

DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY
BOOK 2

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CHAPTER 6

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CHAPTER 6

Throughout the month following the promotions of his new officers, Merritt was so inundated with work that he could barely keep his head above water. He alternated between meetings with his officers and Belmont, training and being trained at the same time. Belmont had an ambitious list of tasks that Mercury had passed on, the most pressing being a renovation of the battle simulation software Rhodes and his superiors used when formulating and testing tactical plans. Merritt wasn't a fan of the software. In itself, it was an invaluable resource. Unfortunately, the higher-ups treated the simulation results as if they were carved in stone, expecting their soldiers to emulate them without acknowledging the software's limitations and the real world's unpredictability.

He knew that he could never convince Mercury or the board of the simulation's fatal flaws. They'd simply tell him to work with the military technology team to "fix" the program, which was easier said than done. Belmont, for his part, accepted Merritt's explanation of the software's shortcomings. But he wouldn't allow Merritt to use it as an excuse.

"Everything has faults," Belmont had said. "It's your job to make them invisible."

In the spirit of their new alliance, Belmont seemed to do his best to be civil to Merritt. But by no means did that soften his rigorous standards. Belmont was a demanding boss. He excelled at his job and expected everyone serving him to meet his level of performance. To Merritt, there was something exhilarating about working for such a person, being pushed to the limits of what he could accomplish. No military officer had ever driven him so hard.

"You're at the top now," Belmont had told him after tearing up one of his written reports and tossing it in the trash. "You can't get

away with just performing slightly better than everyone else on any given day. You have to fly higher than their highest potential, every single day. You have to make yourself unreachable.”

On one Wednesday, he'd plastered the walls of Merritt's Station 1 office with photos of Merritt, each capturing a different instance of his failed poker face. Merritt, upon discovering the scene, had texted him back with the only emoticon the North deemed acceptable: ☺

Throughout it all, Ellis somehow managed to keep him organized and fed. No matter where Merritt tried to hole up and do his work, Ellis or a member of his staff would hunt him down and slide a tray of food under his nose. His quarters were pristine every night when he returned from work. He'd even forgotten to water his jade plant once, only to return home after work and find the soil wet.

Ellis arranged for his off-hours physical training, even sparring with him personally on occasion. Knowing the culture of the underground, Merritt had requested that Ellis keep his combat skills sharp just as Merritt was attempting to do for himself. Ellis knew as well as Merritt did that they both had to be prepared for the next potential invasion—or the first assassination attempt. There was barely time for training, but Ellis had a way of making even the tightest schedule work. He even helped map out all the days on Merritt's private calendar that he could take sleep enhancers without a buildup of side effects.

Staying busy was an effective remedy for Merritt's creeping doubts. He felt no better about himself than he had on the night he'd given Ellis his promotion. But after that night, he'd had barely another second to dwell on his insecurities. In his experience, the best way to quash any hint of inner turmoil was to suffocate it under a landslide of work.

When he received a text from Mercury on one Sunday night asking him to come over after dinner for a “casual discussion,” he should have been thrilled at the chance to spend time with his King. Instead, as he stood before a sea of lists and charts spread out on his desk at Station 1, his first fleeting thought was, “I don't have time for this.” But he knew that anything Mercury wanted from him was a

hundred times more important than whatever else he had lined up. How could he think otherwise for even a split second?

Before he rushed out the door, he took a moment to stop in the bathroom, wash his face, and try to erase any signs of stress that he saw in the mirror. Using some facial massage techniques Belmont had emailed him, he managed to soften much of the tension in his brows and forehead. But he could do nothing about the rings under his eyes. Even Rhodes's magic eye drops had reached their limit.

Merritt hoped Mercury wouldn't be able to see his exhaustion, but he doubted he would be so lucky. Mercury seemed able to pinpoint any weakness a person tried to hide. That he often withheld comment didn't mean he hadn't seen it. After their board meetings together, Merritt had learned some of his patterns. What made Mercury lethal was the way he lay in wait, watching his target's weakness reveal itself and then skewering them with an expertly timed public condemnation. Merritt never wanted to be on the other end of his harpoon.

On the elevator ride up to Mercury's suite at headquarters, he found himself wondering if Belmont knew about his meeting. Was it supposed to be a secret? For some reason, it felt like one, and he hoped Belmont wouldn't spot him. He didn't want to have to explain yet again that he wasn't out for Belmont's job.

