

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 22

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Patreon Serial Edition

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CHAPTER 22

The jarring buzz of Merritt's phone roused him from his unsteady nap against the poison trap control room's door. He could only pry his eyes open enough to make out Archer's blurry name on his screen before he raised the phone to his ear. "Hey."

"That's just what I was afraid of," Archer replied.

"What's what you're afraid of?"

"It's one in the afternoon on a Sunday, and you're half-asleep. Have you really been sitting in that control room since Friday?"

Merritt grunted in response, unable to muster the energy for a real reply.

"You're giving Mercury a tour through the completed poison traps tomorrow, aren't you? How do you expect to be fresh enough to impress him?"

"What other choice do I have? I can't leave this place unattended. It's too big a risk."

Since Merritt's showdown with Belmont outside Torrence's flat two weeks ago, Belmont could no longer blatantly target either Merritt or Torrence. But Merritt knew that Belmont's silent acquiescence was only a front for whatever plan he had in store next. He was probably already spinning a new web for Merritt—one intricate enough that no single thread could be traced back to his hands.

Belmont's most likely target was the poison trap project. It was due to be wrapped up in mere hours, with nothing left but the final inspection by Mercury himself. Merritt had faith in his team's programming work and was confident that Belmont wouldn't be able to mess with any of the code, not even if he enlisted Mannheim to help. The only other thing Belmont could do was compromise the integrity

of the construction. It didn't matter how skilled the construction crew was if Belmont decided to haul a pipe saw into the tunnels and start cutting. Staffing of the traps was only scheduled for after Mercury approved the project, so Merritt opted to monitor the main control room throughout the weekend.

That still left two additional control rooms, several miles of pipework, and the corridors themselves unattended. While the control rooms and corridors were equipped with motion sensors, Belmont had high enough clearance to override the alert system.

Every dollar of Merritt's budget was spoken for, so he couldn't staff the traps with paid security personnel. Instead, he'd negotiated with Balbo to free up troops across Chem Ops to stand guard until Mercury's review. He'd hated to ask her for a favor, but it helped to break the ice after a few uncomfortable months with little personal interaction between them. Balbo had even generously offered to cover Merritt's duties while he manned the main control room. He hoped to one day be able to repay her.

On top of guarding the poison traps, Merritt had spent the quiet hours of his shifts researching painkillers in hopes that he could bring some to Torrence, but his searches had all led him to dead ends. The brand of painkiller Torrence had at his flat had been discontinued, and even black market sales for the pill appeared to have dried up. The only painkillers in Merritt's price range were highly addictive, and Merritt refused to put Torrence at risk. Torrence gave himself five years to live, but maybe the right treatment could change those five years into ten, or thirty, or sixty. Maybe there was a cure for his condition that he just couldn't access due to his rank. Maybe he wasn't terminal at all.

He refused to see Torrence as a dying man. This battle wasn't over yet.

Yesterday, he'd made his first attempt to hack into a distribution center for Northern Chem, the North Sphere's official pharmaceuticals manufacturer, but he'd failed to uncover any vulnerabilities in the code. He'd have to investigate other options once the poison trap project was finished.

Between standing guard and searching for pills, he'd already pushed past the limits of his sleep enhancers. After so many consecutive days, today's pill only made him jittery without making him any more alert.

"You can't stand guard forever," Archer said just as he began to doze off again. "We have immunizations tonight."

"Ellis will cover for me until I can come back."

"You need to get some sleep. *Real* sleep, in a real bed. We'll do the immunizations, and then you can go back to the barracks to rest, and I'll go to the control room and keep watch for you overnight."

"I can't ask you to do that. You have to work tomorrow morning too."

"True. But for me, it's just another Monday morning. For you, it's a big day. And you're not asking me. I'm offering."

"Oh, Archer..." Merritt let out a low, long sigh. "What have I done to deserve a friend as good as you?"

"You know I can't take it when you get sappy," Archer said in a scolding tone.

"Right. Sorry." He gave a delirious chuckle. "It still means a lot to me, though. You mean a lot to me."

"Merritt, *stop*," Archer groaned.

"But you *do*."

"Ugh, sleep-deprived blue-ties are even more insufferable than drunk blue-ties," Archer grumbled, but Merritt could have sworn he heard a hint of warmth in her voice.

The motorcycle ride back to the barracks after immunizations felt like driving through an optical illusion. The tunnel walls swirled and vibrated all around him, and he was lucky he managed to get home without crashing headlong into a stalagmite.

On his way into the barracks, he stopped at the open door to the officers' quarters and spotted Captain Ashland showing off an antique trombone to his colonel. "A gift from Belmont," he was saying. "For the robbery call our unit handled at sub-Ravenswood last week." The tinny honking that followed did even more to repel Merritt than Ashland's momentary sneer as he passed.

