

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 5

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Patreon Serial Edition

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CHAPTER 5

“Another shower?” Pierce asked as Merritt took a seat on the neighboring bed. “Why would you need an extra shower when you didn’t even stick around for afternoon training? That musta been one hell of a filthy book you were reading in the mess hall.”

It had been. Merritt had spent a few minutes before dinner perusing the underground’s archive of pirated ebooks from the surface, looking for something to occupy his mind. The archive’s tiny, blurry cover photos were a pain to navigate, but a book in the classics section called *Helicopter Man* had piqued his interest. The concept of manned flight had always fascinated him. What would it be like to soar through the limitless sky with the sun up ahead and no boundaries in sight? As a child, he used to search the dumpsters in middle-class neighborhoods for discarded model helicopters and airplanes, imagining being above the clouds when the closest he’d ever seen to a cloud was floating smog.

It only took a few paragraphs of reading to realize that this was not, in fact, a book about piloting helicopters. Upon closer scrutiny of the cover, the book’s full title was revealed: *Helicopter Man Pounds Dinosaur Billionaire Ass*. He should have known it was erotica—weird erotica—from the pixelated cover art, but he’d just assumed pilots on the surface would fly shirtless depending on the weather.

But despite Pierce’s insinuation, Merritt couldn’t blame the book for his extra shower; he’d needed it since coming home from the café six hours ago. Reading had merely been another failed attempt at distraction from his already torrid thoughts. The ghost of Mercury’s touch possessed him, denying him peace. Its spectral warmth permeated his body, turning to flame in his bloodstream, and the barracks shower’s unpredictable spray of lukewarm and icy cold was his last line of defense.

You cannot have a schoolboy crush on your King.

He said this to himself as if he hadn't always had one. His devotion to Mercury had surpassed the level required by his pledge long ago. Mercury had deposed a former King who saw no worth in his sphere's aces and twos, no worth in soldiers, no worth in anyone who lacked the proper breeding. When Mercury had taken the throne, he'd opened the door to the rest of his sphere, telling them on his first day in power that anyone who demonstrated outstanding intelligence or talent was worthy of respect, regardless of lineage. The North, he declared, was a meritocracy.

While Mercury had succeeded in charming the majority of his subjects, not everyone in the North adopted his ideals. If the editorials Merritt had read in the news were any indication, many elites clung to the views of Mercury's predecessor, fighting to close the doors he'd opened. And disgruntled aces like Pierce and Torrence believed that nothing had changed for the average hard worker who wasn't blessed with superhuman talent. Most aces and twos, most soldiers, most people of poor lineage were still left in the cold, unable to afford bare necessities.

Merritt understood. Despite an aversion for breaking the rules, his own insecurity had led him to hack his way into two elite colleges. His insatiable thirst for knowledge only carried him so far; fear closed the gap. As a soldier, he was only a gunshot or an explosion away from losing the ability to fight. There was no life for him outside of serving his sphere, and if he couldn't serve his sphere through combat, maybe higher learning would open a second door he never knew existed.

Merritt saw hope in Mercury's reign. If he could push himself to the limits and perform every task to the best of his ability, then maybe his value could outlast his fighter's body. Maybe his life would no longer feel like a countdown to obsolescence. And he'd have his King to thank for it.

His previous fascination with Mercury could have been easily dismissed as reverence at best, idol worship at worst. But that was when crossing paths with Mercury seemed like a far-fetched fantasy. In the past six months, the formerly inaccessible hero had become a living, breathing, tangible man who smelled of clean steam and mint,

who had cold eyes and warm hands. Merritt had stood within his reach, and all it had taken was a brush of contact to turn a spark into a wildfire.

Merritt couldn't remember the last time a blue-tie had touched him in a casual, non-threatening way. But if Pierce knew that the cause for his agitation was a mere touch to the shoulder, Merritt would never see an end to the ridicule. His fellow soldiers seemed to get everything they needed from casual hookups. Didn't any of them ever long for a different kind of touch? If they did, they knew how to hide it.

Pierce watched him intently, as if cataloguing every shift of his eyes. "You'll have to lend me that book," he said with a chuckle.

Merritt gave him an awkward, tight-lipped smile. "It's not really your taste."

