

# DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY  
BOOK 2

---

SHOBANA 'BOB' APPAVU

CHAPTER 4

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Book 2 | Chapter 4

Copyright © 2018 by Shobana Appavu

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author.

Patreon Serial Edition

[http://www.patreon.com/bob\\_artist](http://www.patreon.com/bob_artist)

## CHAPTER 4

---

*I'm waiting in the fifth floor lounge. Come grab me when you're ready.*

Tuesday's board meeting was scheduled for one in the afternoon, so Merritt and Belmont planned to take the second half of Belmont's hour-long lunch break to go over their materials one last time. Merritt had never been to the fifth floor lounge before. He didn't even know there was a fifth floor lounge.

The lounge was situated in between Belmont's private meeting room, where he and Merritt had met the day before, and a smaller meeting room that was shared between Mercury's advisors. Merritt tried his thumbprint on the door to the lounge and was surprised when it allowed him entrance. He'd assumed the room was only accessible to Mercury's advisors and industry directors.

Inside was a room lush and elegant enough to rival an elite North Sphere club, though the atmosphere was more suited to business than pleasure. A set of curved sofas encircled a central fountain, where water flowed from an artistic array of oversized glass beakers, flasks, and test tubes to a series of granite slabs below. Merritt could tell even from the doorway across the room that the water was scented. Fountains in upscale locations were often imbued with mild calming or focusing formulas.

Seven of Mercury's eight advisors were present, along with a few industry directors. Belmont sat across from Mannheim at a corner table with his back to the door, finishing up his lunch on an elegantly crafted white ceramic plate that was curved like a delicate leaf. Hale, one of Mercury's advisors, poured himself coffee at the nearby counter. Or was that Wolfram? It might have even been Taylor. Merritt still had trouble telling all of them apart.

Whichever one it was, two duplicates of him sat on the round sofas at the center of the room, along with Pratt, Evans, and a new face—though “new” might not have been the best word to describe yet another copy of the same fashion doll. If Merritt recalled from the news articles, his name was Logan, and Higgins had promoted him from assistant to trade advisor after Lawrence’s unfortunate demise—and shortly before his own.

The energy in the room felt unwelcoming, like a velvet rope barring him entry. Evans shot him the usual condescending glance, while Pratt didn’t even acknowledge his presence.

“Listen,” Pratt huffed to his fellow advisors, “if you’re all going to the Skin Mill, then count me out.”

“Oh, don’t be such a princess,” one of the carbon copy advisors replied. He gestured toward Logan, who was seated next to him. “We *have* to take the newest advisor out to a West Sphere club. It’s tradition.”

“It’s not West Sphere clubs that I have a problem with,” Pratt replied, a bite in his tone. He sat with his legs crossed, holding a tiny espresso cup and looking like he was posing for a photo shoot. “It’s just the Skin Mill that I don’t like. The guys who go there—they’re disgusting.”

“It’s one of the most expensive clubs in the red light district,” Evans argued.

“So?” Pratt stared down his nose at Evans, wearing his signature sultry pout. “The Skin Mill lets in anyone who can pay their way in. That’s why they end up with all the slimy, classless creeps who can’t get into *Lingue Rouge* or *Mesmerize*.”

“I never had a problem with anyone at the Skin Mill,” Evans replied with a shrug.

“That’s because you’re going after women. The men there are vile. There’s this one guy who looks like a reincarnated sewer rat, and he shows up every single time I go and just follows me around. I’m pretty sure he’s been stalking me for at least six months.”

“You always think West Sphere men are stalking you,” Evans muttered, rolling his eyes. “I bet he wasn’t even that gross, for a guy.”

“Do you know what he said to me the last time I saw him? He said, ‘You’re the only guy I’ve ever seen who looks better in a G-string than my mom.’”

Evans dropped his poker face to show a disgusted grimace. “All right. That’s pretty bad.”

Pratt leaned back in his seat, looking self-satisfied. “If you can think of a slimier guy with a worse pickup line that you met *outside* of the Skin Mill, then I’ll give it another shot. But otherwise, I vote for Langue Rouge.”

“I’ve got a worse one,” Belmont said from across the room.

“Sure you do,” Pratt replied smugly.

