

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 7

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CHAPTER 7

“Attention, Merritt,” Captain Balbo said sharply from behind her desk.

Merritt jumped, fighting to focus his tired eyes. If only he’d taken a sleep enhancer before bed last night, he might have been alert enough to offer his captain his usual respectful greeting upon entering her office. Instead, he paid the price for the six wasted hours of fitful tossing and turning. Belmont’s riveted gaze had unsettled him at the restaurant two days earlier, following him through the weekend and invading his confused, fleeting dreams. “My apologies, Captain. How may I serve you, ma’am?”

“We have received a special request from Troy, General of the East Sphere Army. The East’s Elite Squad plans to launch a small, targeted attack on the West Sphere at the Montclare border between the North and West Spheres. As you know, the area can only be accessed by opening the border gate from within the North’s restricted waterways. The waterways route requires two people to disarm traps and unlock doors on the way to the gate control room. Belmont agreed to grant Troy access to the waterways, but only on the condition that he be escorted by a blue-tie. When Belmont contacted General Rhodes to assign the task, he said he wanted you.”

Merritt blinked a few times, the orders snapping him out of his muddled thoughts. Had he heard Captain Balbo correctly? “Ma’am, did you say that Belmont granted Troy access to our waterways?”

Part of him expected her to show annoyance at having to repeat herself, but she seemed to understand his disbelief. Nonetheless, she retained a firm hold on her poker face. “Yes, Merritt. That’s what I said.”

“Isn’t that a risk to security, ma’am? Guiding Troy past one of our lines of border defense?”

The poker face remained. “Montclare’s traps are scheduled to be redesigned shortly after the mission. Montclare doesn’t share a border with the East, and its route is unique, so Belmont believes the diplomatic benefits outweigh the risks.”

“Understood, Captain.” Merritt knew the limits of a military captain’s power in the North. No matter how much Balbo may have protested, the elites in Intelligence or the board of advisors would just override her. For Merritt to further question the validity of the order would have been disrespectful to her.

He took a moment to consider the details of the assignment. Guiding Troy through a waterways route that was on the verge of being redesigned could work to the North’s favor. Feeding a rival misinformation was often more effective than withholding information altogether. If this was Belmont’s intent, Merritt could easily stand behind his order. But something didn’t make sense.

“Ma’am, you said Belmont wanted me for the job. Do you have any idea why?”

“Troy requested the general or a colonel to escort him. But this is an East Sphere matter that isn’t crucial to the North’s security, so Belmont doesn’t want to risk an officer’s life.” Captain Balbo gestured toward Merritt’s uniform. “Sergeants are competent but expendable. Sacrificing one is no great loss, at least in Belmont’s eyes. But I know you’re good at your job, and if any sergeant has a chance of surviving a potential double-cross from the East Sphere, it’s you. Honestly, I think you’d fare better than any colonel we’d have to pry out from behind a desk anyway.”

“Captain, I went through advanced training in the waterways, but that was back at the Academy. I’ve been in Chem Ops for years now. Wouldn’t this job be better suited to a sergeant from the Waterways Unit?”

“General Rhodes told Belmont as much, Merritt. There was no swaying him.”

Captain Balbo's cool demeanor remained, but Merritt got the sense that the discussions behind the scenes had been more heated than she was letting on. Merritt didn't want to question her again, but he needed to understand the military justification for the order before he could accept what his gut was telling him. "Ma'am, the point of traveling the waterways route is to reach the controls of the sub-level gate and open up access to the border. Couldn't Troy and his squad just wait at the gate while two blue-ties travel the waterways route and unlock it for them?"

"Sure, if Belmont was willing to spare more than one blue-tie for the job."

Well, shit. "I was assuming I'd be able to take a squad with me for backup."

"No, it'll be just you. Belmont doesn't want us to divert any of our manpower."

"So, Captain," Merritt said evenly, "once I open the gate, it'll be just me against the East's entire Elite Squad?"

"I recommend you part ways as soon as you open the gate. Don't leave the control room until the coast is clear. We have no reason to believe that Troy is being dishonest, but there's always the possibility that the attack on the West is just a decoy, and that our own sphere could be the true target. Or he might just decide it's in his best interest not to let his escort live once the job is done. You'll have to exercise caution."

Merritt nodded as Captain Balbo spoke, presenting his best poker face while his mind moved rapidly behind it. This mission felt like a setup. He knew he'd gotten himself on Belmont's bad side during Mercury's party, but had he really descended so far that Belmont would want to get rid of him?

