

A HALF HUMAN WITH A SECRET.
A VAMPIRE WITH A PLAN.

A black snake with a subtle pattern is coiled around a vibrant purple iris flower. The snake's head is positioned near the center of the flower, and its body winds around the green stem and other petals. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a large object, which makes the bright colors of the flower and the sleek texture of the snake stand out.

GUARDIAN

BOOK 1

K.L. HERNANDEZ

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To J, who accepted me when I didn't

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains depictions of—but not limited to— sleep paralysis, emesis, starvation, emotional abuse, mentions of suicide, violence, blood, and death.

ACT ONE

CHAPTER
ONE

KATERINA ELI



Sleep was supposed to be peaceful, but with my heartbeat pounding in my ears and my sweaty body trapped to the bed, I would have preferred suffering another sleepless night than this shit.

Katerina.

Every night it grew harder to regain control over myself. My voice was silent while my thoughts floated around but held no power. The sensations at my fingertips were slowly trickling back, but they still vibrated with the same numbness that took over whenever I tried to sleep.

Whenever *her* hold got to me.

And when it thinned, I sprinted to the one place I couldn't be contained.

“Fuck this.”

My body tensed at the icy temperature of the indoor pool. But it was quick to embrace me and swallow my weight. I drifted as my thoughts anchored me to the water.

September was slowly approaching, and the holidays were soon to follow. My last guardian post was months ago. Since then, I've been waiting to be matched to a new posting. It was understandable—the Company of Essential Guardianship was booming in business, old guardians like me shadowed by the new, improved ones.

It was only a few years ago that the CEG became a recognized organization, funded by both the Vampire Ministry

and the Human Intergovernmental Bureau. When I first started, the company was only an idea with trial and error, waiting for the right moment to spark.

Guardians didn't even have a title back then and were seen as normal bodyguards. Until tensions continued to rise between both governments, and both species needed something to protect them from each other. Someone with the potential to guard anyone during difficult times.

From then on, the CEG was gifted an appropriate name, and guardians not only had a title but full employment. We had research facilities I never thought could exist, allowing the company to improve our services to reassure safety in this new world. One that allowed humans and vampires to co-exist.

And here I was, sitting at the bottom of a pool, jobless.

It wasn't by choice. I just wasn't getting matched to one.

The thought forced my body into the fresh air. I hadn't noticed how long I was down there, but nearby footsteps forced me out of the water. After finishing in the locker room, I grabbed my duffle bag and headed into the dimmed, gray hallways outside the pool floor. I turned toward the same route I always took to my dormitory, up the backstairs, and exited onto my floor, where my room lay empty.

Our rooms were meant to be temporary, but we had the choice to decorate. I never found the need to. Decorating meant staying because of comfort, and I only found it in the water—the one place that always accepted me when I needed a momentary escape.

The room also had a way of stirring up faint memories. The doctors had explained that the use of long-term medication caused my shitty memory. But they never erased the surge of hollow feelings that boiled in my chest.

I couldn't stand being here. Any chance I had to leave, I took it.

The cafeteria was the central hub for the latest gossip and information from the new world. Vampires had been part of fiction for millenniums and transformed into nonfiction

overnight. It was an exaggeration, of course, since vampires had fully surfaced a century ago, but humans never liked accepting the world's true existence. Not even now as guardians, the majority half-human, were constantly hired to protect them.

I squeezed myself toward everyone's focus. The screens among the pillars displayed the latest revelation, the right side focusing on the Bureau while the left aired the Vampire Ministry's response. The topic never changed.

Humans strived to repeal the Two-Species Treaty, while vampires rationalized possible outcomes to keep the peace. It always ended with talks of war.

No wonder the CEG was so successful.

The intercoms screeched, and the screens dimmed, letters forming and exhibiting my name.

“Katerina Eli, please report to the main building.”

I roamed through the cafeteria. The halls grew brighter the farther I walked, the sun finally melting my icy skin while I exited the guardian quarters and followed the path to the main building. It was the one in charge of the more technical jobs — call centers, financing, overall customer service— and held the offices of the main four, our bosses.

The main four consisted of the founder, and his three sons, all of whom were in a constant battle over who would take the seat after their dad stepped down. Although both governments were large investors and had some jurisdiction, the shots were still called by the founder; primarily, that one of the oldest should inherit the company. Guardians, on the other hand, were pushing for the youngest, Lace Fernandez.

Lace stood before the side entrance, his body towering like my cousin as I neared, a small smile decorating his face. While guardians were allowed to roam the premises, I tried not to. Once I stepped outside, it was hard to go back in. After water, the sun's warmth was the second most comforting element on my skin.

He studied me with an attentive gaze as I tilted my head, closing my eyes to bask in the sun's rays. I could smell traces of his scent, fresh like laundry detergent but not strong enough to send me sneezing. "You know, if you wanted to tan, you could have just come to me."

I peeked at him through one eye, a teasing grin twisting his lips along tawny beige skin. His hooded brown eyes met mine, and stretched lines furrowed above his eyebrows. "If I wanted to tan, I wouldn't have announced it to the remaining CEG population."

"As if you've never done it before," I responded, his grin deepening across flushed skin and exposing teeth biting against his left cheek. My instincts quickly surfaced as my eyes sprung open, my legs cementing to the ground. His left arm traveled through the air, twisting through my defense, wrapping around my neck. My body spun and rested against his, his figure tense against my back.

I remained composed, though.

"So, you called to attack me?"

His hold tightened, allowing my airway to be unaffected but tight enough to hint at his advantage. "More like I wanted to test you." His right hand pulled against his left wrist, his arm pressing deeper into my neck, bringing my head onto his shoulder. "It's been a while since we last brawled."

"Huh," I blurted while my shoulders rolled against his chest. "I thought you said there was no point in a brawl when there's no competition."

His grin vanished. "What?"

Before he could think of his next move, my elbows drove through his abdomen, and his breathing responded with uneasiness. Swiftly, I gripped his right wrist and motioned below and around him, pushing his arm onto his back and forcing him toward the nearest wall. His body flattened against it while strands of hair grazed his cheek, a warm smile now decorating his expression.

"Sometimes, I wish I'd bite my tongue more often."

“Glad you’re not the only one who thinks that,” I said as a laugh slipped my lips. I quickly released him and took a few steps back. I could never be too cautious around his sneak attacks.

Six years of friendship, and he still thought I didn’t know his tactics by now. He was an open book, one that overshared with no need to be asked— whether it was stories or actions. It’s what made guardians love him.

Lace saw them as humans and vampires with goals rather than business pawns to hold over the ongoing feud between governments.

Sometimes, it was his downfall. He was bad at holding secrets, and it was noticeable whenever he bit away at his cheek. It was a habit that made it easier to know when he’d attack and when he spoke the truth. A pattern that made me open up to him from the beginning.

He patted his suit down and tried fixing the necktie I had accidentally wrinkled with my harsh pressure. He had recently started dressing up because of increased visitations from the Vampire Ministry and Bureau. If it wasn’t for that, he’d lounge around in fitness wear in hopes he’d fit in with the guardians.

“Thanks for beating my ass,” he said as his fingers laced through the knot and swiftly loosened it.

“What type of friend would I be if I didn’t finish what you started?”

His eyes flicked onto me, the tie sliding from his collar and onto his palm. “I was trying my hardest to not wrinkle a tie this early.” He started making his way inside and through the main lobby, my feet quick to follow beside him.

“Oh please,” I mocked, my voice low as we passed security. “If that was true, you wouldn’t have attacked me. Ah! Don’t look at me like that. You know it wasn’t a test.”

Lace rolled his eyes as we entered the nearest available elevator and clicked the office floor, a gleam lingering in his gaze as I met them. “If I could, I’d reprimand you for speaking back.”

I nudged his arm as I nodded at him. “You’re the boss.”

“You think?” Lace flashed a brief smile as the elevator dinged open. I rarely visited the main building alone. I was never able to memorize the endless hallways since they fused into cubicles and doors. I could only make it out alive if Lace led the way through this never-ending trap.

Besides, he’d typically come to visit me in the training room, or we’d meet across the grounds. Our jobs came first, but our friendship was always a priority.

Our relationship was complicated, but we always had each other— especially after my cousin left to his post a few months back.

Lace’s office was the only one wide open among the sea of closed doors, and once we entered, it became part of them. Files swallowed the floor and covered the walls; his desk was only accessed through a single pathway which I followed closely until I reached the floor-to-ceiling windows.

The landscape from his floor had a clear view of the grounds, but specifically, what hid outside. Trees obscured most of the sight, but tucked beneath them were roads that stretched to the nearest human and vampire cities. But as the CEG was based on the outskirts of New York, they were a good distance away.

“So?” I asked while I turned to him, “What’d you call me for?”

There were only two things he ever discussed here: either I was heavily in trouble, or it was work-related.

“The Two-Species Treaty feud is still ongoing, but it has become the main focus as a way to cover up the current disorder that’s erupted within the Vampire Ministry.”

“What do you mean?”

Lace’s nostrils flared as he collected a few scattered sheets on top of his desk, turning them so the letters faced me. “The Mubaraks of the Regal Vampire Families have gone missing. This has left Heads of Ministry to have an empty spot, one that can’t be replaced.”

My skin froze as I followed his gaze on news articles that I'd never seen.

“The few vampire presses that discovered this information have been forced to scrap any information relating to this issue. If word was to spread...”

“The Two-Species Treaty could be withdrawn by the humans,” I said.

“Not could, *would*,” he emphasized. “Humans have made it clear they don't want to continue governing alongside vampires. By losing a member of their Cabinet and Heads of Ministry, it'll showcase the vampire's inability to maintain order and incompetence under their rule. It's a substantial clause for humans to withdraw.”

“How are they going to keep this big of a thing a secret from humans? There's going to be rumors. It'll practically be impossible to hide.”

Lace stood and walked by me, leaning against his desk. “The Premier has been closely working on amending the relationship between the Vampire Ministry and the Bureau. He hopes they can resolve this issue before the disappearance becomes a focal point, but he's been met with dangerous threats. They've even been extended to his sons.”

I considered his words and actions, his body stern. No cheek-biting hinted. Lace was never one to lie about work-related information, but...

“How do you know this?”

“I'm the boss, no?” He said with a wink. “I'm in charge of relations and pairings, specifically those who sit at the very top.”

My lips parted, but I stopped myself before I could fully react. Of course, I knew this. It was the reason why I waited patiently to be matched to a posting rather than requesting one every time a chance came up. Lace had done it for me consistently. But for some reason, this year was different.

With this single comment, it was enough to raise my hopes.

“Nina, I want you to be the new private guardian for the Premier’s sons, the Sephtis.”

The name rang familiar, conversations surfacing in my mind.

The Regal Vampire Families were made up of the highest-ranking vampires, ones that had long-standing reputations. They were said to be the first vampires to have lived, their lineage surviving insufferable years in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to rise alongside humans.

I never did my homework when it came to vampires unless I was under their guardianship. But the Sephtis had a history I couldn’t ignore.

Their dad, Mir Sephtis, was the Premier for the Vampire Ministry, one of his kids next in line to succeed after a near-lineage extinction three decades ago. They had pushed through the ashes and blossomed into a name to fear, not because of the Premier’s ruling but due to his sons’ inescapable reputations.

Guardians would be sent routinely to the Sephtis. While their NDAs didn’t let them talk about what occurred while at their posts, they’d hint at their bad experiences. Many would abruptly resign mid-contract and never return. Although numbers haven’t plummeted, it still impacted the CEG’s name.

They’ve practically been blacklisted by guardians.

“Am I your last resort?” I crossed my arms across my chest. “And no lying.”

Lace’s lips turned upwards, his eyebrows furrowing. “Yes and no. But— Nina!” He gripped my wrist as I stood. “Don’t be mad at me.”

I inched away, Lace’s hold releasing, but he was swift to cover the door before I could storm out. Sometimes, I forgot how well he knew me, too.

“I’m not mad. Annoyed is a better way to describe how I’m feeling.”

“Let me explain—”

“I already know your reason. I’m never your first choice, and if I am, the jobs are boring.” They were always repetitive. Being a guardian meant risking your life for another person, yet that was never the case when the jobs only consisted of babysitting. But they were safe as Lace liked them.

“Katerina.” His tone suddenly grew serious, his facial expression stern, but it quickly melted away as our eyes met. “Listen, you know why you can’t be my first option. There are other guardians that need to be placed on the field so they can gain experience. You already have that and more.”

“So, you’d prefer to keep me locked up here? Knowing that it won’t do us any good?”

His nostrils flared, and he released a sigh. Sweat trickled from my neck while cool air whirled. Were the walls closing in?

“That’s not true, Nina. It’s hard trying to give everyone a chance in the CEG, one that you don’t need to prove yourself with. I know how capable you are. You were my first thought when the Sephtis requested a new private guardian every month, and trust me when I say I wanted to give it to you, but I couldn’t let you go yet. They’re tough. These guys...” He cleared his throat. “I can’t find out what they do to make each private guardian flee not only from their posts but from the CEG. I couldn’t risk losing you if something were to happen.”

He was telling the truth. I didn’t have to study his expression to know—the warmth in his eyes was enough. “Then why now?”

“Because, and I hate to admit it, you’re my last resort. I don’t have to ask to know that everyone’s scared to accept this offer, especially now with the rising tension between species. If another guardian were to disappear now, it would push Father to cut ties with not only a Regal Family but the Premier himself. It’s not only bad for business but for our reputation. Dangerous even.”

“Does that mean you trust me now?”

“I’ve always trusted you.” He rolled his eyes. “I just couldn’t risk my best guardian to them. Now, I have no choice, on one condition, Nina.”

“What is it?”

“You have to promise you’ll keep taking your medication.”

“If I don’t, would I have to beg to receive this job?” I mocked half-jokingly. Tension pressed against my chest and stomach, nausea rumbling as we sat.

“As much as I love it when you beg, there won’t be a job.” He rummaged through the sheets on his desk. “I’m risking you to this job, Nina. There’s double the danger; I can’t have a third one surprising us along the way.”

“What fun would it be if there wasn’t a risk?” A smirk flourished across my face. “I promise, Lace.”

CHAPTER
TWO

ALEK SEPHTIS



The piano's keys trembled beneath my light fingertips, my hands carried by the rhythm of the melody that possessed my memory during the early hours. My chamber had remained swallowed by the darkness of night, dawn slowly making its appearance with each resounding strum. It was a melody that carried a weight I had long loathed, one that caused my stomach to constrict with sorrow, the entrancing flow pulling and tugging at my chest.

Beams of sunlight crept through the blinds from my chamber's first floor, inching closer to the piano's grand, pitch-black structure, one that had been polished hours ago. A ray of light slowly drifted toward my right hand, the gleam pausing before the black keys and the tips of my ring and middle fingers.

My right hand lifted away from the piano while my left continued along the keys, pouncing with force rather than brushing— my concentration leading instead of my emotion. I wasn't sensing the rhythm anymore, fixated on following the keys through the routine.

Light poured onto my fingertips, the skin burning around and below my nail beds under the morning sun. When I was young, the sun caused me to feel as if hundreds of fiery ants bit away at my skin. At twenty, the pain had numbed with the constant minor exposure, the slightest trace of it being a hot pressure after the first few seconds of meeting it.

Perhaps I preferred withstanding the heat from the morning sun, as it proved to be less threatening when

compared to meetings amongst my brothers.

Yet, today was like every other, and the answer remained unchanged. I had no choice; I had to follow the forced routine of being a youngling.

Though slow with my motions, the formal attire I bore took short minutes to settle into. Dressing up was simply for my brothers' amusement, as their beliefs were based on the vampire hierarchy. A single wrinkle represented an act of disobedience, one they could use to their advantage, for better or worse.

What they fully emphasized was punctuality, the ultimate act of authority for the oldest. Slight tardiness had horrid repercussions, ones my younger brothers and I had dealt with through the years. It forced each of us to be wary of the time. That's why I still hurried with each prolonged motion, finally fastening the cuffs and trailing toward the expansive mirror where light barely hinted within my chamber.

I inspected the fabric in its reflection, every inch smoothed to perfection. Once my eyes traveled back to meet themselves, my attention was on the expression that hid my internal anger.

I clenched my jaw as an electrifying heat rushed through my veins, my hands tightening into fists while I glared at my polished stature. Every time my gaze fell on the mirror, nothing besides disgust twisted my stomach. It reminded me of the life I lived caged in, the one I despised more than myself.

Yet, my eyes didn't show such thoughts. Years of practice had caused a cemented abyss within my irises, a darkness that went beyond the brown tint and displayed no emotion. They were the most dangerous features any of us bore because eyes confessed what lips bit away.

My breath grew heavy as I exhaled the built-up tension within my muscles and forced myself down the dim hallway.

The house had an everlasting gloominess, with its dark interior and low lighting, all windows hidden behind dusty curtains. Walking to the gathering room always brought forth

memories of our mother when the house beamed with tinted light emitting from the stained-glass window above the staircase. It parted the two separate wings, and as I stood before it, I glanced at the curtains in their stead rather than the lively colors.

My mind repressed the memories, my youth, our mother, and anything that could expose my feelings. Even with practice, it constantly proved to be a struggle within myself.

I turned into the secret flight of stairs, descending into the gathering room, the greens and purples burning vividly with little light. In every inch of the household was a piece of our mother, a piece that grew hollow with each year amongst my brothers. This room, though, had her heart and soul etched with a haunting presence.

The youngest, Raphael, sat in his usual chair, the one closest to the exit that led to the foyer and opposite the imitating throne. Although his dark, auburn eyes kept steady on the table before us, his fingers gripping his shaking leg. He tried to calm himself through steady breaths, but it wasn't working in his favor.

The second and third youngest, twins Jacque and Jacob, settled into their accustomed couch across from Raphael's chair. Their dirty blonde hair was swept back, each strand polished into a perfect quiff. Upon their uniform appearance, their movements mirrored each other, Jacque straightening his shoulders and Jacob following.

As the oldest in the room, they bowed their heads when I took my seat. Jacque and Jacob quickly ignored my presence once they finished their greetings.

Although displaying a hint of worry was deadly before snakes, for Raphael, I met his gaze with what warmth I could afford.

His eyes gleamed, and his shaking paused. With a simple gesture, his hands lifted and rested against the armrests, confirming that he remembered to appear fine.

The third oldest, Kaleb, climbed down the stairs with a sway along each of his steps. Sharp, honeyed eyes searched the room as if hunting for their prey with a narrow and determined stare, widening once they stumbled upon me. He skipped the last steps and jumped onto the floor; Raphael, Jacob, and Jacque bowed their heads, but Kaleb quickly dismissed it.

I followed, and as my head rose, an icy pressure weighed against my neck. Kaleb's fingers pressed deeper before he released, his touch lingering as he sat beside me. It was his way of notifying me of a private discussion after our gathering.

He'd always done this for two reasons: either I had done something that offended him or because he required information. In truth, I had no idea what details he wanted.

Unless it came along after the meeting.

The second oldest, Noah, glided down the stairway rail and landed precisely on both of his feet. Deep, raven hair swayed as he skipped across the room. He bounced onto his chair, where it rested to the right of the imitating throne, and cobalt blue eyes studied our faces. "What a bore you all are!" His voice trembled against the silence, breaking the leftover calm. "Quiet, as always. Don't you think, Brother?"

The eldest, Christopher, descended the stairs with straight shoulders, his pure-blond hair pulled into a braid that hid a book underneath his arm. He took his place silently beside the imitating throne to the left, his legs crossing as he settled into the cushion.

After our mother's passing, the seat was left bare in remembrance of her presence.

"Nothing could compare to you," Kaleb said while his eyes rolled. "You're as lively as ever."

"Why, of course! It's gathering day, after all. I'm beaming with excitement to hear what Christopher must announce. Aren't you, Jacque?"

“I don’t think my excitement could beat yours, Brother,” he responded, his tone hinting at amusement.

Our meetings amongst each other had always followed such structure. I had to wait to speak if I was asked to speak at all. Our gathering represented a space for the three oldest to discuss and for the three youngest to listen.

I, on the other hand, was cemented in the middle, a position that held no weight in the midst of the very little authority I was supposed to have.

Our routine had long begun.

Before Noah could pick at another brother, Christopher cleared his throat. “The Mubaraks’ disappearance has been fully confirmed. The rumors of them resurfacing from last week have quickly been disproved, and I’ve received news from the Ambrogios regarding Cabinet and High Parliament.”

The Six Regal Families had a long history within the vampire race, inscribed by humans as the first lineages to rise from the shadows and into a world ruled by humans. After millennia, it was only until the early eighteen-hundreds that our ancestors established their government, holding positions within what’s now known as the Ministry.

While the Mubaraks shared a seat alongside the other families as Heads of Ministry, the Ambrogios were thought to be nearing their ruling period as the head held the position of Secretary, right beside the Premier, the highest sitting position within the Ministry and the head of our name, That Man.

Along with the feud against the humans and the current disappearance of a Regal Family, the Ministry has long been disputing if the Sephtis name should continue as Premier or if a new one should be appointed. With That Man’s constant preference for human matters, the Ministry’s decision grew clearer with each passing day.

Pathetic.

“Do tell,” Kaleb said, his eyes vibrant with curiosity. “Is That Man finally losing his position as Premier?”

“No,” Christopher affirmed. “The Ministry has gone mad with such a sudden occurrence. That Mans sprung to dealing with human matters while burying the disappearances away from both media. Heads of Ministry, on the other hand, have been withholding their final decision regarding his position. If he’s able to settle the Treaty and avoid conflict, it could work in his favor.”

Kaleb sneered, his eyes fueling with fire. “With his ruling, he’s had a dying name, a near-war with humans, and protests from vampires against his administration, yet he’s still able to hold his title? Despicable.”

“Oh my, Kaleb!” Noah exclaimed. “You’re missing the grander picture! He will ruin our name, our reputation. We’d be better off dying out!”

Kaleb’s laughter roared as he motioned forward from the couch. “Are you so ignorant to believe that our reputation hasn’t already been ruined? It’s been from the very moment our brother was born. “Don’t you think so?” His eyes dawned on the eldest, yet Christopher didn’t meet them.

“An entire lineage has vanished. No traces of their last moments have been stumbled upon, and no distant relatives have been discovered to take their place. Either it will end in our favor or not. Do what you will with that information.”

Christopher exited the gathering room as everyone concluded their bows. The room was quick to disperse, my brothers eager to retreat to their chambers. I wished to do the same, but Kaleb’s touch hovered over my skin like a shadow, forcing me to step into the foyer, turn under the main staircase and make my way down into the vault.

Through the years, the vault evolved from an empty space underground only accessible to guardians and maids to a meeting point for brothers that desired to escape without fully leaving. When I descended the spiral stairs, the purple-toned lights highlighted the two separate corridors that wrapped around the expansive pool.

The right led to the first door, the music room where each of my brothers’ instruments sat, surely collecting dust; then

was the second door, the entertainment cave, filled with a range of coin-operated machines to bar games without alcohol. It was typically used by Jacque and Jacob, and at times Raphael too when I could accompany him.

The left corridor led to the family infirmary, meant to treat if one of us was deeply wounded. It never occurred, though, and only recently were the spaces turned to one specific affair: feeding. To the farthest of the corridor was the blood cellar, where my brothers' meals remained stored for whenever they deemed hungry or bored.

I stepped down onto the steps that leveled from the pool's surrounding section, seven pillars masking my sight once I halted. They stood around the pool's large borders, closing the gap between the corridors and the water. My breath was a whisper along with the cold air, one that grew hollow as I took in the ambiance.

It was still, similar to every part of this household, except it echoed within its own silence. If Noah had been here, the water would ripple onto the floor with his harsh ongoing sprints. If Jacque and Jacob were in the entertainment cave, their jest would echo through the closed door.

If Kaleb was in the feeding space, I'd hear his icy laughter trailing through the corridor—one that traveled rapidly to my side.

His palm wrapped around my nape, tapping down on my skin. There was no need to present himself by gripping my neck; he had done so to cement his power because he believed that presence wasn't enough.

Humans had a strong footing, their steps rough against the ground no matter the circumstances. A vampire's tread was light, once thought to be levitation. There was a moment in my life when I entertained the thought. While my beliefs were wrong, it was true that our footsteps were silent.

Vampires focused on sensing presence instead.

All living beings emanated a presence that stemmed from their true inner characteristics into an air that gave sight of

one's company. Kaleb's presence was thick enough to prove authority, his atmosphere suffocating the air with pure ego. It unsettled my stomach being near him, and whenever I was beside him, his self-esteem engulfed my throat.

Humans thought of it as magic. It was both a blessing and a curse to have such a skill.

I stood grounded in my place as Kaleb faced me. My routine continued, one of expressionless appearances and patience that transcended beyond the constraint of the morning. Under this household, we had all the time of day and night, and Kaleb ensured to occupy it.

He studied my face, my eyes fixed against his chest. Although I was slightly taller, I never met his gaze unless spoken to— one of his many dislikes caused by his ego-centric complex.

“Dear little brother, tell me, how have you been this morning?” His lips curled into a smirk, one that exposed the long protruding fangs. Around humans, we weren't allowed to display our fangs with such confidence, but we rarely visited anything beyond the gates. None of my brothers cared to retract them if the guardians didn't file the matter as obstruction of the common law.

“Fine,” I said, a lie rehearsed to always be swallowed as truth. “Thank you for asking, Brother.”

“Good, good.” He patted my cheek, his rough skin dry against mine. He slowly parted and paced to the side of the pool. “You see, Alek, I'm sure you've already pondered why I've requested your presence.” He hovered before the edge, his body perfectly balanced.

“Well, to put it simply, the time has arrived for the CEG to send a new pesky babysitter. With the current course of That Man, I'm expecting this one to be no different than the rest. A mole with a fancy title. And we can't have that, can we, Alek?”

“Of course,” I responded, my tone flat. Kaleb took notice of it at the same time I did.

His movements were quick, like a snake pouncing. A hand wrapped around my throat and forced me toward the nearest pillar, my back clashing against it and my head digging into the crevices.

The only moments he disregarded his own complexes were when he had the chance to cause physical pain. Amusement stemming from disobedience pleased him more than our mundane routine.

His lips neared my ear, his breath warm as he spoke. “Oh, dear little brother, you know I don’t like it when you don’t address me properly. Especially in such a tone.” From the corner of my sight, I could detect a blood-thirsty grin blossoming. “All I ask for is information to know who to expect. I hope my demands won’t be too much for you.”

“My apologies,” I muffled while his palm dug deeper into my neck, the pressure blocking entry for air to properly enter, “Of course... not... Brother.”

His smile widened with my response. He released his hold, my knees tumbling to the ground as coughs escaped my lips. I tried to force myself to meet his gaze before he could use it against me, but Kaleb had gotten what he wanted: submission.

“Alek, be sure to tell Tristan that I require it by tomorrow morning. If not, then the penalty falls on you, I’m afraid, and we don’t want that, do we?” An eerie laugh trailed until Kaleb vanished within the depths of the household.

I suppressed my emotions as they bit my conscience. It was the only aspect of my life that I had a sense of power over. Yet, it was simply another lie I forced myself to believe through the years. Without my brothers around, I continued to withstand a fight within myself.



I strolled from the household entrance to the gazebo in the front yard, following the silhouette of a common pathway that fused with perfectly trimmed grass. It stood between the

rounded driveway and trees, within an angle that was easily visible from the library's first-floor window, in the direct frame of guardians inside the premises.

The gazebo's metal structure consisted of antique white swirls, a matching chair, and a table stationed in the middle. Vines wrapped around the swirls closest to the ground and my chest was elated with the sight of it.

Sonia, the Senior Guardian, oversaw the household's landscape, resulting in dull terrain. Tristan battled her on it on my behalf, the proof of his efforts before me.

Tristan loomed between the gazebo's opening, his presence warm and inviting, unlike my brothers. He rested his arms behind his back as his gaze focused on what was ahead rather than below. Despite a guardian's mandatory uniform consisting of thick, broad shades with mirrored lenses, I could distinguish an allusive gaze as I took a seat and regarded his stiff stature.

"At ease," I said while I settled into the chair and crossed my legs.

Tristan didn't respond, and I abided by the silence between us. The guardians along the households surrounding gates waited in their positions. The minutes for their change of shift trickled in my mind.

Suddenly, a door creaked in the distance, and at a stroke, all the guardians that had once surrounded us vanished into the bordering forest.

Tristan heaved a sigh as he unbuttoned his formal onyx suit, the one for appearances, revealing a bulletproof vest that was part of their uniform. Below it was a guardian's true full-body suit, the one designed specifically for fighting and swiftness.

"Thank you," he said while a smirk played along his lips, melting away the stern expression he bore seconds ago. "I thought I'd be used to it by now, but this vest really weighs on my footing."

“You always say so,” I said, my lips careful with their movements. Although we were truly alone, it had been a habit to maintain a strict expression due to prying snakes.

“So, what does Kaleb want now?” he asked as he rested against the gazebo’s railing. “Your expression is telling enough.”

My chest rose as I released a deep sigh. “The time has come for a new private guardian. He wants the intel on whoever is being assigned to us.”

Tristan’s lips pressed into a straight line. “I’m not sure I could do that, Alek. Sonia hasn’t mentioned anything. I won’t say there might not be a guardian this time, but it seems unlikely to recruit someone after your past stunts.” He cleared his throat. “From what I’ve heard, the CEG is overflowing with rumors regarding your family. It’s becoming hard to find someone who would accept this job and do it properly—willingly.”

Tristan’s face fell toward me, my gaze quick to meet his buried behind reflective lenses. I was never fond of this topic, but it held much importance to our positions that I couldn’t ignore it for much longer. The rumors continued to spread like wildfire during the driest of seasons, causing any possible life I could have outside these gates to be no different from now.

The thought sparked a trail of fire within my veins, the ashes never fully extinguished, but rather waiting for moments like these.

“Dig for anything that could be retrieved for tomorrow morning and be useful to my brother,” I said, my hands tightening into fists at the thought of what would come if I didn’t fulfill his demand.

“Of course,” he said as he nodded his head, not as a guardian but as my only ally.

“My apologies, Tristan.” The words had a tendency to slip from my lips. It wasn’t used to move past burdensome outcomes but rather convey pure regret to a rigorous act.

Tristan fixed his suit and bowed, his punctual disappearance surpassing the evening guardians' arrivals. My stiff posture remained, yet my fingers loosened their grip. For a moment, I enjoyed the evening's tranquil ambiance without the intrusive thoughts of what tomorrow held.

CHAPTER
THREE

KATERINA ELI



Even though Lace was the boss, he was so messy.

We spent the rest of the day organizing the paperwork in his office. As his employee, I had no choice but to help since I needed to sign agreements hidden in the mess. As his friend, it was the right thing to do— or whatever he'd typically say to guilt trip me.

It was his excuse to not do all the work.

By the time I made it back to my dormitory, the night had intensified my nerves of excitement. While the familiar discomfort lingered as I packed my belongings into a single suitcase, it didn't stop me from thinking about tomorrow.

Lace trusted me with one of the hardest jobs the CEG had ever received. I couldn't disappoint him. I wouldn't. I made my promise, and those thoughts forced me to stay up through the night. This time, it was my choice, one *she* couldn't interfere with.

The doctors had said the medication caused sleep paralysis. But even on days I skipped the pills, *she* made sure to trap me at night.

By the time light beamed into the room, I had picked up all my belongings and glanced at the stupid, pasty white room. No more hollow feelings. No more untraceable, faint memories. No more punching reminders of being stuck.

With a final flick of my middle fingers at the shitty room, I was off.

Lace waited beside a CEG-assigned taxi in front of the main building, a book bag weighing down his shoulder as his sleepy eyes fell on me.

“You’re late,” he said, whisking the book bag into my arms.

“I’m on time; you just got here earlier.” I eyed the material inside. “Is this all the papers we organized yesterday?”

“Yes, and more. They’re already a handful, and I’m not even their assigned guardian.” Lace shook his head as his fingers rubbed against his temples. “Are you sure you want to leave today? It didn’t have to be so soon.”

“Lace, it’s okay.” I rested a hand on his shoulder. “I’m ready to leave.”

I spoke carefully. While yes, I was bored —maybe a little impatient too— waiting for a job match, I needed to leave. Being stuck in the CEG with my thoughts always circled back to the medicine— to *her*. I couldn’t tell him, though. I’d be demoted to a guinea pig for testing and more nauseating medication in seconds.

He huffed a sigh, his expression calming with defeat. “Do you have any questions?”

I stared into the book bag, manila folders and white sheets overflowing. “I’ll give you a call if I do.”

He nodded and brought his arms forward, his hands whisking me into his chest. “Please don’t hesitate, especially if something happens.” His warmth heated my skin the deeper he brought me into his embrace. I pushed away before he could hold me tighter, my sight steady on my steps as I motioned into the back seat of the taxi. He shut the door when I settled, his hand rubbing against his nape.

Whenever it was time to send me off, Lace acted like it was his baby’s first day at school —a baby who was almost twenty-one— or my first day as a guardian, which I’ve been one for five years now.

Still, I couldn’t help but giggle while I lowered the window. “It’s okay. I made my promise, didn’t I?”

Lace nodded with tight lips. "Call me when you arrive." He tapped the car door as he pushed away, the taxi driver quick to start the drive. I kept my gaze on what lay ahead, careful not to look back. Even on days I felt caged in the CEG, I couldn't deny there was a certain warmth within its walls. It wasn't only a business I witnessed grow but a place I could always return to.

Like Lace, it would wait for me.

I studied the passing surroundings, the road stretching across the forest that split between the two closest major cities. Each was a few hours away, yet the familiar routes became distinct with a single turn. To the southeast was the closest human city, Albany, and to the northwest was the nearest vampire city, Syracuse.

It took seconds for my eyes to grow heavy with the steady motion of the car. Being the responsible guardian I was, I pushed myself to start my homework.

"How fun," I whispered to myself, practically rolling my eyes.

I dug into the book bag and gripped a stack from the front, manila folders separating each into sections. Glimpsing at the first page forced my eyes wide open.

Guardians were compelled to write an overall assessment after each job, the shortest terms the easiest to fulfill as they asked for the minimum regarding experience. The longer terms tended to have detailed pages due to the extensive post their contract requested. Typically, those dived deeper into what their position consisted of, what occurred, and how it was handled.

For the Sephtis, most were short-term, yet information overflowed. The stacks of papers practically explained every single detail their past guardians had gone through under their guardianship.

"Ugh." I pushed it to the side.

The next stack consisted of clinical documents, with medical record numbers front and center. All seven of them.

Hundreds of pages in my hands. This was information that was rarely given to guardians, but when it was, it was because our subjects posed threatening or critical conditions. Sometimes both.

These guys were just mentally fucked.

Like me.

I immediately pushed the stack aside, nausea already settling in my stomach. I'd revisit them when personal feelings wouldn't get in the way— hopefully.

I forced my focus outside, meadows and dispersed houses upholding the scenery the taxi continued to pass through. Despite gray clouds concealing the sun, I could sense the warmth through the glass, even the hint of light that shined on the endless road that parted the muted green and deep brown landscape.

It was enough to revert my attention to what I strongly avoided.

I dug through the bag and dragged out the last stack of papers, the amount of sheets light compared to the other two. Although the book bag grew airy, it still weighed against my skin. Lace probably snuck in more papers to kill my anticipation of quickly getting my homework over with.

I started turning the pages, my fingers quick to meet the last one. The formatting wasn't the same as the CEG's. The appropriate seal was in neither corner of any of the pages. Instead, every few sheets had large titles bolded at the top, each differing with topics that I quickly caught on to. This stack wasn't part of a guardians' homework from the CEG, but instead, my own from Lace.

I snickered. He'd definitely stayed up doing this for me. Skimming wasn't an option now.

I began with the news articles, most ranging about the Premier and his reign within the Vampire Ministry. A few discussed his past as the sole survivor of the Sephtis name until he was able to have heirs.

Little scribbles caught my eyes as I flipped through the pages, one, in particular, sticking out.

Make sure to review this before arriving.
It's the most important.

It was only three pages long, so I dived in.

The first page was about the Premier's wife, Sophia Sephtis, and her sudden death five years ago. Lace highlighted details about how she was born a human and later transitioned into a vampire.

The second page consisted of the Premier, the loss of his wife leading him to hire most of the CEG's guardians soon after. At this rate, he'd do it again with the upcoming war brewing.

The last page spoke about the Sephtis brothers. It detailed their behaviors in public outings and their horrible actions during national events. All of which resulted in their ban from ever returning. Most of the instances consisted of physical brawls between each other or with invited guests from the Ministry. A few even involved destruction of property, either material goods that couldn't be replaced or the damage of buildings. All for the sake of schemes.

Lace's notes were a warning.

Better to know a bit more about
your subjects than be sorry you didn't.

I lay my head against the seat. The city slowly came into view, the highway growing broader and higher, adjoining with others that led to opposite directions. All of them encompassed Syracuse, the city of vampires.

Syracuse had evolved throughout the years, but the city's architecture was still rich with human history. After the city was abandoned, the remaining bones from its predecessor came to life with the occupation and presence of vampires.

I could make out angled, chiseled faces within the cars that passed by, features common in vampires. The window tints were dark enough to block out the sun's rays and made of the same material used for taxis hired by the CEG because even guardians were sensitive to the sun.

It wasn't long until we exited the city. Forests and meadows quickly overtook the scenery again. In minutes, we were surrounded by nothing, the motion of the car slowly calming my body. My thoughts drifted as the seat embraced me, everything growing dark and still.

A voice trailed along with groggy thoughts, my mind spinning at the sound of a simple yet eerie name.

Katerina.

It was an echo that traveled slowly within the icy, dark water. One that had the power to pull me through the drowning depths of my mind and cage me within the terrors of buried memories.

I inhaled sharply, and my eyes widened, the weight on my body quick to vanish as I regained consciousness. My first instinct was to look around, the papers scattered across the seat and the car still moving. I met the driver's gaze as he called my name again.

"Ms. Eli," he said. "You'll be arriving shortly."

I glanced outside. We were surrounded by rocky hills that seemed to last forever. Slowly, trees began to appear one by one, the single sight of life multiplying as the car drove deeper into a never-ending road. In the distance, mountains enclosed the devouring forest, their trees towering above us as their branches entangled.

And who could ignore the broad gates that expanded in front of us?

The driver's tone was low as he said, "Welcome to the Sephtis side of Woodstale, where humans and most vampires don't know of its existence."

I was familiar with Woodstale, the small settlement outside Syracuse. But there was a side dedicated only to the Sephtis?

Completely isolated from the rest of the world? Vampires were known to stick together, their kind notable for being a collectivistic society compared to humans. It was why there were rarely smaller cities for vampires.

How bad were these men that no one could be around them?

The car halted, mahogany gates seizing the view from the windshield. A green light lashed from beside the security house, and the gates started opening into the swallowing forest, showcasing the roaming guardians.

Guardians were split into two classes: defense and offense. Offensive guardians were typically hired for ground protection. Their post included the freedom to roam and investigate since offensive guardians were engineered to maintain control because of their superb strength, build, and agility.

The car paused before another gate, this one tall and almighty, as it pierced through the high branches. Small gaps allowed light to seep through, yet the forest continued to encompass darkness that almost barricaded the late morning.

“You’ve arrived, Ms. Eli.”

In a flash, I collected the papers across the backseat and pushed them into their designated piles. Lace and I had spent hours organizing them since he had mixed them up— I wasn’t going to go through that again.

I lifted my book bag and immediately noticed a couple of small orange jars at the bottom of it. Before I could grip them, I shoved the papers into the bag in hopes they’d remain correctly separated. I had finally arrived at the place I was anticipating, one that wasn’t just a job but also an escape from *her*.

Once I stepped out with all my stuff, the taxi made its way down the road and back to the first gate. It vanished beyond the grasslands, the gates closing soon after.

I stood before the second towering gate, my senses pulling my attention to my surroundings.

The wind traveled across twisted branches, emerald green leaves rustling while a fresh salty scent tickled my nose. My tongue watered from the sight of blue that hinted through the trees to my left. My shoulders tensed at the sweet aroma that lingered as the gate in front of me widened.

Another reminder that as much as I ignored the unsettlement in my stomach, *she* still craved more.

Whispers echoed in the distance, the opening gate giving a view of the guardians that stood along the inner fence. They weren't meant to be seen by the naked eye, but I could hear their shuffling feet and murmurs.

Defensive guardians had limited purposes. For the most part, they were hired alongside offensive guardians, as those on the defense were meant to defend if an attack couldn't be controlled. That required them to be posted for hours, waiting for a command or an ongoing situation. They were known to be the second in line for reinforcement since their dedicated patience, skillfulness, and senses allowed them to dictate the best outcomes to win.

A woman in the sleek, black guardian uniform walked toward me, her steps drawn out while her broad shoulders straightened. She had a refined pose to her stature, her body towering the closer she stepped. Her dark hair swayed in the air in a high ponytail, the length touching her waist once she stopped. Her eyes were concealed by black, rectangular sunglasses that met her cheekbones, her cool amber skin complimenting her bold red lipstick.

It was a statement, one that implied the confidence that a leading guardian always displayed. It varied depending on the person, but the bowing guardians were enough to affirm my thought.

"Ms. Eli," she said, her voice monotone while she bowed her head. "I'm the Senior Guardian, Sonia. Before I begin, I wanted to thank you for your rapid arrival."

Although this was our first meeting, I already knew about her from Lace and practically everyone from the CEG. She was one of the oldest guardians and held the strongest ranking.

I was stronger, but no one knew except Lace and me. It was how he wanted to keep it.

“You must settle your things before Mr. Amelle can take you through the grounds. Follow me.” She made her way down the dispersed road, the dirt mingling with the gravel driveway as I followed. The sight was overwhelming, the landscape one that differed from the forest and grasslands—and anything I’d seen before.

A grand fountain stood in the center of the driveway, perfectly trimmed grass outside the gravel spanning to the bushes that encircled the gate. Trees spanned across the yard, branches expanding to the sky rather than onto each other. Shrubs belted the lower trunk, each shaped identically, opposing the forest I had walked through.

Nestled on both sides outside the gravel were two pavilions, the smaller one on the left of the driveway with the biggest on the other side.

And right smack in the middle was the mansion. One that caused my neck to crane to really capture it all. It had varying windows and floors that I could tell apart by the contrasting Gothic architecture. Broad, slate stairs met the entrance, the tall stature shadowing the grounds.

“Mr. Amelle will reach out to you soon. Your room is located on the second floor, in the left wing, the first door to your right. I would advise you to stay inside for the time being,” Sonia commanded. “You can’t explore the home and the grounds without Mr. Amelle’s approval.”

Before I could respond, Sonia bowed and walked through the yard until she vanished outside the gate. Was my pulse pounding this whole time?

Before I could analyze it, I climbed the stairs and pushed against the large doors.

To my surprise, they were unlocked.

Like Sonia, I held the same class as a private guardian. Although with different purposes, we were both a fusion of defensive and offensive guardianship.

Meaning that even with my superb physical and cognitive capabilities, I still grew nervous on my first day.

An icy atmosphere chilled my skin as I stepped inside, ignoring how the door behind me closed by itself. The house seemed empty, the consuming darkness a drastic change from the outside. My breathing steadied as I concentrated, my senses igniting in the gloom.

Dust particles floated across the air, no voices or steps lingering along the walls or floors. My feet settled against the royal blue flooring, the color expanding across the foyer and into different open spaces.

Shadows hid the first floor while sun rays slightly seeped onto the second. I could make out the edges of an obscured, colorful design on the floor. It even traveled onto the ceiling, where a massive chandelier hung above my head, the curves resembling the letter 'S.'

Suddenly, a faint, bitter smell brushed against my nostrils. It was one I had come across before, one that, especially in the belly of darkness, tugged my body to meet it. Even with its harsh fragrance, it was always sweet against my tongue.

A shadow emerged, a flat yet demanding voice following. "Announce yourself."

My body quickly relaxed, yet my tongue remained stiff as I forced myself to speak.

"I'm Katerina Eli, your new guardian."

CHAPTER
FOUR

ALEK SEPHTIS



The series of images throughout my sleep was never considered dreams but rather nightmares that always left traces of exhaustion when awake. My chest caved with feelings that I loathed to be reminded of. While I questioned their meanings, the answer was one I was too coward to face and never changing: death.

Bereavement took a seat within my chamber, the sense of peace my piano provided missing. In turn, I sought the greenhouse that blanketed me with tranquility and liveliness.

My routine with the garden was one I looked forward to as the flowers held new surprises during my visits. Not because of the blooms each season brought but the ambiance it harbored.

The visitations were never repetitive since it was an activity that reminded me of who I was under the façade I bore before my brothers. It reaffirmed that I still had a sense of emotions that didn't pertain to anger or hatred, feelings I felt before our mother passed. When the reality of our existence hadn't struck us— when we were living one lie.

Now, we seemed to be living another.

My focus for the morning had remained on the irises, their petals reflecting a blue undertone within their purple shade. The contrast in its signal had grown evident from the previous week, the yellow patch fiery along the inner muted veins. The stems were a vibrant green, the large patch of irises standing tall without crossing each other. It was a sign of their prime

health and my constant maintenance. The garden was once our mother's safe haven. Now it was mine.

It was the single place that she could escape to without truly fleeing; no one and nothing gained the opportunity to bother her here. It wasn't long after her death that I noticed I had obtained this habit from her. The garden was one of the places in this household that brought forth our mother's words with clarity, the moments slipping from my grasp at the reminder of them.

"The past controls us while the future avoids us," she would say, "but the present always reminds us that we have a purpose within our own existence. We have the will of choice, tomorrow determined by today and whether you want to live or be stuck in the unattainable."

The flowers were proof of her words.

I spent the remainder of the morning removing weeds from the soil, my fingers careful with the irises' roots. It was followed by adding mulch where the ground appeared dull and trimming any leaves that had perished. With each hour, the sun grew stronger, and my skin was drenched in sweat. By the time I began watering, the heat was suffocating within the expansive, Victorian greenhouse—yet I didn't stop.

I moved from section to section, verifying that the other flowers were thriving by picking minor weeds and watering. If I had the choice, I'd do maintenance with each differing flower patch every day for extensive hours. Alas, I knew I couldn't.

I sensed the maids nearing the greenhouse, their bodies shadows along the trees. They kept their distance from the entrance and waited along the sidewall.

Maids and guardians had designated places they couldn't enter. They were never allowed within our hideouts and hovered nearby to grab our attention when needed. The garden was strictly prohibited for any of them to enter, including my brothers. Just like I respected their safe havens, the least they could do was respect mine for the time being.

Yet, there was always a routine to uphold. The maid's arrival signified that my time in the greenhouse had come to an end and that I had demands to uphold for the early afternoon.

Specifically, one demand I was dreading.

The maids rapidly vanished after finishing their duties, and I kept a steady pace to meet Tristan outside the greenhouse. His competence was why I sought him out of all the guardians. He was an essential ally after our mother's passing, one that cemented the little authority I held in this household.

We were as alone as one could be surrounded by guardians. Despite that, it was a reminder of their role: to keep an eye and an ear on anything that could be reported back to That Man.

Mother had said it was for safety measures due to our lineage and history, but I knew it was to avoid the shame that was once bestowed upon That Man's name after her passing. He couldn't risk it repeating with his heirs— sons that already had a longstanding reputation for their troubling actions.

In turn, Tristan bore his mask of guardian without breaking, and I of the fourth oldest.

"Alek," he said as he bowed. My brothers nor I enjoyed being referred to by the last name we shared with That Man. It worked in my favor, of course, since Tristan and I had a partnership that went beyond the social etiquette forced upon us.

"Was Kaleb pleased with your assistance?"

Tristan nodded while his shoulders straightened. "He was delighted by your execution turnaround, and as a reward, he's allowing you to accompany him to tonight's feeding."

The vault's feeding spaces were assembled per Noah's requests, the purpose behind it pertaining only to the oldest. Due to Christopher's indifference, Noah and Kaleb had taken the feeding spaces for their private affairs. Jacque, Jacob, Raphael, and I were never allowed unless we were gifted with

a proper invitation. It was aimed as a commendation, and to deny it was to go against the authority of the oldest.

I wasn't sure if to feel accomplished or dreadful at the thought of tonight.

I nodded at Tristan, the gesture targeted for his departure. He didn't move.

“Is there something else you'd like to mention?”

Tristan's body grew stiff, his nostrils slightly flaring. “The new private guardian has arrived. She's inside as we speak.”

I instinctively concentrated on the surrounding presences. The guardians' history was confidential to both vampires and humans. After some time, Tristan was able to disclose what little information he could.

Guardians were considered half-humans rather than half-vampires due to only sharing one similarity with vampires: their enhanced abilities. They were stronger than humans and close in strength to vampires, but while a vampires' strength was permanent, a guardians' was temporary. Their strong physical capabilities came from the routine ingestion of vampire blood, still holding the ability to revert to normal if they didn't continue.

