

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

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CHAPTER 19

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CHAPTER 19

He was barely awake enough to steer his motorcycle. The passing streaks of ceiling lights seared into his eyes as he shot down the high-speed toll tunnel heading east.

He'd expected the mystery man on the phone to text him an address. What he'd gotten instead were geographic coordinates. The altitude measurement read so low he'd thought it was an error. He'd mapped the numbers on his phone, finding that his destination was in the undeveloped peripheral caverns of neutral territory. The caves were often occupied by homeless vagrants or criminals on the run, but the coordinates Merritt had been sent were so deep he wasn't even sure how to access them. The gala was only three miles from neutral territory, but Merritt expected that, once he got into the caves, the last leg of the trip would take the longest.

Part of him wondered if this was a trap. If so, he was already in deep shit. He had no contingency plan. He'd told no one where he was going, not even Belmont. But this didn't feel like a trap. The note of anxiety in the caller's voice had been genuine.

Bottom line: the call was about Torrence, so Merritt couldn't afford to ignore it.

How do I get there? he'd texted after tracing the coordinates.

You'll know, came the reply.

And it was true. When Merritt exited the toll tunnel into neutral territory and careened into the caverns, the shadowy path ahead beckoned to him just like the treacherous mazes he'd ridden in his youth. He'd sailed through the toll tunnel in under two minutes, but he couldn't take these winding, rocky turns in pitch black at nearly the same speed. This terrain could only be traversed by someone whose motorcycle was an extension of their body.

He descended a crooked row of rocks, jumped a creek, and dodged stalagmites. He spotted a crack in a stone wall just wide enough to accommodate his bike and slipped through, then landed in a clearing on the other side. By the time he was near enough to his destination for his phone to beep in warning, twenty minutes had passed.

A final jump across a ravine, a turn to the left, then one to the right—and an astonishing vision met his eyes. He gazed upon a piece of developed land, undocumented by any underground map he'd ever seen. The area was set up like a commune. Tiny, rickety shacks surrounded a central clearing occupied by clotheslines, a rundown picnic table, an algae-laced pond, and a modest garden that was wilting from the substandard conditions. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, some rigged with torches for light and warmth.

He slowed on his motorcycle and set a foot on the mossy ground. He counted three stone shacks and three caves secured with a wooden door. While the placement of the shacks' stones and supports looked precarious, Merritt suspected that the caves were better developed. From the outside, they looked just like the cave lodgings commonly found in the West Sphere's slums, right down to the Gothic windows carved from the sloped walls and fixed with clear glass. Based on their weathered appearance, Merritt suspected the current residents of the commune had moved into the existing structures rather than having built them from the ground up.

Where was Torrence? Another glance at his phone's map directed him straight ahead, toward the nearest cave. He parked his motorcycle beside the dwelling and circled around front. His heart pounded with dread as he knocked softly on the door.

After a brief wait, he heard a deadbolt turning—and another, then one more. The heavy, reinforced door creaked open, and the gentle face of a man about his age peered out at him. Semi-long black hair pulled into a messy ponytail, tawny skin, gray eyes. He wore no blue tie, but Merritt could tell by his styling that he was from the North Sphere. "You made it," he whispered, and Merritt recognized his voice from their phone call.

"Is he here?" Merritt asked urgently.

The man nodded. “Are you alone?” he asked. “Did you tell anyone where you were going?”

“I’m alone for now,” Merritt replied cautiously. “But that can change in a heartbeat if necessary.”

The man was about to respond when a second figure appeared behind him, barely visible within the crack in the doorway. Another blue-tie without a tie, this one with wild, spiky brown hair, sunken cheeks, and deep-set eyes. His intense gaze locked on Merritt, then shifted with fury toward the other man in the door. “You *called him?*” he snapped, his voice hushed but angry. He pulled the long-haired man away from the entrance and slammed the door shut.

“Hey....” Merritt attempted. He raised a hand to knock, then thought better of it. Instead, he leaned in and listened.

“I thought we agreed you wouldn’t call him!”

“I had to!” came the reply. “Torrence—”

“He’s *General of the North Sphere Army!* He’ll have troops here in half a minute! He’ll tear this entire place apart!”

