

# DEVOTED

MERRITT'S STORY

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CHAPTER 20

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## CHAPTER 20

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Soft Sloth Coffee was a South-owned café in neutral territory a block away from Yackley's. In its early days, it served as a waiting area for the neighboring South-owned motorcycle dealer and repair shop, but the drinks were so good that people began frequenting the café even when they weren't waiting for their bikes to be serviced.

On Wednesday afternoon, Merritt sat at a secluded corner table overlooking the rest of the café, nursing a now lukewarm cup of ginger tea and wondering if Odell would stand him up. It had been two years since they'd last spoken. Since then, Merritt had barely pulled himself up a few numbers in the North Sphere's ranks while Odell had rocketed from obscurity to fame in the same timeframe. She had little incentive to honor a deal she'd made to a no-name blue-tie soldier back in 2149.

At the time, Odell had been a South Sphere journalist investigating the West Sphere's dog trade. The West had a long history of kidnapping children and teens from other spheres for their sex trade even though they were forbidden by underground law from enslaving anyone other than their own citizens. In the course of her reporting, Odell had made a number of powerful enemies. One such enemy had sent a gang of West Sphere hunters to try to apprehend her—with a gruesome public execution as their ultimate goal.

It had been a rare day off for Merritt, and he'd decided to use the day to go on an impromptu water-tasting tour through the West Sphere's tourist districts. The West Sphere's most popular attractions—nightclubs, bath houses, and brothels—had little appeal to him. But their restaurants were also known to be the best in the underground, and he'd wondered what the chances were of the best restaurants also having the best water.

He'd never even made it to his first stop on the tour. The moment he'd reached the West Sphere border, he'd been nearly sideswiped by

Odell as she'd sped past him on a Springbok—the only South Sphere racing motorcycle that was available for purchase by other spheres, and one that had been on Merritt's fantasy wish list since he was a child. When a gang of fourteen West Sphere hunters had passed him moments later, he'd followed his gut and pursued them through the West's unpaved tunnels.

When at last he'd caught up with the gang, they'd cornered Odell at a dead end and were closing in. Merritt, acting on instinct, had flung Odell his only knockout blocker, yelling for her to take it before throwing a vial of SYN-12 to knock out all the West Sphere hunters along with himself.

Odell had done what she'd needed to do; she'd fled to safety while the hunters were out cold. Merritt, who'd had regular exposure to low levels of SYN as part of his training, was able to overcome the drug faster than the West Sphere hunters and escape before they regained consciousness.

At that point, he hadn't expected to ever see or hear from Odell again. He hadn't even known her name.

But Odell had tracked him down a few weeks later using investigative tools exclusive to the South Sphere. She'd brought him a copy of the newly published article he'd allowed her to complete, which had exposed ten armbands and blue-ties who'd covertly aided the West Sphere in kidnapping prospective slaves from within their own spheres. And then she'd told him that she owed him a favor for helping her escape from what would have otherwise been her grisly end in the secluded West Sphere tunnels.

Odell's article had launched her into the spotlight, cementing her place among the South Sphere's ruthless investigative journalists, most of whom worked under code names. Within a year, she'd become the public face of the industry. Being the only member of the team whose identity was known, she bore the brunt of the retaliation that inevitably came from articles put out by the South, even the articles she herself had nothing to do with.

Her investigations had exposed and disgraced a seemingly unstoppable North Sphere drug company, the East Sphere's reigning

sport fighting champion, and the lead singer of the West Sphere's most beloved pop band. Taking on powerful enemies had its price. In the South Sphere, Odell was a hero. In every other sphere, she'd been slandered and vilified to the point that restaurants wouldn't serve her and citizens spat on her as she passed them on the street. She took all the abuse with an unshakeable, self-assured smile.

Merritt had never trusted the hit pieces by other spheres that attempted to slander Odell. He'd admired the objectivity of her work, and he'd felt pride in seeing her rise up the ranks.

It hadn't occurred to him until after his latest altercation with Belmont that he was due a favor from someone who was now a truly powerful figure in the underground. Merritt hated the very concept of favors. When he'd helped Odell in the West Sphere tunnels, he hadn't expected to get anything in return. But if he didn't call it in, Odell would have it hanging over her head for the foreseeable future, and that in itself was a tactic many people in the underground used maliciously.

And Merritt really needed the favor.

