

# DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

---

SHOBANA 'BOB' APPAVU

CHAPTER 4

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Chapter 4

Copyright © 2017 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

---

“Tell me the truth, Merritt. Are you a coffee drinker?”

Merritt fought the urge to duck behind his coffee cup. Damen Mercury had spotted his grimace before he even realized he was wearing one. “Ah, no. I’m not. How could you tell?”

“King’s intuition,” Mercury said, his teasing smile bringing a flood of crimson to Merritt’s cheeks.

It was a quarter after two, and it would have taken no less than a King’s summons to get him out of Saturday training at military headquarters. Captain Balbo gave him the all-clear to pack up in the middle of afternoon drills, asking no questions even though he could sense her curiosity. All Merritt could tell her was that he assumed it to be a friendly meeting.

Merritt hadn’t become aware of all the strings Mercury had pulled for him until weeks after their confrontation at the military prison. Not only had Merritt’s disciplinary slate been wiped clean, but he was granted an exception to be commanded by Captain Balbo and General Rhodes alone, bypassing Colonel Harding in the chain of command. Circumstance had yet to cross Merritt’s path with his colonel’s, but he had to imagine Colonel Harding wouldn’t have taken the news well. Regardless, it was a welcome relief, and he spent a good five minutes at the start of his meeting with Mercury gushing praises for his King and thanking him for what he’d done.

The café Mercury had selected wouldn’t have been within Merritt’s price range. It resided at the edge of an elite residential district, clean and quiet, a favorite gathering place for the area’s business professionals. The style was what Torrence, who was more knowledgeable of underground art, called “gothic grunge chic.” Merritt had no idea what that meant. What he saw was flying buttresses,

exposed pipes, Edwardian furniture, and lace doilies. It was an odd but intriguing mix.

As with most bars and cafés in the North Sphere, the pots and servingware were modeled after scientific implements. Loose tea steeped in test tube infusers, water poured from beaker-shaped kettles. To citizens of other spheres, this was part of the novelty of visiting a North Sphere establishment. To a blue-tie, it was a familiar comfort.

“Jokes aside,” Mercury said, “Your demeanor is mellow and consistent. If I were to guess, I’d say you were a Focus drinker. Like me.”

“I am. But I’ll also drink tea. And water; water’s great. I drink a lot of water. Actually, the water at the....” Damn, he was rambling and he couldn’t stop. Torrence was the only person he’d ever met with the patience to listen to him ramble about the water in different North Sphere districts. He had to get back on track. “But I drink a lot of Focus too. Speaking of which, the Focus in champagne you served at the party last night was amazing.”

“You drank Focus at the party?” Mercury asked, a twinkle in his eye.

“Uh. Yeah.” Maybe he shouldn’t have admitted that. But it was worth it to see Mercury show more of what he usually hid behind his poker face.

“Thank you for the compliment, Merritt, but the drinks were mediocre last night. Yackley was off his game. Surely you’ve had a better glass of Focus some time in your life?”

Merritt shook his head, embarrassed. “I usually get whatever’s on tap... and in my price range.”

To Merritt’s relief, Mercury made no comment about his rank. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and said, “Well, one day you’ll have an even better glass of Focus, and then you’ll understand. As for today, we’ll toss that cup of coffee, even though it’s one of the best in the North Sphere. And I’ll show you a truly amazing cup of tea.”

A few minutes later, the waitress poured a new cup of green tea to steep for Merritt, and Mercury asked Merritt about his recent college

graduation. Merritt's reply was bashful. "I know it's not the same thing as graduating from an elite college, but there aren't many other soldiers who stick through the entire four years of academics. I'm grateful to have been able to earn a degree, even if it's more symbolic than practical."

"Grateful?" Mercury asked. "Interesting choice of words. Your grades weren't gifted to you. You earned them, correct?"

"Yes, but statistically, over sixty percent of military students have to take at least a month off school due to combat injuries. When that happens, it can be difficult to catch up. That's why so few of us make it to the end."

"You didn't have to take time off, then?"

"No, King."

"And why not?"

"Because I was never badly injured, King."

"Which means?"

"I guess... that I'm careful and lucky, King."

Mercury shook his head. "There's no such thing as luck, Merritt."

Merritt didn't know if he agreed, but it was hard to question a man like Mercury.

Mercury took a sip of his coffee. His cup still raised in front of his face, he said, "Belmont told me an interesting thing yesterday."

Merritt tensed. The turn of subject blindsided him.

"He told me that you didn't want the promotion I gave you."

