

# DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 18

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Chapter 18

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## CHAPTER 18

Merritt was taking a risk, poking around in Devon's kitchen without his permission. But he felt compelled to do something to show his appreciation. Devon had put his future on the line for Merritt's sake. And last night, he'd offered Merritt more of his warmth than Merritt could remember feeling from anyone in years. Devon deserved all the world's warmth in return, but if Merritt lacked a fire bright enough to give it to him, the least he could do was make him breakfast.

In a sphere rife with meal substitutes and convenience foods, only a minority of blue-ties ever bothered to cook for themselves. Just two days ago, Merritt had read a haughty North Sphere news editorial celebrating "the demise of the home cook" and suggesting that such menial tasks be left solely to restaurant workers and domestic servants. Merritt himself had learned how to cook during his years of working part time in the mess hall at military headquarters while he was still in training. Instead of following protocol, he'd studied pirated cookbooks from the above ground ebook collection and used his newfound knowledge to subtly improve whatever dish he was tasked with preparing.

His results weren't always noticeable. Sometimes he had to cut his losses and acknowledge that there wasn't a whole lot he could do to get his allies enthused about smelt aspic for breakfast. But he found endless gratification in those rare occasions when he was able to improve a dish and see the reactions on his fellow soldiers' faces. It'd been a long time since he'd last had a chance to cook for someone, and he wanted to send Devon off with a smile the same way he had for his comrades in arms.

Devon had more raw ingredients in his icebox and cabinets than the typical blue-tie, and he didn't appear to have any servants, leading Merritt to suspect that he had at least some cooking skills of his own.

But his kitchen appliances were pristine to the point of looking like they'd never been used. Merritt made a mental note to clean up thoroughly after himself.

Half an hour later, he was able to greet Devon in the kitchen with scrambled pigeon eggs and sweet lentil pancakes.

Devon looked puzzled at first. He glanced groggily at the clock on the wall then back at the food. "Where did you get those? Did you run out to the shop? Did you sleep at *all*?"

"I cooked," Merritt replied, suddenly self-conscious. "You had all the ingredients, and I figured you had to eat something, so..."

"Ingredients?" Devon asked with a laugh, glancing at the container of lentil flour on the counter. "I just got those for decoration. It's what the elites do. They say your kitchen looks better if it's fully stocked. That flour has to be at least a couple years old."

"I checked the ingredients. It's got some heavy duty preservatives in there. I've cooked with older flour at the mess hall before."

With a shrug, Devon said, "Well, either way, all of this looks a hell of a lot better than the meal bar I was planning to have."

They sat down at the table, and Merritt subtly watched Devon take his first taste of the food. He was undoubtedly exhausted. In the wake of their passion, neither one of them had thought to take a sleep enhancer before bed, and Devon's vacant but twitchy gaze betrayed a dependence on the pills that was likely even stronger than Merritt's. But halfway through the eggs, Devon mustered up the energy to say to Merritt, "You're a good cook."

Devon didn't seem to have it in him to say more than that for the remainder of the meal. But the satisfaction Merritt felt from those words alone was enough to make all the effort worthwhile.

And enough to distract him from the thoughts of Belmont that had needled him throughout the past hour. It wasn't worth it to dwell on Belmont, on an attraction that was physical and nothing more. His mind and his will were steering this ship, and he wouldn't allow himself to be led astray by wayward hormones. The dread he'd felt the

night before upon recognizing the nature of his attraction now felt like a distant memory.

So what if Belmont made his heart pound a little harder than normal? He couldn't imagine them ever sharing this kind of a peaceful morning after. How would Belmont have ridiculed his gesture of a home-cooked breakfast? Then again, they wouldn't have even gotten to breakfast. Belmont would have tossed him to the curb the moment his own physical needs were met.

Most of his past trysts had ended that way. It was, after all, difficult to prepare and serve a home-cooked meal in the stairwell at Yackley's. Devon had said himself that he was only interested in one night together, and Merritt understood. But this peaceful breakfast was... nice. It reminded him of his mornings at the orphanage cafeteria, huddled together with Torrence, holding hands under the table and sharing secretive smiles over what they'd done the night before.