They retained the appearance and diet of humans, their strong footing varying. With training, guardians were able to learn how to conceal their steps like vampires. Although they never mastered it, it was still necessary for my brothers and I to recognize their presence since it lingered like a fire in a distant forest. We could detect their presence from afar or up close, depending on how enduring it burned.

Tristan's was only a wisp in the air, never disturbing through a steady control. Since his never altered, it was a familiar radiance that was earnest and validated his loyalty.

The new guardian was untraceable, confirming his silent inquiry.

“You're dismissed,” I said, Tristan bowing as I stepped through the double doors that led into the gathering room. It was empty, yet I steadied my breathing while whispers echoed

from the foyer. I could distinguish Christopher's firm tone and Noah's witty voice, Kaleb's insolent comments voiceless in the ongoing conversation. However, I felt his presence emanating through the walls. I grew uneasy at the thought of Kaleb's silence.

Though curiosity tugged at my attention, I forced myself to remain hidden within the gathering room, such a critical moment potentially ruling in my favor or in the opposite direction.

"I will ask again, Ms. Eli," Christopher said, his voice now gravelly. "Why were you sent?"

From where I stood, I caught hints of Christopher's and Noah's backs to me while Kaleb was out of sight. Their bodies circled a small figure within the households' darkness.

Her tone was composed. "Like I said, I was hired by the Premier to continue the term of your previous private guardian. The head of the CEG sent notice before my arrival."

"We received no notice!" Noah said as he paused, his slender figure looming over her. "And we signed no agreement to have another guardian be sent!"

"Your previous private guardian had been assigned a long-term," she responded. "They breached the contract. I'm only here as their replacement until the term ends."

"And when will that be?" Kaleb asked, his question masked as a challenge. Kaleb and Noah interrogated every new private guardian. By sharing a few words, they were able to uncover a guardian's motives through tone of voice and choice of words. Actions were the most telling since they tended to be calculated—similarly to the eyes, someone's body language responded before words could.

Especially guardians.

"I'm not sure," the guardian responded. Her words were honest, with no hint of secrecy lingering. Although my brothers obstructed her movements, I could judge that her body didn't shift or stiffen. Instead, her shoulders slouched

while she held her head high, demonstrating confidence in her words. “It depends on how long you keep me here.”

Kaleb’s laughter thundered through the foyer and into the gathering room. “A guardian with optimism, a wonder to witness.”

“Oh, I’m already assessing how long you’ll last! Truly, Brother, a wonder indeed, even alluring if I may add,” Noah pitched.

“Yes, such a pretty one. Pity.” Kaleb came into my view while Noah strayed from the woman’s side, Christopher now standing apart from them. Although I could distinguish each of their presences easily, there was still no trace of hers. Distance didn’t matter, nor did walls obstruct it. Surely it was due to my brothers’ clashing presences overshadowing hers. I’d never witnessed it before, though. Had my brothers noticed it?

The thought itched against my skin and drew me closer, my body silent while my stomach constricted.

“The compliment is appreciated,” she said, “but flattery doesn’t sway my heart.”

Claps pounded against the air while Noah spoke, “Oh! A dog that barks, how *exciting!*”

Kaleb sneered as he stopped before the guardian, revealing the woman that had stood hidden in the gloom of the household. I could make out her golden, umber skin and deep ink-black hair that was pulled back into a braid that reached below her waist. She was a whole head shorter than my brother, her prominent, full features chiseling as she met his gaze.

Guardians needed to know my brother’s rules before entering the premises, and she had revealed herself— Kaleb’s attention quick to grasp it.

She was too honest, even by mistake.

“Dear, to be quick-witted in front of snakes is dangerous, especially ones with a thirst for blood. Even a dog knows when to yield before a stronger opponent.”

“Snakes that cower their opponents into submission aren’t stronger. They’re spineless,” she responded, her gaze unnerving against his.

Christopher slipped a chuckle while Noah burst into laughter, my teeth biting down against my tongue. Kaleb’s expression grew clouded as he rested his hands in his pockets, his eyes burning with anger.

“A pet should know when it’s time to declare defeat, especially before its owner.”

“But you’re not an owner, and I’m not a pet. I’m just a guardian, and you’re only a boy who needs my protection.”

“A half-humans protection holds no value to me.” Kaleb’s body grew closer, and once he closed the gap between them, he said, “Especially not from someone like you, Kat.”

An instance of speed ceased all movement, the woman’s hand wrapping around his neck. Her fingers dug into his skin as she lifted him from the ground, his weight in no way straining her short stature. My stomach loosened at the sight that had occurred at the speed of light before me, and it suddenly registered.

Christopher and Noah stiffened, Kaleb’s face flushing as he struggled to breathe underneath her grasp. The woman had lifted him in a single breath; as his feet dangled in the air, she displayed an authority that had no means of submission.

I didn’t need to sense her presence to know; her wide icy green eyes warned Kaleb —warned all of us— with its piercing stare.

She released her hold on Kaleb, his knees meeting the ground as his body collapsed. He choked as he gasped for air, Christopher and Noah by no means moving to help Kaleb. Just like them, I stood frozen with shock.

“Don’t you *ever* call me that.”



Shortly after the spectacle, I escaped into the garden before my presence could be noticed. I couldn't entangle myself into the mess that Kaleb had created, a result he hadn't considered. Kaleb's actions were all calculations that led to an end matter that benefitted him. The guardian didn't fall into his trap easily, and his anger was sure to last for hours.

The sky shifted from its pale blue hue to a blaze of oranges and yellows. A body blurred past me; Raphael, careful to not stand close to the irises I decided to visit again.

"How are you always so delicate?" He asked, his eyes wide with interest. "Every time I try to plant any of the seeds you've gifted me, they never sprout."

"You need to place them in a spot that has enough sunlight and shade for their growth," I said. "Remembering to water them also helps tremendously."

Raphael grinned. "If you helped me, they'd grow. You're the only one who has Mother's green thumb."

The mention of our mother always caused my body to instinctively flinch. It was rare to mention her; frankly, there was even a time when I thought her memory seemed to only live in my mind as none of my brothers acknowledged her existence after her death. When Raphael had confessed that exact regard to me, I realized that I wasn't the only one who thought as such. It was what led Raphael and I to bond.

Now, Raphael was the only brother that clung to me, not for protection or power, but because we found comfort in each other's company. Before our brothers, we kept our relationship distant, but in our own safe havens, we didn't have to worry about them prying into our businesses.

"I've helped you countless times. By now, you should be familiar with how to care for a garden."

Raphael shook his head as he took a few steps back. "If I touched your garden, I'd kill all your precious flowers!"

Short laughter slipped my lips. "Of course, I don't mean *my* garden; I'm referring to one of your own. There's enough space on the grounds to have two, surely even three."

“Sonia would rather murder us than touch the landscape,” he responded. “You’ve used up all three chances of expansion. She most definitely won’t allow a larger unmanageable garden.”

“The CEG doesn’t control us.” My tone grew firm, a hint of irritation seeping in.

“But That Man does,” he said with a sigh. “He controls us *and* the CEG.”

That Man always had a way of sneaking into our conversations, regardless if it was a political debate or casual discussion. Everything led back to *him*.

Raphael was quick to press his lips shut, his mouth then widening to voice an apology. I stopped him before a single sound could escape.

“What have I said? You’re never allowed to apologize to me when we’re alone.” I sensed his recurring comment on the horizon, and I interrupted him before he could say it, “Even around guardians.”

Although the greenhouse wasn’t soundproof, guardians weren’t supposed to discuss any conversations they overheard between brothers. Yet, Tristan and I never discussed imposing matters due to Kaleb taking in new hires. It was how he was able to discover that Tristan was the one who dug information for me based on a minor tip. Now, I was his messenger.

“Fine,” Raphael huffed. He followed me as I made my way through the maze of flowers and out of the greenhouse. “Are you meeting Kaleb tonight?”

I nodded. Word regarding one’s accomplishments was quick to spread through the household. One of the twins surely informed Raphael, not as a warning, but as a compliment.

Jacque’s loyalty to Noah and Kaleb ran deep, Jacob blindly following his twin in any form. It granted them protection from Kaleb’s wrath and from being sought out. Yet what Kaleb thrived in was my submission, as it was his ultimate revel.

“Do I wish you good luck?” Raphael asked, his tone sincere yet alarmed.

“Of course,” I said, “although luck doesn’t like making an appearance when around Kaleb.”

“You never know; maybe for once it’ll rule in our favor,” Raphael whispered as we stepped into the gathering room. “Good luck, Alek.” He bowed and walked toward the foyer, ascending the grand stairs above while I descended the spiraling stairs beneath.

The vault encompassed a serene atmosphere, one that confirmed that none of my other brothers were present. Tristan stood beside the entrance, his head motioning as I grew closer. There was no laughter echoing through the walls but instead groans that embodied pleasure.

The feeding spaces mimicked a hospital room; the walls and furniture were all the same eggshell-white and held the same stale air. Kaleb and Noah believed the trail of blood from their lips was enough adornment against the plain room.

Kaleb towered over a man that lay in the bed, his bare body trembling with bliss as Kaleb’s fangs sank deeper into his russet skin. He was one of many regular clients that Kaleb favored, their contracts regularly renewed by the agreement that a witness would be present during these feeding sessions. Originally, guardians were responsible for this, but Noah had tweaked the principle that whether inside or outside, a brother could step in as a witness.

Like tonight.

If they were generous, they’d allow the visiting brother to join the feedings. But Kaleb’s fangs dug deeper, blood trickling onto the bed as the man’s moans fluctuated from pleasure to pain. Although a vampire’s bite was one that caused euphoria, the intention behind a feeding could alter such sensations. Surely, Kaleb’s anger persisted due to the occurrence between him and the guardian.

When Kaleb pulled away, crimson drops stained his teeth and lips. Obsidian veins webbed across his chalky scleras and

into the surrounding skin. A gray cast hinted through his complexion, similar to those that lay lifeless six feet underground. His narrow eyes studied with disfavor. The man's breathing steadied, his blood releasing a nectar scent. It was both enticing and overwhelming, an aroma that didn't cater to my taste.

"Leave us," demanded Kaleb, his voice almost a growl. His gaze retained its strict outraged expression, his common hazel eyes drowned in shadows.

I stood still as the man rose from the bed and grabbed his clothes, exiting with weary steps. Tristan was sure to help him from the moment the door closed.

Kaleb always overfed, not because of hunger but due to his complexes. Even with clients, he made it known who was superior without the need for compliance. Because despite his actions, everyone would return to his feet regardless of how menacing or seductive he posed.

I waited to be spoken to with no sudden movements that could antagonize Kaleb. I maintained an expressionless and still appearance, Kaleb settling in his chair as the silence blossomed into an unnerving bleakness.

"Little brother," he began as he crossed his legs and angled his face toward me, "how was your gardening?"

"It went splendidly. Thank you for asking." I didn't meet his gaze, but I could sense his stare on my skin.

"Good." The chair creaked against the floor as he stood. "Did it go splendid in the morning or the second time you returned?"

My eyes flicked onto him as he walked toward me, an action that confessed what he already knew. I was ignorant to think any of them wouldn't have noticed my presence, but it was foolish to think Kaleb wouldn't have cared for it.

There was no answer to his question as he stood before me, anticipating a blow or a hold against my throat. Instead, his lips slipped into a vile grin that showcased his elongated fangs, the sharp tips concealed in a rose tint.

“I’ll let this slide, dear little brother. But, one thing I won’t allow to pass is how you did nothing for your older brother as a rabid guardian put their hands on me.”

But you allowed her to, I wished to say, my teeth biting away at my tongue. Because you’re weak.

“My apologies, Brother. It won’t happen again.”

“No, it won’t, but an apology and an empty promise aren’t enough to satisfy me.” Kaleb’s chin rose, his gaze looming over me. “You, my dear little brother, have no means to stay hidden in the shadows anymore. Instead, you shall take the mantle of eliminating such a pest from our tainted garden.”

My chest caved at his words, my head outwardly shaking. He wasn’t handing me the eminent task of getting rid of a guardian. We’d done plenty of that.

He strived to ruin the CEG by effacing one more guardian. Permanently.

“This time, you will have the sole honor of obtaining our last laugh.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

KATERINA ELI



The first day and I had already made a huge fucking mistake.

I had barely heard the dismissal as I focused on my trembling fingers. Everything blurred until I reached my room, *her* eerie giggle brushing against my ear.

Of course, I caused a scene. Not with a guardian but my own employer—the one I was fucking hired to protect. I hit the ground while the moment replayed.

What type of professional thought they'd have a few hours before diving into work? Me apparently. Was I out of work that long to think I was able to steal a nap before meeting my subjects?

My stomach twisted with guilt.

It was a wake-up call, a reminder that I never got what I wanted.

Still, I was swift to jump into guardian mode around the three Sephtis brothers. I responded only when they sought my answer and gave direct responses that didn't reveal too much but were enough to satisfy them. Past employers preferred answers that catered to what they wanted to hear. It had worked on the Sephtis until I slipped a thought that was only meant for me. Rather than retracting as a guardian should, I acted without thinking—which was quick to bite me in the ass.

Not only had I harmed my job, *she* almost cost a life. The unexpected fragrant scents of all the men called to *her*.

Mistakes were only made by new guardians. That wasn't my case. I knew how to avoid them. That's what it meant to be a private guardian, yet I ruined my chance.

I waited for Lace's call, the regret in his voice already echoing in my mind. I couldn't bring myself to reach out first; the slight chance of him not finding out kept me still with hope. It was pointless, of course. Anything and everything that happened had to be reported— especially an incident that disobeyed a guardian's code.

My thoughts raced with the many ways I'd reply once Lace called. If I lost this job, I would lose his trust. It had taken him months to give me an assignment, especially one that was as huge as this one. He believed I could protect a Regal Vampire Family, the Premier's sons at that. In return, I had to make the promise I'd constantly made and kept.

I'd stuck with taking the stupid medication, even as the pills grew harder to swallow and the side effects were taking their toll on me. So, where did my reaction come from?

I knew the answer. It still fueled me with anger thinking about the power that name had over me.

The phone slipped from my pocket as I brought my knees to my chest. I focused on the dark shell while it lay silent as the air chilled over my skin.

I hadn't noticed I'd fallen asleep until the dream shifted, the surrounding abyss swaying past me and swallowing me whole. The currents dragged me deeper. Then it hit me.

The dreams were always the same; the stillness in sleep was only an illusion to attract me. It was a way of pulling me into *her* traps. I learned to escape by calming down and pulling myself out of them. But for once, I stilled.

The water leveled around me, towering trees slowly appearing as my feet trudged across the soft ground. It wasn't long until I stumbled into a descending forest, the leaves and bark blending beneath the night sky. Dirt rubbed against my soles, grass stroking my toes the closer I grew to the familiar place.

Her dreams had the same setting: a shabby house deep within the forest alongside a lake. It always sent shivers down my spine.

She didn't move as I entered the dimly lit living room, *her* body sitting straight on a tawny sofa that harbored tears on all corners. A wooden table sat between us, the legs chipping while the carpet beneath it withered away into loose ends. Even the walls and roof that confined us were deteriorating, darkness seeping through the gaps.

I sensed my body trembling with rippling anger.

Katerina.

Her voice was icy and low, the same tone that always roamed deep in the back of my mind. Yet, now there was a sense of satisfaction that trailed in *her* voice, the sound of my name irking my skin like an insult. It was a distasteful greeting in my ears.

She mirrored me in looks; deep black hair that reached below our knees, sharp, green eyes, and warm brown skin. But every time I studied *her*, our features grew further apart. *She* was angular, bones protruding with shadows hollowing *her*. *Her* footsteps were lighter than mine.

The key distinction was the slits that parted *her* irises.

The tips of my fingers dug into my skin as my hands tightened into fists, a fire coursing through my veins. It was infuriating viewing myself in *her*. *She* was a taunting, uninvited guest.

The prescribed medications promised to end *her*, but with every new dosage, they only dimmed *her* voice. They did nothing to the ongoing itch against my skin that *she* caused every day and the constant dreams that paralyzed my body. They did nothing to *her* whispers that constantly grounded *her* existence.

A sneer slashed through *her* lips.

Oh, Katerina, it's rude to ignore someone who's a part of you.

“You’re nothing,” I said through gritted teeth, “but a figment of my imagination.”

She tilted her head. *Her* lips were unmoving as the heat of *her* words hovered on my skin.

You’re losing control.

“What?”

A memory flickered against my mind, the moment transforming the declining living room into the foyer with the three Sephtis brothers. I witnessed how I gripped one of them by the neck and lifted them with no mercy in my eyes, the words that escaped my lips stern and cold.

“Don’t you ever call me that.”

She was fucking mocking me.

The memory quickly dispersed and pieced the living room back together, *her* body carving against the shift of scenery.

A simple name, yet such a powerful trigger—

The rage coursed faster as I continued to respond through gritted teeth, “Don’t you dare.”

—*Kat.*

I pounced across the room before I could think. My hands wrapped around *her* neck, my grip tightening until *she’d* vanished. But it wasn’t real. I held nothing; I had no control. *She* manipulated everything.

“I can erase you with a single pill. You can’t use anything, not even that name, against me.”

Her sneer stretched further.

Right, because I’m Kat, aren’t I?

“That name is nothing. You. Are. Nothing.”

The anger violently weighed against my stomach. It squeezed and twisted my guts, my throat tightening as my mouth grew dry.

Sweet Katerina, you’re not as strong as you used to be.

I stumbled backward, the furniture and walls slowly vanishing into the sky.

Soon, you'll accept me.

Her words echoed around me, with no trace of *her* body or the house in sight as a force plunged me through the floor.

Because we've grown hungry.

My body grew dense along the air pressure, sharp waters swallowing me as I crashed through.

And we'll be satisfied once we've killed them all.

A prickling itch scraped my skin. My throat swelled as my lungs clung for air, a sudden force pulling me away from the dark room through a door.

I slammed against the ceramic toilet, a rapid-fire clawing through my throat and out of my lips. Nothing escaped me, my stomach constricting and yanking me deeper into the ground. The minor light that snuck through a small window reflected the pale-yellow liquid floating on the bowl's surface. It was a bathroom I didn't recognize.

I don't know how long I stayed there like that. When I had enough energy to stand, I dragged myself toward the book bag Lace had given me.

I threw the papers onto the floor and grabbed the orange jars. One by one, I downed the range of antidepressants, antipsychotics, a few new experimental drugs, and nausea medication for the one side effect I could barely medicate. The rest —like my sleeping paralysis, appetite loss, sweating, insomnia, and more— not so much.

Although my memory was shitty, I knew the water was always home. It comforted me with open arms whenever I needed an escape. I craved its security during times like these since it weakened *her* voice and thoughts of *her*.

Pools were enough, but lakes were what I needed. Like the one I noticed when I arrived.

Warmth surged through my chest and pushed me to my phone. There were no notifications, the late time indicating

that maybe Lace hadn't received news of my mistake. Even while the great possibility of my discharge hovered over me like a cloud of smoke, I forced myself back into the bathroom to wash up.

Bitterness stirred in my stomach. I wasn't strong enough to beat *her* by myself. I needed the pills to shut *her* down, even if it shut me off too.

The tension in my muscles stayed even with the steam. My guard was always there.

My shoulders lowered as I stepped into the bedroom I had failed to see earlier. Fuchsia walls clashed against my sight, dark plush carpet caressing my toes while I paced away from the wet tiles. A large wooden bed rested in the middle of the room, cabinets of differing styles occupying any available space along it. The room was large but somehow felt cramped. I liked it.

I settled onto the floor as I searched for the guardian suit and earpiece we were forced to wear on the job. If I even stayed at this job.

The latest model of a guardian's bodysuit was snug, the thick nylon fabric mimicking latex with its outer polished sheen. It was designed to distribute a body's balance while still breathable, mesh cuts around the torso added to retain swift movements in fights. The earpiece was developed to protect and regulate guardians from extreme noises due to our sensitivity. It came as a bonus to speak through.

All that was missing was the bulletproof vest. That probably wasn't coming along.

A knock vibrated against the door. I swear I'd prefer to be buried alive than face Sonia. To have made a mistake and to hear it from a high-ranking guardian was embarrassing.

"You're not Sonia," I blurted when I opened the door.

A man towered over me, deep sepia skin gleaming as a sliver of light trailed from behind me and onto them. Freckles decorated his forehead and high cheekbones, and thick golden dreadlocks twisted above his head into a large bun. He wore an

all-black suit, one that concealed the vest that lifted his chest with each breath. Like Sonia, he bore the same black, rectangular sunglasses that buried his eyes.

“Good morning, Ms. Eli. I hope you’ve rested well,” he said as he bowed, a smile hinting. “I’m Tristan Amelle, the Chief Guardian.”

My mouth parted, but no words came out.

“Follow me, and if at any time you have questions, please feel free to interrupt me.”

Mr. Amelle made his way down the long hallway, a bunch of doors coming into view. While I was quick to match his pace, my eyes wandered around the house I barely glimpsed at after my mistake. Like the outer landscape, its beauty was overwhelming— even if there was a gloominess that the walls emanated.

He descended the main stairs and turned to another below it, the spirals spinning my head.

Did he already tell Lace about yesterday?

“This is the cellar, where the Sephtis frequent daily. Fair warning, a guardian isn’t allowed to roam this site while any spaces are occupied unless commanded otherwise.”

When we reached the last step, he continued forward along the wall. Dim lighting emphasized the surrounding flooring and outlined a door against the far end. From a distance, it was easily unnoticeable since there was no knob.

There was no indication of how it could be opened, too— if it was meant to open.

“If there’s anything to be carried out in the outer grounds, you must use this passageway as an exit and entrance at all times. The main entryway is only for invited guests and the Sephtis.”

If Mr. Amelle had already told Lace, why hadn’t he called yet?

He relaxed his back on the center of the door and pushed, the border revolving as he made his way through. I followed

once the swift rotation slowed, stepping into a dingy alley.

“There are two turns within the underground passageway. The right route leads to an exit next to the first gate within the premises. That one is off-limits. The left leads directly outside the second gate and is in the direction of the guardian’s quarters.”

Did Lace tell Mr. Amelle to give me the bad news after giving me a tour of the house I wouldn’t be a guardian for?

Mr. Amelle made a swift turn and continued ahead until we reached a staircase that leveled against the ceiling. When he almost reached the top, he gripped a handle and pushed through, light pouring in and highlighting Mr. Amelle’s figure. Once outside of the hatch, he swiftly kicked it shut.

“When going about, you must always ensure that the door stays closed to avoid any unnecessary mistakes. For now, as a private guardian, every morning before dusk, you’re expected to do a round across the premises. At night, you must check the household and ensure there’s nothing out of place. With time, there will be more responsibilities for your post as we grow closer to the replacement period.”

To shove in my face that my mistakes always had consequences when I didn’t keep my promises?

“I must note you’ve been quiet this entire time, Ms. Eli. Do you have any worries?” He paused in his tracks while I stilled beside him.

Lace wouldn’t do that, would he?

“Am I not going to be reprimanded for my actions yesterday?”

“For what reason?” Mr. Amelle had held a deadpan expression throughout our time together until now. His eyebrows slightly raised, creases forming along his forehead.

“I don’t know... I was expecting to get fired, maybe? Of course, it was an accident, but I still put my hands on my employer.”

“I have no clue what you’re referring to, Ms. Eli.” Mr. Amelle’s nostrils flared as he sighed and grew closer. “But understand that anything that occurs in the household remains within such walls. Still, let me advise you on something important.

There are three rules the Sephtis demand all employees to follow.

First, you must never stumble upon them unless they seek you out. Second, you can never look them dead in the eyes as it’s bad-mannered. And third, you can never oppose their verdicts as all decisions rests upon their hands.”

“But—”

“Even if you’ve broken all such rules, and they have said nothing, then you are fine.” An eyebrow stayed raised. “Unless you oppose their indifference, then I could request a meeting, and they will most definitely—”

“No!” I shouted, my voice louder than I had expected. “No, I just— I wanted to clarify that what occurred yesterday was a mistake. It will never happen again.”

Mr. Amelle parted from my side and raised his head. “Then I will relay your message to clear any misunderstandings. If that’s all, your duties start today.” A shadowed smile adorned his face while he bowed. “I look forward to working with you, Ms. Eli.”

CHAPTER
SIX

ALEK SEPHTIS



September had come to an end, October settling before I could wind down and accept the true start of fall. Surely there was no drastic change in the season as it had only been a week since the new month's arrival, but I yearned for the shift in the wind that heaved an appealing warmth. The ease of the air as it wandered through leaves and branches. It was the beginning of a new cycle, one that I had been looking forward to, yet, other pressing matters stripped my attention.

I'd been caged in my chamber since my meeting with Kaleb, unable to leave until a scheme was in place. Restless hours had long been wasted on pondering ideas that led to dead ends. Seeking Tristan's help proved to be insufficient, as we were both dumbfounded.

Each of us had our own positions when it came to devising and performing the schemes. Christopher was the overseer, and his purpose was only to receive the final form of the gag. Noah was the leader, the one responsible for the schemes' mechanics. Kaleb was the implementer, the sole brother to carry every scheme into full effect, and whose capabilities allowed each one to succeed no matter how practical or ridiculous it was.

I was the informant, called upon to retrieve viable information and to document them while in action. Jacque was the strategist, his position entitling him to materialize all possible detours a scheme could take. Jacob was the consultant, rarely asked to determine all the positive and negative outcomes that a gag could create. And Raphael was

the puppet, the last resort when a scheme was failing, though it was rare.

Never had our positions been altered, another routine that was durable throughout the years since my brothers weren't fond of change. Yet, Kaleb tasked me with devising the scheme.

With a twist of luck, there was no more hiding in the shadows.

I was expected to get rid of the new guardian. To ruin not only the woman but also the CEG. Because it wasn't just her who insulted him by putting her hands on him, but the CEG. The arrival of every new private guardian was a slap to Kaleb's face and his eloquent gags. It fortified the notion that even with all the power he had as a Regal and as the third oldest, he was nothing compared to That Man.

Tristan entered my chamber and swiftly ascended the stairs onto the second floor. A sliver of light peeked through the blinds and caressed my skin as I rose from the bed, the heat itching against my chest while I walked to the nearest dresser.

Tristan unbuttoned his suit and toppled onto the onyx bench at the end of my bed. "Did I disturb your sleep?" Fortunately, in my chamber, we didn't have to worry about our façades. It was the only space in the entire premises where we had a tinge of privacy. But that meant we had to use it wisely and as a last resort.

"Of course not," I said as I grabbed a pressed button-down shirt. "Rarely have I gotten a wink of rest, particularly now due to Kaleb."

"Has he called for you?"

"No." The button-down wrapped around my body, the fabric loose while I fastened the plain front. "Did any of my brothers notice you?"

Tristan shook his head as he tapped the small receiver in his right ear, the wire hiding behind his lobe and neck. "I checked their whereabouts. Noah and Kaleb are in the feeding spaces for their sessions, while the twins are inside the

entertainment cave. Christopher and Raphael are still in their rooms, but the eldest should be heading into the library soon. That gives us a few minutes to discuss any issues you're having." His head turned to me. "What do you want to address first?"

"The most important matter," I stated while I began pacing. "I have yet to decide on a scheme. Kaleb won't feel generous to bestow me more time since it's already been a week. I also can't risk taking longer since it may jeopardize my feeding privileges."

Christopher administered feedings since we were required to feed on hospital grounds until he deemed we were ready for private clientele. But in recent months, he'd handed full control of our feeding schedules to Noah.

Although he was generous to an extent, he was imperiled by Kaleb's influence. While Noah believed the task was a chore, one that suspended the period he'd use for swimming, Kaleb was willing to shoulder that burden. This way, Kaleb had an added method to manipulate me to his bidding.

"Well, I can't help you with that. Your brothers are ruthless when working together. They know how to design and implement any plan that'll rule in their favor. They're *too* driven."

I turned to him. "What are you alluding to?"

"Their hatred for the CEG, the Ministry, and The Premier is more than enough to fuel them to act above and beyond. It's the sole reason behind their behaviors. Your hatred for all of those is present, but not enough. You don't have the drive to destroy. Only survive."

My teeth sank into my tongue as I took in his words. When given the chance to speak freely, Tristan was able to convey the truth around me easily. Although at times his words stung—like now—I stepped back to analyze his dispute.

"All I'm saying, Alek, is that you all have designated roles when it comes to your schemes. Use that to your advantage." Tristan's head sprung up while a large smile decorated his

expression. “Also, it’s important to use that drive not only to survive but to think outside of the box— well, in your case, your room. The best ideas come to you when you’re outside, not locked up.”

“And you said you couldn’t help me.” A minor grin hinted from my lips. “Though, you could have mentioned this a week ago.”

“I could have, but my time was consumed on other matters that you required me to do.” He lifted his sleeve and looked at his watch, the ticking detectable. “Which is the other issue I expect you want to touch upon.”

Since the incident with the guardian —which bitterly forced me into Kaleb’s hold— I’d asked Tristan to keep watch over her. In the beginning, it was to monitor her actions and keep an eye for anything that could be out of bounds.

But with each briefing, Tristan would report her repetitive routine that was less than ordinary. She had done nothing in the past week that gave me a reason to suspect her. My brothers weren’t keeping an eye on her. Either Christopher and Noah found the incident amusing, or they were waiting for the right moment alongside Kaleb.

But now, even if I was to hear the same report, there was a trace of intrigue that weighed against my chest.

“She does her rounds at the exact hour the day and night guardians change shifts. When she finishes, she stays on the premises to inspect further and doesn’t return to her room until all of you are in your expected quarters. Once she confirms that all of you are tucked away, then she assesses the house with me.” A sudden gleam reflected across his shades while he stood up and buttoned his suit. “Do you have anything else you want to add to the private guardian duties?”

“Does she have a break between all of her rounds?”

I never sought information regarding guardians. No matter their titles, they all enforced their history as being That Man’s moles. My brothers removed them due to their fear of having

their secrets discovered. I sought their departure to have one less babysitter.

Yet, this time it was different, and I wasn't able to place my finger on how.

“From how it seems, I don't think she even sleeps. Those dark bags under her eyes are comparable to yours, actually,” he said as he pointed at my face, his grin digging deeper into his cheek.

“You're dismissed.” I motioned his hand away and walked down the stairs, Tristan's presence hovering over me as he followed.

Tristan paused before the door and added, “I wanted to remind you that the beginning of the month means a replacement period, so I suggest you pay a visit to your mom beforehand. If you continue to evade it, then you won't be able to see her until later.”

Soon after Tristan's exit, I thrust myself into my thoughts.

In no way would Kaleb nor Christopher assist me. There was a slight chance Noah may, but I would risk Kaleb finding out, and the outcome wouldn't be pleasant. Raphael was more clueless than I could be, which directed me to two options that could work in my favor, or against me.

I blurred through the household until I reached the vault. My stomach twisted as I stood before the entertainment cave. When I stepped through the door, my nostrils flared in relief as I came into the presence of the twins.

Luck must be on my side.

Jacob pulled the cue stick behind his back and quickly bowed once he noticed me, Jacque hesitating but doing the same. They were using the pool table today, the remaining black ball still along the red surface that complimented the oak wood. Jacque swiftly turned around once they finished greeting and aimed against the white ball.

In a rapid motion, the balls clashed, and the black ball landed in the nearest pocket, leaving the white ball roaming alone. My mouth widened intending to congratulate him, but

Jacque blurred past me and disappeared into the vault. Jacob didn't move, although his eyes avoided my glare.

“Why aren't you running behind him?” Jacque and Jacob were inseparable; when one led, the other followed. Though they had separate bodies, they practically shared one mind. While Christopher, Noah, and Kaleb joined together to maintain power, Raphael and I were similar to Jacque and Jacob. We did it because we cared for each other. In truth, their bond was one that no one could fully compare to. It transcended beyond the physical and was the purest affection any of us held.

“You never visit us,” Jacob said.

I nodded as I drew closer, aiming to meet with Jacob since he had an ability that I lacked: persuading his twin to disclose information passed down by Noah or Kaleb.

“Jacob, I need a single clue from Jacque.” The façade as the fourth oldest molding itself. Although I didn't hold such authority as Christopher, Noah, or Kaleb, I was still older than the twins. And when alone, they couldn't go against my word. “Kaleb has tasked me with a scheme, but I need an understanding of how exactly he wants me to lead it. Is that understood?”

Rarely was I able to use my authority, a feasible excuse rarely sprouting. But when I did, a thrill cracked through my bones and electrocuted my nerves. It was both exhilarating and terrifying, sensing the mere ambiance enough to remind me why my brothers desired it so much.

Power could wreak one's head due to the intoxicating taste. At times, it was more powerful than the thirst for blood — while blood was limited, the use of authority was permanent.

Jacob nodded as he bowed, leaving after I silently dismissed him. My mind grew weary as I concentrated on steady breaths. Even if power was savory, distance was necessary from it as it could lead me astray.



A gathering was called the following day by Christopher.

Raphael was the first to take his seat, then Jacque and Jacob, whose eyes didn't waver from the ground. I followed, each of us pursuing the continuous routine of bowing when Kaleb entered, then Noah, and finally Christopher. When he settled into his chair, my shoulders straightened.

Christopher's lips parted, and I lightly flinched at the thought of his upcoming words. But a sense of stillness flushed through my body as he didn't meet my unsteady gaze.

"An essential matter has arisen from the Ambrogios," he announced. "They require our time tomorrow evening to discuss it."

"Splendid!" Noah quacked, his eyes gleaming while his palms met. "It was long overdue for their visitation. Really, I've grown quite bored without my precious Bethany's charisma. Oh, I can already predict the vulgar responses she'll blurt as she turns me away!"

Kaleb rolled his eyes as he crossed his arms across his chest. "How many times do I have to remind you, you degenerate? It's not mutual attraction if she bolts away from you every chance she gets."

"Oh, Kaleb." Noah raised his shoulders as he cupped his hands against his heart. "Your words may hurt, but the thought of my precious Bethany expunges such negative fabrications."

"They're not fabrications when she's admitted them on every occasion, Brother," Kaleb responded, his tone settling. "But for what reason would they need to visit? A call would have sufficed. I'm sure we would have even favored sending an owl with a letter attached to it for the traditional experience. Unless..."

Noah's cheerful expression vanished, his features growing harsh and serious. "They've received notice of That Man's

agenda?” Christopher didn’t respond, his silence the answer we were all expecting.

Although my brothers and I held opposing beliefs, the only opinion we shared was of That Man. After his marriage to our mother, he vanished into his duties in the Ministry until he became Premier. She’d rarely mentioned him, and when she did, she’d downplayed his wrongdoings. In return, my brothers and I turned a blind eye, living cheerily with only our mother and with the belief that That Man was nonexistent.

After she passed, and we were the only ones in attendance at the funeral, the truth was a lash of reality. That Man painted himself as a ruler that sought peace between kinds yet allowed his own family to rot silently until he saw fit. That’s why we agreed not to stay still any longer.

He deserved never-ending torment for all the wrongdoings he’d done to our mother.

For that reason, we continued our relations with the Ambrogios. They received intel on the High Parliament, which consisted of That Man and their father, the Ministry’s Secretary. In addition, the Ambrogios held strong connections with those who worked closely with Cabinet, giving us the upper hand while we maintained the charade we were born solely for: The Premier’s sons, heirs that adhered to their duties.

Yet, the reminder of That Man’s existence was turmoil to all of us, specifically Kaleb.

His upper lip turned upward while his eyes deepened. “Their notice must mean they have information for us worth listening to.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Christopher said as he heaved a sigh, his eyes falling onto Jacque, Jacob, and Raphael. “Do any of you have anything you’d like to add before you’re all dismissed?”

The three shook their heads, Jacque’s expression shadowed by fury, Jacob’s somber, and Raphael’s illegible. While the

twins' body language paired with their appearance, Raphael's hands fisted against his upper thighs.

Christopher stood and exited the gathering room, Noah, the twins, and even Raphael trailing as Kaleb lingered. He paused before the opening that led to the foyer, his intentions clear as I remained seated.

"I'm expecting an ingenious plan that we haven't thought of before," he said, his body snaking around the sofa while his tone grew low. "With the time I've gifted you, I'm sure you understand the repercussions if it doesn't meet my expectations, dear little brother."

"Of course," I responded and nodded. Briefly, after my talk with Jacob yesterday, Tristan returned within hours and fulfilled the end of Jacob's promise. Not only had Jacob and Jacque contrived their roles properly, but they even delivered more than I had expected.

"The guardian acts wildly when provoked, proven when she attacked you on her first day. In addition, Tristan has reported that this has occurred before in her past occupations and even in the CEG."

Kaleb waved his hands through the air. "Yes, the information you retrieved mentioned that, but it didn't elaborate."

I nodded. "I was able to acquire more. When called to action, she has a tendency to get carried away. This makes her a possible threat to employers."

Kaleb's eyes widened with interest, and he pulled himself closer to me. "Continue."

"We use her as our pawn rather than implementing one of us. We don't do much of the dirty work; instead, we choose one of the outer guardians to fake an intrusion where she'd have to defend us." A smile crept from Kaleb's lips, the sight of the ends curving into his cheeks forcing my throat to gulp. "It'll be staged as a tussle between the two, dead or alive, and we'll prove the incompetence with not only the guardians but also the CEG. The CEG will then be labeled as treacherous

and faulty since they've jeopardized a Regal Family with the rabid animals they've depicted as guardians."

I deducted Kaleb had handed me the task without informing Noah or Christopher. If they'd known, our meetings would have included them. If they discovered he'd pulled me to plan a scheme without their approval, he'd be punished.

The thought of him dealing with Christopher's and Noah's wrath was my drive to continue.

Kaleb's smile twisted as he rested his hands on my shoulders. "It's brilliant, Alek, truly dazzling."

"Will we go through the process now to ensure the plan can be placed effectively?" I asked, hinting at the answer I knew.

"Oh, dear little brother, did I not mention it to you? This will be our little secret, as a surprise for the guardians and brothers alike. Thrilling, isn't it?"

"Yes, Brother," I responded, my teeth nipping at a smile from slipping.

A hand met my back, and his pat was not forcible but rather light. "You've outdone yourself. It'll rule in your favor when the time to enact the scheme arrives. Think of it as a reward that'll bring you peace of mind if everything goes smoothly—that's if you keep it between us and our brothers don't discover our play."

"Of course, Brother," I said, my stomach loosening as I took in his malicious grin. "I will do just that."



Another day signified another routine to uphold, this one only emerging in front of guests—in specific, the Ambrogio sisters.

After the habitual inspection of my ensemble, I retired from my chamber and onto the main stairs, where my younger brothers began taking their accustomed positions along the last

step. I upheld my spot beside Jacque, then Noah and Christopher followed.

Christopher stood beside the right handrail, bearing an entirely white suit that complimented his pure-blond hair. It was waist-length and pulled back into a French braid that opposed Noah's appearance. Noah's shoulders straightened as he matched Christopher's stance, his oversized azure dress shirt and skirt harmonious with his raven-black waves. While Noah's hair curled in all directions, Christopher's had no strands misplaced along his head.

Both of them side by side contrasted in the same manner darkness opposed light, the difference in their tastes and personalities overwhelming.

Raphael stood on the left, one hand slicking back his jet-black curls while the other wiped down his ebony jumpsuit. Jacob and Jacque were in between Raphael and I, sporting an indigo jumpsuit with their dirty blonde hair pulled behind their ears.

Kaleb strolled to my right, occupying the space between Noah and I, bearing a casual burgundy outfit, his walnut brown hair styled into waves. Yet, just like him, my outfit was standard, a bare white dress shirt paired with gray formal trousers and my hair fixed with minimal effort.

When we settled into our spots, silence was our only companion. Moments like these revealed our stubbornness: many not caring for a word, few remaining too timid. If we didn't discuss revenge, we had arguments. If we didn't have either, then our conversations remained inanimate.

Beyond the closed towering double doors, tires grveled against the driveway and halted, the entrance widening to reveal our guests.

The Ambrogios continued to be the largest Regal Family to live, their power and name extending from all corners of the earth. Although recognized for their influence throughout history, they're acclaimed for keeping relations with all who have the slightest blood connection to them.

And while they were known as the largest name, the Sephtis name was noted as the smallest. We were the only heirs, a single family bearing the weight of continuing our lineage.

That's why That Man perfectly paired the seven sisters with the Premier's seven sons, each of us corresponding in age. It not only cemented our lineage but bound him to more power since their father was next in line after the Sephtis name finished serving their terms.

Their presence evolved along the surge of air that devoured us, the polarity in the sister's extreme.

The Ambrogio sisters' presences varied due to personalities and the fact that they didn't all share the same mother. But their beauty was inimitable, all of them bearing what specifically branded their lineage: ice-blond hair that complimented their variation of distinctive eye colors and features.

For today, only four sisters were present.

Anabella was the eldest from the first wife, and her sister, Bethany, followed. They both resembled their mother's wide and full face, but as Anabella possessed her mother's deep-set, obsidian eyes, Bethany displayed the hooded, crystal blue eyes that dominated their father's lineage.

From the second wife was the third oldest, Catalina, followed by her sister and the fourth oldest, Davina. While Catalina upheld their father's semblance with round features and eyes that matched Bethany's, Davina was a replica of her mother, who bore angular yet harmonious features and soulless silver eyes.

Their appeal rounded their presence like a magnet to attract their surroundings, yet it didn't disguise the truth: they were all wolves in sheep's clothing.

On cue, we bowed, and Christopher broke the silence. "Shall we take a seat?"

CHAPTER
SEVEN

KATERINA ELI



The medication hit right when I finished my rounds inside the first gate. If I had nausea medication, it wouldn't be so bad. But the tension in my stomach, mixed with the echoing ache in my muscles, wasn't particularly fun.

Granted, I wasn't used to jogging miles on end for days. But still. My body should not be hurting this much. If Lorenzo were here, he'd be lecturing me like there was no tomorrow.

I instinctively turned toward the underground passageway. Mr. Amelle stopped me halfway through my walk.

"Follow me," he commanded. Mr. Amelle quickly walked in the opposite direction, which led to the second gate.

"Today, the Sephtis have Regal guests visiting, and generally, private guardians are responsible for mandating such events." He guided me through the driveway, where a limousine awaited by the entrance. "But since it was short notice, I had no time to review the protocol regarding meetings with you. You have the choice of having me join you on the post or not."

"I can do it," I said, my tone a little too eager. "I mean unless there's a specific procedure I need to follow?"

Mr. Amelle shook his head as he paused before the tall doors. "To be precise, Ms. Eli, there are a few matters you need to be wary of."

"Like?"

“There are too many to disclose in this short period. All that’s worth mentioning is that you must not make your presence known, and if they require your attention, then they will be sure to captivate it.” Questions formed against my tongue, but his sudden bow forced me to bite away anything I wanted reassurance on. Damn.

What was it with these people leaving before I could ask questions? Were they scared of them?

I steadied my breath as I stepped into the foyer. I followed the voices, keeping my body balanced against my concentrated pace. I halted between the wall that parted the living room’s entrance and the kitchen’s. The spot was angled and curved, which gave me a clear viewpoint of who was inside.

Lace thought I had a gift for sneaking. I could study my surroundings in an instant and conceal myself. In reality, I had just learned from the best.

Any moment I could spare throughout the week in my room, I used it to review the homework I procrastinated on. I couldn’t rely on gossip since most of the guardians didn’t speak about the brothers whenever I visited the quarters.

I’d tackled the biggest stack: the medical records.

I skim-read through the majority. Honestly, what helped me focus were the photos on my subjects’ documents. Although I hadn’t met all of them yet, the pictures helped me correlate faces with names. It even pushed me to remember that I wasn’t just working for ghosts in an abandoned house.

The thought kept me from dozing off during the late nights.

“To what do we owe this pleasure?” A familiar, monotone voice said, their long blonde hair indicating that it was Christopher.

I’d even done homework outside of my assigned homework. Since Mr. Amelle mentioned I could use any facilities within the guardian’s base—one being the library—I took advantage of it. There, I updated myself on current

affairs. I even went so far as to study some Regal Vampire Families that I hadn't recognized.

Lace would be so proud.

The women in the living room stuck out like sore thumbs. They emitted an air that screamed elegance with posed figures and refined clothes. Not a single hair was out of place. Their body languages were extremely composed. I hadn't believed the raving news articles about the Ambrogio's beauty. Damn, was I wrong.

And besides the brothers, they all enhanced and complemented each other's looks.

Sure, I didn't draw a line to who I was attractive to, but for these guys? I had to. No way would I let these pretty snakes trick me.

Catalina was the first sister to speak, "Our marriage arrangement. It's reached a point where our mothers have joined forces to urge an earlier decision." A giggle slipped from her lips while she rested on Kaleb's lap, whose tongue traveled along her neck and nape in circulating motions.

"Truthfully, they're doing so due to the Mubaraks' disappearance," Anabella, who sat by Christopher, said. "Heads of Ministry are going mad with one less seated family. Father has convinced them to let us decide, but in turn, it has to be resolved by December twenty-fourth."

A snort escaped Davina. "Well, with the way the Premier has dealt with the matter, it seems he'll even allow the decision to be made right before the Christmas Ball." She motioned forward, blocking a shadow next to her. "That's if you don't get banned."

"Oh, we've tried." Kaleb grinned as he broke away from Catalina.

Davina's head tilted while her mouth upturned into a disdained smile. "For once, bite your tongue, Kaleb."

Kaleb's sharp fangs protruded through his lips as he sneered.

“Oh, yes!” Noah said with a high-pitched tone as he clapped. “A showdown between families is just what we need! Don’t you think Bethany?” He turned his head to his left, and his arms motioned toward the figure next to him.

Bethany quickly diverted his actions and added, “Which falls onto the next topic. Your father’s position has grown very unstable.”

The topic reeled my attention, my body inching closer.

“It has been like that ever since he became Premier a decade ago,” Christopher stated.

“You’re correct, but it’s become worse,” Anabella responded. “He’s placing all of his efforts into concealing the Mubaraks’ disappearance from the humans rather than placing an interim family and balancing the Ministry.”

“He’s nothing but a human sympathizer,” Kaleb spat.

“What’s your father’s take?” Christopher asked. “Is he sure that the humans haven’t discovered the truth?”

“He has noted the rising minor rumors,” Anabella began, “but they have all been ceased with no trace throughout the Internet. But it won’t be long until public conferences resume between both species and the humans notice a family head missing.”

“That’s good news,” Kaleb declared. “If they raise the matter, then the Ministry has no choice but to admit to it and to dispose of That Man from his position as Premier. Your father will then be able to take his chair, and we’ll all receive what we’ve been striving for.”

“It can’t work like that,” Bethany swiftly mentioned. “Humans want to withdraw from the Two-Species Treaty. For the past decade, they’ve been itching for a way to overthrow our species. This would be the perfect motive to not only dismember the Ministry but be rid of us all through war.”

“So, what are we to do?” Noah said, his body slouching into his chair while the back of his hand met his forehead. “Oh, Bethany, if you accept me right here and now, I’ll walk you to the altar myself.”

“What a shit-show,” I whispered to myself.

A fragrant scent brushed against my nostrils, pulling me away from all the other ones. While the varying smells were sharp copper, this one was sweet. Flowery. I’d smelled it the day of the incident. But right now, it was strong enough to pull me toward it.

Anabella’s voice stopped me from moving. “No need to make rash decisions. You have about two months to decide on what will work in our favor.”

“Of course,” Christopher said, his tone unchanging. “I will advise that we take up all the time we are gifted. You all must endure your mothers for the time being.”

“They will grow silent once you’ve made your choice,” Davina said while a sharp grin hinted at her expression.

The hairs on my nape rose, my body turning to where they pointed as a faint scent met my side. A boy halted before me, my gaze quick to analyze the features that I’d seen in pictures. My stomach twisted as a sneer hinted across Jacques’s face.

Or was it Jacob?

A swift motion brushed against my clothes and hovered behind me. I was only able to steal a glimpse at the boy who looked like Jacob—or Jacques—with a blank face.

Guardian mode overcame my body, but I remained still. Where had they come from? I hadn’t sensed them, not even their scents. Had they been hiding this whole time?

Both met me in height, the tips of their heads slightly lower than my forehead. Their builds, on the other hand, were half of mine, as they were swallowed by their clothes. But the twin behind me proved his strength as he pulled at my wrists.

The twin in front of me tilted his head. “Brother’s going to be very pleased with our discovery.”

I couldn’t risk reacting. The thought of attacking another brother chilled my bones. Even if I itched to twist out of the twin’s hold as he pushed me toward the living room.

A burst of pressure exploded on my back, forcing my knees to the ground. The other twin wrung his fingers through my hair and angled my head up. The sharp pain throbbed against my skull. “Brothers, may I be granted permission to speak?”

I studied the room, bright purple walls and deep green chairs conquering my sight. The center chandelier was similar to the one in the foyer, but instead of forming an ‘S,’ it dangled into a diamond, and shined against the dark wood and gold Gothic accents all round.