Belmont rose from his seat and approached the circle of sofas with lazy, leisurely strides. He slipped behind Pratt. Lowering his hands onto Pratt’s shoulders, he leaned in close and whispered in a low, sleazy voice, “Have you ever thought about getting involved in politics?”

All at once, the advisors in the vicinity burst into pained groans and laughter. Evans shook his head and muttered, “Well, *shit*.” Pratt, his face still serious, said into the din, “That’s not even funny. I seriously want to vomit now.”

Merritt stood uncomfortably across the room, nagged by the familiar, excruciating feeling of being on the wrong side of an inside joke.

“You’re right about the guys at the Skin Mill, though,” Belmont said before he released Pratt’s shoulders.

He stood upright, raising his head and spotting Merritt. He headed silently across the room, waiting until he was within arms’ length of Merritt before speaking to him. “You made it,” he said with a half-smile. Gesturing toward the coffee bar, he said, “If you need a drink, grab it here and take it with you. I don’t have anything set up in the meeting room.”

“I’m good, thank you,” Merritt replied.

Belmont led Merritt back out to the hall and into the adjacent meeting room. In the vicinity of the other advisors, Belmont had appeared as cocky and overconfident as always. But once the two of them were alone, Merritt felt his intensity spike. He didn’t seem stressed or worried, but he paged through the documents Merritt handed him with a sense of urgency Merritt rarely saw from him.

“I thought about your picks last night, and I looked over them again this morning,” Belmont said. “We’re going to run into some issues when we present them to the board.”

Merritt waited for Belmont to elaborate.

“The board is going to ask what these people did to deserve the promotions you’re giving them. Your write-ups aren’t going to convince anyone.”

“Why not?” Merritt asked earnestly.

Belmont held up Balbo’s report. “‘Brave,’ ‘lowest loss exchange ratio of all combat units,’ ‘has the respect, loyalty, and support of her subordinates.’ That may all be true, but those guys don’t value any of these things. And here....” He pointed to the next paragraph. “You go on and on about her intelligence and tactical skills, but those guys aren’t going to believe a word of it. They don’t see captains as people who do any of their own problem-solving. They think captains just implement orders from the higher-ups.”

“That’s not the way it works at all, though,” Merritt replied.

“Oh, it *isn’t*? Then why don’t you sit here and explain it to me for another four hours?”

Merritt pressed his lips together.

Belmont tossed the paper onto the table. “It doesn’t matter how it works, Merritt. What matters is how you make the sale. You need to learn how to speak their language. They’ll want to know how your picks will contribute to *their* goals. When an officer pays their way in, it’s easy to explain their contribution. But if all they did was save their ace soldiers, the board won’t care.”

“Balbo’s company saved the entire business district during the West Sphere invasion,” Merritt replied. “Who gets more use out of the business district than the elite?”

“Then just say that. We don’t need to talk about how much her soldiers love her. And don’t ever mention a soldier’s ‘wisdom’ or ‘intelligence.’ That’s just asking for an argument. I know you want to change everyone’s mind about how much soldiers are worth, but you need to prove yourself before you can change anyone else.”

“Understood.”

“Good. You need to know that today is going to be an uphill battle. You might have to give up a few of your picks to keep the guys happy.”

Whatever fire had spurred Belmont yesterday evening seemed to have waned today. This was troubling. “I thought we were going in ‘guns blazing.’”

Belmont gave an apathetic shrug. “I’ve only got so much ammo, Merritt. I have to pick my battles. You don’t get it because you’ve only been up here a few times. I come to these soul-sucking meetings every week, multiple times a week. I hate every single person who sits in that room.”

Merritt’s eyes widened. “Not Mercury, though,” he said in a hushed tone.

Belmont laughed. “What? You think I’m going to be hanged for treason? Mercury knows how I feel about him.” He raised an eyebrow. “He knows how *everyone* feels about him. And he uses it to his advantage.”

Merritt fidgeted.

“Uncomfortable,” Belmont declared, pointing to Merritt’s face.

*Damn it.* Merritt summoned his poker face. He took a moment to consider Belmont’s words. “I know I’m asking for a lot. But this is my chance to make a change for the military, and I’m willing to fight for it—however hard I have to. The board will value your words more than they value mine, so I’m grateful for anything you’re willing to say in

support of my picks. But I would never ask you to fight my battles for me.”

