

# DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY  
BOOK 2

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SHOBANA 'BOB' APPAVU

CHAPTER 2

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Book 2 | Chapter 2

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## CHAPTER 2

Donning the general's uniform for the first time Monday morning felt surreal. Merritt had never imagined wearing such garments, much less at the age of twenty-two. His measurements had been taken the prior week, during which he wore a spare colonel's uniform to work. As with the colonels' uniforms, his new general's uniform came with a cut-resistant vest to wear over his tank, giving the appearance of a three-piece suit. His old sport-coat-style fighting jacket was replaced with the highest grade custom fiberglass- and metal-blended suit jacket, strong enough to resist most cuts and even some bullets while still retaining the feel and movement of fabric. Reinforced epaulets protected his shoulders while giving a clear visual cue that he was at the top of the military. Further solidifying his rank, four bands on his sleeve cuffs denoted his role as general.

The jacket had been designed from scratch to fit his body and allowed for a full range of motion. It looked every bit as crisp as an elite model Italian cut suit jacket, but with all the comfort and flexibility of a martial arts gi. He imagined he'd even be able to grapple or engage in hand-to-hand combat without the jacket becoming a nuisance. He wished he'd had access to such a garment back when he was more likely to face combat.

He'd invested in a bottle of Rhodes's magic eye drops after Meade had clued him in on the manufacturer. A drop in each eye cleared the redness and puffiness, leaving him looking fresh and alert despite running on three hours of sleep. No one would ever know that he'd spent the entire weekend cramming in preparation for his personnel discussion with Belmont.

A final glance at the rusty mirror on his bedroom wall left him inexplicably giddy. He was young and inexperienced as an officer. He had a long road ahead of him and would have to rely heavily on the

expertise of his seniors. He wasn't even sure if he was truly ready to take on the daunting job that had been given to him. But damn, he looked the part.

The surge of confidence he found in the mirror carried him through the motorcycle ride to headquarters and up to Belmont's private meeting room on the fifth floor. Throughout the weekend, he'd been nervous about taking such a crucial meeting without Meade at his side, but Belmont had insisted that he come prepared to stand on his own two feet, regardless of his lack of experience.

After Friday's party, Merritt could assume that Belmont had wanted him to come to the meeting stripped of his resources so he'd be more likely to fail. But did Belmont still want him to fail now that he understood his own neck was on the line too? Merritt doubted it, but he couldn't take anything for granted.

Eight chairs encircled the meeting room table, but only Belmont's seat was occupied. When Merritt entered at a quarter to seven, Belmont didn't even raise his head in acknowledgment. He sat tense and rigid in his chair, looking supremely annoyed about something Merritt couldn't discern.

After another moment, Merritt recognized the source of Belmont's ire. A servant was setting up the wet bar at the opposite end of the meeting room—and doing a miserable job of it. Merritt couldn't tell if she was anxious to be working in front of the sphere's right hand or if she was an addict; her hands shook as she tried to line up a row of ceramic cups, clacking them together and nearly dropping one off the counter. Every time the relentless clattering hit a high note, Belmont visibly flinched. At one point, he raised his hands at either side of his head as if to finally yell at her, only to reel himself in, clenching his fists and breathing heavily through gritted teeth.

Merritt wouldn't have expected Belmont to tolerate any less than perfection from someone serving him. On the other hand, he'd never actually seen Belmont abuse a servant, unlike Mercury's other advisors who enjoyed passing cutting criticisms until they were satisfied that their servants were squirming hard enough.

He looked to the servant then back at Belmont, puzzled.

“My assistant apparently forgot that I moved the start of our meeting,” Belmont muttered, though Merritt couldn’t help wondering if Belmont was the one who’d forgotten to tell him. “So no one sent a servant to get the room ready before we got in. This should have all been finished ten minutes ago.” He gestured toward the chairs surrounding him. “What the fuck do we need eight chairs for?”

