

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 17

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CHAPTER 17

While Belmont had kept a professional distance from Merritt during the elevator ride up to his suite, on the way down he kept an arm around Merritt's waist and held him close. His hand wandered lazily, indiscreet even in view of his personal guard. Merritt responded instinctively with his own touch, his hand hidden under Belmont's suit jacket. Awkward as it was to fondle Belmont while his guard looked on, he had to maintain the ruse of attraction at least until the elevator hit the first floor.

And this would be his last chance to touch Belmont before their encounter ended and his permission was automatically rescinded. He was fascinated by the graceful curve of Belmont's spine and the way his smooth muscles felt beneath the silky fabric of his dress shirt.

He shook his head, cursing the Potent for robbing him of his judgment. *This is Belmont! If not for the Potent, you'd want nothing to do with him.*

Merritt pulled away when the elevator doors opened onto the first floor. Belmont stepped away as well, his posture stiffening. Before exiting, Merritt chanced a look into Belmont's eyes, and Belmont raised his chin, casting a haughty downward glance at Merritt.

Well. I guess it's back to business as usual.

With only a parting nod, Merritt stepped out, leaving Belmont to descend one additional floor to the private parking garage below.

Once outside and out of view of the doormen, Merritt retrieved his phone and sent Archer his next coded text. *Still want to meet for drinks? I'm free for the rest of the night.*

Archer's reply came in barely half a minute. *I decided to put in a few extra hours at the lab. Meet me here, and we can decide where to go.*

There was no way for Archer to get into the chem labs without her presence being logged, so she'd told Merritt that the best way to disguise their project was to treat it the same as any other occasion in which they'd met at the labs.

Merritt was grateful for the blood-cooling sight of the sterile chem lab up ahead as he pulled into the parking lot. His Potent buzz had yet to diminish, and the rumbling and bouncing of the motorcycle between his thighs had been nearly unbearable. Even with the help of the clinical setting, he still had to walk a few laps in the parking lot before his blood finally settled.

After circling to the back entrance, he spotted Archer waiting for him in the doorway. Upon seeing her, he felt the same rush of exhilaration he always felt coming home triumphant from battle. He reached her side, and they barely managed a moment of eye contact before a wide grin spread across his face.

Archer's lips twitched in response; she tried and failed to hold back a smile of her own. "Get in here," she finally whispered, surrendering to the show of happiness.

Merritt followed her down a narrow, deserted corridor leading to the wing of the building that housed her office and private lab. "I'm relieved to see that you're still in one piece," she said, giving Merritt a fleeting glance out of the corner of her eye. Merritt had seen that odd look from her before, though it had taken him months to decipher it. It seemed to arise whenever she felt the need to balance her feelings of concern with the North Sphere obligation to always present oneself as cool and collected. "Did everything go as planned?"

"More or less," Merritt said. "I'll show you what I got once we get into the lab."

Midway down the corridor, Archer paused and gestured toward an unmarked door. "This restroom has an emergency shower. It's meant for treating accidental chemical exposure and the like, but people

also use it when they have to pull all-nighters.” Again, she gave him that surreptitious glance. “Do you need the shower?”

Merritt felt the urge to do a smell check on himself before realizing why Archer was really asking if he needed the shower. Lowering his voice, he said, “Things didn’t go that far.”

“Got it,” Archer said with a too-perfect poker face.

They continued down the length of the corridor, and Archer used her thumbprint to grant Merritt entrance into the lab. Once inside, Merritt heaved a shuddering sigh. “Ugh. I feel like I can finally relax a little bit now.” Taking a seat at a nearby counter, he rolled his stiff shoulders. “I really owe you for this, Archer. Devon too. You guys were on top of things.”

Archer shooed away his compliment as usual. “You don’t owe me anything. I offered to help. Just tell me what you got.”

Retrieving one of his pistols from the holster, Merritt disengaged the magazine and fished out the two disinfecting wipes inside. He handed one of them to Archer, who turned it over in her hand without any reaction. Eagerly, Merritt pointed to the corner of the wipe. “Take a look, right next to the ‘tear here’ notch.”

