

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 6

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CHAPTER 6

What would have been excitement over plans to meet Archer the following week turned to panic when Merritt looked online and saw the menu prices of the sushi place she'd selected for lunch. He sifted through his personal belongings in search of any items to sell for a quick buck, but he could only spare a few cheap trinkets. Torrence would lend him the money if he needed it, but he couldn't bear to ask; Torrence was struggling himself. He challenged a few other Chem Ops soldiers to cards, but the nagging guilt persisted. All soldiers were paid a miserable wage, and how could he live with himself if his fancy meal ended up costing a squad mate a doctor visit or a pair of civilian shoes?

He kept his bets low, and by the end of the game, he'd netted thirty dollars in North Sphere currency. According to the online menu, it would be enough to cover a small appetizer and a glass of tap water. If he was still hungry—which he probably would be, based on the photos accompanying the menu—he could stash a few dinner rolls from the mess hall and eat them in the parking lot after Archer left.

When they met up on Friday afternoon at the sleek, modern restaurant, the first words out of Archer's mouth were, "Don't worry about the prices. This is my treat."

Merritt stammered. "Oh, no, you really don't have to...."

"What? I invited you, and I chose the restaurant. It's no big deal."

"But I...." *I took money from my buddies to pay for this. I agonized all week. I picked out my food in advance.* "But I...."

"Eat a lot?"

That wasn't the answer Merritt had prepared, but it was also true. He gave a clumsy smile.

“I know you’re a soldier, Merritt. Order whatever will give you the energy to get through your day.”

I could cry right now, Archer. I could hug you and cry on your shoulder.

“That’s very generous of you, Archer. I appreciate it.”

Archer gestured to a long, rectangular plate with a row of unidentifiable fish chunks, each garnished with a sprig of something green. “I wasn’t sure how hungry you’d be, so I ordered an appetizer as soon as I got here. Please, help yourself.”

“Thank you,” Merritt said. Clumsily handling a pair of chopsticks, he transferred a piece of fish to his plate.

“Have you ever had fresh caught fish? I assume they only serve lab-grown fillets at the mess hall.”

“When I was younger, I sometimes snuck out to a fishing spot with friends. It was one of the spots diverted from Lake Michigan. We’d make a camping trip out of it, cook the fish over a fire and everything. Or sometimes we’d pool our money and sneak out to the Norwood Market to buy a fish. Food at the orphanage was...” He laughed uneasily. “Well, the portions were tiny, and if you wanted to keep your food, you had to be willing to fight the bigger kids for it. And you didn’t always win the fight.”

“I had no idea,” Archer said, with that same mildly pleasant poker face she’d shown him at the party. Neither judgment nor pity. It was as if he’d shared the results of a scientific study, and she was simply processing the data.

“But anyway, thank you for lunch. I really mean it. And thank you for inviting me in the first place. I didn’t think an elite like you would invite someone like me to lunch unless you had ulterior motives.” He laughed awkwardly, wishing he could stop the flood of words that spewed from his mouth.

Archer tilted her head. “I do have ulterior motives.”

Merritt gaped like the fish on the cover of his menu. “Oh.”

She chuckled. It was a light, breezy laugh, like a tinkling bell, and Merritt got the impression that it was as guarded and practiced as her poker face. “I mean nothing sinister by it, Merritt. I was only hoping I could propose a mutually beneficial arrangement for the two of us.”

Merritt’s eyes widened. “You’re not flirting with me, are you?”

Archer’s delicate titter turned to an unrestrained snort. She raised a hand over her face, concealing her laugh before stifling it. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I just wasn’t expecting that.” Another tilt of the head. “Did that really sound like flirting to you? Is that how *you* flirt? Because sweetie....”

“Uh, no. Ah.... After we talked at the party, Belmont told me not to get it in my head that you were flirting with me. But it wasn’t in my head until he put it there.” He bit his lip. “I didn’t think you were flirting. I mean, if you were, I would have been flattered. But I’m gay, so....”

“Well, I guess I’m flattered that you would have been flattered?” Archer gave an odd smile and turned her attention to her menu, while Merritt used his menu to conceal his reddened face.