Somehow, someday, he'd find that again. But he sure as hell wouldn't get it from Belmont.

After breakfast, Merritt took care of the dishes. Not wanting to overstay his welcome, he quickly dressed, double-checked all his belongings, and prepared to leave. He respected Devon's wish for only one night, but he still felt enough for Devon to risk a goodbye kiss on the lips. Devon returned the kiss, giving Merritt a sweet smile after they parted.

Sunday was Merritt's day off, and his schedule was open until his usual evening meeting with Archer for his next round of antitoxins. But it didn't feel like a day off. The moment he exited Devon's mellow abode, he was forced to confront the monumental task that lay ahead.

He needed to call Mercury and request a meeting. But contacting the King out of the blue was intimidating, and he needed to plan his approach.

After a long morning workout, he showered and stopped at a diner around noon, ordering a light lunch and a cup of Calm-infused tea. He sipped it while mentally rehearsing his upcoming conversation. Once he felt the Calm kick in, he bit the bullet and stepped into the deserted restroom to make his call.

“Merritt,” Mercury said on the other line. “Which of my top-tier allies is dead this time?”

“Damen, hi.” Merritt swallowed and cleared his throat. “I have some important information that I need to share with you, face to face. Would I be able to meet with you?”

“Is it urgent?”

“It’s about Higgins. The MYGG-2 poisoning.”

“You have my attention.”

“There isn’t too much more that I can say over the phone. Can I meet with you?”

There was a brief pause. “My work hours are all booked today, and I have a dinner meeting already scheduled. We can meet briefly afterward. Come by my suite at half past nine. I’ll grant you access to the elevator.”

With a meeting that late, Merritt would have to reschedule his appointment with Archer. After sending her a text, he returned to the military training grounds, passing the next few hours at the firing range and poisons course.

He made the trip to headquarters earlier than necessary so he could arrive at Mercury’s suite on the dot. After several minutes in the parking lot reading news articles on his phone, he received a text from Mercury.

*Come up at any time. The guards will let you in.*

Merritt stowed his phone and began the trek inside. He took the now familiar elevator up to Mercury’s suite, crossing his fingers and hoping he wouldn’t run into Belmont on the way. As ordered, he stepped off the elevator and headed down a hall lined with eight visible guards, and perhaps more lying in wait behind the closed doors he passed. The nearest pair of guards appeared unsurprised to see Merritt. One of them held a thumbprint scanner at the ready.

After Merritt’s thumbprint was verified, the guard said, “Please remove your weapons and poison packs. We will return them to you on your way out.”

Merritt removed his holsters, poisons, and concealed blade, and one of the guards took them into a neighboring thumbprint-protected room. The first guard retrieved a small collapsible high-frequency scanning wand and ran it over Merritt's body. Merritt watched the scanner's screen as it displayed a part-by-part monochrome nude depiction of his body in sync with the scanner's movements. Apparently, anyone wishing to see Mercury in his home had to be willing to forgo their privacy.

After every last bit of Merritt's body had graced the handheld screen, he was cleared to proceed past the remaining line of guards and into Mercury's suite. The guard closest to the entrance opened the door for Merritt and motioned for him to enter.

The door swung shut behind him, and he took only a few steps into the foyer before he fell still, struck by the sight of his surroundings. Mercury's suite was as understated and elegant as Belmont's was lavish. The masculine palette of earth tones, cool blue-grays, and neutrals was soothing and powerful at the same time. Mercury had rejected the underground's fickle trends and instead celebrated classic North Sphere styles: metal wall panels, gleaming marble flooring, streamlined seating with smooth, seamless curves.

Merritt wished he could take a few pictures to show Devon. He and Mercury seemed to have similar tastes. But the idea of whipping out his phone camera in the King's suite seemed inappropriate, whether or not it was technically permitted.