Belmont aimed his snarky smirk at Merritt. “Well, if all else fails, just suck up to Pratt and Evans the way you suck up to all your bosses.” Merritt let the comment pass, watching as Belmont spread out the printed reports across the table. “Let’s just get through the rest of these. We don’t have much time left. We need to decide how to sell each of them, and you need to decide which ones you’re willing to let go.”

One last time, they reviewed each of Merritt’s picks. They settled on a pitch for each soldier and listed them in order of priority, and Belmont noted their changes on the reports. At Belmont’s prompting, Merritt also supplied three additional soldier choices that they could sacrifice in the meeting purely for the sake of negotiating one of their actual choices. Merritt was uneasy at the prospect of presenting something less than genuine to Mercury and the board, but he had to appreciate Belmont’s strategic feint.

As they wrapped up their discussion, Merritt checked the time. “You mentioned something yesterday about the officers I fired. Do we have time to go over that?”

“We’ll talk after the meeting,” Belmont said, gathering up the pages and shoving them into a leather file. “Come on.”

Merritt and Belmont were the last to arrive in the boardroom, aside from Mercury. The top advisor’s seat remained conspicuously empty. Apparently, Mercury hadn’t found a suitable replacement for Belmont yet, now that Coulter was out of the picture. One other empty seat remained at the table beside Mercury’s, presumably for his right hand.

Would Merritt be unable to sit next to Belmont for the meeting?

Belmont headed for the empty chair beside Mercury’s. Merritt expected him to sit, but instead he grabbed the chair and carried it across the room. “You’re not sitting next to him?” Merritt asked softly. He’d never seen Belmont take the seat beside Mercury, but he hadn’t ever thought to ask why.

Belmont cringed and shook his head, as if his reasons were obvious. “His cologne,” he whispered back. “You shouldn’t sit next to



him either.” When Merritt still looked confused, Belmont sighed and muttered, “I’ll explain later.”

He carried the chair across the room, plopping it down behind the top advisor’s empty seat. “Move over, Wolfie,” he said to the duplicate advisor to his right. Wolfram grudgingly scooted over, making room for the empty seat. Pratt, on Wolfram’s other side, passive-aggressively refused to slide over in turn.

Merritt squeezed into his seat, sitting rigid and uncomfortable in an attempt not to touch Belmont or Wolfram. Belmont chuckled, shooting Pratt a fleeting glance before pulling Merritt’s chair even closer. He slipped an arm around Merritt. “Hey, I don’t mind close quarters. Do you?”

“I guess not,” Merritt replied, following Belmont’s lead despite not knowing where he was headed. Across the room, Hale shook his head with disdain as if he expected nothing less from Belmont.

“Your chin is so smooth,” Merritt said softly. “How do you get such a close shave?”

Wolfram snickered at his side.

Belmont, trying to hold back a laugh, whispered into Merritt’s ear, “You are not good at this.”

Merritt leaned in just as close to Belmont’s ear. “It was an honest question. Do you use a special shaving cream?”

Belmont turned back to Merritt’s ear, his breath tickling the side of Merritt’s neck. “What would you do if I licked your ear right now?”

Merritt’s face flushed. “Uh....”

Pratt examined Belmont and Merritt with his usual supermodel pout. Then, as if trying to be subtle, he moved his chair down to give Merritt and Wolfram more space.

Before Merritt shifted away, Belmont whispered one more time in his ear, “Pratt’s been trying to get with me for *years*. Use that information however you want.”

Merritt did his best to quickly regain his composure. As usual, Mercury swept in at one on the dot. He took his seat across the room,

scanning the attendees. His gaze stalled on Merritt. “Merritt. I wasn’t expecting you here today.”

Merritt stammered, but Belmont thankfully spoke up. “I invited him. It’ll be beneficial to have him here for the military personnel discussion.”

Mercury raised an eyebrow, but his expression remained unreadable. “All right, Belmont,” he said. “Then let’s start with that. List all of your picks, and then we can discuss each one in detail.”