Hinges squealed, and Merritt immediately recognized Captain Balbo's backlit form in the doorway: black hair braided up the sides of the scalp, erupting in a wild, wide faux hawk of waves and corkscrews that spilled over her forehead. The fluorescent hallway light cast stripes across her brown arms as she swept across the room, taking the bottom bunk across from Pierce. In her typical fashion, she dropped formality after training like a pair of sweaty trunks for the laundry. "Look at my precious sweethearts, all ready to be tucked in."

Merritt heard bedsprings creak above him, and a pair of peering eyes came into view beyond the foot of the top bunk's mattress. "Hey, Cap," Kiona called, a wide grin on her face. "Slummin' it with us again? You haven't slept in the officers' quarters in two weeks."

"I told you, I'm Chem Ops first, officer second." Balbo sprawled across her bed, kicking off one of her boots. "Don't even get me started on the Elite Border Guard captains. I'd pour GUS-42 in every one of their gaping, snoring, elite-enabling mouths." After half a minute splayed out like a spider on its web, she abruptly sat up and pitched her boot at Pierce, her aim so precise as to simulate a stomp to the forehead. "Put your phone away. I'm drunk off my ass, and the light makes me want to puke."

"I was gonna read myself to sleep," Pierce whined. "Merritt got me in the mood."

“Fuck that. Reading is for the weak.” She snorted. “Or at least it’s for people whose *captains aren’t on the verge of puking.*”

“All right, all right.” Pierce stowed his phone. “Then you gotta tell us one of your bedtime stories.”

“I just want to pass out in peace so I have the energy to deal with all of you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s our day off,” Kiona said.

“But I still have to see you and smell you.”

“Please, Mama Balbo?” Pierce pressed, more in the interest of goading his drunk captain than anything else. “Just one story.”

“Ugh. Fine. If it’ll shut you guys up.”

Merritt pulled the covers over his chest, letting his weight settle into the mattress. He supposed a story from Balbo could be a suitable distraction from the thoughts that plagued him, as long as it had nothing to do with sex or North Sphere leaders.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on Balbo’s throaty voice.

“Once upon a time, a drug lord and a pharmaceutical exec were imprisoned in a faraway land under the rule of an evil fascist empire. They fell in love and ran away to the underground, where they sucked down a bunch of pills and fucked each other every morning, afternoon, and night. Every day, every week, every month they drank and smoked and swallowed pills and fucked each other. Nothing else, just constant fucking for six months straight. And then the following year, they had a baby. They named that baby the North Sphere....”

Creak.

Merritt jolted awake, heart rushing, his combat reflexes straining to classify the threat.

Another creak, and he relaxed. It was just the bedsprings from the bunk above him. Maybe Kiona was readying to sneak out, as she

always did on the weekends to hook up with Argus, her East Sphere fling.

He rolled over, closing his eyes against the stiff cloth of his pillowcase despite frustration at having been awoken. He had to get a full night's rest. He'd already taken three sleep enhancers that week; any more, and the side effects would become more disruptive than sleep deprivation itself.

Yet his mind still swam and his blood still rushed at the memory of Mercury's touch. No distraction or mental exercise helped. Every time he opened his eyes, they trailed toward the photo of Mercury on the wall above his bed, deep brown eyes returning his gaze with the same cool focus he had in person.

He squeezed his eyes shut to erase the vision that lingered in his mind, then let his eyelids relax. *Breathing exercises, Merritt*. Inhale to four. Hold to seven. Exhale to....

Another creak from the bedsprings above, only more insistent this time. They creaked, they groaned, they whispered, "Oh, *Argus!*"

No, not just the bedsprings anymore. Merritt flipped his pillow over his head. *Goddamnit, Kiona*.

If Merritt wanted to take extreme measures, he could sound the alarm for a rival soldier on the premises. But a rival soldier was only so threatening when he was mounted with his pants down. Neither Sergeant Rush nor Captain Balbo would interfere. As rampant and inconsequential as inter-sphere liaisons were, it wasn't worth the effort to try curtailing them. Superior officers were willing to turn a blind eye as long as the rival soldier was escorted to and from the premises unarmed and kept fully occupied in low-clearance zones.

Merritt's clump of exhausted emotion was too much to untangle. The interrupted sleep, the unexpected presence of an East Sphere soldier, the persistent memory of Mercury's touch... and now, the rustling and moaning in the top bunk was starting to get to him.

