

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

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CHAPTER 5

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CHAPTER 5

The evening meetings Merritt had scheduled with his newly picked senior officers were strictly business, but he was looking forward to them for selfish reasons. After spending the entire commute from headquarters to Station 1 mentally lashing himself for the decision he'd just given Belmont, he yearned for distraction. He couldn't wait to see the looks on his soldiers' faces when he informed them of their promotions. He wanted to feel their happiness, to know that something good was coming out of the mess he'd made.

Before meeting with any of his chosen colonels, Merritt was set to meet with his prospective personal aide. He was grateful to Perry for carrying on as his aide after Rhodes's death, but it was time to pick a replacement. Merritt could think of no one better than Sergeant Ellis. He'd long suspected that a switch from sergeant to aide would be seen as a reprieve by Ellis, who had a great mind and loyal heart but whose time as a West Sphere POW had permanently affected his ability to cope with combat. He'd made extraordinary progress, and he'd proven himself capable of the challenge, but it had come at a great cost to himself. Now, unlike before, he had a choice of whether he wanted to continue as an enlisted soldier or take a job that didn't require him to fight.

In other spheres, the general's aide was a high-ranking position. In the North, where service work was the lowest form of work, the role of aide wasn't quite as prestigious. However, it was still an officer's position, on par with captains. Merritt wondered if he himself would have preferred being an aide to being a fighter or even a general. He would have excelled in a position where his only responsibility was to tend to the needs of a single superior. If he dared to think about it, he might have considered it a dream job. But he knew better than to allow himself that fantasy.

For Ellis, it would be quite the promotion. And Merritt, having worked with Ellis for months, knew they had a good dynamic. Ellis was every bit as loyal to Merritt as Merritt was to him, without being scared to offer Merritt his honesty.

Ellis arrived at Merritt's office for his one-on-one meeting at eight o'clock, wearing his sergeant's uniform and looking intense as usual. He was taller than Merritt—and more handsome, in Merritt's opinion. His icy pale skin contrasted against his jet black hair and goatee. From his stark coloring to his sharp features and even to the bold scar across his face, he was compelling in his severity.

That scar would have found more favor in the East Sphere. The North didn't take kindly to physical imperfections, and a soldier's scarring was evidence of damaged goods. Most North Sphere soldiers immediately treated such wounds with scar cream, but Ellis, who'd received his injury during his long escape from the West Sphere after his time as a POW, hadn't had the luxury of fading his scar. To Merritt, Ellis's scar was simply a mark of what he'd survived.

Merritt observed Ellis from behind his desk, realizing he was unsure of how to greet him. At one point in their relationship, he would have simply said, "Hi, Ellis." Was that the way a general would greet his new aide?

Eh, why not?

"Hi, Ellis."

Ellis lowered his head in a shallow bow. "Good evening, sir."

Merritt nearly cringed at the formality. "At ease," he said, and Ellis relaxed his posture a bit. "I'm sure you're aware that I've made some changes to the staffing of our military. Has training gone smoothly without Harding and Palmer?"

"Yes, sir," Ellis replied, though Merritt couldn't tell how true that was. Ellis wasn't one to complain, even when faced with great hardship.

"Today I reviewed my officers' picks with Mercury and the board. Chem Ops will get a new colonel and some new captains." He leaned forward, hands clasped atop his desk. "You've come a long way

with Chem Ops, Ellis. Your performance during the West Sphere invasion was top notch, and I have no doubt that, if you were to continue in Chem Ops, you'd continue to bring pride to your unit."

"Thank you, sir," Ellis replied with another bow of the head.

"That said, I believe your greatest asset is your mind. You're organized and analytical, and you have a way of anticipating the needs of others before they even know they're in need. You're well spoken. You represent the North's military with honor and dignity."

"Thank you, sir," Ellis choked out again, apparently uncomfortable at being lavished with praise.

"I had to make some personnel decisions, and I have reservations about taking you away from Chem Ops because you've performed so well. But even though you've never complained about your combat duties, I believe you'd prefer a role outside of battle. Does that sound fair?"

Ellis hesitated. "I'll serve my sphere wherever you choose to put me." He paused to swallow. "But yes, sir. That sounds fair."

"I'm glad to hear that." Merritt offered Ellis a smile. "As you know, the North's general has a personal aide to arrange their daily tasks—travel planning, correspondence, scheduling, and more. Perry was aide to Rhodes, and I plan to keep him on as a staff member. But he was Rhodes's pick, and I need someone as my aide whom I can trust unconditionally. It's a sensitive position that very few people can manage." He allowed his smile to widen just a bit. "I'm offering you the position, Ellis. If you'd take it."

Ellis's poker face fell away, as it often did when he and Merritt were alone. His eyes widened, and he looked like he was fighting back a smile. "General, I... I..."

Seeing Ellis so overwhelmed with happiness made Merritt's chest hurt. He maintained his gentle smile and said, "I just want to be clear, Ellis. This is your choice. I won't remove you from Chem Ops unless you truly want this position. I want you to put in as much thought as you need to, and then let me know. If you know now, you can tell me now. If you need more time, I can wait."

Oddly, Ellis's smile fell away, his look of joy replaced with one of acute distress. "Oh, I... I understand, sir," he said in a soft, shaky voice. "Of course, you'd need me to demonstrate that I want it."

