

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

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CHAPTER 9

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CHAPTER 9

He was soaking wet. Shivering. Trembling. An oversized towel was wrapped around his bare shoulders, its terrycloth loops scratching his skin like steel wool. Under the towel, he wore nothing but his trunks and vital sign monitor.

Was he lying on a bed of nails? It felt like it. His head throbbed, but it rested on something soft. It was the only part of his body that didn't feel like it was in the path of a sandblaster.

"Wh..." He tried to wet his throat. It was like swallowing a razor. "What happened?"

Ellis's voice answered. "You lost consciousness when you hit the water, sir. Balbo had to fish you out."

Merritt opened his eyes just long enough to spot Balbo a few feet away. "Thank you, Balbo," he croaked.

"Any time," Balbo replied wryly.

Gentle fingers brushed the wet hair off his forehead. It was Wells. Merritt realized with a start that his head was resting in his medic's lap. Despite Wells's best intentions, even the lightest brush of his fingers still stung. But Merritt knew of few other blue-tie soldiers capable of such a soft touch.

"Stop touching him," came Belmont's scolding voice. "You're making it worse."

Fuck. Belmont was still here. Belmont had seen his disastrous fall. As Wells's fingers retreated, Merritt forced himself to open his eyes.

On Belmont's face was a look Merritt had never seen on him before. It was so alien he couldn't read it. Taut brows, narrowed eyes. His mouth was a terse, thin line. Was he angry? Stressed?

Worried?

Belmont folded his arms. "That was quite a show."

"I assure you I'm more competent than that," Merritt groaned.

"Oh, I know," Belmont said with a half-smile. "I saw your baseline test. No one ever said you weren't a good soldier."

"What's next?" Merritt asked. He made to push himself upright, and Ellis tensed as if he'd just watched someone drop a piece of glassware off a table. Balbo also looked about to spring forward, and Wells wrapped an arm across his shoulders to keep him from rising. "Hey...." Merritt tried to push Wells's slim arm away. "What are you doing? I still have to do the combat rounds."

"You don't think I'm just going to pin you in the first five seconds of every round?" Balbo challenged. "It's not even worth it."

"But I still need to run the course on the third dose of NSA-2."

"Nope," Belmont cut in. "No more poison. You're done."

"I won't ask my soldiers to take a triple dose of NSA-2 if I haven't done it first."

"Then we fucking *won't ask them to*," Belmont snapped. "Two rounds of the drug is enough. You're shaking so hard you can't even move."

"But Pratt and Evans—"

"I'll deal with Pratt and Evans. I outrank them."

Despite Merritt's relief that his soldiers would be spared the triple dose, his cheeks flushed with shame at Belmont's assessment of his condition. He changed the subject. "Where are the programmers?"

"I sent them home already. And I'd like to send your soldiers home too. We've been here fourteen hours."

"What time is it?"

“Past ten.” Belmont turned to Wells. “You’re finished, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Wells replied. “He’s not injured. The only cause of his suffering is the NSA-2. I only request that he wear the vital sign monitor until the poison is out of his system.”

“Done,” Belmont said. “Then you all can go back to the barracks. I’ll get him home.”

“I’ll arrange for transportation, sir,” Ellis replied.

Belmont shot him an annoyed glance. “I said I’ll get him home.”

To Merritt’s shock, Ellis didn’t back down. “General Merritt is my principal, sir. I answer to him, and him alone.”

Despite Belmont’s annoyance, Merritt knew he understood the sanctity of the relationship between aide and principal. He depended on it as much as Merritt did. “Just let him do his job,” Merritt said, too fatigued to finesse his words.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Belmont muttered. “I can call for a first class passenger motorcycle. It’s something only Mercury and I can request, and it’s the smoothest ride in the underground. You can fucking *lie down* in the back carriage. Any other ride through these bumpy roads is going to be hell for you.”

Merritt considered. The thought of bouncing along over the jarring bumps of the military district’s unpaved tunnels made his aching nerves tingle with dread. He glanced up at Ellis. He could read apprehension in Ellis’s eyes despite his solid poker face.

The last time they’d faced a similar situation, Belmont had commanded the entire Elite Border Guard to corner them outside Torrence’s flat, and he’d ordered Ellis and Hoxie to leave him and Merritt alone. It was no wonder Ellis was reluctant to leave Merritt with Belmont now. Merritt couldn’t have asked for a more loyal aide-de-camp.

And yet, he wanted to accept Belmont’s offer.

“I’ll go with Belmont,” Merritt said.

Ellis looked displeased, but he knew that only Merritt's body—and not his mind—was debilitated. He had enough respect to honor Merritt's decision. "Understood, sir."

Belmont raised a prodding eyebrow. "You're dismissed. Go on, then."