*Poker face, Merritt.* "That's not what I said to Belmont. Is that why you wanted to meet with me today?"

Mercury met Merritt's poker face with his superior model. "What did you say to Belmont?"

"Belmont told me that I'd have to behave differently if I wanted to climb quickly up the ranks. He said I had to get better at schmoozing, which is true. But I told him that I wasn't concerned with

climbing up the ranks, and that I would do my best work wherever you decided to put me. I'm honored and grateful—grateful, yes—for the promotion to sergeant. And I'm performing my job to the best of my ability, because that's where you chose to place me. If you chose to make me a private again, I'd do that job to the best of my ability." His brows furrowed. "I take my pledge to you seriously, King. Every word of it."

"You have no aspiration to reach the top of your field?"

"I haven't thought about it. It never felt like something I'd ever have control over. Promotions usually aren't, where I come from."

"Are you saying that your superiors didn't work hard to earn their promotions?"

"Well, most officers are born into...." He stopped. He didn't know what kind of trap he was stepping into, but he could sense one beneath his foot.

It was too late to rein in the momentum. Mercury wouldn't let him slip out of reach. "General Rhodes. He was born into his position?"

"Of course not, King."

"Then your theory falls flat." Mercury sat back, claiming victory over the conversation.

"But if he was born where I was born, he never could have become general."

Mercury had allowed Merritt to step freely out of the trap, and he'd turned around and run back inside.

Mercury leaned forward, fingers laced together in a web as tight as the one entangling Merritt. "Explain it to me, Merritt."

"I had no choice in my military enlistment. My parents died broke, so I was made a private. The highest rank I can hope to achieve is a decorated sergeant. Only orphans or abandoned children with an inheritance have a chance of breaking into the ranks of commissioned officers. General Rhodes started his military career as a lieutenant, and that opened the doors to the higher ranks. He's never faced enemy fire."

“Interesting that you feel it worth mentioning his lack of combat experience,” Mercury said, stone cold.

Merritt swallowed. He shouldn’t have said it. It had been a long-stifled point of resentment he hadn’t buried deep enough.

“You believe that my top military advisors don’t have enough combat experience to do the job.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you believe it.”

Merritt hesitated. “I will always obey orders from those who are higher up in the chain of command, even when they seem unreasonable.”

“And *when* do they seem unreasonable?”

Damn, he was stepping on mines left and right.

“It was a hypothetical, King.”

“And now, a blatant lie to my face.” Mercury’s face hadn’t changed, but Merritt could feel the bite in his tone. “Tell me about your unreasonable orders.”

Surely, Mercury already knew about the problems in his military? Someone must have told him. As King, he’d have been witness to its dysfunction, but he acted like it was news. There was nothing Merritt could say that wouldn’t equate to denigrating his superiors. But Mercury remained across the table, demanding truth. Merritt felt more trapped than he had strapped to a chair in the military prison.

“It’s a broken system, King. The highest levels of the military rely on faulty statistics and dated simulation software to devise their battle plans. Rather than give us orders to outwit and overpower the enemy, we’re ordered to replicate the simulator. Captain Balbo is one of the few officers who can translate these unrealistic orders into a viable strategy, but every time she leads us to success at Chem Ops, she’s reamed for deviating from the simulation instead of given the credit she deserves. It’ll wear on her over time. It wears on all of us.”

“Our battle simulation software was designed by the most talented engineers, strategists, and programmers in our sphere.”

“So was the Intelligence Database.”

*Oh shit, Merritt. You jumped off that cliff without a parachute. And your tea is over-steeped.*

Mercury’s face went from mellow to masked in an instant. After a long, excruciating pause, he reached into his pocket and slapped something down on the table. Merritt realized with a start that it was an Underground Card Game deck. “You seem to think you know better than my top strategists and advisors. Let’s see how well you really know what’s going on down here.”

That wasn’t what Merritt had expected; on the other hand, he understood Mercury’s intention to use the card game to subtly prove Merritt’s ignorance of his sphere’s culture and current events.

Out of the corner of his eye, Merritt saw a few other café patrons looking their way. There was no way to whip out a card deck in the underground without inviting an audience. Some of the patrons had already begun to circle the table in anticipation of their match.

If there was one thing Merritt knew, it was that he couldn’t turn down the challenge. It was against etiquette, especially when the challenger was an elite. He slid his teacup out of the way, making space for the game. Nothing needed to be said in confirmation; Mercury was already shuffling the deck.