The servant knocked two more cups together, and this time Merritt recognized Belmont’s telltale flinch. Merritt had flinched that same way during countless early mornings in the noisy mess hall after hitting his limit with sleep enhancers and having to go the next day without. Merritt had never realized that Belmont took sleep enhancers. Most high-performing blue-ties did, and they could afford better pills with fewer visible side effects. But this early in the morning, Belmont’s withdrawal symptoms were clear.

The best remedy Merritt could think of was a mix of Spark and caffeine. Together they provided a mellow burst of energy without the jitters and irritability that often came with caffeine alone. But the servant hadn’t even begun brewing coffee yet, and Merritt didn’t trust her not to spill beans all over the floor while trying to fill the grinder. Thinking fast, he left his laptop on the table and headed across the room toward her. “Thank you, that’ll be all,” he told her. As she headed for the exit, he grabbed the wall-mounted phone and connected to his temporary aide. “Perry, could you please arrange for a full service coffee tray to be brought to Belmont’s meeting room from the Sheridan, ASAP? Dark roast, freshly brewed. And a light breakfast from Belmont’s preferred list.”

Belmont could surely hear him placing the order, but he made no comment.

After Perry’s confirmation, Merritt disconnected, but he didn’t immediately turn to face Belmont. He knew the coffee would take at least a few minutes, and he didn’t dare attempt to fill the silence while Belmont’s mood was so low. Instead, he finished aligning the chemical drink vials and empty cups, using his lightest touch so as not to make any noise.

The wait was excruciating, but Merritt couldn’t fault the servant who rushed the order to the meeting room door after barely more than

five minutes. Rather than allow him into the room, Merritt accepted the tray at the door and took it to the table himself. Atop the tray was a fresh pot of coffee, two empty ceramic cups, a tiny pitcher of what looked like real cream, and a dish of pristine sugar pills—the North’s uniquely shaped take on the sugar cube. On either side of the coffee setup was a small breakfast plate—toast points topped with over-easy pigeon egg, a white cream of some sort, a lump of bluish-black caviar, and an elegant swirled garnish that looked like 3D-printed plant matter.

Perry had sent two plates.

*Shit, I have to eat that too?*

Rather than fret about the fish eggs, Merritt headed back to the wet bar and retrieved a rack of assorted chemical drink tubes, placing them on the meeting table beside the coffee. He held out a cup for Belmont. “You drink dark roast, right?” he asked, even though he knew Belmont did. “Black?”

With a surly frown, Belmont snatched the cup from Merritt’s hand. “If you act like an assistant, people are going to treat you like an assistant. Start acting like a general.”

Merritt gave no reply. He could only ponder the painful irony of being a soldier in the North Sphere, and a perpetual duty soldier, no less. He was trained to be simultaneously docile and deadly. He was a guard dog—expected to unleash his lethal bite on command, but faced with the threat of euthanasia if he ever improperly bared his teeth.

Perpetual duty soldiers always overcompensated in the presence of the upper ranks. They bowed their heads and spoke gently, striving to appear non-threatening to counterbalance their unconcealed arms. To be a soldier in the North was to be in a service profession, obediently aiding one’s superiors through sanctioned violence the same way a waiter offered up pots of coffee. Merritt doubted Belmont would ever understand the impossible, conflicting standards he’d been raised to embody.

But Belmont was right. Servitude came too naturally to him, and he’d have to fight his instincts if he wanted to project authority to anyone other than the fellow soldiers who already respected him.

He waited for Belmont to pour himself a cup of coffee and a tube of Spark before pouring his own with a tube of Focus. He didn't care for coffee, but it felt less awkward to take a cup than to just sit and watch Belmont drink his. He dropped in a sugar pill and a splash of cream out of guilt; he didn't want the servant's effort in preparing the tray to go to waste.