It was a far-fetched notion. Surely, Belmont had bigger enemies to deal with?

Nonetheless, he couldn't shake his gut feeling. He met his captain's eyes, analyzing her expression for even the slightest hint that she was more confident in Belmont's orders than he was. "Captain, I..."

“I know,” Captain Balbo said. Her poker face slipped just long enough for her lips to tighten in a somber frown.

Then you have no choice but to suck it up and do it. “When does the assignment begin, ma’am?”

“Next Monday. This should give you adequate time to prepare. Sergeant Hayes has agreed to meet with you one-on-one throughout the week for specialized training, starting in an hour. She’ll meet you at the training grounds.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Troy will meet you at the entrance to the waterways next Monday at nine a.m. As you know, it’ll be an overnight trek, so be prepared.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Captain Balbo’s intense gaze pierced through his façade. “Belmont’s throwing you to the wolves. We all know it.” Then, catching him off guard, she flashed him a fleeting smile as if in challenge. “I’ve heard a few people question what you did to deserve your promotion. But imagine how they’ll have to eat their words when you come back from this mess unscathed. And we made it clear to Belmont that he’s requesting captain-level work from a sergeant, so the compensation will have to match. There could even be a pay raise in your future—if you manage to survive, of course.”

“Of course,” Merritt said with a dry laugh. “I mean, yes, ma’am. I’ll do my duty.”

“Good. I expect to see you back in my office in eight days with your head still intact. That’s an order, Merritt.”

As much as Merritt dreaded being alone with a rival general, part of him felt oddly relieved at having only his own life to worry about for a week. He enjoyed his work as a sergeant, but until his private training in the waterways with Sergeant Hayes, he hadn’t realized how much the pressure of looking out for the privates on his team had worn on

him. Even while trekking through the most challenging terrain he'd ever experienced, he couldn't help feeling like he was on vacation.

He missed his poisons team. He loved his poisons team. It wasn't a word he'd ever use in front of them, lest he be ridiculed for the remainder of his life in the military, but it was the truth. Captain Palmer had dumped him with the supposed rejects from the Chem Ops Unit—a private who was allergic to poison blockers, a private and escaped former POW who hadn't truly recovered from his torture in the West, two privates who were still being treated for major combat injuries, and a combat medic who'd been booted from medical school because he always fainted at the sight of blood. But Merritt had refused Captain Balbo's offer of assigning him a better team. He'd fought alongside these soldiers in past battles, and he knew their worth.

Nothing he'd ever accomplished before gave him the same level of pride he felt upon unlocking the true potential of his team. Each one of them was a valuable asset; they just required a special approach. Merritt trusted them as much as he trusted any other poisons team in Chem Ops, if not more.

Nevertheless, the burden of being responsible for their lives was heavier than he'd anticipated. When he awoke in the middle of the night entangled in sweaty sheets, plagued with nightmares of seeing his team slaughtered on the battlefield, he could do nothing but shake it off and pretend that nothing was bothering him. At the very least, his poker face was getting plenty of practice. As faulty as it often was, it always seemed to hold up when his team's safety was at stake.

"Have you ever lost one of your soldiers in the waterways?" Merritt asked Sergeant Hayes during a break in their final training session on Saturday.

"No, but we've had some close calls," she replied with a knowing smile. "You never stop worrying about 'em. But it'll get easier." She took a swig from her canteen and then spat on the rocky floor. "You're lucky to have a captain like Balbo. You two are a lot alike—you're both protective of your soldiers. Most officers on her level aren't like that."

“Captain Balbo has all my respect,” Merritt said. “I owe her everything I have. I only hope I can do the same for the soldiers who are under me.”

“I’m sure you will. But on Monday, you can’t be thinking about them. And you can’t be thinking about Belmont and his fucked up command either. You gotta focus on yourself and Troy. It’s the only way you’ll survive this. You have the skills and the knowledge to travel the route, but you’re going to be with the enemy. Don’t drop your guard.”

Merritt nodded, grateful not only for the words of wisdom but for Hayes acknowledging his doubts about Belmont’s orders. Both Hayes and Captain Balbo would be on standby for the mission. It was a relief to know that he had allies watching his back from afar. “Thank you, Hayes. I appreciate it.”