A few tricks while shuffling the cards made the gathered crowd ooh and aah. Mercury turned up his charisma to entertain the elite audience, but a draft of cold continued to flow in Merritt’s direction. Midway through shuffling, he cut the deck in half, revealing his card and Merritt’s card at the head of each stack, king and ace of spades respectively. Several in the audience clapped, while someone behind Merritt’s head voiced indignant surprise that an ace had been sitting two tables away from her, and no one had warned her to conceal her purse.

Merritt wondered what other cards Mercury had in his deck. Every citizen carried a deck, but every deck held a different mix. It was startling enough that Mercury had chosen to use Merritt as his ace of spades. Merritt didn’t even play his card in his own deck; he preferred



to play Torrence as his ace of spades. He saw it as more valuable than his own.

According to legend, the Underground Card Game originated when the founders of the underground were still on the surface, serving together in Cook County Jail. They used a standard card deck, pasting a different mug shot on each card according to the hierarchy they'd established for themselves. When the city's most violent and dangerous offenders were exiled to the underground a hundred years ago—though there was reason to doubt the timeline—they brought the card game with them. The North Sphere became spades, East took clubs, West was hearts, and South bore diamonds. Now, in the 2150s, it was the official game of the underground with tens of thousands of citizen cards to choose from. The televised matches were nearly as popular as combat sports and motorcycle racing.

Every citizen of the underground was given a copy of their own playing card, delivered in the mail alongside their official ID. Starter decks could be purchased in stores, and other cards were collected and traded as a hobby. Usually, a match would come with a monetary bet. This time, Merritt knew that something much more important was on the line.

Mercury dealt the cards: six cards per player, with the rest set in a stack on the table. Then he played his first card of the round while Merritt examined his hand.

Merritt's cards were decent: nothing outstanding, but he could make do with what he had. Meeting eyes with Mercury, he laid down his first card to face off against Mercury's: a six of clubs to defeat Mercury's four of diamonds.

Mercury played the five of hearts in the next face-off, and Merritt countered with a six of spades to defeat it.

After all four face-offs were played, Merritt looked to be in good shape. All four of his cards had a higher face value than Mercury's. But before Merritt could collect any of the face-offs, Mercury held up a finger to signify that he had a challenge. Then he pointed to the second pair. "Did you know," he said, "that Agent Pine was assassinated half

an hour ago?” He lifted his phone, revealing a text conversation. “Belmont just gave me the news.”

Merritt bit his lip. If the citizen on his card was dead, then the card was worth nothing. He had the option to counter Mercury’s challenge, but there would be no point unless he could prove that Mercury was lying. “Challenge granted. Your cards.”

Mercury moved onto Merritt’s card in the third pair, six of spades. “Warwick here was fired from his manager job at the North Sphere Central Business Office. No job, no worth.”

“No worth?” Merritt asked.

“He still has some valuable connections, I’ll grant you that. But his power in our sphere will be limited until he manages to establish himself again. Standard rank deduction for temporary unemployment is three. That would drop him to three of spades, low enough to be beaten by my card.”

Again, Merritt had no grounds for a counter. He felt a bit of heat under the collar of his jacket. “All right, challenge granted. Your cards.”

Mercury collected four of the eight cards off the table, his poker face giving an air of indifference to his gain.

Chewing his lip, Merritt considered his next move. Whoever dealt the round was at a disadvantage because they were laying their cards blind, while their opponent could counter their moves with intention. For him not to take the round, he’d have to come from behind later on.

Merritt dealt the next hand. They faced off again, and Merritt used a conservative strategy, sacrificing his lower value cards in order to save up for a potential flush or king/queen combo in the next round. He made good on his strategy when Mercury dealt the next round, and Merritt was able to take all four of the face-offs. Mercury accepted the loss of the round graciously, but he was clearly taking the game seriously now.

By the final round, Merritt trailed Mercury by one card. He organized his hand in anticipation of Mercury’s selections, knowing

that he had his work cut out for him. Mercury took the first face-off, Merritt took the second, and the third was an East-East draw, meaning that both cards would be discarded. Merritt was pretty sure he knew which cards Mercury had left in his hand, and he was prepared.

He had three cards left to choose from in his hand. One was Sinon, a West Sphere hunter card: mid-ranking but not outstanding. One was Brady, a West Sphere dog that he certainly wouldn't use. The third was Kimball, a low-ranking North Sphere associate. Merritt was pretty sure that Mercury's last three cards were North Sphere cards. Merritt was still one card behind; if he won the face-off, he'd collect both cards and thus win the game. If he lost the face-off, he'd remain behind and lose the game.