“You’re kidding me,” Archer whispered after a moment of squinting. She turned to Merritt, and while her mouth was straight, he spotted the smile in her eyes. “I see a pinprick. This is almost too easy.”

Merritt chuckled and shook his head. “I was in Belmont’s suite with him. Nothing easy about it.”

“That bad, huh?”

Disregarding the question, Merritt pointed to the other wipe. “I brought an extra wipe so we can test one and keep the other intact inside its wrapper, in case Mercury wants it.”

“Then I’ll get to work on this one.”

As Archer pulled on a pair of rubber gloves, Merritt reloaded his pistol and returned it to his holster. Archer worked in silence for a few minutes, mixing a few powders and solutions and heating them over a

flame before asking, a little too casually, “You really didn’t have any issues with Belmont?”

Merritt bit his lip, jumping a bit from the burst of sparks that resulted. Since arriving at the lab, the effects of the Potent had seemed to ease up, to the point of becoming little more than a buzz in the back of his mind. The sudden stimulus caught him off guard. “I’m not sure what you mean by ‘issues.’”

“You said things didn’t get to the point of you needing a shower, but you also said the job wasn’t easy. Did he suspect anything?”

“A little, yes. When he was on the phone with Mannheim, I searched his room. Apparently, he was able to hear me searching. He frisked me and asked me what I was doing in his room. Didn’t find the wipes, though.”

Archer appeared more concerned than Merritt had expected. “What did you tell him when he asked why you were in his room?”

Merritt shook his head, giving an awkward laugh. “Something about wanting to see what his bedroom looked like. I don’t know. By the end of it all, he seemed to buy my excuse.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter anyway,” Archer said, squinting into a filled test tube. “The important thing was to get you out of his suite. He’ll find out everything eventually, at least if this test pans out and you pass the news along to Mercury.” She shot him a sideways glance. “It’s a good thing you were able to get out before anything serious happened between you two.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Archer’s head turned like a possessed doll in a horror movie. “You *guess*?”

Damn, he’d spoken without thinking. With a quick, dismissive shake of the head, he said, “Potent still isn’t worn off.”

“Ah,” Archer said, returning to her work.

Merritt wasn’t sure why it bothered him so much that Archer was so adamantly opposed to the idea of him hooking up with Belmont. Why did she care so much? If anything, she usually encouraged him to

get out there and meet new people, to try to be less of a shut-in. It wasn't jealousy or prudishness. Was it her elitist nature? She, like Merritt, hesitated to celebrate any accomplishment that wasn't rightly earned—and neither one of them typically saw sexual favors as acceptable currency. But her reservations about Belmont seemed much more personal.

He remembered her story about Belmont trying to unseat her as valedictorian in college, and how he'd shown her all the cards in his deck. While she'd clearly come out on top, Merritt had to wonder just how ugly their confrontations had gotten. He supposed, given their history, that it made sense for her to want to dissuade Merritt from getting close to him.

More troubling than Archer's reservations was Merritt's resistance to them. He read the news. He knew Belmont's track record as well as anyone. He should have heartily agreed with every one of Archer's points.

He didn't want to think about it any longer. Instead, he watched as Archer tore open the wrapper of the disposable wipe and fished out its contents. She set the wipe on a clear tray then retrieved her newly mixed and heated solution. With an eyedropper, she siphoned a few milliliters of the solution and let three drops fall onto the wipe.

“Does it show anything?”

“The solution takes about five minutes to react. If it's a positive result, it should turn blue.”

Merritt stood up and began pacing. “It'll be the longest five minutes of my life.”

“Aren't you still at the tail end of the longest six hours of your life?”

Merritt laughed. “I'm feeling a little better. Just a little. My body still goes haywire whenever I touch anything, but at least I can think clearly now.”

“It's a shame your first dose of high grade Potent is going to go to waste, though. Did you know that's two hundred dollars a tube?”

Merritt's eyes widened. “Tell me you're joking.”

“High grade is four times as expensive as low grade at most bars.”

Merritt gritted his teeth. “So that’s \$4200 I owe Belmont now.”

“You never told me. Why did Belmont give you four thousand dollars?”

“He wants me to buy a new suit.”