Six feet tall, heavy build, blond flat top haircut, upturned nose. As the leader of the most powerful army in the underground, Troy had appeared countless times on Merritt’s news feed and in his military research, so Merritt had a visual in mind as he parked his motorcycle and made his way on foot toward the waterways entrance. But Merritt didn’t have much more than the visual. Despite his repeated attempts to hack his way toward more information, Troy left a scant digital trail.

Troy was a typical “armband,” as East Sphere citizens were called due to the black armbands they wore as their sphere identifier. Like anyone else in his sphere, he placed a high value on physical strength and aggression. While the East’s military was unquestionably formidable, it still drew criticism from blue-ties, who preferred a more cerebral approach to warfare. Merritt assumed Troy was the type to value daredevils over tactical fighters, lauding their bravado even if it led to their destruction.

Reaching the top in the East Sphere meant being the best fighter, and the East’s elite was the military itself. Troy, jack of clubs and General of the East Sphere Army, was outranked only by Cannon and Samsid, King and right hand respectively. Never before had Merritt

worked directly with someone of such a high caste. In his own sphere, soldiers were peasants. Rhodes, General of the North Sphere Army, was only the five of spades.

When Merritt arrived at the entrance to the waterways, Troy already stood waiting by the locked gate. He wore a long black trench coat, a bit of light armor on one shoulder, and East Sphere black armbands running the length of his forearms. Reflexively, Merritt smoothed the knot of his blue tie.

Troy had been facing away, his broad back mimicking the hulking boulders surrounding the rocky path into the waterways. He turned after a bit of rubble crunched under Merritt's boot, ice blue eyes zeroing in on him like lasers. There was something about Troy's rigidity, his stillness. He was like a coiled spring pulled to its limit, waiting for the perfect opportunity to leap. Merritt felt the suppressed energy like a crackle of static, sending up gooseflesh on his arms and the back of his neck.

"Who the fuck are you?" Troy snapped, fast approaching Merritt.

"Sergeant Merritt North." Merritt lowered his head in a short, deferential bow.

"*Sergeant?* I told that fucker Belmont I wanted the general. Or at the very least, a colonel."

"Sir, because this isn't a matter of North Sphere security, an officer was not required for the job. But I assure you, sir, I'm capable of leading you through the waterways."

"You're not even a high-level sergeant."

"There's only one level of sergeant in the North Sphere, sir," Merritt said, though he suspected Troy already knew this and was only trying to belittle him.

Troy snickered in response, and Merritt was surprised to see a hint of inexplicable warmth in his eyes. But when he spoke, his words remained callous. "'Sir' this and 'sir' that. You blue-ties would call a West Sphere dog 'sir' if they jerked you off good enough."

Merritt remembered that, strangely, the East Sphere military didn't address each other by "sir," "ma'am," or even by title. "You're

general of the underground's most prestigious army, sir. Of course I'd give you due respect." He squared his shoulders. "And if I may, a sergeant like me is ideal for the job at hand. Traversing the waterways takes peak physical conditioning, and I'm trained more thoroughly for the task than a blue-tie colonel or general would be."

Troy looked Merritt over as if sizing him up. "Hmm. Yeah, you got a point. Blue-tie officers got no muscle. They sit behind a desk all day while their arms and legs turn to jelly. But you talk a big game, being pocket-sized yourself. Sergeants come bigger in the East."

Merritt hesitated, unprepared for Troy's remark and unsure of how to respond. There was no more than an inch and a half difference in height between them, though he couldn't deny feeling dwarfed by the breadth of Troy's shoulders. East Sphere soldiers were known for their stereotypical brawn, and Troy fit the mold, but anyone outside the East knew that their bulk was more for show than for function. "I believe you'll find that my build is ideal for waterways work, sir," he said at last. "We'll be scaling cliffs and balancing narrow paths." He gestured toward Troy's trench coat. "Speaking of which, you'll want to leave your coat behind. I brought some extra climbing gear if you need it."

Troy glared at him incredulously. "I have gear. You think I'm an idiot?"

"No, sir. I mean Troy. I mean...." *Damn it.*

Troy snatched his phone, and Merritt wondered if he was going to call Belmont to complain. But then, after a brief pause, he stowed it back in his pocket. With a shake of his head, he said, "Fine. I'll go with it. You have my orders?"

