

# DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 3

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Chapter 3

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## CHAPTER 3

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*Better not turn your back. I got a gun and I'm gonna watch you every day.*

“You do that, buddy,” Merritt muttered, scrolling through the notifications on his phone.

*I'll punch you in the mouth and pull out your spinal cord through your throat so everyone can see what a spineless traitor you are.*

“I... don't think it works that way?”

*You are cordially invited to a formal elite party hosted by King Damen Mercury.*

“I bet I also have a long lost relative who wants to share his million dollar inheritance with me.”

He almost deleted the message out of habit; only the appearance of an official-looking digital signature below the text made him pause. Having never received correspondence from North Sphere Headquarters before, Merritt wasn't sure he could discern its authenticity. It still seemed more likely that the invitation was a ploy to get him in private for a beating than an actual summons to an elite event.

Time to bring out the trusty old laptop. As his fellow soldiers undressed and readied themselves for bed, he sat cross-legged atop his mattress, typing a string of rapid commands on his keyboard.

His hacking led him to the email account of the North Sphere Headquarters event planner. Cautious about nosing around in business that didn't concern him, he confined his search to the party's guest list.

The message was authentic. The party was real, and he was invited.

Nearly six months had passed since his fated meeting with Mercury. Six months of keeping his head down, adapting to his new role as sergeant, and wondering if that chance encounter with his King had only been a dream. And now this.

He couldn't figure out what the party was for, but he wasn't sure it mattered. The people of the North were always looking for an excuse to party. With their sphere's expertise in recreational drug manufacturing, it was considered peculiar for citizens not to want to indulge. Work hard, play harder—at least that's what blue-ties said. Citizens from other spheres were more apt to say that their repressed lifestyles and professional expectations left them needing to blow off steam every chance they got.

Merritt had never heard of aces attending elite parties before—unless they were carrying trays and serving food and drinks to guests. He'd always assumed that no one lower than an eight or a nine would be at an elite party, and that most would be face cards.

Not only was Merritt invited, he got a plus one. There was no question—he'd take Torrence, his old friend from the Norwood Orphanage. Torrence, who lacked Merritt's physical prowess, had somehow managed to scrape together just enough of an inheritance to get out of compulsory military enlistment. Instead, he fumbled his way through the North's cheapest community college before being hired as a low-level office assistant. He spent his days serving coffee, cleaning toilets, and enduring a never-ending stream of verbal abuse from his elite boss.

Merritt always believed Torrence was born into the wrong sphere. He was a brilliant guitarist, and if he'd been born in the West, he would have been set for life with a career as a performer. Musicians were given no such respect in the North.

Despite Merritt's rigorous schedule, they still managed to keep in touch. Just a few months ago, they'd celebrated Merritt's twenty-first birthday together. Torrence was worse than Merritt at disguising his lower-class upbringing—in fact, he was militantly opposed to hiding it—but Merritt still knew of no one else he'd rather bring along to the party.

Mercury's event planner had booked the VIP section at Yackley's Booze and Drugs, a neutral territory bar under North Sphere ownership. Yackley's was a dive bar and a favorite watering hole for soldiers of all spheres. Even Kings and right hands frequented the main room on occasion. It was the underground, after all, and everyone appreciated a bit of lowbrow entertainment.

Having never been behind the red velvet curtains of the VIP room, Merritt found it hard to believe that the grungy bar he knew so well could also do justice to a formal elite party. It was a surreal thought: a bouncer ushering him, an ace, past the velvet curtains that were usually reserved for nines, tens, and face cards.

And yet three days after receiving the invitation, the implausible dream became a reality, and he found himself stepping across the threshold to a new world with his childhood friend at his side.

He smoothed out his blue tie and redid the buttons of his civilian suit jacket, hoping the secondhand garment wouldn't be an eyesore next to the elites in their thousand-dollar custom-tailored suits. The jacket was loose and long in the cuffs, but it dug into his armpits, stretching a bit too tight around his delts and traps. It clearly wasn't made for a soldier. At his side, Torrence also fidgeted with a secondhand suit, trying to pull the oversized garment tighter around his slim frame.