After the waitress took their order and confiscated Merritt’s makeshift shield, Archer fixed him with an odd look. “So you and Belmont talked after I left the balcony?”

“Yeah,” Merritt said. “A little bit.”

“What kinds of things did you tell him?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t tell him that much. We talked about my recent promotion to sergeant. That was about all.” Looking for an excuse to stop talking, he stuffed a fish chunk appetizer in his mouth. As much as he respected Archer, he didn’t know how much he could trust her with further details.

Archer’s face was serious. “Belmont and I go way back. We graduated from the College of Science and Medicine together. The first two years, we barely saw each other. Then junior year, he redid his schedule and transferred into every single one of my classes. I found it odd because usually when a girl gets a creepy stalker, it’s a straight

guy. As it turns out, he was ranked valedictorian freshman year and then dropped to number two sophomore year, and he bribed a lady in administration to tell him who'd beaten him. He found out it was me, and he made it his goal to sabotage me before graduation."

Merritt shouldn't have been surprised that Belmont's history of sabotage dated back so long. On the surface, Archer hardly seemed like the type of person capable of holding off his attempt, but Merritt didn't underestimate her skill. "How did you keep him from doing it?"

"He wasn't as careful back then as he is now. He showed me all the cards in his hand, and I was prepared. I know things about him now that no one else knows. Granted, he's honed his craft since then." She gave an almost nostalgic smile. "I think he learned something, going up against me. At the very least, he hasn't tried anything with me since."

Merritt couldn't help noticing that her explanation was devoid of detail, but he wasn't surprised that she would be discreet. "Maybe I should be more careful around you than I am around him," he said, eyebrows raised.

"Not unless you also try to sabotage my work."

Archer had said it playfully, but Merritt got the sense she wasn't really joking. "I wouldn't do that."

"Then you have no reason to worry." She gave him a reassuring smile. "I know you're no Belmont. He would've—"

"Seriously, is no place sacred?"

Merritt jumped at the now familiar voice a few feet behind him.

"Speak of the devil," Archer mused. Then, before Merritt could move, "Don't turn around."

Turn around? He would have been more inclined to take cover and inject a poison blocker. Examining the décor on the wall behind Archer, he spotted a panel on a lampshade reflective enough to show the action behind him. The hostess was handing menus to Belmont and a companion—Mannheim, the elite blue-tie Archer had pointed out as intelligence director at Mercury's party. Belmont took the menu without a glance in the hostess's direction, too busy ranting to Mannheim.

Merritt squinted at the reflection, pondering Belmont's animated gestures. He wondered how Belmont had risen so far in the North despite a deliberate lack of so many qualities valued by blue-ties. How did he get away with it? Wouldn't Mercury disapprove? Instead of cold and reserved, he was brazen and animated. Every move was telegraphed, every facial expression exaggerated.

Merritt shook his head and returned his attention to Archer. "Anyway, you were saying—"

"—*so fucking pompous!*"

Archer rolled her eyes. "Sounds like he's talking about himself as usual," she muttered while Merritt went rigid at the prickling feeling of Belmont's eyes on him. "Hmm, I'm not thrilled about him being so close when I want to talk business with you. But we can only hear him because he's practically yelling. As long as we keep our voices down, there should be no problem."

"All right," Merritt said.

Archer leaned forward, speaking softly. "I'm sure you already know this, but I still feel obligated to warn you. Don't tell that guy *anything*. Whatever you say to him, he'll find a way to twist it and spread it around the entire sphere, and then some."

"I got that impression," Merritt said. "We barely talked, and he still managed to twist something I said when he told Mercury later on. I never would have known if Mercury hadn't confronted me with it."

"Mercury confronted you?"

Merritt's chopsticks inadvertently crossed themselves, sending a fish chunk bouncing onto the tablecloth. Should he pick it up with his chopsticks or his fork? His napkin? Should he leave it? Orange sauce seeped into the white linen, but Archer still stared at him, waiting for an answer. One eye still on the fish, he said, "Maybe 'confronted' isn't the right word. He invited me out to coffee and asked me about it."

Archer had been about to take a sip of water, but she froze midway. "You had coffee with the King?"