Unlike other guardians who had light sensitivity, I didn’t. But somehow, this room burned my eyes.

But what caught my attention was how swiftly Kaleb yanked Catalina from his lap and jumped onto his feet. “What do we have here, little brothers?”

“Jacque, speak at once!” Noah said as he bounced in his chair like a little boy with free candy. “I must know what’s occurring before us immediately!”

“What the bloody hell is that?” Davina spat, her eyebrows creasing as they met.

“Our new private guardian,” Jacque began, “was eavesdropping on us.”

A sharp ache echoed through my bones, my mask dissolving before I could stop it. “No, I wasn’t! You’re wrong.”

“Is that a protest from your guardian?” Bethany questioned with distaste lingering in her tone.

“Yes, well, they’re all pests regardless of how effectively they follow instructions, don’t you think?” Kaleb asked as his body neared, his movements sly as a snake. “But you must admit, when one breaks the rules, it becomes rather intriguing.”

“I wasn’t breaking any rules,” I said, quick to defend myself in this state. “Mr. Amelle ordered me to stand guard during your meeting. I was doing my job.”

Screeching laughter bounced against the walls, Noah rising from his chair with a broad, upturned smile. “Oh, dragging another guardian into this mess, I see! Such dirty play, I must admit.”

“Yes, truly.” Kaleb paused before me and crouched, Jacque letting go of my hair. “And such a transparent lie at that.”

“I’m not lying,” the words slipped through gritted teeth, the tingling sensation along my hairline growing uncomfortable.

“Tristan would never tell a guardian to hover around confidential meetings,” a new, serious voice stated. The shadow beside Davina moved forward, revealing deep brown hair and a dark gaze that met mine. They were an abyss that only the fourth brother, Alek, possessed.

His eyes trembled with uncertainty, a puzzle in his appearance briefly hinting before it turned blank.

Kaleb’s keen sneer twitched. “All guardians under this household know to never be within these walls when guests visit. There are repercussions to those who eavesdrop, and you, dear, are no exemption.” He cupped my cheeks, his nails digging into my skin.

I bit my tongue, my cheek, and any piece of skin that would numb the fire that burned in my chest. It blazed stronger the deeper he pressed, *her* voice itching in the depths of my mind. I couldn’t risk another incident.

I focused on my breathing and my steady heart. I had to. Needed to.

“Kaleb,” Anabella interrupted. “If she’s a guardian, why does she have no sensible presence?”

His hold loosened, but his fingers loomed over my skin. A gleam ignited in his gaze, one that was drowned in fascination. “A wonder I’ve been pondering myself,” his words were almost a whisper, his breath cool along the air.

“She has no scent either,” Davina said, her nostrils flaring. “Is this the newest model of those foul creatures?”

“We aren’t creatures,” I murmured, tearing away from Kaleb’s hold and standing. “We’re humans who are reformed to protect, especially your kind.”

“Protect?” Catalina huffed a chuckle. “Don’t make me laugh with such an absurd statement. No vampire in this time of age needs a mutt to guard them.”

I exhaled a hollow breath and met their gazes, all of them waiting for my response. They were expecting a guardian who’d remember their place. Beg for forgiveness. Lace had always told me to do so. Because while we were strongly opposed, we still had a clear vow: to protect.

But fuck that.

They didn’t want my protection. They wanted to step all over me. And I was all for a fight.

Because if I didn’t protect myself, who would?

My teeth tugged at my bottom lip as a smile hinted. I stepped toward Kaleb, his eyes widening while a shadow clouded his expression. “You didn’t think that a few minutes ago. You find humans tedious, but they’re not dumb. They’re the ones pushing for war while your kind is trying to avoid it. With the Mubaraks’ disappearance, it’ll happen. Who’s going to protect you then?”

Kaleb’s hand sliced through the air and landed on my neck, a force pushing against my airways. He dug his fingers into my skin, replicating the same motions I had done to him.

But he wasn’t as strong as me. No one was.

I pushed his body away, gasps erupting in the room as Kaleb stumbled back. A blaze ignited in his gaze, his body suddenly stilling while his eyes surpassed me. My hair quickly leapt, adrenaline coursing through my veins as an object hurtled through the air.

I threw Kaleb onto the ground, a sneer peeking through his lips, before twirling. Whatever was thrown landed right on my palm, an intense ache flaming as I gripped it. Thankfully, it wasn’t a sharp weapon.

Guardians were trained in a large range of hand-to-hand combat. A select few, though, integrated fighting weapons depending on their focus field. Lace had trained me with one weapon since I wanted to expand my skill set.

I chose the baton because they were just as swift as my fists. Not as lethal, but close enough.

My fingers tightened against it and I swung it beside my waist, the weapon expanding as I took in my surroundings.

There were no new scents. No sudden movements. Everything was still.

Until an outline blurred through the entrance and outside into the front yard. My instincts kicked in, and I sprinted outside.

This is what I lived for as a guardian. Not to be a babysitter stuck inside all day. I needed action. And I had it as I fell behind the figure.

They swiftly spun, their hand flinging a knife. My body jerked as the tip grazed my T-shirt. Fuck this.

I ripped it apart until it was just my guardian suit. Before I could take in the chilly wind against the fabric, another knife swooshed through the air. Gravel pierced me as I ducked onto the ground. Sweat grazed my neck, and my breathing intensified.

It was embarrassing breaking a sweat in a fight that only started.

Footsteps echoed beyond the trees. I rose onto bent knees, analyzing the grounds. While the figure was dressed in all-black with a mask, it was easy to tell them apart in the yard. All the identical trees created a hazy maze, forcing them back toward me.

It was perfect.

I sprung to the right as a light, fresh scent met my nose, rounding through the maze until I met the figure. My hand fastened on the baton and swung hard, their body doubling over and rolling backward on the dirt before they could feel

my hit. When they steadied, I struck again— this time with both arms.

I took turns with my baton and my fist. They dodged each one, their footing growing lopsided with every wave.

There was my opening.

I motioned my body as if I was going to swing again, but at the last minute, changed my stance and lowered. The roundhouse kick landed swiftly and forced them to crash onto the ground. Before they could move, I hauled their body backward onto the gazebo's posts.

Metal clanked as their head bobbed. I released the baton, my hands twisting their arms and locking them against their back.

Katerina.

“Who sent you?” I shouted over *her* whisper. I pushed their body deeper into the post, their breathing jagged. “Tell me!”

My finger trailed to the mask that hid their face.

Sudden pain reverberated against my knees, my muscles buckling as I tried to regain my balance. The figure escaped my loose hold and dashed. I couldn't even think about running behind them as a foot traveled my way.

I stopped its strike and pushed the new body against the gazebo, their baton sliding across the grounds.

There were two assailants?

I searched through the surrounding area. Guardians were posted along the closed gates.

How were they able to enter?

The new assailant towered across from me as they steadied themselves.

And where was my fucking backup?

This time, I didn't wait. I launched my attack, twisting the fight under my leash. The assailant was swift as they

responded with effortless counterattacks. Our motions fell into a routine we naturally agreed to.

You've grown weak.

That wasn't good enough.

They switched to offense and jabbed, fists pounding against mine as I defended. My neck rolled, a snap echoing along the wind and reviving the fire that had dimmed. My attacks grew sharper. Fiercer. Sloppier.

Prove to me, Katerina.

I needed to do more to ensure they wouldn't be able to get up after this.

Prove to me that you're stronger.

Everything grew blurry while my eyes tried to focus.

I had to do something.

An itch roamed along my fingers until it reached my nails, a sudden energy coursing underneath my skin.

That you aren't what you fear most.

A ringing echoed in my ears.

I had to—

Nails slashed through thick fabric with each motion. A sweet, metallic scent saturated my thoughts.

Me.

The sudden burst of energy exploded, and the ringing blared against my eardrums.

“Stop!”

I forced myself away, *her* voice vanishing along the waters of my mind. My feet tumbled a few steps across the ground. Chills ran through my body as the numbing took over.

I started to drift away, but a force widened my eyes onto the motionless body on the ground. Blood trickled from their bare chest and stomach, a pool starting to outline around them.

Then, a groan vibrated through their mask, my body inching closer.

I yanked it off, and the weight of the mask pummeled my strength.

Thick dreadlocks spanned across the ground, and sepia skin grew gray beneath a slick of sweat. Mr. Amelle's breaths were short and sharp.

Why was Mr. Amelle here?

What had happened?

I scattered away as far as I could push myself until my back crashed against a surface. Cool shivers ran through my body, and the familiar numbness crept in, my vision blurring as I took in what I had done.

You're weak.

My hands traveled to my ears and tightly cupped them in hopes *she'd bury herself*. That I wouldn't have to deal with *her* any longer. But that was a lie. It always was.

Muffles traveled around me. Everything spun. It all was a blur as I tumbled onto the ground. My hands wrapped around my knees and tugged them to my chest.

What had I done?



The velvet water hugged my body. It was like the bed I used to share with my cousin when we were small. Large but compact, with the two of us snuggled together. But the water wasn't wet; instead, it was soft— like a plush blanket.

My eyes sprung open as my weight sank deeper into a mattress. Night swallowed the room as I regained my vision, slowly recognizing the fuchsia walls and different cabinets.

How had I gotten to my room?

I sniffed the familiar coppery, flowery scent. It was natural to want to follow it, but the shadow in my room kept me still. Sonia entered my vision and bowed, my body unresponsive when I tried to reciprocate.

“Ms. Eli, how are you feeling?”

My stomach sank. An instinct I unintentionally gained from that dreaded question.

Whenever Lace or my cousin asked, I always quickly blurted out the same response. Sure, for the most part, I was fine. But on days I wasn't, I still had to bear a mask of strength even when I felt weak.

Not only did it force me to believe it, but it also gave them one less worry when it came to me. It was already enough how much I'd put them through for the past six years.

But was I fine right now? The medication waned my strength with uncontrollable nausea and a pounding headache. The fact that I was starving also wasn't helping.

Maybe that's what was weakening me, and *she* was using it to toy with me.

“Are the sedatives still causing weariness?”

“What sedatives?” My hand traveled to my neck and rubbed along my skin. It was then I noticed the gauze against my left inner elbow.

“They were approved by the Sephtis,” Sonia said, “after they witnessed your sudden convulsion. I administered it soon after you were placed in your room.”

I removed the gauze, and thankfully, there was no blood, and the apparent wound was nonexistent. “Who brought me up?”

“One of the Sephtis, Ms. Eli.”

“Which one?” I asked, my body inching away from the bed.

Sonia's expression remained deadpan. “Ms. Eli, if you are feeling fine, then I must report that you are acquitted of your

duties until further notice. You acted accordingly; however, the Sephtis need to assess today's occurrence."

My mouth widened, ready to defend myself, but I didn't need a mirror to know the state I was in. *She* had taken a great toll on me, especially after seeing what I had done to...

"How is Mr. Amelle?" I couldn't get the image out of my head. He was breathing, but just barely. The bleeding was too much, even for a half-human's regenerative powers.

"He's stable, Ms. Eli," Sonia said, her tone certain.

A sigh of relief escaped my chest. "Did he receive sedatives, too?"

"He had no need. The intake of blood was enough to improve his health. He should be fine by tomorrow." Sonia nodded and bowed, exiting before I could sneak another question. She had answered the most important one, and it was enough of a push to search for my phone.

As if on cue, it vibrated beneath the pillow.

I was quick to pick up, the end of the line soundless as I held my breath. Even if it was just a call, the fear that Lace would discover what I'd hidden from him for so long always resurfaced. Still, I wished there were things he didn't butt into. I'd rather deal with the wrath of his brothers, even his dad, but never Lace's disappointment.

Because although he was my boss, he was my best friend, and best friends knew better than to keep secrets.

"Katerina?" His tone was low. Steady. Almost cautious.

"Lace." His name was a confession on my tongue, a regret that exposed itself. We hadn't spoken since I left the CEG, but I didn't have to tell him about what had happened. He was the boss. He knew everything that ever happened.

But I wasn't speaking to my boss— but my best friend.

"Listen, it's okay," he said. His warmth brushed my ear through the phone. "You're okay. You did what you had to do as a guardian."

I wanted to deny it, the words itching to be released. But instead, I changed the topic. “The medication’s side effects are stronger this time around, Lace.”

“I was expecting that,” he said with a chuckle. “But it shouldn’t have been that big of a difference. Have you been feeding?”

Silence was my answer.

“Nina, did you even pack your normal intake?”

“You know, food’s the last thing on my mind.” It was true. If it hadn’t been for Lace reminding me to feed, I would go weeks with just human food. “I didn’t bring anything at all.”

I could make out his head shaking against the phone. “The Sephtis require a replacement period every few months. One is due soon, so be on the lookout for a new delivery and a surprise.”

“Lace, I can fend with human food, seriously...” I paused and suddenly took in his words. “What surprise?”

“Lorenzo has been approved to be an offensive guardian for the Sephtis. He’ll arrive in a few days.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

ALEK SEPHTIS



The Ambrogios remained in our presence long after the commotion settled down. Christopher occupied that timeframe to secure their word that chatter of today’s occurrence wouldn’t escape these grounds.

A simple rumor from their lips held enough power to ignite a wildfire within our society. Fortunately, they obliged after hours of discourse—in exchange for a commodity that would come along later.

We remained in the gathering room after their departure. Another meeting was upon us.

Christopher and Noah remained in their seats, their gazes falling on us as the atmosphere matured to a dreadful hum.

Suddenly I withered within my body as the pieces from earlier came together. How it followed the scheme I had told Kaleb only two days ago. His implementation of it seemingly coincided with the Ambrogio’s visitation.

But there were no coincidences when it came to the newsmongers’ that were the sisters.

Prick, my tongue itched to spit. Bloody power-hungry prick.

“Kaleb.” Christopher’s tone rarely altered, but when it did, it was more alarming than Noah and Kaleb combined. It held a narrow twang that crept underneath one’s skin and made anyone cower. “Explain.”

Kaleb stood before them with his head angled downwards. His jaw tightened beneath a flushed appearance, one that had remained after the guardian's resistance.

“The half-human forced her grip on me, eldest brother. I took it upon myself to seek retribution for such impertinence.

The scheme you all witnessed was created and implemented by Alek, aimed at killing two birds with one stone. Two of our guardians pitted against each other; one posed as an intruder to expel the new guardian's demise. If news had leaked from credible sources, the CEG's reputation would have crumbled to dust.”

Christopher motioned his head toward my direction. “Alek, do you deny or confirm these allegations?”

My shoulders straightened as I struggled to swallow. Two outcomes took root before me: share the punishment with Kaleb or let him suffer. Although it wouldn't make up for everything he's done, at the minimum, he'd get a taste of his own medicine.

Raphael's eyes widened as I met them.

By no means would I allow Kaleb to haul him into the hell I've dealt with for the past five years for a minute of satisfaction.

“I confirm them, Eldest Brother.”

Christopher stood with towering, straightened shoulders. “Alek, you're pardoned.” He waved his hand in the air, my head instantly nodding as I melted into my seat.

“Kaleb, your private feedings will be restricted for an entire month, and you will attend hospital visitations for the time being. There will also be no more schemes for the remainder of the year.” Christopher began making his way through the gathering room and then mentioned, “And lastly, once the new private guardian is reinstated in her duties, she will receive an apology before all of us. Until then, no one is to visit her.”

The household had ceaselessly bore a silence that transcended beyond the walls to a deafening strum. Through

the years, we had grown accustomed to it to avoid filling the void our mother left in her wake. Yet now, the same stillness caused a wave of suffocation, our own presences affray with the cemented mood. It pestered in spite of my brother's exits, tugging at the tension along my bones.

The ache had risen when the twins brought forth the guardian into the meeting. It had intensified as her behavior shifted from fire to ice, showcasing what she was fully capable of.

Her innate ability to stand her ground, seize control of chaos, suspend an audience with fear, all within minutes.

The scene of it was both intriguing and appalling.

In truth, I had seen it before with our mother during her episodes, where she'd alter from the sweet, caring figure we were familiar with throughout the day to one that screamed and clawed at herself during the late nights.

Five years since our mother's death and the same instincts managed to take hold of me during the guardian's episode. It was a near replica of our mothers. From how she burrowed herself into a ball and rocked back and forth to her movements stilling once I wrapped my arms around her body. She'd soothed down when I settled her in her chamber, the imprint of her body on my chest a lingering ghost.

Yet I hovered in her presence until Sonia's arrival. I itched to see her now.

I couldn't bring myself to deny the intrigue that had begun to blossom when I witnessed her on the first day. But why was that so? My brothers and I had endured countless private guardians before her. Yet, they couldn't compare to her.

She was defiant and stubborn. Alluring yet uncanny.

The answer to my question was at the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it whole. It only emphasized the feeling that had been buried alongside our mother.

Hope.

The desire to drown it surfaced, my fingers aching to meet my piano as I made my way to my chamber.

Kaleb blurred beside me, his hand slamming me against my chamber door. Sharp pain sprouted beneath my cheek as his hold weighed me down, yet an unsteadiness hollowed out his grip.

The Kaleb before me was a frazzled shell of his calculative self. It was truly a sight.

Christopher must have shaken him dearly. My tongue rested against the top of my mouth while my jaw hardened.

“I’m going to cut to the chase,” he murmured. “I don’t give a bloody hell about what the eldest has declared. I’m not letting that pest get away so easily.”

His fingers dug into my skin and pulled me closer. “You’re going to continue with this scheme. If we can’t ruin her and the CEG altogether, then we’ll take them down one by one—beginning with her. Crush her mentally. Emotionally.”

“Why?” The word slipped my lips as a whisper before I could bite it away as a thought.

His face closed the gap between us. “Why? Oh Alek, don’t feign ignorance now. We are both very aware of the girl’s capabilities. If we follow Christopher’s command, then how long until she rips our throats? You saw the way she attacked. She’s not a mundane guardian, and that’s much more dangerous.”

Dangerous for us or you?

Kaleb’s irises trembled as I cemented my gaze on his, his weight pressing against my arms. There was no reason to deny his superstitions. Never had I seen a guardian react in the manner she had, yet I understood guardians had their own method of eliminating an intruder.

Tristan was masked as just that, an intruder, one that I hadn’t expected. My scheme bared the bones of its structure but drastically lacked a body to withstand. It was meant to be a challenge for Kaleb. Instead, it backfired and fell smoothly

into his grace. Fully cementing my position as the middle brother with no true grasp of authority.

“But why me?” I forced through gritted teeth. “Why couldn’t you have continued the scheme with Noah or by yourself?”

“Oh, Alek, where’s the fun in that?” He released me and patted my cheek. “I expect you to fulfill this scheme by the end of this month. There’s only so much I can withstand with such minimal patience.”

“How can I if it’s already failed?”

“Watch your tone, dear little brother.” Kaleb glared, my body frigid as if waiting for his grip again. “You are to create a new one. You’ve spectated all of our schemes through the years. As my successor, approach this as I’ve done in the past — wrap the girl around your finger and once she’s on her knees, break her into thousands of pieces. Understood?”

“Yes,” I said, my throat swelling, “Brother.”

He stepped beside me and widened my door. He nodded instead, my legs walking without instruction. “Oh, and Alek, if Christopher is to find what *you* are doing, then you won’t be the only one to meet my wrath.”

My stomach caved into the everlasting pit it seemed to reside in when around Kaleb.

He vanished from my line of sight, the weight of his burden further caving into me. Wakening the feelings that I had long buried.

The anger burned in my chest, blossoming into a pain that ached my muscles until they grew numb. Music wasn’t going to calm the uproar amongst myself, nor would I risk tainting the garden with these grim emotions.

I closed my bedroom door, and my body stilled as my eyes fell on the door across from mine. The aged pine wood sheltered the new guardian and all those before her. But it had once withstood the screams of our mother’s episodes and restless nights.

Our mother's memory had long vanished from the chamber, but the door kept it hauntingly alive.

A deep breath housed itself in my chest as I left the household.

Long, intertwined branches and wide barks drowned my sight the deeper I walked through the forest, the trail growing apparent with each step along the ground.

Near the outer gate loomed the family cemetery, a once polished burial ground that grew buried in piles of dry leaves. Names of old, unknown members that shared the Sephtis title now were faded outlines on the tombstones, shadowed by our mother's mausoleum.

The Victorian structure curved into a dome, the entrance decorated by vines that swirled onto two pillars, joining into a tower with the Sephtis crest. A coal-black snake twisted within its body rested at the top, their fangs plunged near the end of its tail. Our crest represented how our lineage had the eternal cycle of life out of death.

The destruction our own family must do to one another to continue our lineage.

"Hello, Mother," I greeted as I stepped through the opening between the pillars. A podium rested in the middle with a vase bearing declining sunflowers. The once golden canary petals were now shriveled downwards with a deep yellow tinge, the stem and leaves crumpled and bearing a gray undertone. They had been here since my last visit two weeks ago.

"How are you doing?" Leaves swarmed along the ground and into the air beyond the mausoleum. "I'm not doing too well, though it may disappoint you. I know I promised you many things, Mother, but it hasn't become easier."

My brothers and I never harbored a proper relationship. With our mother, we were cordial with an unspoken detachment. After our mother's passing, it had changed overnight, as if snapping out of a dream.

I settled onto one of the stone pews, the surface rough against my back. “At one point, I was confident that we’d be able to amend our relationship since we are brothers, after all. But that was years ago when I was naive and too faithful for my own good. I continue to do my best, but now, with how everything has shifted, I don’t know how much more I must endure. How much longer I can continue to bear this alone.

Nothing has improved between any of us. Raphael sticks to me like a lost child, but who can blame him? Yet, like him, I’m lost, too.

Jacob and Jacque are inseparable, which should be good news. For the most part, it is, yet Jacque is steering toward Kaleb and Noah. Jacob continues to follow him from pure obligation, it seems.

Kaleb and Noah also have their own alliance with each other. I wouldn’t say they’re close, but they work well together, even if I dislike admitting that.

And Christopher... He remains the same. Distant and cold. I sense the isolation in his presence.”

I sighed, the light of morning slithering across the sky. “My apologies, mother. My original intention was to ensure your well-being, though I took it upon myself to dive into my own problems. That custom never seems to fade, does it?”

I motioned toward the wall where Mother’s grave rested. My palm caressed the cold concrete, wishing I could feel her warmth once more. But alas, that was impossible, and the end of our time together always reminded me of that.

“I’ll bring you irises next time I visit,” I mentioned as I grasped the vase. “They’re slowly blooming and are such a sight to revel in.”

I gripped the vase tightly against my chest, the edged corners digging into my skin as I followed the trail back toward the household. The sun settled beyond the horizon, its hues a ray of muted oranges. The memory of my mother remained fresh, and I wanted to hold onto it as long as I could before I had to force it away.

During the summers, Mother would seek all sorts of activities that would be possible to carry out without the powerful sting of the sun's rays. Her resolve was the lake since we were never allowed beyond the gates.

My brothers had continuously longed for sunset since it signified a visit to the lake, and while I was never fond of the water, I joined because it meant time outside alongside them.

The familiar queasiness overtook my stomach once I neared the end of the forest. Low waters greeted the sand in slow motions, the two merging into one as I drew closer. The same pier resided in the water; the wooden structure stretched to nearly meet a quarter of the lake.

My distrust of the pier had once been stronger than the water. But on days I felt the toughest, I'd walk along it with Mother.

"You're the strongest and bravest of them all," she'd say. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Simpler times had long vanished, yet my mind reminisced on the memories as if they were from a few weeks ago when our mother was alive and my brothers smiled occasionally. But they were smoke in the wind, a visible embodiment that lasted for a few seconds before disappearing again. All that remained was the distaste of the past stranded on my tongue and the ache that echoed within my chest.

Bubbles formed along the water's surface and traveled in my direction at a rapid speed. A dark outline burst through the water's surface, my feet stumbling backward, causing my body to crash on the sand. Hands thrust through the dark matter on the outline and pulled it away, revealing the new guardian's face. Her hands twisted through her thick, ink-black hair, the lengths surpassing her knees. In an instant, her eyes settled on me and quickly widened.

"Alek, I mean, Mr. Sephtis—" She cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. "I wasn't expecting to see anyone at this time."

I took her in. The guardian I had witnessed hours ago was no more, the one who stood before me an utter contrast. Her body didn't tremble as if she suffered from chills, nor were her icy green eyes dazed and hollow. She appeared perfectly fine.

Kaleb's marks from her had vanished while Tristan lay recovering in the infirmary. His condition had improved, but the essence of what occurred to him was still present.

The trembling fear in my body settled into a fiery heat.

"What are you doing here?" The question escaped my mouth like an insult.

"I didn't know this place was restricted," she responded.

"You shouldn't be informed by anyone. You're a guardian, not a child." Regret immediately washed over me, my stomach constricting and twisting as the words echoed.

She took a step forward. "Excuse me? I may be a guardian, but that doesn't mean I know everything. That's not my job."

"Then what is? Attacking innocents when you're furious?" The same sense of regret swallowed me whole, but the anger couldn't be contained.

"W-what? N-no, of course not!" She froze in place, and fists tightened against her sides. "They were all accidents!"

"How many more accidents will it take for you to understand? We don't need you here. Leave! You'll be doing all of us a favor."

Her expression dimmed while her eyes hollowed, the appearance oddly heart-wrenching. I walked away before an apology could slip my lips, my pace faster than normal.

My back was on her, yet, I could sense her gaze through my flesh, sunlight a mere sting compared to her burning stare.

CHAPTER
NINE

KATERINA ELI



I hated being bored.

At the CEG, I wasted hours practicing in the training room or following Lace around. But here, after being relieved of my duties, it was all I could torture myself with. While I could visit the guardian base for meals, I didn't. My appetite was nonexistent since human food unsettled the hell out of my stomach the more I ate it.

The rumbling pain in my stomach was starting to claw through.

Without feeding, I could last three months on human food — four if I stretched out leftovers. But October was already halfway through, and I was digging for drops from the only bag I brought. Lace was smart enough to send me a new shipment. My problem now was waiting with *her*.

She wasn't a whisper in the back of my mind anymore but a scream that echoed in my bones. *Her* presence was too obvious with the way my body grew numb. I only hoped that the gallons of water I chugged with the medication was enough to drown the clashing feelings *she* thrived in.

Times like these made me want to escape, to feel weightless among the waves. After my last trip to the lake, though, I hadn't gone back. Honestly, I was scared I'd stumble on Alek again.

I couldn't face him, yet he was all I thought about.

All the homework wouldn't have prepared me for his harsh —but true— words. It's not like I wanted to do either one.

With Kaleb, it'd been a slip-up. But with Mr. Amelle, I was fulfilling my job. What else were guardians supposed to do?

Still, his stupid words were really getting under my skin. The fury in his tone wouldn't stop echoing in my head. It wasn't fair. If he'd known Mr. Amelle was under the mask, then why let me attack him?

I scoffed as it clicked. These fuckers played me just like their past guardians. And for what? I was still here, wasn't I? I wasn't going to disappoint Lace. I wouldn't be another failed guardian to add to the CEG's failing reputation.

"I need to get up."

My room was growing stuffy with my thoughts, the bed worsening it. Thankfully, there weren't any memories resurfacing within the bright purple walls, but they were definitely stirring my head. But that might have been the medication.

The light that engulfed my room and the warmth from the window immediately melted the frostiness from my skin. My head rested against the glass as I basked in it.

Trees stretched for miles as mountains hinted along the distance. There was no road extending after the gates as if the house led to a dead end. Or was one.

My eyes stumbled on the massive greenhouse beneath my window. I'd come across it during my rounds, but it was my first time really taking it in. The flowers were coordinated by height, and the garden beds were parallel to each other in between curved pathways.

Someone caught my attention.

Alek's gaze hung low, his broad shoulders poised as he roamed through the paths in long strides. With each patch, he stopped to inspect, his angular features softening. Even his bowlike lips shadowed a smile that began to slip—

I stopped myself.

Even if the Alek outside seemed different, he was still a dick like his brothers. He played me like the rest of them. He

wasn't worth admiring for his looks, even if he was pretty.

One second, Alek was dusting himself off; the next, his eyes fell on my window. My reflexes were quick to catch on, my body tumbling to the ground away from view.

“Shit.”

Of course, he noticed me staring. Vampires had astute instincts, a quality cherry-picked for guardians.

But my hero knocked on my room before I could think back on it.

My shoulders instantly straightened when Sonia came into view. “Follow me.” I fell behind her without a second thought.

She rarely walked freely around the house. Like Tristan, they'd fade into the darkness and dash away from view. Now she walked elegantly with careful steps. She turned toward a hidden stairway at the beginning of the other wing.

The bright purple walls clashed against the seven brothers sitting in the living room.

Shit.

Sonia paused beside me once we climbed down the stairs and bowed. I followed her, my stature stiff as I took in their cold gazes. I should have been on guard, but with my duties relieved, I couldn't bother to face them with a mask. They'd shown me their true selves. I'll do the same.

“Ms. Eli,” said Christopher, his voice deep yet dull. He sat next to a throne-looking chair, both him and Noah shrinking in size compared to it.

A large, mocking smile drilled into Noah's face while his legs crossed along his chair's arms. “Oh, look at you! You've lost weight, haven't you?” He clicked his tongue. “You see! I was troubled by the idea of her being kept concealed in her room for so long. She's not a maiden that should be caged in a tower, Brother.”

Kaleb huffed as he lay back on the sofa with crossed arms. “Spewing nonsense without failure.” Christopher turned his

face to him, Kaleb quick to bite against his lips and avoided his gaze.

“Mr. Christopher wishes to clear a few things,” Sonia stated.

Christopher nodded and redirected his sight onto mine, his light green eyes cool and reserved like his posture. “There are many things to address, Ms. Eli, beginning with my brother’s actions. He pulled an excuse of a scheme for a reason that is not worth mentioning and periled not simply our safety but the Ambrogio’s as well. He also created a ruckus before the replacement periods of guardians, which jeopardized two of the... more long-term guardians.” Christopher’s nostril slightly flared as his shoulders rolled.

My stomach fluttered, the butterflies soaring through my throat. “Long-term guardians?” I blurted a little too loudly.

“We acquitted you of your duties to recover alongside Mr. Amelle. The scheme took a toll on both of you.” Christopher’s eyes landed on Kaleb. “We all sincerely apologize for allowing our brother to go unsupervised.”

Noah intercepted, “And Katerina —I can call you that, correct?— please be assured that the scheme was not a collective decision but rather one-sided. Truthfully, if we had all orchestrated such an act, you wouldn’t have survived.” His laughter deepened.

Kaleb rolled his eyes and bowed swiftly, the motion a blur as he said, “My sincerest apologies.”

His tone was flatter than a sheet of paper. He didn’t give a fuck about what he’d done.

“What an apology!” Noah murmured with a grin, the twins’ giggles lingering from my left side. Kaleb scowled at him, the twins quick to silence and blending in alongside Alek and Raphael, who I had just noticed. Raphael was the one nearest to me, and he hadn’t bothered looking my way, not even as I came down the stairs. Alek hadn’t either, but I sensed his gaze avoiding me for the most part.

“I apologized, which indicates the end of all of this,” Kaleb muffled through gritted teeth.

Christopher’s eyes focused on me. “Ms. Eli, if you decide to proceed with his pretense, then you are allowed to remain as our long-term private guardian.”

“Why are you doing this?” Maybe I should have just accepted it, but there had to be a catch. Guardians dropped like flies under the Sephtis, and they made it evident I wasn’t wanted. They couldn’t have changed their minds overnight. “You all see guardians as animals, me as a pet. Why is it that you want me to stay now?”

“Mr. Amelle and Sonia have both vouched for your competence. It’s only wise to maintain a private guardian that’s held with high esteem.” Christopher’s expression remained composed, and his heartbeat steady.

Vampires had slower heartbeats than humans, but when a lie slipped, it was just as noticeable.

I reconsidered Kaleb’s so-called apology. Did it irk me that he didn’t care one bit about what he’d done? Of course. Was I going to let him and Alek get what they wanted? Absolutely not.

“I accept the apology, Kaleb,” I said, my eyes falling on him. “Really, I don’t know how you’ll ever top it.”

Kaleb sneered, and Noah chuckled as he clapped his hands. “Now, in return for you dismissing his joke of a plan, we can dismiss yours against our brother! What an act it was. Such a marvel to witness, truthfully.”

I hadn’t moved, but suddenly my body froze. “What?”

A smile hinted from Kaleb’s lips while Noah’s hand cupped his mouth and said, “Oh my! Did I reveal vital information?”

Mr. Amelle had said that as long as they hadn’t said anything, then I was fine. It’d been almost two weeks, so why bring it up now?

That was the catch.

Christopher didn't speak, but the twin's silent laughter was the answer I needed. "But it was a mistake. It's not like it was intentional."

"We don't do mistakes, dear," Kaleb said as he sat down. "Don't take our minor kindness as fondness. We're still blood-thirsty snakes, and when the fitting moment arises, we pounce."

"So, what? You were going to use that against me if I had decided to leave?" My feet trailed forward, but Sonia's arms moved in front of me and met my stomach, her force pressing me back.

"That's enough questions, Ms. Eli."

"But—" The brothers all began dispersing, most of them vanishing into thin air within seconds. "Fine, but I have one last question." Sonia nodded, and I asked, "Has the other guardian recovered, too?"

"What other guardian?" Alek paused before the opening of the living room.

"The one that fought with Mr. Amelle." Sonia gave no reaction as she stood silent. Alek, on the other hand, grew closer with wide eyes and furrowed eyebrows. "I couldn't tell them apart since they were in disguise in the beginning, but there were definitely two."

Alek glanced at Sonia. "There was no report regarding another person alongside Mr. Amelle. But I'll review it with the guardians who were on their shift at that hour." She bowed and blurred across the foyer into the cellar, the door echoing when she fully disappeared.

Leaving the two of us with each other.

Whether it was the lake or the garden or even here, it was hard to not take in Alek.

We were a head apart, his scrawny shoulders meeting my temples. His jaw flexed as he turned his head onto me. Immediately, our gazes stumbled on each other as if a force compelled them. Those rich, brown eyes locked on mine, the abyss taking me in as his face brightened with a flush.

Like on cue, we both looked away, and I started to make my way to my room. No one had lifted the ban from my duties. I should catch up to Sonia to make sure—

An icy grip stopped me. Alek's hand wrapped around my wrist and dragged me toward the opposite direction of my room. He took me under the main stairs, through the spiraling steps, and into the cellar that resembled a void with dim lights. He directed me through the left hallway and into a room where Mr. Amelle rested.

An infusion bag hung beside him as he sat upright on a bed, a book in hand while he bore a hospital gown. His locks didn't rest on his head but instead poured over his shoulders, and a beam overtook his expression as he looked at us. He still wore his large shades, though.

"Ms. Eli, Alek, if I had known I would receive visitors, then I would have dressed more modestly." His tone was different— as if he was teasing.

Alek's hold tightened, and I swiftly jerked my arm from him.

"Why did you drag me here?"

"Tell him," he commanded with a stern expression. "Tell him what you recounted to Sonia."

"What is it?" Mr. Amelle asked, his expression slowly fading.

I glared at Alek. "There was another guardian fighting with you, wasn't there?"

Mr. Amelle looked at me with furrowed eyebrows. "Not that I remember. From my understanding, it was only me, Ms. Eli."

I quickly shook my head. "Impossible. There were two of you. I don't know who did what, but one of you threw a baton while the other threw knives. And your movements, there was a difference. No way I just fought you."

"I wasn't given any knives." Mr. Amelle turned his head to Alek. "Who do you think it could be?"

“I’m not sure,” Alek said as he studied me with fire in his gaze. “My brother was behind this entire mess of a scheme, so I expected you to have some sort of knowledge regarding the second intruder.”

“No,” he clarified. “I’m assuming Sonia has already been informed.”

Before Alek could respond, I said, “Yes, I just told her about it. I should’ve mentioned this earlier. I didn’t know it was a bigger problem than it seemed.” I crossed my arms as I shook my head in disbelief. I hadn’t paid attention to it when as a guardian, I’m supposed to double, triple check everything. Especially when overseeing seven lives.

“You’ve known about the intruder for days, yet inform us about it now?” Alek blurted.

“It was my mistake. I didn’t mean to keep quiet on pur—”

“Everything’s a mistake with you,” Alek spat, his face twisting with fury. “You’re dismissed.”

Every single insult rampaged on my tongue, but I bit it away. Without looking over my shoulder, I left.

CHAPTER
TEN

ALEK SEPHTIS



“**A**lek...” Tristan eyed me with dismay, a few creases reflecting against his face as his eyebrows met. “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but what did I just witness?”

I couldn’t bring myself to answer Tristan, my jaw clenching while the moment replayed in my mind. Years of honed control were slipping before my heeding. The turmoil in my stomach grew as the new guardian remained stuck in my thoughts.

“That holds no importance,” I quickly stated, brushing the matter away before I could evaluate it. “We have other pressing matters at hand.”

I settled into an available chair next to the bed, Tristan’s lips meeting into a straight line. Although my brothers didn’t roam throughout the vault, it was necessary to maintain a low voice. The walls were known to be soundproof but not entirely earless. “Yes, I suppose so.”

Through Sonia’s approval, tomorrow would mark Tristan’s reinstatement, his fingers itching to return to his duties as if he hadn’t lain with deep wounds yesterday.

“You weren’t notified of a partner?”

Tristan shook his head. “Though it’s expected from your brother. He enjoys the element of surprise every so often.”

“Do you think it was a guardian that’s part of the replacement period tomorrow?”

The heads of snakes remained intact as long as the bodies were conserved. While snakes slithered through the household, they extended to the grounds and beyond.

“Possibly,” Tristan continued with a murmur, “If they were one of Kaleb’s henchmen, the culprit would be obvious to uncover. On the other hand, if they were from either sector, specifically the offensive, since they have no direct link to him, it would be easier to conceal their tracks once they’re gone.”

“Sonia will investigate, but I want nothing to go unremarked,” I said. Although Sonia was the only guardian that had declared her neutral stance since the beginning of her term, it was still a possibility that she could dither to a side that may appeal to her.

“Will do.” Tristan bowed his head and then cleared his throat. “Did you visit your mother like I requested?”

“I did a few days ago. I have to return to replace her vase.”

The guardian’s dimming expression came to mind as the words from that day resonated. In contrast to today, ferocity overtook her demeanor. Huffing in a manner that was livid—almost comical.

“Alek?” Tristan’s voice was akin to a signal that directed me back to the present moment. His index finger circled around the air, near my lips. “You’re smiling.”

My lips immediately pressed into a thin line. “No, I wasn’t.”

A grin adorned Tristan’s face, his head tilting as he relaxed his eyebrows. “I won’t ask any questions—for now— since we have to move on.”

I straightened my shoulders, a tension aching along my chest. “What are we to do with Kaleb?” I’d briefed him on my new mantle granted by Kaleb. Yet, no solution came to fruition.

Schemes came to be as a means of revenge against the system That Man upheld after it had failed our mother. In the beginning, we protested formal events through nonattendance

and interfered with public national conferences between Cabinet.

Then, it twisted into destroying the Lower Belt's events: from setting aflame ceremonies for Elected Officials to destroying charitable works hosted by common citizens.

We were never able to reach That Man— until we uncovered where his strongest ties lay.

The CEG.

By then, our roles had welded themselves to us, and all our efforts shifted onto guardians.

“We could steal Kaleb's upper hand,” Tristan suggested.

Kaleb possessed the notebook of secrets. It tracked all the underhand deals, affairs, and schemes of the Ministry and the Human Bureau. No one knew how he came to hold such information, but its existence has been hinted at through his private interactions with Christopher and Noah.

Yet he didn't risk its whereabouts to anyone. Not even himself.

I was quick to meet Tristan's gaze through the dark shades. “We both understand the dangers of it. We'll jeopardize too much.”

“Then we don't do it ourselves,” Tristan said. “We can recruit someone to do the bidding.”

“Who?”

“Ms. Eli, of course.” Tristan's confidence oozed too easily. “She'd be a great asset.”

“A great asset?” My voice heightened in pitch as my legs sprung from the chair. I quickly collected myself, though the unsettlement within my throat didn't ease. “The woman is a menace who has no sense of calculation. She reacts frantically and storms off when she doesn't receive her way.”

“Guardians are still human, Alek. Their actions are ruled by emotion, unlike vampires who are cunning and calculating, like you and your brothers. You dragged Ms. Eli into my

infirmiry with such brashness, although you sought her help. Then before she could question, you were quick to shut her down.”

Tristan’s eyebrow raised as he angled his head toward me.

I released a heavy sigh. “Go on then.”

Tristan’s face beamed but suddenly diminished as his expression hardened. “While Kaleb’s ultimate destination is the Premier, he possesses enough intel to set the Human Bureau and Ministry on fire. The CEG comes first as a form to dismantle the product of the two highest investors and weaken them.”

“How would the guardian come into play?”

“She’ll fulfill her role as Kaleb sought out— under your hold. You do exactly what he commanded you to, with a twist.”

I shook my head. “That won’t work. I don’t have the charm my brothers possess nor the capabilities of conviction. Like Sonia, the new guardian isn’t easily swayed.”

In addition, her actions were explosive. She expressed herself easily with her honesty. There was no definite calm in her, and that could equally work in our favor or ruin our progress.

And based on her documentation, she had no recorded family and no debts to manipulate to our advantage.

“Then we use our compassion,” Tristan suggested. “As allies, you’ll paint yourselves with authenticity to lead Kaleb away from our plan without suspicion.”

In truth, I longed for it all to stop. The abuse, the fights, the political feuds. If this was the only plausible solution to end this, then so be it.

“I haven’t been the nicest to her.”

“And neither have your brothers. But unlike them, you’re remorseful. Apologizing is what you’re best at.” My face flushed with a wave of heat. “You concentrate on amending your relationship with her. But don’t take too long. With how

fast time is moving, the Ball will be here soon. I doubt they'll decide on a marriage candidate by then, though."

I turned of age during the summer, yet the topic of marriage shadowed us since Christopher's twentieth three years ago. With Noah and Kaleb trickling afterward, it grew more prominent as none of the three seemed to showcase any interest. The twins and Raphael would turn in the next two years, but Cabinet desired a cemented agreement due to That Man's poor ruling.

The Ministry emphasized the importance of the blood compatibility exam to common citizens and Regal heirs of age alike. By forming marriage pairings, the exam assessed the compatibility between lineages. A high compatibility allowed the marriage process to continue smoothly, while a low result allowed the pairing to denote extra partners to guarantee stronger heirs.

Though outdated, these customs allowed a steady growth in our population as vampires were only a quarter of humans. On the other hand, it allowed Heads of Ministry to instill more of their members in Representative roles.

"With how your brothers have been throughout the years, they'll continue to postpone it until Heads of Ministry surrenders," Tristan murmured. "Or until someone steps to it."

"No one will willingly volunteer," I said, my raw feelings regarding the topic seeping. My brothers and I would never succumb to marriage because it was one of many aspects that drove our mother to the ground. It proved to us that death was a better choice than to be bonded to the Ministry— than to do the sole thing That Man spawned us for. "It will never happen."

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

KATERINA ELI



Her presence pricked against my skin like needles. And I wanted to fucking scream. But if I did, I would hear *her* voice hint in mine.

Instead, I swallowed it down alongside the pills like it was my last meal.

The dosage had increased, but none of them were doing what they were prescribed for— except make me more nauseous than usual. Minor headaches started developing, too, and my memories became murkier.

While I was overdoing it, the extra pills muted *her*. I wasn't risking my job for a third time because of *her*.

Something else nagged at my mind: Sonia hadn't reinstated me. The replacement period was today, and there was no doubt she'd be busy, but I couldn't help but overthink.

And somehow, Alek slithered into my thoughts.

“Ugh.”

His words had been on repeat since yesterday. Honestly, they were driving me crazy at this point. They irked my skin more than I'd like to admit and took up the majority of my head space. At least Kaleb made it obvious he disliked me, while Alek... it was different.

His expression was clouded by a shadow of confusion as if he was battling with himself. The more I thought about him maybe feeling some sort of regret, the angrier I got.

He was a puzzle, one with all the pieces scattered before me, but no way to know the big picture.

I stared outside of my window, the grounds barren. Ever since my encounters with Alek, I settled on being stuck in my room to avoid interacting with him. But I couldn't stay still anymore— it was now or never.

After sliding into the tight swimwear, I quickly gazed up and down the hallway. Empty. Pure stillness in the silence. It was the only thing that always consumed the house.

Some days, the quiet space was nice for a sense of peace that I didn't have in my mind. But most days, it made me miss the blaring shouts from Lace and my cousin whenever they were around. The noisiness echoed through the CEG walls. Sometimes, even my own voice in my head. They were all a reminder of my existence. It proved to me that I was here and *she* wasn't.

On the other hand, the house sometimes disproved that. The silence was unlike anything I'd been in before, especially since there were seven brothers in one house. Even when they were out in the living room with the Ambrogios, their voices were slightly heightened. It barely made a difference in the air.

It was too unsettling. I already felt enough of that with *her*.

I silently crept down the stairs and through the entrance. It took seconds to dash through the grounds and through the forest until I reached the lake. Today it gleamed a dark blue glint.

A cold breeze blurred past my body as I took in the serene water below the dark horizon. Daybreak inched in the distance, the gleaming light washing away the stars one by one.

Katerina.

Her voice forced me across the wooden pier and off into the air.

A stream of icy water followed my body as I crashed through the surface. My weight sank as I held my breathing, my control focused on anchoring my body in the deep end.

With fall, the weather slightly shifted each morning. While my body temperature kept its scorching heat, the lake followed the weather's lead. It didn't matter since, no matter what, the water embraced me with open arms no matter the change.

It typically sank my problems along with it, but today the water betrayed me. My problems were all on the surface.

As much as I wanted to blame my anger toward the way Alek spoke to me —and manhandled my wrist— there was something else weighing in the back of my mind.

His scent called to me.

Yes, I had my suspicions, but it was proven yesterday while alone with him. It swallowed the space like my first day and during the meeting; and continued to linger in my room.

Thankfully, I didn't crave it, but it didn't help that *her* hunger dwelled in my bones.

My main reason behind my anger toward him? I wanted to hate him. But I couldn't.

Alek had proven two sides of himself— one that opposed his brothers and another that resembled them. So, what could I make out of him?

That was the thing. I couldn't, and it was confusing. I glimpsed at the way he cared for Mr. Amelle. It hit home as it was similar to Lorenzo and me.

But the Sephtis weren't trustworthy. No vampire was.

I broke through the lake's surface, inhaling a sharp breath. My bones rattled as I swam to the pier, my arms crossing against the wood once I reached it. I rested my head against my inner elbow as my breathing eased from the sudden swim.

It suddenly quickened when the familiar coppery, flowery scent brushed against my nose.

Alek delicately walked out of the forest, holding a vase with flowers. I remained still in the water, my chest caving. I didn't want to see him. I couldn't interact with him like this. So soon after my discovery.

Why was he here right when I was?

He paused right where the dirt blended with the sand, his feet grounded while he froze.

I had two options: swim away and wait it out, or walk out of the water and dash toward my room. Both would make me obvious, but it was a shot I was willing to take.

That was until his eyes met mine.

We were yards apart, yet I noticed the way his eyes deepened once they fell on me. How his eyebrows met and quickly relaxed against his forehead. The way he widened his lips but immediately pressed them into a straight line. How it looked as if he wanted to talk but run away at the same time.

Was that my heartbeat in my ears? That didn't sound good.

Our eyes stayed glued to each other as Alek cautiously walked over. He paused right where the pier began, bringing the vase in hand closer to his chest.

Fuck it. None of my options were plausible now.

I lifted my weight off the water and dragged myself to where he stopped. I kept my distance by staying on the pier.

Our eyes gave no hint of breaking away. His cheeks flushed red while his fingers trembled, and my body suddenly heated up. No way it was from the brisk weather.

“Will you accompany me, Ms. Eli?”

My mouth slightly widened for... what? I wasn't expecting that. I nodded before I could think of what to do—as if I had any other option.

His gaze hardened before he turned, breaking the force. His pace met mine while we walked down, my feet trailing along the shore. The sensation of the water's motion wasn't strong enough to take my attention away from the overwhelming tension that slowly pressed against me.

This was new.

“Where are we going, Mr.—”

“Alek is fine.” He didn’t look back as he turned into the forest. I followed, curiosity obviously winning today.

Alek stopped before a small metal fence that shrunk under the trees. A screeching creak vibrated against my ears as we entered.

Loads of tombstones lay across the ground, buried by leaves as a path split between them. In the middle was a round, large structure, pillars holding a dome that connected to an opening in front of us. At the top of the entrance were black words that peeked through the dirt.

Sophia Sephtis

Loving mother and wife. One of two kinds.

The Premier’s wife was the first human to marry into a Regal Vampire Family and successfully transition into a vampire. She was the breakthrough that allowed half-human guardians to exist.