Behind Merritt was the humble world he knew—cheap beer, pool tables, fistfights, drunk people playing cards. Ahead of him was a room that appeared to spring forth from a fantasy. Everything on this side of the curtain was so...clean. Unlike the chipped old wood in the main room, the VIP bar had a brushed metal surface, its silver complementing a pebble-textured backsplash in pale blue and aqua. Cylindrical ceiling lights hung above the bar, illuminating rows of crystal barware and a display lined with the underground's finest spirits. The gleaming marble floor tiles shone so bright that Merritt could make out his own wide eyes in the reflection. Quickly, he fixed his poker face.

A woman sipping Potent in champagne gave him a sideways glance, her lip curling with distaste as she passed him. Moments later, he received the same reaction from a nearby man. Following their line

of sight, he realized they were eyeing his shoulder holsters. Everyone in the North carried at least one concealed weapon, but the visible pistols on either side—pistols he was required to carry—betrayed his status as a soldier.

Soldiers who scored high enough on their technical, mental, and obedience tests were never truly allowed to be off duty. Outside of training and battle, they were expected to use their expertise to protect the same elite citizens who saw their unconcealed weapons as proof of their inferiority.

How foolish had he been to assume an invitation to an elite party would be enough for any elite to deem him worthy of sharing their space? He might as well have shown up in uniform; it would have at least fit, and the other guests would have been no less condescending. Why even try to pretend he belonged here?

No, he couldn't dwell on that. He was at this party because Damen Mercury invited him. No disdainful glance from a stranger could change that.

Having Torrence at his side helped ease his nerves. At least one person in the room wasn't looking down on him. But, watching a few waiters as they carried trays of hors d'oeuvres, he couldn't help wondering if he'd have been better suited to working alongside them, serving the elites instead of trying to blend in with them.

A waiter approached with slim champagne flutes, each accompanied by a test tube filled with every variety of North Sphere chemical concoction imaginable. As he was about to offer a drink to Merritt, an elite cut in, diverting the waiter's attention and asking him to make a mix of Potent and Charisma in champagne. The waiter did as told, his expression blank even though Merritt knew it was considered rude to ask a waiter or bartender to mix two chemical drinks. Someone of Merritt's rank never could have gotten away with that request, at least not without a snide remark from whoever mixed the drink.

After two more elites cut in to get drinks, the waiter finally returned his attention to Merritt. Even he, surely an ace himself, gave Merritt a disapproving twitch of the nose upon examination of his

holsters. But he said nothing, offering Merritt and Torrence the same selection of drinks he'd offered everyone else.

Focus was Merritt's drink of choice, but outside of the VIP room, the aqua-colored infusion was usually emptied from the test tube into a nonalcoholic mixer, cheap beer, or cheap white wine. He requested a glass of Focus in champagne from the waiter and gave it a taste. It was amazingly refreshing. Low-grade Focus usually had an odd, disjointed flavor of berries, nuts, and ginseng. But when this high-grade mixture melded with expensive champagne, the flavors came together perfectly.

Torrence accepted a glass of Charisma in tonic, its vibrant purple reflecting off the sides of his pale fingers. Merritt watched him take his first sip and then stare down at his glass in awe. "This is unreal," he muttered. "Shit, you know I'm never gonna be able to afford another glass of Charisma like this one again, but now that I've tasted it, I don't ever want to go back to that low-grade supermarket crap."

"Maybe you won't have to go back," Merritt said with a charming smile. "You never know who you might connect with here. Maybe some elite will recognize your talent and save you from your horrible job and your horrible boss and give you a recording contract or something."

"That would never happen," Torrence said.

"You don't know that. Things can get better! I just want things to be better for you." He held up his glass. "Come on, let's make a toast. To new doors opening." Torrence rolled his eyes, but Merritt nudged their glasses together, offering his friend a fond grin. "Come on. Clink?"

With a humoring smile, Torrence clinked his glass against Merritt's, and they each took a sip.

After silently contemplating his drink for a moment, Torrence made a second attempt at offering Merritt a smile. For the first time that evening, it looked genuine.

Merritt pointed to a woman across the room; she sipped from a wineglass while flaring her nostrils at a man whom she appeared to wish would leave her alone. "She looks miserable. Maybe I'll talk to that guy so she has a chance to get away."

“Why would you do that?” Torrence asked.

“I don’t know. I feel like I should try to talk to *someone*.” He gestured toward the man. “If I try to talk to him, will you stand next to me and pretend to think I sound smart?”

Torrence snorted before recognizing that Merritt was serious. “Fine, in a minute. I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, I’ll wait.”