Ellis nodded. "Yes, sir," he said with a shallow nod before turning away. Only Merritt was so intimately acquainted with the shifts in Ellis's eyes to spot the split second "fuck you" emitting from between his lids to Belmont as he passed. He would have laughed if he'd had the breath for it.

Balbo and Wells mounted their motorcycles and rode off into the darkness. Ellis pointedly remained one step past the entry gate.

"That fucker," Belmont muttered with exasperation.

"He's doing his job," Merritt said. "And he's good at it."

"Is he?" Belmont asked skeptically. "You already told him you were going with me."

"But I never told him to go home."

Belmont snorted. "You didn't, did you?" Taking a few steps away, he pulled out his phone to call for the carriage. When he finished, he returned to Merritt's side. "They'll be here in under two minutes. Can you stand?"

"I'm sure I can," Merritt said, lying more to himself than to Belmont. As he pushed himself up on wobbling arms, he was surprised to see a long-fingered hand extended out to him.

Merritt took the hand, and Belmont pulled him to his feet. "Oh. Looks like I can stand after all." He tried to take a step, and his body gave way. He collapsed into Belmont's arms, gritting his teeth as another flash of pain coursed through his body. The towel fell off his shoulders, barely snagging between his ribs and Belmont's arm.

The arms around his abdomen kept him on his feet. Its pressure against his skin felt as hot and raw as an open wound, but Merritt couldn't force himself to withdraw.

Belmont seemed to read the pain past his faltering poker face. “Do you want to lie down again?”

No, he didn’t want to lie down. The warmth of Belmont’s body somehow helped to keep his mind off the pain. But how could he admit to that?

“Merritt. You want to lie down again?”

“No.”

“So you can stand on your own?”

“No.”

“My shirt’s soaked now, you know.”

“That’s because I’m wet.”

“You don’t say.”

Ellis still stood awkwardly at the other side of the entry gate, watching them out of the corner of his eye. Merritt wondered what he must have looked like to Ellis, nearly naked and clutching Belmont of all people.

“This was a bad idea,” Belmont said. “You’re gonna be hurting for at least eighteen hours after that overdose.”

“It won’t be this bad the entire time. I’ll be able to walk by tomorrow.”

“Am I going to have to carry you out of here?”

Merritt hesitated. “Only if you want to.”

After a long pause, Belmont said, “Maybe you should lie down awhile longer.” He knelt, setting Merritt back on the floor atop his skewed towel. The pain set in again, hitting Merritt with bright sparks at every point of contact with the ground. He rolled onto his side, wrapping himself in the towel and trying to quiet his shaking body. Despite all his efforts to hide his pain, a groan escaped his clenched teeth.

“This was a bad idea,” Belmont repeated.

“It had to be done.” The pain was overwhelming. Merritt pulled the towel over his head so Belmont couldn’t see his contorted grimace.

“I know you feel like shit,” Belmont said. “But think of it this way. Someday it’ll be a red-sash or an armband lying on the floor like that instead of you.”

“That’s not what I want,” Merritt mumbled into the towel. After a long silence, he pulled the plush fabric away from his face and locked his pain-tinted gaze on Belmont. “This poison is hell. Promise me you won’t put it into production.”

Belmont frowned as if he wished he could give Merritt a different answer. “I already pulled the trigger on this. I can’t take it back now.”

“It’s torture.”

“It’s a weapon, just like any other. You’re our general. If you find yourself up against someone like Troy or Samsid, you need every advantage you can get. This poison might save your life one day.”

“But... there will always be consequences.”

“Ugh, you’re impossible.”

The rumbling purr of a high-end motorcycle echoed across the training grounds. Their ride had arrived: a leather-clad blue-tie woman on a sleek black motorcycle with an equally sleek carriage hitched to the back. She pulled up barely inches from Ellis, but Ellis obstinately refused to budge.

Belmont knelt at Merritt’s side, securing the towel around him and lifting him off the ground.

“What are you doing?” Merritt asked.

“You said I could carry you out of here if I wanted.” Belmont gave a devious smirk. “You didn’t specify a destination. Maybe I’ll carry you back to my suite.”

“Where’s my uniform?”

“Your aide has all your stuff.”

Merritt still hesitated. “You shouldn’t carry me. I’m too heavy for you.”

“You only think that because I wear glasses.”

Merritt laughed, but the laughter set off a shower of pain in his abdomen, and he curled up in reflex. He heard Belmont curse under his breath, and Belmont’s grip tightened around him.

For the first time in ages, Merritt was close enough to Belmont’s neck to smell his bare skin, and it was so enticing it overpowered his pain for a moment.

Belmont smelled... expensive. Not just clean, but North Sphere clean. Like a surgically close shave, impeccably trimmed hair at the nape of the neck, cufflinks and starched collars, shiny shoes and creased slacks.