Belmont loaded the list of Merritt’s picks on his tablet, which projected onto the wall large enough for everyone to see. One by one, he read through each position, the name of the fired officer, and the name of the proposed replacement. Upon reaching the end of the list, he leaned back in his seat, confidently raising his chin as if daring anyone to challenge him.

It was Thomas, Mercury’s transportation advisor, who finally broke the silence. “I don’t know who any of those people are.”

“Of course you don’t,” Belmont said. “How many soldiers *do* you know?”

“I know Keating. He’s a Waterways captain. His dad is a bioengineer up in sub-Edgewater. He’d be the obvious choice for Waterways colonel.”

“He has a living parent?” Logan asked. “How did he end up in the military?”

“The usual way. Wallen knocked up some ace twenty-five years ago and didn’t find out he had a kid until later. Anyway, Keating’s got good blood, for a soldier.”

“Oh?” Belmont asked, the sarcasm showing in his voice. “Good blood, you say?”

“Didn’t Wallen talk to you yesterday? I thought Keating’s promotion was already in the works.”

“I remember some asshole interrupting my drink at Yackley’s and puffing out his chest while demanding I give his son special treatment for doing nothing, yes.”

Thomas gestured toward the screen. “So, what does this Hayes guy have that Keating doesn’t?”

“Tits, for one.” When Evans gawked, Belmont said, “Hayes isn’t a guy.”

A murmur traveled across the room. It took all Merritt’s discipline to maintain his poker face.

“Now I’m really lost,” Pratt said.

“Hayes is a West Sphere hawk,” Belmont said, launching the proposal he and Merritt had crafted together. “She won’t shy away from any order targeting reds. She used to be a West Sphere colonel, but she slipped her ID into the trading pool and tricked the West into selling her for two blue-tie aces, just to humiliate them. She has inside information on the West’s military practices, and she’s used it to the North’s advantage. Anyone who can consistently defeat the West while also making them look idiotic and incompetent is an asset to the North.”

At first, none of the other board members responded. After a long pause, Thomas said, “But that doesn’t explain what’s wrong with Keating.”

Belmont shot a glance at Merritt, and Merritt sensed immediately that Belmont didn’t have an answer. He cleared his throat. “Keating was in Chem Ops with me for a couple of months, and he’s prone to laziness and insubordination. He’s been bounced back and forth between several different units. His commanding officers have always had problems with him, but instead of booting him to the Shield Squad, they had him transferred.”

Thomas curled his lip as if it pained him to address Merritt directly. “Well, obviously there’s a reason they would have kept him instead of booting him.”

“Yeah, that reason is *Daddy*,” Belmont said. “I don’t need that kind of spoiled brat as a colonel.”

“But if you’d just listen, I could tell you—”

“Why are you even here?” Belmont snapped. “You’re a *transportation* advisor. What do you know about the military? Do your

job and go fix up our roads. If you really want to help us out, maybe lie down across one of them.”

The room fell into awkward silence. Pratt and Wolfram exchanged subtle smirks at seeing Thomas humiliated, but Merritt cringed when he saw Mercury shoot an icy glare Belmont’s way. After the silence stretched on longer than Merritt thought he could handle, Mercury said, “We don’t need emotional displays in the boardroom, Belmont.” Then, turning to Merritt, he asked, “Have you worked with this woman?”

“Sergeant Hayes? Yes. She trained me for my waterways mission with Troy last year.”

“Did she.” It was more a statement than a question. “You performed well during that mission.”

“It was all thanks to Hayes. Without her guidance, I wouldn’t have had any idea how to—”

Belmont elbowed Merritt in the side, and Merritt swallowed his words. He wasn’t entirely sure of his misstep, but he assumed it had to do with Belmont’s promise to teach him how to be a leader. Apparently, announcing to the board that he’d been entirely worthless before getting help from Hayes wasn’t the best way to project his leadership qualities.

“She gave me the means to bring my Chem Ops expertise into the waterways,” he concluded, clinging to his poker face.

Mercury gave a subtle nod. “And you can personally vouch for her competence?”

“Absolutely, Damen.”

“If you put her in that position, you’ll be responsible for her performance.”

“I understand and accept,” Merritt replied.

Without issuing a clear verdict, Mercury returned his gaze to Belmont. “Explain your next pick.”