Merritt waited ten minutes. Torrence’s nervous bladder always seemed to act up when he thought Merritt was going to say something embarrassing. By the time he emerged from the restroom, the talkative man had left his unwilling companion to get a drink refill.

At the center of the room were low, slick lounge chairs that looked too expensive to sit on, even though several drugged-up elites were already draped across them. The chairs circled a central freestanding fireplace, cast in flickering orange light and blue shadow.

“Hey,” Merritt said to Torrence. He pointed to a man slouched in one of the lounge chairs. “I’m going to ask that guy where he got his suit.”

“I have to go to the bathroom again.”

After another ten minutes of standing awkward and alone, Merritt idly wandered across the room toward a row of ceiling-high windows overlooking the North Sphere’s business district. Stepping closer, he spotted an open door leading out to a balcony. He headed outside, leaning against the railing and gazing out at the nearby streets and buildings.

The North-Neutral border and neighboring North Sphere business district were at one of the highest points of altitude in the inhabited Chicago Underground. Merritt observed the stalactites on the very ceiling of the underground itself, wondering at the fact that an entire world existed just a few meters above. Having seen photos of the surface, he knew that the architecture of the underground bore the style of some of Chicago’s oldest structures, but his favorite part of underground architecture was the way buildings and cliffs merged, overlapping and inseparable. Gothic windows and suspension bridges



emerged from rocky walls. Courtyards framed unruly stalagmites, even attempting to tame them with string lights and decorative carvings. From this high up, Merritt could see the massive lighting structures on the ceiling that cast simulated sunlight, moonlight, and starlight across the grounds below.

“Focus in champagne,” a woman said. “Not a drink I see very many people ordering at parties.”

Merritt looked up. Beside him stood a bespectacled woman in her waning twenties, her auburn hair pulled back in an elegant twist. Complementing her blue tie was a white pantsuit that, while well matched with its wearer, felt more clinical than festive. Just like Merritt, she leaned forward with her forearms propped against the balcony railing, her familiar beaky nose in profile.

She turned her head, and her welcoming smile disarmed him. Before he could think to be embarrassed about his drink choice, he was already in the midst of a candid reply. “It’s my first time at an elite North Sphere party. I’m hoping that, since Focus breaks down alcohol before it’s digested, it’ll help prevent me from getting drunk and putting my foot in my mouth.”

“Most people erroneously believe that Focus overpowers alcohol rather than breaking it down. Sounds like you know your chemistry.” The woman narrowed her eyes. “You look familiar. Were you at the College of Science and Medicine last year?”

“I took a few classes,” Merritt said.

“I recognize you from one of my guest lectures. I spoke with a few students after the lecture to review their latest projects. If I recall, you were using Focus as a starting point to synthesize a drug that nullifies the effects of alcohol.”

Merritt blushed. “I’m surprised you remember me.”

“How could I forget? That drug was groundbreaking.” She took a sip of her drink, Spark in vodka. “I remember telling you that you should look into selling the formula. Did you ever do that?”

“I kind of decided to keep it to myself. You never know when a drug like that could come in handy.”

The woman laughed. “You have a point. Sometimes the choice between money and safety is a hard one.” She held out her hand. “I’m Archer.”

“Oh, I know,” Merritt said, shaking her hand. “I remembered from the college course. You were my favorite lecturer, so I looked up your bio because I wanted to follow your work. I read that you graduated at the top of your class. And that you’re the youngest person to ever head up the North Sphere’s Department of Surgery.”

“You know a lot about me,” Archer said behind a generically pleasant poker face. “I’m flattered by your interest in my work. Thank you....” She stalled and tilted her head as if prompting him to supply his name.

“Merritt.”

“Merritt.” She squinted at him. “You’re the one who hacked the Intelligence Database for his college thesis a few months ago.”

Merritt couldn’t read past the squint. Had she suddenly gone from congenial to cold? “Uh, yeah. That was me too.”

Archer leaned in, lowering her voice confidentially. “I have to tell you, I got the biggest kick out of that story. Mannheim—that guy in the corner with the Potent in tequila—is head of the Intelligence Department. And all I’ll say is he needed a little bit of humbling.”

“I didn’t intend to humble anyone. It was just a school project.”

“Intentions rarely matter in the underground,” she said pointedly. “But regardless, it appears you’ve excelled in both technology and pharmaceutical science. What are your plans after graduation?”