Through the CEG’s clinical trials, they developed a way to make half-humans with the use of diluted vampire blood injections. Lace called them steroids on steroids and explained that to ensure a guardian kept their human form, they would fuse different, compatible types of blood. The diluted-crossbred injections would then be administered in a span of months to ensure that human guardians would gain enhanced capabilities.

The Vampire Ministry and the Bureau passed the Interchange Act soon after, making it impossible for humans to transition.

Sophia Sephtis changed politics and made history. And she lay dead, right before me.

Her death had been ruled as a medical reason, never specified. But there were rumors surrounding it, the main one being suicide.

Alek walked inside, and my feeling trailed behind him. This wasn't just anyone's grave. So why would Alek bring me here?

He cleared his throat, his outline towering beside me. "You can take a seat." He stopped before a long, white podium and placed the vase he was holding. In it were violet flowers, the stems standing tall, and the petals spilling over the glass like drapes. He stared at them for a moment and then took a seat against a cement bench.

I followed his lead and sat across from him, the podium separating us. I kept my gaze steady, focusing on his stiff posture and flushed face. Even the way he fidgeted with his fingers once he met my eyes.

"Ms. Eli," he said, his throat throbbing, "My apologies for my actions and words so far."

I studied him, searching for the lie in his pitched voice. His heartbeat stayed steady to the point it was still.

He was telling the truth?

My first instinct was to study his features, to tell apart any difference in his expression that could reveal otherwise. But his eyes didn't sway and instead hardened against my glare.

Laughter escaped my lips. "What?"

Alek's eyes widened, and his shoulders straightened. His cheeks tightened as he said, "My apologies, Ms. Eli, but did I announce something that was intended to be received with laughter?"

I quickly bit my lips shut. "No, no, of course not. I'm sorry, Mr.— I mean Alek. I'm just..." I was speechless, and not for the reason I wanted.

It didn't make sense, unless—

"Are you apologizing to me because we're alone?" It made sense. It saved him the same embarrassment Kaleb had gone through. What was it with them not liking to apologize when they were clearly in the wrong?

His fingers stopped fidgeting and formed into fists, his cheeks tightening even more. He breathed in and out a few times before he said, “Ms. Eli, I asked you to accompany me because I have important matters to address privately. My apology coincides, but if it suits you to think of our private encounter as a way to avoid an audience, then so be it.” His eyes were still on mine, darkening as light rays spread through the space.

“Privately, huh?” His cheeks turned bright red and a smile tugged at my lips. I didn’t mean to mess with him, but it was impossible when the chance came up. His reactions were cute.

He cleared his throat. “My sincerest apologies, Ms. Eli.”

I couldn’t help but study him, to take in the way his words flowed honestly. “Katerina.”

“What?”

“Call me Katerina,” I said, my guard still up. Sure, I was accepting his apology, not erasing everything that had happened between us. He was still a snake like his brothers. “So, what do you want to talk about privately?”

He regarded me for a minute, then nodded. “My brother, Kaleb, holds something valuable to me, and I believe it will be of value to you, too.”

Not what I was expecting. “What is it?”

“He possesses a notebook that harbors enough information to tear down the Ministry and the Human Intergovernmental Bureau alike.” He crossed his legs as he rested his back against the wall. “It also pertains to the CEG, which will be ruined if such contents are released.”

My body froze. “What?”

“If you help us retrieve the notebook, we can maintain peace between all sides.”

“Who’s us?”

He nodded toward the opening as Mr. Amelle stepped through. Today was filled with surprises.

“I don’t blame you for not trusting us,” Mr. Amelle said with a grin. “But as a fellow guardian, I can promise we’re doing this for the good.”

I shook my hand as my head spun with everything. “Wait, hold on. The two of you are working together to what? Take down Kaleb?”

Alek huffed a sigh as Mr. Amelle responded, “Yes, Ms. Eli. We can’t disclose all the details until you agree to align yourself with us.”

“Why the sudden change of heart?” I pointed at Mr. Amelle. “You were a part of Kaleb’s scheme not too long ago.” Then I pointed at Alek as I stood up. “And you allowed everything to happen!”

“It’s not as if either of us had a choice,” Alek said through gritted teeth, “Kaleb’s authority is beyond Tristan’s and I’s. To go against him is as though asking for an excruciating punishment.”

“So why do it now?”

Alek widened his mouth, but Mr. Amelle spoke instead, “Ms. Eli—”

“Katerina is fine.” Alek and I continued to keep our glares on each other, the tension in the air sharpening until it poked at my skin.

“Katerina,” Mr. Amelle repeated. “Surely, you’ve heard of the turmoil regarding the Two-Species Treaty and the disappearances of a Regal Family. Two incidents allow a perfect opening for Kaleb to slither through. If he was to uncover any information that could harm the Ministry, Bureau, and even the CEG—”

“It’ll be chaos,” I interrupted, the sudden realization sinking.

I froze in place as I took it all in. If there was any dirt against the CEG, then everything that Lace had worked for would crumble.

He was always one to protect me, no matter the circumstances. I had to do the same.

“Fine,” I muttered. “I’ll be your ally as long as I don’t do anything that goes against the CEG’s guardian code.”

Alek pulled his gaze away. “We can’t make any promises.”



By the time I exited the graveyard, Alek and Mr. Amelle were long gone. Only one thing stayed in my mind during my time alone.

What did I get myself into?

The hairs on the back of my neck suddenly rose, and I paused before the second gate. An outline blurred past me as my body whirled toward it. Musk drowned the air, harsh footsteps vibrating against the ground as broad shoulders overshadowed me. Skin deeper than ochre covered my sight, and I met familiar, soft amber eyes that compelled me to jump on him.

“Lorenzo!”

“I’ve missed you, Nina,” said Lorenzo Devon, his voice low and gruff. He let go of my weight, and my feet landed on the ground. I tilted my head to catch a full view of him. Everything about him was the same. From the shaved head to the cut in his right eyebrow to his sharp grin. He’d been stationed at posts like crazy for the past few months. Now he was here, which meant...

Lorenzo drew a metal suitcase in front of me. “Don’t think Lace didn’t warn me about your non-feeding habits.”

“It’s not a habit,” I said as I gripped it. “It was a mistake.”

He wrapped an arm around my neck and brought me to his chest, his free hand rubbing against the top of my head. “Cause of that, you owe me two laps.”

I tried to pull away from his force, but his muscles pushed me deeper into his suit. “But! You just got here!”

“There are no buts, Nina,” Lorenzo said as he dragged me away. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

ACT TWO

CHAPTER
TWELVE

ALEK SEPHTIS



Vampires were once believed to be a myth, beings that encompassed the doctrines of temptation and mystery. Folklores depicted us as walking corpses with fangs that desired human blood and obtained it by preying upon innocent victims. While many characteristics became outdated due to our assimilation into society, a few bared true, such as our sensitivity to the sun, heightened abilities, and cold temperatures.

However, one element overlooked by humans was our perception of time. It mentally differed due to our sharper senses. For us, human seconds spanned like minutes, and minutes stretched into daunting hours. Time slipped through humans' fingers akin to water, quick and easy. The same could not be said for vampires.

Under this household, guardians were punctual— except for one. It irked my skin as my patience thinned.

Ms. Eli was a whisper in the fixed air when she stepped inside, her presence and scent untraceable. It was unnerving sharing the household with a guardian we couldn't track. Yet, it proved to be in our favor as she could easily sneak into any crevices.

She settled onto her pew, piercing forest green eyes steady on mine. She bore no surrender to our continuous stare. No mask to bind her as a guardian. Ms. Eli's true self hardened her narrowing gaze.

“Katerina.”

It equally unsettled my stomach as it emphasized my intrigue with each meeting.

“Alek.”

“Thank you for joining me,” I said, my jaw clenching as I was met with silence. Tristan was held back by Sonia to review procedures with the new guardians after the replacement period. Yet it didn’t stop his voice from echoing beneath my skull.

You concentrate on amending your relationship with her.

My eyes traveled to the darkness underneath hers, his words ringing again.

Those dark bags under her eyes are comparable to yours, actually.

“Ms. Eli, are you tired?”

Her glare narrowed as she rolled her neck. “Are you implying that I look bad?”

I immediately shook my head. “My apologies, Ms. Eli. It wasn’t my intention to refer to it in that manner—”

Suddenly, a grin decorated her worn-out expression. “It was a joke.”

The intrigue swarmed amongst other feelings I couldn’t quite pinpoint. One that had once weighed as light as a feather within my body and now evolved to an overwhelming tension.

“And it’s Katerina.” She rested her back against the wall as she crossed her arms across her chest. “Unless you want to keep it on a title basis.”

I pressed my lips into a line as I nodded. “Katerina.” My throat swelled as I cleared it and said, “I want to clarify one vital detail to retrieve the notebook. It concerns the scheme my brother had enacted.”

“What is it?”

“Kaleb wants you to fall for me.”

“You can’t be serious.” She huffed a laugh as her lips twitched and her eyes altered to an icy hue.

Heat collected in my cheeks as the silence settled between us.

Ms. Eli’s mouth hung open, and then she chuckled. “You’re actually serious?”

“As one can be.”

“But—” She shook her head. “How is that reasonable?”

“It’s not,” I responded. “A scheme doesn’t have to be reasonable to be effective.”

“And how were you going to accomplish that?”

“I wasn’t. That’s why I abandoned such an idea and created my own directives.” Her shoulders straightened, and I continued, “But my brother still believes this scheme is being upheld. To successfully acquire the notebook, we must play our roles accordingly.”

“So, what? You want me to pretend to like you while you go about and steal the notebook?”

“You’re partially correct.” I had yet to prove to her that I was unlike my brothers, the trust between us a glint that had yet to spark. I could distinguish it in the way she observed me, distanced and wary. Her questions were meticulous, and it was vital to answer all of them.

“The plan has yet to be set in stone, but I can assure you that you won’t be alone throughout this process. We’ll begin with three simple orders, and then as time progresses, we’ll venture out from there.

Number one, we’ll meet at the lake every few days. The household is swarming with ears that could potentially listen in on our conversations. While the lake should be enough for prying eyes, the mausoleum will be valued only for secure conversations. It’s the only dependable location we can afford —”

“Ah! So that’s why we’re here,” she murmured under her breath with slow nods.

I ignored her comment. “Number two, this may be a given, but you will not share any information with anyone. It must stay between the three of us.”

“Of course,” she said with a mocking smile.

“And number three, I will search for the notebook’s hiding place. You will be the one to retrieve it, but once the entire plan is assembled.”

“That’s it?” she asked, an eyebrow arching. “What about our roles?”

“We’ll play them,” I said, “My brother will be observing us diligently, meaning we must be very careful with how we exude ourselves. We can’t afford any mistakes from either side.” She rolled her eyes but didn’t speak. “For today, it’ll be simple. You must follow my lead.”

“Okay, but I have a question.” Ms. Eli continued before my approval, “Why did you choose me out of all the other guardians?”

“You have no presence, no scent, and your footing is unnoticeable. My brother won’t realize the notebook’s disappearance until it’s too late.”

“And what if I get caught?”

“I can assure you, you won’t,” I said, her eyebrows furrowing with questioning eyes. “If it happens, I will be beside you.”

She crossed her arms against her chest. “Fine.”

I parted my gaze and focused on the sky outside. Thunder roared, and droplets began to crash across the leaves and ground. Kaleb and the twins should be arriving from their feedings any moment.

I extended a hand, hers slowly slithering into my palm. Her heat radiated stronger than sunlight yet caressed my skin like a petal. Before I could concentrate on the sensation that overtook my body, I stepped outside, and her hold tightened.

“Be honest,” Ms. Eli said, her voice a low chime. “You’re not doing this to protect humans or vampires, especially not

the CEG. Even if you didn't play a huge part, you were still in with your brothers to get rid of every private guardian. Including me."

Strands from her up do stuck to her forehead, threading alongside her temples and cheeks, the loose ends meeting her stomach as droplets continued to dwell upon us. Her expression softened as I considered her.

"I won't deny nor affirm your remark," I said as I heaved a sigh. "Katerina, I'm exhausted beyond imagination due to my brothers. Would you believe me if I was to say we were all strangers living under the same roof?"

The slight rain matured to one that engulfed our surroundings, our clothes dampening and clinching to our skin. The dirt thickened beneath our feet as we halted.

"Yes, I can."

An edge naturally encased her voice, yet it lacked in her simple response, interchanged for a somber whisper.

The outer gates clanked open behind us, the limousine passing through the forest as it came into view. I tugged at Ms. Eli's hand and brought her to my chest. A sharp glare met mine through the smoked glass as the inner gates widened, and the limousine proceeded into the driveway.

My shoulders slumped against a tree trunk. Kaleb was one to unfailingly sit on the side that overlooked the forest and lake. There was no doubt in my mind he hadn't noticed us.

Katerina cleared her throat, and my attention fell on her. I hadn't felt when our bodies melded into one another's, but it was the only thing I was keenly aware of now. Swiftly, my hold loosened, and I darted my sight away.

When I glanced at where she stood seconds ago, it was barren, with no trace of Ms. Eli in the passing wind.



A familiar symphony flooded my chambers as fingers traced the keys, one note chiming while the other thrummed; the sequence continued. They were meant to complement each other, but it grew dull. The glide along my wrist possessed no lead. Only a repeated routine that derived from my fingers rather than my sentiment or the flow of the melody. The notes clashed, as did my thoughts.

Two days had passed. I had yet to uncover information regarding the notebook. My brother would never hide the notebook in plain sight or arm's reach. Would he allow someone to harbor it? Where could it possibly be?

The questions dimmed as I stepped onto the front yard.

Noon settled in the midst of autumn, the air nuzzling against my skin the further I stepped into the gazebo. Tristan ambled between the opening, his warm presence easing the coiled hub. The accustomed click echoed.

“What have you uncovered?”

Tristan had not only been occupied with his duties but was also tracking any revelations concerning the true intruder.

“I have yet to confirm this, Alek, but no guardians from the last period were tasked by Kaleb. They were just commanded to stand still and watch. In fact, he currently has no henchmen.” Tristan lowered his voice, “I also checked the security footage in the employee facility.”

“Go on.”

“They didn't pass through any of the cameras. I have no leads on their escape,” Tristan said. “*But* rumors are floating. Kaleb may have hired someone outside of the CEG.” His fingers motioned against his onyx tie and loosened it. “My opinion? I'd say it was Kaleb's last client. He was the only visitor on the most recent log.”

Humans capitalized on all that related to vampires. Since they were our main diets, they had established an industry surrounding our livelihood. Private human businesses focused on vampire feedings, developing private clinics where some

partook in illegal deals. A source of payment were vials of vampire blood.

When a Regal family member engaged with such establishments, they were highly esteemed. Our blood was the most potent, strongest kind to exist. It was known to be the greatest opioid to humans.

“It’s not the first time Kaleb dealt with under-the-table deals like this,” Tristan pointed out.

“My apologies, Tristan, but for now, focus on the intruder. The scheme will be my responsibility.”

Tristan swiftly straightened and bowed, then a smile slipped across his lips. “Have you made any progress with Katerina?”

The sound of her name involuntarily sparked a warm sensation in my stomach. It was irksome. “If we had, you would have been informed by now.”

“And she knows about the scheme that your brother is expecting you to continue with?”

The door beyond the grounds clicked open, and footsteps trembled across the inner gates as guardians motioned inside.

“Naturally,” I muttered. “Would there have been a reason not to?”

Tristan shrugged while he fixed his tie, his façade solidifying across his expression and physique. “Be cautious, Alek. We don’t want the roles reversing.”

“It won’t,” I stated as my jaw clenched.

Tristan’s shoulders straightened as he smirked. “Don’t make any promises you can’t keep.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

KATERINA ELI



“**W**hat to do, what to do, what to do,” I whispered as I paced around my cramped room. Was it always this small? I never noticed. Or maybe it was all in my head because the sleepless nights were finally catching up to me.

Nope. Not possible.

I lost count of how long I’d gone without sleeping. Sure, it wasn’t unheard of for some guardians to go without sleep. But the maximum was forty-eight hours.

With how it felt as if I was hit by a semi-truck, my guess was I’d already surpassed the two days.

What will you choose, Katerina?

The hunger grew, now clawing through my insides until the pain vibrated against my bones. It was enough to numb *her* voice into a whisper, but it only fueled my anger.

Choose, choose, choose.

I stopped inside the bathroom, the blinding white light shining directly on my reflection. One I was starting to recognize as less of my own. One I wanted to punch whenever I faced it.

If you don’t, you’re going to kill them all.

My hands tightened around the cool cast-iron sink as I stared into my eyes. The usual emerald green darkened into a mossy color that belonged to *her*. Even my normal circular irises had extended vertically like slits.

Or I will.

I needed to feed.

Especially that boy.

The insulated suitcase lay on top of the toilet, my nose flaring at the sight of it. Just the thought of it was enough to water my mouth. Practically ignite the need to swallow the blood down as if I needed air.

She continued to remind me.

I wished I could convince myself that I didn't need it. That lie was enough to make my body stop. But I knew I was wrong. I always was.

Especially now, since I was under a roof with seven vampires that carried what my body thirsted for.

Choose, choose, choose.

But if I fed, *her* voice would grow louder. *She'd* gain enough power to be more than an itch across my skin.

What will you choose, Katerina?

I could resort to not feeding and only surviving on human food. I'd done it before. It was the quietest my head had ever been. But by weakening *her*, I'd weaken me, too.

The medication was already doing that, and I fucking hated them for it.

Choose, choose, choose.

My throat swelled as I carefully unlocked the suitcase. Sweet coppery scents crashed against my nose, the tension in my muscles relaxing while I practically swallowed a bag in one breath. A sweet metallic aftertaste settled on my tongue right as a surge of energy traveled through my veins. The fatigue instantly vanished.

I don't remember the last time I felt this... awake.

I wanted another one. Maybe if I...

It took all my force to shove the luggage away and leave. I needed distance. A distraction before I could make a mistake.

Training was the perfect excuse. And no way was I getting my ass kicked now.

I silently exited the underground passageway and made my way toward the employee quarters. A musky scent tickled my nose.

Lorenzo's arms wrapped around my waist and lifted me over his shoulder in the lobby. "Didn't think you'd want to run those laps already."

I punched his shoulder blades until he let me go. "You're insane."

"With those actions and language, I might as well double it." His stern expression eased with a smirk. "But I'll be lenient because we've been apart for five months."

I mockingly bowed in his direction. "Wow, sir. You are too kind, sir. Thank you for sparing me you, kind, considerate, most—"

"You're still giving me those two laps." He wrapped an arm around my neck and pulled me toward the staircase. "But training will do for now."

The building was a smaller version of the CEG, only holding four floors that met our basic needs. The first floor had the common area and cafeteria, the second floor was reserved only for training, and the third and fourth floors housed all the shared dormitories.

"How have you been?"

"I visited Mom's grave." We made our way through the empty training floor, settling in front of the weights.

Lorenzo's last post was up north in Canada, near our hometown, Ottawa. Although we barely remembered our time before the CEG, Lorenzo cherished the few memories he had with his mom— my aunt, Elia Devon.

It'd been over six years since she'd randomly passed. He never let her go.

"How was it?" While I barely had any memories with my aunt, it was nice hearing Lorenzo talk about the only other

person he cared about. She was also my caretaker after—

He scoffed as he settled into a bench. “Her grave? Practically buried. I hire monthly cleaners, yet they still do a shit job. I might as well make the walk and do it myself.”

I smirked. “You blabber it but never do it. So much for being a man of your word.”

Lorenzo ignored me. “I also tried tracing our old house while up there. All I stumbled on was an abandoned hospital.”

I pressed my lips together. Lorenzo knew the house had been torn down a little after my aunts’ death, but he was stuck on finding anything relating to his mom. For what? Who knows. If I asked, he’d only spiral down a hole, and I wasn’t up for opening those cans of worms.

“Watch it,” pointed Lorenzo. “I know that face.”

“What face? I’m not making a face. You are.”

He glared, then his eyes flashed behind me. I turned to the mounted screen on the wall where a vivid red headline motioned beneath the news anchor.

Company of Essential Guardianship: Who will essentially take over?

I hadn’t spoken to Lace since the incident with Tristan. With the holidays approaching, no way he had time to pick up my calls for check-ins.

Lorenzo cleared his throat, his eyes softening. “His father is close to deciding on the CEG’s shares and inheritance.”

If he was making a decision, then that meant... “Is Lace going to inherit the company?”

Lorenzo shrugged as he picked up a pair of dumbbells. “With the guardians vouching for him, maybe. He’s been sufficient and competent compared to his brothers.”

All three brothers were the face of the company. The oldest was in charge of business plans to achieve high marketing and capital. The middle brother focused on expansion and the testing facilities that were fixated on the science of guardians.

This left Lace to fend for the CEG alongside his dad, who was practically retired now.

The sound was off, but the closed captions continued across the screen as the news anchor spoke.

“The Bureau is trying to meddle? Of course, they are. At least the Vampire Ministry is staying out—”

“You can catch up on politics later.” He settled his back on the inclined bench and angled his arms into a push stance. “There’s something else we need to talk about.”

I grabbed my own set of weights, settling into the bench next to him. I barely started pushing when he said, “I know about the scheme the Sephtis pulled on you, Nina.”

A weight pressed against my shoulders and within my chest. And it wasn’t from the dumbbells.

I let them go onto the floor as a dry laugh escaped me. “And I thought Lace sent you here to reunite us.”

“He did.” He finished his set and settled the weights on the floor, angling toward me. “But I also know of your non-feeding habits.

“I’m not up for a lecture right now.” I stood, ready to sprint away, but he gripped my wrist.

“Listen, you settled a situation like a guardian would. But that doesn’t hide the fact that you weren’t feeding while taking stronger medication. The situation could have escalated.”

I pulled away from Lorenzo’s grip, making sure I kept the sigh of relief to myself. “Okay, okay! I get it. Lace wants me to have a babysitter to make sure I eat. Fine. Do you need to sniff my mouth every day to make sure I do?”

“No, Nina. If those guys do something else, it’ll affect the CEG and Lace. Nothing can happen until his dad makes the final decision. We can’t ruin Lace’s shot.”

In other words, you can’t ruin Lace’s shot.

Of course, I fucking knew that. I already slipped up once, and Lace let me stay. He still trusted me as guardian for the

Sephtis. Which is why I was trying everything to not disappoint him and protect him.

So much for training.



Alek sat on his side of the bench in the mausoleum. We've only met a handful of times, but somehow it felt like the hundredth. Granted, our meetings across the lake have been boring. The guy doesn't talk unless it's to get on my nerves. It's like he knew how to get under my skin.

And I hated how I couldn't tell if I liked it or not.

Usually, he broke the silence first. But after meeting with my cousin, I needed to get this over with and be alone.

"Did you report the intruder to the CEG?"

Alek glared at me, his eyes narrowing as he said, "No. Until it's fully confirmed that the intruder was someone outside of the CEG, then we'll keep it between ourselves."

"So why are we here?" I said as I rested against the wall.

"Tristan stumbled upon information regarding the possible intruder. Heed your surroundings."

"You want me to look out for more clues?"

"I would count against it," Alek said, "since you may risk Tristan's role."

I rolled my eyes. "So, what? We continue sneaking away in hopes your brother sees us? And then what? I become your full-fledged lover to really sell it to him?"

"We're not lovers," he stated.

"Of course not," I scoffed. "We're barely even allies walking around until your brother's fooled. You really think he's going to believe us when all we do is a whole lot of nothing?"

Alek's nostrils flared as he clenched his jaw. "Then what do you suggest we do, Katerina?" My name was venom on his tongue, a word he firmly spat out.

Two can play that game.

"Holding hands while waiting around will only get us so far." I looked away from him as heat surged through my body. Since when was it hot? "If you want to find the notebook, search for more ways than one. If you want your brother to think you're doing something, act like it, Alek."

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

ALEK SEPHTIS



Ms. Eli's words severely plagued my mind, the nightmares a mere haze to the echoes of her deep, soft voice.

If you want to find the notebook, search in more ways than one.

The garden conveyed no solace; the piano sunk further away in my chamber as I rooted myself in her indication. She brought up a valuable point. Tristan had yet to locate the man that visited during Kaleb's feeding. If he continued down this path, the time in our hold would cease, and I couldn't take such a gamble. One thought ceased that potential outcome.

The key to a new door hung in the vault, yet was the risk worth it?

I hovered before my door, the question weighing my footing and my hands while I tried to step outside. I stopped in my tracks when I noticed Kaleb standing beside the door frame, his dark hair disheveled and eyes aflame. The familiar mask settled in my demeanor, and my body grew rigid as his fingers wrapped around my neck. A reoccurring fire trailed across my veins the deeper his nails dug into my skin.

He drove me back onto my chamber's carpeted floor, searing pain blossoming against my back.

"Get up."

Instantly, I followed his command and forced my hands behind my back, my fingers tightening around each other. Our chests roughly met, and he heaved a sigh.

“Dear little brother, what have you done.”

Kaleb rested his fingers against my cheek and leveled my face onto his. His eyes burrowed into mine, his an everlasting calamity that shouted and echoed while mine a deliberate chasm.

A snicker slipped through his sharp grin as he straightened my dress shirt and patted my shoulders. “Tell me, did you miss my presence?”

“Of course, Brother,” I said as I swallowed down the coughs that itched at the back of my throat. He hadn’t paid me a visit since Christopher’s last gathering, the weight of Kaleb’s presence eventually vanishing from my qualms. Now, it weighed heavier than being engulfed by water, a pressing sensation that swiftly saturated the air.

“How has it been playing with the pest? Enjoyable? Riveting?”

“Yes, it has.”

His laughter echoed through the room, his smile anything but joyous. “I must admit, it has been entertaining to see such a sight. It’s a gift in itself to witness my dear little brother flourish into one of *us*.” He strolled away and toward my piano, the tip of his elongated nail trailing along the polished outline. “Pity, I must admit, as your time is almost up.”

“Yes, it is,” I murmured, unable to properly assemble my thoughts and form a request. Yet, Kaleb didn’t accept requests — he was the one who granted them.

“I’m feeling generous on this fine day.” His index finger rasped across my piano, gleaming eyes wide. “I’ll grant an extension, dear little brother. I expect the best results by the Christmas Ball. I must witness her ruin without fail. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Brother,” I responded with a nod.

“Additionally, you have done a fine job at reserving this scheme between us. Let’s keep it that way.”

“Thank you, Brother.” I bowed, and his presence diminished as I rose. The air mended to its still nature, one that I longed for after every private meeting with Kaleb.

He was a constant testament to the little authority I possessed, a reminder of the position I was grounded to—submitted at his feet.

If you want your brother to think you're doing something, act like it, Alek.

Frustration welled up in my chest. Not due to Kaleb's control but rather Ms. Eli's resoluteness.

She didn't cower away from her honesty nor hid herself behind lies. Her actions cemented what I could never amount to, a fight that she chased while I longed for. And her words awoke a visceral desire that was slowly etching itself into my bones. The intrigue flourished into something unprecedented, a tangible sensation that twisted my stomach until my throat swelled against a trapped breath.

Was it admiration? Jealousy? Did I want to be like her, or did I simply want her?

Don't be absurd, I told myself, yet I couldn't swallow it down as truth.

Between two risks, there was only one I could accept, and I escaped to find it before the brewing realization could continue descending upon me.

Noah's arms flexed across the pool's surface, his body turning with each motion as he swam back and forth. Since his youth, he relished competing against us until he defeated each brother. Though it's been quite some time, he still practiced as if a competition loomed.

Water swept beyond the floor before my feet, his deep raven hair concealing his forehead as he came up. His abdomen rested along the border as he shook his head, revealing cobalt blue eyes that shimmered when they fell on me.

“Oh my.” His chest lay on the ground as he leaned closer. “What a lovely coincidence to discover you in my domain.”

Noah's tone habitually chimed, quite unlike anyone else's. While Christopher and Jacob were a constant drone, Jacques and Kaleb a fluctuating yet obnoxious ring, and Raphael's a silent hum, Noah's voice was a penetrating note, a treble that collided with my brothers.

The slightest change of tone foretold his objective. Currently, he was utterly fascinated, which was equally charming as it was horrifying.

"Tell me, Alekin, what are you seeking me out for?"

"Well, Brother—"

He waved a hand in the air and lifted from the water, his long limbs steadying on the floor. "Ah, ah! With that introduction, I'll need a drink before we begin." He motioned onto the left pathway and into the last door beside the feeding space's entry. When he exited, a transparent bag rested in his palm with a straw in an opening, the blood swishing as he walked. Similarly to Kaleb, he displayed his sharpened fangs in full glory, the length extending as he slurped.

In recent years, vampires discovered the similarities between human and pig blood cells. With a simple tweak in the content and structure, it was able to provide the same nutrients as a human's. For common vampires, it had become their staple diet due to its accessibility and affordability. But for my brothers, it was a snack.

"Not as refreshing, but this will do for now." Noah exhaled, and the stale metallic scent lingered between us. "Now tell me, Alekin, the suspense is *killing* me."

My throat grew dry. "I would like to request a copy of the feeding log, Brother."

He arched an eyebrow, the gleam still apparent. "*Oh!* To say I'm shocked is an understatement, though something I'm looking forward to. Why do you desire such a thing out of all the privileges I can bestow upon you?"

"I would like to review a few names from the previous weeks." To give answers to Noah was to play a battle of chess — each word had to be calculated and evaluated before a

move could be made because if one misinterpretation occurred, then he'd gain the advantage.

“Being cautious, I see!” He sucked the straw, his slurp blaring beside my ears. “I must admit it hurts to be kept secrets from, littlest brother.” He swished his mouth as he tapped a finger against his cheek. “Answer me this: Have you practiced swimming?”

I clenched my jaw, suppressing the bewilderment that itched to escape. “No, I haven't, Brother.”

His appearance shifted, a serious ambiance outlining his features but not stripping the shimmer in his gaze. He stood taller, towering over me with sheer confidence that only he possessed. His voice altered, too, to one that resembled the eldest.

“Measure for measure, favor for a favor, a debt that will undoubtedly be repaid.” He slurped the last bits of his pouch, purging the drops that possibly remained. “Do you understand the terms you must uphold for such information?”

“Repaid be the debt, undoubtedly a favor for a favor, measure to measure,” I repeated, followed by a nod, the words a seal to the agreement. It hadn't been my first time undergoing such an arrangement, yet unlike the past, this wouldn't be a foolish mistake or a learning curve.

His mouth widened into a vile smile, and his stained fangs lapped over his lips. “Then the debt you will owe me is a race in the lake,” he stated, his fruity tone resurfacing. “There will be no definite date or time for such an event, so I expect you to be on your toes, just like the good old days, Alekin!”

My stomach tensed as my tongue slipped, “That's all?”

“Remarkable, isn't it? I continue to outspend myself with such charity.” He crossed his arms over his chest and rocked from side to side. “If only my lovely Bethany would admire such heart-stirring qualities.”

He handed me the emptied bag and turned toward the pool, the water swallowing his body as he broke through the surface.

When his head appeared abruptly, he tilted his head toward my direction.

“Why?”

It was a forthright question, one that I wasn't expecting an answer to.

In turn, Noah smirked. “Alek, we all seek the last laugh in our own ways. Rest assured, the finishing act will be mine.”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

KATERINA ELI



Whenever Lorenzo and I found ourselves in the training room, it was empty. Which was both good and bad. Good because we had the space to ourselves. Bad because he forced his training regime on me, using the two laps I owed him as leverage. It was inevitable, but I stalled, my decisions catching up to me as we wrestled.

“You know,” I said through huffs, my arms wrapped tightly around Lorenzo’s neck, “I go easy on Lace because he’s a twig. Those same rules don’t apply to you.”

While Lace was lean with barely any muscle definition, he still held some ground against me when I didn’t use all my strength. Lorenzo, on the other hand? I had to sweat a little bit. Sure, I was stronger than him, but he was still double in muscle and height. And adding his endurance and stubbornness to the mix? He could keep up a fight for days if he wanted to.

I forced him away, and Lorenzo stepped back, creating some distance between us. “Watch it. That’s our boss you’re talking idly about.”

“Oh please,” I muttered while my chest heaved. “Don’t act like you’ve never talked shit about him before.”

“We’ve moved past that time in my life, Nina,” Lorenzo stated, his tone stern. “With everything Lace has done for us, he only deserves praise.” A longing look softened his expression, and his eyes lowered. The same one that seeped through when he spoke about him.

Lorenzo didn't lie. I knew how much Lace had done for us, especially for Lorenzo. He supported him in searching for anything relating to his mom. Right before my aunt randomly passed away, she'd sent us to the CEG, where Lace opened the doors. He was the only one who knew of my condition and advocated for ways to help me.

He was the glue when we grew distant.

Suddenly, *her* presence swelled my bones. I hadn't sensed *her* since my feeding a few days ago, going so far as to assure *she* was gone by doubling my intake of medication.

But as swiftly as *she* appeared, *she* vanished. My body remained stiff, and it gifted Lorenzo the perfect opening.

He sprinted in my direction and rounded my body, bringing his arm around my waist and lifting me off the mat. He threw me over his shoulder, but instead of resting me against it, he let me tumble behind him.

“Fuck!” My muscles twisted with soreness, a pain blossoming in my mid-back.

He crouched and met my eyes, extending an arm. “How's your medication?”

Instantly, my body stiffened as I gripped his hand and balanced on the ground. I couldn't tell if my face was as hot as it felt. “I've been taking it.”

One thing I could never deny Lorenzo was a checkup. He didn't pester us for answers about my condition —because honestly, we weren't even sure what it was— and waited for a concrete explanation from Lace when the day came.

My medication history was a punching reminder that, even if I did everything right, Lorenzo and Lace would never entirely believe me. I was guilty of fluctuating between taking them and not. But it didn't stop the hollow hole in my stomach from deepening every time I faced this reality.

“Lace told me the doctors increased the prescription. Has it been affecting you badly?” Lorenzo tilted his head, and his eyes collided with mine.

“What do you think?” I asked, quickly biting my tongue. Fuck. “It’s fine, really. I’m fine. Nausea’s there, but the medication is doing its job.”

A door swung open behind us as Tristan stepped through and bowed. Lorenzo was quick to bow back, but I gave a swift nod at Tristan, avoiding his eyes.

Had he heard the conversation? Of course, my medical history was public record, like all of the other guardians. But mine had a few tweaks to hide the full truth, one Lace and I liked not to face. One that Lorenzo didn’t know about.

“Ms. Eli, your new responsibilities start today.”

“What?” I blurted out, quickly gazing at my cousin. “Which ones, M-Mr. Amelle?”

“Feeding duties.” Tristan kept his tone impartial, but he tilted his head toward the exit.

Lorenzo nodded at me. “We’ll talk more later.” He quickly bowed and stepped out of the training room, disappearing into the staircase.

I fell behind Tristan as he stepped outside and toward the underground pathway. Once we were swallowed by darkness and away from guardians, he let out a deep breath. It was as if he had a switch that intuitively turned on and off depending on who he was around.

Somehow, it felt familiar, and it didn’t settle right in my chest.

“I’m sorry for not mentioning it to you, Katerina,” he said. “I’ve been preoccupied with, you know, everything else.” Although he wore large, black sunglasses, his right eyebrow lowered as he opened his mouth. Was that supposed to be a wink?

“What is it?”

“The task is self-explanatory. Sonia promoted you to take over.” He continued down the route that led to the cellar, his steps matching mine. “Alek and Raphael know the drill, but

essentially: in the feeding room, be sure to monitor their surroundings. It's a quick in and out.

“There's ongoing construction, and since it's a human hospital, stay by their side as they're going undercover. If you have any questions, be sure to ask Alek.

For now, you'll oversee outer feedings. If all goes smoothly, Sonia will promote you to monitoring household feedings, too.”

“Anything else?” In the underground humidity, my workout suit was starting to stick to my skin.

“You'll be needing this.” Tristan handed me a bulletproof vest, the thick fibers weighing down my palm. “You leave in an hour.”



With how big the limousine compartment was, I didn't think it could feel any bigger with three people in it— four if we included the driver. But I was wrong.

Raphael and Alek sat on opposing corners, practically yards apart, while I was right smack in the middle. No one spoke. If they couldn't breathe, they probably wouldn't to keep up the deafening silence. Did they not get tired of being quiet all the time?

But if they spoke, what would they say? The few times I've seen them interact, it was too formal, their topics strictly political and spiteful. I couldn't blame Alek's exhaustion. Being alone in a house filled with asshole brothers was depressing.

Being lonely and surrounded by that environment was torture.

The limousine turned into a white building, the hospital's drop-off area busy with wandering humans and parked cars. I stepped out first and analyzed the entrance, people exiting and entering without batting an eye in our direction.

Alek walked inside first, Raphael following behind him. The automatic doors widened, sending a wave of coppery air that brushed my nose. Their scents intensified enough to meet my watering tongue. The smallest taste would be enough. So much more than—

I stopped in my tracks.

What was I fucking thinking?

Her voice trailed as loud chatters swallowed the central entrance. I kept it moving as Alek and Raphael continued. I couldn't have them leave my eyesight. They came first, not *her*.

Kids ran through the hospital halls with vibrant costumes while adults roamed with dull masks. Vivid green and black decorations embellished the white walls, bright orange lights shaped like pumpkins hanging from the ceiling with black bats.

Then it struck me with a shear stabbing. Today marked a little over a month since being assigned to the Sephtis. And my twenty-first birthday. My throat tightened while tension weighed against my chest.

“Ms. Eli?” Alek’s voice snapped my head toward him. A shadow cast over his gaze, his expression hardening as he cleared his throat. “We’re here.”

The feelings numbed as I pushed the thought away. This was something to think about later. Not now. Not ever, if possible.

They stepped into a small room, open white drapes separating lines of cubicles. They were all empty, with no one in the room except for the attendants who roamed behind the nurses’ station which overlooked the space.

Human pulses accelerated, heightening their uneasy breaths as nurses walked to the guys. Sweat trickled against my forehead as the salty scents mixed with the flowery fragrance. The circulating cold air wasn’t helping.

“Could I step out?”

Alek's sharp gaze met mine, his silence enough to force me through the double doors. I swallowed the air, taking in the metallic scents that calmed my body.

I told you, Katerina.

Her force shoved me toward the nearest wall.

Shut up.

If you don't kill them, I will.

My breathing grew jagged as if *she* gripped my neck.

No.

Our hunger has grown more.

I pulled away, *her* force looming but slowly turning into a faint pressure.

You're wrong.

The medication has only worsened you.

My head rolled, the tension in my neck loosening as fists tightened beside me.

You're nothing.

Her hold vanished like smoke as vibrations filled my pocket. I was swift to pull out the phone and pick it up.

"Long time no talk, stranger," said Lace.

"Lace—" I quickly bit away my tongue before I could reveal anything. Lorenzo must have told him something today. This guy took up any chance he got to talk to Lace, even if it was just for a few seconds. He didn't like to admit it. But he didn't have to when his actions and face did.

"Did I catch you at a wrong time?" He asked, almost cautiously.

"No, no, of course not. Well, I'm currently on a task, so it can't take long."

"Always on top of your job, Nina." I could sense a smile through the phone as he snickered. "I wanted to check on you.

Have the Sephtis given you trouble? They've grown quiet. It's unusual."

"Everything's fine! Seriously, you don't have to worry about anything, Lace."

"Okay, okay. Listen, I know you don't like it, but I wanted to say—" The hairs on my nape rose. Lace's words grew distant as my focus shifted, his voice fading while I studied the adjoining walls. A shadow blurred through crowding humans.

I didn't notice when I started following. "I'll call you back."

I kept my distance, my head bobbing above the crowds but focused on them. They were wearing black clothes with a matching mask, but that didn't confirm the assailant. It was the same jagged breath that met the air. The same build that carried an uneven footing.

How did they know the guys would be here? Who were they working with? Who sent them?

Only one way to find out.

They turned into another hallway, and I stepped through an opening covered by strips of plastic. I was quickly met with a deserted entryway, the walls chipping with paint and the floor covered in debris.

It was still. Unlike the mansion, where the walls still vibrated with life, this hall was hollow and empty. There were no footsteps or voices.

Only *her* whispers and the figure.

They struck with sharp blows. We fell into sync, their attacks blocked by my defense, and then my attacks blocked by theirs. We didn't have batons or knives this time. Just our hands and bodies. With each punch, they inhaled sharply. With each sway, their feet grew weary.

I needed to do more.

Katerina.

Dark eyes gleamed past the masks' opening, sharp slits glinting against obsidian eyes. I've seen them before. But where?

You're weak.

The familiar numbing eased across my skin as the assailant's arms twisted through my blows and onto me.

You're wrong.

A pinching throb enveloped the side of my neck. In seconds, everything hazed around me until it all turned black.

The hunger has let me in.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

ALEK SEPHTIS



Hunger and desire harbored a tenacious tug during feedings. With sharp adrenaline swelling through my veins, the combination of all three roused my true nature. I could sense the obsidian veins webbing beneath my scleras, expanding into the surrounding leaden skin as the human nurse motioned to me.

My fangs also extended below my lower lip, the tips nearly jabbing against the flesh.

Sweat ran across the nurses' temples, the salty scent meddling with her bitter-sweet blood that quickened. She was swift to release Raphael and I from the IV lines and pure silver needles.

Doctors and nurses who led the blood banks inevitably bore the same knot on their expressions— fear consuming their eyes and worry trailing with each trembling gesture. The burden of our confidential visitations intensified each time.

Luckily for them, our visits would decrease as the Christmas Ball drew closer. Tomorrow marked November, and all preparations to follow, indicating the little time I had in my grasp.

Noah was quick to deliver a copy of the log, yet no leads surfaced. While I had no means to clinch onto the trifling strands of hope that swung faintly, they remained animated, persistent.

Raphael hovered over my shoulder. “The silver irritates my skin every time.”

Beneath the healed place where the needle had rested, a trivial itch blossomed.

“It’s what we have to endure until Christopher grants us permission to private feedings.” It wasn’t a custom amongst Regal Families; however, Christopher upheld it for an undisclosed reason only he knew.

“It’s almost noon. Do you think our brothers will notice if we stay longer? There are festivities going on in the entrance,” Raphael murmured, his eyes gleaming then suddenly dimming as I met them. He understood better than to celebrate alongside them. It was an act intolerable within our society, as humans were evident with their hatred toward our species.

“Raphael, although we seem to be dressed for the occasion, doesn’t mean we should partake in them.” Our nature fully engulfed our faces, and though humans exaggerated us into monsters with their costumes, there was a clear distinction that the naked eye could identify.

“I know. It’s just... Doesn’t hurt to try.” He gave me a half-smile, one that exposed the sadness that hollowed his dark eyes. “Are we leaving immediately then?”

“Yes, we just have to be navigated by Ms.—”

I analyzed the room. An eerie sensation hovered over my skin with the realization that she hadn’t returned.

A fiery red flare suddenly engulfed the space, loud rings booming from the speakers that hung from the ceiling.

“Is there a fire?” Raphael asked, frozen in place.

My chest tightened. “Go retrieve the driver, but be careful with the humans. Your strength is at its most potent now.”

“W-what? But I can’t leave you alone!”

“Yes, you can,” I assured him. “Once you meet the driver, request for Mr. Amelle’s presence and that he come alone.”

Raphael was one who never asked questions, yet his worry raged on his expression. Nevertheless, he was swift to follow orders.

Hysteria overwhelmed the adjoining hallways, humans squeezing past exits as the blare echoed every few seconds. I vanished from eye view, escaping through a hidden hallway before I could collide with a human. They were notorious for pointing fingers at those who could easily swallow the blame in acts of distress— especially when vampires were involved.

My feet dashed as I searched for a whiff of what could possibly be Ms. Eli's scent. Sensing her ever-so-faint presence in the air. With each turn, I met voids of space until I blurred past barren hospital rooms and offices, reaching the construction at the hospital's side entrance.

A dusky, deserted corridor vibrated beneath my stilling feet. I fixated on the adrenaline that pounded against my skull, steadying as much as I could. It didn't waver my heart which craved to accomplish more; the newfound energy was vigorous. If I continued, it wouldn't be long until all sense of logic and calculations were decimated.

While this type of nature was unlike the one that appeared when starved —the atrocious side of vampires— it was one that needed to be maintained before it enveloped our bodies.

When it finally calmed, I inched through clear doors and before an unexpected scene.

Ms. Eli pounded against a damaged wall but fleetly recuperated, meeting a figure concealed in black deep in the room. In the blink of an eye, she attacked, and the figure avoided each of Ms. Eli's throws.

Her palms stretched and curved to scratch rather than punch. The shadow retreated a step at a time as if trying to escape her grasp, and Ms. Eli met them with ravenous aggression. The movements grew familiar the further they danced. The intruder was careful. Ms. Eli was chaos.

It was a nastier replica of the day of the scheme.

What drew Ms. Eli further apart were the patches of hair that formed on her cheeks. The waves that slipped from her bun which had once rested perfectly on her crown. Icy-green eyes that housed a swelling hunger, dulling the woman I knew.

She was a predator after their prey, a shell of herself, in the same manner that our mother descended into when her episodes dawned.

Ms. Eli rapidly turned to me and stepped in my direction. It gave leeway to the intruder, their shadow vanishing before I could take it into account. My focus was on Ms. Eli's possession long before I had regarded it.

Ms. Eli was slow as she grew close, each step followed by a pause and a roll from her shoulders.

"Stop," a trembling tone said, Ms. Eli's lips widening and exposing a few narrow, shark-like fangs as they lengthened. "This... isn't..."

It was as if two voices battled each other upon the same lips. One amplified the softness of the other, the two confined in a battle that translated into her body. She progressed forward, her upper body pushing backward, opposing the bottom half. Yet, I remained frigid, waiting for her.

My chest tightened once Ms. Eli closed the space between us. She was like lightning, her ambush one that I met with swift deflection and blurred motions. I maintained my balance by following her shift in movement. The fight within herself surged, each slash grazing my dress shirt but never quite penetrating.

Ms. Eli's eyes widened and exposed a cry that bared unspoken words, ones that I entirely understood without a sound. It called to me, awakening anew old instincts.

She suddenly halted. Normally, her heat radiated like the sun, but it flourished into a frenzied wildfire on top of my iciness.

"Please," she whispered, Ms. Eli's true voice hinting as she twisted her fists into my shirt. Sharp points pressed against my flesh while she rested her forehead on my chest. "Make it stop." Her words were a whimper, one that was followed by a wavering sob and heavy sniffles.

She tumbled forward, my arms wrapping around her instantly. "It's okay, Katerina," I whispered, my voice a soft

rustle against the heavy air. “It’s okay.” Though my words repeated, I couldn’t quite acknowledge if it was for Katerina or myself.

Katerina slumped further into me, my hold tightening and scooping her into my chest. It was unconscious, instinctive, and remarkably natural. Her trembles vibrated against my body, but her eyes shut, and the tension in her shoulders eased the closer I brought her to me.

A familiar presence swelled in the air, and Tristan stormed through the hall. His arrival was brisker than I had anticipated.

“Recover all of the footage from the first floor. The intruder escaped, but there must be a way to trace them.”

“I’ll get to it after you leave first.” He stretched his arms, but I pulled away.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I was just— I didn’t know you wanted to carry her.” Tristan cleared his throat, his shoulders suddenly straightening.

Though I noticed the wonder in his raised eyebrows, I paced toward the exit that led west of the hospital. “Round the car to the other side. The humans escaped through the main and rear entrances.”

“Alek,” he said as he halted. “What happened with the intruder?”

I held a sigh within my chest. “They were able to find us and lure out Katerina. She handled it perfectly. I’m safe.” Though his gaze studied me, searching for a potential, hidden answer in my demeanor, he nodded in defeat.

Tristan pressed his lips into a mic against his suit’s inner lapel, his eyebrows meeting. “No one saw you, correct?”

“No. The humans were preoccupied with their hysteria.” We walked through plastic doors and into another adjoining hall, the floor lifeless, the bones of what once was indicative. “Where’s Raphael?”

“I sent him off with my driver. I also relayed that you’d be late due to complications during feeding.”

“We can’t risk him knowing what occurred. No one, to be specific. We can’t let what little lead we possess regarding the intruder be intercepted.”

Tristan flared his nostrils and responded, “If Sonia finds out, then you’ll be taking the fall.”

“I’ll be as guilty as a sinner.”

My gaze trailed onto Katerina. She was stilling, the trembles refining into occasional minor jerks. The line between her eyebrows didn’t unwind, though, further tightening her eyelids.

Tristan chuckled. “You like her.”

“Excuse me?” I abruptly stopped. Never had Tristan ignored me, all before today.

The limousine rounded to where we stood outside, and I rested Katerina inside on an extensive row. Tristan bowed, the driver exiting onto the main road.

I opened the cushion beneath me and pulled one of the shirts I left stored in case of emergencies during feedings. In the past, Raphael had left our sessions with soiled attire, which Noah reprimanded the two of us for. At this moment, it proved to work in our favor.