The nearest guard outside Mercury's suite interrupted him as he began unstrapping his packs. "You may enter with your packs, sir," he said.

Stunned, Merritt stammered, "But I'm armed."

"Our orders are to let you in with your packs, sir," the guard stated, ushering Merritt through without so much as searching him with his scanning wand. Merritt continued down the hall, unable to shake his discomfort. Mercury's guards were allowing people through armed, and without being searched? Were they not concerned for their King's safety?

He received another text as he reached Mercury's suite. *Let yourself in.* Merritt tried the thumbprint sensor on his door. He heard a beep, followed by a click, and the door opened.

He stepped into the familiar suite, a pleasant feeling of warmth washing over him. For most of his life, being at home had meant peeling cobwebs off his hair, slathering greasy ointments on himself to stave off skin infections, and hoping that he wouldn't wake up to a colony of fire ants feasting on him. Conditions were better in the general's quarters—no dampness or infestations—but his quarters were still a far cry from Mercury's.

Mercury was nowhere in sight. Merritt stood awkwardly in the lobby, unsure of whether or not to venture in further. After a moment, he heard footsteps from around the corner. Mercury stepped out from the hallway, entering into view. "I thought I heard you come in."

Merritt wanted to reply, but he only managed to stammer stupidly. Mercury wore nothing but lounge pants and an open robe, his blue tie draped around his neck. His cologne wafted ahead of him, enveloping Merritt. It had been a long time since Merritt had been so close to it, and it felt more intoxicating than ever. What was it Belmont had said about that cologne?

Right. He'd said, "I'll explain later."

Mercury stood a few paces from Merritt, appearing completely at ease being bare-chested while Merritt was in full uniform. "I added your thumbprint to my guest list, so you're welcome to let yourself in any time I'm home and accepting visitors."

Merritt continued to stammer. When he finally found his voice, he managed to spew, "I'm armed!" When Mercury gave him a curious glance, he recognized the folly in his words and added, "The guards didn't search me or ask for my weapons. I wanted to make sure you knew that."

"I know, Merritt," Mercury replied as if humoring him. "I told them to allow you through without a search. You're my general."

"Oh." Merritt nodded awkwardly. "So you allowed the same for Rhodes?"

Mercury wore an odd smile. "I never entertained Rhodes at my suite. Regardless, he wasn't a perpetual duty soldier." After a pause, he examined Merritt's face and asked, "Why do you look concerned?"

Remembering his poker face too late, Merritt gave up all pretense and said, "I'm honored to have your trust. And I'm sure the interior of your suite is well fortified. But I still worry for your safety if people are allowed in with weapons."

Mercury narrowed his eyes, lowering his mask to show Merritt his displeasure. "I'm not defenseless, Merritt."

"Of course," Merritt replied. "I just—"

"Draw your pistol."

Merritt gaped at him.

"Go ahead," Mercury pressed. "Draw your pistol as fast as you can."

Merritt obediently reached for one of his pistols, but as soon as he freed it from the holster, Mercury smacked it out of his hand, grabbing his wrist and slamming him against the wall. Merritt gasped, the wind knocked out of him. When his focus returned, he realized he was pinned between Mercury and the wall, one wrist held tight to the plaster and a knife digging into his throat.

Where had the knife even come from? Merritt knew that Mercury always kept a knife strapped to one thigh when he was fully dressed, but he hadn't noticed one within the lounge pants and robe.

Mercury stared into his eyes, wearing a dangerous smirk. "Was that really your fastest?"

Was it? Merritt wasn't sure. He was in a haze.

He swallowed, wondering how long Mercury would maintain the pressure of the blade against his throat. "Maybe not," he said, his voice strained. "But it wasn't too far off."

"Can you get free?"

"I think so."

Mercury gazed deeper into his eyes. "Try."

With his free arm, Merritt tried to lever Mercury's knife-wielding hand away from his throat, but Mercury swiftly pinned Merritt's limb with his elbow. Pushing up harder with the knife, he whispered with a

gust of breath so minty it could have frosted Merritt's brows, "And now you're dead."

Merritt's heart raced. Never before had he felt so defenseless, uniformed and fully armed while facing a half-dressed man with a single knife.