“Actually....” Merritt scratched the back of his neck uneasily. In the dim mood lighting, Archer must not have spotted the pistols obscured by shadow under his arms. He didn’t want Archer to look down on him, but he couldn’t lie. “I graduated from the Military Academy a few months ago. And I’ve been serving for five years. I’m a Chem Ops sergeant now.”

“Oh.” Archer looked surprised, but not judgmental. “How did you end up going into the military when you were studying chemistry?”

Merritt felt his body go hot under his shirt. As much as he wished to avoid the subject, he'd seen the news articles written about him online, along with their accompanying comment sections. If Archer didn't find out the truth from him, she'd likely hear an even less flattering version from a fellow elite. Or perhaps she'd already found out from the news and was testing to see if he'd be honest with her. "I wasn't technically a student at the College of Science and Medicine. Or the School of Technology. I couldn't get comprehensive academic courses at the Military Academy, so I snuck out and, uh, pretended to be a student at other schools sometimes."

Archer raised her eyebrows. "Those are the most selective schools in the underground. If you were able to pull off your ruse without getting caught, then in my opinion, you earned your seat. I just hope you're as good a fighter as you are a scholar. I don't want you winding up on my operating table."

"It's not in my immediate plans," Merritt said with a smile.

Archer returned his smile. "But I'd be happy to see you anywhere else."

It was unusual, if not unheard of, for an elite to be this friendly to someone like him. But he didn't want to question Archer's intentions, even if only for the selfish sake of feeling accepted at an elite party for five minutes. "I'd be happy to see you too."

"I find prodigies like you to be incredibly exciting. You're the future of this sphere. And you're in Chem Ops, so you must really know your poisons." Her smile grew warmer. "I have an office at the military hospital. I'd love to talk poisons with you over lunch sometime." She rolled her eyes, silently acknowledging the longstanding North Sphere tradition of dispatching one's enemies with a poisoned meal. "You know what I mean."

Merritt laughed. "I'll gladly accept your offer, but I might keep one hand over my drink."

Archer's tipsy laugh was interrupted when a towering man in a stiff ivy cap and rectangular glasses leaned in between them, placing his hand on the balcony railing and effectively blocking their view of

each other. Facing Archer, he said, “Roscoe wants a word with you. Something about a grant.”

“Oh.” Archer stood up abruptly. Leaning around the tall man, she handed Merritt a business card. “It was very nice meeting you. If I don’t see you again tonight, you can reach me at that number. There’s a great sushi place by the hospital if you want to do lunch next week.”

“Sounds great. I’ll give you a call.”

As soon as Archer stepped away, the tall man slid into a lounge chair a couple feet behind Merritt. Merritt’s heart thumped the moment he saw the man’s face, and he couldn’t tell if his sudden adrenaline rush had more to do with anxiety or excitement. Belmont’s face had been plastered all over the news feeds for at least the past few years, and only a blue-tie who lived under a rock would fail to recognize him. If ever there was a man who knew how to incite drama or attract a camera, it was this one.

The fresh face, rosy cheeks, and sophisticated glasses were incongruous with the outrageous headlines that always accompanied his photo. Another day, another scandal with Belmont the Gossip Queen at its center. Belmont even loved the derisive nickname the tabloids had given him, saying that no one would so adamantly call him “queen” if they didn’t think he’d one day be Mercury’s right hand—the queen card in the underground’s deck.

Merritt was startled by his height. Nowhere did the papers mention that the bespectacled drama addict was nearly six and a half feet tall. Nor did they mention his broad shoulders and streamlined but solid build. His face had a clean-cut elite schoolboy vibe to it, looking like he could have been fresh out of college despite being twenty-seven according to the news articles.

He lifted a glass pipe, holding it in place between his lips. With a flick of his hand, he uncapped his lighter and sparked a flame, waving it back and forth under the pipe’s receptacle to heat the North Sphere drug within. Dancing firelight cast a glossy sheen on his smirking mouth.

He had a pair of lips that begged to be punched. Or kissed. Merritt couldn’t tell which, and it unnerved him.

Belmont took a drag from his pipe, blew the smoke far enough to reach Merritt's face, and leaned back in his seat. "Archer's a nice woman, but she's also highly intelligent. She'd never go for a soldier. Even if it looked like she was flirting with you, I guarantee you she was just being polite."

