

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

SHOBANA 'BOB' APPAVU

CHAPTER 7

Devoted: Merritt's Story | Book 2 | Chapter 7

Copyright © 2018 by Shobana Appavu

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author.

Patreon Serial Edition

http://www.patreon.com/bob_artist

CHAPTER 7

Merritt's dreams were muddled but euphoric, conjuring Mercury's touch, his scent, the wordless rumble of his voice. But he awoke the next morning drenched in sweat, his stomach tied in knots. The vague sensations of his dreams were replaced with vivid memories of coherent words, an acrid sting in his nostrils, and a knife at his throat.

You can thank me with your continued unquestioning service.

The sentence had sounded encouraging last night. Why did it now sound like a threat? Like a warning that the time to question Mercury had come to an end?

Mercury had once encouraged him to share his thoughts honestly, no matter how controversial. What had changed? Why was he no longer interested in being challenged?

Walking into Monday morning's board meeting felt like another test. Merritt had spent all weekend preparing his arguments, but now he wondered if he even had the standing to present them.

First on the agenda was the overhaul of the military's battle simulator. His objective was simple enough in theory: he needed to work with the military technology team to improve his soldiers' ability to match the simulator's predictions. But in practice, the task was nearly impossible.

The board's blind faith and dependence on the software pained him. He wanted to improve the accuracy of the software; it was a valuable tool with plenty of untapped potential. But he also felt compelled to convince the board that the simulator should be used only as a guide, and that officers needed the flexibility to respond to the unique challenges of live battle.

He wanted desperately to do as Belmont did during board meetings. He wanted to take what was important to him, package it, and sell it. He wanted to fight tooth and nail on behalf of his troops. But he couldn't crawl out from under the weight of Mercury's expectations. He was in a position of servitude, not of leadership.

Belmont was allowed to fight tooth and nail. His arguments brought him counter-arguments instead of automatic dismissals. Merritt, a mere soldier, had no inherent right to argue with his superiors. It was only Belmont's presence at his side that pushed Pratt, Evans, and Mercury to hear him. But Belmont couldn't force them to *listen*.

"You keep harping on about these 'real life variables' that the simulator doesn't account for," Evans snapped. "If you think the simulator is so deficient, then go work with the tech team and have them program in all the variables that are missing."

"Sir, the variables are infinite." Merritt struggled for words. "We can and will improve the simulator, but the military's objective on the battlefield should always be to defeat the enemy, not to match the simulator. Real life conditions will always diverge from the simulator, and soldiers need to act on what's real, not on the hypothetical."

Evans narrowed his eyes. Though his poker face was flawless, Merritt felt a spike in his hostile energy. He seemed insulted by the simple fact that a military man had talked back to him.

Belmont was uncharacteristically quiet. This was Merritt's battle, and Belmont was letting him fight it out. The rest of the board also remained silent, apparently pleased to watch Merritt get trounced by their designated military advisors. Their compulsion to backstab each other couldn't compete with their disdain for soldiers.

After a long pause, Evans raised a devious eyebrow. "What do you say is the simulator's worst fault, Merritt? Is it the issue you mentioned with soldier injuries?"

There were too many faults in the simulator for him to narrow down, but Evans's suggestion was as good a choice as any. "Yes, sir, I suppose so. Blue-tie soldiers in the simulator absorb damage from enemy fire but continue to fight at their peak until they're marked as

dead. But a real human soldier can't fight through serious injuries like that. This skews the results of every simulation we run."

"You *really* can't fight through a bullet wound?" Evans pressed. "Not even after all your fancy training?"

"It depends on the wound," Merritt replied. "Every wound is different, and it'll affect performance accordingly."

"Hmm." Evans turned to Pratt. "Then we should get some of that data into the simulator, shouldn't we? Say, shoot up a few soldiers and then run them through the test courses to see how well they can fight after being hurt."

Merritt's eyes widened. "We can't—"

"Good call," Pratt replied. "We can run them through the course uninjured as a control, then send them through again with one gunshot, then two, then three. We can even map out different types and locations of the injuries and build it all into the system."