Unlike Belmont's suite, which seemed limited to the basic living area, bedroom, and bathroom, Mercury's suite appeared to hold a myriad of rooms behind a maze of hallways. Before Merritt could explore any further, he heard Mercury's voice somewhere to his left, as if playing through a speaker. "Merritt, can you hear me?"

"Yes, King," Merritt said into the empty room.

"Go down the left corridor, and then turn right when you reach the end."

Merritt followed Mercury's directions. The door to the right of the corridor was heavy wood with a small inset window, giving the appearance of a spa or steam room within. When Merritt opened it, he

was indeed met by a cloud of fresh, clean steam. It obscured his path while filling his nostrils with the familiar scent that always made him burn when he sat close to Mercury. He squinted as he walked, unable to see more than a foot in front of him. Humid air condensed on his skin, collecting under his suit jacket and heating him past the point of comfort.

From a distance ahead, he heard Mercury laugh. “You look a little lost, Merritt.”

The steam parted. Merritt stood in a room made entirely of what looked like glass, but it couldn’t have been pure glass since it wasn’t fogged. His heart skipped when he looked past the transparent floor, beholding a view so deep and narrow it looked like an elevator shaft. Growing from the shadowy depths countless stories below were tall, thin trees with spindly green leaves—genetically modified bamboo, if Merritt were to venture a guess. The tallest trees extended up past the steam room’s clear walls, surrounding them from all sides. Merritt felt like he was hovering in the midst of a lush forest. There were barely any accessible areas in the underground with green foliage, and the sight left him breathless.

At the center of the room was a sunken hot tub, also crafted in a clear material. Mercury sat inside, the water bubbling at the level of his pecs. Merritt immediately lowered his gaze to avoid fixating on the dusting of hair on Mercury’s wet, sculpted chest.

Mercury leaned back, his arms resting at either side of him on the edge of the tub. Gesturing toward the water beside him, he said, “Hop in if you’d like.”

*Yes. I would like.*

But that couldn’t have been what Mercury actually meant, could it? He wouldn’t just casually invite a random underling to join him in his clean, clear hot tub where he was...

...apparently not wearing a bathing suit.

“Uh...” Merritt again averted his gaze, hoping the copious steam would conceal his reddened cheeks.



Mercury tilted his head and observed Merritt with an amused half-smile.

Flustered, Merritt took several steps back and tripped over a wooden caddy. “I... I... I... I...”

*Did you just say “I” four times?*

“I...”

“You had information for me about Higgins,” Mercury said, raising a thick brow.

“Yes!” Merritt cringed at the sound of his own cracking voice. “I have something to show you too. But there might be too much steam in here. I hate to interrupt your... your bath... but this might not be the best place for me to hand it over. I can wait until you’re finished.”

“No, I’m finished. We can talk in the lounge, back near the entrance.”

Mercury began to rise, and Merritt bolted for the door. “I’ll meet you out there,” he said, turning his back on Mercury before he could rise from the water. He’d long since lost his grip on his composure, and there would be no hiding his reaction if he caught a clear view of what had previously been distorted below the water’s surface.

Only after darting through the swinging wooden door and passing two additional side rooms did he slow his pace. He needed to catch his breath.

After returning to the relative privacy of the entryway, he attempted to mop the moisture off his face with his equally damp hands. He was grateful to be away from the heat of the steam room, but he still longed to remove his jacket. A few minutes later, Mercury emerged from the hallway, hair slicked back and wet, and Merritt stepped forward to greet him. He wore a luxurious black cashmere robe that Merritt still found distracting. It didn’t help that the belt was a little loose and Mercury’s chest was still plainly visible.

Mercury headed to the wet bar and poured two glasses of mineral water. “I dismissed my servants for the evening,” he said, emptying a tube of Focus into each glass. “It’s best that we have privacy tonight,

given the subject you want to discuss.” Following etiquette, he held both glasses out to Merritt.