He stumbled into the enlisted soldiers' barracks and, without even changing out of his clothes, sprawled across his old bed. He'd tried so hard to adapt to sleeping at the officers' quarters, but if ever there was a deal breaker, it was a *goddamn trombone*.

Sleep came to him swiftly, but it felt like his eyes had only been closed for a minute before he was roused by the rocking and creaking of his bedframe, followed shortly after by telltale moaning and heavy breaths from above. Only half-aware of his surroundings, he let out a loud groan of frustration and mumbled, "You're kidding me, Kiona."

The rocking and moaning stopped, and Kiona stuck her head out from the top bunk. She hung upside down, her stick-straight black hair swaying. "Hey, Captain."

Merritt rubbed his eyes. Was he really awake? Was this really happening?

He *was* a captain, even if he wasn't Kiona's captain. Unlike his countless nights as a private enduring the cacophony of creaking bedsprings directly overhead, he had seniority now. If he wanted to, he could order Kiona to send her foreign lover packing. He was just tired and crabby enough to do it.

But he'd give her a chance to willingly comply before slamming her with an order. "Kiona. I have to give a presentation to Mercury tomorrow morning, and I'm exhausted. I know inter-sphere relationships are tricky, but can you and Argus please go *anywhere* else?"

A second head peered down at him from above, startling him. It wasn't the East Sphere officer he was expecting. He recognized a face he'd seen a multitude of times in Mercury's board meetings, and the realization left him stammering. "Coulter. I... I'm sorry to interrupt." Merritt lowered his head in a deferential nod.

“You’re meeting with Mercury tomorrow?” Coulter asked. He rolled his eyes. “He’ll give an audience to anyone these days.”

“It’s for the poison traps.”

“Right. I forgot you were helping out with that little project.”

Helping out. That was a funny way to say “leading.” But Merritt lacked the energy to even think of correcting him.

Oh well. He could always return to the officers’ quarters.

The moment he lifted his head off his pillow, the wailing, tortured *moo* of a distant trombone met his ears.

Goddamnit, Ashland. If Belmont had given Ashland that trombone for the purpose of disrupting Merritt’s rest the day before his presentation, then he was even pettier than Merritt had ever given him credit for.

“Coulter, sir, wouldn’t you two be more comfortable at your place? There’s no privacy in the barracks.”

“That’s what’s fun about it,” Coulter said. He pulled Kiona back onto the bed, and she let out a surprised laugh. “I’ve been with a girl in every region of the North Sphere except the waterways and military headquarters. But now I can cross one of the two off my list.”

“Okay, but if you two could... keep it down?”

“Just put your pillow over your head,” Coulter called from the top bunk.

The creaking of the metal bed frame resumed, and Merritt rolled face-down onto his pillow.

A morning scan and a round of simulations on all the poison traps netted no evidence of overnight sabotage. Archer had done her part to guard the controls, offering Merritt an encouraging smile as he arrived to relieve her of her shift.

The poison trap's control room was located at the top of a tall tower overlooking an untamed clearing at the northeast border of the military district. A row of guards stood in wait at the fortified barricade encircling the grounds, and a squad of foot soldiers manned their posts on the inside.

General Rhodes arrived at half past eight, briefly glancing at the data log on the control panel's main screen as Merritt made a last effort to tidy up the room. He tossed a few stray wrappers and empty test tubes from the packaged vials of Spark and Focus that had kept him company over the weekend, stowing the trash can in a closed cabinet before proceeding to wipe down any smudges and fingerprints he spotted on the computer screens. General Rhodes didn't attempt to engage him in conversation, which was good because he needed to save his mental energy for Mercury.

Shortly before nine, General Rhodes pulled a small bottle out of his pocket and handed it to Merritt. "For your eyes," he said.

Merritt examined the label. Medicated eye drops designed to instantly eliminate the appearance of redness or puffiness. Damn, how tired did he look? He was afraid to glance at his reflection on the nearest black screen. Instead, he said, "Thank you, General," and tilted his head back to administer the drops.

It wasn't until Mercury and Belmont's motorcade arrived on the grounds that Merritt's adrenaline finally kicked in. The King and right hand, flanked by their guard detail, dismounted their motorcycles and approached Merritt and General Rhodes at the entrance to the control room. Mercury said nothing, simply raising an eyebrow as a prompt for them to begin the presentation.

General Rhodes ushered both of them into the control room and toward a pair of seats. After a brief introduction, he passed the baton to Merritt, offering him a subtle but encouraging nod.

Merritt dove straight into the presentation, giving a rundown of the central panel's controls and the video surveillance feeds on either side. He explained the corridors' security features, including a network of thumbprint sensors, motion sensors, and thermal detectors, all hooked up to the security feeds of the three control rooms.

He then flipped through a slideshow of pipework diagrams on his laptop, detailing the process of stocking the pipes and maintaining their supply of poison so that they'd be ready at a moment's notice without posing a significant danger of leaks or ruptures. He pointed out the temperature controls, diagnostic equipment, and emergency drainage system.