"We can't just shoot our own soldiers," Merritt protested.

"It's not like we don't have them to spare," Pratt countered. "The Shield Squad's looking pretty packed these days. Not enough of them are dying off."

"They at least deserve the honor of giving themselves in battle."

"They've pledged their lives to their sphere," Evans said. "They don't get to choose how they go out."

At a loss, Merritt turned subtly to Belmont for backup.

Belmont slouched in his seat, tossing up a dismissive hand. "Sounds like we all agree that the simulator would be better if it accounted for injured soldiers. Merritt will work with the military technology team to collect the new data, and we'll have them work it into the next software update."

Merritt's skin went cold.

But why was he surprised? Belmont had no reason to care about the lives of Shield Squad soldiers. He shouldn't have expected any backup.

He jumped when Belmont leaned in close. “*Poker face*,” Belmont whispered pointedly into his ear. “I have a plan.”

A plan? Merritt wasn’t sure if he should dare to keep hope.

Belmont returned his attention to Mercury. “I think that settles the discussion on the simulator.”

“Yes,” Mercury replied. “We need to move on if we want to wrap up military matters before lunch.”

The discussion moved from the simulator to budget allocation. Merritt attempted to state his case for better bulletproof fighting jackets for Infantry, Border Defense, and Chem Ops privates and sergeants, but he was swiftly shot down. “You can’t ask us for a multimillion-dollar renovation of the simulator and expect to go shopping for new *outfits* after,” Pratt sneered.

Merritt spelled out the importance of proper gear for his troops, and how the added expense would save them money in medical care down the road. He even pointed out that the simulator’s budget was entirely separate from the arms budget, and that the simulator overhaul was already accounted for, but Pratt and Evans refused to hear his arguments.

The repetitive, contentious exchanges were wearing him down.

“I don’t understand,” Pratt said snidely after Merritt finished reviewing the arms budget in detail. “Explain it again, would you? Talk to me like I’m stupid.”

Merritt attempted to re-explain what he’d already explained, but Pratt repeatedly interrupted him, demanding that he elaborate on concepts that needed no elaboration, and asking that he present proof on statements that were common knowledge.

“You can’t elaborate more than that?” Pratt pressed after Merritt stumbled through a ten-minute explanation of the different metal fiber blends in officers’ jackets compared to enlisted soldiers’ jackets, and why the enlisted soldiers were in greater need of bulletproof jackets than officers working behind a desk all day. “How do you expect to convince us of anything if you can’t back up your argument with measurable data?”

“This...” Merritt squeezed his twenty-page report in his hand until the paper crinkled. “This *is* measurable data. There’s statistics on enlisted soldier injuries compared to officer injuries. There’s comprehensive records on medical care costs, on production costs....”

“But I don’t see how they all connect,” Pratt maintained, his tone snide. “Explain it to me like I’m stupid.”

Merritt’s exasperation hit its peak. “There’s no other way I *can* explain it to you,” he blurted.

Pratt glared at him, apparently picking up on the double meaning Merritt had hoped would go over his head. Wolfram and Taylor exchanged scandalized glances. Belmont released a snort of amusement.

“This is getting tedious,” Mercury declared at last. He stared pointedly at Merritt. “I need you to be practical.”

Merritt clenched his teeth. “I apologize, Damen.”

Evans leaned forward, his forearms crossed atop the table as he gazed down his nose at Merritt. “You’ve talked a lot today. Are you ready to listen for a change?”

“Yes, sir,” Merritt replied, his fists clenched under the table.

“You’re ready to be practical?”

Evans was treating him like a child. Merritt’s cheeks flushed with a mix of frustration and shame. “Yes, sir.”

“Would you like to know how many new poisons we can develop with the money you’d rather tie up in bulletproof jackets?”

We don’t need new poisons. We need jackets. “Yes sir.”

Evans pressed on. Despite Merritt’s countless mental objections, he could barely manage more than a “yes, sir” to every question aimed at him. Only after ten or eleven such replies did Mercury, Pratt, and Evans finally seem content with his level of servility. He’d dug himself a hole with all his arguments, and nothing short of groveling would get him back to the surface.