It hadn't occurred to Merritt that Archer would have been flirting with him in the first place. That comment alone seemed strange enough, but Belmont's condescending tone only put Merritt more on edge. Hiding his concern, he said, "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your insight."

"It's Belmont, not 'sir.' My name means a hell of a lot more down here than a generic title."

He'd said it casually—eyes closed and brows raised as he took a drag from his pipe—but Merritt suspected he felt more strongly about it than his attitude implied. And his words rang true; Merritt knew the power of his name.

Belmont was made for the underground. The gossip, the backstabbing, the half-truths, buried evidence, and strategically revealed scandals—this was his repertoire. To his enemies, he was a symbol of the worst side of the underground North. To his elite allies, he was a symbol of everything they aspired to get away with.

Merritt had taken too long to examine him; Belmont's gaze caught his and held it like a fist at his shirt collar. He couldn't will himself to break eye contact. It was Belmont whose gaze finally shifted, sliding down Merritt's body and then back up to his eyes. Merritt wondered what he was looking for. He assumed Belmont would make the same note everyone else had about his shoulder holsters, but the path of his eyes didn't linger on the guns.

"On second thought, I'm guessing you're glad to hear Archer wasn't flirting with you." He took another drag and leaned forward, his eyes locking on Merritt's again. Lowering his voice to almost a purr, he said, "Can't say I blame you. I'd feel the same. I'm the exact opposite of Mercury's other advisors. I love women in the boardroom, but keep 'em out of my bedroom, you know?" He gave Merritt a confidential wink.

“I live in the barracks,” Merritt said. “It’s coed.”

“That’s *fascinating*,” Belmont’s snark was thicker than the smoke wafting from his pipe.

“I just meant that you can get used to sharing a bedroom with women. It’s not so different.”

Belmont stared incredulously at Merritt for a good ten seconds before turning away. “Wow.”

Silence resumed. Apparently, Merritt’s response hadn’t been enough to hold Belmont’s interest, and Merritt had no idea what he was looking for in the first place. Belmont shifted his attention back to his pipe, heating the drug with his lighter again. Assuming their interaction had ended, Merritt turned back to the cityscape, only to feel Belmont’s gaze on him again, unwavering, from behind.

He took a glance over his shoulder, but Belmont’s attention was on his pipe. Merritt’s eyes passed over a few other lounging elites at the opposite end of the balcony—all blissfully self-absorbed—before inevitably returning to the cityscape.

A motorcycle drag race had broken out on one of the side streets just outside the North’s business district, and the aerial view of it was captivating. Merritt leaned further over the railing, hoping to discern a make or model even though he knew he was too far away.

“I know who you are,” Belmont said after nearly two minutes of silence. “You’re the hacker.”

It pained Merritt to divert his focus from the race, but he knew it wasn’t polite to have his back to an elite who was speaking to him. And if Belmont wanted to talk about the hacking incident of all things, Merritt couldn’t afford to be distracted. He turned to face Belmont.

“I know that North Sphere soldiers get more training in computers and technology than soldiers in other spheres, but I find it hard to believe a soldier would have the mental ability to hack a database built by elite blue-ties. Someone must have helped you. Right?”

Merritt almost flinched; the unexpected insult hit him like spit in the eye. “No, no one helped me.”

“Still getting death threats?”

Yes, he was still getting death threats, but there was something startling about the fact that his personal affairs had caught Belmont’s interest. Surely, he wasn’t *that* important?

“I doubt the Intelligence Department will ever forgive you for what you did. Or the rest of the government, for that matter. But if you can name names—share the blame, if you will—then maybe some of the people harassing you will move onto a fresher target.”

Merritt got the strange sense that Belmont wasn’t looking to share the blame; he was trying to get Merritt to admit he lacked the skills to hack the Intelligence Database on his own. But Merritt wasn’t about to lie. He remembered those glimpses of light he saw in Mercury’s eyes during his interrogation. Mercury had been impressed with his skills, and Merritt wouldn’t let go of that. “Unfortunately, there’s no one else to blame. I worked independently.”

Belmont released a heavy, smoky sigh that smelled vaguely of pineapple. “Okay, so you’re smart. But there must be a reason you joined the military instead of aiming a little higher.”

Another needle prick to his skin. Belmont’s backhanded compliments were deliberate. “It’s an honor to protect my sphere.”