Throughout his talk, Belmont slouched deep in his chair, filing his nails and acting as if he wasn't paying attention even though Merritt knew he was surely searching for any tiny inaccuracy in the presentation that he could pounce on.

Next, Merritt proceeded through a series of live demos showing how the security system would respond to various types of intrusion. After wrapping up the final demonstration nearly an hour later, he turned back to General Rhodes, who picked up the remainder of the presentation.

Rhodes discussed the details of the trap network's projected maintenance costs, their current expenditure, and staffing considerations. Then, after giving Mercury a chance for questions, he asked, "Are you ready to proceed to the corridors, King?"

"Yes," Mercury replied.

General Rhodes led the way out of the tower and to the parking lot, where Merritt had reserved a bike-drawn carriage so the group could ride to the poison traps together. Merritt was wedged in between Belmont and Mercury, with Rhodes taking the back seat. As awkward as it was to be sandwiched between the King and his right hand, Merritt was glad that he didn't have to drive in his current state of exhaustion.

Once they arrived at the Oakley Corridor, Merritt continued the tour. This portion of his presentation only took a few minutes, but he got a sense as he neared the end that Mercury had stopped paying attention. The King was looking around the corridor, eyes narrowed.

"This layout," Mercury said, pointing at the pipes that ran throughout the walls and ceilings. "Who designed this?"

"It was a group effort between the foreman, the lead engineer, and me," Merritt said.

Mercury didn't respond immediately. After another moment of reflection, he gave Merritt a glance. "This is the type of work I like to see. It's clearly functional; I can tell as much from your presentation. But the design also has a surprising amount of grace to it. It's sophisticated. Worthy of the North Sphere. I could see the elite wanting to showcase their houses' plumbing on their walls like this."

Merritt blushed at the unexpected compliment. He wasn't sure how to respond.

"Belmont had told me that your work on the pipes was 'shabby,' and that you would be unprepared for your presentation today. I can see that he was wrong. You've had answers to every one of my questions so far, and you know these traps backwards and forwards. I'm impressed."

The blush deepened. "Thank you, King."

Belmont was surprisingly quiet, even in the wake of Mercury calling him out. The presentation was almost over, and he had yet to say a word to try to discredit Merritt. Merritt wondered if the worst was waiting for him in the final stretch.

The presentation at the Hamlin Passage went as smoothly as the Oakley Corridor. Merritt kept glancing at Belmont, as if asking him to just get it over with and do whatever he was planning to do, but Belmont remained a silent observer throughout the presentation.

Mercury walked down the corridor, running his fingers over one of the pipes, and Merritt felt an instantaneous, visceral reaction at the sight of his King's hand gliding over the cylindrical length. Merritt immediately diverted his attention to a stray rock on the floor, running it under the ball of his foot as he waited for Mercury to give any further response.

After a minute of examination, Mercury turned back to Merritt. "Tell me about the materials used for the pipes again."

"Of course, King. It's our proprietary G-88 alloy, with our highest grade sealant." He continued to explain the composition of their alloy and its resistance to corrosion from water, the elements, and the poisons within. In the middle of his description of the sealant, Mercury held up a hand.

“Thank you, Merritt.” He gave Merritt an odd smile. “I remembered everything you said from the first time you explained it. But you have an incredibly melodic voice. Listening to you talk is enjoyable.”

Merritt’s cheeks flushed. “Thank you, King.”

At the opposite end of the corridor, Belmont rolled his eyes.

“Shall we head back?” Mercury asked.

Again, they piled into the carriage. As they began their ride, Merritt asked, “Do you have any last questions, King?”

“Just one,” Mercury replied. He set a hand on Merritt’s knee, and Merritt nearly jumped. “Why do you still have so much trouble calling me Damen?”

Merritt opened and closed his mouth. He glanced at Belmont, then to General Rhodes, then back to Mercury. “I apologize, King. I had assumed you didn’t want me to call you by your name when I was on duty and...” he glanced again at Belmont and Rhodes, “around other superiors.”

“I don’t care if we’re in the boardroom or playing a card game or sharing drinks. I want you to call me Damen.”

“Understood,” Merritt replied. “Damen.”

Mercury gave Merritt’s knee a gentle squeeze. “Excellent work on the poison traps. You’ve exceeded my expectations with this project. I daresay I’m looking forward to the day the West attempts to attack us.”

Merritt’s face flushed. “Thank you, Damen.”

“Speaking of drinks,” Mercury continued, “Coulter and I are planning for dinner and drinks this weekend at his flat north of headquarters. He’ll be serving West Sphere cuisine and a few rare bottles of South Sphere wine. Perhaps you’d like to come?”

“Oh...” Merritt nodded, trying to disguise his surprise. “I’d be honored.”

Mercury gave an offhanded laugh. “I’d invite Belmont too, but he has no appreciation for Avalon red.”

“Avalon is putrid,” Belmont snapped.