Perhaps he should have been embarrassed or scared, but Mercury's scent coupled with the pressure of his body only stoked the flames inside him. He breathed in deeply through his nose and closed his eyes. The thumping in his chest grew harder, his breaths coming out as desperate pants. When Mercury finally stepped away and stowed the knife somewhere inside his robe, Merritt had to brace himself against the wall for fear of his suddenly rubbery knees giving way.

How had he come to a point where he felt disappointment when a knife was removed from his throat? All he knew was that, in that moment, he would have let Mercury do whatever he wanted with that knife—no questions or hesitation.

"As you can see," Mercury said, "it takes more than simply being armed to pose a threat to me. The throne only opens to those who can defend themselves."

"Understood," Merritt replied in a wavering voice. He pushed himself away from the wall, hoping his legs would hold steady, and retrieved his dropped pistol.

"Anyway," Mercury said, his tone deftly shifting from dangerous to genial. "Would you like a drink? Some wine, perhaps? I have a new vintage bottle of Roseland red."

"Ah...."

When Merritt hesitated a moment too long, Mercury said, "I'll get you a tube of Spark. You look like you need it."

Merritt cursed himself mentally for failing to hide his exhaustion. He watched Mercury prepare his drink, uncomfortable knowing that Mercury had now served him twice, and he had yet to reciprocate.

"I dismissed my servants for the night," Mercury said as he filled a pressurized rapid-boil kettle with water. It was the same thing he'd said the other time Merritt had visited his suite. "There are times when

I just want privacy, even if it does mean taking on their menial work myself. But they're only a phone call away should we require them."

Merritt wasn't sure of the proper response, so he simply nodded. He eyed the kettle curiously, wondering how expensive it was. At his quarters, he'd only ever boiled water on the stove the old fashioned way—at least whenever Ellis's staff hadn't delivered him a full service tea tray in anticipation of his needs.

"The last I spoke to you, you were still deciding on the fate of our four former colonels," Mercury said as the kettle hissed softly behind him. "I was pleased that you opted for final dismissal."

Merritt's head was hardly on straight enough to talk business. He tried desperately to collect himself. "Yes, Damen. It seemed to be the most logical choice after accounting for the needs of our military."

"I agree," Mercury replied. "I see it as the obvious choice, but part of me still expected you to fight the decision." The kettle let out a soft *ding*, and Mercury retrieved it, carrying it across the kitchen to the bar counter. As he poured the hot water into a glass mug, he said, "It was the only acceptable option. Any other choice would have challenged rationality."

Merritt breathed a sigh of relief. As much as the decision still tormented him, at least now he knew that Belmont hadn't led him astray by pushing for it.

Mercury poured the test tube of bright yellow Spark into the mug of hot water. After giving it a gentle stir, he asked, "Do you want to know the secret to a perfect glass of Spark?"

Merritt nodded.

Mercury held up a small glass bottle. "A splash of goat's milk." He poured the milk into the cup before Merritt could panic and decline. "I know that the lower class prefers to mix coffee and Spark before adding creamer and sugar. But with high grade Spark, a hint of goat's milk, and no sweetener, you get a taste that's far superior to coffee. And without the jitters." He passed the mug to Merritt. "Give it a try."

Merritt accepted the drink, hesitating before tasting it. He'd only had real milk a couple of times, one of them at his Monday meeting

with Belmont, when he hadn't added enough to really understand the taste. Most coffee drinkers in the North Sphere used chemical creamers or drank their coffee black. The flavor of the creamers didn't meld well with tea or Focus, and Merritt couldn't afford to keep milk in the house, so he typically went without.

Realizing that Mercury would probably be offended if he waited any longer to taste the drink, he quickly took a sip. It was surprisingly good, which was a relief because he lacked the energy to pretend to like it. It was richer than he was accustomed to, with a subtler flavor than Spark in coffee, but he wasn't surprised that this was the way the elite preferred the drink. "It's very good," he said. "And very... yellow."

Mercury laughed. "The color is a little off-putting, isn't it?"

With a guilty smile, Merritt nodded. "I'm glad you're the one who said it."

"You get used to it."

Merritt took another sip even though he would have preferred to let the drink cool a bit more. He didn't want Mercury to think he didn't like it.