Archer sighed as she rinsed out the eyedropper. “I don’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into, Merritt.”

They watched the clock for the remainder of the five minutes. Merritt continued pacing, and Archer sat at the counter, drumming her fingertips on her knee. After the time was almost up, she glanced at the wipe and said, “We’ve got a positive.”

Merritt hurried to her side. The wipe had turned a deep shade of blue. His heart pounded with excitement.

“You can still pretend you know nothing,” Archer said evenly. “I can toss that wipe in the trash.”

“I didn’t come this far to throw my evidence in the trash.”

Archer lifted the wipe with a pair of tongs and dropped it into a plastic bag. “I’m giving this to you. Do whatever you want with it, but you didn’t get it from me. From here on, I want no part of whatever you’re going to do.”

Merritt nodded. “I appreciate everything you’ve done. I’ll keep your name out of it.”

Merritt knew he was being paranoid, but he didn’t want to return to his quarters with the poisoned wipes in his pack. No one’s lockers were private, and some officers had nothing better to do than to rifle through each other’s belongings so they’d have fodder for gossip. It was past one in the morning, but Merritt decided to risk being rude. He gave Devon a call.

“Hey, Merritt,” Devon said after three rings.

“Did I wake you?”

“Nah, I’m a night owl.” He laughed softly. “Not to mention I’ve been waiting up to see how things went for you. I was hoping you’d call.”

That was surprising. Merritt would have expected Devon to turn in for the night once Archer let him know his duty was done. “Thank you,” Merritt said clumsily. “For waiting up. I mean, that’s... nice.”

Damn, but why couldn’t he actually *tell* Devon how much he appreciated the gesture without sounding like a half-programmed robot teaching itself to speak?

“So... what’s up?” Devon asked after a long, static-filled silence.

Merritt swallowed. “I don’t want to go back to the barracks tonight. There’s no privacy. Do you live alone? Is there any chance I can crash at your place?”

Another crackling pause. In a voice that sounded unexpectedly pleased, Devon said, “Sure, come on over. I’ll text you the directions.”

Devon lived in a peaceful if homogeneous middle-class district only a few minutes away from Archer’s lab. Rows of identical industrial style two-flats lined the city street, and only a couple of lights shone in the windows Merritt passed. At this time of night, the Norwood slums would have still been bustling with activity—rough-looking people loitering on their bikes and smoking chemical joints, unkempt kids walking 2-pound pet rats on leashes. There was no such activity in this neighborhood, which was so peaceful it almost felt suburban.

Barely ten seconds after Merritt rang the doorbell, Devon opened the door and peeked outside. He wore a dark blue T-shirt and a loose-fitting pair of pajama pants, his blue tie untied and draped around his neck. Merritt sucked in an involuntary breath. There was always something incredibly suggestive about a North Sphere man at home with his tie undone. In advertising, the look was often shown as a prelude to intimacy, sometimes coupled with Potent’s signature rosy lips and cheeks.

“I’m on the second floor,” Devon said softly, gesturing with his head. Merritt assumed Devon was trying not to wake his downstairs neighbor.

Devon’s house slippers padded pleasantly on each brushed metal step as Merritt followed him up to the second floor. Devon used his thumbprint to open the door to his unit.

It was an amazing space, small but welcoming. Set in cool, dim lighting, the living room was perfectly coordinated in tones of black, dark gray, and mellow aqua. Metal panels and smooth, silvery black electronic boards lined the walls, and a faint neon aqua glow emanated from the underside of the stainless steel kitchen island. Devon motioned for Merritt to leave his packs and shoes on a low metal platform alongside the door.

“You don’t still have to wear your holsters, do you?” Devon asked. “You’re a guest. You’re not on duty.”

“Oh,” Merritt said, unbuckling his holsters. “Thank you. I would have had to keep them on if you hadn’t excused me. It’s your home, so I follow your rules.”

“That’s crazy,” Devon said. “You mean to tell me you have to play guard duty even when you’re out at a friend’s house unless they give you permission to relax?”

“That’s why they call it perpetual duty,” Merritt said.

“That has to make it at least ten times more difficult to hook up,” Devon teased, shooting Merritt a playful glance.