“Such a good, patriotic little soldier,” Belmont said, hovering at the edge of sarcasm. Another glance up and down. “I suppose you do look like you take your job seriously. With a body like that, you must do a lot of training.”

“I do.”

“Well, if you ever need someone to rub down those sore muscles....”

“We have physical therapists at headquarters,” Merritt replied politely.

Belmont rolled his eyes. It was a subtle movement that Merritt almost missed. He played Belmont’s comment back in his head, along with his answer. Was Belmont hitting on him? And frustrated that Merritt wasn’t picking up on his signals? Merritt usually had a knack

for reading other people, but Torrence had always told him he had a gaping blind spot when it came to attraction.

“All that military training is paying off,” Torrence had told him once after a long night of clubbing. “Look how nimble you are, dodging signals left and right.”

Torrence had a point. For all of Merritt’s uncanny ability to read the intentions of his enemies, he’d missed many an opportunity with attractive men. But he simply didn’t ever expect to be hit on, and definitely not by a face card. When so many people looked at him with disdain, it was hard to believe a look could ever mean anything else.

And Belmont’s glance was especially deceptive. He’d started their conversation with a veiled insult and then shifted to a pick-up line. Merritt didn’t trust him.

Belmont removed his glasses. He pulled an expensive handkerchief, monogrammed with the letters G.B., out of his breast pocket and wiped his lenses. After he finished, he glanced at Merritt’s nearly empty champagne flute. “Let me get you a refill. What are you drinking?”

Merritt held up his hand. “Oh, that’s all right. I’m done for the night.”

Belmont rolled his eyes again. “Just trying to do something nice for you, honey.”

Oops. Clearly, Merritt had flubbed that exchange. He knew it was poor etiquette to decline an offer from an elite, but he was unpracticed. Among his circle of struggling friends, declining a drink would have been the most polite response, saving his companion the expense.

“Whoa, wait. Really. What *are* you drinking?” Belmont pointed at his cup like it was a nudist wandering the streets at noon.

“Uh....”

Belmont broke into a laugh that was hearty but also sharp-edged. “*No shit*, Focus at a party? I didn’t even know Mercury *served* Focus at his parties.” He snorted and slapped his knee. “What did you think we’d be doing at this party? Grading each other’s term papers?”



Belmont's laughter seemed far more raucous than the situation warranted. Merritt started to wonder what he was smoking.

At last, his laughter died down. "Focus at a party," he said, shaking his head. "That's actually kind of cute."

Merritt had no idea how to respond. He scanned the crowd behind Belmont, hoping to find hints in their facial expressions, but none of them appeared to be listening in.

"I hear you were promoted to sergeant," Belmont said, catching his attention again.

"Yes. Six months ago."

"If you want to keep climbing up the ranks, you're going to need to get better at schmoozing with the elite."

"I'm not trying to climb anywhere. Wherever my boss wants to put me, wherever the King wants to put me, I'll give them my best. It doesn't matter to me whether it's private or general."

Belmont gaped at him, and Merritt wondered if he'd said something inconceivably stupid. He knew that look. Torrence and Pierce had given him that look a thousand times.

Belmont abruptly excused himself, hurrying back indoors. He looked to be on a path toward a corner booth at the far end of the room. Merritt's gaze caught on his long legs as he stalked across the clearing; he had surprising grace, like an actor who knew every inch of the stage he walked. Even when he unexpectedly stalled to talk to an attractive brown-haired waiter, the move appeared choreographed.

From where Merritt sat, it looked like Belmont was flirting, and the waiter was playing back, leaning in coyly and batting his eyelashes. Was that the reaction Belmont had expected out of Merritt?

He puzzled over their last exchange. Why had Belmont automatically assumed he wanted to climb quickly up the ranks? Titles and status had never mattered to him, and he didn't see why having the wrong title should get in the way of him doing good work for his sphere. Being recognized for his good work would just be icing on the cake.

Still, Belmont had a point. Whether or not his intention was to rise up the ranks, he *did* need to learn how to talk to the elite.

Archer had been easy enough to talk to, but she seemed to be a little more down to earth than most of the other people at this party. He scanned the area, trying to spot the familiar faces he'd memorized from his card deck or seen in the news. For a fleeting moment, he spotted Higgins, Mercury's second in command. His thin gray hair was slicked across his conspicuous bald spot, and he chewed pensively on the stem of what appeared to be bifocals. At sixty, he was much older than most government officials. In the underground, powerful people seemed to hit their peak in their thirties, and if they played their cards right, they could extend their power into their mid-forties. But rarely did they last much longer without dropping in rank. If Higgins could do it, maybe Mercury could do it too. He was forty years old, still going strong as King, and Merritt hoped to be able to serve him for a few more decades.