“He won’t, I promise. He has no reason to! He’s just here to see Torrence. If we can somehow get him through the night—”

“It’s too big a risk.”

“Well, he’s already here now, so what’s the difference if we let him upstairs?”

There was a pause, and then the other guy replied too quietly for Merritt to hear. They continued their conversation in a softer tone. Merritt could do nothing but wait outside in silence.

He wondered who these men were, and why they were hiding in neutral territory without their sphere identifiers. They seemed too soft to be criminals or insurgents—but when it came to blue-ties, looks were often deceiving. One thing Merritt could tell for sure, however, was that they weren’t fighters. They showed more bone through their clothing than muscle. Merritt, armed with his dual holsters and poison packs, would be able to control the situation if anything went awry.

After another minute, the door finally opened, and the ponytailed man peered out again. He offered a feeble smile and said, “Please come inside.”

Merritt nodded and crossed the threshold. The interior of the cave was finished and furnished just like any of the modest homes in the West Sphere slums—slick, newly swept mud floors, torches mounted on whitewashed walls, and a mud stove peeking out from the tiny kitchen around the corner. Within the cramped entryway, the surly man shot him the stink eye before disappearing into an adjacent room. Before the remaining man could speak, Merritt said softly, “I promise I won’t give you any trouble, but you need to tell me what’s happening with Torrence.”

“He ran out of meds,” the guy replied. “It’s been nearly a week since he’s had them. They were supposed to be shipped last week, but there was a delay. I just got word that the delivery will come tomorrow to his old place, but I..” He swallowed hard. “I don’t know if he’ll make it through the night.”

“What meds?” Merritt pressed. “What’s wrong with him? I know he’s sick, but he wouldn’t tell me anything about his condition.” Suddenly the man appeared reluctant to speak, and Merritt clenched his fists with frustration. “What does he have?” Merritt pressed.

“It’s nothing contagious, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not worried about that. I just want to know what’s wrong with him.”

Again, the man responded with strained silence.

Merritt shook his head, exasperated. “Why all the secrecy?” he demanded. “I might be able to help. I’m not an elite, but I have some connections. Would you really let Torrence die, just to keep me in the dark?”

The second man suddenly reemerged from the neighboring room. “We don’t need your help,” he snapped. “After his medication comes in, we’ll have everything we need.”

“And what happens the next time there’s a delay?” Merritt asked. “I know people in D&P. If you’d just—”

“You can’t get these drugs through the *government*,” the man snarled, his final word dripping with contempt.

“If they’re off the black market, you don’t know they’re safe.”

A flash of anger showed in the man’s eyes; he wasn’t even trying for a poker face. “These fucking *black market* drugs are the only thing keeping him alive.”

Merritt didn’t reply. He couldn’t argue with that. But, in the resulting silence, he could only think about how useless he was. His military and personal connections could do nothing to save Torrence. Finally, he turned to the long-haired man. “Then why did you call me here, if there’s nothing I can do?”

The man ran his shaky fingers through his hair. “Torrence keeps saying your name. I thought that maybe if you just... stayed by his side through the rest of the night, it might calm him a little. It’s already past three in the morning. We just need to get him through until the medication comes in. That’s all we need—someone to help keep him stable for the next few hours.”

Torrence was saying his name? Merritt clung to his poker face and swallowed past his suddenly tight throat.

When he opened his mouth, his first words broke embarrassingly. He swallowed again and took a breath. Then, his voice as steady as he could make it, he whispered, “Show me where he is.”

The moment he entered the tiny, windowless attic, he was hit with the acrid stench of blood gone rancid. It smelled like death—like forgotten, nameless bodies left on abandoned battlefields. The ponytailed man lingered in the clean hallway, reluctant to cross the threshold. When Merritt closed the door between them, the man made no argument.

Merritt took in the sight of the attic with distress. A flickering wall torch illuminated the soiled linens heaped in the corner. Yet more sheets and rags lay strewn across the floor. At the center of the room, a thin mattress sat covered with two more dirty blankets. The lump under

the blankets was barely big enough to suggest a body. How thin had Torrence gotten in the months since Merritt had last seen him?