Katerina turned in the cushion, her face falling onto my line of sight as her eyebrows knitted across her forehead. Her lips motioned as if she was whispering. I scooted to her side, sparking a reflex that led my fingers to caress her temples. Cold sweat trickled from her forehead, my touch swiping them away alongside the crease still embedded between her eyebrows.

“It’s okay, Katerina.”

You like her. Tristan’s comment resounded within my mind, the three words stretching into a treble. It was absurd as it held no embodiment. I’d never felt attraction, never seized the desire to develop a close relationship. Katerina’s and I’s

relationship still upheld itself on a rocky foundation, yet, I couldn't help but enable my pillars to sink underneath it.

Katerina stirred the turmoil that I had kept at bay. Feelings that had been buried with our mother. Yet, the overwhelming sense of hope unfolded, an obscure warmth blanketing it.

Before I could confront such revelations, her episodes came to mind.

The Human Bureau and the Ministry designed the Interchange Act to nearly forbid humans from transitioning into vampires. After our mother, no other human-turned-vampire was born as she was the testament to the supposed miracle transitioning bestowed. The complications were too grave, and she was the prime example of what could occur if anyone dared to go through it.

But one detail never accounted for in the media was her burden of marrying into a Regal Family and bearing seven heirs one after the other. It had depleted the little mental state she had relegated all alone.

What I witnessed with the two confirmed it was impossible for Katerina to be a transitioned vampire.

Katerina inhaled a sharp breath, her body rising away from my touch. The hollowness in the loss immediately settled as I took her in. Her hair detached from its disheveled knot and cascaded over her shoulders, the length of the waves nearly reaching the floor. Her eyes gleamed with the familiar icy green hue as our gazes met.

Green was slowly becoming my favorite color.

"You're awake," I muttered faintly.

"What happened?" Her eyes trembled as she bit away at her thumb, the claws she bore completely gone.

"My apologies, Katerina." I cleared my throat, attaining the profound inflection I'd briefly lost. "Everything is fine, but I authorize you to have the rest of the day off."

"Wait—" Katerina stopped shuddering, and now the familiar heat seized her expression. "What happened, Alek?"

The limousine paused before the inner gate that had yet to open. “We will discuss it later. You are excused.”

The worrisome curiosity didn’t melt away, but she did as I asked. Katerina swiftly exited the car and vanished beyond the trees. Though she appeared fine, the knots in my stomach continued to burrow.

When the driver pulled into the driveway, I recognized the limousine that occupied the side space and stuffed the damaged shirt away. To my knowledge, we weren’t expecting a visitation from the Ambrogios— unless it was an act of surprise.

Bodies crowded the foyer, all seven Ambrogio sisters before us sporting eloquent outfits in varying shades of the rainbow.

After my greeting and quick apologies, Christopher announced, “Let’s move over to the dining room, shall we?” We all followed him, Anabella on his side as she whispered untraceable words. Raphael met my side, though Gia, the youngest and on par with his age, trailed near him. There was no need to share words as his gaze asked, *What happened?*

I slightly shook my head, *Nothing*.

Our routines followed suit.

Each of my brothers sat beside their accustomed betrothed within the expansive table. Davina, on the other hand, sat before me, her back to the foyer.

Jacque followed on my other side with Esmeralda, her twin, Fortuna between her and Jacob, and at the very end of the other side was Gia and Raphael. Although the three youngest sisters were from the third mother within the Ambrogio name, they resembled their older siblings, their feats closely corresponding with the older four.

Murmurs arose into extended conversations, Davina’s eyes dawning on me. “Oh, Alek, your delayed feeding backtracked us.”

“My apologies,” my tongue quickly responded. She was the first to initiate the conversation when together. It was

identical to the routine I bore with my brothers because, like them, Davina held authority over me in one way or another.

Her pale hair was pulled into a bun, further chiseling her angular features. Round, rose-pink lips stretched into a thin line while deep gray eyes pricked against my flesh like knives.

“No worries, sweetheart,” she responded, her tone disguising the hostility. With each visit, a blazing hatred intensified through her words and glare. The feeling was mutual.

Servants entered the dining room with goblets filled with crimson red blood, the sweet, metal aroma flooding the space. Yet, I lacked the desire to feed.

“The ball’s underlying theme has been approved,” Anabella mentioned.

“Which means we have to decide on which outfits we have to wear,” Catalina murmured to Kaleb, his face souring as he huffed a chuckle.

“Oh, Bethany! I hope you have thought about our matching attire. I have no preference, though I wouldn’t mind sporting a dress this year,” Noah chimed to her as she steered away from his side.

Anabella cleared her throat. “This year’s Christmas Ball will be dedicated to appreciation.”

“The invitation has been extended to select Elected Officials within the Human Bureau and Ministry alike,” Bethany mentioned. “Even close servants that assist them.”

“All high-ranking guardians are to attend,” Davina added, her eyes flickering above me. She hadn’t turned, yet I noticed the way she gazed behind me, the goblet exposing the window that reflected what was behind her. “Which includes the one behind us.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

KATERINA ELI



Maybe for once, I wasn't opposed to running. But it was impossible because fuck did my body hurt.

It was as if my muscles were overexerted, a soreness echoing within my bones and extending deep inside me. Even my gums ached as if my teeth had been repeatedly pulled out. But there were no memories that explained why I felt like this. No thoughts. Nothing.

What happened?

Searching for a crumb of a hint caused me to stick out. Walking into the dining room in a room full of snakes heightened the need to sprint away.

New faces appeared among the Ambrogio sisters, fourteen chairs occupied by a brother and a sister next to each other. What was it with these families and their need to have so many kids? The exact amount at that?

Regardless, all of their overwhelming scents intensified the headache that pounded against my skull.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Davina spoke as if I hadn't just asked a question. "It's quite simple. There will be a curated list for every guest and household, the max of invited guardians depending on how large the attending family is."

"In your case, it would be three," Bethany said.

Davina angled her face to where I stood, revealing Alek, who didn't look at me at all. For one second, he'd held me as

if we were more than reluctant allies. In another, he didn't even pay attention to me. Asshole.

But why did I think otherwise? And why did it cause my chest to hurt?

"You, deary, must take a spot." Her voice was stern, and no one went against her command. Not even Kaleb, who shot daggers at me.

How fun.

"Father wants us all to showcase our unification," Anabella muttered, "In hopes it keeps the Mubaraks' disappearance out of view. News outlets have begun raising questions regarding their absences during hearings. The confirmation of the Christmas Ball's theme and the new attendance sheet will bury it."

"They're doing too much for a family that routinely vanishes," Catalina murmured as she rolled her eyes.

"So not only will guardians be guests but still operating like usual," Kaleb declared, his gaze turning cold.

My stomach twisted as a burn scraped against my throat. I wanted to run to the nearest bathroom, but I stayed still. They had yet to dismiss me. If they wanted me to stay, then they'll deal with my vomit.

"Oh my, what a brilliant idea! Continuous labor disguised as fun," Noah exclaimed as he clapped.

"No, you idiot. It's not an undercover job," Catalina spat. "But if by chance something out of the ordinary occurs, then the already stationed guardians will have reinforcements."

They continued barking back and forth, their voices blending into one another as my mind trailed. It was quiet, maybe even too quiet at a time like this. There were double the vampires in my presence, so where was *she*? I wasn't complaining, but I was suspicious. Without *her* presence, it led me to question the throbbing in my chest.

What happened that left my body so fatigued? How did I get here?

I can recall the feeding room. Taking Lace's call after stepping out. Then... blank. After that, the last thing was waking up in Alek's lap, his expression softening like it had never done before.

Something fluttered in my stomach, and it wasn't the puke.

"Not in the mood to bite today?" Davina asked, her voice almost bitter.

"She shouldn't be," Catalina said. "A mutt should know its place."

"Don't call me that," I muttered through gritted teeth. It wasn't the first time she used that stupid word on me. But it definitely was the first time it ignited my blood with a crackling rush.

The term was used to degrade half-humans. To classify us as nothing more than guinea pigs.

And right now, it hit home harder than usual.

"Ah! There's that gleam we all favor!" Noah tilted his head, and a light smirk slipped through his red-stained lips. My hands tightened into fists on my sides, sharpened tips clawing through my skin.

Tristan breezed into the dining room before I could spout all the profanities that came to mind.

"Pardon my intrusion," he said as he raised from his bow.

"What do you require, Mr. Amelle?" Christopher asked, his blank expression suddenly soothing.

"We require Ms. Eli's presence, sir. It's time for the routine search across the grounds."

"One day won't do no harm," Davina said, her eyes steady on mine.

Tristan pressed his lips together. "I'm afraid that the request is coming from the Senior Guardian. I'm only the transmitter, Ms. Ambrogio."

"Oh, no fun!" Noah chimed. "It was just growing interesting."

Christopher nodded, Tristan swift as he exited while I forced myself to follow behind him. He steered away from the dining room, through the kitchen, into the living room, and up the side stairs.

The more I explored the house, the more it became a labyrinth of doors and stairs. It was as if they sprouted from thin air every time I thought I had mapped out the mansion to a T.

Tristan turned to a door across from mine and pulled me inside. I froze in place as I turned my head. Holy shit. This room was huge.

A second floor loomed over the first, with high ceilings held up by pillars at the ends of the room by the staircases. It was the opposite of mine; while mine was cluttered and small, this one was quadruple the size, with a large piano, long chaises, and bookshelves.

Not fair that I didn't get a loft.

"Whose room is this?"

"Alek's," Tristan stated as he climbed the stairs; beneath each one, a door that probably led to more rooms and stairs. I followed him, but my body craved to dart to my room. Something wasn't right— me.

The second floor had two large dressers on both ends, and in the middle, an enormous bed put the one my cousin and I used to share in shame. In front of it were two armchairs with a table between them, sitting near the railing that overlooked the first floor. They matched the bed's comforters and pillows with a deep violet fabric and paired nicely with the dark walnut Victorian-style furniture.

"These aren't the grounds." It was supposed to be a joke. But it sure didn't come out that way.

"All guardians are on duty due to the Ambrogio's visit. There's no place to speak privately besides here."

"There's my room," I said without a second thought. I really wanted my fucking bed.

He grinned. “Sure, but your room isn’t as secure as Alek’s nor as big.”

“What do you mean secured?”

“Well, while it is soundproofed like the rest of the rooms, it isn’t as insulated,” he said as he unbuttoned his jacket and rested on the cushion. “Anyone can barge into your room without permission.”

“No one’s done that.”

“Yes, but you’re still under the Sephtis’ roof. Even if they ignore a private guardian’s presence, we can’t risk anything with visitors.”

Tristan cleared his throat and motioned to the empty chair. After a fight with myself—which didn’t last long—I sat down. My muscles were throbbing. I’d be an idiot if I didn’t rest. It also helped the clawing burn in my throat.

“Why am I here?” Talking typically helped. It had to since it was either that or throwing up what little I had in my stomach.

“There are important matters I need to discuss with you.” His tone squeezed my stomach with unbearable nausea. “On the hospital site, I discovered these.” He pulled a piece of paper and unwrapped it, revealing canines that were longer than standard and a cluster of short hair. “They were where you and Alek were. Do you recognize them?”

I didn’t have to study them to know *her* fangs and fur. But how? My hair was intact. While my gums hurt, my teeth were all there.

“No,” the lie slipped so easily. It didn’t stop the guilt from rising. Lorenzo never liked liars, but it was the only way to protect him and Lace.

“Do you remember how the intruder looked? Or what they had done to you before you became unconscious?”

“Intruder?” I thought back, digging for any crumbs my mind stuffed away. “They wore the same uniform, mask and all.”

Tristan rested the piece of paper on the table and crossed his legs. “Anything else?”

“They plunged something into me after I tried stopping them.” My hand traveled to my neck where hollow pain hovered.

“A sedative? That would explain why you were unconscious.”

“Do you think Kaleb was behind this?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Tristan responded. “If it was, it’s risky but proves his point. While he’s known to go above and beyond, I don’t see him being...”

“Dumb?”

“Reckless.”

Alek’s sweet, flowery scent filled the room as he stepped inside. Tristan met him downstairs in a flash, their whispers growing distant.

I eyed what rested in front of me.

Through the years, I picked up a habit of stealing *her* evidence. It was a way to keep *her* at bay. To erase *her*.

But every time I stared at them, they echoed *her* words.

You’re weak.

Alek and Tristan walked onto the second floor, my hands quick to rummage the scraps into my pocket as I stood. “Are they gone?” Alek nodded. “Then I’ll be accepting your offer to take the rest of the day off.” I didn’t wait for either of their responses and left for my room.

Once locked inside, I went straight to the toilet. My hand tightened around the paper in my pocket, bringing it out to the vivid light.

Snow-white fangs and raven-black fur rested on my palm. They brought *her* to life. I ended it.

Even as they flushed away, one thought haunted me.

The medication was useless, time was ticking, and I needed to end *her* once and for all.



Nothing compared to lakes.

They were the perfect balance. I didn't have to compete with waves like in the ocean. It didn't restrict me like pools. I didn't have to concentrate on settling down my mind like in rivers.

But this wasn't the grounds lake. It was the one in my dreams with *her*.

Even so, *her* presence didn't linger above the surface. Neither did it call to me. Instead, it was something else. In an instant, the water drained from the lake and leveled me against the dry ground. Then, I stood in the distinct, dimly lit room with someone that sent shivers down my spine.

We shared the same circular face and the same full pout. Creases etched across his skin, enhancing the dark circle under his large eyes— even the darkness resembling mine.

The only difference was his taunting gray eyes, the shade altering from a clouded state to deep ash as they settled on me. A rage flamed across rich olive skin as he traveled across the room to me.

It was as if I shrunk in size, my skin and body movements alien to me. He wrapped his fingers around my neck, my throat swallowing a cry as my eyes held in the tears that slowly burned. That ached to escape.

Like me.

“*You!*” His hold tightened. The numbing sensation electrified my body while the hairs on my nape rose, his face slowly blurring as he pressed deeper. Harder. Until it all grew dark. “*You monster! You killed them all!*”

I gasped for air as my eyes fluttered open, coughs immediately scratching my throat as I regained consciousness.

I don't know when I ended up in the bathroom or when the yellow liquid ruptured through my mouth. All I knew was that I had no energy left in me. No tears to cry.

Just the fiery push to not give up— even if an emptiness swallowed me whole.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

ALEK SEPHTIS



Katerina plagued my mind instead of the notebook's whereabouts or the intruder that had made her unconscious. After the Ambrogios visitation ended, I rushed to her in need of confirming she was okay. That familiar desire embedded itself in me after she'd left Tristan's brief meeting, igniting the turmoil I realized at the hospital, the warmth a flare.

Yet, I understood this wasn't instinctive or unconscious. It was madness.

Her remains from the hospital lay in my bookcase alongside the log Noah had entrusted. The two were embedded within polar books, yet my hands gravitated toward where the teeth and fur hid. It was hers, a secret between us, and the thought further ignited this...

Absurdity.

One that prevailed as I dashed off to the forest with a more chipper step than I'd like to admit. Surely, it couldn't be because I'd see her soon. Absolutely not.

The cemetery's metal entrance swung along the traveling breeze, my body stilling as I paused near the mausoleum. A tall shadow inhabited the inner walls that didn't belong to Katerina.

"What were you thinking, Mother?" said a brittle voice, "How could you abandon us yet forsake us with traces of your presence?"

An echo thundered against the walls, a book crashing on the ground and slipping onto the opening. My body froze as I studied the title.

The book was bound by thick dark leather, rigged yellow pages peeking through the fore-edge. It was one that bore scars upon its spine and case, detailing the years of use the sheets had endured. Although the letters were faded, they bore a phantom imprint I recognized.

The History of Vampires.

The scripture had once been known as the Vampire Encyclopedia, detailing the history of our species, the rise of the Regal Families, and the achievements our kind had attained since the beginning of time. In the mid-nineteenth century, the name was then altered to what we referred to now. Soon after, all editions published prior to the twentieth century were outlawed due to misinformation that was detailed within the text.

The History of Vampires was comprised of three volumes: *Vampirism and the First to Walk*, *Biographies of the Regal Seven*, and the *Vampiric Achievements Throughout Time*. It was the textbook that our kind studied, the teachings we were brought upon, and the understanding of the world vampires lived in.

The mystery behind the ban of past editions remained throughout the years. Eventually, such wonders had thinned, the curiosity a petal that had shriveled with passing time. Those who continued to question were seen as conspiracy theorists seeking to damage the Ministry for the benefit of the Human Bureau.

Although in recent years it was scarcely touched upon, our mother had consistently emphasized the importance of the illegal edition before her passing— one that she had possessed in secrecy for our education.

It holds the truth of it all; the truth they try so hard to conceal, she'd say.

An edition we had all collectively agreed on burning after our mother's death. It was the one and only decision that we all had a say in. If discovered by the wrong hands, generations would be ruled as treasonous and sentenced to extinction.

I blocked the entrance, and Christopher turned to me. Although he remained composed with straight shoulders, his stare penetrated through me with a clenched expression. He was a statue that began to expose his thoughts.

The rush from the feeding still buzzed through my veins like a soft musical tone. It was a reverberation that yearned to be exercised and manipulated. If he pounced, I'd strike back. The terror that seeped through my bones at the thought was insufficient amongst the instinct.

"Where did you get that?"

"It was Mother's."

"We all witnessed the destruction of the book, the fire that encapsulated each page until it was ash on the ground."

"We did." Christopher's gaze fell on mine, unwavering compared to Kaleb's. "But that wasn't the true edition."

All my fury concentrated in a simple question. "Why?"

"Many things that cannot be disclosed, Alek," he said as he stepped forward. He lowered to grasp the book, but I kicked it away to the podium.

"No," I muttered while a rush ignited my veins and my bones, the ashes that constantly waited to be lightened emerging. "I'm tired, Brother, of being left in the shadows to fend for myself when all three of you have constantly thrown me into the pits of hell once I escape. Either you explain why you're holding a treasonable book, or I risk all of our lives."

"Watch your tongue," he spat, "You will be met with repercussions."

"I'd rather meet repercussions on my own terms than with yours or anyone else's." My fingers tightened into fists, the tips settling deeper into my palm. There was no stopping.

Christopher flared his nostrils as he took a deep breath. “Then what do you ask for, Alek? An explanation in exchange for your silence?”

Katerina’s words echoed. *If you want to find the notebook, search in more ways than one.*

I shook my head, grasping the opportunity luck had gifted me. “In exchange for keeping the whereabouts of the book silent, you’re going to assist me with Kaleb.”

Christopher didn’t utter a word. For once, the silence grew unbearable within the mausoleum.

“If you don’t choose wisely, Brother, then the first to discover your possession will be the Ministry.”

His composed appearance unraveled, emerging like a heavy veil, concealing the glaring eyes that responded without the need for words. He gripped the book and walked through the opening, my body utterly still until his presence dispersed.

My chest caved with sudden realization. The mausoleum’s walls closed in, suffocating me wholly, and knots overtook my stomach. Had I finally spoken against my brother, the eldest at that?

Yes, and it felt intoxicating.

Suddenly, a thrilling spark swallowed the tension. The smell of salt and water seized the air, and I followed it until I reached the sand. Memories upon the pier came alive, along with the feelings that the view surged. Yet now, they were an echo that grew hollow beneath the adrenaline that captured my senses.

Leaves crunched across the forest ground. “I was searching for you,” Katerina said, her voice a symphony that called to me. “I went to the mausoleum, but you—”

I instinctively gripped her wrist and brought her to my chest. The motion was swift, the collision minimal, yet I’d never felt anything this natural.

“Alek, are you okay?” she muffled against me. “You’re trembling.”

“Yes, of course. My apologies, Katerina,” I quickly stated as I released her, Katerina’s eyes narrowing onto mine. She remained in my embrace, and her warmth eased against my skin. If she stepped away, I wasn’t entirely sure I could sustain putting distance between us.

She studied my features, my jaw quick to clench as I reveled in her focus on me.

This is absurd. Absolute madness.

“Is this the second phase of fooling your brother?” She chuckled, her smile faint. “Affection?”

She laughed, tears swelling at the corners of her eyes. If her voice was a symphony, this would be my blissful death.

“Wow, you actually listened to me? Glad to see someone taking my advice for once. Warn me when you plan on doing more of this. I might be out of practice from—” She suddenly stopped and took a step back. “J-just warn me beforehand.”

She tilted her head, and a flush deepened her umber skin, her eyes darkening as she met mine. “I will, Katerina.”

She cleared her throat and took another step back. My hands hovered along her upper back. I didn’t let her go, though. “But we’d have to do something else besides public affection, wouldn’t we?”

“You can teach me how to swim,” I murmured, Noah’s offer slithering into my mind. “As a part of our private affair.”

“Not very private,” she replied as she looked around. “But we could do that.”

Kaleb’s past affairs were all performances. In his mantle, I was expected to recreate the same. Yet this wasn’t a mantle, and I wasn’t a performer.



Tristan entered my chamber in the late hours when the household was at its stillest and my mind at its rowdiest. It was

rare for him to meet with me at such times, but the USB and computer in his hand explained such queries.

He settled the items on the couch and took a seat after I did. “I was able to meet with Kaleb’s client.”

“And?”

“He had an alibi for the day the scheme took place. I investigated the logs from the private clinic and those who were with him during that time.” He cleared his throat. “Alek, it all checked out.”

A weight toppled onto my stomach, the heavy sensation sending my mind into spirals. “Then that signifies we have nothing.”

“Not yet,” Tristan said as he gripped the laptop and USB. The screen lightened while he maneuvered through the computer, revealing multiple videos. He motioned the mouse onto one of the recordings where Katerina appeared, and I quickly pointed at the latest one that showcased the intruder leaving.

“Click on this one.”

If Tristan was to see the videos, he’d see what caused Katerina to become unconscious. It was recognized throughout the world that those who were different were looked down upon; our mother was a clear example— including the guardians who were only half-humans.

Outside of vampires and humans, there was a third kind that society had ostracized into extinction. Although the media depicted them as so-called werewolves, they were recognized in the new world as lycans.

It was a possibility, but not one that I was going to align with Katerina’s presence.

The video initiated upon a click, the sequence showing the intruder entering a car that sped off before the camera could fully catch it. Tristan rewound and slowed it down.

“I know this car,” Tristan said as he inched closer to the screen. “It’s a taxi handled by the CEG.”

I could sense Tristan's body stilling beside me, the same sensation taking over as the idea rattled my mind. If the CEG had been behind the intruder, then who was underneath the mask? If we dug further, would there still be a connection between Kaleb and the intruder?

Would we stumble upon something more?

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

KATERINA ELI



I should take my own advice and bite my tongue more often. Who did I think I was genuinely wanting to run a few days ago?

At least I was giving Lorenzo the two laps he'd been pestering me about since his first day. But the asshole doubled them by the time we started. After the second one, they were beating my ass.

Lorenzo loved running. Of course, he did—he was the fastest and had the most endurance. He apparently also loved being mad at me.

I didn't bother asking. It was coming, the lecture brewing the more I ignored him. I wanted to delay it as much as possible, and I secretly hoped Tristan would magically appear to save me. But I hadn't seen him after my rounds.

It was obvious Tristan was on high alert because of the Christmas Ball. After the Ambrogios visit, guardians took up double shifts, and there was extra precaution across the grounds. Though I wasn't entirely sure if it was for the Sephtis' safety or to avoid them getting into danger. They were known to ban themselves from public events. If any of them were planning anything, Tristan needed to intercept them before it could happen.

Thanks to that, I had new duties. I spent most of my shifts in the underground passageway, overhearing conversations in the cellar. While boring, at least nothing stuck out. So far.

So, suffering it was.

We stopped in front of the employee's residence, but before he could step into the lunch rush, I pulled him away from the entrance.

“Okay, what's up?”

Lorenzo's eyebrows furrowed. “What?”

“There's a lecture brewing; I literally feel it. What's wrong? Not satisfied with the four laps you cursed me with?”

“I'll curse you with more if you don't watch your tone, Katerina.”

The name was dry on his tongue. I fucking despised it when he called me like that. The feeling typically simmered, but right now, it erupted. I bit away at my tongue, anything to contain the shouts that ached to pour out.

“You're off.”

I scoffed as I avoided his hard stare. “What are you talking about? I'm fine.”

“Don't bullshit me.” Lorenzo's nostrils flared as he squeezed his eyes shut. “You've barely kept up.”

A fire burned against my skin and engulfed my throat. Although *she'd* been silent, a familiar rampage stirred my stomach.

“Just because I didn't meet your speed doesn't mean I'm off.”

Yes, I was fast. Not Lorenzo fast, but I was able to keep up with him no matter how many laps we ran. But when I didn't, it linked back to *her* impact.

He didn't know about the incident in the hospital. Thankfully, Alek and Tristan had agreed to keep it between us. The influx of memories from that day engulfed my every thought. Intensified the queasiness from the medication. Even tightened my throat with guilt for some reason—

Metal clanked against the air as the first gate opened, an SUV slowly passing through. It didn't belong to the Sephtis, but I recognized it from a few days ago.

“We’ll talk about this later.”

It was instinct to follow the car. But instead of tailing it, I turned to the underground passageway. I stopped in the middle of the dim path, concentrating on the noises that echoed outside of the walls. Footsteps vibrated above me, and I stopped to study their direction. My eyes roamed across the space, falling onto the opposite path that was darker than night, like a void.

It sent shivers down my spine the more I stared at it.

Voices trailed behind the cellar door. I opened it an inch and peeked through, Kaleb walking down into the feeding room, Davina at his tail. Someone else was with them.

“Sonia?”

I rarely saw her. Granted, as Senior Guardian, she was responsible for all guardians, maids, and maintenance groups that came every month. She was behind the scenes.

So why was she here with Kaleb and Davina?

Coppery scents lingered like perfume as I snuck my way to the foyer. I knocked on the door across from mine, and when it opened, I stepped inside without a second thought. Or maybe Alek pulled me. Not sure which one came first.

“Katerina,” he said through a deep breath. “What are you doing here?”

“There’s something I need to...” His hold loosened against my forearm, his fingers softly caressing my skin. My palm opened on the urge to feel more. All I got was a brief linger of our fingertips until he pulled away.

Our gazes never left each other, and it roused something in me I hadn’t felt in a while.

“My apologies, I-I didn’t mean to—”

A heady giggle slipped my lips. Were those butterflies in my stomach? “I told you to warn me,” my body naturally

inched closer to him, the inclination to tease him riling, “when you’re going to do this.”

One thing I didn’t know I enjoyed until Alek? Making him blush. Not only was it so easy, it only happened around me.

“Of course.” His flush looked to travel all throughout his body, his arms the same rose red as his face. He turned away before I could tease him more.

Alek took a seat on one of his emerald green chaises and motioned toward the open space next to him. “What would you like to discuss?” He asked, his voice raspy as I settled down.

Right. Almost forgot I came here for an actual reason. “I saw Kaleb meeting Davina in the cellar. Sonia was there too.”

“Sonia?” He asked, and his jaw clenched as he crossed his legs. “And Davina is with my brother privately?”

I nodded as *her* presence crept over my skin.

Alek’s eyes stilled on the ground. “They’re known to hold closed sessions with each other, their conversations always pertaining to the Ministry. But never once had they requested Sonia to join.”

Tristan had mentioned once how the feeding room was used for two matters: what it was meant for and for private meetings. It’s why he was in charge of it. If he’d known about their meeting, he would have reported to his post. Sonia didn’t fill in for no one.

“Do you want me to keep an eye on them?”

“No. If you hover near the vault again, it may risk your position. We’ll investigate when the time calls for it.”

We fell quiet. It wasn’t a silence that was a cue for me to leave. Not one that distanced Alek and me behind walls. It was warm and comforting. More open than the quietness of the lake.

It urged the questions from the hospital on my tongue to form.

I remembered the bits and pieces after some time. The assailant. *Her* attack on Alek. His gentle touch as I stopped *her* from ripping him to shreds. His calming words pulled me from *her* hold.

He saw *her* rampage and sought my safety even when his life was at risk.

Did he recognize what *she* was? Would he report it back to the CEG after our agreement is finished? Was he scared of what *she* was capable of when I wasn't in control?

Alek's lips parted, and his fangs glinted under the light. I'd never noticed how long they were before. Or how nicely they laid against his plump lips.

“What?”

“Would you like to listen to one of my melodies?” He said as he tilted his head toward the large piano. “It tends to ease my mind in moments when thoughts swallow me whole.” He stepped toward it and rested on the bench, his head snapping toward me. He looked petrified with wide eyes. “My apologies, Katerina. It wasn't my intention for the words to be phrased in that manner. What I meant is that—”

He suddenly stopped and I walked to the bench. “Finish what you were saying.”

His lips pressed together, and he lowered his gaze. “You seem to be troubled, that's all.”

“Is it that obvious?” I sat on the spot next to him. “I'll take you on your offer.”

Everything about him softened around the edges: his shoulders slumped, the abyss in his eyes gleamed, and a smile so gentle I'd never seen before warmed his face.

Yeah. Those were definitely butterflies.

Alek eased against the keys with slow movements. A steady, distant harmony filled our surroundings, each tug against the keys increasing the emotion behind each note. There weren't any lyrics, but I could feel what he depicted. Heartbreak. Sadness. Exhaustion. A memory that I didn't have

but could experience. A tenderness that felt like a hug. An eeriness that clung to my bones after it finished.

“It’s our mothers,” he said slowly. “Sophia’s Requiem.”

“It’s gorgeous, Alek,” I muttered, and I meant it. It was the most honest I’d ever been. “Thank you for showing it to me.”

I didn’t notice when we stopped staring as if it was a competition and started just looking through each other. Or how much darker his eyes grew when I met them. Not even the pull his body had on me.

This wasn’t good. But it was too late to draw a line on this snake.

“Although I said we couldn’t make any promises, I want to assure you, Katerina, that what occurred in the hospital won’t ever be discovered.”

“Why?” I blurted out and immediately wanted to bite my tongue. But I needed to correct myself. “Don’t get me wrong. I really appreciate it, but I need to know...”

The words died along the way. I needed to know what? That he knew what I was? That if I confirmed it, he’d accept it?

It was impossible. Lace was the only one burdened to carry my secret. I couldn’t bear to tell Lorenzo. He hated the fact he was a lycan while I wasn’t even sure what I was. Our symptoms were nothing alike, our diets were polar opposites, and when he transformed, it was nothing like *hers*. But the thought of him hating me was enough to never tell him.

“You’re different,” he started, his eyes roaming over me, “Our mother had no say in keeping her existence a secret. I’d like for you to have that choice.”

Nothing in the air showcased he was lying. It was the opposite. His expression was stern, and his eyes were frozen on mine. A storm of emotions swelled inside of me. I couldn’t tell where one started and the other ended, but one thing was obvious: I’m glad it was Alek who knew.

He stretched his palm before me. “It will be a promise upheld between us.”

When our hands touched, any thoughts I had—even of *her*—dissolved.

“Just between us, then.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

ALEK SEPHTIS



“**W**hile vampires are calculating, humans are sneaky beings,” our mother had once said. “*Although both are cunning in their own ways, a human’s desire outweighs the thought of consequences. They’re limited to impulsivity, unlike vampires, who ponder before they react. Vampires are motivated to reach the top in any conceivable way.*”

Yet, a piece I never acknowledged in her lessons unveiled itself.

“Even if that meant manipulating their family.”

It was one that shadowed every crevice in my decisions, echoing, magnifying as I pondered my brothers who stood before me.

Tailors inhabited polar corners of the gathering room, Christopher, Noah, Kaleb, and I on individual round stands. The Ambrogios were passionate about corresponding attires between pairs. With the pending marriage announcement, this pressure increased tenfold, each accidental jab and pinch exhibiting it.

“Is she an imbecile?” Kaleb asked with fury laced in his tone. The tailors all around us shook more than a leaf.

Noah’s laugh echoed. “Oh my, Kaleb, you *do* understand your dear Catalina doesn’t understand what’s in season.”

“Obviously. She chose pleats for the third year in a row! And if you call her my dear one more time, dimwit, I’ll be sure to pay your pool a little visit.”

“Oh please.” Noah waved his hands in the air. “You’re just jealous that at least my Bethany listens. If only she’d accept my hand in marriage. We’d make such a grand pair.”

“Ha! As if she wants to bear the title of the Premier’s wife, nevertheless, *your* wife.”

“Then why not you? You do have a great sense of authority already. Why not extend it to our species? Catalina is practically dying for the proposal.”

Kaleb scoffed with disgust. “I’d rather be six feet under than be bound by marriage and a tainted title in an iniquitous society.”

With the two canceled as options, it left Christopher and I. His dynamic with Anabelle was evenhanded. She didn’t display a vast dislike for him like Bethany, nor was he repulsed by her like Kaleb. Together, they were the defined example of a Regal couple, a pair that complemented each other physically and mentally.

On the other hand, Davina and I could never be an option. She was too similar in attributes to Kaleb, both two sides of the same coin. I couldn’t bear to succumb to someone who not only saw me as a pet beneath them but one I couldn’t love.

And that was the foundation our mother taught us about marriage.

You must find someone who sees you as an equal and values you to your very core. Not your status or goods.

With the Christmas Ball forthcoming, I couldn’t help but question who’d be announced.

My gaze fell on Christopher, who kept his eyes steady on the ground, and our mother’s voice rang. How could I manipulate Christopher to subdue Kaleb once and for all?

When we were excused, I slithered into the garden, where noon decorated the sky with a blanket of clouds. The sun was partially hidden, yet the flowers withstood their full liveliness.

I paced along the stone pathways that overlapped across the vast greenhouse. It wove through the white and black calla

lilies and soft green gladioli that appeared near the entrance. Both plots faced each other, their blossoming petals nearly overflowing past the dividers that separated them from the trails and the next row.

Beside them were arctic blue forget-me-nots and bronze zinnias. The forget-me-nots snaked along their lot while the zinnias towered outside of their borders. Then followed the ruby red roses that spiked in all sorts of directions, and opposing them were the violet irises, nearly meeting the roses in height and width.

At the very end of the greenhouse were vibrant sunflowers, our mother's favorite, their petals and leaves practically rebounding the shimmering sun within them.

Yet, this peace was short-lived.

Tristan's search for the intruder continued. He had one lead. I bore none. If I didn't play my cards correctly with Christopher, I might not have a possibility of any.

A shadowy presence loomed behind me.

"If you run away from the tailors, they'll search for you. They have a deadline to meet."

Raphael drew next to me. "They won't notice. They're too focused on Jacques's disapproval for every little thing."

"Very well," I said as I continued my walk, pausing before the forget-me-nots to inspect. "So, what will be your excuse for evading the tailors?"

"Plants! Yeah, let's talk about plants." A weary smile flashed across his face while he tilted his head. "Mine are close to death."

"Well, have you watered them?" His silence was profound. "Raphael, plants dry up when exposed to only sun. You also have to—"

Raphael threw his arms into the air and waved them. "Okay! Never mind." He pressed his lips and followed behind me as I neared the roses. "I was wondering, Brother, if you don't mind me asking."

“I never mind. You know that.”

“Okay.” He cleared his throat and stopped beside me. “Is there... something you’re hiding from me?”

I stilled, and my stomach tensed with restraining knots. “Why would you think that?”

“I just— I was curious. You know I’ve always been by your side, and we’ve never kept anything from each other.” His eyes gleamed while a small smile flashed across his lips. “But the Christmas Ball is around the corner. And there’s nothing about another scheme.”

A sigh of relief constricted within my throat. “Christopher’s stuck to his word.”

Raphael nodded as he looked around. Then he quickly hid behind my back. He had yet to reach my shoulders, but his knees bent to fully conceal himself. I followed what he’d stumbled on and noticed Sonia roaming around the inner gate.

“Maybe you might not fear the tailors, but surely you’ll dread Sonia’s wrath if she catches you.”

“Fine,” he huffed as if defeated. Once Sonia vanished, he bowed and stepped back inside.

Though sunlight poured onto the sunflowers, what captivated my eyes was Katerina as she walked across the grounds. Her speed picked up as another guardian followed behind.

Who was he, and why was she running away from him?

“Ms. Eli!” I called, the tone nearly aggressive, her title unsettling against my tongue. The keen desire morphed into a greedier sensation. One that had never emerged before and was too absurd to entertain.

Was my mask slipping?

The answer bloomed instantly, and once Katerina’s eyes cemented against mine, it was a realization that burned my cheeks.

It was never there to begin with.

She bowed when she stepped inside. “Yes, Mr. Alek?”

My title also didn’t sit right against my skin. The discomfort was apparent in both of our expressions.

“Katerina,” I lowered my voice as if needing the correction, “Would you like a tour of my garden?”

If her laugh was my death, her smile was my revival. “Sure.”

I commenced the trek on the left side, introducing each flower as we followed the stone path. It first led through the roses, zinnias, and calla lilies. We then turned to the right side through the gladioli, the forget-me-nots, and the irises. Never did distance grow between us. Instead, we walked as if it was a tight space, our arms brushing against one another; our hands hovering, never touching. It was enough.

Anything she gifted me was enough.

Though she looked immersed in the tour, her gaze still roamed to what was outside. Or potentially, who could still be.

“Is everything alright?”

A shadow loomed over her expression, the line between her eyebrows prominent. “I don’t know.” She continued her walk while her eyes were firm on her steps, and for the first time, she seemed puzzled with no sense of a truth lingering.

“Do you have a favorite flower, Katerina?”

In a garden, she was a flare of light. In the midst of the day, she bore an air of mystery that paired with the night. In my presence, she was an iris that encapsulated me fully.

“I never really thought about that,” she said while she walked toward the sunflowers, my eyes naturally following her. They towered at the center where the pathways intersected. Her eyes softened as if admiring the sunshine before her. “But the sunflowers are beautiful.”

The familiar flare in my bones caused a shudder to pierce through me as it sank. Being with Katerina felt as natural as breathing. The greatest intoxication, the strongest craving. I wanted to be bound to it—to her—without escape.

“Yes, they are.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

KATERINA ELI



As if it wasn't bad enough witnessing Sonia doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing, she knocked at my door early. Regardless, it wasn't as if I was sleeping— thanks to *her*.

The hairs on my nape rose.

Oh no. Did she see me that day Kaleb and Davina met up? Was she here to reprimand me?

No way. It'd been a little over a week. If she'd noticed me, she wouldn't have waited this long. I definitely wouldn't. Not because I was a guardian who sought answers but because I was impatient. Just a little bit.

“Your presence has been requested. The Sephtis expect you in the gathering room in half an hour.” With that, she left, and relief eased my muscles.

The bright bathroom lights stung my eyes when I stepped in. It took a few seconds to adjust to them, my gaze falling on the mirror that reflected *her*.

My pupils stretched to edged slits, parting the iris, the shade a deep green that grew darker the longer I focused on them. Crimson-red tears stained my cheeks as they ran down to my neck.

This was *her* mark. *Her* need to cement herself. To prove *her* existence.

I knew why. But fuck did it irk my skin.

I was quick to reach the cold suitcase, the last bag perfectly resting. The hunger didn't cave into my body like before, so I was able to hold off drinking the last one until we neared the Ball. I was going to need it. But the hunger throbbed against my bones. One that was slowly building up with *her* consistent whispers.

You're weak.

The coppery scent was faint as I swallowed it whole. The rush of electricity was instant. My body acted as if I hadn't fed in years; each time, the intake stimulated my senses. I equally loved it and hated it. It sealed *her* whispers away but amplified my dependency on feeding to feel normal. In control.

But something didn't sit right in my stomach, and it wasn't the blood.

I glanced at my phone and looked at the time. I'd think about that later. If I didn't leave now, I'd be late. And while I would love to irk the guys, today wasn't the day for that.

If Sonia came to me personally and not Tristan, whatever they were gathering for was important.

The living room was barren for a few minutes. The bright purple room grew brighter underneath the chandelier, the stillness complementing its beauty— until chaos personified arrived.

Each brother climbed down the stairs one by one, youngest to oldest. Raphael's eyes were stuck on the ground as if counting his steps. Jacob was focused on what was ahead of him with a steady gaze. Jacque's glare fell on me and then quickly diverted. Their scents were like strings of airy and zesty smells that tangled together, all of them tailored to each brother.

Alek followed, his flowery scent overpowering everyone else's. After our time together in the garden, it was obvious why it was so strong. Sure, a person's scents depended on their blood, but also their surroundings. But somehow, his always intensified when we were around each other. Since our first day meeting.

I liked it.

Kaleb strolled down the stairs once the four brothers took their seats, a grin edging across his face when he noticed me across the room. Noah slid along the rail, his feet perfectly landing on the ground. Christopher was the last to enter. The three together held a muddled scent, the underlying metal growing bitter. Humans had scents like that. At the hospital, they bled into each other like oil and water, never mixing but somehow churning my stomach as if I'd eaten their food.

It was disgusting just thinking about it, a wave of nausea creeping over me. The familiar fire didn't rasp my throat, though. Weird. Had I taken my—

"I see we have a guest before us!" Noah said and clapped his hands, his eyes falling on me. "Your willing silence is new, little mouse."

After my first horrible encounter with the Ambrogios, Tristan reviewed the protocol when it came to meetings: stay still, keep quiet, and hide in a corner. Felt like I was on time out more than anything, but I stuck to it.

Their gazes grew prickly against my skin.

"A pest should be alarming," Kaleb muttered, his back to me. I noticed the way he stifled on the couch as he added, "Not intriguing."

"You're no fun!" Noah tilted his head toward Jacob and Jacque. "What do you two think?"

Jacob gave no response, but Jacque said through gritted teeth, "I agree with anything you say, dear brother."

Noah waved a hand in the air with a teasing smile, his attention falling on Raphael, who sat at the other end of the room. "Littlest of brothers, *you* are our precious little mouse, but I think you might have competition." He winked, and Raphael stiffened as his thighs grew closer together, a small, awkward grin hinting.

Then Noah looked over at Alek. His back was also to me, but he'd kept his head tilted to the side, his eyes glancing at

where I stood. I'd definitely tease him about it when we meet for our lessons later.

“And you, Alekin. What do you think?” Noah asked, a grin decorating his face, openly showing his fangs. “Will she continue being a dangerous pest disguised as a little mouse or the barking dog we've all come to adore?”

I suddenly froze. What was I expecting? Alek never spoke in meetings, not that I've noticed. No way he'd talk now, especially for something this... dumb.

My heart still raced in my ears, almost blocking it as he cleared his throat and his voice deepened, “I think—”

Tristan entered the living room with a small woman shadowing beside him. While his broad build blocked her from view, her scent was like a breath of fresh air. New, crisp, and drowned heavily in rosewood perfume.

He opened his mouth, but she quickly cut him off with a blaring, high-pitched voice. “My lovely, troublemaking boys! Thank you, Tristan, but there's no need to introduce me. I can do that much myself.” The woman stepped away from his side and revealed herself.

She was stout with rich brown skin, a patterned red headdress at the top of her crown, short, amber braids hinting through. Gaps hinted in the spots where her fangs were supposed to be in her gleaming smile. But the star of the show was the matching wraparound red dress she wore, gold bangles all along both arms. The outfit screamed in the room, which was already loud in colors and decorations. It was as if she fit right in somehow.

Vampires were known to not display their age after a while, but the guys didn't have this problem. The Ambrogios didn't either. But this woman? She could tell me she was thirty-five, and I'd believe her based on her physical appearance. The way she carried herself, straight and elegant with weathered steps, said otherwise.

Tristan brought over large suitcases and rested them beside her. “This room hasn't changed one bit, just like you lot.” The

closer I paid attention, the more I could make out a small accent.

“Oh my, Ms. Hoko!” Noah chirped. “You should know by now that clowns never change.”

“If there had been, you would have been the first to know,” Kaleb huffed.

“Let’s keep it that way.” Ms. Hoko’s laughter vibrated against the walls. “Will any of you give me trouble during our fittings?” She walked toward the middle of the living room and paused in front of the centered coffee table.

“Maybe,” Jacque said as he crossed his arms over his chest. “It’ll depend if I’m in the mood to be fitted.”

“I’ll try my best not to,” Jacob murmured.

“Me too,” Raphael replied almost in a whisper.

“Varying answers for different subjects,” Ms. Hoko said. “Too appropriate for what the Ambrogios have instructed for this year’s Christmas Ball. Who will I start with?”

“Her,” Christopher said as he motioned at me.

“What? Why?” I blurted, a little too aggressive. Fuck.

“Why to be fitted, of course! You didn’t recognize our little mouse, did you?” Noah said as he looked at Ms. Hoko.

“I can’t say I did,” she responded, her eyes falling on me, and I instinctively bowed. When I raised, her expression softened with a faint smile.

Kaleb scoffed. “Why would she go first? She’s not a proper guest, only an employee disguised as one.”

“No, she isn’t,” Christopher replied, and his eyes met Kaleb’s. “The Ambrogios were clear with their instructions. All attending guardians will be guests. The requirement to be on duty takes effect only if something life-threatening is to occur.”

I searched for Tristan. Was he also a part of this? But he’d vanished before I noticed.

Ms. Hoko clapped her hands, releasing a harsh blare. “Be off then. Shoo! This is a challenge I must begin.”

“Aren’t you one to enjoy a challenge?” Noah asked with amusement.

“Yes, but the only challenge I deal with is you all riotous bunch. Fair warning, if any of my works are to be dirtied, you will all face the wrath of my bare hands. Now be gone!”

They didn’t hesitate. Never had I seen them follow rules so quickly— except for one.

Alek lingered near the staircase. Ms. Hoko didn’t pay mind as she started setting up in a bare space. Tools were spread across one of the couches, while different types of fabrics were laid along the seats.

But my focus was on him. A force practically pulled me toward him, the same happening to him to grow closer to me. The air between us was different. I don’t know when it’d changed, but it had. It wasn’t cutthroat anymore, but softer, warmer. It still pulled and tugged, but more electrifying than ever.

I didn’t remember when was the last time I felt like this, if ever. But it was nice. Even if I knew I needed to put some distance between us, I didn’t listen. I reveled in it.

“Are you lost, Alek boy?” Ms. Hoko said, her hands rummaging through the suitcase and retrieving a large, cluttered book.

“N-no,” he quickly replied. “My apologies, Ms. Hoko; I simply wanted to ask how you were doing.”

I swallowed a laugh, a cough stifling in my throat. It was a fast save. Easy enough to deflect what he was planning on doing— if he was planning on doing anything at all. Still, it was cute.

“Alek boy, the both of us know how well I’m doing.” Ms. Hoko’s cheeks wrinkled as a bright smile appeared. “I have to fetch something from the car, so I expect you to be gone by the time I return.” She exited the room in a flash, the door quietly opening and closing.

The silence was apparent, but it was nothing compared to my heavy breaths and racing heart. I hadn't even run.

It made the butterflies in my stomach more obvious. With each of our meetings, they were becoming stronger on top of the urge that burrowed into my system, which riled a hunger that didn't crave blood. I don't know how much longer I could withstand it.

There wasn't much space between us, but Alek closed whatever distance there could be as he lowered his head to my ears, "Will I see you tonight? For our swimming practice?"

"That depends." I raised my head, his clashing eyes darkening until they were black. "Are you ready to swim in the dark?"

A grin hinted through his lips, his fangs apparent. The sight of it made the hunger grow. "With you, always."

Low giggles escaped us. He was never this vocal inside in the open, where his brothers could be roaming. He was blossoming little by little, and it warmed my chest.

With that, he blurred upstairs, right as Ms. Hoko entered with a round platform. I took it away before she could take another step, the weight settling on my shoulder. It wasn't as hollow as I expected.

"I hope your choice of attire corresponds with your silent movements."

When I laid the platform down, Ms. Hoko didn't waste any time. She was quick to measure every inch of my body. It hadn't been my first time attending an event like this, but it sure was the first one I had to attend with a proper dress. Typically, for parties I was working, a blazer did the job. This wasn't the party for that. Honestly, it fit Lace and Lorenzo more than me.

They were the talkative ones, thriving in building connections. I didn't like them because they were always too shiny and super loud. The fact I also had to conform to appease others was overwhelming.

I shrank at parties. I already did enough of that with *her*.

Ms. Hoko noted each of the measurements against her skin. She brought out a book and ripped out pages, placing them across the table.

“Although I do like a minor challenge, I’m afraid I can’t go above and beyond since I’m swamped with the boys. But I have a few gowns that are sitting and waiting for the right owner, Miss...”

“Eli,” I said as I stepped off and stood next to her. “Katerina is fine, though.”

“I think Miss suits you better,” she said with a wink.

I studied the photos that rested beside rough sketches. The pages were detailed with pieces of fabrics and colors. Minor descriptions about the dresses and suits were scribbled on the sides, including the different trials it took to assemble the pieces. It was like a messy scrapbook.

While the dresses were beautiful, none of them seemed to fit me. Some were too glitzy, and others exposed more than I liked. Until a picture caught my attention.