Merritt nodded, but he wondered if he shouldn't have mentioned it. There had been plenty of witnesses at the café, so it didn't seem like

something he would have needed to hide. As an added bonus, Archer didn't seem too concerned about the fish chunk on the table after hearing his statement.

"You seem surprised," Merritt said.

"I am a little surprised. Mercury doesn't make a habit of dining with aces. He won't even invite his general out for drinks." She raised an eyebrow. "There must be something about you that's caught his interest."

Merritt shrugged. "I don't know what that would be."

After a pause, during which they both sipped their water in marginally comfortable silence, Archer said, "About that arrangement I mentioned."

"Oh, right."

She opened her mouth to speak, but then her eyes locked on a waitress who was being a little too attentive. With nothing more than a pointed glare, she sent the poor teen scurrying across the room. "I wish they wouldn't always hover like that," she said with a sigh. "Though I suppose I can't blame her. A lot of elites don't even tip if it takes a server more than five seconds to reach their table after they're hailed."

Merritt didn't doubt it.

Archer glanced around the room one more time before leaning in closer. "So. The arrangement. Mercury put out a call to his directors and advisors asking for new wide-range military poison formulas that are cheaper and have a more stable active radius. Apparently, some elites living near recent battle zones have gotten sick from the poison vials thrown by Chem Ops. I've been working on a new line of poisons for almost a year now, but I'm looking for a consultant with practical experience in chemical weapons."

Archer's manner of speaking fascinated Merritt; she spoke in casual conversation exactly as she did behind a podium in the lecture hall. Even when being spontaneous, her lines somehow sounded rehearsed. He wondered if a question existed that she couldn't meet with a prepared reply. While she lacked the charisma of Mercury or

Belmont, she possessed the cold, analytical temperament that the North prized so highly.

After pausing for a sip of water, she continued. “There are about five or six independent teams trying to meet Mercury’s demand, but none of the others have enough respect for soldiers to even want to approach them. As a result, they’re bound to develop poisons with impractical uses.”

Merritt knew this all too well. Some of his unit’s poison blockers were so inefficient that soldiers willingly skipped them, tossing knockout vials knowing full well that they were taking themselves out along with the enemy.

Archer seemed to pick up on Merritt’s reaction, and she nodded in understanding. “As a Chem Ops soldier, you possess a level of expertise that the rest of us lack. Not only that, you happen to also have a knack for chemistry. I’d love to know more about the environments where you fight, and how wide-range poisons fit into your arsenal. My goal is to minimize the price of the poison and the need for blockers while maintaining effectiveness and ease of use.” She pulled out her phone as if already poised to mark dates on her calendar. “I know you run a tight schedule, but if you’re willing to meet with me once every week or two to exchange data and review formulas, I can make it worth your while.”

“That sounds like an interesting project,” Merritt said after consideration. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but how come you’re working on chemical weapons? Isn’t that strange for a surgeon?”

“Director of Surgery,” Archer corrected.

Merritt cringed. He hoped he hadn’t offended her. “Yes, Director of Surgery. But still an amazing surgeon, from what I’ve read.”

Archer leaned back in her seat, her face taking on an introspective expression. “Everything in the North Sphere always comes down to drugs and poisons. Chemical weapons, pharmaceuticals, recreational drugs: this is our specialty. No matter how much our sphere respects the doctors and scientists and engineers who work in other fields, we can never compete with drugs and poisons.”

Merritt understood. The North's criminal founders—the fabled drug lords and pharmaceutical industry bigwigs who were exiled underground long, long ago—built their sphere from the ground up with drugs and poisons, and it had been the core of the North's economy ever since. That drug and poison manufacturers got preferential treatment was no secret.

Archer ran a finger over her tie, probably subconsciously. “I hold a prestigious position, and I worked hard for it, but I still follow as many orders as I give. If I want any real control over my work, I need to earn Mercury's recognition. As long as I don't work in drugs and poisons, he has an excuse to ignore me. My boss is the Director of Science and Medicine, and if I can outperform him, it'll be harder for Mercury to turn a blind eye to what I've done.”

“The Director of Science and Medicine is the highest-ranking director in the North Sphere. Jack of spades. You seem really young to be competing for that kind of position.”

“I'm running on a different clock than most of the people I'm competing against, Merritt. I have to make my mark before I grow too many wrinkles for Mercury to take me seriously.”