"Yes, sir. You and I will travel to the Montclare border access point together. We're scheduled to reach our destination by six a.m.. Provided we both arrive safe and unharmed, I'll open the thumbprint-protected sub-level gate, and the rest of your Elite Squad will then be able to meet up with you at the border. After I close the first gate behind you, you'll be able to use your own thumbprint to open the second gate."

“You’re talking as if it’s gonna be just you and me in there. You don’t have a squad with you? No backup?”

Merritt considered bluffing, but he hesitated a moment too long to pull it off.

Troy laughed and shook his head. “Damn. Your sphere really doesn’t care whether you live or die, do they? That Belmont is one cold motherfucker.”

Merritt gritted his teeth, but he remained silent.

“What? Don’t pretend. I know you had to be thinking the same thing when they gave you the job.”

“The route requires two people, sir. No more, no less. My usefulness to you is protection in and of itself.” Merritt wore his best poker face, but he couldn’t tell if Troy was convinced.

Troy shook his head again. “Fine. What else?”

Merritt briefed Troy on their route through the waterways. The primary purpose of the waterways was to protect stretches of the North Sphere border from invasion, as well as to prevent soldiers who’d already invaded from easily escaping back to their home sphere. Merritt and Troy would need to hike on foot through an old, gutted sewer system that the North Sphere had converted into a series of water traps. The route wasn’t meant to be traveled successfully, but soldiers in the Waterways Unit were required to prove that they could run each route from entrance to border without difficulty. With the help of Sergeant Hayes, Merritt had journeyed the Montclare route three times over the past week. This would be his first time leading the route. The trip would be risky for a first-timer like Troy, but Merritt had no doubt Troy was capable.

The bigger question in Merritt’s mind was what else Troy was capable of. Merritt’s eyes flickered to Troy’s muscular body and back to his face before he continued his explanation. “We’ll be passing a few water traps that require two separate thumbprints to disarm. Normally, they require two Waterways Unit thumbprints, but for today only, we’ve programmed the traps to accept your print and mine. And by the way, North Sphere thumbprint panels are coded to record a pulse along

with the print. In other words, a dead person's thumbprint won't work." He raised an eyebrow at Troy as a subtle challenge.

Troy gave a surprisingly genuine chuckle as he took off his trench coat. "Noted."

Merritt gestured with his head toward the entrance. "Ready, General?"

The scuttling footsteps of fleeing rats echoed around Merritt as he stepped off the crumbling stone steps and into a dank, cold tunnel with Troy at his side. He and Troy each wore a headlamp, illuminating the path enough for them to walk safely on the uneven terrain. For the first ten minutes, they moved in near silence, with Merritt giving an occasional warning or word of instruction about the coming obstacles.

As they rounded a corner and began a steep uphill climb along a slippery gravel trail only wide enough to fit one of them at a time, Merritt heard Troy say behind him, "Merritt North."

"That's my name, General."

"You're the hacker."

Merritt didn't respond at first. He was startled. "I didn't realize that news had spread beyond the North Sphere."

"You won't find anyone who loved that story more than we did in the East." Troy's heavy footsteps scraped rhythmically behind Merritt as they half-walked, half-climbed. "We all know how the North looks at soldiers. Mercury and Higgins think fighters are brainless, so we loved seeing a soldier of all people put them in their place. I just didn't realize it was you because I remembered the hacker being a private."

"I was a private," Merritt said. "I was promoted."

"That's surprising. I would have thought Mercury would rather have you executed. Label you a traitor for catching one of their mistakes."

Merritt fought back a sudden surge of indignation. Troy painted Mercury as some sort of mindless, heavy-handed dictator. But Mercury had given Merritt more than he ever could have imagined. He wanted to stand up for his King, to say that Mercury knew exactly what was best for his sphere, but he didn't want to give Troy any more information than necessary. He had no way of knowing how Troy might use even a seemingly insignificant detail about the North Sphere against them.

“Are all North Sphere soldiers as smart as you?” Troy asked. “Are all of you closet hackers and computer whizzes?”

The Academy trained all soldiers on battle-related software, and specialists received more extensive training, but Merritt wasn't about to share this information with Troy. Instead, he eyed the general over his shoulder. “We're nearing the first cliff, sir. We're going to need to rappel down the other side.”

They took a few more steps, and Troy said, “Well? If I got a virus on my computer, would you be able to fix it?”

“If you're having a problem with viruses, sir, then first I'd recommend you stop visiting West Sphere websites.”

It wasn't until after Troy glared at him with annoyance that he asked himself if it had been the best idea to broach the subject of Troy's porn viewing habits.

