



# Hound

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** Loyalties will be tested. Scales will sway. And death will collect their bidding

Lorenzo Devon has only known one thing in this new world: the Company of Essential Guardianship, a protection service for vampires and humans. By day, he's a guardian whose loyalties lie in the company that granted him a chance when he had nothing. By night, as the company's sole lycan, he eliminates those threatening the CEG. Nothing else exists outside these parameters. Until... Christopher Sephtis has lived his whole life, alongside his brothers, outcast by society—existing for one purpose: to be heirs to the Premier title, ruler of vampires. As the eldest, all eyes are on him to assume the title, especially when talks of war wages between the Vampire Ministry and the Human Intergovernmental Bureau. But his attention is on something else—someone else.

After a failed mission that ended in a kiss, Lorenzo must form an alliance forged by deceit with Christopher. But the crumbling peace between vampires and humans will be the least of their worries—because a forbidden attraction will crumble the basis of their world.

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

### LORENZO DEVON

Death was to be avoided at all costs. It was the first lesson offensive and defensive guardians learned at the Company of Essential Guardianship since the client's safety and well-being was priority. Socially, it was looked down upon. Legally, it was a huge pain in the ass.

It was rare, but in the case a client's safety depended on the other party's elimination, so be it. Outside of those parameters, though, CEG lawyers wouldn't be much help. If there was no client involved and a guardian acted on their own volition, the CEG stepped away and allowed the Human Intergovernmental Bureau and the Vampire Ministry to handle it.

No one—nothing—would save the guardian from their laws.

“You have reached?—”

Regardless, my boss would kill me if I killed unauthorized.

“We are unable to reach the phone at this moment.”

Five years under my belt, I knew this as much as the other. With years on the field, searching for a different route was easy, a skill so refined it was second nature—except for now.

“Leave your name and number and we’ll?—”

A crack pierced the still night as red filtered my vision and fury raced through my bloodstream, my mom’s headstone, degraded and buried by grime, blurring in front of me.

The thick October air caressed my nose, an exhale easing the tension in my muscles. The anger thinned into prickly annoyance, its thorns stabbing my chest as I took in the tombstone. Thankfully, there was no sign of decay, but the weathered and stained surface had worsened since my last visit.

With back-to-back contracts, it left little leeway between posts, the transitional periods barely lasting a few days. But whenever I could sneak in a visit to my mom’s resting place in Ottawa, I came. That meant months between visits if fortunate. But for once, I had a stroke of luck.

For the last month, I’d been stationed in my hometown, allowing me to check up on her tombstone weekly. And on those visits, day or night, I could count on one hand how many times her stone was actually cleaned.

“Fucking scammers.”

My fingers tightened against the smartphone as I lowered it from my ear. Another crack sliced through the silence. Glass trickled from my hands, slight shards meeting my skin. Darkness sharpened my eyesight, but tonight, anger permanently stained my vision.

Moonlight coated the fog-covered graveyard, pearl white light bordering the tombstone next to me. During the day, I explored the near-deserted town a few kilometers over before visiting Mom. Curiosity got the best of me one day when I tried tracing my cousin’s and I’s old house. Instead of meeting the shabby, wooden

house, I stumbled on an abandoned hospital north from here. The years were apparent in its withering walls, but the building still stood.

Vibrations pulled my gaze away and onto the incoming call. My stomach tightened as a gust of brisk wind passed through. Never did the cold penetrate through my scalding skin, but the hovering sensation was soothing.

Except now.

Fuck. I was expecting his call, but not this soon.

I cleared my throat before picking up. "Devon speaking."

Lace Fernandez's low chuckle filled the line, the sound sending a wave of warmth through me. "I know that tone. Who pissed you off this time?"

"No one," I said a little too quickly.

"Cleaners are still doing a shit job?"

I snickered. "How'd you know?"

"It's all you complain about," he stated. "Well, you complain about most things, really."

"I don't complain." My tone edged with defense and I cleared my throat in an effort to conceal it. There was a clear distinction between moaning about an annoyance and rightfully stating someone's incompetence. Even if it was angrily.

"For time's sake, we'll go with that," he responded. "I have a job for you."

My shoulders straightened at the shift in his voice, the teasing from seconds ago gone. In the small chance I had a drastic transitional period before posts, Lace sent me on missions. They were side jobs that he entrusted me with, a secret only kept within us. It helped the CEG, the very organization that gave me and my cousin an opportunity after Mom's passing, and subdued the hunger that once threatened my life.