Merritt laid down his North Sphere associate card. Mercury looked at the card, cocked his head, and then looked at Merritt. "You realize, don't you, that if we draw on this face-off, I win?"

"Yes, King."

"I know you have to have a mid-ranking West Sphere card in your hand. If I recall, there are two hunter cards we haven't seen yet, and only one card remains in the deck. You didn't even want to take a chance with your hunter?"

"No, King."

Mercury shook his head, apparently disappointed. He laid his card down across from Merritt's. It was Magnolia, the North Sphere government's official medical examiner. She ranked higher than Kimball, but because they were both from the same sphere, they would typically both be discarded. With both cards discarded, Merritt would remain one card behind and would lose the game.

Mercury raised an eyebrow at Merritt, giving him a chance to challenge even though he appeared to believe it was useless. Merritt cleared his throat. "You know, Kimball is a pretty talented engineer. She's the one behind most of our newest military vehicles."

"And?"

"I'm on friendly terms with her. She hasn't been all that happy with her job lately. Getting disillusioned."

“Is that so?”

Merritt hesitated. He eyed the crowd of bystanders who’d gathered to watch the game. For a split second, he remembered throwing five syringe darts into Colonel Harding’s back. He remembered Captain Balbo handing him his blue tie and saying, “I wonder if you should’ve let him win, though?”

He set his last two cards face-down on the table and said, “Your game, King.”

There were a few sighs of dismay from the audience. Once it was clear that the game was over, the crowd slowly dispersed, and Mercury gathered his cards. “Not bad, Merritt, but you still have a lot to learn.”

“I do.” He watched Mercury as he neatly organized his deck. The King’s poker face was still up, but there was no doubt the disappointment Merritt had caused was irreparable.

Mercury packed away his deck and then rose to his feet. “Well, Merritt. It was nice having drinks with you. I wish you the best with your future in the military.”

Merritt recognized Mercury’s words as goodbye—most likely a permanent goodbye—and he swallowed his sorrow. “Yes, King. Thank you. I appreciated the opportunity to speak with you.”

He lowered his head in a shallow bow, but Mercury turned away without acknowledgment, responding to a buzz at his hip. His back to Merritt, he lifted the phone to his ear. As Merritt headed for the door, he could hear Mercury greeting Belmont.

Out in the blinding lights of the simulated afternoon sky, he straddled his bike, but he didn’t turn his key in the ignition right away. Instead, he sat and examined his surroundings, asking himself if he’d just blown an important opportunity.

As he retrieved his key from his pocket, he saw Mercury stalk out of the café, heading toward him at a fast clip. “You knew,” he called, his tone just sharp enough to convey the possibility of anger.

“I’m sorry, King?”

Mercury stopped next to Merritt's motorcycle, laying a hand on one of the handlebars. "I just got an interesting call from Belmont. It seems Kimball has made a break for it and escaped to the South Sphere."

"Oh." The word was already out of Merritt's mouth before he realized he hadn't displayed a sufficient level of shock. "Has the South baptized her?"

"Yes. Baptized, and gone from the North." Mercury leaned in closer, setting his other hand on the seat behind Merritt. "You knew. When you played that card, you knew that she had already escaped."

Merritt's silence was telling.

The North wasn't the only sphere Merritt had hacked. For nearly six years, he'd examined the code of the South's inter-sphere surveillance system, their means of spying on anyone and everyone. It was their most powerful method of controlling their rivals, and no other sphere had the means to defend against their eagle eyes. No sphere had ever found wires or stationed cameras; they only ever saw the footage, leaked strategically to benefit the South or destabilize whichever other sphere was at its most powerful.

Merritt fared no better against the South's surveillance systems, despite his best effort. His original goal had been to hack all cameras stationed in the North and shut them down, but his skills were not advanced enough to compete with the South on that level. Not only were the cameras constantly moving, there was no discernible way to shut them down.

In his attempts, however, he'd managed to stumble upon a server that processed a small selection of live videos on their way to their final destination, most likely a South Sphere technical expert. The video files were live feeds of the East-South border. On one such video, Kimball had met in secret with a South Sphere contact to orchestrate her escape. When he'd tentatively asked Kimball about it a few days later, she swore him to secrecy, telling him that the South was giving her a future where the North only offered a glass ceiling.