Mercury put away the bottle of goat's milk and returned his attention to Merritt. "Anyway, I'm glad to see both you and Belmont are still alive after a few weeks of working together."

"Things have been going smoothly, for the most part."

"For the most part?"

Merritt caught himself. "I mean other than the natural disruption caused by so many people changing positions in such a short time."

"Right." Mercury smirked. "Firing those captains and colonels—that was cutthroat, Merritt." He leaned in confidentially. "I'd have done the same thing. I just didn't think you would have."

Merritt didn't reply. He didn't know what to say.

"What I find even more surprising, however, is your claim of smooth sailing with Belmont."

“We’re under tight deadlines. We’re both professionals, and we understand that there’s no time to fool around.”

Mercury gave a knowing smile. “I know Belmont. And Belmont knows how to make time to fool around.”

“Then we must be exceptionally busy right now.”

Mercury looked skeptical, but he let the comment pass. After a moment, he said, “Belmont hasn’t been my right hand for long. His areas of expertise are quite different from Higgins’s. Belmont is a master of domestic affairs, while Higgins was more knowledgeable about foreign matters. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I barely had the chance to work with Higgins.”

“I thought he offered to ‘mentor’ you,” Mercury countered with a mysterious raise of the eyebrow.

Though puzzled by the odd inflection in Mercury’s tone, Merritt disregarded it and replied, “Yes. And then he died.”

Mercury appeared amused by the morbid comment, but he continued without a pause. “Regardless, you talked with him. You spent time with him. You began work on the poison traps together.”

“Higgins had years of experience as your right hand. Belmont is starting fresh. But I think he and I make a solid team and complement each other well.”

“Meaning that you make up for his shortcomings, and he yours?”

Merritt knew that Mercury was trying to get him to reveal the areas where he felt Belmont’s skills were lacking. “Meaning that when we work together, there are no shortcomings.”

Mercury shook his head. “You fascinate me, Merritt.” After a look at Merritt’s puzzled face, he continued. “I thought you’d be dying to tell me about every last one of Belmont’s flaws. I’ve worked with him for years, and I know he has many. He’s my best, but he’s far from perfect. Anyone else would have jumped at the chance to tear him down.”

Merritt shrugged. “I don’t know what else to say. We’ve worked well together.”

Mercury leaned forward. “Would you care to know what he told me about you?” Merritt’s heart pounded, but before he could reply, Mercury continued. “He told me that you’re argumentative and disrespectful. And stubborn.” Mercury chuckled. “And an ‘insufferable know-it-all,’ which I found ironic, coming from him.” Mercury examined Merritt’s face, eyes narrowed. “What do you think about that?”

“I’m not surprised he would say that. I thought he’d say worse.”

“Now, is there anything else you want to tell me about him?”

Merritt shook his head. “No, Damen. Belmont and I are working together toward a common goal. I think we’ve been successful so far.”

With a resigned laugh, Mercury shook his head. “You truly are fascinating, Merritt.”

“Is that why you called me here?” Merritt asked. “To talk about Belmont?”

“There are many matters I’d like to discuss with you,” Mercury replied. “I’m going to get myself a glass of wine. Why don’t you go and have a seat in the study? I’ll meet you there in a minute.”

“The study...?”

“Down the hall,” Mercury said, pointing. “The first door on the left.”

Merritt headed toward the door, wondering what it was that Mercury wanted to talk about. Halfway down the hall, his head began to ache uncomfortably. He’d traveled too far from Mercury’s alluring scent, and he wanted nothing more than to inhale it again. How long would Mercury take to meet him?

Upon entering the study, his breath caught in his throat. He’d expected the classy, elegant seating area with plush chairs and a work desk. What he hadn’t expected was row upon row of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, all stocked with old, faded volumes that made Merritt’s heart race even harder than it had after Mercury had pinned him to the wall.

Melville. Twain. Hemmingway. Poe. Tingle.

These are all classic above-ground books?

Merritt spotted a sturdy black desk, upon which was an open book. He approached, noting that a passage was tabbed with a sticky note.

There is one thing I do not doubt, that no man who lives in the same world with most of us can doubt, and that is that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has little notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.