“Shoot.”

## Page 2

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“A Regal Vampire Family has gone missing.”

“Huh. Definitely wasn’t expecting that,” I blurted. “Does the public know?”

“No. Besides the Vampire Ministry, Nina, you, and I know. The media hasn’t discovered it yet, but due to the tense Two-Species Treaty feud, it’s grown difficult for the Vampire Ministry to conceal it. The few vampire presses who have a crumb of information have been forced to scrap it, but word could still spread?—”

“Lace.” I didn’t like interrupting him, but when it came to politics, I could give less than a fuck. While it made the world go around, it made my brain pound. “I got the gist, no need to expand. I can hear the terror laced in your voice. Pun-intended.”

That earned me a chuckle. “Is it that bad you had to crack a joke?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged my shoulders. “What do you want me to take care of?”

“Sylvester Reynard-Mallory, a renowned artist turned news monger, is showcasing resistance toward the Vampire Ministry. While they’re keeping a close eye on him, he has a history of failing to comply with the Ministry’s orders.”

“When would you like me to report?”

“Tonight,” he affirmed.

“What about my post?”

“Follow as scheduled. You’ll need an alibi if things go south.”

“They never do, you know that.”

“I know, Enzo,” his voice softened, “but tonight could either break it or make it for the CEG, Vampire Ministry, and Bureau alike. We can’t risk that.”

I nodded as I rested a hand along Mom’s tombstone, dusting off the debris that covered it. “It’s local, I’m guessing?”

“He so happens to be visiting a feeding bar near your area as we speak.” Lace mentioned the coordinates in a hushed tone.

I rolled my shoulders. “You want me to follow the usual procedure?”

“Yes. And Lorenzo?”

“Yeah?”

“If his silence can’t be guaranteed, he takes his last breath tonight,” he emphasized.

Whenever Lace green lit it, electricity instantly sparked my veins and tugged at the lurking hunger.

Like now.

My jaw hardened as a growl itched against my throat.

“Understood.”

At the edge of Ottawa, where the brisk river ribboned through the Quebec border,

stood a four-story gothic mansion. With a black and red exterior, pointed arches, and wood trim, the vampire parlor was the only one in this area. The rounded driveway remained empty, but after showcasing the invitation Lace was able to pull at the last minute, the space confirmed what the shifted air hummed.

Low, dark music droned inside the velvet burgundy walls, deadpan lyrics and high-pitched baselines heightening the bodies inside. Vampires plagued every inch of the feeding bar. Few roamed across the dimly lit lobby, red liquid sloshing in their goblets. I was expecting—hoping for—at least a human or two. The more outsiders there were, the less unwanted attention I got. While no one bothered glancing my way as I followed exploding laughter through the den of darkness, hypervigilance came with the job. As a lycan, it was second nature, just as concealing my scent.

Like breathing, I didn't have to think about it. Instead, in this line of work, my movements needed to be calculated into a choreography that led my prey from point A to B without any obstacles. Tonight's prey was simple.

Silence him. If he didn't want to be, then a permanent solution would be enacted.

Hallways branched all around, leading to various rooms and hidden staircases, an oval-shaped bar rooted at the center of the floor. Glass liquor bottles trimmed the column and mirrored the bodies that occupied the dens.

Perfect.

Primary colors flared across the rooms, reds, yellows, and blues obscuring faces, but emphasized the glistening red-stained fangs. Intensified the strumming music that vibrated against the walls. Swelled the bland, metallic scents that bled into the rancid air.

## Page 3

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A half-human's scent was manageable. Their humanity overrode their vampirism, thinning their smell to the point of nothingness. But a vampire's was the opposite. They were damp, bitter, and permeated like rot.

Like now.

My stomach twisted as the smell burrowed onto my tongue, solidifying my poker face. I'd rather be surrounded by carcasses than vampires.

The hairs on my arms stood when I settled on a velvet stool in front of the bar.

A broad build cased in sepia skin and formal wear rounded behind the sleek bar top, amber eyes meeting mine. A glint shined within them before the bartender glanced away and pulled a distinct octagonal, ruby red bottle from a concealed corner. The small thing disappeared in his large hand as he poured a measured amount into a silver goblet. His nostrils slightly flared as a powdery scent spiked the air.

