me fail?” He lowered his voice, his eyes locked relentlessly on Belmont’s. “You may know Mercury better than I do, but one thing I know is that he doubts you. He’s doubted you ever since I traced Higgins’s murder back to you. He doubts your account of the West Sphere invasion. If you fail to command me and our military collapses, do you think Mercury would absolve you of the blame?”

Belmont didn’t reply, but Merritt saw his jaw muscles tighten.

Merritt’s heart raced, his adrenaline spiking as he dove in for the kill. “I answer to you now. You may think that gives you power over me, but it’s the other way around. The success or failure of my decisions rests on your shoulders as my commanding officer. You’ll get credit for my successes. You’ll be blamed for my failures. And you’re already on your third strike with Mercury. *You can’t afford to let me fail.*”

A bold vein throbbed at the side of Belmont’s forehead as he stood staring with clenched teeth. He pressed his lips together, breathing hard through flared nostrils.

Merritt stood still and silent. He refused to release Belmont from his locked gaze.

At last, Belmont loosened his grip on Merritt, turning away and crossing his arms over his chest. He said nothing, but his muscles remained taut and tense.

Merritt continued holding tight to his poker face. Even with Belmont’s back turned, he wouldn’t let slip any evidence that he was more repulsed by his own words than by Belmont’s actions at the party. He’d just threatened his commander’s job. The words had needed to be said, but he hated himself for saying them.

He knew Mercury’s advisors. He knew the culture of the North Sphere elite. Had Belmont ever worked with someone who wasn’t trying to overtake him? Someone he didn’t feel the need to demean in order to secure his own position?

The silence grew too long to ignore, and Merritt’s fists finally began to soften. He took a slow step forward, wishing Belmont would turn around so he could see his face. Quietly, he said, “All I want is to

do my job. I'd never take anything away from you." He swallowed. "But there's nothing more I can do to prove it."

Belmont remained silent. The scant sliver Merritt could see of his face wasn't enough for him to read.

"I'd like to return to my quarters and prepare for Monday's meeting. Is there anything else you'll be needing tonight?"

"No," Belmont muttered, turning around at last. His face was neutral and guarded. "But we're going to have to talk about these vacancies first thing on Monday. Seven instead of ten. You really have no idea what you've just done."

"I'll come prepared. Anything else?"

"No. Nothing else. Just go."

"Thank you. I'll see you in the morning."

As Merritt turned to leave, Belmont called after him, "I was right about one thing, Merritt. You really do have a good set of balls."