It peeked through the ends of the pages, and I swiftly tugged at it without a second thought. The edges were burnt, the colors faded, but the beauty remained.

A woman sat on an emerald couch, a burning yellow dress overflowing from the cushion to the ground. A couch that sat right in front of me. I brought the picture up to the light and noticed a familiarity of her facial features on the guys.

“Is this—”

“Where did you get that?” Ms. Hoko said as she walked closer. With her short arms, I was able to pull the picture away before she could yank it.

“It hid in your book,” I said, her dark eyes widening. “This dress is beautiful.”

“Yes, and it’s not an option, Miss.” She reached further and gripped the picture away from my fingers, her movements swift. “You can choose anything else in the book if you disliked the designs I sported, but this one sadly cannot do.”

“All of them are pretty,” I murmured, “but they’re not me.”

I’d constantly fought with my cousin about everything—my diet, my medication, my fighting style. Lorenzo wanted the best for me but did it to appease Lace.

I lived a life where everything was decided for me. *Her*. Doctors. Lace. Lorenzo.

For once, I wanted to make my own choice. I couldn’t let it escape from my hands when I barely held it.

“Why do you say so?” Ms. Hoko asked, tenderness warming her deep eyes.

“I can’t fit in even if I tried.” I was living a pretty lie to Lorenzo, to the world, instead of freely living as an ugly truth.

Alek’s words warmed my skin like a hug.

“I’m different. I want to accept myself as me for once.”

Ms. Hoko’s eyes trembled with a gloss, and she rested a free hand on my shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do, Miss.”



Rounds across the grounds. Hospital visitations for feedings. Avoiding Lorenzo. The routine repeated for the next few days like a broken record. It was tiring, but at least I had one thing to look forward to.

“You want me to keep practicing?”

Alek and I met in the mausoleum today since he wanted a break from the swimming lessons at the lake— if they could even be considered lessons. I’d spent hours explaining to him the motions in the water while he sat on the dock, inching farther and farther away from the edge with each minute. By the time our time would be up, he was on the shore and ready to go back inside.

I’d even suggested using the training room to build muscle so he could have some payoff. But he’d denied that.

“Yes.” Alek settled the vase on the mausoleum’s podium. This time he had brought zinnia’s, the orange petals vibrant within the darkness. “Christopher and Noah have demanded it to be necessary for the Christmas Ball.”

“Why?” Fighting I was fine with. But dancing? Now that was overboard. “The party isn’t for us, it’s for you guys. We’re just decorations for the theme. Plus, guardians don’t dance.” It wasn’t fair to group all of us. Lorenzo was definitely good. I was not, and Alek didn’t need to know that.

“Tristan surely will,” he said. “It’ll be the first night where he’ll fully enjoy himself.”

“Still, I wouldn’t feel right having fun,” I muttered. “Especially not if I’m forced to dance.”

As an agreement for his consistent swimming lessons, I was supposed to at least learn their traditional dance. He’d compare it to the ballroom waltz. It was nowhere near that.

“Would you prefer to use me as a practice partner then?” He turned to me after he finished fixing the flowers. The sunset radiated through the opening and highlighted his flush. His shyness was easing but still prominent. And his smile? They came out more often. I just wanted to bottle it up just in case they vanished.

“I would take up your offer, but you have to meet with Tristan soon.” He’d tracked down the cab the assailant had used. “I could always request help from the CEG. I have my ways, you know.” If I asked Lace, he’d tell me. He would grow suspicious, sure, but he couldn’t tell me no.

I don’t think I could do the same if he questioned me.

“That won’t be necessary,” Alek replied as we exited and trailed down the pathway within the forest.

His hand met mine as our arms caressed. It was natural to hold hands at this point; I didn’t need him to warn me anymore. But, even when I expected his fingers to interlock with mine, I grew hot. I couldn’t blame it on the weather as the air grew chillier.

Every time we reached the end of our walks, his hold tightened as if he didn't want to let go. After a few minutes, he did, but kept his eyes on me. He turned toward the second gates as I made my way to the underground hatch. With one last shared smile, we vanished into our own places.

My steps thundered within the ongoing silence of the underground passageway. What made it worse was the ringing that vibrated in my pocket. I didn't need to look at the screen to know who it was since Lace had a gift for calling at the most unusual times.

Katerina.

I stopped in my tracks. "Lace? Hey—"

Her voice was like an echo that vibrated along the underground walls, but his voice was louder.

"Nina! I'm so...last time was..." His words were choppy, and while I tried to focus on him, *she* pestered.

You thought you could escape me.

I continued through a familiar route, concentrating on my turns and Lace's voice.

"...My brother...this...weapon...Father is...to hand down the..."

"Lace, I-I can't hear you—"

His voice vanished, and the call dropped, a sweet coppery smell dragging me away.

But that'll never happen.

No.

Because we'll always be hungry for more.

Stop.

The scent grew intoxicating when I stopped before a wall, my surroundings pitch-black. But I could read the word dripped in blood, *her* giggles an echo against my ears.

WE KNOW
WHAT YOU ARE

Nausea rumbled in my stomach as a fire crawled from my throat to the tip of my tongue. Gray eyes flashed across my mind as a familiar face appeared. A deep, taunting voice engulfed my ears.

You're a monster.

Everything numbed as I sunk deep, deep into the abyss.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

ALEK SEPHTIS



Fittings continued on. Ms. Hoko’s persistence to assemble our attires in readiness for the Christmas Ball blocked any potential rendezvous with Katerina the past few days. And though arranged, Christopher’s implication also sent a tinge of annoyance through me.

I had to upkeep my end of the bargain —brought forth after our uncanny alliance— before he could assist me with Kaleb.

The library held three floors; the first housing walnut bookshelves that reached the ceiling, bulky books occupying each layer. The second floor was similar, the difference being the antique, deep cherry desk within the matching, steep shelves.

He sat on his grand chair behind it. His eyes glanced above the rims of his glasses as I closed the door.

Christopher stood, his hands resting upon the grand book. The sight of it twisted my stomach.

“Search through the pages until something catches your eyes.” Christopher spoke in his fixed, still tone, an unnerving chord that disrupted his quivering body. He maintained a concealed expression, a façade that nearly hardened his facial features to stone.

“Why?”

His nostrils flared as he settled his glare on me, a struggle for composure displaying across his appearance. There was no

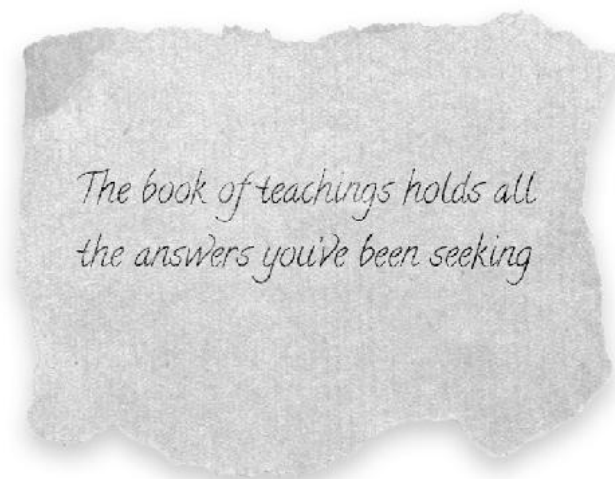
fire that blazed within his bronze eyes, but rather firm lines that emerged between his eyebrows.

“You are undoubtedly digging your own grave, Alek.”

“You were the one that forced the shovel into my hands,” I responded, the familiar façade shedding from my skin and exposing a semblance that I rebutted for Kaleb’s sake. Now before Christopher, there was too much at stake to keep silent. “We’re allies. If questions are left unanswered, then this agreement is off, and we’ll all be dealt with by the Ministry.”

His lips pressed into a straight line. “Sit.”

The seat swallowed my body, the room stretching before me. My gaze focused on the paper he retrieved from his patch pocket, the sheet rustling as he unfolded it and rested it before me. The words were smeared with blue ink, the phrasing distinguishable.



“What is this?”

“An anonymous message,” he said and pointed at the scripture. “It was placed in my study, resting above that piece of work.”

He paced across the room, his arms resting behind his back and his shoulders rigid. “Whoever it was knew the book was in my possession.”

“Why *did* you keep it?” It was a thought that had gnawed at my mind. This couldn’t be for personal gain as it held no substance to him, the risks too grand. Though unspoken, we all

believed it was the reason behind our mother's death— her murder. The evidence was nonexistent, but our silent theories were resolute.

Unless he planned to use it against That Man.

“Mother left behind many unsettled matters,” he said as he paused beside one of the elongated bookcases. “One being a note, instructing me to keep the scripture. In the beginning, I did so in hopes it held hints of her passing. And while this new note proves that, its critical timing carries more than suspected.” His nostrils flared, and he removed his glasses, a hand swiping through his scalp, the few long pale strands of hair disheveled from his braid.

It was the most I'd ever heard him speak, especially with such rawness in his words and expression. A sense of sorrow lingered in his steady eyes.

“How exactly can I help you, then?”

“Skim through the book.” It wasn't a strict command anymore but instead a request.

I began probing through the dense flaxen-hued sheets, each one a ponderous feather that weighed my palms. In my youth, our mother would scour the book's pages as if it was one of her favorite classical pieces. Her touch was gentle, her eyes bright while she searched for the world's answers.

Writings engulfed the pages, the given little space along the margins embellished by minuscule drawings. It ranged from doodles of nature to rough sketches of stick figures, each influenced by the colors.

During our teachings, our mother would assign us each a colored crayon. She'd point at the spaces we were able to draw in, each brother taking a turn to avoid fights from erupting. The memories brought a smile to my face, one that was as faint as a distant memory. Long unachievable. Yet, her voice still rang with such great presence.

“Flowers have their own symbolic language,” she'd say during my time along the chosen page. “And like flowers, colors have significance. When beauty is before our eyes, we

tend to overlook those depths. But remember, Alek, there will always be underlying messages in your color.”

Suddenly, my body halted, and I absorbed the sight before me. The memories, the drawings, the colors, the pages that they were in— the pieces of the puzzle abruptly appeared.

Christopher neared as I began shifting through bundles of pages, falling on the section where garnet red immersed the borders. Due to the *History of Vampires* comprising of three volumes, each division was parted with a blank title page that was outshined by our childish drawings. Mine adorned the second volume, *Biographies of the Seven Families*, on the *Epide* title opening sheet. My red sketches ventured across their section, the only name that had gone extinct.

I paused before the family tree, where it extended to the last few pages where paintings and photographs rested. They depicted the families in the old ages, yet, one page in specific bore photographs upon a thick page that was stiff along my touch.

The pictures protruded as if it was attachment rather than a part of the paper itself. It stood out like a shriveling petal along a flourishing bud. Although it was a unit within the book, its’ semblance didn’t fit.

I angled the page upwards and ran my index finger along the fore-edge, a gap revealing itself at the top of the sheet.

“What is it?” Christopher strode to my side.

The pocket widened as my hand slowly slithered inside, a piece of paper caressing the tips of my fingers. Once I retrieved it, I rested it before Christopher and I, both of our gazes fixed on the folded sheet. My body remained still, further settling in the embracing chair, while Christopher unfolded the page and read through the contents.

“These are all books,” Christopher said.

“What types?” I leaned over to the sheet and read through the names, all of which brought a collection of familiar but hazy memories.

“Ones she used to read to us as children.” He motioned toward the spiraling staircase that connected the three floors. He ascended the steps and paused before the access door that blended into the ceiling. The third floor of the library had once been open to us all while our mother was still present, but after her passing, it was shut away by That Man. He held the only viable key— or so we believed.

Christopher removed his glasses from its chain, twisting the hinges from the temples, bending the pieces apart and together to create an imitating key.

He inserted it through the flat lock, the access door widening above him after a click echoed. He vanished into the depths of the ceiling. I hovered on the last few steps, staring at the entrance I hadn't passed through since the night of our mother's demise.

My throat tightened as the memories engulfed me, a trembling seizing my fingers. I couldn't step inside. Although I forced my body to move, to follow where Christopher's feet thumped against the ground, I remained utterly frozen, shrinking in stature.

“How did you know I could uncover it?” The question emerged through a constricting tension in my chest.

Christopher neared the access door, his body a shadow from where I stood. “Because you were mother's precious child, Alek.”

“No, I wasn't.” His words were a slap in the face, one so prevalent that it flushed my cheeks. “How could you say such a thing?”

“It's true,” he muttered, his voice growing distant. “Since our youth, Kaleb had been the destructive one, Noah the rambunctious child, and I the muted one. Jacque, Jacob, and Raphael were the vexatious children who had yet to uncover themselves. You, on the other hand, were the child our mother had always envisioned. The one she molded to her liking.”

A blazing fire raged within my body, a match sparking my veins with a scorching ache. “That's not possible. I had

continuously been the weak child, the sibling you three despised— you’ve all loathed my very existence since the day I could remember.”

“I never once felt that way toward you, Alek,” Christopher murmured, his voice a wisp along his breath.

“Then why... ” My jaw tightened, and my eyes blurred with stinging tears. “Why did you allow Kaleb to do such abhorrent acts to me?”

“I don’t have an excuse,” Christopher stated with a frank, somber tone. “Nor do I have an explanati—”

A low knock on the second floor interrupted his words. Christopher swiftly, instinctively, shut the access door, forcing me to the door frame. To my surprise —and pure relief— Tristan stood within the hallway.

He immediately bowed and raised his head to meet my ear. “It’s Katerina. She’s been reported missing.”

Instantly, my feet moved into the hallway and toward my chamber next door. “By who?”

“A fellow guardian,” he peeked through the door and then closed it after surveying the corridors, “who has declared himself as her cousin.”

“Her cousin? But her files stated she had no family members.”

“It’s for immediate members, as in parents and siblings. The CEG files never dive deeper than that,” Tristan said as he walked toward the window that overlooked the driveway.

“Where is he?”

“He’s returned to his post, but he’s been wandering the grounds since morning.”

I sensed my body stilling, and my jaw set as the memories of our day together in the garden surfaced. The man’s tall stature had towered over Katerina, and from a distance, I deciphered a shadowy gloom in his appearance. His narrowed eyes evaded mine as she’d parted from him, vanishing into the bushes.

Brutish panic enclosed my chest, one so potent that it reverberated the forgotten sensation from the night our mother passed.

“Did you search for her?” The words slipped through gritted teeth.

“Yes, she’s nowhere to be found,” Tristan responded with a stern tone that attempted to submerge his alarm.

That’s impossible.

We were meant to meet today. If Tristan hadn’t discovered her across the grounds or within the household, then that signified...

“Go to the cemetery, specifically the mausoleum.”

“Where will you go?” He fell behind my tracks.

“The lake.”

I blurred across the household and through the forest, halting onto the shore that met the water. The sun had completely vanished from the sky, replaced by a muted crescent, a cool breeze traveling along the air and nestling my body whole. The faint light shined upon the lake’s surface, the surrounding mountains and trees embracing the obscurity.

A vampire’s senses heightened at night, and in my current dismay, multiplied tenfold as a cloud of fright weighed against my bones.

I need to find her.

I reached the edge of the pier. Amidst the lake floated webs of hair, the strands accenting against the dark water’s surface. Distant memories hardened my skin, yet I overlooked them. There were no thoughts, no calculations that stopped me from descending into the water.

It had been years since I’d dipped into the lake, yet the waves accepted me, my muscles tense as I swam faster. Further.

I snatched Katerina into my embrace, her body limp as I brought her closer. The panic flourished into a burrowing fury

— it electrified my veins until my skin burned. Who *dared* do this to her?

“Katerina,” I rasped, the words nearly a wail, “I’m here. Wake up, *please*.”

At that moment, coughs escaped her lips, her arms wrapping around my neck with great force. I swam back to the pier, the tension in my muscles lulling as I sensed her warmth radiate profusely.

“Alek.” A sob echoed against my neck, her fingers traveling and intertwining into my hair. They were soft touches, as though she was studying me, confirming that I was here with her. “Make it stop.”

Harsh steps jerked along the pier, Tristan jogging toward us as I reached the edge. He helped me with Katerina, holding her as I steadied onto the wooden boards. Tristan and I didn’t exchange any words. A silent plan came about between us.

He rested Katerina in my arms, her curved body curling into my chest. Her forehead nuzzled into my collarbone. Both of her hands balled into my drenched shirt as her whimpers continued. Her breathing steadied. Her body appeared unharmed.

She was safe.

The proof rested in my arms, yet it didn’t numb the raging desire to slaughter whoever did this to Katerina. Never had I felt such blinding wrath— not even toward my brothers.

Tristan followed my lead as I motioned away from the gates and through the guardian concourse. A metallic scent trailed behind us until we reached the infirmary.

I rested Katerina upon the barren bed, her drenched body slumping while I neared her side. Katerina’s nostrils flared as she took in a sharp breath. She hastily straightened against the bed’s board, and Tristan leveled a bin before her, Katerina immediately tipping her head into it as she retched.

Tristan tapped against my shoulder and stepped outside. Katerina tugged at my shirt before I could stand. “Stay.”

“I wasn’t planning on leaving.” I studied her, tracing the sharp curves on her face, the hollowness that deepened her under-eyes. Though exhaustion resided in her eyes, her gaze penetrated through me, clenching my chest. “I’ll be quick.”

Before I could settle beside her, I stepped out the door where Tristan oversaw the pool.

“You need to question her,” he said. “If this was the intruder, then...”

“I know.”

Although Tristan appeared to hold questions, he bowed and exited without querying.

When I settled next to Katerina, our fingers found each other instinctively. Her shoulders slumped, and she eased into the mattress, pulling me beside her. Our bodies molded into each other, her warmth complementing my iciness. She nuzzled against my neck again, a comfort blanketing us.

It was the most natural thing I’d ever felt.

“Alek.” Those somber icy green eyes found mine. “It wasn’t the assailant.”

“Then who?”

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone.”

I softly wrapped my arms around her neck. Never was I one to make promises, as it had been all my brothers and I were accustomed to from our mother and That Man. Promises that signified nothing. Struck with the reality of how empty words could be.

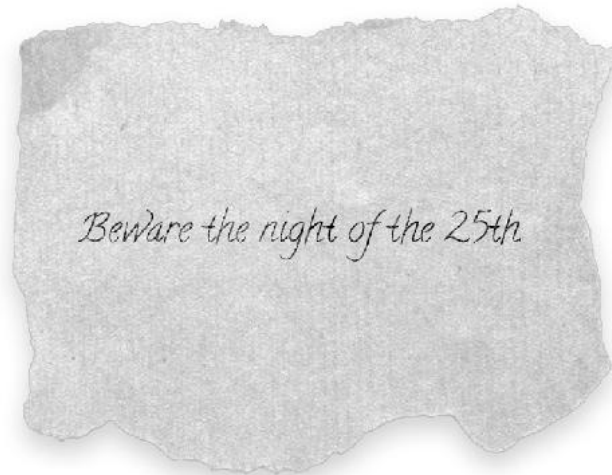
Yet, with Katerina, all I craved to do was promise anything, everything possible. How could I deny her such a thing?

“I promise.”

Her lips languidly whispered before falling asleep, “It was *her*.”



When I awoke with Katerina still in my embrace, relief washed over me. It was momentary and quickly dispersed as my eyes fell on a folded piece of paper above her head. I recognized the material, but not the writing.



ACT THREE

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

KATERINA ELI



I *t's happening again.*

I was asleep— I knew I was. But I couldn't move. Couldn't open my eyes, although they screamed to widen. My hammering heart constricted my chest to the point I couldn't breathe. Sweat trickled down my skin, the bed burying me deeper into it, minor twitches escaping that did nothing. I'm stuck to it, but I'm somewhere else.

She's a suffocating force that pulled me into the abyss.

A harsh grip dragged me into the shabby house. It pushed me, my body tumbling onto the creaky, wooden floors. I tugged at my legs and arms to stand, but they stayed still. I couldn't scream. I couldn't leave. I couldn't do anything.

Drenched hair cascaded over my shoulders, strands rapidly shedding as my body crawled across the floor. The motions weren't mine. It was as if someone else was moving, but I was inside them, seeing through their eyes. Everything was familiar yet so alien. From the way I shrank in size to the way, I hugged my knees to the thoughts that pounded against my head.

I'm going to die tonight.

“*You!*” The deep voice said, the sound enough to raise the hairs on the nape of my neck. His footsteps pounded against the ground, hands squeezing around my neck.

Taunting gray eyes deepened to a deep ash once they met mine. His hold tightened as if he wanted to strangle me to death. The pain burrowed through my skin to my bones.

He pulled me from the ground as if I was a feather, so light, so fucking weak, with barely any force. Veins throbbed on his forehead while deep lines dug through his cheeks and between his eyebrows. My body trembled at the horrifying sight, but he did the same.

Was he scared of me?

“Why couldn’t you have just let her live?” Tears streamed down his cheek to his neck. Sobs filled the air as the man stilled, his grip loosening but never letting go. “She would have been alive if it wasn’t for you. You monster!”

Suddenly his outline washed away, and everything vanished. In a flash, I stood in the middle of the familiar forest. The water drowned my surroundings and harsh waves drew me in until I couldn’t kick anymore. Until my arms gave up.

I was swallowed deep, deep into the abyss.

Then, the lake drained, and I collapsed onto carpeted floors. Swelling pain consumed my muscles, a numbing following. A shadow stepped forward and embedded itself into me, merging. Colliding. Whispering words in *her* voice.

“They would have all been alive if it wasn’t for you.”

Bodies concealed the royal, blue floor. The color quickly deepened to a deep purple as blood seeped from shredded faces into the carpet, their bodies hanging together by a thread.

My eyes sprung open, bile scraping my throat as it poured out of me with heavy force. It floated on my bathroom toilet like my fucked-up memories and dreams.

They all flushed away.

But *her* presence remained as an aftertaste. Fucking bitter and revolting.



I rested for five days in my room. Not because I wanted to but because Alek forced me to.

I wished he was still here with me. With the Christmas Ball, he was roped away by the time I woke up after that shit show, and I hadn't seen him since. I... missed him.

At least being off duty gave me a real reason to stay inside and not be seen by Lorenzo. Technically, I had been ignoring him since our little fight. But now, it wasn't on purpose. There was a reason—one that he still didn't know.

I couldn't explain it to him. I didn't even know what exactly happened.

A small knock came from my door, and Tristan entered after a minute. I'd told Alek about the writing on the wall, and Tristan had been looking over it ever since, pausing on the intruder's investigation.

"The only thing I retrieved was this," he said, his palm showing a plastic bag with red-stained towels. "The wall was wiped clean by the time I discovered the location. All I could collect were the minor drops of pig's blood on the floor."

He handed me the bag, and I opened it, taking a whiff of the acrid, metallic scent. "And nothing about who did that?"

With *her*, something so vivid could happen in front of me and turn out to be all in my mind. But the blood proved it was reality—that the thin line that separated my sanity from *her* insanity still existed.

"Unfortunately, no." A small smile hinted. "Are you feeling better?"

Was I? "Yeah." The lie was dry on my tongue. "Thank you, Tristan. I'm okay to return tomorrow."

"Of course," he said and bowed. "You have a visitor."

Before I could ask, Tristan motioned away and gave sight to Lorenzo as he walked inside. Thankfully, anger hadn't furrowed his eyebrows. Instead, his shoulders lowered as he grew close, and once behind closed doors, he released a heavy sigh.

“Lorenzo, I—”

The words barely left my mouth as he pulled me into a bear hug. His hold was tight, and his skin was boiling.

“I’m glad the savior in you saved that Sephtis kid.” His voice grew unsteady as he shook. “But the guardian in you should have known better, Nina. You fucking scared me.”

I quickly picked up what he meant and made a mental note to thank Alek and Tristan. They saved my ass from explaining to Lorenzo what I didn’t know.

“I reacted before thinking it through,” the lie eased into the air when he let go.

“I can see that.” He looked over me with soft eyes. “Honestly, this isn’t a good look on you. Being bedridden.”

I huffed and rolled my eyes. “As if you’d look any better.”

“It would never happen. I *think* before I react. Sometimes, I’ll admit, I’m guilty of not doing so, like accepting your rounds on top of my own. No wonder you don’t like running. You do enough covering these grounds.” His laugh thundered. “But Nina, you know to be careful around these men.”

My smile left. “What?”

The tip of his ears twitched as he lowered his voice until it ran deeper. “These Regal Vampires are known for their schemes. You can’t get wrapped into them.”

“What does that mean?”

Although Lorenzo didn’t lie, he knew how to avoid the truth when he wanted to. It was in the way he avoided eye contact when it happened. But this time, it was different.

His jaw tightened, a vein pulsating on his neck. “It means I’m going to that ball with you.”

“What? How?”

Though Lace and I knew he had high ranks, Lorenzo preferred to keep it a secret. Instead, he stuck with a mid-tier title that granted him flexibility with the type of jobs he was assigned to. To be a high-ranking guardian typically meant

higher risk positions, which he tried to avoid. It was a way to not expose himself since lycans were apparently extinct.

Funny how similar we were, yet so different.

“Don’t worry about that.” He inched to my left side and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, forcing me into his chest. “What you should worry about instead are the laps you owe for worrying me.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

ALEK SEPHTIS



December had quickly settled with rain and extensive fog. It stretched from the outer gates to my window, giving no sight to the trees nor the guardians that were stationed around and beyond the household.

Yet, I found Katerina in mere seconds as she concluded her scour across the grounds.

She became the calm I sought, the beauty I was utterly captivated by. The intoxication in my mind that dismantled our prompted rendezvous by the second.

The rain halted when I met the gravel. Shortly after I settled onto the cement pew, Katerina's outline hinted through the mist and entered the mausoleum. The color in her umber skin had returned, the gray cast from her time in the infirmary gone. Her deep ink-black hair was darker than night, slicked back into a braid that reached below her waist. She twisted it and water trickled from her strands before taking the space next to me.

There was no distance between us as our hands tangled. It wasn't a routine anymore but rather habitual. Standard.

Continuously, a serenity loomed over me when I considered her untraceable presence and scent. Though vampires saw it as a threat, it had no effect on me anymore—a trait I was fond of.

“Katerina, how—”

“Alek, I—”

The words echoed as quickly as they grew hollow, laughter suddenly filling the silence before it could settle. “You may go first.”

A smile adorned her appearance, bringing to life her vibrant eyes. “Well, I’ve been wanting to ask something that’s been bothering me for the past few days.”

“Go ahead,” I said, my chest tightening.

“You were lying, weren’t you? About not knowing how to swim?” I gave no response. “We never reached that point in our lesson where you actually dived into the water. That night when you helped me out of the water, you swam to me, didn’t you?”

I chuckled at her curiosity. “When we were young, we used to visit the lake with our mother. I used to swim alongside my brothers, but Kaleb had a tendency of toying with me, labeling them as minor schemes. A few were harmless while others were torturous. It resulted in my growing fear of the water and eventually led me to believe I’d lost the ability to swim.”

“He’s always been a dick, huh?” She huffed as she crossed her free arm across her chest. “I was hoping my lessons magically helped you.”

“To be frank, if it weren’t for them, we would have both been stranded in the middle of the lake.” My lips mirrored the smile that adorned her expression.

Due to her, smiling came naturally.

“Thank you,” she murmured, and our gazes met, the icy green hue deepening as they searched my eyes, “For helping me. For keeping everything a secret.” Her lips parted as if she craved to say more, but no sound escaped her.

“Of course. But Katerina, I’m not sure how much longer I can prolong Tristan from not questioning or possibly Sonia from discovering.” There was an extensive truth to my statement, but it stemmed from the lingering intrigue that shadowed me. Katerina’s mystery entangled me further into the feelings I harbored for her.

“I know, and seriously, I’m grateful for all you’ve done. But Alek... there’s a lot no one knows about me— stuff I don’t even know.”

“I fully understand, Katerina. You don’t need to make any excuses to compel me. I’ve done that all by myself.”

“I want to tell you, though,” she said, her tone almost a whimper as her eyes fell on my lips.

“It’s okay, Katerina,” I responded as our breaths intertwined into one. “I sincerely mean it when I say to take your time.”

“I’m...” Her words trailed as she rested her chin against the edge of her shoulder, her heat radiating. A squeezing impulse caused my body to draw closer, the gap between our lips closing until—

“Nina?” A raspy tone whispered. My eyes snapped to the opening, the towering man bordering the cemetery. Katerina and I stilled in our motions, her head turning away and looking over to the entrance. He swiftly fell out of sight.

“It’s my cousin. I have to go before he reports me missing again,” she said with a chuckle.

“I’ll see you later, then.” Fury caused my clenched jaw. But before I could consider such a sensation, Katerina’s lips caressed my cheek, my skin flushing in response as she quickly left.



Christopher requested a private meeting in his chamber.

Unlike the left corridor, which had dim lights to showcase the pathway, shadows immersed the right wing. Noah’s and Kaleb’s chambers lay to the right while Christopher to the left, near That Man’s that hadn’t been entered since our mother’s passing.

Our mother’s body was uncovered there. Remnants of that night had been cleaned, but the memory and stench of putrid

blood remained behind the door.

Christopher's bedroom was composed of two floors like mine, though his was utterly swallowed by towers of literature books and scattered pages; it swelled from the first floor to the steps that led to the second. Stacked books obscured the corresponding flight of stairs on each side of his space and revealed a hint of space that I could slither through. The available gap grew finer the closer I ascended to the second floor until boundless books consumed the area around his bed.

A small desk hid in the depths of the second floor, Christopher's back to me. He didn't lift his eyes, nor did he halt what he read, but his lips slightly divided, and he commanded, "Sit." His tone grew softer, unrecognizable from the one I was accustomed to.

I overlooked the thin children's books that were spread across the mahogany surface, vivid, colorful covers gleaming underneath the low lighting.

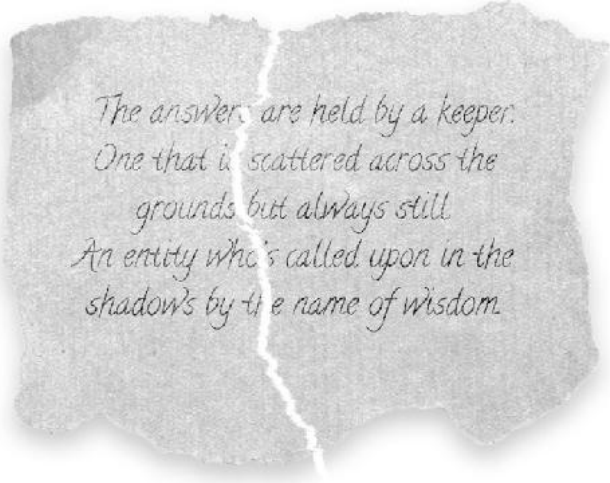
He closed the last book and withdrew his glasses with one hand, the other rubbing the bridge of his nose. Straps at the endings of the temples and around his neck held them in place against his chest.

Christopher's deadpan expression steadily dispersed with each meeting, revealing what tangled his mind.

"What did you uncover? Is it about what mother left behind?"

"Yes," he said with a sigh. "It seems Mother had an obscure liking for puzzles and riddles."

He huddled all the books together and retrieved pieces of paper from their dust jackets, words unraveling. He arranged them until the scrawled cursive read cohesively, penned in the same color the notes Christopher and I discovered had been in.



*The answers are held by a keeper.
One that is scattered across the
grounds but always still.
An entity who's called upon in the
shadows by the name of wisdom.*

“Do you think Mother wrote this?”

He shook his head. “Her writing was sloppier and rarely this cohesive.”

My focus fell on the words, assessing each line in any possible manner I could to attain a specific significance. “Have you been able to decipher it?”

“No.” A sliver of irritation seeped through.

I waved toward the room that was engulfed by pages and works of literature. “Then what’s with all the books?”

“I read to escape from the bounds of continuous studies. What you see before you are what I relish in, not what I shackle myself to at times like these.”

“Then how can we know what the riddle refers to if you can’t even solve it?” A knock vibrated against the door on the first floor, both of our heads tilting to it.

“It must wait,” Christopher said as he stood. “It slipped my mind that Sonia required my presence to discuss the marriage proposal.”

“Who are you planning on electing?” Christopher didn’t respond as he walked down the steps. Though his chamber was enveloped in darkness, I could sense the hint of light beyond the concealed windows fading.

Sonia bowed as I exited the room and trailed through the corridor until an outline descended the stairs. Kaleb slithered

across the foyer and below the main staircase, and though my feet desired to follow, my body continued forward. He had yet to call for me to question my progress with Katerina, an advantage in itself.

Tristan stood in my chamber, still and quiet. Steps echoed beside me and closed the gap between us before I could speak.

“I found the intruder,” he whispered, although we were alone. “They’re on the grounds disguised as a guardian from the CEG.”

“Who is it?”

Tristan’s throat swelled as he said, “Lorenzo Devon, Katerina’s cousin.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

KATERINA ELI



Lorenzo —like always— was in the training room. Did he even sleep in between his rounds?

“What’s up?” I walked toward the pull-up bar, where he finished his last set.

His shirtless chest stiffened as he jumped onto the ground. He ran a hand through his hair, the buzz cut now grown into baby waves.

A familiar softness settled in his gaze. “It’s about Lace.”

“What about him?” The few times I’d spoken to him, something always came up on my end as if the universe itself didn’t want us to talk. I couldn’t help but feel a hole burrow into my stomach at the mention of him.

“The CEG is going to announce a new production for guardians soon. Lace wanted to make sure you knew beforehand.”

“What type of production?” Annually, the CEG upgraded one product for the betterment of guardians. Last year it was the bulletproof vest that’d been changed from its usual plastic polymers to the thick fibers Lace’s middle brother had created. The year before was the guardian suits we were meant to wear during our posts, now more flexible and breathable than before.

“They’ve been developing a series of weapons for a guardian’s kit belt,” Lorenzo said and grabbed a towel from his usual bench, wiping the sweat from his forehead. “It’s still in its early stages, but he knows it’ll get the green signal.”

I crossed my arms across my chest. “What type?”

“Batons, knives, guns. The usual. But they’d be creating them with new material that Lace’s brother discovered, known as silver nitrate. So far, they’ve been able to integrate it into ammunition.”

“The Vampire Ministry and Bureau are allowing this?”

“They’re the ones who suggested the idea ‘cause of the Two-Species Treaty. They’re scared shitless, both sides. If the CEG is pulled into it, then we’ll have some cover.”

“But that’s not what we stand for,” I muttered. “Guardians are neutral. We protect those who hire us. We’re not some special task force for political shit shows.”

“There’s no harm in expanding, Nina,” Lorenzo stated. “If both governments are open to the development, Lace’s family is in.”

“And Lace? Since when has that been his vision?”

I knew the type of future he wanted for the CEG: expansion across all corners of the globe, and further research for half-humans. But never did he say he wanted to upgrade guardians with weapons. We were already disliked. If weapons were added into the mix, we wouldn’t be protecting.

We’d be enforcing.

“People’s visions change,” Lorenzo stated as if that was a good enough explanation.

“But this is different! This isn’t what the CEG stands for—this isn’t what we stand for.”

I would have never changed my mind to join the CEG if it wasn’t for Lorenzo. We wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t believe in the oath the CEG was grounded on: to protect with body and heart.

If our positions went against that, then I couldn’t do it.

“There’s nothing we can do,” he said, his voice softening. “Since I’ve never used weapons before, Lace has recruited me

for the training and weaponry trials. After the Christmas Ball, I'll be returning to the CEG."

I took a step back as my chest caved and my throat tightened. "So now I won't see you again for what? Weeks? Months?"

"I'm not sure."

I shook my head, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. "Look, I get that you want to believe every decision Lace makes is for the better, but you're just as blinded by him as he is of the pretty picture—"

"Excuse me?" Lorenzo's eyes widened, and a flame overtook his gaze. "The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I—"

Lorenzo wasn't the type to care about crushes. But, it was obvious he felt more than indebted to Lace for what he's done for us. Especially since they had been working so closely together for the past few years.

It was all in the way hearts practically shut out from his gaze whenever he looked at Lace. The guy was infatuated with him.

But there was none of that here as Lorenzo gritted his teeth, a vein popping from his neck. "He's doing everything he can to establish the CEG as more than a reputable guardian service. Unlike you, who has lost her sense of duty to go play house with an egotistical vampire Regal."

Katerina.

My fists tightened as a raging fire burned beneath my chest. "What did you just say?"

Choose, choose, choose.

He didn't budge.

My voice grew louder. "Say what you actually believe, Lorenzo! Tell me how much of a fucking disappointment I am to you and how blinded you think I've become!"

Your hunger has grown.

Shut up.

“I’ve seen the two of you. The way you look at him. The feelings you think that Sephtis kid has for you. It’s all a farce. You’re nothing more than another plaything to him, Katerina.”

It’s not just me anymore.

“And you’re not?” I shouted, *her* voice like an echo. “All you do is follow Lace like a lost puppy in hopes he’ll praise you. In hopes that he’d give a shit about you like you do to *him!*”

No.

A rush of adrenaline spiked through my veins and then suddenly stopped, the weight of it pressing down on my stomach. The lines between Lorenzo’s eyebrows relaxed. But something clouded his gaze. Was it the realization that I was similar to him? Hatred for the thing he hated about himself? Pity that I was worse than him?

The hunger has claimed you.

“Nina...”

“Don’t talk to me!” I said, forcing my feet away, far from him. Far as fucking possible before it all came crashing down.

His expression dimmed as he remained still, my body sprinting before my mind could stop me. Or before *she* could do anything.

What had I just said? What had *she* just done? The moment replayed in my mind with such vividness that it blurred my surroundings. I stopped in the underground passageway, the darkness sucking me deeper into the abyss that my words had gouged. The words that had changed Lorenzo’s expression in seconds. Ones that struck a nerve we had promised we’d never bring up.

Had I really said that?

Yeah. I had.

But he used my feelings for Alek against me. Why couldn’t I do the same? He practically threw them at my face

with the excuse that they weren't real. Wasn't it fair?

The sorrow clawed through me, tears burning against my eyes. But they stilled as *her* voice pestered like a fucking swarm of flies.

Katerina, accept me.

No.

It would all end if you'd do so.

Her voice was a sudden force that slithered across my body and numbed my skin. *She* was the fire that blazed in my chest, expanding without a way to extinguish it.

You want them all dead.

“Shut up!” My voice bounced against the walls and echoed down the passageway. I quickly cupped my ears until I couldn't hear the ringing that took over. “Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

Please.

Choose.

Slowly, my vision blurred until a gulf of darkness swallowed me, forcing them shut as her voice continued.

Call for my name.

My throat tightened as my chest caved in, a burning tension rumbling in my stomach.

No.

Admit I've never been nothing.

Her force pressed harsher against my body, bursting through my veins and ripping across my skin.

That's always been you.

It all stopped. *Her* presence dissipated as a ripe, coppery smell trailed along the passageway. The scent pulled me into the living room, where it engulfed every single corner.

Ms. Hoko motioned away from her suitcase and planted the platform on the floor. She jumped as she turned to me, a

hand resting on her chest. “Miss! Oh goodness, I hadn’t noticed your presence. I’d come on such short notice that Mr. Amelle just went to fetch you. I hadn’t expected to see you so rapidly.”

I settled my sight on her belly, a slight movement poking through her skin. “Are you pregnant, Ms. Hoko?”

Even if she gave me no answer, there was no doubt. I hadn’t noticed this last time, but her scent was stronger than an average vampire, more potent than Alek’s and all of his brothers combined. I could sense the strong stream of blood coursing through her veins. Practically hear the resounding beat of her heart next to me.

It twisted my stomach with nausea but made my mouth water.

“Why yes, I am,” she said with a smile, an arm resting along the curves of her stomach. “But I have yet to announce it. While the weight gain has helped disguise my partner’s and my little secret, she’s counting down the day until we reveal it to everyone.”

The new world didn’t know the specifics of how vampire babies came to be —besides, of course, basic biology— but one obvious thing was how hard it was to conceive. No doubt vampires kept it a secret for a reason.

But it was surprising how Sophia, a human-turned-vampire, was able to pop out seven back-to-back. No wonder she made headlines even to this day.

“I didn’t mean to spoil it.”

“You haven’t! No worries, Miss,” her eyes widened with such warmth I felt it wrap around me like a hug. “The Ball is only two weeks away. Let’s get to it.”

Ms. Hoko opened the suitcase and took out a plain, vibrant yellow dress, stretching it flat across the table. “Well, the original piece can only be tailored once due to its frail details. I can’t risk a mistake occurring as then it means that you may have no formal fitted dress for the night.”

“Then what’s this?”

“The first prototype, which I kept for memory’s sake,” she said with a longing in her voice. “Practice must do as the measurements must be exact for the final piece.”

She gripped my hand and forced me onto the platform, assembling a curtain around it. “First, you must undress. I’ll assist with the dress. Fair warning, the fit might be tight as Sophia was much thinner, almost skin and bones.” Her voice lowered, a sense of sadness creeping in before she cleared her throat.

She was right. It was tight, but I could still breathe. Better than what both of us expected.

She worked in silence, pinning and trimming with heavy breaths. Even if *she* didn’t linger in my mind, I could still feel her. It was like when I’d swim for hours and then finally leave the water. My body would still sway on land as if I had never left. *She* was here. I knew it. It angered me more than when she made *herself* known.

It was as if *she* was taunting me.

“Were you close to their mom?” I asked to think about something, anything else.

Ms. Hoko’s fingers slightly stopped along my torso, but she continued as she said, “You could say we grew up together. Even Sonia too.”

“Sonia?” It’s hard to imagine her talking to anyone by choice.

She covered her lips with a hand. “That’s very private information which I wasn’t supposed to say.” She chuckled. “But yes, all three of us were friends before the CEG came to be. Promise to not say anything, Miss! Sonia never liked to admit it— not even the boys know.”

I smiled, my mind trailing to Alek. “Are you close to them?”

“Why, of course! Although, just like Sonia, most of them don’t like to admit it.” She sighed as she wiped her hands. “I’ve seen those boys evolve from bratty little children to clowning adults.”

“I think they’re still pretty bratty,” I mentioned, and she laughed.

“Yes, I suppose so, Miss,” she said, the same sad tone lingering in her voice. “But, I still see them as children. I promised Sophia before her passing that I would look after them if she ever left this world.”

My moments with Alek replayed in my mind, his words practically caressing my skin. He was the best one out of all of them. Was I biased? Maybe. But was it the truth? Absolutely.

“I think you did a good job.”

“Oh, Miss, it’s kind of you to say so,” she rested her hands on my shoulders and gently rubbed them, the sparkle in her gaze shadowed. “But even I’m not capable of keeping them safe from the depths of chaos.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

ALEK SEPHTIS



Our mother's death anniversary was less than two weeks away, such as the Christmas Ball. Yet today's gathering didn't relate to either subject as Sonia shadowed Christopher. He harbored a stern expression, still as stone, but with a clenched jaw that deepened his stare.

It mirrored the morning after our mother's body was discovered, and they had announced it.

"The Human Bureau has uncovered the Mubaraks' disappearance. News has leaked to the public."

Kaleb's eyes widened slightly, the color nearly fleeing from his cheeks. "How? I thought they were making all sorts of excuses to hide their disappearance."

"It's currently under investigation. There are no leading suspects," Sonia said.

Noah's laughter bounced against the walls. "The show *must* go on! This turn of events has restored the fun we've missed throughout the Ball preparations!"

"You imbecile!" Kaleb spat at Noah. "This isn't for your entertainment. It's our doom."

"Our? Oh, Brother! A single demise is upon us, it can equally be yours or mine. Though politics aren't for a person such as myself, I've been more than willing to lend my hand in marriage! Yet my sweet Bethany doesn't seek it." He huffed an inflating sigh.

Kaleb sneered. "Stop giving her the option to reject you."

“I will do no such thing,” Noah rebutted. “We—”

“A decision must be agreed upon from both sides,” Christopher interjected, “If Bethany is not willing to take Noah, then we will not force it.”

“It’s saddening.” Noah slouched into his chair. “But I can do no more than do my best in hopes she’ll fall for me.”

“She never will,” Kaleb spat.

“Then so be it!” Noah shouted. “But! I’m not the only sibling who seeks marriage. Your beloved Catalina is anticipating your acceptance.”

Kaleb scoffed and muttered, “She knows better than to have such senseless expectations. Catalina is nothing more than a—”

“Enough,” Christopher’s voice resounded against the walls and stilled the room. “I possess the final decision for the marriage proposal. All who are of age, including myself, are on equal planes for candidacy.”

“How will we know you’re being fair?” Kaleb asked, his tone sharp. “You can simply choose one of us and exclude yourself!”

“I will choose whoever will be of favor to us. If you oppose it, then you can take the matter to That Man.”

Kaleb’s face flared with a fire in his gaze. “That Man has done nothing but shame our family name after being the sole survivor. His isolation of us is up until we’re of gain to him.”

Soon after the Cold War, the Sephtis lineage faced near extinction; That Man was the single bearer of the name and automatically next in succession. To cement it, he kept our mother, his newly transitioned wife, in the family manor away from harm. It ensured that both her and his future heirs were protected— through lifelong seclusion.

“And yet, we all must abide by our birthright, even if we loathe it with all our beings,” Christopher said as he stood and leveled his gaze at all of us. “Now that the Mubaraks’

disappearance has been outed, our duty is expected to be upheld.”

He vanished into the second floor, Sonia following him while the room quickly vacated. Raphael stayed behind alongside me.

“C-could I speak to you privately, Brother?” His hands fisted against his pants as he stood, his eyes averting my own. I nodded and led the way to my chamber. There was no doubt Christopher’s ultimate decision worried him. Though he wouldn’t be a choice, I was.

We settled on opposing chaises, his body stiff against the cushion.

“What’s wrong?”

He deflected my gaze. “I’m sorry, I-I—”

“I’ve told you to never apologize to me,” I said.

“I know, but...” He exhaled heavily. “Brother, I know what you’re planning.”

Suddenly, my skin turned to stone, and my stomach constricted. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve always been the outsider; for schemes, meetings, even feedings. I’m overlooked since I’m the youngest and am believed to add nothing new to the table. But that’s where everyone’s been wrong.” His eyes stumbled on mine. “I know you’re conspiring against Kaleb by retrieving his notebook. I can help.”

I grew taken aback. Though his words were laced with truth, I contributed to his exclusion. Through the years, Kaleb’s threats stemmed from Raphael, as I strived to keep him in the shadows, away from descending into the retributions our brothers sought. It ruined them. I couldn’t allow the same to occur to him.

“Raphael—”

“Don’t lie to me, please,” he said, his lips quivering. “I know you’ve always protected me by concealing me. But I’ve been in the dark about everything. I can’t let you do that

anymore. For once, please, let me help. I know where the notebook is.”

I settled in the silence after his words, unraveling what bloomed before me. A single question slipped through my lips, “How?”

“I’ve grown used to being in the shadows. I use them to my advantage.” His shoulders lowered as he slumped into the chaise. “The abandoned music room allows me to eavesdrop from a safe distance. But, controlling my presence also helps.”

Few vampires were able to cloak their presence. It was a skill that was not easily mastered, and while Regal families had an advantage due to our potent blood, it was rare. In those cases, it was inherited.

If Raphael had been able to be in our presence without notice, he could discover anything.

“And by doing so, you figured out that I was plotting against Kaleb?”

“Kind of. Well, I saw you with Ms. Eli often. You guys give each other... looks.” He flushed as he smiled softly. “There were moments I overheard you and Mr. Amelle referring to the notebook, too. I was able to connect the dots.”

“Very well then.” I sighed with defeat. There was no reason to refuse him as he solved a problem that had weighed my shoulders for months. “Welcome.”

A bright smile adorned his face. “He entrusted Sonia with it. She’s the only one who knows where it’s hidden. She doesn’t leave at all, so that means the notebook is on the grounds.”

The possibility of her dithering from her stance was slight after Katerina witnessed her attendance with Kaleb and Davina. Never did I think it would be accurate.

“I don’t know where exactly, but there are two choices: the underground tunnel or the employee building.”

Within the depths of my chamber, the puzzling plan uncovered itself, pieces falling into place with one simple

pitch of luck. The minor spark of hope that I'd kept buried finally ignited.

“Thank you, Raphael,” I said with warm gratitude. “No more hiding now.”

He stepped toward me and wrapped his arms around my neck, bringing me closer to him as he nodded enthusiastically. “I can't wait to finally see Kaleb get a taste of his own medicine.”

He stepped away. The lost child that had clung to me was no more, and neither was I. Instead, we now eyed each other like allies and true brothers.

“As do I.”



Night coated the forest with serene silence, accentuating the lake's motions. The brilliant crescent outlined Katerina's figure along the wooden pier's edge. My stomach tightened as I grew close, her radiance within the darkness capturing my attention and senses whole.

Our fingers found each other, the natural routine settling, our shared moments burying what was once cold as night, now transforming into the heat of the day.