He stopped in the restroom after the meeting, seeking a chance to catch his breath in privacy. He splashed cold water on his face and braced himself over the sink, closing his eyes and trying to concentrate on the feeling of water droplets falling from his eyelashes and the tip of his nose.

The bathroom door opened, and Belmont stepped inside. Merritt immediately grabbed a paper towel and blotted off his face, attempting to appear unfazed by the events of the meeting.

“For someone who doesn’t like to argue, you sure went at it in there. Nice.”

“They raked me over the coals.”

“No. They ran out of arguments, so they started repeating themselves. You won that debate. They just refused to admit it, and they wore you down.”

“What good is ‘winning’ if it doesn’t change things?”

“You can’t change everything, no matter how high up you are. Not even Mercury can change everything. So you remind yourself that you were right, and you go out and get yourself a victory drink even if no one else is drinking with you. And then you come back tomorrow.”

Merritt didn’t respond. He couldn’t think of anything worth celebrating after that meeting.

Belmont leaned against the wall, training a perceptive eye on Merritt. “This is the hardest part of going from ace to boss: realizing that there are limits to all that power you imagined you’d have at the top. You didn’t fuck up. You just ran out of power.”

With a resigned frown, Merritt muttered, “So there’s nothing I can do.”

“That’s not what I said.” Belmont grinned at Merritt in challenge. “They put up a brick wall in front of you and told you to go another direction. Now what do you do?”

“I go another direction.”

“No,” Belmont said emphatically.

“Then what?”

Belmont leaned in, his voice soft but razor-sharp with confidence. “You take a chip out of the grout. Every day, you go home and fill up your toolbox, and then you come back here and take another chip. You’d be surprised how small a hole you can use to bring the entire wall down.”

“Hm.” Merritt wasn’t sure what else to say.

“All you need is the right tools. You’re more than capable of wielding them.”

Merritt stared into the sink, watching stray drops of water slide down the brushed steel bowl and into the drain. At first, he wasn’t sure how he felt about Belmont’s words. Then he realized with shock that he felt good. He felt hopeful.

You’re more than capable of wielding them. Had he just earned a solid compliment from Belmont, with no backhand in sight?

“All morning, I’ve been craving hummus from that little place on the border. Grab your stuff and let’s go. My treat. We only have an hour before I have to get back to that goddamn meeting.”

It took Merritt a moment to understand that Belmont was inviting him out to lunch. “Oh. Uh... do you want me to bring my notes?”

“Fuck, no. I just want to spend one hour talking about something other than work.” When Merritt remained hesitant, Belmont asked, “Come on, when’s the last time you’ve gone an hour without thinking about work? You’re never going to do your best thinking if you drive yourself into the ground.”

Merritt swallowed. He’d been planning to get through some paperwork over lunch, but perhaps Belmont had a point. And the invitation was strangely compelling. Aside from a few uncomfortable parties, he’d never spent time with Belmont during his off hours. What would it be like to go out for a meal with him, one on one?

“Is it okay to do that? You’re my boss.”

“Was there anything forbidding it in your precious procedural handbook?” Belmont challenged.

No, there wasn't.

“Whatever rules you guys have in the military about fraternization don't apply to you and me.” Belmont flashed a charming grin. “One of the perks of being at the top.”

Merritt hesitated a moment longer. “What about the plan you had? About the simulator?”

“We'll talk about it tonight, after the meeting's over.” Belmont gestured with his head toward the door. “Where did you park? In the back lot? Let's go.”

There was something hypnotic about the way Belmont ate. In contrast with his often off-color language and choice of discussion topics, his table manners were impeccable. Merritt knew that all elites learned proper table manners at a young age, but most of them abandoned the custom at adulthood, only following the rules of etiquette when the situation demanded it.