Not just months, Merritt realized with a sinking heart. In one week, it would be a year since he'd last shaken Torrence awake at his flat. How could he have gone an entire year without seeing his friend?

He'd never stopped trying. He'd sent a text every week since his promotion to general, and he'd left a voicemail at least once a month. Torrence had gone into hiding after the shock of his home being surrounded by the entire Elite Border Guard, shortly before the West Sphere invasion. But for all the times Merritt had tried to reach him since then, he hadn't gotten a single reply.

Gazing down at the quivering lump under the blankets, his chest felt tight with sorrow so overwhelming it left him breathless. Why had he accepted that silence without a fight? Why hadn't he tried harder to track Torrence down?

He inched closer to the mattress. Damn, those sheets were filthy. It looked like Torrence had been left to his own devices in this room for days—un-showered, unshaved, unable to drag himself to the bathroom reliably. The blankets around his head and shoulders appeared stained with dried, caked layers of blood and sputum. Had anyone even come to *talk* to him? To comfort him in his pain?

He remembered something he'd once overheard an East Sphere soldier say about North Sphere citizens. The man had called blue-ties “coddled, prissy elitists who cringe at filth and refuse to ever get their hands dirty.” This was a stereotype Merritt had always resented—but never before had it stared him so blatantly in the face. Downstairs were two blue-tie men who cared about Torrence and wanted desperately for him to survive. But they couldn't bring themselves to confront the mess, the smells, the splatter—not even to comfort him in what might be his final days. Instead they'd left Torrence to suffer, filthy and alone.

This was the North Sphere at its coldest and ugliest.

Merritt knelt beside the mattress and laid a gentle hand on the mound beneath the blankets. “Torrence,” he whispered. “It's me.”

Torrence shivered beneath his hand. He was barely more than bones.

“Can you hear me?” Merritt asked.

No reply. Just more shivering.

Merritt eased the blankets away, searching for Torrence’s face. He unearthed tangled, matted strands of hair, followed by a sweaty forehead. Torrence’s deep, sunken eyes were closed, lids tinged violet-blue and crusted white with old tears. Dried blood lined his nostrils and dotted his chapped white lips. Merritt rested the back of his hand against Torrence’s hollow cheek. Cold.

He felt a sting behind his eyelids, and he blinked away the rising wetness. Torrence, the most passionate person Merritt had ever known, was now barely an empty husk, all the life wrung out of him. Merritt couldn’t even tell what was left of him.

Torrence groaned, snapping Merritt to attention. His eyelids fluttered, and he whispered, “Merritt...”

“Torrence,” Merritt replied urgently. “I’m here.”

Torrence reached up shakily and grabbed Merritt’s hand.

Merritt felt a lightning bolt course through his chest. He squeezed back hard and repeated, “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Torrence opened his mouth as if trying to speak, but instead he only emitted a wet, phlegmy rattle from deep in his lungs. He gave a few feeble coughs, then squinted up at Merritt for only a moment before his eyes glazed over. “I’m glad I... got to see you.”

Merritt knew exactly what Torrence meant, and he shielded his mind before sorrow could set in. “No,” he growled, leaning in close. “This isn’t the last time you’re going to see me. I’m not going anywhere, and *neither are you.*” Torrence shook his head weakly, but Merritt repeated, “No.”

Had he just lied to Torrence? The thought tore through his heart like a stab from a knife. But he quickly buried his doubt. He wasn’t lying. He would make his words the truth.

Torrence gripped Merritt’s hand hard enough to hurt. It felt like he was channeling all his strength into that squeeze, to tell Merritt something he couldn’t say with words. For all the months Torrence had

pushed Merritt away, now he held him like he never wanted to let go. He pulled Merritt's hand toward him, as if desperate to erase the distance that had grown between them.

Merritt gathered Torrence in the soiled blankets and pulled him up until his head rested against his chest. He wrapped his arms around Torrence and embraced him as tight as he dared. "I'm here."

Torrence let out a racking cough. Blood splattered Merritt's four-thousand-dollar suit. Merritt hugged him tighter.