“I have news regarding the plans...” Katerina's eyes settled on mine, the iciness within her gaze mellowing. “What's the matter?”

“A lot.” She rested her head against my shoulder, the soft moonlight emphasizing her pouting full lips. “I got into a fight with my cousin.”

My stomach hollowed as Tristan's discovery came to mind. I had yet to tell Katerina the intruder's identity. No prolonged time, in-depth analysis of varying phrasing or wording could nurture the reveal. At this moment, with her sorrowful tone, I couldn't convey it.

Not now or ever.

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“Maybe.” She sighed and nuzzled into the curve of my neck. “We’ve just been having back-to-back fights. When I think we’ve solved one, another one comes up. I don’t know what to do anymore. Honestly, I don’t even think I can do anything with the way he’s going about it.”

“Is that what occurred on the grounds?”

She nodded. “We solved that problem. Or I thought we did. We just keep opening these cans of worms all because of *her*.”

She’d mentioned this ‘her’ before, though never touched upon it. I never sought to as it proved to be a tricky subject. We fell silent, the traveling wind engulfing our surroundings.

“Do you remember when I said there were things no one knows, not even me?”

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t lying, but I wasn’t completely honest. Promise you won’t ask any questions.”

I nodded and tightened my grip around her hand. “I promise.”

“I... I have this medical condition, or that’s what the doctors think, that causes me to—” She cleared her throat. “It causes me to go on these rampages. You’ve seen them. Well, for the most part, they’re out of my control. I have medication, of course, but they don’t always...work.

To maintain it, Lace implemented a set protocol where my cousin would practically be my guardian. Sort of like now.”

She paused and looked up at me, my jaw tightening as my throat briefly confined a breath. The new greedy sensation flared through my bones as the thought of someone else closer to her undertook me.

“Who’s Lace?”

“I’m talking about a rare medical condition, and you focus on that?” She chuckled. “You might know him as one of the

Fernandez's, the CEG big bosses. He's also my best friend. He's helped my cousin and I with a lot."

"Do they call you Nina?" It had been another burning question, this one more bothersome than the other. Why, I'm not quite sure.

"Yes, they do," she said, her voice lowering.

One more inquiry slipped my lips, "Do your friends call you that, too?"

She huffed and bumped her shoulder into mine. "As if I have any friends. I'm just as distant as you were in the beginning!"

I chuckled, a smile resting on her lips. "Does that mean Tristan and I aren't your friends?"

"Tristan's an ally and a great coworker; I don't know about friend, though." She narrowed her gaze. "And you, I could consider you a friend, but I don't think that's right..."

"Is that why I refer to you as Katerina? Because we're not necessarily friends nor allies?"

"Are you jealous that you're not?"

"I believe so."

"It's cute coming from you," she murmured and nuzzled closer. "I like the way you say my name, Alek. I like how it sounds normal. How warm it makes me feel inside."

Slow waves resonated in our surroundings and encompassed us, the wind whispering along the still air and through the motions of our fingers interlacing with each other.

"I hope this doesn't steer you away," she whispered under her breath. "But it's the least I can share after all you've done for me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you, Alek. For everything."

"Thank you, Katerina, for sharing such sensitive details. I will cherish it like all of our promises— past, present, and future."

Our eyes stumbled upon each other's. The familiar squeezing impulse led my face to lean toward hers. Our breaths entangled, her heat swelling within the chilly air, emphasizing the desire and hunger that bridged together within me. They were unlike the variation I felt when fed, rather two halves knitting into a whole that Katerina awakened.

This wasn't absurdity or madness— it was tangible infatuation.

“Katerina,” my voice hollowed as our lips grew closer, “may I—”

Our rocky foundation had long sunk, yet I craved to plummet further. Fully. To subdue the craving that had long intoxicated me.

And Katerina fulfilled it as her lips crashed onto mine.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

KATERINA ELI



I took the lead, and Alek immediately followed. His lips lightly caressed mine, so carefully as if studying my course of action. I kept it sweet. Mellow, even. Yes, for him, but for me, too. It had been a while since I'd last done this. I couldn't mess it up. For either of us.

He was quick to pick up the rhythm, following steadily as he leaned more into me. I hoisted us with an arm, but the other traveled up. From his chest, his neck, onto his hair. My fingers pulled a handful of his soft waves. It pulled him deeper into the kiss, one I'd never felt before.

Never sought before.

Traces of his fingertips hovered over my neck. His ghostly touch sent a shiver down my spine, and he responded with a tug.

"Katerina," his voice rasped, penetrating my heart as it drowned my ears.

One second we were sitting next to each other. The next, I was on top of him, straddling his waist with his arms wrapped around me.

He slightly pulled away, his low gaze taking me in. But my eyes were on his fangs as they retracted. On his plump lips that parted further apart. On the pants that filled the air between us. I'd never heard something so sensual. So inviting. So hot.

"I don't want to prick you," he panted, his voice dangerously low. It definitely sent another shiver through me.

“I don’t mind it.” Never had I thought about it before. But for him? I’d try anything.

A smirk edged across his face. “Another time, please? I need to savor this more than I need to breathe.”

He didn’t wait for my response. He dove head first, slamming onto my lips, my body instinctively melting into his. Molding my hands onto his solid chest and curving to the firm hold against my back. I didn’t know I needed this, how much I’d missed it. Thank fuck Alek awakened this part of me that was asleep for way too long.

This kiss wasn’t slow or careful. It was hungrier. Needier. So much greedier as he devoured me as if he’d been underwater for hours and finally took his first breath. Even if he begged to be drowned again as his hands slid up my spine.

One settled around my neck with light pressure while the other dug my hair out of its bun. Strands of darkness coated us as he never broke apart, the kiss intensifying.

“Alek.”

There was no savoring. Just engulfing deep down.

His flowery scent circled in the air, the space between us long gone as he continued his lead. I followed him without hesitation.

Kill him.

My hands cupped his cheeks, my thumb rubbing along his jaw while another trailed down his neck.

No.

There, a heightened pulse met my touch.

Just like the others, Katerina.

I pressed down, thinking of his plump lips as they kissed me. The blood that stirred beneath his skin. Would it smell as potent if I nicked him?

Stop.

I pulled away, whiffing a gulf of air that immediately electrified my body and forced me away from *her* whispers. Alek's hold stilled behind my neck, his fingers caressing my skin and treading on my hair around us. I could feel his eyes heating my cheeks, and my thoughts washed away like a wave with his voice.

"I like you, Katerina."

Our foreheads rested against each other's while his hand found mine. Our fingers intertwined just like countless times before, but this time, it felt different. Something so strong that it squeezed my heart.

"I like you too, Alek."

I had casual flings before. But this? It was the most real thing I ever had.

His eyes burrowed into mine. They weren't an abyss. His expression didn't hold a puzzle or any uncertainty. Instead, they confirmed all his words, the deep brown so intense and soft that I couldn't help but let them embrace me.

Only Alek possessed that feature, and it was my favorite.

As if on cue, we both broke into laughter.

"My apologies, I—"

"Ah!" I said. "Don't apologize."

"My—"

I swiftly pecked his cheek since it shut him up instantly. It worked. "What did I just say?"

He chuckled. "It's quite a horrid tendency, I must admit."

"You think?" I wrapped my arms around him and brought his body into a tight hug. "Let's take it slow, yeah? It's been a while for me."

I pulled away and noticed his flush spread from his cheeks to his neck as he nodded. "If I must admit, I'd never felt or done this before."

“What an honor,” I half-jokingly said with a smile. “We’ll talk more about it later. It’s getting late.”

He nodded, and we fell into a comfortable silence as we walked toward the mansion. He guided me through the gate and toward the large doors. Our hands never left each other—not until a musky scent trailed from my door.

“We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?”

“Tomorrow, then.” He leaned down and lowered his jaw onto my hairline, a kiss heating against my crown. Before I could say anything else, he vanished into his room and left me in the barren hallway.

I couldn’t avoid Lorenzo every time we fought. I especially couldn’t avoid what I stumbled upon when I entered.

Lorenzo sat on my bed with a shadowed expression. Orange jars spread across the sheets, each filled to the brim with familiar pills. What the fuck? Why were they filled?

“You lied to Lace,” he murmured. “You lied to me, Nina.”

“N-no, I didn’t!” I stepped forward, but Lorenzo drew a hand to the air, forcing me to still.

His deep eyes lowered and blurred with disappointment. “Katerina.” My name on his tongue was an insult, one that shook the air and caused the hairs on my nape to rise. “You promised you would take your medication no matter what. It was the price you had to pay to keep working.”

Her giggles trailed beside my ear, *her* voice looming over me. Instantly, she flashed the times I’d gripped the medication and tossed them into the toilet. How they’d flushed down without a trace. Over and over again.

It was all *her* fault.

But how? I could trace the powdery taste on my tongue from each pill. I’d felt the nausea rumbling in my stomach, even now. It wasn’t a lie—it couldn’t be.

But it is.

No—

“I’m not going to tell Lace yet.” He shook his head and continued, “But you won’t be going to the Christmas Ball. I’m staying behind to ensure that. It’s going to be a large event. We can’t risk it ‘cause you chose to not take your medication.”

My chest caved, a rasping heat clawing against my throat. “You can’t do that. Please, Lorenzo. I have to go to the Christmas Ball.”

He shook his head and stood. Although he was always taller than me, I never felt so small before. Until now. “Who knows what could happen in a room filled with humans and vampires while unmedicated. But I’m not putting that to the test just for you to have fun for one night, Katerina!”

I couldn’t respond to him. But there was one thing I needed to know— even if it destroyed me. “Did you ever really trust me?”

“I can’t say.” His throat bobbed. “I never pestered you for answers. I respected your privacy and kept all my questions to myself, but if I can’t even depend on you doing the bare minimum, there are no more excuses.”

“What does that mean?”

His expression grew blank, but I could tell how much he fucking despised me as he said, “You’re unequipped as a guardian, Katerina. You’ll be leaving with me after the Ball, and I will push for your title to be stripped to Lace.”

He left me all alone in the swallowing abyss that became my room.



Water overflowed from the tub as I sank deeper. Lorenzo’s words replayed in my mind like a broken record, growing louder each time. I wanted to drown it out. But the lake was too far, and the tub wasn’t doing enough.

I pushed myself until my head hit the floor. His voice continued to seep through my skin until I drifted away.

My eyes stung as a white fluorescent light beamed on me. The walls and furniture were a clash of whites, reviving memories of the place I thought was home before the CEG.

It was my own personal fucking nightmare.

A girl came into view, her height meeting my chest as I stood. She wore a dark, violet dress covered in dirt with ripped sleeves. We shared the same bushy eyebrows and round face, but there was still a youth to hers that made her lips smaller and eyes larger. Despite that, there was the same hollowness in those green eyes and dark shadows underneath them.

“Who are you?” I said, my voice distant.

Although her lips didn’t move, mine parted and slipped, “Rin.”

Two doors appeared behind her. She stepped through one, and my body instinctively followed behind her. We stepped inside the same house.

The one *she* always forced me into.

But this time, *she* wasn’t there. It wasn’t me who crouched in the corner of the room. Instead, it was the little girl.

Her entire body trembled beneath the wet, long strands of hair, and her arms tightened around her knees. Loud steps vibrated against the floor. The same man with the taunting eyes towered over her. In a split second, his hand gripped her hair and pulled her to stand. I tried walking, but my feet were glued in their spots.

He shoved the girl to a bare wall, her body tumbling to the ground and stilling in the corner as someone stepped inside. Their outline was blurry as if water drowned our surroundings and contorted their features. I couldn’t make out their faces, but their voices rose the hairs on my nape as a low, flat tone spoke.

“Abdel,” she said.

The man scoffed and swung the cup in his hand across the room. Glass shattered across the room, and dark liquid pooled on the floor. “Fuck off, Elia.”

She shook her head as she stepped toward the other end of the house. “What have I told you about the girl?”

“I don’t give a *shit* what you’ve said about that monster,” he spat, his deep voice resounding with disgust. “She killed her. She killed my one and only love.”

“And yet, you continue to uphold that empty promise you made to her,” the woman said, a sneer hinting, slowly breaking the blurry effect. “The deal stands whether you survive her or not. I will be more than willing to take away the burden that’s been bestowed upon you.”

“This has *never* been an empty promise, unlike those you’ve made. Your stolen bastard proof of them.”

“I gave that child a chance at a meaningful life, one he would have never achieved with that failed *mutt*.” Now a wave erased the distortion above her eyebrows. “Don’t forget Abdel, that monster was brought into this world because of you. She had that child *for* you.”

He sprinted across the room, nails lengthening as he gripped her neck. Fangs crowded his mouth as he spat, “All you do is spit lies. That’s what you’ve always done to my people— to lycans that oppose being your guinea pigs.”

Suddenly, the blurry outline washed away and revealed a woman who met the man’s height. She had slicked dirty blonde hair and wide, moss-green eyes that deepened as they stared at the hand around her neck.

“Don’t say I never warned you.”

Their voices dimmed, and a large wave of darkness swallowed the room, my eyes blinking at the sight of the white room again.

The little girl stood in a corner with her eyes on me. I tried moving toward her, but shackles echoed beside me. I was barred onto a bed, my legs clasped to the end of the frame. The same woman entered with a vile smile.

“I finally got a hold of you, Katerina,” her icy voice said, causing the hairs on my nape to stand. “All it took was six dead, including that mutt father of yours.”

My surroundings began to vanish, each item rising and floating into the abyss that expanded until it was only me and the little girl. We stood in the middle of nothing, her lips parting as if she wanted to speak. Instead, it was my distant voice that did.

“The way to end *her* is to find the root of *her* existence,” my lips said. “And it’s all buried in your memories.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

ALEK SEPHTIS



Being with Katerina didn't feel like a routine. Nor a chore. The anticipation for each meeting grew dire, knitting into my infatuation. A greater impulse that stirred the desire to do more with her. For her. With her.

I longed to explore what made her laugh to replicate the sweet symphony flawlessly, and what made her happy to imprint such striking smiles in my mind, what made her angry and sad to protect her from any harm.

Though, never did I imagine a one-two step inducing her annoyance so rapidly.

Katerina's lips parted as her feet stepped across the ground, her motions following the set pattern we'd practiced. It was as if her upper body focused on one section of the dance while her bottom half contemplated the opposite.

Her bushy eyebrows met as she glared at her feet.

It was the most marvelous sight I'd ever seen.

"Would you like to rehearse the dance again?"

"I'm fine," she muttered and shook her head. "It's just... annoying. We've practiced so many times together, but I still can't get it right. I'm good at fighting, but I can't do a stupid waltz to save my life. How does that make sense?"

I drew closer to her, her fingers settling on my palm. Her fingertips caressed my skin as they found the gaps, intertwining until our hands tightened. The overwhelming flush continued to possess my stubborn cheeks every time.

“Then let’s continue where we left off,” I murmured while my head leveled beside hers, her grin captivating. “If you’d like.”

Although the tenderness in her eyes hadn’t altered, the green hues retained a slight hollowness. Similar to our mother’s.

Her sunken appearance was ingrained in my nightmares, the mother that my brother’s and I had once known slowly diminishing with each episode.

Was her condition like our mother’s? Did it stem from turning or something else? The questions had meandered in the back of my mind ever since the hospital, and while I wished for answers, I wouldn’t seek them. Katerina must share them on her own when—or if—ready.

Yet, an inkling to do what I couldn’t with our mother persisted.

“Or we can relax and not talk about the Ball.” She tugged my arm, pulling me away from such thoughts. “If you’d like.”

Laughter had become second nature to me as the past three days were spent alongside each other. In addition to inevitably accepting her commands. “I’ll follow wherever you lead.”

“Even if it’s to hell and back?”

“Especially if it’s hell and back.”

The craving to meet her lips blossomed, the sensation idle when apart but impending. Kissing her was the key to heaven, the ultimate allurements to a sinner. My body pleaded to be swept into the greedy desire, the thundering hunger that seized my bones. It heightened the crushing ache that I could no longer overlook.

You need to tell her the truth.

I had yet to reveal the intruder’s identity. Partially due to not knowing how to unravel it and partially in hopes we’d be proven wrong. Tristan continued investigating Lorenzo’s activities, nothing of the norm leaping out. We needed

evidence to prove his innocence. Yet, nothing steered him that direction.

“Katerina. There’s something I have to tell you.”

“What is it?”

I cleared my throat. “It may all be a suspicion, but I can’t be silent on it.” The tips of my fingers grazed along her skin until a hand cupped her cheek. “All the evidence that Tristan has acquired leads to one possible intruder. It’s not to say that they are, but...”

“Alek, who is it?”

“Lorenzo Devon,” I stated, Katerina’s body stilling beneath my touch. “The tapes and logs of his shifts all showcase a connection to the incidents.”

“But... how?” Her eyes trembled as her eyebrows furrowed deeper. “Why would he do this? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know. Tristan simply wants to restrain him before he can do anything else,” I said.

“He was invited to the Ball. I don’t know by who or how. B-but he’s staying behind.” She lowered her gaze as if avoiding my own, her body stiffening and pulling away. My hold loosened, the emptiness without her touch settling while Tristan appeared.

“It’s time, Alek.”

I nodded, and he retreated, concealing himself in the forest. “If this is too much, you can take the rest of the day off. If you seek answers, you can go directly to him, but—”

“It’s fine,” she said, her words stale. “If the evidence points to him, there’s nothing I can do to disprove it.”

A shadowed semblance clouded her, her shoulders caving while the minor glimmer in her gaze dimmed. Though my tongue itched to reassure her, there was an extent to making such promises. Especially ones that held no weight.

Tristan led the way through the forest and toward the inner gate, Katerina parting from my grasp and vanishing to the other side of the outer driveway until she and Tristan became one with the swallowing woods.

I blurred through the entrance and paused before the library's second floor, studying the air that embedded itself into the gloomy silence.

Christopher sat on his grand chair, his eyes entranced by the book before him that he had recently gathered. Raphael sat on the spiraling stairs that led to the third floor, his head meeting mine in height. Though his legs were firm, his fingers picked at each other.

My hand rested on his shoulder and squeezed, my attention falling on Tristan and Katerina as they entered.

All my allies settled in one room. Nerves chilled across my skin.

The plan for tomorrow—a plan I had long awaited—came to fruition.

“The plan will go as such:

Katerina and Tristan will retreat the notebook. During the Ball, Raphael will keep a close eye on Kaleb to ensure that he does no heinous acts. Christopher will also be monitoring Noah and the twins.

I will be focusing on the main entrance of the ballroom for Tristan's and Katerina's secure arrival. If one doesn't arrive, it will represent the failed attempt at obtaining the notebook.”

We decided it was best to not inform Christopher and Raphael about the intruder's capture. It would not only peril our chances but also raise questions I couldn't answer. Christopher believed the intruder to be insignificant, nothing more outside of Kaleb's scheme. If he was to discover an underlying reason, he'd discern Katerina's connection.

The risk was too grand and of no avail.

The thought of tomorrow further heightened the angst that burrowed in my stomach. With our mother's death

anniversary, rumors yearly sprouted, especially during each Christmas Ball. Her murder had been ruled as an unclassified medical reason by the Ministry, but word of suicide spread to vilify transitioning and humiliate us.

“Is anyone worried about their role?” I asked as I cleared my throat. Everyone shook their heads, and the consoling stillness concluded our time.

“Then Katerina and I will leave to discuss some protocols for the night,” Tristan said. They bowed, Katerina stealing a glance my way before they vanished into the corridor.

“Raphael, excuse us for a moment,” Christopher ordered. “I must speak with Alek.”

Raphael met my gaze, and I nodded, the slight motion enough reassurance for him and myself. Once he bowed and exited, Christopher removed his glasses and arranged the ends to form the imitating key. He stepped through the spiraling stairs and unlocked the hidden door.

I followed him with dreadful steps as he stepped into his study. My body froze on the last few steps, and my throat tightened, the memories beginning to manifest, but I suppressed them with tight fists. I couldn't allow the terrors of that night to continue to grip me. It needed to end.

Before I could freeze, I pushed myself through the opening.

The room had remained the same. Bookshelves invaded my sight, their statures nearly meeting the roof as I took them in. An alcove parted the sea of books; sunlight beamed through the window and onto the pathway where Christopher lurked.

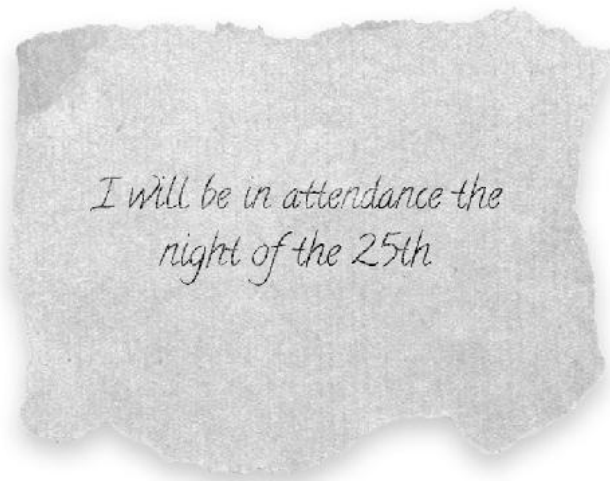
It had been the place I'd huddled in five years ago, where I witnessed the culprit escape after taking our mother's life—unbeknownst to me at the time.

I halted in the center of the room. It was as if all my limbs became motionless, and there was no sense of control left for me to uphold.

Christopher gestured into his pocket and discarded folded pieces of paper onto the bench. He unfolded them one by one, splaying them across the sky-blue cushion. His head tilted to summon me. A crisp, earthy scent parted his faint lignin aroma once I stood closer.

“I discovered it during my early reading sessions.” His gaze lowered to the four small notes, most of which I recognized.

Except for the one to his right.



They all shared the same writings, including the similar shades of blue ink that smeared across the pale sheets.

“Where did you find this?”

“In my study,” Christopher stated.

“You didn’t see who left it?”

Christopher shook his head. “I visited Mother’s grave right before my session.”

“*You* visited Mother’s grave?”

The mausoleum had loomed in the cemetery long before we were a thought. After our mother’s desolate burial, I was the only one who visited, sometimes alongside Raphael, when her death was still anew. Recently, his hesitation refrained him from visiting.

I believed my brothers had forgone visitations, too, due to unresolved emotions, everlasting disbelief, or both.

“I may harbor my own faults, but I never forgot her,” he said. “But this will be a matter to discuss some other time, Alek.”

Dejection shot through me but quickly subdued as our attention dropped to the notes. “What are we trying to uncover?”

“A hint,” he noted. “In a span of weeks and right before a grand event, we’ve obtained four different sets of notes— all of which must pertain to each other.”

“How?”

“The writing, for one, is the greatest indicator,” Christopher said, and his tone lowered. “Though there’s a slight difference in sizing on half of them.”

“They seem to have been written on the same type of material, too.” I leveled the newest and oldest one.

“Yet, two hold messages that contradict each other.” Christopher snatched the one I had stumbled upon in my chambers and placed it beside the recent addition. We had yet to unfold the puzzle scrawled before us, but now, more was added to the muddled assortment.

“These oppose each other,” I said as I pointed at the oldest and newest notes, “then what about the other pair?”

“One led to the other,” he emphasized. “All placed within differing ends of the household and timeframes.”

My chest tightened. “The puzzle within the children’s books was from our mother. The other three have been strategically placed for us to find.”

Christopher released a heavy sigh, “There’s no denying it was recent, too. Someone on these grounds knows what we’re devising.”

“Tristan can investigate this,” I mentioned, but Christopher immediately shook his head with a stern refusal.

“There is too much at hand currently. What’s been set in stone can’t be interfered with,” he said and hid the notes in his pocket.

I settled into the stillness that followed his words. A sudden idea struck me.

“The first and latest notes were found here,” I said, my tone probing, “which means they had access to your study. The only other person to have the key is That Man.” My tongue dried at the mention, the very thought igniting a fire across my veins. Considering if it truly was him behind such occurrences, it leads to an endless chasm of questions with no guidance.

“Though it’s a slight likelihood, That Man hasn’t meddled in our affairs for the past five years.” He paced toward the stairs, my feet falling behind. “We’ll revisit this at a later time.”

He settled on his desk and brought his glasses to the bridge of his nose. A blank semblance emerged onto his expression. “Have you thought about your alternative plan to take down Kaleb?”

“Not yet.” Though I couldn’t admit it, my rendezvous with Katerina suspended such a ploy.

“I suggest you get to it,” he said, his tone shifting as a knock echoed behind me.

I bowed, but before I stepped toward the door, I suddenly asked, “Are you still deciding who to appoint for the marriage proposal?”

“Yes,” he murmured under his breath. “It’s been a vexatious process. Sonia has been assisting me ever since the month arrived due to my indecisiveness.”

“Will you elect yourself then?”

“Anabella and I underwent the process three years ago when we came of age,” he whispered, and the façade slightly diminished as his eyes settled on mine. “Our blood compatibility concluded with very poor and inauspicious results. Though she was prepared to continue with the marriage proposal, I promised it under my own terms. She rejected it.”

If the blood compatibility results were negative, then the match was ostracized. For Regal families, if the pair continued with the marriage without seeking other compatible spouses, they would lose their titles if no heir spawned.

He cleared his throat as he shook his head. “She wants a husband who will only love and lust for her. But I can only care for her as a friend. She understands I cannot be with women.”

Another knock vibrated against the door, and Sonia entered, her greeting bow indicating my departure. I retired to my chamber, a sudden shadow blurring past me and onto the chaise on the first floor.

Kaleb’s suffocating ego swallowed the room. I forced my gaze onto the floor as I sensed his presence looming. He didn’t stand. Rather, he curved against the cushion to face me.

“Dear little brother, do you understand what tomorrow will unfold?” He asked, his shrill voice a resounding chime.

“Yes, Brother.”

A blood-thirsty grin blossomed as he said, “Good. Although it wasn’t prevalent, I was still afraid you may have forgotten our agreement since I hadn’t paid mind. Though your immersion within your role has been too remarkable to cause such doubts.”

There was never an agreement, you prick, my tongue itched to say.

“I expect the grandest of betrayals tomorrow with that pest of a guardian,” he said as he stood and stepped to my side. “And Alek, remember, you’re under my hold, but if you continue lurking in and out the shadows, know that mutt of a guardian won’t be the only one entangled in this grand tragedy.”

“What?” My lips blurted out.

Kaleb’s eyes widened with a prominent glee. “I may have let you roam freely for too long little brother, but fear not. Once you break her into thousands of pieces, then what you’ve

been masterminding will go unheeded. We shall all share the last laugh.”



In the dead of night, when the clock marked the fifth year of our mother’s death anniversary, my walk to the cemetery was bleak and heart-wrenching.

Sunflowers rested still and tall within the vase, the golden canary petals holding a deep warmth on the edges and pale gleam closer to the corolla. It was a sight that I continuously reveled in once I rested upon the pew, the night its accessory.

It exposed the sorrow that pressed in my stomach.

“Mother, I hope your rest has been well for the past five years,” I began, a chill breeze seeping through the space.

“I come here today to apologize once more for the very incident that stole your life from this world. If I hadn’t hidden in what’s now Christopher’s study —on that wretched third floor within the library— perhaps I could have heard your willowing cries. Perhaps I could have stumbled upon your fleeing body before it was too late. Perhaps I could have witnessed exactly what took place to avoid such horrid rumors.

“As always, my apologies, mother. My apologies for being such a coward. My apologies for not saving you. My apologies for letting one of the guardians discover your body once my brothers returned when it should have been me hours before. My deepest, sincerest apologies for not being a strong son, but a weak bastard.

“My payment for such has succumbed me to loneliness, into the darkness that you had once abided in. Alas, this grand lonely path has now been shined upon. For that, I have come to a heart-wrenching decision.

“Alongside Tristan, Katerina, Christopher, and now Raphael, I’m not as alone as I believed myself to be. With

them, the sense of hope that I had lost alongside you has been fully ignited, but it's grown brittle in a short span due to Kaleb.

“For that, my apologies for what I've decided upon, as it disobeys all you've taught us.”

Her voice trailed in the depths of my mind, ever so slight yet profound.

“Promise me you'll never follow my path,” she had said before sending us off to the Christmas Ball that led to her tragedy, *“that you'll never hold the chasm of titles and authority to determine your worth. It will ruin you just like it did me, your father, and all who rule our kind.”*

Yet, those words failed to include the reality we lived in, one without a choice. Our mother painted a lie within her picture, showcasing a dream that was never attainable within our existence. Bearing a choice signified we had options, and while few made themselves apparent throughout the years, they never sustained what was truly needed.

Protection for those I cared for, those I loved dearly. Deeply. With Kaleb's hold on me, it was impossible— unless that hold was stripped permanently.

“I will be accepting the marriage proposal.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

KATERINA ELI



For once, it wasn't *her* who pestered my mind like a thorn. But me. I was driving myself insane.

After Lorenzo's confrontation about the not-so-empty jars, I realized some of my memories were gone. There were small gaps, completely blank. I didn't remember what happened after he'd left. How I'd fallen asleep for the past week leading to the Christmas Ball. Or how I'd end up in some places. Not even the little girl that popped out of nowhere.

Or was it from somewhere?

She was silent for once.

The little girl loomed in every reflection I turned to. The mirrors. Bathtub and toilet seats. On top of the briefcase hidden in my closet. She was everywhere. Did the house actually have ghosts that none of the guys noticed?

Maybe. But that didn't explain why she looked eerily like me.

Was she an entity like *her*? Was she a part of me that had been erased by the medication? Or was she a new existence from that thing that jabbed beneath my chest?

When exactly did she start appearing? The more I searched for the exact moment, the more distant the memory grew. As if she didn't want me to know. But she didn't use her force like *she* did. The little girl knew this was my body, and she was a brief presence.

The thought wouldn't be as unsettling if she wasn't staring back at me from the piano's reflection.

"What the fuck," I whispered to myself. The tailors —and Alek with a sly grin— caught that.

He stepped off the platform when the tailors finished. Once we were left alone, I exhaled a breath of relief as guardian mode dissolved.

He'd requested me instead of Tristan for the visit, and I kept my mask as still as possible. But damn, was it hard. We were alone so often now that I had forgotten we were employee and employer.

We'd become so much more since my first day. The thought made me smile.

"What are you smiling about?" He asked lowly as he walked to me.

The deep, plum velvet suit was perfectly tailored to complement his broad shoulders and lean body. An ivory tie decorated his collar, shades of yellow hinting at the edges as the afternoon light shined on it. The handkerchief in his breast pocket glinted the same color.

"Nothing."

My feet dangled in the air as he twirled us, our lips meeting in a soft kiss.

"Careful," I muttered as I broke apart and wrapped my legs around his waist. "If Ms. Hoko notices a single wrinkle on your outfit tonight, she'll kill you with her bare hands."

"Hands that have become frail through the years of sewing and designing for countless events," Alek said as his large hands gripped my thighs, closing any leftover distance. Why hadn't I noticed how sexy they were? I wanted them all over me. "But it's a risk I'm willing to take to taste you."

He plunged forward, his plump lips ravaging mine without warning. His kisses grew hungrier each time, and I reciprocated tenfold. How could I not when the same hunger was becoming harder to calm down? It was as if he was my

calling, and I settled by molding into him. My body remembered every nook of his like it was the back of my hand.

My tongue rolled and searched, no fangs meeting me. Disappointment weighed down my chest. I trailed my fingers into his hair and pulled, earning me a groan. That sound alone was enough to tip me over the edge.

“Alek,” I moaned. “If we continue, your clothes will be ripped off, and you won’t make it to the Ball.”

“I don’t mind,” he panted, his eyes shimmering. It squeezed my heart, equally warming and breaking.

I hadn’t been able to tell him about my leave tomorrow. Not even Lorenzo orders to keep me away from the Ball. At first, I was going to go against his words after finding out his backstabbing. But I rationally considered my cousin’s words. Even if he was the assailant, he was still right. Lace would say the same. If I went to the Ball in this state—with *her* state haunting and simmering—I couldn’t promise anyone’s safety.

Not even my own.

And if I went against Lorenzo’s logic, I’d be no better than him.

That’s why I stuck to acting like everything was fine. Normal. As if I was sticking to Alek’s plan. Once I retrieve the notebook, though, it’d change. I’ll give it to Tristan and send him off by convincing him that I can get to Lorenzo without suspicion. I’ll find my cousin. I’ll get the answers that I so desperately needed. I’ll even be ready to get back to the CEG and become a guinea pig again. Not.

The thought of meeting with doctors pricked my skin. They were made of shit, just like their supposed advice. It never changed: to get better, I needed to want it. And I did—but they didn’t understand it was my body that didn’t want to.

It was her.

I grew so tired of being weak, dependent on medication that didn’t do anything but deteriorate every part of me. What I needed was to save my own damn self. With Alek’s reassurance throughout the week, it had been enough to keep

her at bay. But I wasn't sure it was enough strength to carry me tonight. Or ever.

Alek tucked the loose strands behind my ear. "It seems we're both lost in thought."

Fuck. Every time his gaze softened, I couldn't even think about lying. I couldn't bear to do so with him. "Let's save this for another time." Although my arms loosened around his neck, he didn't let go. Instead, he guided us to the piano bench, where he rested me next to him.

"I must share something with you, Katerina. It deals with Kaleb's intended scheme—"

"Tomorrow," I interjected, wanting to hold onto this moment for as long as I could. Before it turned to shit. "Just... later. Please."

It was a promise, not entirely empty, but definitely partial. I don't know if Lorenzo's backstabbing could benefit me. But in the case they stripped my title, I'll fight to be with Alek. It was the only thing I had in my life that I chose. The hope tensed my muscles, and I focused my steady gaze on him.

For him, I'd win any fight.

"What if it can't wait?" he asked, his voice turning brittle.

"It can," I said. Was it to reassure him or me? I wasn't entirely sure. "Unless someone's dying, I don't want to hear it." Before he could protest, I kissed his cheek, a flush steeping his skin as a response.

His nostrils flared as he sighed. "If you insist."

A knock caught our attention, and Tristan entered, his hands rummaging through his tie and loosening it. For now, Tristan still wore his guardian uniform until his part of the plan was completed. Me? I wore it as my armor for when I confronted Lorenzo. Maybe I could have gotten this over with last night after Alek broke the news. But it was impossible since I knew Lorenzo's hatred for vampires.

"Why?" I had asked him once when we were roomed together at the CEG.

“I can’t say,” he’d said, his voice almost bitter. “But it’s deeply rooted. Almost like it was instilled by someone.”

The disgust oozed in his tone whenever he spoke about them. It was the same disgust he harbored for me now.

“The limousine is waiting in the driveway. Are you ready?” Tristan asked.

Alek and I stood, his hand finding mine and giving me a quick squeeze. “I’m afraid I have no choice.”

“Neither do we.” Tristan chuckled, his cheeks crinkling against his sunglasses. “I will meet with you in the passageway after I send them off.”

I held a sigh in my chest as I nodded. “Got it.”

Alek lowered his head, resting his forehead against mine. His skin was ice while mine was fire, but somehow, they balanced each other out. “If you’re unable to retrieve the notebook, I still expect to see you tonight for our dance,” he murmured, his voice magnetic and pulling our noses closer. “Ms. Hoko will have your dress.”

I swallowed harshly as my throat tightened, forcing me to change the subject. “You’ll have the notebook no matter what.”

That was the least I could do.

We parted away, his cold fingers cupping my face. He rested a short kiss on my lips, sealing a promise I was too scared to make, a lie I couldn’t voice. I didn’t open my eyes until his touch was a ghost of itself, and the car trailed outside on the gravel.

Tristan waited in the underground passageway, the dim light splitting him from the abyss that swallowed the other side. The side I hadn’t stepped into ever since the incident. By now, it was a habit to ignore the trembling that overtook my body whenever I entered the underground passageway. But Tristan’s voice took my mind off it.

“Are you wearing your vest?” He asked, and I nodded. “And the receiver?”

My hands fell on my ears and touched around, realizing I had forgotten it. “I haven’t used it at all.”

“I noticed that. If I was Sonia, I would have written you up for that already. But I’m not,” Tristan smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out an earpiece. “Make sure it’s on at all times during our split. It’ll be the only way we’ll communicate while you’re sneaking into the quarters, and I’m scouring the grounds.”

With that, we split off. The protocols stayed the same for all the guardians who stayed behind. Lorenzo would be scheduled on his shift soon. If I hurried, I could send Tristan off with the notebook before he could catch my cousin. Thankfully, Sonia reported to the CEG today, which meant I had her office all to myself and no one to see me.

Sonia’s office was the only one on the first floor, near the back entrance. Tristan had mentioned her room being only accessed through her office. He wasn’t sure how. Did she have a hidden door? I took a mental note of that.

Long story short: I was practically killing two birds with one stone.

Sonia’s office was plain and organized, unlike Lace’s, who always had piles of papers all over his desk and floor. A hardwood desk sat in between bookshelves against the walls, but they were as empty as the desk’s countertop. I looked inside the cabinets and pulled them in and out to check every single space available. Nothing. Onto the next step.

I searched throughout the entire room for secret hiding spots. Stopping in front of the bookcases, I flipped through pages quickly with an attentive eye. Empty again.

Katerina.

The hairs on my nape rose. I studied the empty room, the earpiece suddenly blasting with a familiar voice.

“Katerina? Is everything going well on your end?” Tristan’s deep voice silenced the trailing whisper.

“Y-yes. Did you find Lorenzo?” My chest tightened as I placed the book back and leaned against the bookcase.

“No. There were some last-minute changes done by Sonia. I’m still searching where he might have been sent,” he said, and a sigh slipped my lips. “Let me know when you discover the notebook.”

“I wi—” Suddenly, I lost my balance and fell backward. I stumbled onto the hard surface, catching myself before my head met the floor. The bookcase revolved and shut in front of me in a swift motion.

Was this what Tristan meant when he said Sonia’s room could only be accessed through her office? Probably. Definitely not what I was expecting, though. A door would have been less... cliché.

The white room was large and dim, more spacious than mine back in the CEG. A bed rested in the left corner and a desk on the other side, a few bookcases taking up the remaining wall.

And in the middle, there was a door with a small handle. Although my feet motioned toward it, my eyes trailed onto the desk filled with manila folders. Folders that had a big brand on the front. A brand that belonged to the CEG.

Katerina.

Open it.

The first file held my background, the one I’d witnessed Lace wiped out from the CEG’s database. There was no way he had lied. If he kept any copies, it would have hindered me from enrolling six years ago. He would have risked his title if anyone found them and noticed he still approved my guardian license a year later.

But the proof was right in front of me, resting untouched with a taunting hold on my throat.

I rummaged through the short stack, skimming through the information. There were some pieces I recognized —my birthday, place of birth, old address, treatments that could have disqualified my enrollment— but the detailed random vicious attacks were all...blank in my mind.

It didn’t ring a bell.

But the pulsing ache in my gut said otherwise.

You're weak.

Remember.

A force led me to the next yellow folder. They held information about different men whose pictures rested on each new page with one similarity: gray eyes.

It surfaced distant memories.

A downpour of me in the same white room engulfed my head, and each of them shoved into the room while I shifted. Accepting *her* each time. Of *her* as she caved into the endless hunger that burrowed deeper into the abyss.

Do you see?

What will you choose?

I froze in place, but my hands acted on their own, flipping to the last page. This face I knew; it sent shivers down my spine.

He was the man I'd seen during my dreams alongside *her*. The man who shared cold, gray eyes with the others. A face that shouted with a deep voice.

You've done all of this.

The hunger will let me in.

The walls suddenly flooded with blood, red streaks staining the white room as it puddled around me. My skin numbed as a burning sensation rose from my stomach and into my throat. I felt it rasp against my tongue and mouth, coughs trying to escape. Instead, red liquid trickled from my lips and onto my hands.

Because of her.

Say my name.

I blinked, and it all vanished. The urgency to leave engulfed my body, but trembling fingers reached the next pile. It wasn't about me anymore, but Lorenzo's background, too.

Sonia had done her homework on us. But why? How was she able to access all of this if Lace had erased it?

I read through Lorenzo's, all detailing similar information to mine. But while mine dived into incidents I hadn't remembered, his had his old posts, all ranging from the beginning of his career to now. Even his visitations to his mother's grave.

Then, it hit me.

The assailant's movements and build were similar to Lorenzo's, but he'd never used knives before. Any weapons, for that matter. Before his arrival, he'd been stationed in Canada. If he'd been the assailant on that day of the scheme, then there would have been a report about him missing his shift. A report that would have been on this file.

The shame of doubting my cousin crushed my chest. Then who had done it?

I pressed the receiver, but an ear-splitting static blared. I instinctively removed it, and in a flash, a familiar ringing took over. A distant creak echoed behind me, but everything blurred.

A familiar pinching throb shot through the side of my neck. Fuck. Not this crap again.

I lost all my senses as everything turned black.



Muffled voices trailed in the distance, my eyelids growing heavier the more I tried to open them. Deep in the unconscious, I felt my fingers moving across a smooth surface. My neck as an ache blossomed and hairs stood. My senses as they tried to recover from their hazy state.

Katerina.

An itch spread across my skin as the numbing sensation crumbled. Fuck, my head was throbbing.

Wake up.

Two shadows motioned as I slowly looked past the haze, their appearance a mass of darkness I couldn't make out.

Wake up.

Tires screeched with a sudden stop, a voice vanishing along a traveling gulf of air. Then, the swift motion picked up.

Now.

“Katerina!”

I inhaled a sharp breath, and my body jolted awake, an immediate sense of defense taking over. I flung forward, a seat blocking my body, but my arms rapidly wrapped around someone. I glanced at the rear-view mirror, meeting eyes that resembled *hers*. They were dark in color, but the slit was too distinct to not notice. And then I noticed who they belonged to.

“What the fuck?” My throat was so dry, the words rasped against the grogginess.

Sonia placed the sunglasses back on, her arm aiming my way before I dodged it. She kept a steady pace as she drove down a bright path that caused my eyes to widen with tears, dangling lights webbing across the branches.

“The sedative is still in your system. If you lash out like that, it'll exhaust all the energy your body is trying to recuperate.” Her voice wasn't monotone like the times we've spoken, but silvery.

“What did you do to me?”

“It wasn't me who did it.” I tried forming words, but my tongue fell flat while my body continued to wake up. “Ms. Eli, I understand you're disoriented right now, but there's an important matter at hand. The boys are in trouble.”

“What?”

“I warned Alek, but he didn't listen. You must go inside and retrieve all of them before it's too late!”

“Why should I help you if you tried killing me?” My throat throbbed as the burning sensation rasped against my throat. “How do I know you’re not lying?”

“I know what you’ve all planned,” she said. “If you do as I say, then Alek will gain the notebook he sent you to search for.”

I stilled in the seat; her words an echo in my mind. My stomach rumbled as a flame rose up my throat. I couldn’t hold it in any longer and vomited on the car floor. Sonia tsked, but I ignored it. The grogginess was slowly leaving my body.

When I finally gazed up, we passed through large gates, gardens decorating the expansive area while lights illuminated the driveway beneath the night sky. Different types of fountains spanned across the grounds, each cascading water that blazed, changing colors.

People roamed, all wearing variations of dresses and suits while holding cups that swirled with red liquid. I could make out the metallic smell that clashed against the honeyed scents, fangs in full appearance as they drank. While my body was all vibrations, I forced my concentration on the house.

It was like a castle— no, it was a castle, towering beyond the car’s window. The exterior was a pale pink hue that was washed away by the gold lights which encompassed its surroundings. Even the driveway’s gravel matched in color, only it was slightly ashen.

Tires screeched as Sonia stopped the car and stepped out, her body quick to motion to my door and open it. She gripped my side and brought me out, my balance easing as I stood.

Ms. Hoko came into view, her heeled feet clinking against the marble pink steps, her hands gripping my wrists. “Miss! Alek mentioned your tardiness. Let’s go! I can’t have you appearing in your uniform.”

She looped her arm around mine and led me into the castle, vivid white lights shining against the gold interior and silver decoration. This wasn’t helping my pounding headache.

Ms. Hoko shoved us into a private room and commanded,
“Strip. We must get you ready for tonight, Miss.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY

ALEK SEPHTIS



The Seven Regal Families were vampires who had walked outside of the shadows our kind had been living in throughout the early centuries, eventually birthing and establishing the government and society we now were accustomed to. At the beginning of time, they had once consisted of seven names: Ambrogio, Epide, Níng, Lautaro, Mubarak, Sephtis, and Pulelua. The Epide lineage had ceased to exist directly before our mother joined That Man in union.

With the Mubaraks' disappearance, it seemed another name was soon to become extinct.

Yet, such demise never halted the Regal heirs from grand parties. Notably the Ambrogio sisters.

Although they were recognized to be the root of all malicious talks, high praises trailed their celebratory events, housing one in each region where they owned estates. This one, in particular, was only half an hour from our household. An hour from Syracuse, where the Ministry was based in.

The celebratory events represented stability between Regal heirs and political members. The Christmas Ball, in specific, fell on the final hearing of the year for High Parliament and Heads of Ministry, diminishing the attention on it with entertainment.

With this year's subtheme, selected members of the Human Bureau, high-ranking CEG guardians, and Representatives and Elected Officials from the Ministry bridged the ongoing tensions with laughter and chatter.

Three flights of gold staircases lead from the entrance hall and onto the main dance floor, the baroque architecture decorated with varying white flowers. Frost vines descended from the chandeliers, accentuating the red carpet that concealed the steps. Two stages were occupied by an orchestra that spanned across three platforms. The first line performed a thrumming symphony that didn't disrupt the ongoing conversations. Vast windows loomed before us, outlined by green and white glittering lights.

Raphael neared my side as we descended upon the overflowing dance floor, slithering onto the opposite side. We upheld a cocktail table beneath a window, granting us sight of everything.

Christopher was alongside Anabella, fulfilling their duties as the eldest, greeting and conversing with all those who held the highest of importance within the Ministry and Human Bureau. Jacque and Jacob were beside the stage with Fortuna and Esmeralda, all four giggling into each other's ears.

On the other side of the dance floor was Noah squirming through bodies and onto the bar, his eyes searching for Bethany, who sat at the far edge. Near them was Kaleb, who strode away from Catalina and onto the cocktail tables on the opposing side of us.

"There's been a minor alteration," I murmured to Raphael, his body drawing closer. "I want you to keep an eye on someone else. I'll handle being Kaleb's shadow for the night."

"Who?" He quickly tensed.

"Gia," I said, motioning my head toward her direction. She waited beside the stage and swayed as she observed the dance floor, her eyes stealing glimpses at Raphael. "Enjoy a portion of the night alongside her. It's evident she wants to be by your side."

Raphael followed my gaze, and the stillness in his posture waned. "Are you sure? I want to be useful tonight, Brother."

"You will be," I said as I glanced at Davina, who was in deep conversation with the Lautaro siblings. The eldest of the

five was Valentina, her brick red gown complimenting the second eldest, Nicolas' emerald green suit with pale, white detailing. The three youngest, Nahuel, Hernan, and Belen, all sported a variation of red and green suits, their outfits cohesive along their olive skin and cool, auburn hair.

They surrounded Davina, her height distinguishable along their short statures. "Don't allow Davina to come near me. Understood?"

Raphael nodded and quickly vanished into the crowd. When he met Gia, I searched through the growing crowd, contrasting aromas blending into the drowning air. The main event was set to begin in an hour, yet I searched for Katerina. The strain in my stomach didn't settle as I thought of her safety, of Kaleb's words as they hovered like an eerie symphony.

Once you break her into thousands of pieces, then what you've been masterminding will go unheeded.

I had pursued my role better than Kaleb's, and my feelings for Katerina were authentic. Natural. More vigorous than anything I've felt before. He believed I had fooled her. But it was I who fooled myself.

Tomorrow, I'd confess the marriage proposal privately, away from Kaleb, before the set announcement, and abide by Katerina's decision. Tonight, I'll make her time with me worthwhile.

I gripped a freshly placed goblet from the bar. A ripe, metallic aroma swirled within the silver cup. Human blood wasn't permitted in events, yet the Ambrogios snuck it in through the guise of pigs' blood. Humans could never tell the difference. It disgusted them, nevertheless.

Kaleb's laughter boomed, his goblet waving in the air and clashing against one of the Pulelua's. Sharpened fangs flashed as they drowned in their conversation, all six siblings huddling closer to Kaleb. His eyes flickered toward me, and he motioned his head, a direct invitation to partake in the exchange.

Kaleb loved dragging me into his shared banter with Regal Families as much as he despised them all.

“Little brother!” Kaleb’s voice grew into a reverberating key. “Setefano here was just mentioning you.” I halted beside Kaleb as he made space within their tight-knitted circle, his arm wrapping around my neck and weighing down against my posture.

