

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 8

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Patreon Serial Edition

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CHAPTER 8

Merritt had a rough night, curled up in an elevated crevice within a hard-to-reach rock wall. Sergeant Hayes had alerted him to the hiding spot last week, and he knew that someone unfamiliar with the terrain wouldn't spot the access point. The cost for his safety, however, was waking up with a sore, bruised back.

As he ducked around a corner to relieve himself, he thought about the last thing Troy had told him the night before. He'd said that he would have wanted Merritt as a captain. He didn't seem like the type to run his mouth; rather, sharing that sentiment appeared to have been a calculated move. But Merritt had no way to decipher his intentions.

Troy seemed to assume that Merritt would be tempted by the prospect of being an East Sphere captain. Had it been a genuine proposition, or was Troy just trying to erode his confidence in his own sphere by telling him he'd have it better somewhere else?

If Belmont really was trying to get rid of him, would he go as far as to collude with Troy to set up a trade or a capture? On the other hand, maybe Troy was just trying to butter him up so it would be easier to catch him off guard with an attack later on.

Whatever the reason for Troy's actions, the lingering prickle on the back of Merritt's neck told him to watch out. He would need to put his contingency plan into action.

He fished his phone out of his pocket, traveling up and down a narrow corridor in search of decent reception. Signal strength was iffy in the waterways. The area's underground cell site had been in a state of disrepair for nearly two years, but Mercury's board of advisors refused to approve the budget required to fix it, instead diverting the funds to the Elite Border Guard—the unit that prevented the North's riffraff from encroaching on elite territory. Merritt suspected it would

take significant casualties in the waterways to finally get the board's attention, and he only hoped he wouldn't have to be one of them.

After several minutes of searching for a signal, he finally found a good spot to make his call. Hayes, on standby for the duration of Merritt's mission, answered immediately.

"Corvus Corax reporting, SSA," Merritt said softly into his phone, using his code name and informing Hayes that he was safe, secure, and alone.

"Go ahead," was Hayes's reply.

"I'm calling to request temporary suspension of thumbprint access for Montclare Border Gate 2."

He heard a crackle on the other line while Hayes hesitated. "If thumbprint access is suspended, the gate will have to be unlocked manually by key."

Merritt knew why Hayes was doubtful. If all thumbprints were de-authorized from the second gate, he would have to accompany Troy to it and unlock it for him with the backup key he'd been ordered to carry with him. That meant he wouldn't be able to part ways with Troy before the arrival of the East's Elite Squad. It would be eight against one. But if plans remained as Belmont had set them, Merritt would outlive his usefulness the moment he opened the first gate. "It's a safeguard," he explained. "If all goes according to plan, I'll reauthorize thumbprint access when I reach the control room, after Troy and his squad have passed the first gate."

"Understood." A pause. "Request for suspension of thumbprint access at Montclare Border Gate 2 completed. Proceed with caution."

"Thank you. Corvus Corax out."

With a heavy exhale, he stowed his phone. Only a few minutes remained before he had to meet up with Troy. Merritt could almost still feel the pressure of Troy's arm around his neck, and he wondered what the chances were that Troy would try to jump him again upon his return to the checkpoint.

But worrying was a poor substitute for planning, and he had a plan.

He swallowed his apprehension along with a chunk of dried food, washing it down with a few swigs from his canteen. He felt filthy, but having traveled the waterways route three times with Hayes already, he wouldn't have expected anything else from the journey. He'd have to wait till the mission was complete before he could shower. After cleaning himself as well as he could with a damp cloth, he rifled through his packs, carefully considering his gear. The climbing, crawling, and swimming were behind him, and the remainder of the journey would be a simple hike along easy terrain. Any possible threats would come from Troy or his squad, and he was prepared.

For the first half of the journey, he'd kept the backup key to the second Montclare gate strapped to his thigh underneath his pants, out of sight and out of easy reach from Troy. He hadn't wanted to carry a manual key with him—it was like carrying a ticking bomb—but it had been Belmont's order. As far as Merritt knew, Troy wasn't aware that he had a manual key, but if Merritt was forced to carry it, he'd do what was necessary to secure it.