With a cringe, he refocused his attention on the terrain ahead. Troy's gaze lingered on his back, but it didn't feel as intense or hostile as he'd expected. He assessed that Troy was only mildly annoyed.

At the top of the cliff, Merritt retrieved a coil of rope from his pack and laced it through the built-in harness on his uniform, watching out of the corner of his eye as Troy donned a harness and prepared his rope as well. They rappelled side by side, and Merritt noticed that Troy kept a close eye on him, as if evaluating his skill and fitness level. Merritt touched down first, and when Troy landed, he gave Merritt an approving nod. “So far, so good, Merritt North.”

When they reached a steep rocky path that they'd have to carefully climb, Merritt led the way, then offered Troy a hand to ease his last few steps up the sharp incline. Troy accepted the help as if it

had been offered by a comrade. At the next grouping of steep rocks, Troy scaled the cliff first, and when Merritt neared the top, Troy reached down, returning the same offer of a helping hand.

This is a test. Merritt concealed any doubt and accepted his hand, knowing that Troy would gain nothing by attacking him at least until after the final gate was opened. Still, he wasn't sure what to make of Troy's unexpectedly cooperative behavior.

"You're not even winded," Troy said after they finished scaling a particularly difficult cliff.

"Neither are you, sir."

Troy rolled his eyes as if Merritt had just stated the obvious. "Well."

"We have another half a mile to go before we reach a sheer drop into the first water trap, sir. Let's keep going."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, the trek long and arduous, no talking other than to exchange direction and confirmation. They climbed rocky cliffs lined with slick moss, crawled through narrow passages dotted with spiky stalagmites, and crossed dangling single-rope bridges with the aid of their harnesses.

Escorting Troy was almost as easy as being escorted by Sergeant Hayes. Despite the constant low-level anxiety at being in the presence of an enemy, Merritt still couldn't help but admire Troy's level of fitness. For all his bulk, he had surprising endurance and agility. Merritt made a mental note to try out some of Troy's unfamiliar climbing techniques in a future training session.

It was past nine in the evening when they reached the first water trap. Merritt held up a hand, signaling for Troy to halt, and he stepped up to the edge of a steep cliff.

Over a hundred feet below lay a still pool lined in concrete, its water shimmering green from reflected algae. Waterways soldiers were trained so thoroughly in their technique that they could make the dizzying, bone-crushing dive without injury, but the water was barely deep enough to accommodate even a perfect dive, and not deep enough to accommodate an error.

“We can’t jump from here, sir,” he told Troy. “We’ll want to rappel closer to the surface, and then we can drop the rest of the way. There are two hidden notches under the cliff edge where we can attach our climbing ropes.” He took off his jacket, shirt, and shoes, stowing them in his waterproof bag before tossing his bag over the edge of the cliff. “There are two thumbprint panels along the east wall off the underwater chamber, one foot up from the floor. After we’re both in the water, we’ll each need to swim below the surface and activate the thumbprint reader. I’ll take the left. You can take the right. The panels are camouflaged, and there’s no lighting below the water’s surface, so I recommend you keep hold of me after we hit the water and let me guide you to them.”

If the entered thumbprint wasn’t recognized by the sensor, automated jets began to pump poison into the water. But Merritt didn’t see a reason to tell this to Troy.

“Once we activate the panels, we have to keep our thumbs on them until the water is drained enough to open the door,” he continued. “As soon as we remove our thumbs from the panels, the valve will shut, and water will start pouring in again. The panels can only be activated once every twenty-four hours, so we have to get it right.”

Merritt noticed that Troy was staring fixedly at him, and he wondered if Troy had realized he was withholding information. “What is it, sir?”

Troy’s gaze didn’t shift. “I didn’t expect you to be so ripped.”

Merritt looked down at his own shirtless body as if seeing it for the first time. His training showed, and he was pleased with his build, but he wasn’t sure what Troy was surprised about. His body didn’t look much different from any other Chem Ops private’s. “I’m a soldier, sir,” he said.

Clumsy as his response was, he couldn’t deny that he was flattered. East Sphere soldiers prided themselves on their brawn. With Merritt’s lean build, he never would have expected to get a compliment on his physique from an armband. He’d take it.

With a shrug, Troy removed his shirt and packed his gear away. Merritt's gaze stalled on the well-muscled arms and torso previously hidden beneath layers of fabric.