Half an hour of peace, then ten minutes of violent fits. Torrence would shoot up from his trembling sleep, hacking so hard Merritt thought he'd rupture a lung. Blood sprayed from his mouth and streamed from his nostrils. Not normal blood—even the blood straight from his body carried that troubling, rotten smell. Torrence choked and gasped whenever the blood rose to his throat, and Merritt had to ease him through each fit to keep him from aspirating.

How could any medication fix him? He had no control over his body. His heartbeat was rapid and weak, and his breaths came out quick and shallow. He was overcome with pain so bad it left him shaking and crying.

Why was his blood like this? Was it an infection? His bone marrow? His kidneys? Were the rest of his organs being compromised by his tainted blood?

Then came the question Merritt had tried his hardest not to ask himself: even if Torrence made it through the night, how much longer would he have after?

Tears threatened to spill past his eyelids. He hurried around the corner into the attached bathroom, closed the door, and braced himself over the rusty bucket sink. All he wanted was to let himself go and cling to Torrence—to weep for the glimmer of light lost from his eyes, to weep for every day he'd failed to protect him. The more Merritt tried to hold himself together, the more he tore apart from the inside.

But he couldn't allow himself the indulgence of falling apart. If he could protect Torrence from nothing else, he had to protect him from the sight of his doubt and sorrow. Even if he didn't believe Torrence would make it through the night, he needed Torrence to believe it.

He couldn't fail Torrence this time.

He returned to Torrence's side, strengthened by his own resolve. When Torrence's next fit of coughing passed, Merritt pulled him close, rocking him and whispering in his ear until his body calmed. He wasn't lucid, but Merritt whispered to him anyway, on the off chance that some of those words would seep in and push him to keep fighting.

"I never stopped thinking about you. You never stopped being important to me. You can hide from me for the rest of your life, but I won't stop loving you. You're my best friend."

He was a blue-tie; he never imagined he'd say such things out loud. But it didn't matter how agonizing the words felt in his throat. He needed Torrence to hear them.

When Torrence fell back to sleep, Merritt stacked his pillows and lay him down with his upper body elevated to ease his breathing. Then he turned to cleaning. He gathered up the discarded sheets and towels and loaded them into the tub in the adjacent bathroom. The pipes were old and wobbly, but they worked, likely fed from a nearby well. He ran hot water with soap and disinfectant. While the linens soaked, he returned to Torrence's side with soapy washcloths and gently cleaned the blood and grime from his face. He'd only have a few more minutes until Torrence would start coughing all over again.

At half past five in the morning, violent spasms rocked Torrence's body, nearly casting him from Merritt's arms. Merritt propped him up to try to ease his tremors, but it was no use. Torrence heaved and coughed, then pulled away from Merritt just in time to vomit bile onto his sheets. Merritt fought down his horror.

Torrence collapsed, his eyes wide and vacant. Merritt couldn't tell if he was conscious. He set a hand on Torrence's clammy forehead,

then stroked his tangled hair. He could feel Torrence trembling beneath his hand.

Was his presence helping at all? Was there any point to him being here?

He felt the threat of tears again, and he forced them back. But he couldn't contain his anguished tremors or his catching breaths.

He set Torrence down and rose to his feet until he steadied himself. Then he knelt beside the mattress, concentrating on the mess to keep from venturing into the darkness of his thoughts. He wetted a rag in a nearby bucket and began mopping away at the soiled sheets.

A tear seeped from Torrence's open eye.

At a quarter past six, Torrence's tremors grew so strong Merritt could see him shaking underneath his blankets. Torrence's skin felt disturbingly cold, like an hours-old corpse. Merritt pulled him up, dirty sheets and all, and drew him into an embrace to warm his body.

"Just a few more hours," he whispered in Torrence's ear. "Stay with me."

Torrence's tremors didn't stop, but they slowed just a bit.

At half past seven, the ponytailed man stuck his head into the room. Merritt looked over his shoulder and noted the expression of shock on his face. He was probably surprised to see Merritt holding Torrence so close. Merritt didn't withdraw.

"You've been quiet," the man said. "I've been out in the hall all night, and I never saw you leave the room. I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

Merritt had a feeling the man had been tasked with sitting in the hall to make sure his guest didn't stray too far into the house. He

gestured toward Torrence. “He’s hanging on. When’s the medicine supposed to get here?”