Stripped down to his underwear, he retrieved the key from his thigh, setting it on a rock beside him. He removed a vial of SYN-12, an airborne knockout poison, from one of his packs, then fastened it upside down in the slot at his thigh strap that previously held the key. Through a loop in the vial's cap, he laced a length of clear fishing line. After pulling on his pants, he slid the dangling length of the fishing line up between the stitches of his pocket.

He dropped the key into his pocket, tied the dangling end of the string to the key handle, and trimmed the loose length. He checked his work; laced between two ridges in the ornate sculpted handle of the key, the string's presence was imperceptible by touch.

From his pack of blockers and antidotes, he retrieved his single syringe of SYN-12 blocker. He flicked the needle and then injected it in his inner elbow. It would last six hours.

While yesterday he prepped for the environment, today he prepped for combat. A strap around one thigh atop his pants, its slots loaded with syringe darts. Two straps around the abdomen, over his tank and tie, holding an assortment of syringes, syringe darts, and vials. A pack at his hip held blockers and antidotes.

After his packs were prepared, he slipped on his fighter's jacket, leaving it unbuttoned for easy access to his poisons. To finish, he equipped his dual shoulder holsters.

Two minutes to four, and time to return to the checkpoint. When he entered the room, he saw Troy kneeling at his bag, looking prepared and surprisingly well rested. Without any greeting, Merritt said, "Are you ready to continue, sir?"

They proceeded in awkward silence, the tension palpable in the air. Gone was the peaceful cooperation from the day before. Troy was the enemy, and Merritt couldn't risk extending a hand to him again. He doubted Troy wanted to kill him; Troy's comments to him the day before had been purposeful, as if aimed to leave a lasting impression. It was not the effort someone would put into talking to a man who'd be dead in twenty-four hours.

Merritt also doubted he was in danger of being taken hostage. If the East was looking to take a POW as leverage to bargain with Mercury, Merritt would be of little value, low ranking as he was. Mercury didn't negotiate the return of captured soldiers. They were his sphere's peasants, easily replaced, and he simply let them go. Rival armies had no incentive to take POWs from the North's army when they knew they'd get nothing in return.

But there had to be a reason for Troy's undue interest in his abilities. Again, he considered Troy's suggestion that he could be a captain in the East. If Troy really did want him as a soldier, his path would be frighteningly easy. Merritt was legally owned by his King, and he couldn't willingly escape to the East. But if Troy captured him, Mercury would sign him away without a fight.

Still, it didn't make sense. Troy's military was the elite of the elite; he had no shortage of qualified captains to choose from. Why go through the effort of trying to retrain a foreign soldier who wasn't accustomed to East Sphere protocol?

"Listen, kid," Troy said after an hour of hiking in strained silence. "I was just playing with you."

"You're a rival soldier who jumped me from behind. That's no game, sir."

“Who fucking cares that I jumped you? We do that sort of shit to each other all the time in the East. What did you think I was gonna do to you when we were both unarmed and half-dressed? I’m no red-sash.”

Merritt’s lip curled at the reference to West Sphere soldiers. The East Sphere’s intimidation by brawn paled in comparison to the West’s intimidation by sexual violence. Hailing from the sphere in charge of the underground’s sex trade, there was no line they wouldn’t cross. To a red-sash, there was something appealing about orally sodomizing a dying enemy as they drew their last breath.

After no less than ten pep talks to his team since becoming a sergeant, Merritt still couldn’t shake their fear of the West. “Their army is subpar,” he’d told them during their last training session. “And they’ve conned you into respecting them. Don’t let the mangled and desecrated bodies fool you. Reds brutalize corpses because they’re scared of living soldiers who fight back.”

“Speaking of red-sashes,” Troy said, cutting through his thoughts, “I’m looking forward to slaughtering some of ‘em today. Everyone says they’re so brutal and scary and this and that, but when do they ever show it? Only to POWs and their own citizens and the handful of corpses they actually manage to get their hands on. When I see a red-sash, I see an easy kill.”

“They’re cowards,” Merritt replied. He hadn’t intended to engage in conversation with Troy, but the words slipped out, propelled by intense hatred that he was powerless to contain. “They use their commerce as a shield. They know that most guys in the underground would rather cave in to their demands than lose access to the sex trade. It’s how they get away with everything they do. I guess you can afford to have a half-trained, unskilled army when no one wants to go to war with you and everyone is scared of you for no good reason.”