The hairs went up on the back of his neck. In retrospect, he wondered if Troy's comment about him being ripped had been a joke. He reminded himself that East Sphere fighters only bulked up for show, in order to better intimidate their rivals. But the reminder did little to reassure him while standing next to Troy, his massive, rocklike muscles stretching his skin taut and rippling with veins. *Just don't instigate a fight with this guy.*

He noticed Troy smirking, and he realized that the poker face he'd held up since the beginning of their expedition had given way, offering Troy an honest glimpse of his apprehension.

Collecting himself, he motioned toward the cliff and said, "Let's go, sir."

Troy tossed his bag over the edge, and they rappelled side by side again, stopping only a few feet above the surface of the water. In unison, they released their ropes, dropping into the pool. The frigid water stung Merritt's skin through his clothing. Over the sound of lapping waves displaced by their jump, Merritt called, "Ready to go under, sir?"

"Ready when you are," was the curt reply.

Merritt held out his arm for Troy. Troy grabbed on, and they both ducked below the surface. A few dolphin kicks took Merritt down to the underwater door, where he grabbed the handle to steady himself. Troy remained at his side, stabilizing himself with a hand against the concrete wall. Merritt found Troy's other hand, guiding it along the wall until he located the thumbprint panel. After giving Troy the signal, they each pressed their thumbs against their respective panels. A loud, mechanical click echoed through the water, followed by the sound of a valve opening. Merritt felt the pull of the water as it began draining from the pool. He let out a bubble of breath, knowing exactly how long it would take for the water level to fall below his head and pacing himself accordingly.

When the water finally lowered past his mouth, he sucked in a hungry gasp. A few feet away, he heard Troy do the same. “Hold your position, sir,” Merritt called. “We have to let it drain all the way before we deactivate the panels and open the door.”

It took a few more minutes before the water drained completely and Merritt was able to stand comfortably on solid ground. With the path cleared, he left the thumbprint sensor and pushed open the sealed door to the next chamber. “Quickly, sir,” he called to Troy, channeling all his strength to hold the heavy door as incoming water began to refill the pool. “Grab our bags and go through, but don’t take more than a single step forward or you’ll fall. Instead, press your back against the wall and slide to the right.” He motioned for Troy to pass, and then he followed in after, shutting the door behind him just before the water level could rise above the threshold.

The lights in the next room didn’t turn on until the door behind them latched closed. They stood at the edge of another cliff, leading into another concrete-lined pool. “We’ll have to jump this one, sir. Go ahead and throw in the bags first.”

Troy did as suggested. The bags hit the water hard and then bobbed on the surface.

“The water directly below us is too shallow to sustain our landing. We’ll need to dive forward as far as possible. This time, the thumbprint panels are on the floor of the pool, at the center. Grab my arm after we land, and I’ll lead you to them.”

Merritt took the dive, the surface of the water smacking him like an impatient caretaker at the Norwood Orphanage. The frigid waves took his breath away, and he couldn’t keep his teeth from chattering as he waited for Troy to reach his side. After Troy grabbed his arm, they kicked down to the floor of the pool. Again, they timed their use of the thumbprint panels and waited for the water to drain past the exit. Troy grabbed their bags, carrying them across as Merritt held the door open.

Once across the threshold, Merritt heaved a sigh of relief. They’d reached their checkpoint for the night—a small, hexagonal room with metal flooring and metal walls. It was barely lit, but it was warm and dry with no sign of rats in the vicinity. Too eagerly, Merritt shed his

soaked, freezing pants and tossed them aside to hang later. He tried for a moment to suppress his shivers before noticing that Troy was shivering as well, making no efforts to hide his discomfort as he removed his own waterlogged garments.

When Merritt finished drying off, he dropped to his knees and sifted through his packs in search of dry clothing. Towel draped around his shoulders, he pulled on an alternate pair of pants, and then he unearthed a container with his rations and popped the lid. “Do you have enough food for tonight and tomorrow morning, sir?” he asked Troy. “If not, I brought an extra—”

“This isn’t my first time on an assignment,” Troy said in a tone that made Merritt blush. He dressed himself and then sat across the room from Merritt, pulling out his own food and a flameless ration heater.

“This is the best resting stop we’re going to find,” Merritt said. “It’s nearing ten o’clock. We should turn in here, and we’ll need to resume at four in the morning to reach the gates by six. There’s nowhere to wash, though. You can relieve yourself in the east-facing side tunnel.” He gestured toward a door opposite the one they came from. “Otherwise, there will be options once we reach the gate control room tomorrow morning.”