“You see?” Mercury replied without a glance at Belmont.

Merritt got the sense that Mercury was almost trying to rub Merritt’s invitation in Belmont’s face. It was a strange way for a King to treat his right hand, but it seemed that Mercury never liked for his higher-ups to get too comfortable in their positions.

And Merritt didn’t entirely mind seeing Belmont squirm.

“I’ve never had Avalon red,” Merritt said, “but I’m looking forward to it.”

“Good,” Mercury replied.

As Merritt turned away from Mercury, he caught a glimpse of Belmont at his other side. Belmont’s gaze was locked on Mercury’s hand, a scowl on his face.

Shortly after lunch, Merritt was surprised to receive a group text from Belmont. *Party at the Brighton Rose tonight at 9pm to celebrate our success on the poison trap project. Well done, team! Drinks are on me.*

Despite being the project’s point person, Merritt wouldn’t have expected Belmont to include him in any of the resulting festivities. It appeared based on the guest list that everyone who worked at a management level or higher on the project was invited, along with a handful of Mercury’s advisors, but Mercury himself was not planning to attend.

As usual, Merritt didn’t want to go. Aside from having to work the next morning and needing to catch up on sleep, the party was hosted at a West-owned nightclub in neutral territory. Merritt assumed that Belmont had chosen a West-owned establishment as a symbolic gesture of their anticipated victory over the West Sphere, but the paranoid part of him wondered if Belmont had remembered his

discomfort around dogs and chosen a West-owned location just to put him on edge.

But in the end, he had to go, if for no other reason than to express his gratitude to everyone on his team. He owed them a night out to celebrate, and he'd do his best to act like he wanted to be there—even if it meant bumming a few more of those miracle-working eye drops off General Rhodes.

The thumping music and flashing lights did little to help his mood as he entered the club at nine in the evening. Being a Monday night, the club wasn't at its most crowded, but there were still enough people to bump the decibels up to a grating level. Forcing himself to ignore it, he quickly headed across the room to give his thanks to General Rhodes. Rhodes, a grin on his flushed face, urged Merritt to get a drink and loosen up before slogging his way through greeting everyone else.

With no North Sphere chemical options at the bar, Merritt settled on a vodka tonic, hoping that if he held it in his hand and took an occasional tiny sip, he at least wouldn't look like a stiff.

As he waited for the bartender to prepare his drink, he took in his surroundings. At the center of the dance floor, Belmont was grinding on a male dog. The sight left Merritt seething, and he couldn't pinpoint why. Most irritating of all was that Belmont was an amazing dancer. Merritt hated that Belmont's gyrating body had the power to command his attention.

It took all his effort to pry his gaze off the couple and redirect it to his surroundings. He saw General Rhodes at a table with the foreman. Nina, the lead programmer, was at the far end of the bar, sipping a cocktail while chatting with Coulter. It looked like Coulter was trying to put the moves on her, flashing his usual charming smile and leaning in close, but Nina maintained her distance. Merritt didn't bother trying to figure out how Coulter could jump from Kiona the night before to Nina tonight, but Nina was refreshingly resistant to his games.

He recognized a few faces from other spheres around the room as well. Argus, the hot-headed East Sphere officer and Kiona's prior fling,

was getting hammered at the bar. 75th, Odell's partner, sat at a table in the far corner, huddled behind her laptop and wearing her usual inexplicable pair of sunglasses. Merritt was sure that she had come to gather intelligence for the South. He couldn't imagine her frequenting such a club for enjoyment.

The bartender slid a lowball glass across the counter toward Merritt. Before Merritt could pay for his drink, he saw a large hand smack several dollar bills onto the counter. "I got this," a familiar voice said at his side.

Merritt recognized the black armband then glanced up to meet eyes with Troy. He wanted to insist on paying for himself, but he knew it wasn't proper etiquette to decline someone of a much higher rank. So he gave an uneasy smile and said, "General. Thank you."

Troy ordered a beer, and then he gestured with his head toward a nearby table. He held up a card deck in his other hand. "Got time for a game?"

Merritt hesitated. He wasn't in the mood to play. He just wanted to give his brain a rest for the night. But declining a card game would have been even worse than declining a drink. He followed Troy to the table, hoping he was at least fresh enough not to embarrass himself in front of another man who he knew to be a skilled strategist. "What are we playing for?"

"How 'bout a hundred?"

Merritt gritted his teeth. He didn't have a hundred dollars. Mercury would likely pay him a bonus for his good work on the poison traps, but he couldn't count on that money until it was in his hand. "It might take me a couple days to get you that much."

"Hey, I know you're good for it." They took a seat at the table. "But I'm surprised you're that hard up. You're a military captain, right?"

"Military captain isn't a high-paying job where I come from, sir."

"Right." Troy shuffled his deck. "But last time I saw you, you were just a sergeant. Congrats on the promotions, by the way."

"Thank you, sir."