He rolled over and eyed his surroundings. It was Saturday night, and a good half of the beds in the barracks were empty. Curfew was another lax rule, especially the night before a day off. As long as a soldier's performance didn't drop during training or battle, their

commanding officers allowed them a bit of freedom. What a blue-tie lacked in sleep, they could usually make up in performance-enhancing drugs.

Even Merritt snuck out after curfew when he needed to, usually to the computer labs down the street. But sneaking out had always made him uneasy. He preferred to adhere to any given rule unless he had a compelling reason to break it.

Soldiers were welcome to keep a personal laptop as long as they could figure out a way to procure one. They weren't paid enough to purchase one from a store, so Merritt had opted to spend the past few months sifting through dumpsters, lifting parts from abandoned machines at secluded labs, and buying dirt-cheap components with minor damage from people who didn't know how to fix them and assumed they were worthless. In six months' time, he'd diligently collected enough spare parts to build his own laptop for use at the barracks.

He thought to grab his laptop and duck around the corner to the study, but how much focus would he be able to achieve when his thoughts stubbornly clung to his King? On the other hand, if he was going to be awake, he really should do something productive. Mercury had told him to prove his worth. How much worth could he claim when all he managed to accomplish was pointless fantasizing?

Regardless, he needed to get out from under Argus and Kiona. The upper bunk's mattress had begun to bounce and flop like a fish pulled from water. He threw on yesterday's clothes, rumpled and haphazard except for his shoulder holsters and impeccably knotted blue tie, and hurried in the dark toward the exit.

Out in the half-lit main corridor, he spotted more soldiers on their way in or out, blatant and casual in comparison to his furtive dash. A couple leaned against the wall fifty feet away, making out. At a hundred feet, a barely conscious private sat propped in a doorway, smoking a North Sphere chemical joint. The sharp, synthetic, vaguely grassy smell carried all the way to Merritt and stung his nostrils.

Perhaps he was being overly cautious in trying to exercise stealth. The nearest patrolman was just as visibly stoned as the soldier in the

doorway. Military police was the cushiest job available to a former orphan, requiring almost as hefty an inheritance as lieutenant. Rarely if ever did they intercept a soldier by choice. They spent their days in drink and drugs, their leisure interrupted only when a senior officer ordered an arrest.

Merritt passed the patrolman without attracting so much as a glance. At the end of the corridor, he reached a perpendicular hallway. He stood at the fork, looking left to the barracks exit and then right to the officers' quarters.

There was no reason for his hesitation, no reason to consider turning right. He could remember only one other time he'd ventured down the hall of the officers' quarters after curfew.

"Do you like sleeping in the barracks, Merritt?" Colonel Harding had asked him that night in his office over a glass of gin.

"I don't mind it, sir," had been Merritt's response. "It's better than the orphanage."

"Living in the barracks during training was the biggest pain in the ass I ever experienced. There's no privacy. How do you get any action?"

Merritt had lowered his gaze to the alcohol he wasn't technically allowed to have, feeling too awkward to reply.

If he'd given Colonel Harding an honest answer that night at age eighteen, it would have been that he simply didn't get any action, and—aside from some experimental fumbling with Torrence at the orphanage—never had. Now barely twenty-one, he could cite the occasional drop to his knees in the stairwell at Yackley's, but the sum of his experiences still amounted to little. Rarely did he seek further contact or even reciprocation. The physical sensations, though enjoyable, couldn't compare to his mind's simple desire to serve and please.

Receive an order, perform it with his best effort, receive praise for a job well done. This was his life's template. It made no difference whether he faced a school project, a battle, or a blow job. In the absence of any other measure, he gauged his worth by the enthusiasm of the praise he earned.

Receive an order, perform it with his best effort.

Receive an order. *Perform it.*

Mercury had ordered him to prove his worth, but how could he build any worth atop a foundation of failure? Mercury had wiped his slate clean—bailed him out—but Merritt had never done his part to reconcile the matter. The memory of his failed order lingered like poison in the air.

He headed halfway down the right hallway; gone was the sure-footed approach with which he'd taken the main corridor. Along the hallway's left wall were locker rooms, showers, and private offices for captains and colonels; on the right were sleeping quarters.

It was past two a.m., but the light was on under Colonel Harding's office door. Merritt took a few approaching steps, listening for voices or footsteps—any sign that Colonel Harding had company.

No movement inside. Only the low thump of the bass from recorded music.