The South Sphere held the underground's only exit to the surface. Reaching it required a dangerous trek on motorcycle: dizzying jumps

across wide chasms, daunting rides on rickety suspension bridges the width of a single rope, and expanses of treacherous terrain pitched in absolute darkness. Only a South Sphere rider with a lifetime of training could manage the route, and only a South Sphere motorcycle could withstand the jumps.

As a sphere of refugees, the South had a history of illegally claiming citizens from other spheres, whether or not their original King was willing to relinquish them. An escape to the surface freed a person from their sphere leader's ownership. By "baptizing" a person—dipping them in the surface's sunlight just long enough for both feet to touch the ground—the three Queens of the South could legally strip any underground person of their sphere citizenship and then claim that person as their own when they reentered the underground via the South Sphere. The South only accepted select refugees into their sphere due to limited resources and the dangers of the journey. Apparently, they had seen Kimball as valuable enough to take the risk despite the North's refusal to acknowledge her value for years.

An escapee's card was powerful in the Underground Card Game. Symbolic of the embarrassment to their former sphere, their card defeated all cards in their former sphere's suit. Merritt's Kimball card, regardless of rank, would defeat Mercury's North Sphere medical examiner card.

Mercury gripped the handlebar of Merritt's motorcycle, eyes focused and intense. "Why didn't you state your case? Why didn't you challenge the face-off? Even if you didn't know for sure that Kimball had been baptized on the surface, she was still a traitor card. She would have still beaten Magnolia and any other North Sphere card."

"I know."

"So why didn't you do it?"

"Because we had an audience."

Mercury narrowed his eyes.

"It wasn't about the game. You're my King. It wouldn't have been appropriate for me to demonstrate a level of confidential knowledge, in public, that you didn't have. My job is to serve you, not humiliate you."

Merritt wasn't sure what to make of Mercury's expression. He seemed to have willfully dropped his poker face in order to demonstrate how preposterous he found Merritt's words to be. "Maybe so, but then you were the one to walk away humiliated."

"By tomorrow, they won't remember me. They won't remember my loss. I was only a faceless ace to them. But if you had lost in front of them, they would have remembered. They would have gossiped, and word would have spread."

"Merritt, I'm a King. I don't need you to spare my pride over a game of cards."

"I know, but after what I did with the Intelligence Database, I..."

Mercury put his hand on Merritt's shoulder, and Merritt jumped, startled at the physical contact. Blue-ties simply did not touch each other for no reason, and to casually touch someone of a vastly different rank was unheard of. By law, Merritt could not touch Mercury uninvited.

The hand squeezed, and Merritt felt a buzz like a thousand bees in his addled brain.

"Merritt," Mercury said sharply, as if noticing that Merritt's focus had waned. "I'm a King. I have the respect of my people, and I'm not going to lose it in a card game. Do you really believe my hold on my sphere is that fragile?"

"Of course not, King."

"You're an ace. You're starting from nothing, and if you want people to respect you down here, you have to take your wins. You have to command respect. I put my name on the line by wiping your slate clean and promoting you to sergeant. I put my reputation on the line by sitting with you in public for tea and coffee. Now, you need to prove to the rest of your sphere why you were worthy of the gift I gave you. My people need to see proof that I'm surrounding myself with the best and the brightest." Mercury's gaze locked on Merritt's. There was intensity in his eyes, and Merritt couldn't tell if it was meant to support or to intimidate. "If you want to serve me, serve me by proving your worth to everyone. Not just to me, not just in private conversation, and not just from behind a computer."

Mercury's words overwhelmed him. How could the concept of proving one's worth apply to someone who had none?

No, something had changed in the past six months. Mercury was his King, the sole authority capable of determining his worth. Today, standing outside a café where patrons thought it necessary to hide their purses from him, Mercury spoke of him as if his worth was a given. He'd take Mercury at his word; Mercury knew better than he did.

Another squeeze of the shoulder brought Merritt around. "Do you hear me, Merritt?"

Merritt's voice wasn't ready for its summons. Only an empty huff showed up to accompany his nod.

"Good. Then I'll let you go." He leaned in closer. "But the next time we play cards, don't even think about letting me win."

Merritt swallowed. His mind was still in a haze as Mercury stood close enough for Merritt to bask in his warmth. Finally finding his voice, he said, "Yes, King."

Mercury gave Merritt's shoulder a last squeeze, and a smile flickered on his lips. "Drive safe, now."

Merritt bowed his head. "Yes, King."

He waited for Mercury's hand to slide off his shoulder, watching him turn and disappear inside the café, before he fired up his motorcycle and turned the corner onto the nearest side street so he could clear his head in privacy.