“He... wouldn't hold that against you,” Merritt said with disbelief.

Archer's eyes took on a dangerous glint. “And on what data do you base *that* theory?”

Yikes. He remembered that same look, maybe even that same phrase, from when Archer had reviewed student projects after her guest lecture at the college. A year and a half later, it hadn't lost its bite. “It's what Mercury always says—that anyone in the North is worthy of respect if they can show enough talent or intelligence.”

“I'm sorry to tell you this, Merritt, but he doesn't measure everyone with the same ruler. I know you had coffee with him once, but I've been to twenty or thirty of his confidential board meetings. I know the side of him that the media is paid to ignore.”

The waitress arrived with their food. Grateful for the interruption from the uncomfortable discussion, Merritt dug into his salmon nigiri. It pained him to hear Archer speak ill of his King, but he told himself

that she was only doing her best, using her unique skillset to serve her sphere just as Merritt was doing. If she had professional differences with Mercury, that was none of his business.

“I’ll pay you for your time, by the way,” Archer said. “It’s a set fee for uncertified consultants that comes out of our research budget, so it’s not a huge number, but it amounts to ten or eleven times more per hour than you’re making as a sergeant.”

“Oh,” Merritt said before he could stop his overeager response.

“And as an extra token of my appreciation, I’d gladly offer you any other compensatory service you might find useful. Money can’t buy everything, and this is your chance to request one of those things.”

“I’m not sure what kind of things you mean.”

“Maybe you wanted me to help you connect to one of my colleagues. Or maybe you have a friend or family member waiting for medical care, and you want them bumped to the front of the line. That sort of thing.”

Merritt considered. Actually, there was something. “Would you be willing to teach me elite etiquette?” he ventured softly.

Archer cracked a smile. “You ask as if it’s too scandalous to say it out loud.”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d be allowed to teach me. They say the rules are only taught by word of mouth because elites don’t want commoners to be able to pass themselves off as elites just by picking up an instruction manual.”

“That’s not entirely untrue,” Archer said before taking a sip of water. “Do you know any elite etiquette at all?”

“I know the obvious stuff that everyone knows—that the person serving food or drink takes the first bite to prove that nothing is poisoned. That you’re not supposed to decline an offer of food or drink from someone higher ranking than you. That you’re not supposed to give your phone more attention than an elite in your presence. And so on. But I don’t know the subtler rules.” He gestured toward an untouched knife and fork on the neighboring table, crossed at a right angle at the upper left corner of the plate. “Like how to set a table. We

don't do it like that where I come from. And I know there's something weird about entering certain rooms with your right foot first and others with your left?"

"That one is just a nuisance," Archer said with rolled eyes. "Thankfully, a lot of those rules are reserved only for formal functions. But if Mercury's going to continue to invite you to his parties, I can see why you'd want to learn. Yes, I can teach you, but not while you're on the clock at the labs. We can do a weekly lunch, if you have time. Still my treat."

"I'd hate to make you pay for that many of my meals."

"All right. Every other week, we can meet at the mess hall. I'd be allowed in, right?"

"Yes, but I'd feel even worse making you eat *that*."

"It's food, Merritt. I can handle it."

Merritt gave her a grateful smile. "Then I guess we have a deal."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Belmont griped, stopping mid-step as the hostess led him and Mannheim to a table. "It's *him*. Here, at an elite restaurant. No way in hell is he paying for his own meal."

Mannheim squeezed past him, unwilling to wait for him to stop gawking before taking a seat. "Just sit down, man. I have an afternoon meeting. I can't be late going back to work."

Belmont slumped into the seat across from Mannheim, absently taking a menu from the hostess, but his gaze remained on Merritt. "First he's in the VIP room at Yackley's, and now he's here. He's offal! *Seriously, is no place sacred?*"

Mannheim squinted across the room. "Who are you flipping out about? That blond guy with Archer?"

Belmont nodded. "He was at Mercury's party last week. You didn't see him there?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice him."

“How could you not notice him? He’s fucking hot.”

“Whatever you say, Belmont,” Mannheim said, as if for the thousandth time. “And how do you go from ranting about how horrible it is to see him here to ranting about how hot he is?”