Belmont moved onto Balbo, which was an easier fight than Hayes thanks to her impressive record. Lorel, on the other hand,

brought on another tense debate. Belmont took the lead, and Merritt was surprised at how passionately he argued their case even though she was one of the picks Merritt had reluctantly marked as dispensable.

After a few rounds of back-and-forth discussion, Merritt recognized that Belmont was trying to demonstrate to Mercury that his knowledge of military matters exceeded that of the other advisors in the room. He stubbornly avoided turning to Merritt for help, even when he fell short on solid facts and had to resort to embellishment. Merritt played along, piping in only when Belmont explicitly asked for his input.

Belmont didn't mention that the source of his sudden military expertise was Merritt, but Merritt didn't object. As he'd said the day before, his information belonged to Belmont. He didn't need credit for it, and he suspected that having his name attached to it probably would have diminished its value in the eyes of the other advisors anyway.

In fact, Merritt was grateful that Belmont did most of the arguing for him. Merritt was more than happy to brief, to educate, to explain in even the most minute detail—but arguing was another matter, and even listening to the heated back-and-forth discussion left him feeling drained. After enduring round after round of frustrating debate, having to swallow so many baseless counter-arguments and underhanded comments from people who were nowhere near as invested in the North's soldiers as Merritt, he understood Belmont's characterization of board meetings as “soul-sucking.”

The end of the session couldn't have come soon enough. With a hard fight from Belmont, including plenty of posturing over the supposedly tragic sacrifice of their three decoy picks, they miraculously managed to retain every one of Merritt's true picks. The victory seemed to come at the cost of any smidgeon of camaraderie Belmont might have previously had with the other board members—save for Pratt, who fluctuated between arguing and stroking Belmont's ego the same way one might jiggle a sink handle between hot and cold in search of the perfect temperature.

As they were about to break, Mercury turned to Merritt. “Have you decided on a dismissal date for the four colonels you let go?” he asked. “Or do you plan to retrain them?”

“The former colonels are no longer on the job,” Merritt replied, confused.

Mercury gave him an odd look, as if Merritt had misunderstood a question he’d considered rudimentary.

“We haven’t chosen a date yet,” Belmont cut in. “It was best to prioritize filling the spots. The dismissal procedure is next on our list.”

“Don’t put it off,” Mercury said sternly.

“We’ll take care of it right away,” Belmont assured him.

“Good.” Mercury turned to the rest of the room. “We’ll break for fifteen minutes. Merritt, you’re free to go. The rest of you, be back at a quarter to four.”

Mercury was the first out of the room. As the advisors began filtering out behind him, Merritt lingered at Belmont’s side. He grabbed Belmont’s notes, sorting them before handing them back over. Only after everyone had cleared out did Merritt softly say, “Your debating skills were incredible. I can’t believe we managed to keep all our picks. You were just... amazing.”

Belmont eyed him suspiciously. “There you go, sucking up.”

“I’m not,” Merritt protested, stunned. “I meant what I said. You didn’t have to fight so hard for those picks. I know they mattered more to me than they did to you.”

Belmont examined him for another moment. Then he turned back to his tablet, closing all his active documents. “Tell me, Merritt, does goat shit turn to sugar when you touch it?” He glanced at Merritt’s deepening frown and laughed. “I meant that as a compliment. You sit through a crap meeting like that, and you’re still this sweet after. I like it. I don’t know how you expect to survive as general, but I like it.”

Merritt was almost amused. Belmont seemed constitutionally incapable of paying him a compliment that couldn’t also be seen as an insult. But it would take more than a backhanded compliment to ruin his mood. He stood up, pacing around in a circle before realizing he wasn’t sure where he was going. He felt filled to the brim with energy, but he had no outlet for it. He wanted to spar with someone or break into a sprint.

His facial muscles, on the other hand, felt worn from maintaining a poker face for so long. He released the mask, letting a smile break through. “We got *every pick*, though.” He paced in another circle, taking in an exhilarated breath. “We lifted one colonel and eleven captains up from the enlisted ranks. That would have been impossible even a few months ago. *We* did that. We made a real change for the military.”

Belmont raised his head. At first, he looked annoyed, but then his eyes met Merritt’s and the tension faded from his face, as if Merritt’s smile had infected him and spread to his brain. He flashed his own smile for just a moment before shaking his head. “Congratulations, Merritt. You just had your first taste of power. Don’t get drunk on it, now.”