Heading back inside, he scanned the room for Torrence. Nervous bladder or not, the guy had been gone for a pretty long time. Merritt finally spotted him wistfully watching the hired West Sphere musicians who provided the night's soundtrack, his back against the wall farthest from the band. Merritt approached him, leaned against the wall next to him, and said softly, "None of them are anywhere near as good as you, are they?"

"They're not even as good as you," Torrence said.

"They're definitely better than me. I know all of two chords. But thank you."

He couldn't help feeling guilty, watching Torrence watch the band. Torrence had wanted so badly for Merritt to be his fellow rebel blue-tie musician, but Merritt could master neither the technique nor the attitude. He'd learned to carry a tune in his childhood, but he was barely a dabbler. Next to Torrence's rawness, visceral emotion, and spontaneous creativity, his melodies sounded robotic at best. He knew he was holding Torrence back, but losing Merritt as a band mate in his teens seemed to kill Torrence's drive to pursue a performing career altogether. Nothing hurt Merritt more than witnessing the disappointment he'd caused his friend.

“Talk to anyone interesting out there?” Torrence asked, gesturing toward the balcony.

“Yeah, I met Archer.”

“Who’s that?”

“Archer North.”

“This is a blue-tie party; who here isn’t a North? I still don’t know who that is.”

“You don’t know Archer? She’s amazing. She’s the head of the Department of Surgery. She guest-lectured at the College of Science and Medicine while I was sitting in on classes. She’s a genius, and she’s friendly too.”

“You sound as excited about her as you did after meeting Mercury, and I’ve never even heard of her.”

“That’s one of the most impressive things about her. How many elites at her level have you never heard of? She’s as good at keeping out of the news as Belmont is at getting into it. I talked to him too, by the way.”

Torrence’s eyes widened. “Belmont, Mercury’s top advisor? The Gossip Queen?”

Merritt nodded. “He didn’t seem to like me much.” He faltered. “Well, I mean he didn’t seem to like my personality.”

“As opposed to...?”

“He gave me a weird compliment on my body. I don’t know.” When Torrence waited for him to elaborate, he said, “Remember that guy at the club a few weeks ago who you swore was hitting on me while I was trying to read an article about fish populations on my phone? He was looking at me the same way Belmont looked at me.”

“Belmont was hitting on you, and you actually noticed?”

“It was weird. He made some sort of offer to give me a massage.”

Torrence laughed. “Yeah. If *that* guy offered to give you a massage, I think it’s safe to say he was hitting on you.”

Merritt frowned. He'd been trying his best not to let the conversation bother him, but it did, and now he understood why. If Belmont had been hitting on him, that put his comments about schmoozing in an entirely different light. When Belmont had told him that he had to get better at schmoozing, was he implying that, in order for Merritt to rise up the ranks, he had to be more receptive of Belmont's advances? Merritt couldn't do it. Nice lips or not, Belmont was too dangerous to allow any closer.

But what would happen if Belmont continued to push and Merritt continued to keep his distance? Belmont was Mercury's top advisor, and Merritt believed he was likely to replace Higgins as second in command one day. Merritt didn't want to be on the bad side of the man closest to Mercury. Regardless of whether promotions were at stake, it pained him to think of Belmont chipping away at Mercury's approval of him.

"I don't know," Merritt said. "I could have been wrong. It was hard to tell whether he was hitting on me or whether he hated me."

"Maybe it's both," Torrence said.

"You guys talking about Belmont?"

Merritt jumped at the sudden presence over his shoulder. Standing barely half a foot behind him was a young waiter carrying a tray of champagne flutes. "If you thought he was hitting on you, he was hitting on you. Trust me. That's the way he does it. He butters you up with sweet talk and then knocks you down with a backhanded compliment."

Torrence leaned in, lowering his voice confidentially. "You speaking from personal experience?"