Troy laughed. “I was just saying the same thing to our right hand the other day. Why the fuck is anyone scared of them? We got new privates practically pissing themselves the first time they go to battle with the West because they’re so worried about being captured or their corpse getting fucked. If they’d just suck it up and fight, they’d see that the West is all talk and no action.”

“More people need to say that,” Merritt said.

Troy shot Merritt a smile. “I’ll say it again if you want. I’ll say it to everyone.”

“Have you faced their new right hand, sir?” Merritt asked.

“Gray?” Troy snorted with derision. “Gray doesn’t fight. He’ll beat a dog, but when it comes to facing equals, he’ll send in someone else to do the dirty work. I’m telling you, the guy’s got bulk, but he can’t fight for shit.”

“I think the guy’s a monster. He’s dangerous. I wouldn’t mind taking him out myself.”

“Really? I’m surprised to hear that. You don’t strike me as the violent type.”

“I’m not saying I’d get any joy out of killing him. But the man needs to be put away. The whole sphere needs to be torn down. The slavery and abuse needs to stop.”

“Oh, you’re one of *those* guys,” Troy said.

Merritt braced himself. There was nothing more frustrating than arguing with an underground citizen about the dog trade. The archive of pirated ebooks from the surface had plenty of articles and studies on sex trafficking and the psychological damage it caused its unwilling participants, but precious few underground citizens outside of the South Sphere—which took in escaped dogs as refugees—ever bothered to do such reading. Torrence, with his mind for justice, was the only friend Merritt had who was also vehemently opposed to the dog trade.

Luckily, Troy simply gave an eye roll rather than try to start an argument. “I don’t know, man. Say what you want about the dog trade, but I don’t think Gray’s much of a threat. I could drink ten beers—nah, fifteen—and I could still take him.”

Merritt gave an affirming nod even though he knew Troy was only puffing out his chest. Typical armband machismo.

They continued to idly chatter throughout the next hour of walking. While Merritt was still unwilling to trust Troy, he couldn’t

help but notice a difference between his conversation with Troy and the conversations he'd had with almost any higher-up in his own sphere.

Troy respected Merritt's opinion. He listened to what Merritt had to say, he considered Merritt's words, and he gave a real response. Coming from a sphere that prized its fighters, he valued Merritt's thoughts about combat in a way that no elite in the North ever would. Sometimes he agreed and sometimes he challenged, but he didn't dismiss or patronize him. The conversation grew casual enough that Merritt even felt comfortable dropping the "sir" from his response every now and then.

It felt strange for someone as high ranking as Troy to speak to him like an equal. Strange, but also exhilarating.

They rounded the last corner, and Merritt pointed at the control room door several feet ahead. "Almost there," he said. Unlocking the door with his thumbprint, he motioned for Troy to enter.

The control room was exactly that: a closet-sized room housing nothing but the controls for the first of two impenetrable gates protecting the Montclare border. The back wall of the room was set entirely in glass, overlooking the Montclare sub-street two stories down. On the opposite side of the street was the first metal gate, set in a solid rock wall reinforced with steel beams.

Through the window, Merritt spotted the Elite Squad, a selection of the East's most talented officers and fighters, handpicked by their King and used for operations that required the highest level of tactical combat skill. He watched as they equipped their packs and organized their weapons. Eight soldiers in all, but no sign of Samsid, Elite Squad leader and the King's right hand.

In Merritt's opinion, the current Elite Squad chosen by Cannon was nowhere near the best in East Sphere history, especially in the absence of Samsid, but he wasn't foolish enough to believe he could handle all of them by himself. Troy and Pangolin—the Elite Squad's strategic officer—were enough of a threat on their own.

He headed for the computer at the center of the room, typing in his access key and logging into the system. Then he turned to Troy. "Sir, I need to inform you of a change in plans. Your thumbprint is no

longer approved to open the second Montclare gate. After I enter my thumbprint here, the first gate will open. You will then be free to meet up with your squad at the sub-street below. Once you're past the first gate, I'll use this control panel to reactivate thumbprint access so you can open the second gate."

Troy narrowed his eyes. "Belmont told me my thumbprint was already approved for the second gate."