Merritt tempered his smile. “Right.”

Belmont continued to stare at him as if contemplating whether or not to continue speaking. After a long pause, he shifted his attention back to packing away his tablet.

Merritt turned away so Belmont couldn’t see his face, letting his smile slip through for another moment before collecting himself and returning to the table. Sitting down beside Belmont, he said, “So—next steps. I assume there’s some sort of new procedure I have to follow for the colonels I let go?”

Belmont set his files down in a stack on the table and turned to Merritt. He opened his mouth, hesitated again, and then turned away. “Can you stop looking so happy? You’re making this harder than it needs to be.”

Belmont’s tone signaled bad news. Merritt summoned his poker face. “Is there a problem?”

“There’s no problem. This is just standard procedure. But you’re not going to like it.”

Merritt waited silently for Belmont to elaborate.

“We don’t just release disgruntled ex-colonels from military service. They had access to some of the highest clearance levels, and if they left on bad terms, they pose a security risk to the rest of the sphere.

When someone that high up is booted from the military, we have two options: retraining or final dismissal.” Belmont raised an emotionless eyebrow. “You’d be subject to the same two options if you ever come under fire, by the way.”

“What do these options entail?”

“Retraining is exactly what it sounds like. We send ‘em back through the same brainwashing—ahem, *training*—program we sent them through when they joined the military. We create an individualized plan based on their psych eval, and the training method we choose is determined by what their tests suggest will work. The methods can get...” he let out an odd laugh, “...pretty brutal.”

Belmont’s mention of brainwashing was clearly not accidental, even though he’d made a point of correcting himself. “My military training wasn’t brutal at all,” Merritt replied. “I even went the extra step for perpetual duty testing, and I get retested every year. It’s just routine stuff—physical and psychological analyses. Maybe a little boring, but certainly nothing on the level of brainwashing.”

Belmont stared at Merritt as if he was too innocent to understand the conversation. “I read your psych eval summary back when you were still a private. Your training was easy because you were easy. You’d already bought into the military’s ideals, and you *wanted* to be a soldier. You weren’t resistant. Granted, back when I read your report, I couldn’t tell if you really were the perfect soldier or if you just knew how to game the tests. I can tell now.” He traced his long finger across the wood grain of the table, as if searching for anything to look at besides Merritt. “The psych eval is the starting point. It determines the course of your training—whether you’ll face positive reinforcement or negative, whether you’ll be drugged or not. Subjects who face retraining almost always have reasons to resist, so retraining almost always requires mind-altering drugs, isolation, sleep deprivation, days-long interrogations, and so on.”

Merritt tilted his head, skeptical. “I’ve never heard anything about this.”

“It’s a top secret program,” Belmont replied. “Retraining only happens with colonels and higher. And I’d venture to guess that if any



of your fellow soldiers went the difficult route for their initial training and wanted to talk about it... well, they probably wouldn't have talked to *you*."

"My allies trust me," Merritt replied defensively.

"They trust you to protect them in battle. They wouldn't trust you to shield them from a treason accusation. They'd probably expect you to report them straight to Mercury."

"If we're talking about true treason, then of course I'd report it. It's protocol."

"You see?" Belmont asked. When Merritt shook his head in defeat, Belmont continued. "Anyway, retraining is only one option. The other option is final dismissal. Final dismissal is also exactly what it sounds like."

Merritt's brows furrowed. "What do you mean? You execute them?"

Belmont nodded. "Yes. Covertly. The Elite Border Guard's Blackout Division carries out the assassinations so that they look like natural deaths or inter-sphere murders. You wouldn't have any involvement. The only reason you're even involved to this extent is because you're the one who chose to fire those guys."

"What *is* the extent of my involvement?" Merritt asked. "Are you asking me to choose whether to retrain or dismiss them? Because of course I'd choose to retrain them."

"Retraining is expensive, and there's no budget for it because we almost always choose dismissal. If you want to retrain these people, you'd need to pull the money out of another military program. And Pratt, Evans, and I would have to sign off on it. Would you really be willing to skimp on blockers or bulletproof jackets for your old Chem Ops squad just to give those four assholes a second chance?"