There was only one liquor vampires drank. Unlike the human liquor they displayed as decoration, this one was a shared secret for those who knew what it was made of: snake venom. If humans got a taste of it, death would be immediate.

"Humans have died from it thinking they're the outlier. But a vampire's creation isn't a test of will for humans, it's atestament to what humans aren't: vampires,"Lace had warned me before my first mission. The precaution was appreciated, but unnecessary.

I wasn't human, after all.

The bartender slid the cup across the counter and my left hand met the cool stem. His short hair swayed when his chin tilted to me, a hoarse voice scratching the air as he said, “On the house.”

And the confirmation was in the burn that trailed down my throat as I sipped, the acidic aftertaste that smoothed my tongue. Bane had no effect on my system, but it did smolder the vampire smell by a hair.

“Thanks,” I muttered as he walked toward other customers.

Midnight struck against the clock above me. Based on Lace’s phone call, Mallory should have been here already. While I knew what he looked like, his scent would be easier to notice between the four floors.

But there was no rush. I had all night.

I slowly sipped as I took everything in. Besides the very illegal consumption of human blood, nothing stood out. And while this place was one call away from shutting down, I couldn’t risk reporting it. Not only would Lace not like it, it would?—

A slender, tall man exited one of the dens, wavy, platinum blonde hair cascading over narrow shoulders and swaying against a cinched waist. Ruffles ran along his white shirt’s neckline to the bottom hem, collar bones peeking through.

He was a Victorian doll misplaced in a world infiltrated by modernism.

He possessed my vision, called to me like a magnet. It could have been the sharp angles of his face, the fullness of his lips, the curve of his shoulders. But then our eyes collided and something snapped within the hunger.

My focus dissipated. And my nostrils flared.

His scent was different. No muddled rot lingered. Instead, a faint, refined powdery-like smell brushed my nose.

What the fuck.

Sage, green eyes widened as he took me in. It was too late to look away. So, I did what every man would do.

I waited.

His subtle gulp was somehow audible against my ears, even though we had about four meters between us. Before he could tug his gaze away from my hardened restraint, high-pitched laughter snatched my attention.

There.

A thick, fox fur jacket drowned a familiar puny man, highlighting the five o'clock shadow that did nothing to his sickly skin. He walked toward the spiral staircase at the far end, each step stumbling on each other, his murmurs slurring into an incoherent mess. Bleached strands with charcoal roots framed pointed features. A smoky, starched scent defined his profile like a shadow.

Sylvester Reynard-Mallory was in direct line. No time was wasted when it came to pouncing on my prey.

The remaining liquor went down in one swift gulp, the trace of the familiar burn subduing underneath the weight of sage green eyes, remnants leaking into my line of focus as I made my way toward the reporter's demise.

The hunt has begun. Time to let out the beast.

## Chapter 2

CHRISTOPHER SEPHTIS

## Page 4

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Regret was a feeling long ingrained in my bones, its dense weight carried by blood and flesh. The first time I'd ever felt its tug was after our mother's passing, when silence had consumed my thoughts in the darkness of night. At the time, it was a pinch behind my eyes, a slight heaviness in my chest. Although such remnants persisted, throughout the years, it twined itself into a cord that always dangled, clutching my presence erratically. Its shadow was a figure I'd become too familiar with, habituated with, and in turn, mastered how to subdue it.

Yet, on the occasion I stepped into Le Maudit, regret was more than an acquaintance. It was a vexatious nightmare.

Wednesday, particularly in the early autumn season, was the feeding parlor's liveliest night as the freshest selections of pure, human blood wines were supplied. The domestic powerful and wealthy visited to indulge even if the parlor enacted an intake limitation of a goblet per patronage. It was all one needed when mingled with bane, our kind's concoction of pure ethanol and inland taipan venom.

This sort of intoxication dulled our main senses while collectively increasing a vampire's libido. The scale of what amplified and diminished varied on the individual, but one common aspect in all was the mindless blathering that seized them. And in the presence of Anabella Ambrogio, it evolved.

All seven Ambrogio sisters possessed a gravity that could never be mirrored by outsiders, their beauty the pull and their disposition the trap. Yet, Anabella sustained a potency only she embodied, one that blindly led her chase exactly where she desired them.