“How else am I supposed to say it? They’re both true.”

“I just don’t see how he’s worth getting upset over. I don’t even know who he is.”

“He’s the hacker.”

Finally, something broke through Mannheim’s icy exterior. He turned in his seat, glaring at the back of Merritt’s head. “*That’s* the motherfucker who almost cost me my job?”

“You didn’t recognize him?”

“I don’t spend as much time staring at guys from behind as you do, man.”

“You’ve been sending him death threats,” Belmont said. “You and your entire team.”

“Just because I know his number doesn’t mean I know the back of his head.”

“He’s been all over the news.”

“And I’ve been too busy to follow the news. In case you forgot, I’m the one who had to figure out a way to fix that goddamn bug he dug up, and it wasn’t easy when I had Mercury breathing down my neck and interrogating me every thirty minutes.”

“Oh, right,” Belmont said, though he’d stopped paying attention midway through Mannheim’s reply. “Anyway, his name is Merritt. You’d think he was someone important, the way Mercury’s doting on him. But he’s just a soldier. I think he’s getting a big head from all the special treatment Mercury’s giving him.” Belmont glanced at the menu in his hand, but he was too aggravated to concentrate on the overly ornate type. “Fuck it, I’ll just pick something at random when the waitress comes back.” He tossed the menu aside. “I’m Mercury’s top advisor, for fuck’s sake. Give me another six months, and I’ll be his right hand. If you’re an ace and a jack gives you a compliment, you

should at least be gracious and accept it. But that guy is *so fucking pompous!* You should have seen the way he shot me down every chance he got. It's as if he knows he's Mercury's new anointed one, and he thinks he doesn't have to respect any of the rest of us." He glanced back at Mannheim, who looked too absorbed in his menu. "Are you even listening?"

"I always listen to your monologues," Mannheim said, as monotonous as an automated phone attendant. Then quieter, "Been listening for twenty years nonstop."

The waitress arrived with two bowls of miso soup and then took their orders. After she retreated with their menus, Belmont said, "Mercury seems to think he's smart. But obviously, he can't be *that* smart, seeing as he's in the military."

"He's smart," Mannheim said coldly. "I oversaw the creation of the code that he cracked. An idiot can't do what he did. Every person on the team combed over it before it was put into place, and no one saw the exploit that he saw."

"Then it was luck. He stumbled onto the mistake and took advantage."

"How obvious do you think that bug was? I wouldn't even call it a bug. He developed a complex hack to turn the system against itself." Mannheim glowered at the tofu floating in his spoon. "No idiot is capable of dismantling my work. If he managed to do it, that means he's a genius."

Mannheim was acting as if Belmont had insulted him. Belmont held up his hands. "All right, all right. No need to get worked up about it. All I mean is he's not *educated*. Not the way we are. But none of that even matters. The problem is Mercury. And I know exactly why Mercury is so interested in him."

Mannheim slurped his soup.

"You don't want to hear?" Belmont asked.

"I assumed you were going to tell me either way."

Belmont glared across the room, lip curled. "He put five years into training me, trying to make me into a replica of him. But I have no

interest in being him. I'm getting shit done and grabbing headlines while doing it. And now that he realizes I'm not the lap dog he wanted me to be, he's looking for someone else who'll pant and wag his tail after every command he's given." Another scowl at Merritt. "And that one would do it. I've never seen anyone so fucking eager to sign his life away to his King."

"Goddamnit, Belmont, eat your soup. You know it drives me crazy when you rant until your food gets cold. Because then the whole way back to headquarters, I'll have to listen to you complaining about how the food was cold and terrible and how you're dying of food poisoning as we speak."

"When have I ever done that?" Belmont asked.

Mannheim stared at him incredulously. He returned to his soup without a response.

"Whatever, I don't care," Belmont said. "Here's the point. Only one of two things can happen. Either I end up killing him or I end up sleeping with him. I don't see how it could turn out any other way."

Surprisingly, Mannheim chuckled. "Just this morning, I told my programmers that either I'd kill him or I'd hire him."

"Well, he's apparently not interested in sleeping with me, and he already took a promotion to sergeant. So I guess that narrows down our choices."