“Why’s it so hard for you to call me Troy?”

First Mercury, now Troy. At his current level of exhaustion, his North Sphere military habits were a challenge to overcome.

“Old habits,” Merritt replied. “And it’s been awhile since we’ve spoken.” He watched Troy give his deck another shuffle, trying to put his thoughts into words. “But how do your subordinates show you respect if they can’t call you by your title?”

“They show respect by obeying the chain of command and doing their jobs. A guy can say ‘yes, sir’ all he wants, but it doesn’t mean respect if he can’t follow it up with action. You guys in the North Sphere think titles and formalities are the same as respect. In the East, effective action is respect. We still call Cannon ‘King,’ but the rest of us don’t give a shit about titles. It’s just extra words we don’t need.”

Merritt knew there was more to the story. He was familiar with East Sphere history, and he knew that their military used to use honorifics too. He’d always gotten the sense that Troy preferred the old ways. Throughout their waterways mission, he’d seemed to warm up whenever Merritt called him by title, despite his initial verbal objection to it.

But Merritt didn’t have the mental energy to push the subject now. He’d have to ask about it another time. “Thank you for the explanation. Troy.”

Troy glanced around the room while he dealt the first hand. “Lots of blue-ties here tonight. You guys throw parties for everything, don’t you?” He raised a hairless eyebrow. “Special occasion?”

“We’re celebrating the completion of a difficult project.”

“What kind of project?”

“The confidential kind.”

Troy chuckled. Then he motioned for Merritt to lay down his first set of face-offs.

As Merritt suspected, Troy was a skilled player. His strategy seemed to be to barely eke out a win on two of each four face-offs, maintaining a tie while reserving his most powerful cards for the end.

He confirmed Merritt's suspicions by turning to face cards and combos in the later rounds, and Merritt found himself having to think creatively in order to counter those hard-to-beat cards. In the final round, Troy took the first three face-offs, but Merritt still had a one-card lead going into the fourth of four face-offs. He played the best card he had left in his hand: Quincy, a high-ranking East Sphere officer and the nine of clubs.

Merritt gaped in shock when Troy laid down his final card against Quincy. It was Merritt's card: two of spades. He knew Troy had better cards left in his hand, and he wondered why he would have thrown the game in the final moment.

Merritt nodded. "Good game," he said, reaching for the cards.

"Hold up," Troy said. "You're not gonna give me a chance to challenge?"

"Is there anything to challenge?" Merritt asked. "You took everything this round except the last face-off."

"Yeah. You're not gonna let me challenge the last face-off?"

Merritt shrugged. "Right. Go ahead."

"You're worth more than a two, Merritt. Quincy is an average captain. You're an outstanding captain. If you were a captain in my sphere, you'd be a ten."

"I have to counter your challenge, Troy. The game runs on how each person is valued by their own sphere, and a military captain in the North is only worth two."

"You think your King only values you as a two? He's got you going to his board meetings, going to elite parties, heading up 'confidential' projects. He's got you on the do-not-trade list. He's got your number on speed dial."

"How do you know these things?"

"Doesn't matter how I know. All that matters is it's true. You can't sit there and tell me you really think you're only worth two."

"Even so," Merritt said, "ten in the North Sphere is director level. If you claim I'm worth more than two, I might concede. Maybe I could

beat some fours or even fives. But ten is a stretch. Even General Rhodes is only a five.”

Troy leaned back in his seat. “You don’t recognize your worth. Half of your worth is what you claim for yourself, you know. Saying you’re a ten is the first step to being a ten.”

Merritt burst out laughing. He kicked himself under the table, but he couldn’t stop the cackles that shook his entire body. Clearly, his exhaustion had left him delirious.

“What the fuck is so funny?”

“That you’re trying to pep talk me into losing a card game.”

“I’m talking to you about more than the card game, you know.”

After a long stretch of trying to control his breathing, Merritt finally tamped down his last broken chuckle. “Sorry, but I don’t buy it. I know where I stand in my sphere, and I’m not going to let hubris lose me a game.”

Troy held up his hands. “All right, all right.” He reached into his pocket, pulling out a hundred dollar bill. “I’m thinkin’ you need this cash more than I do.” He tossed the bill toward Merritt, who nodded in thanks and picked it up.

“Wow, that was the most boring card game I’ve seen all year.”

Merritt looked up, seeing Belmont hovering over his shoulder. He was clearly drunk, and he was probably also high, based on his odd, twitchy smile and red-rimmed eyes. In his hand was a nearly empty glass of what looked and smelled like a cosmopolitan, but Merritt could also see two halves of a large pill capsule that he had presumably split into his drink.

“It was a good game,” Troy snapped. “We don’t need grandstanding and theatrics and compulsive lies to make a card game exciting.”

“But it *wasn’t* exciting. That’s what I’m saying.” Belmont brushed his hands off on his thighs and stepped closer to the table. “Move over, armband. I’ll show you how to play a card game that’s actually worth watching.”