In the past, it never failed. In the present, it seemed to crumble.

Boundless, obsidian eyes held mine as she leaned deeper into her choice of man for the night. Uncertainty wavered in his reluctant hands, each clammy stroke along her back unmeasured. It amplified the looming withdrawal in their rigid kiss.

If I noticed it, Anabella surely did, as well.

Her pull was swift, not a single strand of platinum blonde hair out of place as she stood and strode to my side outside the dens' entrance. She shut the French doors, tucking away her choice in abandon.

“Not to your liking?” With the years of frequenting feeding parlors alongside her, Anabella's taste in men was particular. Tall, broad-shouldered with a deep complexion and high cheekbones. Their similarity to a guardian back at the manor was uncanny, but I kept it to myself.

She smirked, her icy presence surging as a drop of humor gleamed in her dark eyes, her bloodless fangs flashing. “He was too tense.”

I extended a hand, her cool palm caressing mine as she realigned her plunged neckline with her left hand, neatly tucking misty pink nipples. Within the floor-length, pale blue, silk dress, her silvery-fawn complexion glimmered like a jewel and emphasized her sharp curves. Flared sleeves cascaded beside her once she straightened her posture.

“The night is still young,” I murmured as we slithered from the den and into the main floor. “Your fling must be hidden in the shadows.”

She hooked an arm around mine and scoffed. “Or lodged in their partner's genitalia.”

“As if you wouldn’t join.”

“Surely, but tonight isn’t for too much pleasure.” Her gaze narrowed as she studied our surroundings, halting before the rounded bar and collecting two liquor-filled goblets.

“Did you find Mal?”

Sylvester, or Mal, which Anabella preferred to informally call him, was the reasoning behind tonight’s visit. Anabella’s sudden invitation for a relay of information had come during noontime, and Sonia, the Sephtis Senior Guardian, wasted no time admonishing my sudden departure. The berating questions would come afterward, though, an inkling bled in my chest between Anabella’s supposed discovery and Sonia’s dry yet evident unsettlement.

Especially as we were to have the pleasure of an Ambrogio visit tomorrow after quite some time.

“No.” My head followed her sight, each den preoccupied by plastered patronages. Despite being the heirs of Regal Families, not a single soul batted an eye at us. How could they when their intoxication blurred their vision and muddled presences amongst them?

Except one.

I glanced at a particular stool down the bar, the seat empty. The man from minutes ago was absent, his broad stature and possessive bronze eyes plastered in my mind. Though my search across the first level for Sylvester continued, my intentions altered after a realization dawned on me: I hadn’t probed the man’s presence. Upon failing to find either, I returned to Anabella, in hopes these whirling feelings within me ceased.

Regret was no longer a caving pit. Instead, it twisted and blossomed into a foreign craving

“If we split, we could cover more ground, don’t you think?”

“We could, but I was under the impression that we’d share a drink over conversation, not haul the poor man.” On the occasion we met with Sylvester, life seemed to drain from his eyes more and more. Anabella blamed his leftover career; I believed it was his raging alcoholism.

“Christopher, you know how unbecoming he gets,” she remarked. “If he amounts his liquor to his body weight, a word won’t escape him. We just need to pull him aside before he slumbers, or worse, is swept into an orgy.” Her eyebrows slightly rose as she examined a barkeeper with short waves. “I’ll do the second level.”

“And reexamine the first level?”

“Grand idea.” In the blink of an eye, she stood beside her new choice of the night, a bright grin uplifting her chiseled features as they fell into conversation. Her gravity magnetized, drawing attention from all corners, yet my own deviated.

Since our youth, That Man had engrained our pairing, alongside my brothers and her sisters. A pair were to wed, Anabella and I the best fit when compared to our siblings who were of age. Yet, we still tethered for reasons we’d unveiled years ago, interred alongside our agreement.

In the public’s eye, we upheld the façade of a pair, feeding the expectations and desires of High Parliament. But in private, we took pleasure in whomever. Anabella’s wish to please her family was embedded flesh deep, but her care for me ran just as vast.

As expected, tart muskiness stroked my nose, slicked bodies ravishing each other across the open-door den before the staircase. While liquor had the ability to diminish a vampire's presence, Sylvester’s still overhung. His tolerance proved to persist as his

muted presence lingered in the suspended air. Faint, but ample enough to steer me onto the fourth level.