“I don’t do a whole lot of ‘hooking up,’” Merritt said. “Especially not in people’s homes. One of the tenets of perpetual duty is to minimize the amount of time you spend in any kind of compromising position. I owe my waking hours to my sphere. So, short showers. Short bathroom breaks. Short hookups. I have to be ready in case my services are needed.”

“That’s a nightmare,” Devon said incredulously.

“It’s for my King.”

“So Belmont wasn’t even lying when he said you were saving yourself for your King,” Devon mused. “Are all soldiers like that?”

Merritt saw that look cross Devon’s face—the same look his fellow privates used to give him whenever he talked about how fortunate they were to be able to serve and protect their sphere. “No, we don’t all face the same demands. Perpetual duty is... a little different from regular duty. I knew what I was getting into when I signed up.”

Never mind the fact that he’d made the decision in the midst of heartbreak over Torrence’s withdrawal from their budding romance. It would do no good to tell Devon about that. As a soldier, he would honor his commitment to his sphere—no complaints or second guesses. Perpetual duty required total devotion, leaving him little freedom for personal pursuits, but this was an insignificant sacrifice. What he couldn’t do for Torrence, he was happy to do for Mercury.

“It’s not a nightmare,” he said to Devon before realizing that the time for that statement had passed. Now, the words lingered awkwardly between them.

Smoothly, Devon headed toward the kitchen and asked, “Make you some coffee?”

“That’s all right,” Merritt replied. “I don’t want to be up too late.”

“Herbal tea, then? I also have a box of high grade Calm. Or just water.”

“Oh. Sure. I’d love some water.”

Devon poured a glass of water and handed it to Merritt. Merritt tasted it as Devon began preparing coffee for himself. “You get good water here,” Merritt said.

“I should hope so, with the amount I pay for it.”

“It’s interesting; a lot of times, the most expensive water isn’t the purest or even the best tasting water. The best water I ever had was...”

Devon wasn’t listening. Merritt couldn’t blame him.

Silence resumed as Devon finished filling the coffee maker and turned it on. A minute later, over the sound of percolating water, Devon

said, “Archer sent me the code saying that you found the disinfecting wipes in Belmont’s suite, and I know you were going to test them at the lab, but then neither of you told me how the test turned out.”

Merritt cracked a smile. “The test was positive. That’s why I didn’t want to go back to the barracks. There’s no secure place to store the evidence. I don’t want anyone going through my things before I have the chance to turn the wipes over to Mercury.”

Somehow, Devon looked pleased and disappointed at the same time. “When you said on the phone that you wanted to come here because there was no privacy at the barracks, I thought you meant something else.” Before Merritt could respond, Devon continued. “But anyway—he really did have poisoned wipes?”

“Yes. MYGG-2, just like the coroner said.”

With a low whistle, Devon said, “I can’t believe you pulled it off.”

“You thought I wouldn’t?”

“The way you looked on the Potent, I thought you’d disappear into Belmont’s suite and never come out again,” Devon joked. Curiously, he narrowed his eyes. “How did that go, by the way? I tried to get you help as soon as I could, but I had no way of knowing if it was fast enough.”

“You were just in time. That scheme with the thumbprint was genius. Was that your idea?”

“Yeah,” Devon confessed, almost nervously. “After I pulled off the initial hack, I went back to the Sheridan. I know Mannheim usually lingers pretty late after parties, so I stuck around close to him until he got the alert about the breach. I offered to go back to the office with him to get everything under control, but the fix turned out too easy, so I had to buy us more time. I lied that the thumbprint database had been breached and I deleted the thumbprint as a precaution.” He shook his head, concealing his nerves with a refreshed poker face. “It was kind of a risky move, but I was thinking on my feet. I was worried it would all fall apart before you had a chance to escape, but I’m glad to see that things worked out.” Again, he seemed to scrutinize Merritt. “Belmont

must have been pissed off, though. You really got out of there before anything happened?”

“If by ‘anything,’ you mean sex, then yes. Nothing happened.”

Surprisingly, Devon laughed. “Kinda sucks for you.”

“Huh?”