Merritt's heart began to race. Belmont was the underground's card champion, and with good reason. Being the Gossip Queen gave him an edge when it came to challenging a face-off, and he had no qualms about blatantly lying during a challenge. Because he didn't seem any more trustworthy when he was being honest, it was impossible to tell when he was lying. Wrongfully countering a challenge meant instant loss. Belmont gleefully used this to his advantage, forcing a loss by baiting his opponent into countering his challenge and then whipping out irrefutable proof to support himself.

There was no gracious way to decline a card game invitation, but Merritt had heard stories of people poisoning themselves at their table and ending up in the hospital just to get out of a game against Belmont.

"What are we playing for?" Merritt asked. "The only money I have is what I just won."

Belmont scoffed. "You think I need your money? When I play, I like to get more personal than that. Last week, I claimed a South Sphere woman's prosthetic arm. Week before that, I got a DNA sample off a guy. And I want you to go just as personal. Look at me, and tell me what you want if you win."

Merritt didn't want anything of Belmont's. What he wanted was a promise of safety. He wanted to tell Belmont not to target him or double cross him again. But he knew that such a promise would be meaningless coming from a man as underhanded as Belmont. After a moment's consideration, he gestured toward Belmont's chest. "I want the handkerchief."

Belmont gasped in mock indignation, raising a hand protectively to his breast pocket. "Brutal, Merritt. *Brutal*. You know, my great-great-grandmother monogrammed this handkerchief for me on her deathbed and gave it to me two minutes before her final breath."

"You told me it was monogrammed by an East Sphere fighter you found in the classifieds."

"Good memory," Belmont said. "But I was lying. Or maybe I'm lying now. It's so hard to keep track sometimes."

"You're lying now," Troy said. "I know the fighter. He's one of mine."

“Mind your business, armband.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Troy rose to his feet. He leaned in toward Merritt’s ear. “I gotta go. But you watch yourself with him. He plays dirty.”

“I know,” Merritt whispered back. “Thanks.”

Troy gave Merritt a slap on the back and headed for the door. After he was gone, Belmont raised an eyebrow. “You see the way he smiled at you when he left? What is it between you two?”

Merritt responded only with a cold gaze.

Belmont slid into the seat Troy had previously occupied, his long legs stretching out far enough to jostle Merritt under the table. “Oh, come on now. Don’t be so serious. You’re acting like I’m about to slip you a dose of MYGG.”

Merritt remained silent.

“I thought we’d reached an understanding. Surely, we can be civil enough with each other to enjoy a simple game of cards.”

“You haven’t told me what you want from me if you win.”

“If I win?” Belmont grinned. “I’m going to win, Merritt.”

“*What do you want?*”

Belmont grabbed Merritt’s tie and wrapped it around his finger. Leaning across the table, he whispered, “Your innocence.”

Merritt pulled free and rolled his eyes. “I’m not a virgin, Belmont. I can’t give you that.”

“Oh, my precious vanilla bean,” Belmont laughed. “Virginity and innocence aren’t the same thing. I’ve touched you, Merritt. I know you’re innocent. Or do you not remember?” He narrowed his eyes. “I know you snooped in my bedroom the night you came up to my suite. I heard you opening my closet door. Did you like what you saw in there? *That’s* where your innocence is going to go.”

Merritt felt a traitorous blush bloom across his cheeks. Now there would be no way of denying that he’d snooped in Belmont’s closet.

“Listen, I asked you for something specific. Your handkerchief. You need to be specific about what you want. Date, time, a list of activities.”

“You want an itinerary?” Belmont laughed. “All right. Saturday, twenty-four hours. Nine a.m., I strap you down. Nine fifteen, I get my paddle. Nine thirty, I get a vibrating—”

“You know what? Surprise me.”

Belmont laughed. “You don’t want to hear what I have planned?”

“You enjoy telling me too much.”

Again, Belmont reached for Merritt’s tie. “So does that mean you accept?”

Merritt stared down at Belmont’s hand. “I’ll accept on the condition that you don’t touch my tie again unless you win.”

Raising his eyebrows, Belmont dropped Merritt’s tie. “Deal. It’s adorable that you actually think you can beat me at cards.”

“You didn’t think I could throw a bulls-eye at the North Star Lounge either.”

“That was dumb luck if ever I saw it.” Belmont pulled his card deck out of his pocket and began shuffling. “Hey. You ever buy that designer suit?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why aren’t you wearing it?”

“Who would wear a four thousand dollar suit to a West-owned nightclub?”

Belmont gestured behind him. “You don’t think anyone here is wearing expensive clothing?”

Merritt didn’t look. He suspected that Belmont was trying to divert his gaze so he could pull something unsavory while shuffling the cards. “You know what they say. Don’t wear anything to a West Sphere nightclub that you don’t want people getting their fluids on.”