His ginger tea had reached room temperature when the café's door swung open and a familiar mousy young woman stepped into view. For all her clout, Odell was tiny—barely five feet tall if not accounting for the extra six inches of dreadlocks piled and twisted atop her head. She had tight, sinewy muscles and skin that shone like polished obsidian in contrast to her draped white blouse and silver pauldrons. South Sphere citizens, with their lightweight but conspicuous armor and occasional robotic accents, always stood out in a crowd.

Merritt raised a hand to catch her attention; she spotted him and smiled momentarily before her mouth and brows twisted into a wince.

"That's not the face I was expecting to see," she said as she took the seat across from him.

Until her wince, Merritt had forgotten about the mottled bruises across his face. It'd take another two days before the daily North Sphere healing ointment would do its trick. "You didn't catch me on one of my finest days," he replied with a sheepish smile.

She gestured toward his bruises. “This have anything to do with the favor you need?”

“In a way, I guess.” He slid the menu card across the table toward her. “What would you like to drink? It’s my treat.”

“That’s generous of you. I think I’ll have a latte.”

“All right. Let me get it for you.”

When he returned to the table minutes later with a cup of coffee and a second cup of ginger tea, Odell accepted the coffee with a genial smile. “Bruises aside, you’re looking great. Healthy. I’m glad to see that. Things can turn around so fast down here, especially for soldiers.”

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well too,” Merritt replied. “I know you get a lot of heat from just about everyone in every rival sphere, but you’re doing such important work.” He gave a wry chuckle. “I just hope to never be the subject of one of your team’s articles.”

“Keep being the Merritt I know, and you’ll never have to worry about that.” Odell took a sip of her coffee. “I realize we haven’t been in touch, but it feels like I know you better now than I did before.”

Merritt gave her a playful frown. “Stop spying on me, Odell.”

“No can do, buddy. It’s my job. And it’s just too easy now that 75<sup>th</sup> and I are together.”

Merritt tried not to cringe. As head of the South’s surveillance department, 75<sup>th</sup> was one of the North Sphere’s most hated enemies. She reported directly to Freya, one of the South’s three Queens, and she was as militant and antagonistic as Odell was amiable. While Merritt had trouble imagining what Odell saw in her, he was awed by the collective power the two of them held over the rest of the underground—and all without even being face cards.

As if to reassure him, Odell added, “You’re not one of our targets. You’ve just been mingling with a lot of people who are.”

“I have a feeling you’d tell me the same thing either way,” Merritt said with a chuckle, and Odell returned his smile.

He lowered his gaze to the white band around Odell’s middle finger—the South’s sphere identifier. Idly, he realized that he enjoyed

her company. It was too bad she was from a rival sphere and only giving him consideration due to her outstanding debt. Under different circumstances, they probably could have been friends.

After a few more minutes of peaceful chatting, Odell finally asked, “Are you ready to start talking about whatever favor it is you need?” She held up her phone. “I should warn you, I’ll be recording our conversation.”

“Yes, I’m ready.” The recording didn’t worry him; it was typical for Odell’s job, and he knew based on her history that, contrary to the underground’s expectations, she’d go to any lengths to protect a source. “I was hoping you might be able to put out a news bomb for me.”

South Sphere news bombing was a notoriously disruptive—and effective—way of quickly spreading the word about a recent underground scandal. The news in question was sent out as an emergency notification that would pop up simultaneously on the phone of every citizen in the underground, regardless of sphere association. Only the South Sphere, having hacked the infrastructure of the underground’s global communications database, had the capability of sending out mass notifications across all spheres. News bombs were usually deployed with the purpose of public shaming or destabilizing an entity that the South felt wielded too much power.

Odell’s smile took an uncomfortable tilt. “That might be a little difficult, Merritt. News bombs have to go through five levels of approval before even being considered for publication. Only the most scandalous stories are ever approved. Otherwise, it’s just annoying and spammy, and people won’t even read it. Every time a news bomb doesn’t have the right impact, news bombing as a technique becomes that much less powerful.”

“I have something scandalous. I promise.”

Raising an eyebrow, Odell said, “Then tell me about it.”

Merritt cleared his throat. “I have proof that Belmont was behind Higgins’s murder. If word got out, Higgins’s former supporters could potentially go after Belmont in retaliation. I can show you exactly how he—”

“Not good enough,” Odell said. “I’m sorry, Merritt. Everyone up high in the underground is out to kill their boss and take their seat. And everyone probably already suspects Belmont. I can see why you’d feel it’s scandalous, and it would make for a great news article. But not a news bomb.”