"As I said, sir, it was a change of plans."

"I don't like changes in plans. If you were going to reauthorize my print before I reached the second gate anyway, why even bother telling me you changed the plans on me?"

"I'm sure you understand why, sir."

A wry smile tugged at the corner of Troy's mouth. Then he rolled his eyes. "All right. Noted. Do what you need to do."

Merritt turned back to the control panel, entering a series of commands, and an empty box appeared on the touchscreen. With a deep breath, he pressed his thumb to it. Behind him echoed the whirring sounds of machinery coming to life.

"You're all set, sir," he said to Troy. He pointed to a door at the opposite end of the control room. "That stairwell will take you down to the sub-street. Only blue-ties are cleared to unlock it, so I'll have to let you through. The first gate will auto-lock after ten minutes unless I lock it faster from the control panel. The stairwell door will also auto-lock, but I'll manually lock it as soon as you leave anyway. Neither the gate nor the stairwell door can be opened from the outside after they're locked, so once you're out, you're out. I hope you have an alternate escape route planned for when you're done with your attack."

"Of course I do," Troy said, a little sharp.

Merritt gestured toward the stairwell door. "Then are you ready, sir?"

"Do it."

A press of the thumb against the panel, and Merritt opened the stairwell door, motioning for Troy to pass. "Best of luck in battle, sir."

Troy held out a hand. “Good working with you, Merritt North.”

“The honor is mine, sir.” Merritt reached out to shake Troy’s hand.

“One more thing,” Troy said. His hand darted forward past the offered palm, grabbing Merritt by the wrist. With stunning strength he hadn’t revealed during their grappling the night before, he yanked Merritt forward, turning him around and twisting his arm behind his back. Into Merritt’s ear, he whispered, “Armbands don’t shake hands.”

Merritt felt something cold and hard against his temple, and he could tell by Troy’s posture that he wielded a previously concealed pistol.

“This is hardly the thank-you I was expecting,” he said through shallow breaths.

“It’s a thank-you, all right. Someday you’ll understand.” Troy pressed the pistol harder against Merritt’s head. “Hands up.”

As soon as Troy released his wrist, Merritt did as told.

Troy pulled the pistols from Merritt’s dual holsters and tossed them aside. Then he attempted to unlatch the straps holding Merritt’s poisons.

“They don’t come off easy, sir,” Merritt said.

“Sure they do.” Pulling out a knife, Troy deftly sliced the straps apart, catching the packs before they could clatter to the ground and setting them down carefully so as not to release any poisons by accident. When he was done, he grabbed hold of the back of Merritt’s shirt collar. “Let’s go.”

When Troy tried to nudge him past the stairwell’s threshold, he resisted. “What good could I possibly be to you outside of this room, sir? I told you, once we’re past that door, I won’t be able to reauthorize your thumbprint for the second gate.”

“You were lying. You had guilt written all over your face. You wanted me to believe you’d disabled my thumbprint so I wouldn’t go after you.”

“Pretty risky, sir, testing out your theory without a safety net.”

“I got a safety net,” Troy said. “*Move.*” He shoved a knee against the back of Merritt’s thigh, forcing him to stumble forward.

Hands still up, Merritt nearly tripped going down the stairs. Troy’s grip on his shirt collar pulled the fabric uncomfortably tight around his neck. “Sir, I have to remind you that killing your escort will do nothing to help your relationship with the North.”

It was a good thing he had his back to Troy; his deceptively cool tone was the perfect cover for his failed poker face.

Troy laughed. “I could do whatever the hell I want with you, and I know it’s not gonna get me on Belmont’s bad side. And if someone higher up than Belmont cares about you, then maybe you’d make a good bargaining chip.”

“I really wouldn’t, sir. But I’m flattered that you think so highly of me.”

“You talk a lot.” They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Troy shoved Merritt out onto the sub-street ahead of him, into the middle of eight Elite Squad soldiers with their weapons drawn.

“How thoughtful, Troy,” a familiar tall woman with soot-stained eyes said. Merritt recognized her immediately: Pangolin, Elite Squad Strategic Officer. “You brought us a gift.”

“Wrapped in a nice blue ribbon,” a man with a gray-brown beard and bandaged head said.

“Where’s the cargo bike?” Troy asked.