"No, I'm not cute enough for him to give me the time of day. But I've seen him hit on at least half of my coworkers. He likes going after aces and twos because he can do whatever he wants and they'll just be flattered that a jack is giving them attention. When he goes after people of his own rank, it's usually to get something out of 'em. You know. Politics." The waiter glanced around the room, as if to make sure Belmont wasn't eavesdropping on their conversation. Then he turned back to Merritt. "He's always bragging about being the master of the

‘three B’s.’ Bribe, bed, and blackmail. But I like to say there’s four B’s, because you can’t forget how he always backstabs ‘em in the end.”

Merritt had read about the “three B’s” in news interviews with Belmont, but he’d never before heard that Belmont liked to go after aces and twos. It made sense. “You seem to know a lot about him.”

With a shrug, the waiter said, “I know the same things everyone else knows. Everyone gossips about Belmont, and Belmont gossips about everyone. I’d be surprised if I could tell you anything about him that you didn’t already know.” The waiter thought for a moment. “You know he’s the Underground Card Game champion, right?”

Merritt nodded. “Yeah, but I thought that was because he cheated.”

“‘Cheated’ is a strong word. He plays dirty, yeah. He makes false challenges and lies his ass off. But that’s not technically against the rules.”

“You really believe he’s *never* cheated?” Torrence asked. “The real question is how he always gets away with it.”

“You’d be surprised what you can get away with when you’re high ranking and good in the sack,” the waiter said. “That’s the rumor about him, anyway. And they say his dick is huge. Like, massive.”

“Bet he started that rumor himself,” Torrence muttered.

“Maybe. But I’ve heard it from a few people. The busboys were all comparing notes one day.” He snickered at Merritt. “If you ever get up close to it, let me know if the rumors are true. I’m kinda curious.”

“Sorry,” Merritt said, “but I don’t see that happening.”

With a dismissive shrug, the waiter continued on his way. Merritt tried to put Belmont out of his mind as he looked around the room again. All night, he’d been hoping for a chance to speak with Mercury, to thank him again for the promotion and the party invitation, but he had yet to spot him. A few times, he thought he recognized the back of Mercury’s head, but he was too far away to know for sure.

Looking around one more time, he finally spotted Mercury, and his heart surged. The King sat in a corner booth on the other side of a

tinted water wall, his arm around the shoulders of an unfamiliar woman whom Merritt suspected was a high-ranking West Sphere dog even though she was fully dressed. Several other men—a few of them with their own West Sphere escorts—also sat at the table, and Merritt recognized a couple of them as part of Mercury’s board of advisors. He also spotted Belmont at the table; apparently, he’d just slipped in. Unlike the other men at the table with their purchased female escorts, Belmont had brought along his freshly snared waiter.

This was a gathering that was well out of Merritt’s league. He felt silly for assuming Mercury would have time to talk to a lowly military sergeant at a party like this.

He turned to Torrence. “You want to sit somewhere and watch the band?”

With a shrug, Torrence followed Merritt to a pair of adjacent lounge chairs. They were not as comfortable as they looked, and Merritt felt incapable of relaxing his posture while he wore his shoulder holsters.

At a quarter to midnight, the first guests began to trickle out of the bar on their way home. As soon as Merritt saw them head out, he turned to Torrence and said, “We’re done here, right? Let’s go.”

Torrence didn’t need any convincing. He pulled on his jacket and followed Merritt to the door.

They barely made it outside when Merritt felt the fluttering of feathers descending upon him. Wings battered his head, blowing his hair out of place, and a messenger pigeon landed on a nearby railing. Merritt had never received a message by pigeon before, and he had no idea how this one had even managed to find him. He knew the elite North and especially the South preferred pigeons for casual but confidential correspondence. In a world constantly threatened by hacking and security breaches, sometimes the adoption of archaic communication methods was the best defense.

Merritt unearthed a capsule from within the pigeon’s harness. He emptied the tiny typed scroll into his hand. “Sergeant Merritt North: The King wishes to speak with you tomorrow over coffee. Please be prepared to meet him at two p.m. at the following address.”

Merritt stared at the pigeon, as if it could offer further clarification. After he finally managed to collect himself, he glanced at Torrence, who looked equally stunned. Then he turned back to the pigeon. “Thank you for the message. I’ll be there.”

“It can’t understand you,” Torrence said.

“Sweet bird, though. I wish I had some seed to share.”

The pigeon gave a soothing *coo* before taking off. Merritt watched the bird disappear into the distance, and then he and Torrence continued on their way toward their homes. It wasn’t until they’d walked several blocks that Merritt realized he was smiling.