Merritt wasn’t discouraged. “Well. It’s not the news bomb itself that I need. It’s the threat of a news bomb.” When Odell eyed him curiously, he continued. “I’ve managed to get myself on Belmont’s bad side. He wants to ruin me, and this information is the only leverage I have against him. He’ll have problems if the news goes beyond my tiny circle of allies and starts to reach people who have the power to counter him.” He pushed his cup of tea aside and leaned across the table, lowering his voice. “A news bomb would terrify him. But if you can’t create a genuine news bomb, a mock news bomb would work just as well. I want to make Belmont believe that the news bomb has been created, and that it can be deployed at my command or in the event that something happens to me. It could be as simple as you sending me an email with a mock article and a list of the conditions under which we’ve agreed that it would be deployed, so I can pass the information along to him.”

Odell smirked. “So you want to blackmail him. I didn’t know you had it in you, Merritt.”

“I’m just trying to stop him from going after me or my friends.”

Odell held her hands up. “You don’t need to explain it to me. This is the underground, and even though I’ve never met Belmont, I know more than enough about him to understand why you need what you need.”

“Right,” Merritt said. He stirred his tea infuser a few times, watching as the faint color spread through the water in wisps and swirls. “With the South Sphere’s surveillance system, I’m sure you’ve seen even more of him in action than I have.”

“Freya has a video clip of him jerking off to your playing card.”

Merritt dropped the infuser. He hoped he’d heard wrong. “What?”



“Yeah. It was one of the South Sphere’s most watched videos a couple months ago. She offered to show me. I was like, ‘Thanks, but no thanks.’”

Merritt rubbed his temples. “I think I was better off not knowing that.”

“Sorry.”

The South Sphere’s surveillance system seemed to extend to every last corner of the underground, but none of the other spheres had ever managed to figure out how they could consistently obtain video of what were supposed to be private moments. No one had ever found a single wire or camera leading back to the South Sphere.

Fortunately, the South never attacked another sphere out of nowhere, either physically or through cyberwarfare. It relied on the fear induced by its brutal counteroffensive strategies to ward off attacks before they ever happened. An attack against a single South Sphere citizen was considered an attack against the entire sphere, and retaliation was swift and vicious.

Not only did the South use these videos for the purpose of keeping their enemies in check, but they also uploaded some of the less important but more entertaining videos to a streaming video site available only to their citizens. They hosted viewing parties where they got drunk off South Sphere wine and laughed at the idiocy of their foreign rivals.

“Hey, about your video surveillance system....”

Odell leaned back in her seat with a teasing smile. “Come on, Merritt, you know better than to ask about that. We’ll never tell you how it works.”

“No, that’s not what I’m asking.” Merritt wiped up the drops of tea that had splattered across the table from his fallen infuser. “Even if we can’t create a real news bomb, the mock article has to be convincing enough—and incriminating enough—to make Belmont compliant. I have evidence I can share with you, but there might be some gaps in the timeline that I need help filling in. Is that something you’d be able to do, using the video you’ve collected?”

“Possibly. I need more information before I can guarantee that we have the footage.”

Merritt nodded in understanding. “Here’s the deal. Belmont poisoned Higgins by ‘cleaning’ his glasses with disposable alcohol wipes laced with the lethal poison MYGG-2, knowing that Higgins had a habit of chewing the stems of his glasses. He stuck a needle through the packets and squirted the poison onto the wipes. I have a packet of disposable wipes that I stole from his bedroom, along with lab results proving the presence of the poison. But I can’t prove that this wipe came from Belmont’s bedroom, and I’m sure that, by now, he’s gotten rid of any other wipes he had in his possession. But if you could track down any video of him poisoning the wipes and using them to clean Higgins’s glasses...?”

“Hmm.” Odell contemplated as she took a long sip of coffee. “I can check with 75<sup>th</sup> and see if we have anything. It’d speed it up if you can narrow down the time frame.”

“I saw Belmont wipe down Higgins’s glasses about ten minutes before one of Mercury’s board meetings. It was a Monday near the end of September.” He fished around in his pocket for his phone. “I can check my calendar and get you the exact date.”

“No need; we can track it down just from that information. We have all of Mercury’s board meetings tagged and categorized.”

Merritt frowned. Apparently, no information was safe from the women of the South Sphere. “MYGG-2 stays viable for a maximum of two weeks after it’s mixed, so Belmont would have had to mix the drug within that frame—probably at his old flat, before he moved into his suite at headquarters.”