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Music was one with *Le Maudit*, eerie chords pulsating from the walls, sealing empty crevices. No tampering had been made to the volume, yet the usurped melody diminished in my ears. I halted on the last few steps, concealed by thickset balusters. Within the angle I stood, I possessed ample sight of the fourth level's right side, where the man hid in the shadows across from me.

Standing, his towering height swallowed his surroundings. As he leaned against the end wall, his build underneath the leather trench coat doubled in size, squared shoulders enhancing the definition of his bulky arms underneath the sleeves. Narrowed eyes focused on the door left of him, bronze irises gleaming along deep, copper flesh.

He was impassive and rugged at a standstill. However, that shifted the moment Sylvester staggered out of the lavatory.

The man seized Sylvester in a wink, the ends of his trench coat flaring in the air as a veined hand hauled him by the neck into an empty den. His steps trembled against the carpeted floors beneath him. My feet followed without command, entering the joining room parallel to the den where French doors hid my figure.

Sylvester's muddled presence faintly heightened in the fraught air. It was a string, calling to be pulled at. Urgency to step in rushed through my veins, to assist who Anabella and I came for, yet I remained plastered, awe-stricken.

The man shoved him against a wall, his tilted face giving away his hardened features that slowly contoured into that of a beast underneath the dark. Confusion knotted in my chest at the familiar sight. Mother would recount stories during the latenight of

vampires in the olden days who possessed such ability, one that churned fear, yet there was no trace of such within me.

However, this appearance was far from her words. It was a vision that lured with its feral form—an allurements that beckoned my existence.

White, patchy strands swept Sylvester's jaw as sunken, silver eyes leveled. Recognition flickered in his gaze. Gone was the murkiness that swam in intoxication; assumed was a flare that altered his complete demeanor with refined awareness.

"Hound." Sylvester's voice was firm, assertive. For a man who was meek and disdained for it in our society, there was no trace of it. "You were overdue."

"Mallory, either you pay me too much mind," a hint of jest coated the man's voice, "or you don't care about your life very much."

His hands pocketed themselves into his thick fur jacket as the man's grip tightened around his throat, constricting his airways as he wheezed, "I pay you minddueto caring for my life."

"Your death sentence says otherwise."

"Purely existing warrants death."

The man snickered, the humor gone. "Existing grants you leeway, the information you possess guarantees you a spot six feet under."

Sylvester's eyebrow arched. "I didn't think a hound sustained such hostility, especially to a man deemed mad by his own society overnight."

"And you think that'll stop you from talking?"

“You believe you will?”

“Wouldn’t you prefer being silenced and alive instead of silent and dead?” The man took a step forward and closed what little gap remained between the two. “Tell me, Mallory, before I rip you to shreds.”

His words curled into a snarl and reverberated in the space, muffling the drumming dark melody.

“Threats pummel my every move. One more won’t alter my ultimate goal.” A sneer sliced across Sylvester’s face, fangs glinting underneath the low lighting as they stretched to their full capacity. They hollowed his bottom lip and emphasized the missing canines next to them. “The Forgotten Wave will rise. There’s no stopping it. Not even me.”

The man’s shoulders expanded while his neck rolled. A resounding growl escaped his lips as he lifted Sylvester off the ground, back pounding past wood. Crackling bones interlaced with the music that seemed to vanish beyond my ears. Murder coated the air. Though I never witnessed such a thing in action, I recognized its tight bind around my flesh. The swallowing force that kept me immobile. The very shadow married to my presence.

Sylvester kned the man’s chest and chin. His body gave no response, yet his fingers betrayed him as they loosened around Sylvester’s throat. The man waited a second too long. The advantage was no longer his. Sylvester swiped it.

Sloppy but calculative, Sylvester threw his punches, the weight of them thrusting the man’s bulking figure deeper into the room. Within the cloak of night, darkness wrapped around the man, eyes burning with a fire that blazed the room.

Sylvester retreated, each step slower than the last until he reached the den’s entrance.

Defeat lined his muscles as a pocketed hand lifted and pressed against a small machine hidden between his index and thumb. The man shrieked as he tumbled to the ground, his form withering until it became one with the carpet. The device tumbled onto the carpet as Sylvester sprinted to the staircase and vanished.

Anabella is expecting you. You must return.