Casual lunch with a subordinate was not such a situation, but Belmont still handled his cutlery like an elite. He'd mastered the art of switching utensils with an elegant split-second sweep of the hand, and without a single clink of metal. Merritt watched him set down his used-but-pristine spoon with his index and middle fingers at the same moment he scooped up his fork between his ring and little fingers. When, upon raising his hand, he passed the fork under his palm to his thumb and index finger, it almost looked like a magic trick.

Yet Merritt sensed an air of joylessness in the graceful movements of Belmont's long, articulated fingers. He allowed himself a moment to envision Belmont's upbringing: painfully strict, devoid of affection, with a constant demand for excellence.

That demand seemed to permeate every aspect of Belmont's life. What must it have been like for him to compete through an elite prep school, and then the North's most prestigious college?

Would Merritt's own knowledge and achievements have been more difficult to reach if he'd been raised with the same expectations as

Belmont? There was a certain freedom that came with having nothing, and Merritt had been free to explore the realms of knowledge on his own terms. Failure could only lead to a continuation of the status quo, with no risk of loss.

He suspected Belmont had never had such freedom, and that he'd navigated through the North's education system knowing that the slightest misstep could cost him his standing. Despite all of Belmont's resources, his education was likely more an obligation than a passion.

Belmont abruptly stopped eating, looking across the table at Merritt with furrowed brows. Merritt blushed and dropped his gaze down to his own food, but Belmont didn't give him a pass. "I want to know what you were staring at."

Merritt gave an embarrassed chuckle. "I was admiring your table manners. Archer tried to teach me, and I was a disaster. I don't know why it's so much easier to handle guns and syringe darts than spoons and forks."

Belmont smirked. "If you grew up in my house, you'd have gotten a smack on the knuckles with a metal knife handle if my dad caught you holding your utensils wrong. Anything to keep his kids from looking like aces."

"I thought maybe it was like that for you."

"What do you mean?" Belmont asked, eyes narrowed.

Merritt stammered. "Oh, I don't know. I mean... I just assumed your parents were strict."

"Why would you assume that?" When Merritt hesitated, Belmont leaned forward. "No really, Merritt. I want to know *everything* you're assuming about my upbringing."

Merritt set his spoon down. "In the board meeting before last, you got pretty agitated when we were talking about Keating's dad pulling strings for him. Your parents were elites. The bios I read about you in the news said you'd been an elite your entire life. But I got the impression your parents wouldn't have pulled strings for you if you'd messed up like Keating."

Merritt noticed a slight tightening in Belmont's jaw muscles, but Belmont only asked, "What else?"

There was more? Merritt scratched the back of his head. "I double-checked all the procedures you taught me during training. You didn't misdirect me, and you didn't leave out any critical details. You were given the task of training me, and you did it with precision even though it's common for professionals to sabotage their subordinates' training to prevent them from rising in rank."

"Sabotaging your direct report's training is cheap," Belmont replied. "Sabotaging your superiors, on the other hand...."

"That's my point. You thought I was after your job, but no matter how much you wanted to ruin me, you still have a sense of professional pride. I'm guessing you've always faced the highest expectations, and you've never had the freedom to fail."

Belmont stabbed a fork into his falafel. But rather than eat it, he simply stared down at it. Then he returned his intense gaze to Merritt. "I thought we were just working together. I didn't think you were analyzing me the entire time."

"It wasn't my objective. But... you're interesting."

Belmont paused, staring suspiciously at Merritt for a moment before shifting his attention to his food. He deftly sliced the falafel and ate half. After swallowing, he said without lifting his eyes, "It's not a secret that my parents were assholes. My dad especially had a lot of enemies." When he finally raised his head, his eyes cast a mysterious glint. "He was president of Northern Chem before it... went out of business."

Merritt cocked his head as the puzzle pieces came together. "I remember when the North released its first line of pharmaceuticals under the umbrella of NSTech. NSTech is an arm of the government, and Northern Chem couldn't compete with their automated delivery and personalized drug recommendations." He chanced a knowing squint. "That was around the time you became an advisor to the King."

"Funny how that lined up," Belmont replied, downing another falafel hemisphere with a crooked half-smile.