Belmont smirked. “Those of us who have more than one expensive suit can afford to get fluids on a few of them. I suppose you’re not so lucky.”

“I’m lucky in better ways than the freedom to soil my clothes.”

“You’re funny.” Belmont gave his deck a final shuffle. “You know, Merritt, there’s a fine line between love and hate, and that line is possession. I love everything about you. The only reason I hate you so much is because you’re not mine. Because I can’t have any of those things that I love.”

“I think you’re high.”

“I’m not saying anything I wouldn’t say sober.”

“If your love is dependent on possession, it’s not love.”

“Ah, you’re such an idealist. Yet another thing I love about you.”

Belmont swept all four face-offs in the first round, leaving Merritt reeling. Not only did Belmont sweep the round, but he swept it using no cards with a face value higher than three, while Merritt had played all midrange cards. The concern must have shown on his face, because Belmont’s cocky smile widened as they entered the next round.

Belmont took two of the four face-offs in the second round, but Merritt got the sense that he’d deliberately thrown the other two face-offs. Still, it didn’t stop Belmont from gloating his way into the third round. For the next several rounds, he maintained a consistent six-card advantage over Merritt, but Merritt couldn’t shake the feeling that Belmont was going easy on him. Belmont didn’t challenge a single face-off, and when Merritt challenged, he conceded immediately. Something was up, but Merritt couldn’t tell what Belmont had planned.

In the second to last round, Belmont played a traitor card, bumping his lead up to seven going into the final round. Merritt squeezed his remaining cards so tight he bent them. Sweat dripped from along his hairline, and his thumping heart felt like someone taking a battering ram to his ribcage.

If he didn’t take every single face-off in the final round, he would lose. What had he been thinking, promising his innocence to Belmont at a game where Belmont was not only a champion but an undefeated

champion? How could he have been so blinded by the demands of elite etiquette that he couldn't figure out a way to say no? Why in the world *had* he agreed to the deal so readily?

Guess I should start picking out my favorite Christmas ornaments.

Belmont effortlessly sniffed out his doubt, and he laughed. "Oh, Merritt, you're unraveling before my eyes. This is better than I could have dreamed of. But enough with the pretense. You're getting what you wanted, aren't you? When I proposed this game with your innocence as the prize, you didn't argue. You only asked for more details. I think you *want* to lose. I think you want to see more of my closet."

"You played all your face cards in the middle rounds," Merritt said, using all his effort to keep his voice steady. "I think you don't have anything good left in your hand."

"We'll find out soon enough, won't we?"

Merritt knew what he was going to play for the final round. He had a King-Queen combo with Cannon and Samsid, and he had Noble, a South Sphere Queen with a face value of twelve that defeated all East Sphere cards. At this point in the game, and based on the cards that had already been played, there was no way Belmont could beat any of those three cards. The only vulnerable card Merritt had in his hand was Dolon, a West Sphere master pen keeper and the jack of hearts. It was a powerful card, but it could be beaten.

Taking a steadying breath, Merritt put down Cannon, his first card in the sequence. He pressed his clammy hands together, waiting for Belmont to respond. Belmont countered with a West Sphere dog, clearly sacrificing a worthless card against one he knew to be unbeatable. Merritt followed up with Samsid, and Belmont shook his head. He played another throwaway ace. Merritt's heart didn't slow. He knew that all Belmont needed was a single good card in his hand, and he'd still take the game.

A tremor ran through his fingers as he put down Noble's card. Belmont shook his head. "So you've been hoarding your face cards.

Such a cliché technique. A novice technique. I'm so embarrassed for you I could cry."

"Better wipe those tears now while you still have a handkerchief."

Belmont let out a low whistle. "Ouch." He laughed, carelessly tossing another throwaway card onto the table. "All right, honey. Let's see what you got left."

Merritt steeled himself. He could barely hear the dance music or the nearby chatter above the ringing in his ears. He swallowed, trying to wet his parched throat so he could say something to mask his anxiety, but his throat clung shut. Silently, he set down Dolon's card.

"Saving the worst for last?" Belmont asked.

"As long as my worst is better than your best."

"But *is* it better?"

"You're stalling."

Belmont tsk'ed and shook his head. "Now Merritt, you know it's not proper etiquette to rush your opponent during a card game."

Merritt pressed his lips together, but he couldn't relax. He knew that Belmont was going to ride out the last moments of the game for as long as he possibly could, even if he'd already chosen the card he was going to play.

A player could take up to one minute to lay down their card and still maintain good form. Merritt counted the seconds in his head. After fifty-nine seconds, Belmont played his final card.

It was Coulter, North Sphere advisor, ten of spades. Merritt felt the briefest moment of relief, but then he remembered that Belmont had the opportunity to challenge, and his heart sank. A challenge wouldn't be difficult. Belmont had vacated the spot of Mercury's top advisor, leaving it open for the next in line. While Coulter hadn't been named yet, he was Mercury's obvious first choice. Even without the official designation, Coulter could easily pass for a jack. But it all depended on how Belmont chose to challenge, and whether Merritt could counter.