Merritt breathed in deep, doing everything he could to focus on that scent instead of the pain. Beneath the crisp surface was something that smelled rugged and real, followed by a fruity, playful note that drew him in like a teasing scarf around his shoulders.

He tried to hold onto the warmth of the scent, but the pulsing pain across his body inevitably regained his focus. He bit his lip, barely stifling a groan.

“You all right?” Belmont asked.

He was embarrassing himself, clinging to Belmont like a swooning model on a romance novel cover. Fuck, what if he ended up on the cover of one of *Belmont’s* romance novels?

Hoping to crack a joke about it to diffuse the tension, he chanced a look at Belmont’s face. His words fizzled in his throat; the intensity in Belmont’s eyes was startling. Merritt was too muddled by pain to read the look, but it struck him like an arrow to the chest. Overwhelmed, he averted his gaze.

Belmont loaded Merritt into the carriage. Merritt expected him to leave after giving the driver directions, but instead, he climbed in beside Merritt. “Someone has to make sure you actually get through your front door,” he explained.

Merritt wanted more than anything to say that he could make it on his own. At this point, he was thoroughly mortified by his

helplessness. But he knew he needed the help. Closing his eyes, he braced himself for the rumble of the motorcycle engine.

He wished he could appreciate the smooth ride in the upscale carriage, but even the slightest vibrations shook him down to his bones. More than once, he had to swallow back on his nausea. Would the cleaning bill be deducted from his pay if he puked in a first class carriage?

Halfway through the ride to his quarters, Belmont glanced out the back window and gave a low chuckle. “Heh. We’re being followed.”

Merritt was about to voice concern when he realized who was following them. Of course it was Ellis.

After traversing the subterranean tunnels leading up to the general’s quarters, the carriage finally pulled to a stop. Merritt fought through the pain to sit upright. “I can make it the rest of the way.”

“You don’t look like you can.”

“It’s fine. If I don’t make it inside, Ellis can pull me across the threshold.”

“That’s stupid,” Belmont said with a snort. “I’m already right here. What? You don’t want me coming into your quarters?”

“It’s not that,” Merritt said. “I don’t want to waste more of your time.”

“If I thought it was a waste of time, I wouldn’t have offered.”

That was probably true, and besides, it wasn’t worth the fight. “All right. Then, if you could help me to my bed?”

His thoughts took an unauthorized turn, and he felt himself blushing. He hoped Belmont wouldn’t notice.

Belmont hoisted him off the plush upholstered seat and carried him up to his quarters. He ducked in front of the door so Merritt could unlock it with his thumbprint. Once inside, Belmont hesitated. He seemed fixated on something at the center of the living room. “What’s that?” he asked.

“What’s what?”

“Who gave you that?”

“Who gave me *what*?”

Preoccupied, Belmont set Merritt down on the sofa, mumbling an apology when Merritt sucked in a pained breath. Returning to the front door, Belmont called, “Hey! Come over here, will ya?”

Ellis appeared in the threshold, carting Merritt’s folded uniform, packs, and phone. He set them down on the kitchenette counter and turned to Belmont. “How may I help, sir?”

Belmont gestured toward his waist. “You carry a security scanner, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I need it for a sec.”

Reluctantly, Ellis handed it over. Belmont took the scanner and headed toward the coffee table. He snatched Merritt’s jade plant off the table, gripping it by the stem.

“*HEY!*” Merritt cried, bolting out of his seat. His flailing arms narrowly missed Belmont before he crashed to the ground and curled up in pain. “*Shit!*”

Belmont wore a startled frown, still holding the plant. “What the fuck, Merritt?”

“If you hurt Charles, I swear I’ll kill you!”

“Charles?” Belmont gave a quick glance around the room before returning his gaze to the plant. “You named your plant *Charles*?”

Merritt hesitated. “It’s a proper North Sphere name,” he said defensively. When Belmont gave the stem a jiggle, his sense of urgency returned. He tried to rise to his feet, only to collapse again. “Don’t!”

Belmont stared at him incredulously. “For fuck’s sake, I’m not going to kill your plant.” He gave the stem another jiggle, lifting it out of the pot, soil and all. He traded the pot for the scanning wand, running it over the plant from top to bottom. Only after three passes on both the plant and the pot did he seem satisfied. He returned the plant to its pot and set it back on the table.

“I told you it was nothing,” Merritt muttered.

“No you didn’t. All you said was ‘Charles, Charles!’”

“But it *was* nothing.”

“I know it was nothing.” Belmont’s gaze went cold and serious. “But did you check it before you brought it into your quarters?”

“It was from Archer.”