"I'm just asking you to think it over," Merritt replied, startled by the change in Ellis's demeanor.

"I do want it, sir. I've never wanted a position more. I just..." He lowered his gaze, wearing the same haunted expression Merritt had seen over and over during their earliest private training sessions. "I wasn't prepared to do... *this*. Today." He looked down at himself, biting his lower lip as he stood in silence.

Merritt opened his mouth, but he wasn't sure what to say. He couldn't tell what was going through Ellis's mind.

After a long pause, Ellis finally raised his head, but he still couldn't manage to look Merritt in the eyes. "I apologize if I have difficulties... performing to your standard. It's been an embarrassing problem since returning from the West. But..." His hands shook as he removed his fighting jacket, folding it neatly and setting it on a nearby end table. "I know I should consider myself lucky. Of all the officers who could have made this request, I..." He gave a dry, resigned laugh. "I could have done worse than you, sir."

"Ellis, what are you—?" Merritt blinked as Ellis began unbuckling his belt. "Why are you—? Stop it!"

Ellis froze, his belt half-undone as his eyes widened. Redness flooded his pale cheeks, and he swiftly redid his belt with fumbling fingers. "Oh, fuck. I-I'm so sorry, sir. I thought you were..." He gritted his teeth, urgently snatching his jacket and pulling it on haphazardly.

Merritt stared at him in horror. "What did you think I was asking for?"

Ellis's gaze shifted with shame. "Sir, I don't know of anyone who's gotten an officer's job without either payment or... services rendered."

"Services rendered," Merritt repeated hollowly. A wave of revulsion washed over him as he remembered Colonel Harding's hand

on the back of his head. He felt disgusted by the memory, and by Ellis's assumption. Ellis *knew* him. How could he have ever thought Merritt was the same as Harding?

He knew the disgust showed on his face, but he wouldn't hide it. Ellis needed to see how far off base he was.

He told himself not to take it personally. He knew Ellis's history with the West Sphere, and the history of his own sphere's officers. But it still stung.

"I apologize, sir," Ellis said insistently. "I was out of line." He clenched his fists, looking desperate to undo whatever damage he'd caused. "I never should have made that assumption about you, of all people. Especially not after what happened between you and Harding."

Merritt tensed. He'd never told anyone about what had happened with Harding. What version of the rumor had Ellis heard?

His continued silence seemed to put Ellis on edge. Ellis resumed talking, reverting to the crisp, impersonal tone of a soldier speaking to his superior, but Merritt could hear the urgent undercurrent beneath his words. "Even before I knew you, I admired you for saying no to Harding. I don't know if I would have had the strength to do the same, sir. But the fact that you did..."

At last, Merritt spoke. "What is it you think I did, Ellis?" he asked hollowly.

Ellis straightened his spine and took in a steadying breath. "A senior officer deliberately got you drunk so you would be compliant when he made an inappropriate offer. He dangled a promotion in front of you, in exchange for sex. But you were brave enough to stand for your principles, regardless of the consequences."

"I see," Merritt replied, pulling on his poker face.

"That's how I know that you'll be a great general, sir. You'll be facing countless requests from your superiors, and they won't all be in the best interest of our sphere or our military. But after what happened with Harding, I know—we all know—that you'll have our backs, just like you always have. And that's why I want to be your aide. It would be my honor to serve someone with your integrity." He swallowed and

paused before adding, “That is, if you still want me after the unforgivable way I insulted you.”

Merritt felt nauseated. *You give me credit that I don't deserve.*

Before he could reveal too much, he heard Belmont's voice in his head. *You can't let them see your weakness.*

Poker face up, Merritt softened his fists and lay his hands flat on his desk. After a subtle, steadying breath, he said, “Thank you for your candor, Ellis. I'm confident that we'll work well together, just as we always have. You'll begin your new job tomorrow morning, five a.m. Meet with Perry at his headquarters office, and he'll take you through your training.”

A look of relief washed over Ellis's face. “I can't thank you enough, sir. I won't disappoint you.”

“Thank you, Ellis. You're dismissed.”

After Ellis left his office, Merritt stepped out from behind his desk, heading across the room and locking the door. He turned and leaned his back against it, eyes closed, taking in several deep breaths.

Balbo was scheduled to arrive in less than ten minutes, and he couldn't have this conversation again. He couldn't tolerate listening to one more person telling him how much integrity he'd had for saying no to Harding.

They didn't know the truth. They didn't know him.

How many of them would still stand by him—how many of them would still respect him—if they knew that he'd said yes?

If they knew that Harding hadn't actually needed to get him drunk in order to earn his compliance?

If they knew that, had he not been drunk to the point of nausea, he wouldn't have lost his nerve at the sight of his colonel's erection? Or frozen to the spot when Harding had shaken him, slapped him, demanded he open his mouth, and finally tossed him outside in frustration?

If they knew how many times in the following months he'd tried to find Harding alone so he could make good on the order he'd failed to complete?

He'd never had the integrity to say no to a commander's inappropriate order. But his subordinates had apparently accepted that fantasy, using it to fuel their faith in him.

He didn't deserve their faith. He didn't know if he ever would.