Merritt recognized the passage printed on the open pages. It was an above-ground speech given in the late 1800s, a veritable love letter dedicated to the act of war for war's sake. Holmes had lamented the cultural shift that had led to warfare falling "out of fashion," and he'd celebrated the memory of past combat.

Merritt had never known peace, but he could imagine it. The vision emerged to him as a collage of scenes from the books he'd read—stories of average people going their entire lives without ever seeing a friend slaughtered. Without ever having to slaughter another person's friend.

As a youth, he'd yearned for peace in a way that was irresponsible for a future military man. He could never imagine fighting out of a love of war; he wanted only to protect his brothers and sisters in arms.

It was during his early teen years of doubt that he'd grown closest to Torrence. "They tell you they need you to fight for their cause," Torrence had said. "But the truth is they're only cooking up a cause to justify their need to fight."

And there were times that Merritt had agreed with him. For four bloodthirsty factions to seek out constant battle was one thing. To draft unwilling aces into service on their behalf was another. If not for Merritt's exposure to subversive above-ground literature—and his friendship with someone as rebellious as Torrence—his indoctrination into the North's military ideology would have gone unchallenged.

But despite all his doubts, he was destined to become a North Sphere soldier.

Once he could no longer resist the reality of his future, that 1895 speech extolling the virtues of war had brought him comfort. Perhaps, in accepting his fate as a soldier and his sphere's fate to be forever at war, there would still be the potential for honor and even happiness.

"The Soldier's Faith," Mercury said from the entrance to the study. "Have you read it?"

"Yes, Damen," Merritt replied, running a finger nostalgically down the edge of the page. "It was required reading before entering the Academy."

"Of course." Mercury stepped inside, holding a wine glass so sheer and delicate that it looked like a mere breath could break it. Nodding toward the open page, he said, "I read that passage and thought of you."

The idea of Mercury doing literally anything and then thinking of Merritt was enough to set his heart ablaze. He looked back to his King, wide-eyed, hoping that he would elaborate.

Mercury gestured toward a pair of armchairs near the door. "Have a seat."

Merritt sat and placed his mug of Spark on the round glass-top wooden table separating the chairs.

Mercury sat across from him, setting down his wine glass and leaning forward with a hand on the table. "After I named you General of the North Sphere Army, I chose not to release you from perpetual duty. Do you know why I made that decision?"

"No, sir," Merritt replied, catching the "sir" too late and biting his lip.

Mercury smiled secretively, as if Merritt's slip-up had proven something to him. "I kept you on perpetual duty because you're a soldier down to your core."

Merritt's brows furrowed. Those words coming from any other elite would have been meant as an insult, but he wasn't sure if Mercury spoke with the same intent.

"There's a unique nobility in a soldier's desire to serve his sphere without asking for anything in return. You don't need riches or rewards. You don't need a luxurious suite. You only need the opportunity to do your duty to your King and sphere. As a perpetual duty soldier, your commitment is even greater. At this moment, when you and I are alone together, you are the one charged with my safety. This, at its highest level, is the job you accepted when you signed up for perpetual duty."

"It's the job I've always wanted," Merritt said. "Everything I do is for your sphere, and in your name."

"That's right. I knew you felt that way. And to take that away from you would have been to rob you of your purpose. You're happiest in servitude, and I've chosen to honor that."

Am I?

Servitude was all he'd known up until the day Belmont had challenged him to be a leader. But of course, he was happier to serve than to lead. Happier, and more comfortable.

Aren't I?

After all, nothing had been more uncomfortable than having to decide the fate of the four colonels he'd fired. To condemn them to death and know it was on his head.

Yes.

Nothing, except for every time he'd yearned to change the fate of a friend. To see them condemned to death, poverty, and abuse—and to have no power to change anything.

Stop it. This is your duty. You're here to serve your sphere and King.

"I understand, Damen."

Mercury lowered his voice, his face serious. "It's true that, in your new position, you have a vast army under your command. But you

should never forget that your position as general is not the highest level of leadership, but rather the highest level of servitude. You're here to serve my military advisors, and to serve me. Retaining your role as a perpetual duty soldier should help to remind you of that."

Merritt nodded, his thoughts moving languidly in Mercury's presence. He remembered Belmont's promise to help him be a leader, to hold his own around the elite. He remembered that surge of exhilaration he'd felt after winning his officer picks at the last board meeting—that alien sensation Belmont had called his "first taste of power."