Merritt hesitated just a moment. It felt wrong for him to be served by his King instead of the other way around, even though he knew that Mercury was only following proper hosting etiquette in the absence of hired servants. He hoped to one day be able to return the favor, but he couldn’t imagine ever having a living space worthy of a King’s presence, or mastering elite etiquette to the point of being able to host an elite in his home.

What might Mercury think about a home-cooked breakfast the morning after...?

Merritt shook the thought out of his head. “Thank you,” he said, accepting a glass. He waited for Mercury to take his requisite sip and then followed suit.

A smile spread across Merritt’s face after his first sip. It had been ages since he and Mercury had discussed drink preferences and played cards at the elite café, but Mercury had remembered Merritt’s drink of choice. The warmth in Merritt’s chest could have rivaled Potent’s buzz.

“Packaged chemical drinks are never quite as good as freshly mixed tubes at a bar,” Mercury said, “but high grade packaged Focus is still better than low grade fresh Focus, if you ask me.”

Merritt took another sip. “I see what you mean.”

Mercury leaned back against the counter. “So, tell me what’s on your mind.”

Merritt set his glass down on the counter and took in a deep breath. “Yesterday, I was able to find evidence of who killed Higgins.”

Not even the tiniest shift in Mercury’s poker face.

Merritt reached into his pack, retrieving the two disinfecting wipes—one still in the packaging, the other tinted blue in a plastic bag. “I’m sure you noticed that Higgins had a habit of chewing on the stems of his glasses. Before the board meeting you invited me to, I saw Belmont cleaning Higgins’s glasses with a disposable wipe, and I thought it was strange that Belmont would clean his glasses, and that he’d carry disposable glasses wipes with him when he normally cleans

his own glasses with a handkerchief. So I managed to retrieve these disposable wipes from Belmont's bedroom, and I had one of them tested at a lab." He held out the wipe in the plastic bag. "As you can see, it's a positive test for MYGG-2." Then he handed over the wipe still in the package. "That one hasn't been opened. But if you look near the top, you'll see a tiny puncture mark, where I think Belmont inserted a needle to apply the poison. He also has more like that one in the nightstand drawer on the left side of his bed. They would probably still be there now—if you wanted to send anyone in for a search."

Mercury examined the wipes, maintaining his perfect poker face. He looked back up at Merritt then down at the wipes again.

Merritt cleared his throat. "So, to summarize, it looks like Belmont killed Higgins by using poisoned wipes to clean his glasses."

At last, the poker face fell away. Mercury set the wipes down on the counter and gave Merritt a subtle smile.

Merritt stared back at him hopefully, his eyes wide.

"I already knew that Belmont killed Higgins. I just couldn't put the pieces together. But now it makes perfect sense." His inscrutable smile lingered. "Thank you, Merritt, for your excellent deduction."

"You knew already?" Merritt's brows furrowed. "If you knew that Belmont killed Higgins, then why did you make him your new right hand?"

"He earned it. I've known Higgins for thirty years, and I know how competent he was. Killing him would have been no small feat." Mercury took a sip of his Focus and then shook his head, chuckling softly. "Poisoned glasses cleaner. It's clever."

"You *wanted* Belmont to kill Higgins?"

"I want the most clever, most ruthless, most capable person in the North Sphere as my right hand. Belmont just proved to me that he's that person."

After a stretch of silence, Mercury stepped away from the counter and stood in front of Merritt. His gaze was sharp and inquisitive; it seemed to probe even deeper than the guards' invasive scanning wand,

and Merritt wondered what Mercury was able to see of him that he'd thought he'd successfully hidden.

"Now," Mercury continued, "Higgins has his loyalists. There are people in our sphere who would have Belmont's head if they were given proof of what he did. I won't protect him if word happens to get out, but neither will I hang him out to dry. How could I punish him for such an elegant murder?"

Merritt wanted more than anything to slip out from under Mercury's scrutinizing stare. His disbelief, his horror, and his disappointment were all on display in front of the King who valued stoicism above all else. All his efforts to implicate Belmont and get the truth out, all the risks he took—and now, Mercury was laughing it off and commending Belmont for a job well done?