“First time on high grade Potent, and you were left unsatisfied?” Devon shook his head. “That’s a waste of a once-in-a-lifetime moment of pleasure.”

“I’m better off. Nothing good would have come from sleeping with Belmont.”

“You really think so? Rumor is he’s really good in the sack. And besides—having the support and the protection of your sphere’s right hand? That could open a lot of doors for you. I heard Belmont saying that he’d ‘take care of you.’ You’d probably never have to worry about money again.”

“It comes at too big a price, though. I’d never want someone like Belmont having that kind of power over me. And how could I ever believe I’d really have his support? The newspapers are already filled with people who trusted Belmont’s promises.”

Devon shrugged. “I guess everyone’s price is different. I still think you’re a little crazy for not accepting his offer.” He examined Merritt for a moment. “Has the Potent worn off yet?”

“Not yet. I don’t feel like I’m losing my mind anymore, but the bodily sensations are still pretty acute. Riding out the last half hour won’t be a picnic.”

Devon tilted his head. “Who said you had to ride it out?”

Merritt looked back at Devon, puzzled.

“Merritt, you are so frustrating.”

“I’m frustrating?”

Devon approached, slowly reaching out and toying with the tie around Merritt’s neck. “I know what I want. Now, what do I have to do to get it through your thick skull?”

“Get what through my thick skull?”

Devon looked like he was on the verge of rolling his eyes, but then he narrowed them, an impish smile spreading across his lips. He pulled down on Merritt’s tie, leaning in for a kiss.

A warm tingle suddenly rushed through Merritt’s lips, making his heart skip. He wrapped his arms around Devon, pulling him close and fervently returning the kiss. Only after his breath was spent did he finally withdraw. “Is this a good idea?” he gasped.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Devon gave him a playful nudge. “I’m only asking for one night. Is it against the rules for perpetual duty soldiers to have fun?” He raised his head to meet Merritt’s lips again.

After another minute of kissing, Merritt pulled back again. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier that you wanted to do this?”

Devon pressed his lips together, his eyebrow twitching as he tried to stifle his reaction. At last unable to hold himself back, he pounced on Merritt, and they tumbled to the floor.

Devon planted sweet, teasing kisses on Merritt’s lips. While returning the kisses, Merritt slid Devon’s T-shirt up over his chest. Devon deftly wriggled out of it then returned his lips to Merritt’s while undoing Merritt’s tie. Finally withdrawing, he gestured with his head down the adjacent hallway and met Merritt’s eyes.

Together, they stumbled toward the bedroom, leaving a trail of socks and shirts and blue ties in their wake. Merritt tossed Devon onto the bouncy queen bed in a show of strength that earned him a happily startled gasp. He explored Devon’s body, his fingers and tongue gliding over soft skin before returning for Devon’s mouth. As they kissed, he attempted to untie the knot at the waist of Devon’s pants, but somehow he only managed to tighten the knot. After a moment of fumbling, Devon laughed into Merritt’s mouth and reached down to untie it himself.

“What did you do, weld these things together?” Devon asked, struggling with the impossibly tight knot. Merritt crawled back a step, filled with the irrational worry that the knot could never be undone and Devon would be stuck in his pajama pants indefinitely.

At last, Devon managed to loosen the knot, and Merritt made up for lost time by yanking the pants down along with Devon's boxer-briefs. He grabbed Devon by the hips and lowered his parted lips.

The Potent's physical effects were as powerful as ever. Stardust trickled down the back of his neck as Devon ran his fingers through his hair. The sounds of Devon's gasps and moans amplified the pulsing in his own mouth.

He chased the sparks in his mouth, dragging the tip of his tongue and tightening his lips as Devon thrashed. He would have gladly knelt between Devon's thighs for hours, listening to the sighs and whispered pleas, basking in the rising heat from Devon's skin. As he was on the verge of taking Devon to the edge, Devon pulled away and whispered, "Wait." Reaching for the nightstand drawer, he retrieved a condom and a bottle of lube, raising an eyebrow in invitation.

Merritt took them from his hand, leaning in and warming him up with a long, languid kiss. He kissed a trail down Devon's chest and back while sliding on the condom and lubing himself with one hand. Devon's fingers met his, helping to spread the slick gel and sending a shockwave of pleasure through him.