He reached for the doorknob.

“What are you doing, Sergeant?”

It took all Merritt's self-control not to jump at the voice at the far end of the hall. The words were soft, almost inaudible, and for a split second, he wondered—hopefully—if the voice was addressing someone else. Heart pounding, he turned to meet Captain Balbo's narrowed eyes.

That she'd addressed him as “Sergeant” made him uneasy. She'd only ever called him by first name outside of official military business. “Captain, I... I was just....”

“Looking for Harding?”

A swallow, while Merritt futilely contemplated lying. “Yes, ma'am.”

“*Why?*”

Her critical tone struck him like a snake bite; its venom was crippling shame. Why, indeed? What explanation could he offer her

when he lacked one even for himself? Furrowed brows, wrinkled nose, flared nostrils—it was the same face she adopted in training when a soldier displayed astonishing stupidity. “Captain, I...” He had nothing.

“It’s a good thing I woke up to vomit,” Captain Balbo said with an irritated sigh. She motioned for him to step away from the door, holding a finger to her mouth to signal silence. Once she led him back to the end of the hall, she pulled him around the corner with a stinging grip. “You’re out of your mind. What would possess you to go after him in the middle of the night? It took an order from the King himself to get your disciplinary marks cleared, and now you’re looking to get them all over again.”

“I just wanted to talk to him, Captain.”

“What could you possibly say to him that wouldn’t provoke him?”

Merritt’s gaze shifted. What would he have said to Colonel Harding? His plans were nebulous.

An apology. A vow to do better in the future. A peace offering.

At last, he said, “Captain, you don’t know what happened with him and me two years ago.”

“I know the report he filed was all lies,” Captain Balbo said.

“Well, yes, but...” He fidgeted. “This was my failure. I just want to make it right, ma’am.”

“Some things can’t be made right. You’re poking a stick at an anthill. Just leave it alone, Merritt.”

“I’ve never failed to carry out any other order. I have to fix—”

“You have to leave,” Captain Balbo said. “Go back to bed or go out to a bar, I don’t care. But you *cannot* go back to his office alone. *Ever*. That is an order.”

Merritt clenched his fists.

“Merritt.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Captain Balbo's furrowed brows softened at last, and she released her iron grip on his arm. "You managed to attract the attention of Damen Mercury when you were only a private. You could become someone down here. Don't sabotage yourself."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't just say 'yes, sir' and 'yes, ma'am' to every order you're given. Think on it. Really think on it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Captain Balbo pointed toward the barracks corridor and the exit. "You have two choices."

With a respectful bow of the head, Merritt took the exit.

If ever Merritt wished for the chaotic thumping and flashing lights of a crowded dance club, it was tonight. But Torrence was working an overnight shift, and Merritt doubted he'd enjoy going to a dance club alone. He'd be lost without his friend by his side telling him the name of the song that was playing, or dragging him onto the dance floor when he felt too awkward to take the initiative himself.

Instead, he opted for the familiar comfort of Yackley's Booze and Drugs. He'd take a dartboard over a dance floor any day. And unlike the night of Mercury's party, there would be no elites sneering at his dual holsters in the main room.

Best of all, Yackley himself manned the bar tonight. A curtained door behind the counter allowed him and his fellow bartenders easy access to both the main room and the VIP room, but in the event of a formal function on the other side of the curtains, Yackley did his duty for the elites while his employees served the commoners.

Merritt took a quick survey of the main room on his way to the bar, recognizing no one at first glance. Freed from the constraints of natural sunlight and with easy access to sleep enhancers, citizens of the underground made good use of their late night hours. By three in the morning, the crowd at Yackley's usually started to thin. Tonight was

especially sparse, most likely due to a West Sphere concert scheduled earlier that night. Torrence had sent Merritt a string of texts at lunchtime, lamenting the fact that he'd been forced to work an extra shift while the Rabid Jackhammers were playing.

Anyone who'd attended the West Sphere concert would likely have moved onto a West Sphere bar or club afterward, so it was no surprise Yackley's was emptier than usual. Merritt didn't mind the dip in traffic. There was still plenty of activity to keep him distracted.

The surest way to signal availability at an underground bar was to order a drink of Potent. Anyone carrying a red drink was likely looking for immediate action before the effects of the drink wore off. However, Potent was the most expensive North Sphere specialty drink, and Merritt couldn't afford to throw money around.