“It’s an interesting use of a drugs and poisons degree,” Merritt mused as he stirred his lentil soup.

“Hey, I didn’t even want to go into D&P,” Belmont protested. “I did it for the rank, and because my parents made me. But when I was a kid, I wanted to be a writer.”

Merritt almost laughed. “Really?”

“What’s funny about that?” Belmont asked, sounding offended. “I’m a damn good smut writer. I may or may not have a few romance novels floating around the underground under a pen name.”

Merritt gave Belmont a blank, humorless stare.

“You don’t believe me,” Belmont huffed. “Well, I guess you’ll never know. But I really am a good writer. I’ve even done editorials for the North Sphere Tribune. I’m sure you’ve at least read those.”

Actually, he had. They’d been artfully written and dangerously persuasive. But he’d always assumed Belmont had a ghostwriter.

“When Higgins first brought me on as his assistant, he had me write up memos for him all the time. Then he had me write other things under his name, like reports and articles and editorials. I was good enough at it that he eventually stopped bothering to scrutinize my work. That’s when I started sneaking in passages here and there that I knew would insult specific allies of his and turn them against him. By the time he died, his web of allies was only about a tenth the size it used to be.” He leaned back in his seat and stretched out his legs. “Take a second and think about how much power I had, to be able to put words straight into the mouth of the King’s right hand. I deep-throated him with his own propaganda and made him swallow every last letter.” He shook his head disdainfully. “Poetic justice.”

Merritt cringed at Belmont’s choice of words.

“I write poetry too, by the way,” Belmont said, and this time Merritt failed to contain his cackle. “What? I’m a master of every genre! Romance, poetry, business, motivational. In fact...” He reached for his phone. “There’s an article I wrote for Underground Business Week back when I was first named top advisor. Normally, you’d have

to have a subscription to read it, but I'll send it over to you for free." He gestured toward Merritt's hip. "Gimme your phone."

Reluctantly, Merritt fished his phone out of his pocket. Due to its enhanced security features, a standard file drop wouldn't work. He pressed his thumb to the phone's sensor while extending it across the table. Belmont did the same, touching his phone's transfer port to Merritt's.

Merritt looked down at the popup message notifying him that he'd received a new document. "'The Secret Link Between Coming and Overcoming,'" he read off the screen. "'Why You Should Mix Business and Pleasure.'" He gave Belmont a pointedly skeptical stare, accompanied by a slow blink.

"Food for thought," Belmont said, dabbing his grinning mouth with a napkin.

Merritt expected Belmont to walk with him back to the parking lot after lunch, but instead, Belmont turned the corner into a quiet alley behind the restaurant. Merritt followed him silently, wondering if he would fish out a glass pipe as many blue-ties did after a meal in the business district. The most popular lunch spots for blue-tie professionals often prohibited vaporized drugs unless they were mental enhancers.

Merritt wouldn't join in on the activity, but he supposed he could tolerate the smell of the chemical for a few minutes. Belmont had paid for lunch, and it would have felt rude to back away at this point.

Once they were past an overfilled dumpster and out of view of the street, Belmont leaned against the wall, folding his arms over his chest and turning expectantly toward Merritt. "An entire lunch together, and you still haven't told me."

"Told you...?"

Belmont's face was frighteningly calm. "About your meeting with Mercury."

Merritt blanched. How had Belmont...? Had he seen Merritt on his way to Mercury's suite? Had someone told him? Had *Mercury* told him?

"I apologize," he rasped, suddenly short of breath. "I wasn't sure if Mercury wanted me to keep it private, so I didn't say anything."

Belmont chuckled softly, as if trying to relax Merritt. "Why are you so nervous? I'm not pissed off. I just think it's funny that you thought I wouldn't find out about it." He flashed a jocular grin that Merritt suspected was a theater mask. "So? What did you tell him about me?"

"I told him we were working well together," Merritt replied with a swallow. His tone came out so guilty he wouldn't have been surprised if Belmont had assumed he was lying.

Belmont examined him for another moment before heaving a frustrated sigh. "Your poker face is shit, Merritt. Have you learned *nothing* from me?"