Belmont sat silently sipping his coffee, staring fixedly over the rim of the cup at Merritt. Merritt, uneasy, choked down his too-sweet coffee while trying to avoid eye contact. After barely half a minute, he could no longer tolerate the tension. He took his cup and continued to drink while pacing back and forth across the room, only to feel the weight of Belmont's gaze grow even heavier as it followed his movements from behind. He looked over his shoulder, brows furrowed. "Is something wrong?"

Belmont averted his gaze like a cat caught eyeing its owner's dinner. He hid his expression in a split second and pasted on a scowl. "You're wearing the general's uniform for the first time." He snorted. "You look like a little kid playing dress-up."

"I hope you don't stare at kids like that," Merritt said before he could think better of it.

He didn't know what it was about Belmont that always spurred him to impudence. He never would have said such a thing to any of his former bosses. But Belmont didn't appear terribly offended. He simply rolled his eyes, finishing the remainder of his drink in silence.

After another few minutes, Belmont's Spark in coffee apparently kicked in. He stood up, pulling the extra chairs away from the table and rolling them into a nearby storage room. Merritt lent a hand despite not understanding why it was such a big deal to have a few empty chairs around the table.

Once the chairs were cleared, Belmont returned to the table, slouching in his seat and stretching his long legs out far enough to span the length of the previously neighboring chair, as if he'd waited the entire morning just for the chance to straighten his knees.

He grabbed a toast point, taking a bite to the center without spilling any caviar on his shirt.

*Witchcraft*, Merritt thought to himself with a dry smile.

After finishing the toast point, Belmont set the remainder of the plate aside for later. He placed his hand atop the table, sliding a seamless panel out of the way to reveal an electronics storage compartment underneath. The inner platform rose to the level of the surrounding panels, and Merritt spotted a large tablet that apparently controlled the monitor mounted to the wall opposite the wet bar. The monitor's screensaver—an animated medical illustration of poison traveling through the human bloodstream—faded away to reveal the headshots of every military officer Merritt had fired the previous Friday.

“We need to talk about who’s going to replace all these guys,” Belmont said. “We have interim staff in place for urgent matters, but we can’t leave this many seats unfilled for long.” He narrowed his eyes at Merritt. “Did you have anyone lined up for these jobs, or were you just flying by the seat of your pants on Friday?”

*A little bit of both, honestly.* But Merritt wasn’t foolish enough to admit it. “I know who I want for the colonels’ positions.”

“Wow, you really came prepared,” Belmont sneered, the sarcasm dripping from his voice. “That’s four people out of the twenty you let go.”

“The colonels should pick their own junior officers.”

Belmont gaped at him incredulously.

“We’ll still review their picks,” Merritt clarified. “I’ve already consulted with several of them, and I’m prepared to discuss their recommendations with you now. They know better than anyone else who they’ll work well with. It’ll be bad for morale if they don’t have any control over their personnel choices.”

Belmont looked at him as if he was speaking in another language. “*Morale?*”

“It’s important,” Merritt insisted.

“We don’t let officers pick officers. That’s what we have senior management for. If you can’t pick them, we should just hand the job over to Pratt and Evans.”



“Our units with the best loss exchange ratio had junior officers placed by senior officers instead of by military advisors. The Waterways Unit has an LER of twelve to one, Chem Ops is six to one, Border Defense is—”

“You know these numbers off the top of your head?” Belmont asked skeptically.

“Don’t you?”

Belmont’s lips tightened.

“They’re pretty basic numbers,” Merritt continued, hoping to downplay his expertise for Belmont’s comfort. Belmont’s eyes went cold.

*Oh look, I made it worse.*

Biting his lip, Merritt turned back to the screen. “Anyway, we can start with Chem Ops, since that’s the only unit where I’m assigning any junior officers.” He opened his laptop, rotated the screen on its pivot point so Belmont could see, and pulled up the charts for his Chem Ops picks. “I’ve chosen Balbo to replace Harding as colonel.”

“Who?”

“Balbo.” Merritt pointed to the headshot at the top of her file.

“I don’t even know who that is.”

Belmont obviously knew who she was. “She was my captain when I did the waterways mission with Troy,” Merritt said. “You’ve worked with her.”