Odell glanced down at her phone, which Merritt assumed was transcribing their conversation in addition to recording it. “All right, I’ll have my team start poking around. Email me your lab report and any other information you want included in the article, and I’ll get to work. It’s [newsbomb@southsphere.ugd](mailto:newsbomb@southsphere.ugd).” She looked up from her phone. “You got a deadline for this?”

“Yesterday,” Merritt said. He ran a finger over the bridge of his swollen nose. “Belmont is already out for blood. I have all my

information prepared, and I'll send it before I leave the café." He pulled the poisoned wipes out of one of his packs and held it out for Odell. "And here are the wipes themselves, if you want them."

"Great," Odell said, taking the wipes. After packing them away, she returned her serious gaze to Merritt. "I'll do what I can to help you. But I do hope you understand that news moves fast down here, and the threat of a news bomb won't keep Belmont at bay forever. Even Higgins's closest allies will move on after six months. A year if you're lucky. Belmont knows that."

"I never expected this to make me invincible," Merritt replied. "I just need to buy myself enough time to come up with a more permanent solution. But I appreciate the warning."

"Good. As long as you're prepared." Odell glanced at her phone and then slid back in her seat. "I have to run; I've got a tight schedule today. But I'll contact my team and get them to work as soon as your email comes through."

"Thank you so much, Odell. You're amazing."

"Happy to return the favor, Merritt. You're one of the good ones. And that's not something I can say very often down here."

"Just cut him loose, Mercury," Belmont said, sitting slouched in his seat as he filed his middle fingernail. "He's the reason we're behind schedule on the poison-trapped corridors. Delays are inevitable when you're asking soldiers to do cerebral work." He shot a cutting glance across the boardroom at Merritt. "We had to slow everything down just so he could keep up."

General Rhodes bristled at Merritt's side, but he remained silent.

Mercury turned his cold gaze toward Merritt. "Merritt. You've been overseeing the poison trap project. Why are we behind schedule?"

"We're not behind schedule, King," Merritt replied calmly.

"According to Belmont's report, we were expecting the project to be approved by now."

“The report—”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Belmont cut in. “The captain’s got a pretty face, but he’s not so good with dates and numbers.”

“I can assure you,” General Rhodes said sharply, “Merritt has proven himself more than capable of overseeing this project.”

Stunned by the unexpected support, Merritt gave General Rhodes a fleeting, appreciative nod. The general returned a subtle nod in response.

“Hey, I’m not arguing with you,” Belmont cut in. “Merritt’s got a *great* mind—for a soldier. In fact, he’s the sharpest soldier I’ve had the pleasure of knowing.” With a smirk, he gestured toward the lingering bruises on Merritt’s face. “Which makes it all the more tragic that he keeps hammering away at those brain cells in the military. *Look* at him. Each blow to the head takes its toll, you know. I’m sure he’d be fine by any other sphere’s standards, but we aim higher in the North. This kid’s going to get progressively duller as time goes by.”

Merritt gritted his teeth when he saw several advisors nodding in response to Belmont’s words. He hadn’t thought they’d be so easily taken in by Belmont’s typical routine, but their bias against soldiers was apparently even stronger than their distaste for Belmont. Merritt supposed it made sense that General Rhodes’s words had no impact; it was clear only fifteen minutes into the board meeting that he didn’t have the respect of anyone in the room except Merritt.

General Rhodes was unusually clean cut for a military man. He wore his hair slicked instead of spiked, and he lacked a single commemorative piercing or tattoo. Having never been a fighter, Mercury had chosen him for his mind rather than his physical prowess. Even so, he was forced to defer to the board of advisors, including those who had no military expertise, simply because Mercury valued their intellect above his.

Merritt sympathized with him. Despite their difference in background and Merritt’s belief that General Rhodes was a bit out of touch with his soldiers, he knew Rhodes deserved more respect than he got.

“I think it would serve everyone best,” Belmont continued, “if Merritt was taken off the job. Clearly, he’s not the type of leader this project needs.”

“That would be a catastrophic move,” General Rhodes said. “We’d lose weeks just trying to get a new point person up to speed, and the threat of a West Sphere invasion only grows stronger with each passing day.”

“Get us back on schedule,” Mercury said simply, his cold gaze fixing on Merritt.

Across the room, Belmont let out an exasperated huff and shook his head. Clearly, he’d hoped Mercury would take his suggestion and boot Merritt from the project, and he was doing nothing to hide his dissatisfaction with the decision.

Ignoring Belmont’s display, Mercury glanced at the clock on the wall. “We’ll take a short break. Rhodes and Merritt, that’s all I needed from you. You’re both dismissed. Everyone else, be back at ten past ten.”