Belmont hated Coulter. Would he have the nerve to state that Coulter was worth more than his face value? Would it be a worthwhile admission for him, even if it meant otherwise losing the game?

“So close,” Belmont said. “You were so close, Merritt. How does it feel to come this close to the most glorious comeback in all of underground card game history and fall short in the very last face-off?”

“What’s your challenge?”

Belmont cracked a suspicious grin. “You haven’t heard the gossip? No one’s texted you about it?” Belmont tapped the phone at his hip. “Dolon is dead. Killed at midnight last night in a back alley on the West-Neutral border by a single syringe dart to the neck. Killed by none other than *my card*. Coulter, advisor to Mercury.”

Merritt leaned back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. All at once, the anxiety left his body. “Is that really the best you’ve got?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Belmont asked. “You know, if you counter a challenge and you’re wrong, it’s instant loss. Do you really think it’s wise to counter me?”

“If I don’t counter your challenge, I lose anyway.” Merritt pointed at the cards on the table. “And besides, I’m not wrong. I *know* you’re lying.”

Belmont smirked almost playfully. “You’re bluffing.”

“I’m not bluffing. You said Coulter killed Dolon at midnight last night? Well, that’s impossible, because at midnight last night, I was holding a pillow over my head trying to block out the sound of Coulter and one of my Chem Ops soldiers having sex in the bunk directly above me. He was there all night.”

“And who’s going to back up that claim?”

“Anyone who was there.”

“Oh, and isn’t it *convenient* that there happen to be no other North Sphere soldiers here at the club?”

Merritt glanced across the room, where Coulter had been sitting with Nina earlier in the evening. He was no longer there, but then

Merritt spotted him on the dance floor only a few feet away. “Coulter, sir,” he called.

Coulter stopped dancing and turned around, apparently surprised that Merritt would call for him. “You need something, Captain Merritt?”

Merritt bristled at Coulter’s facetious use of his title, but he hid his disapproval and gestured toward the cards on the table so Coulter would know the context of their discussion. “Sir, Belmont is claiming that you were out in the West Sphere murdering a master pen keeper last night, when you and I both know you were sleeping with Kiona at the barracks. You can back up my counter, right?”

Coulter’s charming smile fell away in an instant, and he stammered. Barely a second later, Argus flew up from his seat at the bar. “Are you fucking kidding me?” he yelled, the beer sloshing from his jug. He wadded up his napkin and whipped it across the room at Coulter. “You better be fucking kidding me, pretty boy, because you swore up and down you weren’t getting with my girl, and that little blond bastard who wouldn’t lie to save his own ass is saying he *saw you fucking her all night?*”

Coulter held up his hands. “Whoa, Argus, calm down. Let’s talk about this—”

“You blue-ties always wanna *talk*,” Argus yelled, spit flying. He reached for the pistol in his shoulder holster. “*Talk to this, motherfucker!*”

Unperturbed, Belmont grabbed Merritt by the arm and said, “Might want to get down.” He pulled Merritt under the table with him, denying him the chance to intervene in Coulter’s defense. A split second later, gunshots blasted.

Merritt saw Coulter reach for his own gun, but his fingers barely managed to graze it when a bullet struck him in the shoulder. Before he could even fall to the ground, a second bullet struck him clean in the middle of the forehead. Merritt stared, wide-eyed with horror. More gunshots followed from the bouncers aiming to disarm and incapacitate Argus.

His cheek still pressed against the cold wood of his chair's leg, Merritt glanced at Belmont. He felt a horrible pang in his stomach when he saw Belmont grinning back at him, a devious glint in his eye. His gaze was terrifying and magnetic.

Belmont had this planned all along, Merritt realized. He'd invited both Argus and Coulter to the same party, probably already having heard Coulter bragging about his tryst in the barracks. He'd stacked his deck so the right cards would fall. He'd woven his imperceptible web, and both Merritt and Coulter had walked headlong into it.

The bouncers wrestled Argus to the ground and confiscated his weapons. As they dragged him out of the nightclub, the chaos finally began to die down. Merritt sat back down in his chair, his fists clenched atop the table.

Belmont pushed himself back to his feet. "Thank you, Merritt. I've been wanting to get rid of Coulter for *months*. He was getting entirely too close to Mercury. Private dinners, drinks after work, even going on trips together. I'm a right hand. *Anyone who gets that close to my King needs to be taken care of.*"

He rose to his feet, pulling his handkerchief out of his pocket and tossing it toward Merritt. It landed on Merritt's hand.

"If anyone is going to have my one and only loss, I'm glad it's you." He tousled Merritt's hair on his way toward the exit. "I'll see ya later, honey."

Merritt stared after him, eyes still wide. Then he picked up the handkerchief between two fingers. It was crusty.