"You have a very expressive face," Mercury said. "Normally, I'd disapprove of such a display of emotion. But on you, I find it quite entertaining to watch."

Merritt felt a flash of anger, and he directed all his attention to reviving his fallen poker face. For the first time, he got the sense that Mercury didn't take him seriously. That Mercury might even think he was stupid or naïve. The realization left him feeling numb. Hollowed out.

"If..." He took a sip of Focus to wet his throat. "If the information I brought you has no further value, then I suppose I shouldn't take up any more of your time. Thank you for meeting with me."

"You're leaving before finishing your drink?" Mercury asked, raising an eyebrow.

Right. Archer had told him during his elite etiquette lessons that it was impolite not to finish a chemical drink bought or served by an elite. Steeling himself, he said, "No, I'll finish. It's... really good."

Standing awkwardly, he forced a long sip. Mercury made no effort to fill the silence; his gaze still seemed fixated on Merritt's transparent facial expressions, and Merritt wished he'd just look away. He was starting to feel like a cheap prop set out for display.

What an idiot he was, to think Mercury would have given a damn about his revelation. How could he have so thoroughly misread the King who'd held his devotion for years? He'd wasted his limited time and resources for nothing. He'd endangered Archer and Devon—risked their exposure to Belmont—for nothing.

He drank his remaining Focus as quickly as he could without appearing rude. After finishing, he set his glass down on the counter. Almost mechanically, he asked, "Is there any other way I can be of assistance to you, King?"

Mercury gave him one more glance through narrowed eyes before deliberately sliding the disposable wipes across the table toward him. "No. That'll be all."

Merritt tried to ignore the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as he stowed the wipes in his pack. With a courteous nod, he turned and headed for the door.

Before he could open it, Mercury called to him, "I'm impressed with your sleuthing, Merritt."

Merritt hesitated, then turned to face Mercury.

"Your inquisitiveness is the very thing that caught my attention in the first place." Mercury took another slow sip of his Focus. "As with Higgins, I know Belmont too. I know how competent he is. You caught him red-handed without being caught by him, and that's no small feat either. The ball is in your court now."

"What do you mean?" Merritt asked.

Mercury pointed toward the pack where Merritt had stowed the disposable wipes. "Belmont underestimated you, and you now have enough information in your hands to ruin him. How you use that information is up to you."

Did Mercury *want* him to go after Belmont? Or was Mercury testing his loyalty to his sphere's leadership? Belmont had gotten away with assassinating Mercury's right hand, but Belmont was only one rank below Higgins, and Belmont hadn't taken a soldier's vow of duty and obedience.

“Belmont is your right hand,” Merritt said after a long pause. “It sounds like you approve of his performance. If I cause trouble for him, it would also cause trouble for you.”

“I only approve of Belmont’s performance as long as he continues to keep himself at the top. You have the power to drag him down, if that’s what you want to do. I’m giving you free rein. But would you be prepared to accept the consequences?” Mercury met Merritt’s gaze and held it. “Exposing Belmont would be a bold move. It would certainly gain you his respect. But no one had Belmont’s respect more than Higgins, and let’s not forget where Higgins is now.”

“I remember the last time you told me about earning Belmont’s respect, King. It was at the quarterly review party. You suggested I try to make nice with Belmont.”

“At the time, I didn’t believe you had any weapons in your arsenal capable of challenging Belmont. Now you do.”

Merritt struggled to maintain eye contact with Mercury, but his King’s gaze was so cold he had to look away. Staring down at the door handle, he said, “I guess I have a lot of things to think about.”

“I’ll be interested to see what you decide to do.” Mercury finished the last of his Focus. “Have a good night, Merritt.”

“You too, King.”

“Damen.”

Merritt swallowed. “You too, Damen.”

As he headed for the exit, he chanced a fleeting look over his shoulder. Mercury was already gone, a hint of black cashmere fluttering through a nearby doorway before disappearing from sight.