But the memory felt muddled under the mantle of Mercury's scent. Why was it so hard to hold onto that moment of defiant empowerment? Or the pride he'd felt upon fighting the board to make a tangible change for his military? Belmont had promised to give him the means to hold his own against his superiors, and some small part of him hungered for it, but... but his head just ached so hard when he tried to think it through.

He inhaled again, allowing Mercury's scent to melt away his discordant thoughts.

It's not worth it. Just listen to your King.

"When you first caught my attention," Mercury continued, "I wondered if you had the capacity to rise above the military and join the ranks of top management. But the more I witnessed your actions and decisions, the clearer it became that you would not achieve this. You don't think like an elite, and you don't carry the values of the elite. You're too thoroughly trained in the ways of the North Sphere military. Your convictions are so strong they've seeped into your bones."

Merritt's skin felt oddly cold upon hearing Mercury's words. "I apologize for disappointing you, Damen."

"You haven't disappointed me," Mercury said, retrieving something from within the folds of his robe. "You've enlightened me."

Merritt raised his head hopefully. He recognized the item Mercury held. It was a double-banded blue tie, just like the one Archer had shown him in her lab. They were given only to the people Mercury trusted the most.

“This is Coulter’s old double-banded tie,” Mercury said, running his fingers across the smooth blue fabric. “I’ve held onto it since his death. There hasn’t been anyone else after him who’s earned it. Higgins had one. Wilson has one. Crilly, Hale, Archer. And of course Belmont—though he’s going to have to work to hold onto his.” Mercury ran his hand over it again, appearing contemplative. After a long pause, he said, “I’m going to give this one to Wolfram.”

Merritt reached quickly for his poker face, embarrassed to have gotten his hopes up. Of course Mercury wouldn’t have offered him something so valuable and meaningful. He hadn’t done a thing to earn it.

Mercury stared into Merritt’s eyes, seeing past his poker face. “I do wonder what it would be like to have someone like you in my inner circle, Merritt. You’re like no one else I’ve chosen to keep near me. At first, I wondered if you’d find a way to transform yourself into a true leader. But now I wonder what it would be like to take you exactly as you are.”

Merritt realized that his palms had begun to sweat, and he clenched his fist atop the table.

“You never did learn to take your wins. On the other hand, I know I can trust you not to prioritize your wins over my objectives. 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 reached out, placing his hand on top of Merritt’s, and Merritt’s heart pounded.

“You’ve gone from private to general. You’ve learned to stand tall. But you haven’t forgotten how to kneel.”

Merritt’s gaze locked on Mercury’s hand. The light glinted off the thick gold band on his middle finger. That was the ring Merritt would kiss if he was ever invited into Mercury’s inner circle. He’d kneel and recite his soldier’s pledge. Then he’d recite the pledge he’d written exclusively for his King. And then he’d kiss the ring.

Mercury's hand remained. He gestured with his head toward the open book on the nearby desk, reminding Merritt of the passage he'd just read. "As my general, you will no longer be just a soldier fighting for a cause you don't understand. You will be privy to the inner workings of your sphere's management. Your eyes will be opened. But you're a soldier down to your core, and I expect that you'll maintain your soldier's faith even when your duty is no longer accepted in blindness."

Mercury's hand withdrew. Merritt watched it, a longing ache in his chest.

"I should let you return to your work," Mercury said, rising to his feet. "Leave your cup. I'll have a servant in to clean up."

Merritt rose as well. "Thank you for the drink. It was the best Spark I've ever had."

"I'm pleased to hear that." Mercury glanced at a clock on the wall. "I have some reports to read before bed, so I'll have you let yourself out. But remember, your thumbprint is approved in the system. I'm hoping you'll come back another day. We have much more to talk about."

"I'd be honored, Damen."

Merritt was about to head for the door when Mercury stopped him with a hand on his arm. "One more thing." He headed across the study, retrieving the book that had lay open on the desk. Handing it to Merritt, he said, "This is yours to keep."

Merritt's eyes widened. "Really?"

"I know no one else who would find it as inspiring as you."

Merritt took the book, holding it close to his chest. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You can thank me with your continued unquestioning service." Mercury gave Merritt a pat on the shoulder before turning away. "Have a good night, Merritt."