“Yes, King,” Merritt said in unison with General Rhodes. They both knew what neither was saying—Belmont had fudged the numbers when submitting his schedule to Mercury. He’d set an intermediary date as the final deadline, making it look like they were behind schedule when they were in fact two days ahead. But there was no point in arguing the matter when advisors like Pratt and Evans were ready and waiting to contradict them in favor of Belmont.

Merritt was now faced with the ugly task of telling the foreman and lead engineer that they had five fewer days to complete all their work.

At least Odell’s faux news bomb was running on schedule. In less than twenty-four hours, she’d sent Merritt two article drafts and three video clips showing Belmont in action. Merritt had given his stamp of approval on the materials and offered Odell profuse praise for the quality of her team’s work. All that was left was for her to send out the final confirmation email including all materials and the parameters under which they’d supposedly be released to the public.

Merritt had requested the email state that the news bomb would be deployed automatically in the event of his death, incapacitation, or disappearance, or immediately upon request by him or three unnamed and fictitious proxies—and that these conditions could not be rescinded under any circumstances.

Once Belmont was confronted with that threat, he'd hopefully think twice not only about targeting Merritt but about trying to sabotage any future military projects either.

As he rose to leave the boardroom, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Excitement coursing through his veins, he retrieved his phone in anticipation of the final email from Odell.

When he looked at the screen, he saw a notification of an incoming text rather than an email. The moment he unlocked his phone, an autoplaying video maximized on his screen and played at full volume.

Moaning. Lots of moaning. And a familiar spacious bed with black sheets. Two nude intertwined bodies. Devon on his hands and knees beneath Belmont.

A hailstorm of unwelcome questions descended upon Merritt as he scrambled to close the video. Did Devon know he was being recorded? Based on the low camera angle and proximity, he must have known. But did he know Belmont would send the video to Merritt? What if he *did* know?

Devon seemed to be enjoying himself more with Belmont than he had with Merritt. And who could blame him, based on the video? Belmont's technique looked... enjoyable.

Merritt quickly shooed the thought away and focused on getting the software to respond. But the video refused to close. Across the room, Coulter and Mannheim stood watching Merritt's struggle, having heard the tinny moans echoing from the phone's speaker. Mannheim looked more amused than surprised, and Merritt wondered if he'd helped Belmont program the video to hijack Merritt's phone. Beside Mannheim, Belmont remained lounging in his chair, an infuriating grin on his lips. Merritt's only consolation was that Mercury had already left the room.

Still unable to close the video, Merritt resorted to shutting down his phone. He suspected a virus attached to the video, and he'd have to run diagnostics later when he had a place to sit and work. Gritting his teeth, he shoved the phone back into his pocket and headed for the door.

Moments after he exited the boardroom, a long-fingered hand closed around his elbow, pulling him to a stop. "I was just showing you what you're missing out on," Belmont purred into his ear.

Merritt yanked his arm free, his cheeks burning red. Before he could reply, Mercury emerged from the nearby restroom, stopping midway down the hall to meet Coulter, who'd just stepped out of the boardroom. Belmont pulled a few inches away from Merritt to watch them.

Coulter's glance flickered deliberately toward Belmont before returning to his King. "Mercury. Are we still on for our dinner meeting tonight?"

"Of course," Mercury replied. "I assume Rose will be cooking?"

"Cooking, among other things," Coulter said with a subtle wink. "And I got a bottle of the same wine from last time."

"Wonderful." Mercury gave Coulter a charming smile. "Nothing like a bottle of Brighton red to get the *ideas* flowing."

"We'll be masters of innovation tonight," Coulter replied with a secretive laugh, and Merritt could tell that the "meeting" he had planned with Mercury would have a vastly different vibe than the board meeting he'd just left.

Mercury gave Coulter a slap on the back before returning to the boardroom—a move that drew a resentful scowl from Belmont. Coulter, on his way to the restroom, shot Belmont a cutting half-smile over his shoulder before disappearing around the corner.

Merritt could barely see Mercury's form past the glare on the wall of windows, but his eyes lingered on his obscured silhouette. Seeing the familial behavior between Mercury and Coulter left him with an odd, uncomfortable ache in his gut. On those occasions when he'd been alone with Mercury, he'd felt like Mercury had seen

something special in him. But the way he talked to Coulter was different. *That* was the tone he took with someone he considered to be on his level. An easy smile, an inside joke—with someone who he knew would understand it.