“Oh, right. Her.” Belmont raised an eyebrow. “She’s a *friend* of yours, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She’s also the best captain we have.” He pointed to her chart. “Her company has outperformed every other unit in the military. She knows how to balance the needs of her sphere with the needs of her troops, and you won’t find anyone who’ll say a bad word about her.”

Belmont leaned back in his seat, slouching deeper than Merritt would have thought possible. With a mock carefree gesture, he said,

“Installing your friends in high positions, huh? I suppose you’ve earned that right, now that you’re at the top of your field.”

“That’s good to know,” Merritt replied, trying not to sound defensive, “but Balbo is fully qualified for the job. I’d pick her regardless of our relationship.”

Belmont shook his head dismissively. “And here I was thinking you were a worthwhile blue-tie for once. You *should* use your position to prop up your allies. Reward them and rack up the favors. Debt is the closest thing to loyalty you’ll find in the underground.”

“Noted,” Merritt replied, more to end the conversation than to express agreement. He disagreed vehemently; his allies trusted him, and he didn’t need them indebted to him. But he couldn’t just dismiss advice from his boss without consideration.

There was a knock at the door, and Belmont called, “Come in.”

Belmont’s assistant poked his head in, saying softly, “Hale is on the phone; he wants to talk about the tax data he sent you.”

“I told him I’d see him after dinner. Tell him to stop trying to jump the line.”

“He said to tell you it’s urgent,” the assistant attempted.

“Of course he did,” Belmont snapped. “But it’s not.” Belmont shooed him away, waiting for the door to close before turning back to Merritt. “Who’s your next pick, then?” he asked.

Merritt moved on. Squad 274’s Sergeant Lorel would take his place as Chem Ops Corvus captain. She was a seasoned veteran who’d proven herself during the West Sphere invasion by outsmarting the West’s heavily armored special ops units. It pained him to promote her over his own handpicked Sergeant Ellis, but he had another role in mind for Ellis. Hoxie would take Ellis’s role as Squad 269’s sergeant, and Balbo would work with her team to fill the remaining officers’ positions.

After two more interruptions from Belmont’s assistant, they finally finished reviewing all of Merritt’s proposed Chem Ops changes. Belmont deferred to Merritt for Chem Ops, but when Merritt proposed Sergeant Hayes for the new role of Waterways Unit Colonel, Belmont

held up a hand to stop him. “Are you fucking with me?” he asked. “You’re going to put a sergeant in a colonel’s spot? It was bad enough that you went from captain to general. This is never going to fly.”

“Hayes was a colonel in the West Sphere army before she tricked them into trading her for two underperforming privates. It was her way of giving her former sphere the finger.”

Belmont scrolled through several screens of data on the tablet in front of him. “She’s got about a million disciplinary marks against her. And about two million complaints about poor performance.”

“All unfounded,” Merritt said. “Her former colonel was persecuting her due to her origins. He didn’t believe a West Sphere woman could be anything other than a dog.”

Belmont grabbed another toast point and took a bite as if to stall for time, but the skepticism lingered in his eyes. Merritt suspected he wasn’t familiar enough with Hayes or anyone else to be able to offer an argument, but he still seemed intent on making one.

Merritt turned to his computer, pulling up an annotated list of the entire Waterways Unit. Gesturing toward the screen, he asked, “Who would you choose if I didn’t choose her?”

He’d asked the question respectfully, but he meant it as a challenge.

Belmont hesitated, staring down at the sea of names. “Give me that,” he said, grabbing for Merritt’s laptop. He keyed in a few commands, filtering the list. After analyzing the data, he flipped back to the detailed soldier bios, pulling up three listings. “These three have the highest kill rates.”

“Kill rate isn’t relevant in the Waterways Unit. It isn’t relevant in most units. Soldiers are only credited with kills when their actions are traceable via AI analysis of battle footage. In the Waterways Unit, most invaders die by drowning or falling into traps. The trap specialists should be credited with their deaths, but they never are. But either way, kill rate doesn’t translate to command skill.”