“You say that as if it makes it more trustworthy.” Belmont wagged the scanning wand at him like a scolding teacher. “I don’t care who it’s from. If someone gives you a gift, it *has* to be checked for bugs and drugs. You know this.”

Belmont was right. No matter how much Merritt trusted Archer, no matter how high ranking she was, he’d breached protocol by allowing an un-vetted gift into his home.

“Did you check *anything* in your quarters before moving in?” Belmont asked after returning the scanner to Ellis.

“Of course,” Merritt said. “They did a search of the entire place. I got a certified email from Evans and everything.”

Belmont snorted. “Of course you did.”

“I did,” Merritt insisted, brows furrowed.

Belmont released a heavy sigh. Turning back to Ellis, he gestured toward the scanner and said, “I need that again.”

Ellis handed over the scanner. As Belmont examined every vent, crack, and gap he could find in the room, Ellis helped Merritt back onto the sofa. He retrieved a spare sheet from the bedroom closet, helping Merritt to cover himself more thoroughly than the oversized towel from the Hamlin training grounds could.

Merritt was ready to dismiss Belmont’s search when the scanning wand beeped at a ceiling vent in the far left corner. Belmont shot Merritt an “I-told-you-so” look, hooking his foot around a short stool and stepping atop it. He dislodged the vent cover, activated the flashlight on the back of the scanner, and aimed inside. “Ah-ha,” he announced, pulling a microphone out from the vent.

Merritt stared, wide-eyed and stunned. “I don’t understand,” he breathed.

Belmont set the tiny wireless microphone on the coffee table. He retrieved a knife from his belt pack, crushing the microphone with a single strike from the knife handle. “You have to check these things, Merritt.”

“But Evans said—”

“Evans was probably the one who put it there!” Belmont cried. “He probably bribed the security crew when they were setting up your place. He did the same thing to Rhodes. Rhodes would have private meetings in his quarters, and he’d come up with these great strategies, and then Evans would listen in and steal all his ideas and beat him to every punch at the next board meeting.”

Merritt shook his head. No wonder Rhodes ended up always sleeping on a cot at Station 1 instead of working from home.

“Well,” Belmont said, “I just hope you haven’t been sharing sensitive information here in your quarters. Because whatever you said, Evans has it now.”

“Oh, no, I haven’t—” Mid-sentence, Merritt’s face fell.

“What?” Belmont asked. “You *have*?”

Merritt blushed. “Well, no.” But he may have had more than a few philosophical conversations with Charles over the past month and a half.

“I’d suggest you have someone in to do another check on the place,” Belmont said to Ellis as he returned the scanning wand. He pulled out his phone and tapped in a quick text. “I’m sending you the name of the guy who checked my suite when I first moved in. He does good work, and he owes me about eight hundred favors. Ask him to come tomorrow while Merritt’s home. That way you can both watch him work.”

“Yes, sir,” Ellis said.

“Okay. Good.” Belmont turned back to Merritt. “Don’t get all settled in on the sofa. That upholstery looks uncomfortable even for people who didn’t overdose on a nerve sensitizer. I’ll take you to bed.”

Merritt was past resisting for the point of resisting. He braced himself, allowing Belmont to gather him in the sheet and lift him again. The bedroom was only a few paces away, and Belmont was stronger than he looked. Gingerly, he lowered Merritt onto the mattress. Merritt groaned at the sensation of pinpricks across his skin.

“Even the mattress hurts?” Belmont asked.

“It’s softer than the sofa. But it also covers a broader surface area. I hadn’t anticipated that.”

“Do you want to go somewhere else, then?”

“Nowhere else will be better. I’ll just have to power through it.”

“Will you be able to get through tomorrow?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Painkillers?”

“Won’t work.”

Belmont frowned. “So you’re saying there’s nothing I can do?”

Merritt didn’t reply right away. That wasn’t the type of question he would have expected from Belmont.

Belmont’s presence was more comforting than he’d expected, and he was tempted to ask him to stay. But that wouldn’t have been reasonable. Merritt would be overstepping his boundaries, and he doubted Belmont would want to stay overnight in such a decrepit little flat anyway. In the end, he didn’t even want Ellis, his own aide, to stay with him. The fewer witnesses to his weakness, the better.

At last, he said, “I just have to ride it out. That’s all.”

Belmont seemed disappointed by Merritt’s verdict, but he didn’t argue. “All right.” He gave Ellis a nod. “Then I guess we’ll leave you alone.”

“Please page me if you need anything, sir,” Ellis said. “Otherwise, I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Of course,” Merritt said. He watched Belmont and Ellis head for the door. After they left, he rolled onto his side and burrowed beneath his blanket. None of the pain in his body compared to the sudden dull ache in his chest.

He never knew it was possible to feel so lonely.