Merritt wondered what it would be like to be at Coulter's level, to be within Mercury's inner circle. It seemed impractical even to fantasize about it.

*You're not on his level, and you never will be.*

He shook his head. *But you don't need to be. Just serve him like you always have. You don't need more than that.*

He glanced at Belmont, but Belmont's hostile attention remained on Coulter. Recognizing Belmont's distraction, Merritt realized he had a chance to slip free. He tried to sidestep and head for the elevators, but Belmont caught him the moment he made a move and shoved him against the glass wall.

Merritt hoped Mercury wasn't watching them through the glass. Before he could check, Belmont leaned in, setting an arm against the wall beside Merritt's head and blocking his view. He stood so close that Merritt couldn't even inhale without their chests brushing each other.

"Devon is living the good life now," Belmont whispered. "Everything I'm giving him, I would have given you. I saw the look in your eyes when you watched the video." His soft, husky chuckle vibrated in Merritt's ear. "You took everything I offered and threw it back in my face—and now you regret it."

"I regret nothing," Merritt said, his lip curled. "My crew is going to have to rush construction on the poison traps thanks to your lie. You jeopardized North Sphere security—your King's security—just to take a cheap shot at me in a meeting." He locked onto Belmont with his ice-cold gaze. "Every time I try to tell myself that supporting you is supporting Mercury, you show me that you don't give a damn about your King *or* your sphere."

"Tell me, Merritt. Is there *anything* you care about besides doing Mercury's bidding? Is there *anyone* you wouldn't toss aside just to get closer to him?" Belmont gave a derisive snort. "I can only imagine how empty your life is outside of serving him."



Merritt's poker face shot up like a shield before he could feel the sting of Belmont's keen words. "You can twist my intentions however you want," he said evenly. "I'm just doing my job."

He tried to slide out from under Belmont, but Belmont shifted and blocked his path. "You want to spend all your waking hours kissing Mercury's feet? Well, I'll give you a lesson from his playbook." He leaned in, letting a single finger slide deliberately down Merritt's tie. "Mercury always says that everyone in the underground has someone they can't bear to lose. Someone they rarely talk about because they don't want their enemies to know. Someone whose loss would just destroy them." He chuckled. "Now, *I* don't have anyone like that. And neither does Mercury. It's what makes us invincible. You, on the other hand...."

"Are you threatening to harm Mercury just to get to me?" Merritt asked, eyes narrowed.

"*I'm not talking about Mercury anymore,*" Belmont whispered. "We're blue-ties. We keep our vulnerabilities under lock and key. You're always making a big show of serving Mercury, and that tells me that you don't *really* fear anyone taking him from you." He shrugged. "Maybe that's because you know he can protect himself better than you can ever protect him. But I'm sure that's not true of everyone in your life." He leaned in close enough for his lips to brush Merritt's ear. "Is it?"

Merritt deftly sidestepped, slipping out from under Belmont's grasp. Belmont stumbled forward, his forehead hitting the glass with a comical *thunk*. When Merritt let out an unwitting laugh, Belmont turned and glared at him.

"Watch yourself," Belmont hissed. "Do you really want me to take the gloves off?"

"I don't have time for your games," Merritt said, flattening his expression. "I have poison traps to build."

He made it halfway to the elevators when Belmont's soft singing reached his ears.

*"A chasm divides us*

*While you shatter your soul for someone else*

*I've already lost you*

*But I can't bear to see you lose yourself"*

The hairs rose on the back of Merritt's neck. He forced himself not to stop walking, not to turn back to face Belmont. It had been three or four years since he'd last heard that tune, but the melody was etched so deep into his memory that even Belmont's flippant hum grabbed him like a vice around his heart.

"It's a nice song, isn't it?" Belmont asked.

Merritt pressed the down button and waited, his back to Belmont. He wouldn't let Belmont see that he was rattled.

"I was down in Norwood on business last night. I sure as hell wasn't planning on touching any of the food down there in the slums, but then I heard the most angelic voice drifting out from this little café, and I just *had* to see who was singing. For all his talent, the poor kid only had three dollars in his guitar case. I left him a hundred. And a business card with a note that I'd pay him ten times that much for a private performance tonight."

A soft bell echoed across the lobby, and the elevator doors opened.

"I don't know if he'll call me," Belmont continued.

Merritt boarded the elevator, at last turning his steely gaze back to Belmont.

Belmont's wicked half-smile was visible for only a moment beyond the closing doors. "But even if he doesn't... I know where he lives."