Belmont pursed his lips. Then he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “Whatever. Who’s next?”

Was Belmont really so uninformed about his own military's operations? It was stunning. Higgins had been a true expert on the matter. Although his philosophy on the value of soldiers had differed from Merritt's, he'd been thoroughly educated on every aspect of the North's military. "You used to work for Higgins, didn't you?" Merritt asked.

Belmont's gaze turned frigid. "What does that have to do with anything?"

If only Merritt had realized before asking his question that there was no diplomatic way to phrase his follow-up. *Didn't you learn anything about the military from working with Higgins?*

Merritt had come to work hoping he could tap into the expertise of someone with more authority than he had. But as their discussion progressed, he grew disillusioned by Belmont's ignorance. Belmont truly seemed to believe that everything he needed to know about the military could be deduced by running a few algorithms on the data collected by the military statistics team. He had no idea how little data was actually collected.

Belmont hadn't been right hand for long. Considering the fact that he had no interest in associating with soldiers, it shouldn't have been a surprise that he was unaware of what went on behind the scenes. Still, it came as a shock that someone Merritt knew to be a genius on many levels was so uninformed about his own troops—and it was scary that such a person wielded so much power over them.

Every time his assistant interrupted the meeting with an urgent question, Belmont had a smart, confident answer at the ready. Merritt watched him swat away unfavorable deals, craft sneaky counteroffers, and poke holes in flimsy excuses as if the job of right hand was too easy for him, but once he returned to military matters, he was like a student who'd forgotten his homework.

Merritt could sense Belmont's mounting frustration as they continued their work and he countered every suggestion Belmont made. He wished he could concede and support a few of Belmont's choices, but Belmont's suggestions were too uncritical for him to accept in good

conscience, and they only got worse as time went by and his frustration turned to exasperation and then to apathy.

They were on their final pick when Merritt mistyped a search term on his computer, accidentally pulling up an old document from his poison project with Archer. “Oops,” he muttered, moving to get rid of it. “Sorry about that.”

Before he could close the window, Belmont grabbed his wrist. “What was that?”

“Huh?”

Belmont pushed his hand aside, pulling the window to the center of the screen and dragging it larger. “What is this?”

Merritt frowned at the disorderly document covered with his scrawled, sometimes harebrained notes; then he returned his gaze to Belmont. “Just a few poison formulas. It’s from the poison project I worked on with Archer. I’m sure you know about it. The wide-range vials that were previously supplied to the military didn’t have a stable active radius, so we’d end up with soldiers getting sick from their own poisons and having to use excess blockers. The poisons even started to affect civilians. So she and I came up with some formulas with a more predictable range. They’ve been in production for a few months now.”

Belmont grabbed the laptop. He walked across the room, pacing back and forth as he read through the formulas. He scrolled down to the bottom section, where Merritt’s notes grew even more fragmented. “What about these?”

“Those were just ideas,” Merritt replied, embarrassed. “Stuff I never showed her because it wasn’t good enough. Either too far-fetched or too expensive, or it wasn’t relevant, or I couldn’t figure out how to make it work.”

Belmont read through the page, his jaw muscles clenched. Merritt said nothing, but he grew more uncomfortable as Belmont continued to scroll. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Belmont having access to his private thoughts.

Again holding up the laptop to display a screen of formulas, Belmont asked, “Where did you learn how to do this?”

Merritt hesitated, unnerved by Belmont's accusatory tone. "I sat in on a few classes at the College of Science and Medicine back when I was still in school. I thought you knew that."

"You don't get to this level of poisons chemistry just by 'sitting in on a few classes.' How did you figure these out?"

He felt crushed by the weight of Belmont's irrational anger. "I don't know. I consulted a lot of reference books. It took a really long time." *And I spent my entire stipend on sleep enhancers for three straight months.*

"What's the active range of SYD-4?" Belmont asked.