The man pointed down the street. “We brought a spare rider, too.”

“Good. Jackal, load him into the cargo hold after the second gate is unlocked.”

“Got it,” the bearded man said.

Merritt waved one of the hands he was holding up, trying to get Troy’s attention. “As I told you, sir, I can’t unlock the second gate without reauthorizing thumbprint access from the control room.”

At this, Pangolin let out a sharp laugh that reminded Merritt of an eagle call. “Oh *man*, has he been calling you ‘sir’ this entire time? That is so cute. No wonder you want to keep him.”

“Fuck off, Pangolin.”

“‘Sir Troy,’” Pangolin said with a snort. “Don’t tell me you actually miss that shit.”

Merritt observed their banter, curious. Troy was Pangolin’s senior officer, and yet she treated him more like a brother than a superior. And Troy did nothing to chastise her. He didn’t even seem genuinely insulted. How did the East Sphere military not crumble under this level of insubordination?

Then again, Merritt knew Pangolin. He’d faced her in battle and had only survived due to sheer luck and help from his allies. When she fought, she was impossible to track. Even video footage couldn’t keep up with her inhuman agility. If anyone’s talent could excuse them from expectations of subservience, it was her.

Troy jerked him forward again, pushing him toward the second gate while his squad flanked them at either side. When they reached the metal barrier, Troy gestured with his head toward the thumbprint sensor. “Do it.”

“It’ll do no good, sir.”

“Pardus.”

The soldier named Pardus stepped forward at Troy’s command, grabbing Merritt’s wrist and forcing his hand to the thumbprint sensor. After holding it in place for several seconds, the panel still showed no response.

By the feeling of Troy’s fist tightening at his collar, Merritt could tell that Troy hadn’t gotten the outcome he’d expected. “It isn’t too late to let me return to the control room, sir. The doors won’t auto-lock for a few more minutes, and I’m a forgiving person.”

Troy pushed the pistol harder against Merritt’s temple. “Belmont told me you’d have a backup key.”

Why would you tell him that, Belmont?

He ignored the sting of betrayal. “Sir, I don’t have any such key.”

“Sure you don’t.”

“Sir, it would be in your best interest to let me return to the control room.”

Still holding gun to temple, Troy wrapped his other arm around Merritt’s neck. “Search him,” he said to his soldiers.

“Sir, you should *really*—”

Troy constricted his arm, turning Merritt’s sentence to a squeak.

Have it your way, then.

Two of the men began patting Merritt down. Pardus patted the outside of his pocket. “Oh, he doesn’t have any such key,” he laughed, then reached in. “No one will ever think to look in my *pocket*.”

Pangolin’s eyes widened. “Pardus—”

It was already too late. As Pardus pulled the key free of the pocket, the fishing line connecting it to the cap of Merritt’s SYN-12 popped the cap off the vial. Poison flowed down Merritt’s thigh, leaving a tingling chemical burn as it turned to vapor upon contact with air. Between the fibers of his pants, tendrils of smoke twisted.

Merritt heard Troy’s pistol clatter to the ground before the thud of his body. All around him, soldiers went down like a playing card pyramid.

He stood at the center of the prone bodies, scratching the back of his head. “Okay, then.” Now that there was no longer a gun at his head, he felt surprisingly calm. He took a glance at the time on his phone. Five past six. *They’re going to be late.*

A few feet away, Pangolin twitched. SYN-12 would keep a soldier down for half an hour, but she was fighting it. He had no idea how; resistance to SYN was unheard of. Not wanting to risk it, Merritt gave a measured strike to the side of her head, knowing just the right angle and amount of force required to incapacitate. Again, he failed to put her down, but a second strike did the trick.

Before anything else, he dashed back into the control room and reset the counter for the stairwell door. Then he returned to the sub-street. He retrieved the gate key from Pardus, and then as quickly as possible, he disarmed every soldier, stacking the weapons outside the control room stairwell. Patting his leg, he determined that the chemical burn was only mild and would probably fade with topical treatment. He could give it a more thorough examination later.

Fishing his phone out of his pocket, he dialed Captain Balbo. “Corvus Corax reporting. I have the East’s Elite Squad incapacitated. Any special instructions, or should I let them revive and proceed as planned?”

A long pause. “Say again.”