“Gotcha,” Troy said.

Trying to ignore the appealing smell of Troy’s reconstituted meatloaf as it heated, Merritt finished his crumbly, bland, scientifically formulated meal replacement patty and stowed his container. Then he knelt beside his bag, locating his canteen.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Troy stand up and circle behind him. At first, he assumed that Troy was just stretching his legs, but then that same chill ran down the back of his neck. He heard the rustle of clothing, felt Troy’s arms closing in around him, and he instinctively raised a hand.

Troy’s arm circled Merritt’s neck in a sleeper hold. Merritt slipped his hand underneath just before Troy tightened his grip. He gasped as Troy squeezed, his heart racing.

Troy forced Merritt onto his stomach, trying to hook his legs around Merritt's body in order to immobilize him so he could adjust his choke hold. Merritt's own raspy, urgent breaths were all he could hear above the rushing in his ears. His wrist was pinned next to his neck, creating just enough of a gap under Troy's arm for his blood to continue pumping unobstructed. Despite successfully holding off the blood choke, the pressure of Troy's impossibly thick forearm threatened to crush his windpipe.

Muscle memory and years of training rolled Merritt onto his back, facing Troy and breaking his choke hold. Troy tried to smother his movements, but Merritt shifted his legs to Troy's waist, closing him in his guard to restrict his movements. Troy planted a hand on Merritt's collarbone, pinning him to the ground while he raised his upper body. Merritt expected Troy to strike him in the face, and he got ready to block, but the blows didn't come.

Taking a swing of his own, Merritt caught Troy with a sharp hook to the jaw. A flash of anger crossed Troy's face, and he retaliated with an elbow to Merritt's cheek. Merritt groaned, but he didn't slow down despite the warm burn of blood on his face. He tried to slide out from under Troy's body, but Troy caught him, pinning his wrist. They struggled, and with a tricky maneuver, Troy slid Merritt's arm behind his back and pinned his wrist on the other side, immobilizing it entirely and leaving Merritt with only one usable arm.

Troy aimed for another strike, and Merritt raised an arm to shield his face. Troy threw two more strikes, paused, and then struck twice more. Merritt blocked the best he could, but the punches lacked the sting he'd expected. With every strike, their clash began to feel more like a sparring session than an actual fight.

Why was Troy holding back? Was this another test?

There was no time to think about it. With a sudden, calculated twist, Merritt freed his wrist and shifted his position. He raised his guard high, flipping his legs in front of Troy's chest and rolling him into an arm lock. With Troy's arm pinned between his legs, he butted his hips forward just enough to put painful pressure on the elbow joint while pulling Troy's hand and wrist in the opposite direction.

“Ah! Break, break!” Troy cried.

Merritt wrenched harder on his arm.

“*Fuck!* I said—”

Troy seemed to expect Merritt to release him, but Merritt wouldn't risk it. With a powerful wrench, Troy managed to break Merritt's hold. The moment Merritt realized he'd lost the arm lock, he shot to his feet and backed quickly across the room with his guard up.

Troy climbed slowly to his feet, rubbing his arm and wincing. He chuckled and shook his head. “You got skills, kid.”

Merritt's breaths came out hard and heavy. He could do nothing to hide the stunned, wary anger that surely showed on every inch of his face.

With a humoring smile, Troy took a step forward. “Calm down. I won't go after you again.”

“The North Sphere gave you passage through the waterways as a favor,” Merritt said. “I'm under no obligation to continue escorting you.”

Troy gave an exasperated sigh. “Oh, don't blow this out of proportion. I know you wanted to test me out as much as I wanted to test you out. Not everyone is lucky enough to participate in a grappling session with the General of the East Sphere Army, you know. You're talented, Merritt. You'd put a lot of my East Sphere fighters to shame. And you're smart. Sergeant, my ass. I'd want you as a captain at least.”

Merritt raised a hand to his cheek, where the streaks of blood had dribbled down to his chin. Keeping his eyes on Troy, he grabbed his bag and hoisted it over his shoulder. “You can sleep here, sir. I'm going to go a little bit further. I'll meet you back here at four tomorrow morning.”

“Is that really necessary?” Troy asked.

Merritt headed through the next door, closing it swiftly behind him.