The second best way to signal availability was to dress the part. Merritt loosened his tie and undid the top button of his civilian shirt, knowing the change was negligible but unwilling to go further.

He took a seat at the bar. Yackley smiled at him from within the wisps of his curly gray beard. Despite Yackley's near celebrity status, he always had a bit of extra warmth to share with his fellow blue-ties, no matter how low ranking. "Another all-nighter? Perfect timing, kiddo. Tonight's special is your favorite: Focus in mineral water."

Blushing, Merritt said, "Actually, I'm going a different way tonight." He considered. "What do you have cheap for Charisma?"

"In red wine."

"Perfect," Merritt said. Yackley poured the wine and then added the purple contents of a test tube. He handed the glass to Merritt, who slid a few North Sphere dollars across the counter.

Merritt was more than halfway done with his drink when a broad-shouldered older man took the seat beside him. "Potent in vodka," he barked to Yackley while holding a phone to his ear. He paused, then said into the microphone, "Yeah, Randolph, I know what time it is, but if you'd done your job like you were supposed to on Friday, I wouldn't be calling you on the weekend. I want those reports on my desk when I arrive Monday morning. No excuses."

The man hung up the phone and slid it into his pocket. Then he turned to Merritt and said, “What are you staring at?”

Merritt lowered his eyes. “Nothing. Pardon me, sir.” But after a moment of looking away, he allowed his eyes to shift back to the man, who took his glass of Potent from Yackley and began to drink. He had black hair, a dusting of gray on his sideburns and stubble. He carried himself like an elite, but Merritt assumed that, had he actually been above a nine, he would have ordered from the VIP room where the drinks were a higher grade.

Merritt stared for a second too long, and he inadvertently met the man’s eyes for a second time. He averted his gaze again, but not before the man laughed at him. “The poor ones always go for Charisma when they can’t afford Potent.” Face reddening, Merritt set down his wineglass. He could feel the weight of the man’s eyes examining his clothing. “What are you? A two? A three? Stand up.”

Merritt would not have normally been so quick to take orders from someone who wasn’t a direct superior. But tonight, he was in a fog. Tonight, he wanted orders to follow.

He rose to his feet, and the man looked him up and down, noting his holsters. “You’re a soldier, then? You’re built like one.”

“Yes, sir. I am, sir.”

“‘Sir.’ I like that.”

Nothing else needed to be said. The man chugged the remainder of his Potent, and Merritt set aside the dregs of his Charisma. Around the corner in the shadowy stairwell, Merritt pretended to be unfazed by the button torn and lost from his only civilian shirt. He closed his eyes and focused on every sensation—the ragged brick scraping his shoulders, the scent of mold and stale sweat and half-smoked joints, the stifling pressure of the body leaning against his. A tongue traced up the row of piercings in his ear before flicking the ring in his left eyebrow. Warm fingers dragged across his abdomen, then reached under his belt.

He grabbed the man’s arm and pulled him forward, stifling a tremor in his voice. “Just tell me. Tell me what to do.”

The man chuckled, his breath hot on Merritt's cheek. "On your knees, soldier boy."

Merritt obeyed. Something crumbled like dry dirt under his knee, and he ignored it. His shaking fingers fumbled with the man's belt buckle and then the zipper. Once the layers of fabric were parted, he closed his eyes and leaned in, surrendering to the whims of someone who knew what he wanted and felt entitled to demand it. Merritt's head was pinned against the wall, rough brick digging into his scalp, fingers twisting and pulling his hair. He was drowning, sucking in desperate breaths amidst the thrusts that hit him like crashing waves. They jarred him, overwhelmed him, and finally calmed him. Above the rushing in his ears were orders to lick here, suck there—and he didn't miss a command.

And then he heard it. The sigh. The gasp. The satisfied "yeah." He rode the waves, felt the rise in tension, the fingers tightening in his hair, and then release.

Merritt watched the man from his knees, as if awaiting a verdict.

The man zipped his pants. "Nice," he said with an imperious half-smile. He gave Merritt's hair a careless tousle before leaving him alone in the stairwell.

Merritt combed his hair into place with his fingers, idly observing how his head had been so effectively cleared just by being banged against the wall for a few minutes. No more buzzing and churning of thoughts—just a numb, hollow peace. He felt... okay.

Across the room, a rat scurried out from a crack in the wall.