"I'm sure we can find the money somewhere," Merritt said, though he was sure of no such thing. Every unit except the Elite Border Guard was perpetually underfunded, and Merritt doubted he could convince Pratt and Evans to let him use their preferred unit as a piggy bank.

“Retraining even one person costs more than six months of Chem Ops poison blockers. It’s a minimum six-month process that requires top-level staff, onsite doctors, and premium drugs.”

Merritt summoned his poker face so Belmont couldn’t see that he was conflicted. Firing the four colonels at his party had felt like an unmitigated victory. But if he’d known that he was sentencing them to death, he wouldn’t have done it. He might as well have pulled out one of his pistols and shot them in the middle of his speech.

Belmont’s gaze locked onto him, as if trying to see past his poker face.

“When do you need a decision?” Merritt asked.

“I needed it last Friday. Normally, we deploy the Blackout Division or initiate retraining before the target even knows they’re out of a job. Mercury’s pissed that these four ex-colonels are still at large.”

Merritt rose to his feet, taking a few steps away. He didn’t want to turn his back on Belmont, but he wasn’t sure how much longer he’d be able to maintain his poker face. How could he be asked to execute four former soldiers who’d done nothing wrong?

Returning his gaze to Belmont, Merritt said in a strained voice, “I want to retrain them.”

“No.”

Merritt narrowed his eyes.

“No,” Belmont repeated. “I won’t sign off on it. As it stands, I think retraining is an irrational decision, and you haven’t convinced me otherwise.”

“Those colonels dedicated their lives to this sphere. Their issue was with me, not with the North. They did nothing treasonous. I have no reason to believe their retraining will be difficult.”

“You fired them because you knew they’d be insubordinate. And let me tell you, they were pretty damn eager to come to a party where they believed their general would be humiliated.” Belmont cocked his head. “And so what if they *do* only have a beef with you? You have

guards and a security detail now. Would you really put your guards' lives at risk by leaving a known threat unaddressed?"

Merritt didn't reply. His poker face remained, held up only by numbness.

"Really, Merritt, you don't know how lucky you are. You have an entire military division that's ready and able to wipe out four of your greatest enemies without leaving a trail, all on the government's dime. You don't even have to lift a finger. And you want to dump hundreds of thousands of dollars into sparing them instead?" He shook his head. "It's a stupid choice, and I won't sign off on it."

"Then it sounds like you don't need my decision," Merritt replied, his voice as blank and numb as his poker face.

"Like hell I don't!" Belmont snapped. "This is your job, Merritt. If you want to retrain them, then fucking sell it to me. If you want to dismiss them, then *sell it to me*. But you're not going to push the decision onto me. Are you a general or not?"

Merritt clenched his fists. Belmont was right; it was his responsibility to make an informed decision on behalf of his military.

How could he sell retraining to Belmont? How could he justify the cost and the risks?

*Think of something. Think of an argument. It's your duty to protect the citizens of your sphere, and this is the only way to save these four people's lives.*

He couldn't.

*I put them in this position, but I can't save them without sacrificing someone else.* The four former colonels would likely resist retraining, and they were too great a threat to be worth endangering his guards or anyone else in the military.

He swallowed through his dry throat, clinging to the last remains of his poker face. "I'm General of the North Sphere Army," he said at last. "Any decision I make has to be for the benefit of our military and our sphere's security. The colonels I fired are no longer a part of this military, and they're a threat to our security, so I can't take money away from active soldiers in order to retrain them." He squared his

shoulders, steadily holding eye contact with Belmont. “We’ll dismiss all four of them.”

Belmont nodded, his expression showing no hint of judgment. “That’s all I needed from you. I’ll direct the Blackout Division to carry out the job. You won’t hear anything more about it.”

“Understood,” Merritt replied. “Is there anything else we need to discuss today?”

“There’s always something,” Belmont said. “But I don’t have time now. I have to finish this meeting.”

“Right.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning for your daily report.”

As Merritt headed for the door, Belmont called to him, “These are the types of ugly decisions you’re going to be making every day, from here on. Better get used to it.”

Merritt swallowed. “It’s my duty,” he replied, his throat just a bit tight.