“I have the East’s Elite Squad incapacitated. Any special instructions, or should I let them revive and proceed as planned?”

“Corvus, I don’t follow.”

“I rigged the manual gate key to a vial of SYN-12 in one of my packs. They tried to steal the key from me, and they released the poison.” Merritt’s brows furrowed. “It’s a rare opportunity. Shall I search any of them? Kill any of them?” In battle, there were obviously no rules against killing someone as high ranking as an Elite Squad member, but outside of battle, one ran the risk of retaliation. If the assassination was unprovoked, it was likely to start a war, so Merritt didn’t want to harm any of them without it being cleared first. On the other hand, these were the most dangerous fighters in the East Sphere, and if Mercury had been looking to put any of them down, the opportunity had presented itself.

Captain Balbo still hadn’t replied. Merritt wondered if their connection was faulty. “Hold on.” He switched his phone to camera mode, flipped it to front facing, and held it at arm’s length in front of him. In the viewfinder, he could see himself with the splayed bodies of the Elite Squad soldiers behind him, Troy at his feet. Out of reflex, he flashed a tentative smile as he hit the shutter button. He never knew how to smile at cameras. He sent the photo to Captain Balbo. “Photo sent, please confirm receipt.”

Instead of a confirmation, Merritt heard a sputtering laugh on the other line. A moment later, Captain Balbo appeared to collect herself. “Stand by for instruction.”

The line went quiet. Merritt stepped outside the first border gate, knowing it could auto-lock at any minute and not wanting to be caught on the wrong side. After a couple of minutes, Captain Balbo returned. “Have you confiscated their weapons?” was her first question.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Orders are to return their weapons, reauthorize Troy’s thumbprint access at the second gate, and leave them between the two gates to revive on their own.”

“Command confirmed. Corvus Corax out.”

Merritt retrieved the weapons from the stairwell, laying them in a stack beside the fallen soldiers. Then he retrieved his wallet from his packs, unearthing a spare copy of his playing card, ace of spades. He knelt at Troy’s side, sliding the card into his hand.

“Just playing with you,” he whispered before hurrying back to the control room.

Ten o’clock on Monday night, and Belmont was still trapped in his public office at the North Sphere border. Every time he tried packing up and heading home, another crisis hooked him and reeled him in. He’d planned to take the afternoon off in the wake of nine consecutive 12-hour days, but after the crucial mistake of checking his email “one last time” before shutting down his computer at noon, he’d foolishly latched onto another piece of bait—one with spiky blond hair and a painfully nerdy smile.

A photo had gone viral among military and fighters’ groups on the internet. In it, Merritt gave his camera a toothy smile while the East Sphere’s Elite Squad lay on the ground unconscious behind him. One of Belmont’s old flings, a bartender and part-time sport fighter, had picked up on the scent of juicy gossip and passed the photo along to Belmont.

The incident wasn't news to Belmont; the captain on standby for the assignment had contacted him that morning asking for instructions after Merritt had incapacitated the Elite Squad. Belmont's orders: pretend it never happened. Return the Elite Squad's weapons and let them continue their invasion. Don't give the glory to Merritt.

What Belmont hadn't known was that there was photo evidence of Merritt's feat. Merritt didn't have to lift a finger—didn't have to say a word on his own behalf—and still the glory came to him.

The bartender had meant well. A lone sergeant singlehandedly taking out the underground's most feared squad was a newsworthy event. It would have made for the perfect opportunity to embarrass the East and gain respect for the North, if only someone else had been holding the camera.

Instead of capitalizing on the opportunity, Belmont set to work at shutting it down. He dropped a few comments online under a fake account, claiming that the photo was staged. From another account, a comment that the soldier didn't *really* defeat the Elite Squad since Samsid, the squad's leader, was absent. And a few more comments stating that the victorious soldier was a lieutenant, not a sergeant, and therefore he wasn't as vastly outranked as everyone had made him out to be.

But this was only the beginning, his efforts limited by his lack of food and rest. The real work would come later. He was willing to try anything to reverse the flow of the current that threatened to carry Merritt past him.