With slick fingers, Merritt slid a hand under Devon. He worked gently, afraid to hurt Devon, and Devon gave him an insistent, demanding nudge. Taking the hint, Merritt quickened his pace, twisting and thrusting with his fingers until Devon's sighs turned to moans.

Merritt leaned forward, seeing the hunger in Devon's eyes. "You ready?" he whispered.

Devon's grip bit into Merritt's arm, his gaze wickedly seductive. "I've been ready for six fucking hours. *Do it.*"

Meeting Devon's lips again, Merritt pushed forward with tongue and hips in unison. Devon gasped into his mouth and pulled him close.

Merritt was on the edge, already fighting that familiar dreaded sensation he'd felt at the Sheridan with Belmont—like he was dangerously close to spilling over too early. Yet somehow, the Potent kept him balanced there, riding wave after wave without tipping. His heart quickened. His muscles tightened. The sweet tension pulsed

harder and harder until it was nearly unbearable, but he didn't withdraw.

Devon's breaths huffed against the side of his neck. Like Merritt, he was hovering on the edge, eyes closed, brows furrowed, fists clenching the bedsheets. Merritt reached down, stroking Devon without slowing his thrusts. He needed to see Devon's release, feel Devon's release before his own.

The breaths at his neck grew quicker and shallower, punctuated by soft moans. He pushed Devon for more, watching the tension grow between Devon's brows. Devon drew back his lips, and Merritt heard his own name gasped out in a way he'd never heard before. Devon's body quaked and trembled, his back arching off the mattress. Then he collapsed, his chest heaving.

Merritt rode the spasms of Devon's body, the flush of Potent spreading across his chest and warming him down to his core. Sparks erupted like firecrackers in his fingers and toes and thighs while the fluttering ache between his legs grew overpowering. A seismic tremor shook him. Overcome, he squeezed Devon in a crushing embrace, surrendering to each excruciating pulse until his body was spent.

As his arms gave way and he fell to the mattress, Devon grinned at him, stroking his cheek with the back of his fingers. Saying nothing, Devon drew in close and tucked his head under Merritt's chin, softly kissing his chest and then closing his eyes.

That was good. Merritt wrapped his arms around Devon, holding him tight. *It was good. Just stop thinking and let it be good.*

But he didn't feel good. Not anymore. He felt a lead weight in the pit of his stomach.

That was good! Why can't you just leave it alone?

It had been perfect. If Merritt had existed only for the forty minutes that he'd been at Devon's house, he'd have felt like he had everything he ever needed. No complaints. No shortcomings. No regrets.

Holding Devon in his arms was a rare, pleasant comfort. It couldn't compare to the nights he'd held Torrence—nights where an intertwining of arms felt like an exchange of souls—but he never would have expected it to. It had still been a great night. Why wasn't it good enough?

He knew why. And he blamed the Potent.

Hours ago, he'd surrendered to Belmont's touch, so overwhelmed with lust that he could barely see straight. He'd braced himself in the privacy of Belmont's bathroom, reeling from the desire that he was almost powerless to resist. He'd cursed himself for compromising his judgment, for taking a drug he couldn't hold. And then he'd done everything in his power to avoid sleeping with Belmont. He'd been determined not to succumb to the drug—not to succumb to the lure of Belmont's sultry eyes and dexterous hands—even if sex would have been the easiest way out. Belmont's body was sweet poison, and he refused to take a sip.

When he'd finally come to Devon, they'd reveled in each other's company. Devon had sent those same shooting stars through Merritt's body, with every bit as much intensity as the physical sensations he'd felt with Belmont.

But the wild, feverish thirst that had left him panting from Belmont's touch never once surfaced with Devon, even under the influence of the same drug.

He'd always been told that Potent's effects were more physical than mental, but in the midst of his blinding thirst for every brush of Belmont's fingers, he'd refused to believe it. He needed to believe that the Potent had caused his desire instead of just adding a few sparks to what had already been there.

He blamed the Potent, even though he knew the Potent was innocent.

Staring across the dark room, he pulled Devon a little closer.

Well. This is inconvenient.