The three eldest brothers, Setefano, Nonu, and Reno, all stood alongside each other, the younger sisters, Tali, Miah, and Thavana, forming the remainder of the ring that enclosed me. The siblings met us in height and shared similar variants of their golden garments that adorned their deep, sepia skin. Each of their bold, red-brown eyes were attentive as they studied me. The façade I had long bore cemented.

“Kaleb mentioned something quite interesting,” Setefano said, a faint accent trailing along his words. “And it sparked many questions from us all.”

Reno chuckled, a polished smile settling along his sharp lips. “Tell us about the new plaything you were finally able to acquire. Your older brother here wouldn’t tell us the juicy details.”

“Pardon?” My eyes glanced at Kaleb as his grin grew.

“The guardian!” Nonu shouted. “Kaleb was telling us how closely wrapped you have her around your finger. How did you do it?”

My fists tightened behind my back at his mention of Katerina. I cleared my throat, a vile sensation burning through my veins. “My apologies, but I don’t understand what you’re referring to.”

Our schemes were never delved into with other Regal Families. If one minor piece of information slipped in their presence, the plans would spread like wildfire. Noah made it evident in the very beginning of this custom, as it was one of the Lautaro’s that had revealed vital details to the news, the scheme in turn dispersing.

“You can’t tease us like that,” Thavana muttered. “You must tell us how you did it.”

Kaleb’s laugh vibrated against my ears. “You are all so persistent!”

“Yes, we are. Why wouldn’t we be?” Tali asked as she motioned closer to us.

“It’s impossible to secure a little half-human that easily,” Miah argued, “especially one without the use of blackmail.”

These bloody reprobates, my tongue itched to say— instead, I tightened my jaw until the pain succumbed to the yearning to smash their heads into their skulls. Never had I felt such a strong sensation. It proved to be just as hard to contain.

“I simply followed my brother’s instruction. That’s all there is to explain my success,” I said through gritted teeth and a forced smile.

“Such flattery!” Kaleb’s hand gripped my shoulder, his fingers pressing into my skin. “Words rooted in such loyalty that it’s nearly impossible to swallow as truth.” They all fell into roaring laughter while Kaleb’s gaze froze on me.

The Puleluas flickered the ashes to life, but Kaleb ignited the searing fire that itched to bury him.

“Well, while we’re on the topic of guardians,” Thavana introduced. “Did you hear the statement the CEG released after the humans leaked the Mubarak’s disappearance?”

“Not at all,” Kaleb said as his tone dulled. “Those all related to the CEG are all miserable mutts that only side with either kind when it benefits them.”

“I agree, but they’ve reported missing guardians,” Setefano said. “Now it’s only a matter of seeing if what they claim is true.”

“Why so?” I asked, the words slipping from my lips before I could bite them away. Even though I was within their circle, it didn’t signify that I was allowed to speak, and Kaleb’s grip made it visible. Yet, there was no restraint that followed.

“The Mubaraks were never big believers of guardians,” Miah mentioned. “Rumors have it, though, that it made it easier for them to occasionally disappear. Typically, it would last for a few weeks, so it was never a big deal.”

“But now it’s due to the missing guardians,” Thavana said. “It’s brought forth more unnecessary attention.”

Roaring thrums began to ease through the soft melody, strings, and keys colliding in a rhythm of blues. The second and third lines on stage seized the ballroom with dynamics, parting the dance floor and introducing the first dance of the night. A mass of pairs occupied the center while conversations suddenly dimmed.

Kaleb’s hold loosened as he focused on the commencing dance. An outline blurred to my side and tugged at my sleeves, guiding me away from the Puleluas and Kaleb.

Raphael halted along a barren cocktail table. “Tristan’s here.”

My eyes immediately hunted for him. He wriggled through the blended crowd that curved around the main floor, humans, half-humans, and vampires paying no mind to him. The hope to see Katerina emerged as quickly as it shattered when Tristan’s eyebrows furrowed deeply.

“I lost track of Katerina,” he said through sharp breaths. “I searched everywhere across the grounds and found no trace of her or Lorenzo.”

A resounding anger possessed me, the chilling panic flooding my body. “When did you lose contact with her?”

“After she entered Sonia’s office,” he said, his forehead gleaming with sweat. “She hadn’t discovered the notebook yet, and once I finished my search across the inner gate, she stopped responding.”

“And Lorenzo?”

“It’s why I’m here.” He analyzed the crowd. “Sonia sent him for coverage at the last minute.”

“And you believe he might know of Katerina’s whereabouts?”

“Of course,” Tristan responded as he began scouring through the sea of heads, the music now transcending and shifting into the second dance. Similar to the pairs that parted the dancefloor, the three of us split.

I stumbled upon Christopher, who spoke to the eldest daughter of the Níng family, Ai, her sky-blue gown bright against tawny skin. Fen, the second eldest, and Yan, the third eldest, sported a vivid amber gown that parted them from Ai, yet they all shared the same parted charcoal mane that cascaded over their shoulders. The fourth youngest, Liu, was nowhere in sight, but Lorenzo came into view. He stood close to Christopher, his eyes scanning the staircases.

I pulled Raphael aside. “Keep an eye on Kaleb and Davina.”

“Gia’s already helping with that,” Raphael said and nodded, both of us parting into polar sides of the horde. Tristan reached Christopher and Lorenzo just as I did, Tristan pulling Lorenzo away as my brother’s gaze fell on me. We excused ourselves from the Níng family, Christopher’s eyes widening.

“What’s happened?” He asked through gritted teeth.

“Katerina vanished. Tristan thought it best to question her cousin.”

“Why?”

The truth couldn’t be omitted any further.

“We believe Lorenzo’s the intruder.”

Christopher straightened his shoulders. “What significance does that hold?”

“He attacked Katerina during our hospital visitation in October,” I said and bit my tongue before I could say more without Katerina’s permission.

“*What?*” Lorenzo growled. He towered before us, his large, bronze eyes deepening into charcoal. His hands

sprawled from fists, and his nails lengthened. Christopher immediately stepped to his side and placed a hand on his, lowering it out of view.

Lorenzo shut his eyes as his nostrils flared with an exhale. “You think I could hurt my cousin? My *blood*? She’s the only family I have fucking left!”

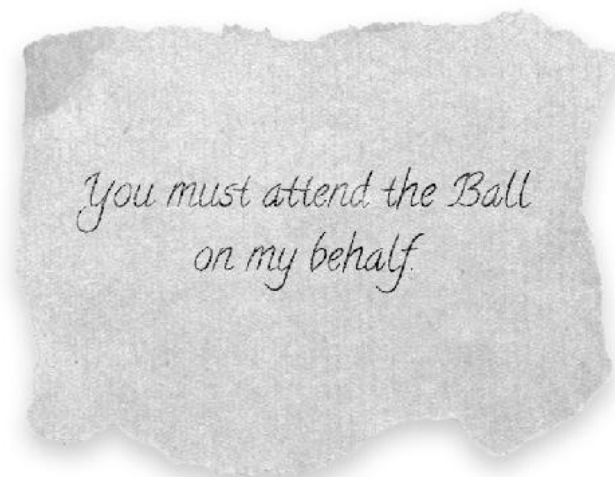
“Then why are you here and she isn’t?” I spat.

His eyes widened with fury. “Sonia sent me.”

“She never misses an event,” Tristan muttered. “How can we believe that?”

“She gave me a note,” Lorenzo bit back, bringing forth a piece of paper from his pocket.

“A note?” Christopher slipped. Both of our faces fell as Tristan unfolded it.



The writing was one ingrained in my mind, firm from yesterday’s revision with Christopher.

It all came to a full circle.

Lorenzo was never the intruder; the evidence was painted that way to make him at fault. Kaleb entrusted Sonia with his notebook, entrusting her with more— such as playing the role of the intruder in the scheme. The incident within the hospital was their doing, Kaleb seeking to break Katerina in other ways than one.

He's done this countless times before, yet never to such imprudent lengths.

Our mother's clues pointed directly to a keeper who was scattered across the households' grounds, always in the shadows— she had been the very entity that was still until called upon.

Why had Sonia done it all? What was the reason behind the notes she left for us to discover? How had she gone unnoticed beneath our noses for this long?

“Katerina?” Tristan murmured beside me, his tone nearly a whisper along the escalating melody.

Our gazes fell upon the figure that descended the main stairs with swift steps. Inky, black hair cascaded over her shoulder to her waist, fashioned into a thick French braid. The top of her gown was adorned with brilliant sunflower petals, the sheer sleeves hemmed into cuffs on her wrists. A short train trailed behind her as her hands gripped further into the tulle skirt, the vibrant canary yellow emanating a slight orange glimmer the closer she grew.

Katerina was day against night, the summer beyond winter, the very warmth that evaporated the frost along my flesh. What undertook my body wasn't simply hope but something grander. More profound than life itself.

I hadn't noticed when I began parting through, but I couldn't deny the gravity she had on me.

“You are the most beautiful being I've ever laid eyes upon, Katerina,” I declared breathlessly as I paused before her. “Would you do me the honor of sharing this dance with me?”

Her eyebrows furrowed along a shadowed expression, but her hand brushed against my palm. “Alek, we have to go.”

Before she could pull me away, I tugged her from the last step and onto the floor as the music's sequence shifted into a low thrum. All three lines that comprised the full orchestra began a composition that brought forth pairs all throughout. The sonata droned upon the floor and walls, one that

harmonized the resonating opening and forged an adagio beyond its transition.

“Follow my lead,” I murmured against her ear. “Like we practiced along the lake.”

“Did you not hear me?”

Our steps fell into sync in the same manner they had during our practices, I undoubtedly taking the lead and Katerina following with a cautious rhythm.

“I did, Katerina.”

“Then why won’t you listen to me?”

“I thought you were gone,” I whispered and pulled her closer, her radiating heat a flare against my skin. I sensed her stilling within my hold, yet I continued across the floor as the keys chimed and strings rumbled through the air. “We’ve come to realize that it wasn’t Lorenzo but Sonia.”

“What?” Katerina parted to angle her face onto mine as the music around us strangled. “She’s the one who brought me here.”

Though I halted, her feet continued to follow through with the strides I was meant to guide. “Why?”

“She said that you’re all in danger.” There was a gloom in her gaze as she searched mine. “She promised she’ll give you the notebook, Alek, but we have to leave.”

Though the notes Christopher and I had received prior to the Ball certainly possessed a connection —alongside Lorenzo’s as well— there was a contrast to what Katerina conveyed. Two of which came hand in hand regarding tonight, both portraying two possible conflicting outcomes.

I hadn’t realized when the symphony had halted, but it was Lorenzo’s sudden appearance that forced Katerina to tow me away from the main floor.

“Can I speak to her?”

Katerina’s eyes widened, and her hand tightened around mine. A protest formed upon the tip of my tongue, but the

sudden shriek of a microphone steered our attention onto the stage where Davina stood.

The Ambrogios had commanded Ms. Hoko to tailor our outfits as a parallel to each other's, each of us bearing colors that aligned with the sister we were calculated to be engaged with. Her rich mulberry gown and cape was a statement that depicted more than that. It established the authority neither of her sisters were able to attain.

“I wanted to begin tonight's announcements touching upon this year's underlying theme by showing our gratitude toward all the high-ranking guardians that have joined us at this lovely Christmas Ball. This night is the representation of those that have brought together both kinds within and beyond the Ministry and Bureau. Let's give them a well-deserved round of applause.” Blaring cheers and applause drowned the ballroom, but it hollowed within my ears as I stepped forward.

Davina's gaze met mine as my body collided with bodies that further separated me from reaching the stage. My jaw tightened while my head shook. She responded with a sneer sharper than a blade.

“But, this isn't the grand news for tonight. Everyone, I'm proud to announce that I, Davina Ambrogio, am now engaged!”

The ballroom stilled in an intense silence that transcended beyond flesh and bones, eyes burning against my skin as I sensed them all settling in my direction.

“A toast for those who have brought our kind together and to the one that has gifted me with the greatest act!” Her eyes swiftly flickered from me to Kaleb, and it leered my gaze onto him as a wide smile edged across his snake-like expression.

Suddenly, the glimmer within Kaleb's eyes vanished as a boom echoed through the ballroom. Glass shattered all around us, blood splattering from his blush pink suit. Screams engulfed the ballroom, the darkest symphony, as chaos ensued.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

KATERINA ELI



They're all going to die.

Her voice was a brush of wind along my ears, but *her* presence was a weight that stiffened my body into place. With each tug, her hold grew stronger.

Bullets punched through walls and windows, granite tumbling from the ceiling while glass crashed onto the floor. Grapple hooks shot through the air and pierced through pillars, zip lines webbing across the space. Figures dressed in all-black suits and masks plunged through the darkness and into the light, deafening screams and gunshots drowning the ballroom.

Bodies clashed as guests ran, vampires swift to find exits along the staircases while humans struggled to locate shelter. Guardians sprinted into action and parted into their general order of defense and offense.

Defensive guardians collected groups of people away from danger. Offensive guardians dashed straight-forward into the fight that erupted near the stage, the opposing side meeting them with swift movements and blaring shots. Lorenzo was one of many buried in the attack, his motions ferocious as he took the lead. Setting unsaid plans in motion. Taking control of the situation before more lives were lost.

I itched to step in and help in every way I could, but *she* forced me to focus on the one thing I wanted to avoid: blood.

Crimson red stained the marble floor, a mixture of sweet copper and bitter rust drowning the air. My stomach rumbled

and my mouth watered at the sight. At the taste if it reached my tongue. The hunger deep within me caved and expanded. One so penetrating that it led *her* whispers to turn into shouts.

The hunger will continue to intensify, Katerina.

She crept from the hazy state I'd been in after waking up from the sedative. *Her* silence had lasted long enough. No more dormancy. No more, no more, no more.

A low groan vibrated across the room as Alek pushed Kaleb and him to hide behind a pillar. His hold tightened on Kaleb while a hand pressed against his deflated chest. Immediately, the drowning scent pulled me to his body.

I needed a taste. A sip. Anything.

Until it rips you apart.

No.

Her force vanished as I pushed myself across the room, bodies crashing and falling as I avoided the bullets. Or were they avoiding me? Alek and Kaleb were my priority. I needed to take them out safely. Even if I had to hold my breath until I turned purple.

“Katerina,” Alek murmured through sharp breaths. There weren't any tears across his clothing, but blood drenched his trembling hands. “My apologies for—”

Until it kills all of them.

“Right now isn't the time,” I said through gritted teeth, the familiar air tingling against my tongue. This fucking guy. Somehow, Alek still found something to apologize for. But there was no way to ignore what he spoke about, the ache in my chest burning.

But that wasn't important. Their safety was.

I reached over and leveled Kaleb onto my arms. Fuck, he was closer to dead weight than a living being. His abdomen shed blood along an oozing silver liquid. Whatever it was, it was killing him slowly, the moan from his lips barely a whimper. His head swayed onto me as his eyes remained shut.

Alek eased onto Kaleb's other side, pulling him closer to him and relieving me of Kaleb's weight.

"Keep close," I whispered to Alek as we stilled on the pillar.

Lorenzo directed the offensive guardian's attacks, most of them targeting the weapons before the masked figures and a few taking over guns as a form of support.

People still flooded the exits from the first floor. Fuck, how many were invited for this blood bath? I considered the ones on the second and third floors, but they were too far from reach with Kaleb's obvious state.

The nearest one was the back door behind the bar, but even then, the path was plain in sight. Sure, Lorenzo had the situation under control, but I couldn't risk it. The hairs on my nape rose to the point it chilled my skin.

Something was so fucking wrong.

But if you accept me, it'll all end.

What was the reason behind all of this? Had the CEG been informed of tonight's incident? Who'd been the one behind all of it? Too much had happened in such a short span. I had to get the guys away before they were caught in the crossfire.

Despite Kaleb already dealing with the consequences.

I nodded toward the direction I was going to take, Alek quick to follow without disrupting my steps. We were in open view of the dance floor, guns aiming in our direction. Lorenzo's head whipped to us. His reaction was swift as shots fired.

Choose, choose, choose.

My body crashed to the ground, and Kaleb tumbled out of our arms. Alek's chest pushed me deeper onto the surface while another bullet pierced through the air. Instincts had long settled in my bones, but now they electrified my veins as I forced Alek beneath me and straightened my shoulders. This couldn't continue.

The first lesson Lace ever taught me was to disarm when disadvantaged. To take out the one obstacle that could take out my employee. Kaleb was almost gone. I couldn't have Alek massacred, too. I wouldn't, wouldn't, wouldn't.

A masked figure sprinted toward me, the rifle strapped to their chest. There was no planning as their rapid jabs disrupted my balance. No steadying as they pulled out a knife and slashed across the air that was enveloped by a fresh scent. There were two weapons I needed to disarm. The knife came first.

I dodged each strike, my footing unsteadied with every slice. We fell into sync with our attacks. One too familiar.

Arms collided, their strength leveling against mine. I pushed their arms, the knife falling and gliding across the floor. I motioned my body as if I was going to swing, but instead, I lowered and roundhouse kicked. They avoided it as if they knew it was my next step. Thankfully, they were still close enough in reach. I wrapped my arms around their neck and pressed against their throat.

The figure was composed while my body tensed, their airway completely unaffected.

An itch roamed through my skin, and I pulled away their mask. Taking a few steps back, I noticed the dark strands that cascaded. The way they turned to me and towered more than usual. All my strength drowned away as my sight grew hazy. But I could see them perfectly.

“Lace?”

What will you choose?

He wasn't the best friend of six years I knew. No teasing grin hinted across his flushed face or gleaming brown eyes. Instead, a hollowness shadowed his features. A shadow of bloodthirst that slipped past his serious expression.

Masked figures encircled us with drawn weapons; Lorenzo was thrown into the barren space alongside Kaleb and Alek. My cousin's expression darkened, Lorenzo's face harsh with lines against his forehead as his eyebrows met.

“It’s been quite a while since we last brawled.”

A swarm of emotions battled within me as my voice dimmed, *her* presence a ghost at my side that whispered.

Call my name.

“What?” I blurted out, fists tightening against my waist as I tried to take everything in— forced myself to see a lying truth. “What’s going on? Why...”

“I’ve always liked a harsh brawl when the competition arises. I just never sought one out until now.”

He tilted his head, and guardians stepped forward, two of them gripping my wrists and bounding me to their side. Others brought Alek and Kaleb onto their feet, Kaleb’s body flopping forward as the deep red continued to seep through his suit. The sight watered my tongue, but I forced my teeth to nip against my cheeks. My jaw stiffened as I kept my nostrils from flaring and taking in the aroma.

“Lace,” Lorenzo murmured as his tone grew lower, “What’s all of this?”

“In the beginning, it was all a scheme devised by him,” he pointed the rifle at Kaleb, “But there was a minor twist added by my superior. She thought it would be a great opportunity to achieve what we’ve been planning for so long.”

“What type of bullshit are you spitting?” His claws slowly came out, melding into his skin like a second layer over his nails. Teeth started lengthening into sharp points, and his chest heaved while it expanded.

Lace waved the gun at Lorenzo with inattention. “Ah, ah, ah. I don’t enjoy it when obedient dogs bark back at their owner.”

Lorenzo’s eyes had long erased his natural amber. They were black now, all-consuming and furious.

“What the fuck are you—”

A shot boomed and rang against my ears, a bullet slicing through the air and piercing Lorenzo’s chest.

“No!” I shrieked, my skin burning as I moved to my cousin, my only family member. He tumbled onto the floor with wide eyes and a sunken expression. “Lace, what the fuck are you *doing*?”

“I’m finishing a job that should have been done years ago,” he said as he wiped his gun against his chest. “Lorenzo was ordered to be killed by the superior long ago. I, instead, kept him all alive for my benefit. Yet, his feelings proved to be an inconvenience. We couldn’t have an attached hound, now, could we?”

A monster.

His finger pressed against the trigger, but I wriggled away and collided with his body. The gun flew out of his hand, and Lace plummeted across the ground. Metal echoed, and guardians raised all of their guns toward me. A few targeted Kaleb and Alek, who stood trembling with wide eyes.

“Don’t do this! Please!”

“As much as I like it when you beg,” Lace stood and dusted off his black bodysuit, “I can’t do such a thing. What type of friend would I be if I didn’t finish what you started?”

Become what you fear most.

Hands tightened around my shoulders and forced my knees to the ground. A ringing blasted against my eardrums. My neck rolled and cracked. A sudden burst of energy exploded as a numbing took over, my eyes blurring with tears.

“You’ve turned into a monster, Nina.” Lace picked up the gun and raised it to his left, aiming at Alek. “You’re the reason this night turned out like this.”

“No!” I shouted, the nausea rumbling in my stomach and the endless burn clawing at my throat. Every moment of us together in the CEG, every conversation, cry, and laugh turned to fucking ash in a blink. That piece of me crumpled as I stared at Lorenzo’s unmoving body and at the man that I thought was my best friend.

“Please, Lace. T-this isn’t you. This isn’t what you—”

“What I wanted?” A smile edged across his face as he lowered the weapon, his eyes bleak. “I got tired of playing the best friend, you see.”

Me.

A coldness drowned my body as every inch of myself merged and reformed, memories vanishing and hitting me at once.

“I wanted excitement; I needed it so much that it led me to agree to all of this in the beginning.”

Say it.

He walked around me, the guardians holding me tense against my skin. Deep underneath, arms and legs cracked out of place. They elongated and expanded, ripping muscles and flesh. Blood-filled tears ran down my cheeks, but as the memories came back, I couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop. Shouldn't stop.

“To some extent, I wanted to try and help you too. Not for the better, but to make you want the worst.”

I was alone, alone, alone.

My ribcage tore into me as my spine split in two, teeth biting against screams that wanted to escape. My throat swelled and tightened as everything consumed me at once. The pulsating ache rose in my chest.

Say

“That's why the superior changed her mind about you. The same couldn't be said about your cousin, though. And what better way to dispose of him than by testing my new toys?”

My

The everlasting ache from my head now pounded against my skull and bones. My shoulders shrugged away as the fingers grew distant, and a force loomed within me.

“Isn't that right, Katerina?”

Name.

An itch crawled against my skin.

“Don’t call me that.”

My blurred vision fell on Lace, his hands drawing the gun and aiming toward my direction.

“Then what do I call you? You’ve always been nothing without a label.”

This time, I plunged into the abyss by choice.

His face distorted as tears continued to slip down my cheeks.

We have always been everything.

My neck rolled and cracked.

You have never been nothing.

Our voices became one.

Katerina.

“Kat.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

ALEK SEPHTIS



The striking strum of Katerina's growls trembled against the walls. Bullets steered to her chest, abdomen, and legs. They rebounded against her skin as if she bore armor thicker than silver, clinking onto the ground. The blood-soaked floor swallowed them whole, a river of silver forming.

Pure silver was thought to be a vampire's weakness, and although it harbored the ability to pierce through our skin, it wasn't virulent. On the other hand, silver nitrate —its richer, most potent sister— was our death sentence.

High Parliament and Heads of Ministry had uncovered such information at the beginning of That Man's term. In turn, the only ones who were aware of it were direct Regal Families. If common vampires and humans obtained such information, it signified a traitor amongst us.

And the CEG had.

Katerina flung across the room with such blurring speed that my eyes could scarcely see where she moved. She sprung onto high pillars and climbed to the utmost edge, bullets trailing behind her with every move yet solely grazing stone. She was a hazy figure as her body leaped across chandeliers, glass spilling over us like rain.

Katerina's transformation unraveled, pieces of her still persistent as others washed away.

Her large, paw-like feet pounded against the floor, taking bodies with extended claws. They slashed and impaled through the skin, all those in her way abruptly collapsing like

flies. Razor-sharp fangs assumed her claws when they became insufficient. Brown fluid further buried the floor, and pungent metal saturated the frigid air.

Katerina landed amidst us, the ground trembling as she stilled. There was no trace of the dress she'd worn moments ago. Instead, sporadic patches of fur decorated her bare figure, a gray tinge shadowing the umber skin that hinted through. Her icy green eyes withstood, burning brighter and deeper than ever. Though her face preserved human features, they molded into an angular, furrowed version.

Her height towered with rounded shoulders, shrinking those who surrounded her. She panted heavily while gnarls echoed from her throat, a wolf studying its prey for the hunt. Terror upheld her audience, their trembling fingers unable to aim. Yet, I eyed her in wonderment— in pure adoration.

Beautiful.

Heat enclosed my wrist as Tristan tugged at me. “We need to go.”

I stood but froze as my eyes stumbled on Katerina's cousin. No breath entered or escaped him, yet his features were gray and angular with a similar semblance to Katerina's.

“We're not leaving him behind.”

Tristan nodded, inching toward his lone body while the ongoing chaos took the stage on the other end of the ballroom. As he hauled him over his shoulder, patches of stubble shadowed Lorenzo's face, and claws stretched from his fingers.

Tristan rapidly made his way through the back of the main staircase, doors wide open and leading toward the entrance of the Ambrogio estate. Shrieks echoed, and body parts flew across the ballroom, Katerina tearing flesh and shattering bones. Her eyes flew toward our direction, slits parting the sea of darkness that consumed her gaze. Yet, she didn't dash onto us and rather onto Lace.

Be brave.

I heaved Kaleb's body against my chest and ran behind Tristan. An outline appeared as we continued down the foyer, Ms. Hoko's short stature rushing toward us at full speed. Tristan kept a steady pace as she said, "Follow me." Although questions itched against my tongue, I held them in place as I focused on her crouched posture.

Hallways blended into one another as we stepped through the opposite wing, the number of doors minimizing until it became barren, and only one stood hidden in the crevices within the wall. We descended through spiraling steps and into a softly lit hallway that displayed no décor that associated itself to the Ambrogio sisters, as if utterly detached from the estate.

There was no scent that trailed nor presences that roamed through the hallway apart from ours.

"W-where are we going?" The words ran from my lips as if water surged through my throat.

Ms. Hoko rested a hand before the wall and ran her fingers as she trod forward. Her other arm cupped her stomach, fingers wrapped around an indecipherable object. "I made a promise to escort you to safety. This pathway will take you to the other side."

"Where will you go?"

"I must stay here, my boy," Ms. Hoko said with a somber tone. "It was what was commanded of me to ensure balance."

Kaleb's head revolved against my chest and fell in the direction Ms. Hoko led. His mouth widened, a sharp cough escaping alongside blood that dripped onto the floor. There was an inkling of life still within him, his eyes struggling to widen while he continued inhaling keen breaths.

The same couldn't be said of Lorenzo.

Tristan turned to me. "We must go for your safety. Please, Alek, just follow me."

"Katerina is still back there! We can't—"

A snarl trembled in the distance, resounding steps trailing. Tristan turned in the direction Ms. Hoko pointed and sprinted through the space until he vanished.

Be brave.

Ms. Hoko huffed, “All will be fine. If balance is restored, then we shall all meet once more.”

“What balance? Why are you speaking such things as if you were to d—”

Growls throbbed along the softly lit hallway, deep, forest eyes glinting as a shadow grew closer. Clashing scents immersed the air, and my throat swelled at the rampant aroma, an uneasiness rumbling deep within my bones.

“Leave and meet those who are awaiting your arrival!” She said as she pushed onto the steps that led through the corridor. “Go, my boy!”

“I—”

A gust of air tore past me as Ms. Hoko brought the door and shut it with full force, sealing her away into her own demise. Caving feelings resonated in my stomach, yet, I scurried through the same path Tristan took.

Light outlined a frame at the end, and I pushed forward and through, stumbling from the steps onto a distinct surrounding. A long podium rested in the middle, sunflowers that I had placed earlier in the day, a silhouette outlined by the night. Once I stepped outside and into the cemetery, I observed the mausoleum that I had long believed was our mother’s grave.

Now, it stood foreign in my eyes.

Leaves crunched behind me, yet I didn’t turn. Tristan met my side, his shoulders slouching. Lorenzo was gone, but I could still make a trace of his coppery blood in the wind.

“Where is he?” I asked, my voice harsh as a spark electrified my veins.

“Christopher took him, but Alek, I need to take Kaleb. He needs immediate—”

I couldn't bear listening to any of this. To him. All that entranced my focus was what was right before me.

"How long have you known, Tristan?" My tone grew louder through gritted teeth. "How long have you *known* that our mother's resting place was never simply that?"

"Always," he murmured as his head lowered. "Your father had been against it, but your mother pushed me to persuade him."

I turned to him and neared, fists fastening underneath Kaleb's body. The fire couldn't be contained any longer. "*What?*"

"Alek, I must take Kaleb," he said as he carefully stepped forward, "We will talk about this later."

I bore no words, allowing him to take Kaleb away and leave me alone— until a sudden sob behind me stilled my motions.

Katerina stumbled through the mausoleum, stepping through the cemetery. My feet sprinted to her as her arms wrapped around her bare chest. She had reverted back to her natural state.

Long strands of hair cascaded over her shoulders to the ground, aged scars embellishing her skin. Wide, doe eyes spoke words she couldn't compose. She tumbled into my arms with a frenzied tremble.

"I killed them. I killed them all."

Her mouth remained open, yet all that escaped her were silent cries and rose-red tears down her cheeks. Fingers clenched against my suit while a scorching heat radiated from her skin. Her hold dwindled the further she burrowed her face into my collarbone. Her pain seeped through fabric and skin, melding into a tight knot in my chest.

My arms parted from Katerina and moved swiftly as I removed my blazer. Once it rested upon her and concealed the bones that hinted through her sparse hair, she settled deeper into my build.

Footsteps drew close, my head whipping to see Tristan returning. My gaze was enough warning to stop him.

“They’re waiting for you.” He froze as he studied Katerina in my hold. “I can take her to the infirmary and tend to her.”

I shook my head as Katerina tensed underneath my embrace. “Katerina, what do you want to do?” Her response was a vibration against my chest. “Stay by her side until I get back. Don’t take her anywhere she doesn’t consent to go.”

Tristan bowed and straightened, his expression harsh with lines within his cheeks. I motioned closer to Katerina and whispered, “Will you be well while I’m gone?” Her slight nod was a tremble, and I wrapped the blazer closer to her chest, where her arms shook before parting.

Tristan’s head remained peering forward. Although a clenching ache overtook my chest at leaving Katerina momentarily, I forced my eyes ahead until I reached the vault.

Presences arose as I walked toward the infirmary door but halted as a new presence loomed from the edge of the corridor, a shadow standing beside the swimming pool.

A towering figure turned to me and revealed a face that was a combination of my brothers and I. He shared Noah’s slender and broad build, the midnight-black hair that Raphael bore with the same length as Christopher’s. Grand, umber eyes stared with a parallel fire as Kaleb’s, his sharp features alike to Jacque and Jacob— yet, it was his voice that evoked an ache from my bones due to the similarity to mine.

“Alek.”

A thick, golden band gleamed against his left ring finger, like the one our mother continued bearing until her passing. Yet, on his opposing hand, he bore a ring of complete polarization.

He sported the crest of the Sephtis name, the very one that assumed our mothers’ mausoleum. On his finger the snake tightly coiled against the bottom half of his index finger. On him, our crest signified more than the destruction of others for our lineage, but rather, the very destruction of us.

That's what he had done with our mother. It's what he would do to my brothers and I.

My jaw tightened at the sight of him before the very same space he occupied.

"May I have a moment with you?"

"What for?" The words were dry upon my tongue, the swelling in my throat rasping.

"Your marriage acceptance."

"You want to speak with me, not about your first ever appearance before us, or Kaleb, who's fending for his life at this moment," my eyebrows furrowed as I took in his oddly remarkable deadpan expression, "but instead, a fucking marriage proposal?"

The anger that fueled my veins was one I'd never fully experienced. The hatred I'd bore for That Man had long been faint and overlooked. Standing before him in this very moment surfaced a turmoil of sensations that spread like wildfire in its driest of seasons— a chasm that entwined further into my bones, all-consuming.

"I witnessed what took place, and I can assure you that your brother, Kaleb, is well."

It was then a connection sparked in my mind. "It was you who left me that note?"

"Yes."

My chest caved as the memories flooded my mind in an ongoing chain. "You were present while the ballroom turned into shambles, and vampires, humans, and guardians alike, lost their lives?"

"My presence couldn't have been known. I—"

A chuckle escaped my lips. "It's remarkable that after all these years, you're still a coward who forces a façade that promises nothing but *lies*."

"Alek—"

“Don’t you ever call for me in such a tone!” I shouted and neared, his eyes lowering onto me. “You were never our father nor a husband, just a man that succumbed to the thrill of sitting in the highest authority while your family rotted.”

“And yet, you’ve made the same dreaded decision,” he muttered. “Usha advised me on the matter, and it escalated to an affair beyond my expectation.”

My stomach constricted as I asked, “Ms. Hoko? Why would she have spoken to you?”

“There are many things you have yet to learn.” His eyes darted beyond me and searched. “But that shall wait.”

Footsteps echoed, and Christopher came into view, That Man blurring past us and vanishing into the underground tunnel. He halted by my side, retaining distance.

“Did you know about his attendance?”

“I had my suspicions,” Christopher said. “Ms. Hoko had vanished alongside a man too uncanny to overlook before the chaos erupted.”

“And why didn’t you mention such a thing?”

“It was sudden, and once the thought surfaced, they vanished. It was as if they knew when the conflict was incoming.” Christopher crossed his arms against his chest. “Kaleb’s awake. I believe it’s best you hear what he has to say.”

I couldn’t help but wish for my disappearance, to retrieve to a moment where it was only Katerina and I. Where had it all gone wrong? Where did it all start leading to this moment?

The atmosphere within the infirmary was one I wasn’t expecting. Though my brothers surrounded the wall, fury radiated from all of them, and a sense of gloom clouded the space.

Kaleb sat with straightened shoulders on the bed, the suit clinging to his body in shreds as bandages concealed his chest and stomach. His eyes flickered onto Christopher and I as we entered, and the habitual keen grin flourished across his face.

“Speak,” Christopher commanded, and the composed expression he harbored evaporated. “Now.”

He chuckled as he said, “Or what? My feeding privileges will be revoked?”

Noah smacked his lips, his current semblance contrary to his routine mask. “Ha! That’ll be the least of your worries after Alek hears what you explained.”

“Just... tell me already,” I intervened as my patience thinned to a fine thread.

“I did it all,” he breathed. “From the scheme to the writing along the walls to the very incident that took place during the Christmas Ball. I achieved all of it with Sonia’s help.”

There was no façade. Just pure anger that engulfed my veins. “Why?”

“You see, Alek, after her attack, I had the marks she left behind on my neck tested. The results were inconclusive. It was then Sonia delivered the treacherous documents that proved your little girlfriend’s true nature.” Kaleb’s smile dug further and revealed his elongated fangs. “I instructed you to continue with the scheme, but there was no likelihood that you’d achieve such an aim. Yet, you proved me wrong. You went the extra mile and wrecked her beyond repair, not only breaking her little pest of a heart but exposing her legitimate mutt nature.”

His laugh thundered within the room as he added, “Who would have thought you would truly have the last laugh?”

“You did all of this,” I began, my jaw tightening as I forced the words from my dry tongue, “Because she hurt your ego?”

My fingers dug into my palm, my body instinctively moving and yanking Kaleb off of the bed and onto the nearest bare wall.

“I did it because I wanted to ruin—”

A fist pierced through the air and connected against his cheek with resounding force. A burning ache settled in my

skin, activating the fire I had continuously extinguished for his sake— and now, I released all of the devouring feelings, hit after hit.

Blood concealed my knuckles as Kaleb's hands thrust against my chest, his strength absent. I heaved him deeper into the surface. Presences thinned in the air while the anger fueled my veins and intoxicated my senses.

“I should have left you for dead, you selfish bloody prick. Exactly how you'd done to me countless times before at the lake.”

“Just like you'd done to Katerina?”

I stilled, and my tight hold faded as I took a step back. “What?”

“You thought it ended at the Ambrogio's estate?” Kaleb's eyes gaped, and his lips twisted into a vicious grin, blood trickling from his lips and face. “Oh no, dear little brother, that's where you're wrong. The fun has just begun.”

I thrust him deeper into the now-dented wall as Kaleb's resonating laugh followed. “I knew about your plans, and now, I won't let you off so easily.”

My eyes widened as a whisper escaped my lips, “Katerina.”

She was my sole focus as I bolted.

The hope in my muscles and bones shriveled as I discovered Tristan's body on the ground. Although his chest elevated, an empty syringe protruded from his skin.

An itch crawled through my skin as the morning rays descended from the sky. Leaves whistled against the traveling wind and settled on a notebook that lay on the ground. Between it and Tristan's still body, strands of hair floated along a pool of blood and sharp canines.

Katerina was nowhere in sight.

I lost her.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

KATERINA ELI



The montage of memories was a blur through my transformation. They consumed me.

There was no lake, no house, no one. It was only me and blood all around.

The first man I ever killed was my dad. A man who had done too much and said so little. He appeared without the taunting eyes or the spiteful words, but I could still hear them. Feel them as they itched against my skin. He'd call me by all sorts of names —monster was his favorite— but the worst one was when he'd call me by my given one.

Katerina.

It was an insult in itself because he used it every time I did something wrong. He'd say it with such venom that I couldn't stand it.

He was the one who'd given me the scars that I ignored underneath my clothes. My patches of fur hid them when I transformed. It was as if they had a mind of their own. I couldn't stand seeing them.

He'd always blamed me for my mom's death. I didn't even know her. She was a ghost he only ever focused on. Which was why I tore him to shreds, starting with his mouth.

My dad was nothing but a disgrace that blamed me for what he caused and deserved.

The second, third, and so on were a range of different faces. They all shared my dad's eyes, my triggers. I'd never

met them, but I still reveled in their screams. All of them were vampires, and I had bathed in their blood after their cries weren't enough. I'd done to them what I wished I could have done over and over to my dad.

Which was why they continued being thrown in— all for entertainment.

The latest I killed were the guardians that flooded the ballroom. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't enjoyed tearing them limb by limb. It hadn't been enough. There was more I had wanted to do. More I had expected to have happened. But everything had finished in a breeze, and it didn't fulfill me the way I had wanted it to.

That's why I had searched for the one prey that could do more than satisfy me.

I had killed all of them because I had become stronger. Because each time, I needed more to ease my hunger. I had always made the choice to never escape. To accept the control as it caved in. Because I needed to prove to myself what I was meant to be.

A monster.

Do you see where it all stemmed from?

Us. Always.



A heaviness lifted from my body as my eyes sprung open. I darted onto my feet, but my head throbbed, and the little energy I had gained vanished. My body stumbled onto a wall, failing at keeping my balance. Within a second, I crashed onto the floor.

“Take your time to collect yourself. The heaviest of sedatives tend to have the worst effects.”

The husky voice drew out a small accent in their words. But there wasn't a person around me. Only darkness blocked my eyes from seeing anything.

Then, my stomach churned, and a rapid-fire rasped against my throat as liquid escaped my lips. It felt never-ending as a pain ached from within my bones to above my skin. Even as the burn drifted and my sight slowly returned, I stayed still against the ground.

“Or you could do that.”

I whipped my head toward the voice. Tears formed against my burning eyes, a woman lying on an all-white bed staring at me— as if she was waiting for me to notice her.

She was slender, with bones outlining her clothes, her deep-brown skin ashen underneath the bright lights. Her broad nostrils flared as she kept her focus on me, her dark, cedar eyes matched the short fuzz that grew on her head. It seemed familiar.

But I couldn't tell how.

My mind raced with fragments of memories, but they were all a compilation that muddled together. Metal clinked against the air as a weight held my wrists, cuffs binding my hands together. My instincts rushed but quickly dimmed as there was no sense of energy left in my body. Fuck. What left me like this?

“You can't get out of those. Trust me, I've tried.” She brought her arms to the light, scars decorating her wrists. “And before you start screaming, that won't work either. I've done everything possible, and I'm still stuck here.”

“Who are you?”

A grin hinted against her face, showing a gap between her front teeth as she responded, “I could ask you the same thing. But my name is Jabari Mubarak, the first of the Mubarak name. I'm a Regal Vampire, and my father holds a place in the Vampire Ministry— or should I say, did. The world probably thinks we're all dead.”

Mubarak... I had heard the name before, but from where? The name floated in my mind along a voice that forced the hairs on my nape to rise. The more I focused on it, the more it forced the headache that hinted.

“I’m...” What was I supposed to say? My name was at the tip of my tongue, but nothing formed.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “When we’ve been drowned in sedatives, it tends to affect our memories.”

“Why do you say that as if it’s a good thing?”

“I like to forget everything that’s happened here, but that never lasts. All the anger and frustration flushes back into my system once the sedatives waver,” she said in a low tone. “Once you get your memories back, you’ll want to forget everything, too. So, cherish it while it lasts.”

“But then I’ll get angry even if I don’t remember, wouldn’t I?”

She tilted her head. “Maybe, maybe not. Depends on what fuels you.”

Footsteps echoed behind the wall, and a door creaked open in front of us. My sight fell on a white hallway, a figure quickly blocking it once they stepped forward. Large black sunglasses blocked her eyes while vibrant red lips motioned as she said, “Get her.”

Two large men in white suits stepped in and gripped my arms, my body dangling as they dragged me outside. The door closed before I could do anything. My head spun as I tried thinking, the memories slowly piecing themselves together.

It then dawned on me.

“Sonia.”

Although she continued forward, she glanced to the side. The men turned sharply, and the place grew brighter to the point it blinded me. What was it with these fucking lights? Were they trying to ruin people’s eyesight?

There was no way to distinguish where we’d gone, with each hallway sharing the same white exterior. Then it hit me.

I was in a fucking hospital. Like the one I had been in right before I entered the CEG.

Sonia opened a door, and the two men entered, the same plain-white interior across the room. There was a bed in the middle and a chair beside it, the position of it sending shivers down my spine. There, the familiarity came over me.

The bed wasn't just in the middle of the room but was placed directly where the two-way window could oversee. The chair wasn't just next to it, but resting slightly to the side, exactly how it'd been when my aunt would visit me. Elia.

All that was missing was me.

The men forced me onto the bed and dragged my cuffs across to shackle my arms and legs at the ends. They clinked as each of them were easily attached, my body struggling underneath their hold.

They left me alone with Sonia.

“What’s going on?” Memories of her were still scattered. But they slowly surfaced. I needed time for them to settle, to come back before they strayed. “Was this all part of your plan?”

With each question, more came up.

“Where’s the notebook?”

A voice echoed in my mind, sending a wave of warmth.

“It’s in Alek’s possession, just like we had agreed to before the Christmas Ball.”

Alek... The Christmas Ball...

It all came crashing down. The night replayed with gruesome detail. Especially Lorenzo’s frigid body on the ground.

“Why would you do this?” I asked as I remembered our interaction, the anguish coating my body with heaviness. “Do you even know what you are?”

“I do.”

“Then how can you do this to me!” My arms swayed forward, but the shackles kept them from slipping over my head. “We’re the same. Not half-humans, but—”

Sonia motioned toward me as she removed her sunglasses, revealing what she'd hidden until now.

Sharp slits cut deep into her obsidian eyes, the sight of it difficult to distinguish as one fused with the other. But no fangs filled her mouth. No fur covered her skin. She remained in her human form perfectly, something I was never capable of.

Her expression altered, the deadpan face I knew vanishing. Now she was someone I hadn't met before. Someone full of vulnerability through her emotions and words. Someone that showed her fear even through confidence.

“Half-vampire, half-lycan.”

“Hybrids.” I froze at my response, the sudden word transporting me to a time that I had forgotten— had completely pushed away. It'd been all I heard of during my time here before my aunt sent Lorenzo and me to the CEG, where I buried the memories. It had been shoved so deep down that I had lived as if it hadn't been a part of me. As if everything that I had done wasn't a part of me.

Because of her.

“Then why am I here? Why am I in shackles while you're standing guard?”

“Because you have the answers to all of our questions.”

“What questions? What the f—”

Sonia closed the gap between her and the bed as she lowered to my ears. “Lorenzo isn't the only family you have, Katerina. If you do what I say, you'll be able to find them and uncover all that's been hidden.”

“Why should I trust you after what you've done?”

“Because I always keep my promises,” she said as she straightened, “regardless of life or death.”

Before I could ask anything, the door clicked and widened as Lace entered. Sonia straightened her shoulders, and the same deadpan appearance emerged as she bowed at his entrance. Lace's gaze didn't meet mine as he stepped toward

Sonia, his whispers low to the point I couldn't make out what he said. Sonia took her leave and gave a warning glimpse at me above her sunglasses, Lace's back to her.

If I bring her down with me, would I lose my chance at escaping?

The chair screeched against the floor as Lace sat. His appearance hadn't changed from the few months we'd been apart. But there was no gleam in his gaze or a teasing grin across his face. Instead, he was a hollow shell of himself. Hardened yet so relaxed.

His shoulders straightened while sheets of paper scattered across a yellow folder rested on his lap, my gaze stumbling on the familiar font. They were medical records with the same CEG branding that each client had.

But I had never seen my name on them. Or any of the information on it.

Katerina Eli

H213227

HBT-01 Virus.

****Condition Eradicated****

"Why, Lace?" It was all I could bring myself to say. Because if I said anything else, it would all come out in shouts and cries.

"Would you believe me if I said I want to see the world burn after I've stripped everyone of their authority?" Lace's eyes traveled onto me, and my best friend was nowhere to be found, "Or would you believe that it's all been what the superior had wanted?" A smile formed, and a glint hinted through his eyes. "Because it's both and more."

"What *bullshit* are you spitting?"

A grin slashed across his face, and he gave no response, a silence settling as an outline appeared behind the door's window. Once it opened, a woman stepped inside, and Lace rose from the seat, my aunt taking the files from his palm.

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

She appeared exactly as she had six years ago, not like the dead woman she was supposed to be underneath the tombstone that my cousin had continued visiting this entire time.

My dead cousin.

“You are too, yet here we are, two living corpses.” Her words were icy but composed.

She wore a white coat, and along the pocket was imprinted a name I didn’t recognize.

“Who the fuck is Cecilia Epide?”

“The rightful heir to the Ministry.” A smirk hinted across her face as she continued looking over the file. “I’ve missed the ring of my true name.”

“What about your son?” Fury devoured my veins, my arms and legs kicking through the ache that appeared on my skin. “How could you lie to Lorenzo?”

“He was nothing more than a failed experiment. There’s no importance in a subject that brings disappointment. There are greater matters in mind, and that is you.” She cleared her throat, those apathetic, moss-green eyes locking on mine. “Understand this, Katerina: everything you have believed your entire life has been a fabrication that I have created. You’ve been dormant too long. But, it has all led to this moment, this discovery.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

“You, sweet patient, will be the key to the eradication of vampirekind.” She stood as the two men stepped in, one holding a syringe while the other held a straitjacket. “Take the hybrid to the examination room. We have no time to waste.”

Blood seeped through the cuffs as I pushed and tugged, screams escaping and intensifying. Sonia stepped forward as Cecilia walked away. Lace followed her, everything I had believed in crashing with a heavy weight.

The guardian who had helped me was a traitor. The figure that I thought was my aunt was only a figment of my

imagination. The best friend I had was non-existent and saw me as nothing more than a pawn.

Everything I had believed in was destroyed in seconds.

The men's hands tightened on the objects they held, a coldness taking over as the cuffs loosened. Everything in my body expanded. Patches grew at rapid speed. Teeth began to fall from my lips, the pain blossoming and coursing throughout my entire body.

Every single memory and thought flooded my mind at the same time, surging feelings that had buried themselves. That I had buried. But not anymore.

In a swift motion, the same numbing cascaded over me. The hunger caved and became mine to partake in. I plunged deep into the swallowing abyss.

Accepting what I buried: myself.

Did you miss me?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to start this off by giving thanks to you, the reader. Thank you for reading. Thank you for giving this book a chance. Thank you for your support, no matter the form it comes in. It absolutely means *so* much to me.

Thank you to those who have helped unravel, redevelop, and polish this book into what it's become. Your inputs were so eye-opening and valuable. If it weren't for you all, these characters wouldn't have had as good of a development as they did. You've made my dreams into a reality.

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Thank you to my support system. Many of you have been a part of this journey from the start, but some joined in later. You've all been amazing. Your overwhelming aid and love has been remarkable. I'm so lucky to have met each of you. I love you, guys.

This book came to me at a rough time in my life. While it started as a fun idea during my creative writing class, it turned into an escape from a personal hell: cancer.

I was diagnosed with leukemia at a time when I was supposed to be focusing on college applications and entrance exams. Though my diagnosis stripped me of opportunities, it opened doors I never imagined existed. It brought focus to a goal that pushed me through all of chemotherapy. It gave me an output when I was stuck in the hospital due to

complications. Honestly, it gave me a reason to live when I didn't want to.

Thank you to my Hematology/Oncology family at Nicklaus Children's Hospital. Although I've aged out, you all still accept me with wide arms and ask me about my writing career. Your support during and after treatment has been so heartwarming.

And so with that, I want to give my final thanks to the teenager who birthed this idea. You knew what you were doing before life took a sharp turn. We survived. We did it. I'm so proud of you— of us. So, thank you.