Damn, it was hard to think straight. Was it worth letting Troy off the hook in order to prevent Merritt from getting recognition for what he'd done? The analytical part of his mind said no, that Merritt could only gain so much recognition as long as he was a soldier and doing the work of a soldier. Who cares if other fighters respected him? It wouldn't gain him any respect from the elite.

But the burning, anxious pulse in his chest told him to shut down Merritt's path to success at all costs. This news could *not* get back to Mercury.

Belmont rubbed his temples. The lack of food and rest did nothing to help steer his chaotic, racing thoughts.

Never could he have predicted that one day he'd turn down an opportunity to publicly shame Troy. The brainless oaf would have deserved it. As far as Belmont was concerned, Troy owed him for the favor.

Just when the demands of his empty stomach grew strong enough to pull him from his work, he received a call from the oaf himself. The West Sphere invasion was finished, and Troy wanted to come by his office to return the keycard that had gotten him as far as the waterways entrance. For some unfathomable reason, he wanted Merritt's captain there too.

Captain Balbo arrived ten minutes after ten, doing her duty by responding to Belmont's small talk about local restaurants even though she'd never been to any restaurant worth eating at.

When Troy finally arrived fifteen minutes later, Balbo rose to her feet and gave him a respectful bow of the head. Belmont didn't rise; he sat slouched behind his desk, his chair turned sideways and his gangly legs sprawled out in front of him. Troy curled his lip as if annoyed by Belmont's relaxed posture, but he didn't comment. Instead, he said, "Good. You're both here." And then he fished something out of his pocket and tossed it onto the desk.

It was a bloodstained red sash. Belmont eyed it and then returned his gaze to Troy, unimpressed.

"We're all finished. You told me to bring you back a souvenir, didn't you?"

"You finished your attack on the West Sphere already?" Belmont asked. "What happened? How many casualties?"

"That's privileged information," Troy said with a haughty smirk. "Keep your ears open over the next few days. You'll probably hear about it from someone else."

He was withholding information on purpose, just to get under Belmont's skin. Belmont wouldn't play into it. He took a casual sip from his coffee mug and leaned back in his chair. "Thank you for

sending back our sergeant in one piece. It would have been a pain in the ass to find a decent replacement and retaliate against your sphere at the same time.”

“Why didn’t you at least let him take a squad with him?” Troy asked. “Is your army that short-staffed?”

“We’re not short-staffed at all,” Belmont said. “We just didn’t feel the job was worth more than the one soldier.”

“And what if I’d decided to kill him after all?”

“He’s just a sergeant. That’s what he’s there for.”

“You don’t like that kid much, do you?”

Belmont laughed. “I think you’re reading too much into things. I don’t have a problem with Merritt.” In a split second, he turned his vague smile to a wicked smirk. “And judging from the pictures going around, I’m thinking you couldn’t have killed him if you wanted to.”

He knew what Troy would say: that it was a fluke, and that he would wipe the floor with Merritt any other day. Even if it was just meaningless posturing from a stereotypical armband, Belmont wanted—*needed*—to hear it.

“Pardus fucked up, and he’s off the Elite Squad. As for the sergeant...” Troy turned to Balbo. “The kid answers to you, right?”

“Right.”

The corner of Troy’s lip twitched in a split-second almost-smile. “He’s a competent soldier. He held his own.”

Belmont bristled.

Troy slapped his borrowed keycard onto the desk beside the bloody sash. To Belmont, he said, “And now my business here is done. Next time we cross paths, make sure you’re armed.”

Troy turned to leave, but before he could cross the threshold, Belmont called, “Wait.” Troy turned back around. “‘Competent soldier?’ That’s it? That’s all you have to say about him?”

“What else do you want me to say?”

“You spent almost twenty-four hours with him. You worked with him. You were knocked out by him. I’m sure you have stronger opinions of him than ‘competent soldier.’”

“I gave your King a full report of my mission with him.”

“You gave Mercury a report? What did you tell him?”

Troy tilted his head in a show of mock sympathy. “Oh no, looks like you don’t have high enough clearance.”

Belmont hid his white-knuckled anger behind a jocular grin. “Oh, come on, armband. I’m curious. Merritt’s an interesting guy. I just want to know what you make of him.”

“What I make of him?”

“Yeah.”

Troy gave a short, harsh chuckle. “He’s smarter than your general.”

Without another word, he let the office door swing shut behind him.