Merritt opened his mouth, sputtering as the realization hit him. "You were just testing my poker face again?"

Belmont held up a hand in protest. "I wasn't *just* testing your poker face. I really do want to know about your meeting with Mercury. But honestly, I care more about what he said to you than what you said to him."

"Oh." Merritt hammered up his poker face. "It was nothing, really. I think he just wanted to make sure I wasn't letting the power of being general go to my head."

"You're the last person he needs to worry about there," Belmont snickered.

"It was still a good reminder. The military is a service industry, and I can't forget that I'm here to serve. He just wants me to remember my obedience."

Belmont responded with narrowed eyes and cynical silence. After a long pause, he said, "Just a few minutes ago, you were dissecting my personality right to my face, and now you're letting Mercury

manipulate you like this? I'll never understand how you can be so perceptive and so clueless at the same time."

Merritt frowned but didn't reply.

"That's why you were fumbling in the meeting today. You couldn't make your case because you kept yielding under pressure."

"I can't argue the way you can," Merritt insisted. "At least I can't argue and get away with it."

"Since when?" Belmont challenged. "They let you talk, didn't they? That's the only opening anyone is ever given. Either you take that opening or you don't."

Merritt's gaze shifted from Belmont to a stray meal bar wrapper lying two feet from the dumpster. He needed to think.

As an ace, he'd taken comfort in the knowledge that, no matter the injustice he faced, he was powerless to fight against it. That powerlessness had given him permission to carry out his orders with minimal strife. Resistance would have been pointless and counterproductive.

Mercury had wanted to hear his challenges, his concerns, even his complaints back when he was a private. Why, now that he was a general, did Mercury only want his compliance?

Because now you actually have the power to change things.

Merritt shoved the thought out of his mind. Even if it was true, he was a servant to his King. It wasn't right to harbor such thoughts about Mercury.

And it certainly wouldn't be right to voice them out loud to Mercury's right hand.

"Anyway, Mercury is right," Merritt said at last. "I shouldn't be arguing when my job is to support my King and sphere."

"You support your King and sphere by being the most effective general you can be," Belmont countered. "And you do that by making your military the strongest it can be. Sometimes you're going to disagree with Mercury and his advisors. If you don't stand your ground and sell what you need to sell, then you're derelict in your duties."

Merritt struggled to hold onto his poker face, channeling the tense frustration down to his clenched fists instead. “You’re telling me to do the opposite of what he wants from me.”

“*I’m telling you* that he’s going to value your results more than your lip service,” Belmont said deliberately. “Your ‘yes, sir’ will only get you through the end of the meeting. What happens after, when your soldiers actually have to go and fight?” Belmont’s own frustration surfaced in his furrowed brows. “You were on the right track barely two days ago, and today you’re a mess. I told you, you have the tools to do this job. But you have to be willing to *use* them.”

Mercury’s words continued to tug at the corner of his mind. *This is what makes you different from anyone in the top ranks of the underground. It’s what makes you different from anyone else who’s served me. Even Belmont, my right hand, never properly learned to defer to authority. He refuses to even bow his head.*

Mercury approved of Merritt’s obedience, and not of Belmont’s insubordination. He wouldn’t have pushed Merritt for dirt on Belmont, or criticized him behind his back, if he’d truly been satisfied with Belmont’s work.

Yet Belmont still had Mercury’s ear—and his respect—in a way Merritt didn’t. Merritt couldn’t ignore that.

Belmont stepped away from the wall, heaving a weary sigh. “I can tell this is going to be a problem. But for now, let’s start with something we both know you want: my plan to get you your simulator results without shooting up any of your soldiers. I have to get back to my meeting, and I know you have to go back to the military district. But come by my office at half past six, and we’ll talk.”

Merritt was happy to delay any further discussions about his duty to his sphere. He’d had enough arguing to last the rest of the year. “All right. I’ll be there.”

“Good.” He headed out of the alley, leading Merritt back toward their motorcycles. “And practice that fucking poker face, would you?”