“It’s being delivered to Torrence’s old place in sub-Norwood at ten. Chase has to accept the delivery and bring it back here.”

A flash of panic crossed the man’s face, and Merritt knew immediately that he hadn’t intended to reveal his friend’s name. Merritt offered a reassuring smile. “Whatever reason you have for hiding in neutral territory is none of my business. I’m only concerned about Torrence.” He tilted his head. “But it would help if I knew your name too. It’s only fair; you know mine.”

The man hesitated, then softly said, “Briar.”

Merritt nodded in thanks. “So, your friend has to bring the medicine back here from sub-Norwood. That’d take at least half an hour, wouldn’t it?”

“Probably.”

Merritt hammered on his poker face as he considered the timeline. “That’s late.”

Briar squinted across the room at Torrence, who lay asleep in Merritt’s arms. “You don’t think he’ll last another three hours? I thought he was looking a little better. And I wasn’t hearing as much coughing or vomiting.”

“No, it’s not that.” Merritt couldn’t guarantee anything, but Torrence did seem more stable. Merritt would stay as late as he needed—but he had a board meeting at noon. He wasn’t sure how he’d get there in time. Even if he took a toll tunnel, it would be a twelve-mile drive up to the northernmost district of the sphere—and he’d have to find a way to clean himself up. Could he afford to miss it? Mercury didn’t take kindly to no-shows.

Torrence began to cough, and thoughts of the board meeting fled Merritt’s mind. He adjusted his hold and eased Torrence through the spasms. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Briar duck out and close the door behind him.

The attic door didn't creak open again until a quarter to eleven. Briar peered into the room and called to Merritt, "Meds are here."

All at once, the tension left Merritt's body. He heaved a sigh of relief, squeezing Torrence tight. Torrence lay asleep, his head resting on Merritt's shoulder. He could have passed for dead, but Merritt felt the slightest wind coming from his nose and mouth.

Briar held up a plastic bag with six small vials of liquid and a syringe inside. "I can take it from here," he said, though he looked reluctant.

"Are you sure?" Merritt asked. "I don't mind doing it."

"Each one has to be injected in a different location, and I know all the spots. I've done it enough times on mys—"

He cut himself off, but his slip didn't go unnoticed by Merritt. Were all these guys sick? Were they all waiting on late medication? Had they just not progressed as far as Torrence yet?

"I've done it before," Briar continued. "For Torrence." He tiptoed across the room and knelt gingerly on the cleanest spot of floor he could find. Then he prepped the first needle. Merritt lingered, watching until all six vials were injected.

After Briar delivered the final injection, he rose to his feet with a heavy sigh. Then he checked the knees of his pants for stains.

"What now?" Merritt asked. "How long will it take for the medication to kick in? What will it do?"

"The first injection treats his blood, makes it more normal. I think the others treat his organs, because otherwise they get damaged by the blood. I don't really know; I'm not a doctor." Briar frowned. "He still coughs a lot, even on the medication. He has trouble eating, and he throws up sometimes. But when he's on the meds, he can stay conscious and function through most of the day. He'll keep getting worse, but the treatment slows it down."

Merritt gazed at the unmarked, empty vial. “So it’s no miracle cure. Torrence is still terminal.”

Briar didn’t reply.

Merritt gave Torrence one last squeeze, then slowly eased him back onto the mattress. He rose to his feet and pointed toward the bathroom. “All the sheets and rags are hanging to dry in there. They should really be washed more often.”

Briar stood in awkward silence.

“I want him to call me when he’s better,” Merritt said. “Or at least answer when I call him. Please tell him that.” He barely kept his voice from shaking.

“I’ll tell him, but it might be a few days before he’s aware enough to listen. That’s what happened the last time his meds were late.”

“That’s fine,” Merritt replied. “I just want to know that he’s okay. I assume my invitation to your hideout was... a one-time thing.”

Briar glanced toward the door, behind which Chase probably lurked. Then he returned his gaze to Merritt and nodded reluctantly. “We appreciate it, though. He probably wouldn’t have gotten through the night without you.”

“I’d do it for him a thousand times more if I had to.” Merritt said as he gathered his belongings. He chuckled dryly. “If he’d let me.”