Merritt replied automatically, only realizing after he'd begun speaking that Belmont was quizzing him. "Nine foot radius in a controlled environment. But we've found that it can travel up to forty feet under the right conditions."

"What class of drug was used as the basis for PTX-78?"

"PTX-78 was the generic name for Potent's original formula, and it was derived from an above-ground PDE5 inhibitor."

"What effect does COE-21 have on the circulatory system?"

"COE-21 hasn't been used in military drugs for over a decade. We have better agents now. It's before my time."

"So you don't know."

"Well..." Merritt cleared his throat. "It triggers increased peripheral vasoconstriction and splenic contractions to improve the levels of oxygenated blood available to vital organs. It used to be taken by Waterways Unit divers." He hesitated. "Is it 'splenic'? I don't really know the terminology. I might have pronounced it wrong." He made a squishing motion with his hands. "It makes your spleen do this."

Belmont's icy stare left him withered in his seat. Cringing, he lowered his hands.

After a long pause, Belmont turned his attention back to the laptop, where he continued to scrutinize Merritt's formulas. In a voice soft enough that he could have been speaking to himself, he muttered,

“You know things about drugs and poisons that half the guys in my graduating class didn’t know.”

“You studied drugs and poisons in college?”

“I graduated number two at the College of Science and Medicine. D&P was my specialty before I ended up in government. It’s still my specialty.”

“It’s not my specialty,” Merritt said urgently. “I don’t know much beyond what’s in those notes. My specialty is the military.”

Narrowing his eyes, Belmont asked, “What’s Code 24836 in the Military Officers’ Procedural Handbook?”

Was Belmont really going to quiz him on the military reading he’d been assigned to complete over the past three weeks? He had no choice but to play along. “A purchase order from a senior military officer for personal use poisons cannot be reimbursed through military funds unless the target is an enemy of the state.”

“Code 86864,” Belmont demanded without acknowledging Merritt’s correct answer.

“There’s no such code.”

“Yes there is.”

Merritt shook his head. “The book skips from 85000 to 87800 to account for discarded policies put in place by Mercury’s predecessor.”

“Code 86864: The North Sphere General is not to be involved in management of the Elite Border Guard’s Blackout Division, which answers directly to the King and Right Hand.”

Merritt clenched his fists. *Should I even say it?* “That’s 68684.”

Belmont glared at him before typing a search into the laptop. After staring at the screen for a moment, he let out a frustrated growl and tossed the laptop down to the table from a bit too high a distance. Merritt had to dive to catch it.

“Did you memorize the entire fucking handbook in three weeks?”

*You don’t understand, Belmont. I haven’t slept since I was twelve years old.*

Belmont turned away, his shoulders tense. “When Mercury called you a genius, I thought he was just trying to get under my skin. But he wasn’t lying. He wasn’t fucking lying.”

Merritt knew what was going through Belmont’s mind. Belmont hadn’t come to today’s meeting expecting Merritt to be fully prepared. He certainly hadn’t expected to face off with someone whose military and poisons knowledge rivaled his own.

Merritt had wanted Belmont’s respect for ages, and it finally felt like he’d earned it. But couldn’t he have Belmont’s respect without also being saddled with his envy and insecurity?

“Belmont, you’re my boss.” Merritt stepped forward, speaking reluctantly to the back of Belmont’s head. “My knowledge belongs to you. My skills belong to you. This is why you have a general. I’m here to serve you.”

Belmont didn’t acknowledge his words. When he finally spoke, he seemed burned out. “Just make your last pick for the Elite Border Guard so we can stop for lunch.”

Merritt wished he knew what Belmont was thinking, but it didn’t seem wise to ask. He pulled up a soldier profile on his laptop. “Lieutenant Rice. He’s been an officer for six—”

“Don’t explain it. Just mark it down.”

“All right.”

Belmont glanced at his watch. “Take half an hour for lunch. I’m going to Yackley’s, so you should go somewhere else. I need a break from you.”