Yet my feet gravitated toward the man, everything around me ceasing to exist once I stood before him.

At my feet, he curved into himself, his trembling fingers extending to the device. Instinct told me to let it be, but something else nibbled. A force led my hand to retrieve it before he could.

Heated flesh wrapped around my left wrist with the restraint of a chain as my right hand tucked away the device.

The pit in my stomach returned tenfold, further interwoven with the craving, as the man lifted his head. Burning bronze eyes stole what little breath I held, but viper-like slits held my gaze.

“You,” he exhaled, his gruff voice sharpened by pain, “you’re the?—”

## Page 6

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Low pitched sirens wailed beneath the window. They weren't meant for human ears to hear; but rather, vampires.

Vampire authorities had routine inspections on feeding parlors to assure law-abiding customs. Never did they visit spontaneously—unless one reported disruption.

“Bloody hell.”

A shadow unfolded as the man wavered onto his feet. Pure impulse rushed through my veins as I caught his build, his solid weight faltering my balance.

There was no possibility of making it to Anabella before I was discovered. Where was Sylvester? If he remained within these walls, who's to say another fight wouldn't recur? It was a risk I couldn't sustain, especially when our visit regarded the Mubaraks?—

A groan vibrated next to me, the man's footing finding itself. Though he still appeared bewildered, I dragged him away with every muscle I could exhaust until I tucked us into a secluded, tight repository.

Every sharp and muscular angle he possessed molded into me within the tight space. His heat consumed me. Every crevice in his face chiseled. Plump lips pursed. Smooth flesh glistened, particularly along the slash along his right eyebrow. On a flawless canvas, it would disrupt the beauty, but this added to his.

Electricity charged between us. His nostrils flared as they inhaled me, his soft caress trailing from the crown of my head to my cheek. A bronze, soft gaze hid away as

heavy eyelids concealed them, the man's lips meeting mine. First careful, studying with wonder, then, it flickered, and each stroke of his possessive tongue searched formore. Hands held me as if I were attached to his grip, as if I were never meant to be away from this moment. My grip followed suit, clutching firm muscles underneath the trench coat.

This wasn't impulse or instinct. It was a potent carnality and I was a moth intoxicated by the light.

Suddenly, he inhaled a heavy breath and pulled away with furrowed eyebrows, fire burning fiercely within those widened eyes, the dark hue melting into a frenzied medallion yellow.

"What do you think you're doing?" he spat with a contorted expression that leaned toward disgust.

"Me?" I scoffed. "I was the one who helped you hide before the authorities could pull you away."

He tried to retract, his heat ever-growing, but the small gap between our chests was all the tight space allowed. "By kissing me?"

Warmth flushed my cheeks. "That was you doing, you imbecile."

"Sure." He tugged at the knob beside him and stepped away, his feet resounding against the carpeted floors.

I followed with fury coating my vision. "You owe me a debt."

"A debt that can only be redeemed with a name, Doll." A sharp grin tore across his face. "And I don't kiss and tell."

“I’ll uncover it,” the words slipped before I could bite at them. The desire to know the name of the man who kissed me grew as he gave no response.

The man exited the den, evading the unraveling new presences by disappearing into the opposite end of Le Maudit. Every fiber of my being ached to follow him. This was unlike myself. To rectify such, I stood still and collected what little apparent dignity I possessed for the night.

Authorities embedded each corner. By the time I reached the first floor, uniformed bodies infiltrated the space I’d shared with the man who’d slipped from my grasp.

I pulled my gaze away and focused on the familiar beings deep in the parlor.

Sylvester’s focus flickered onto me, no sense of recognition filling his murky eyes, and fell back on the drink before him. Anabella followed his gaze. “Christopher!”

His body was languid, his presence muted. This was the Sylvester I’d interacted with. The Sylvester our society was accustomed to.

“I found him! Well, in truth, Mal discovered me before I could track him. But no matter! Sit. We can’t waste no more,” Anabella chirped as she pulled me to them.

Had I imagined it all? Impossible when the device met my hand within my pocket.

Sylvester staggered as he turned to us, a hiccup trailing between his words as he said, “With the disappearance of the Mubarak lineage, Heads of Ministry are preparing for the worst-case scenario.”

“Which is?” Panic clipped Anabella’s tone.

My attention was caged by the man who’d stolen a kiss, whose lips shadowed my

own, further detaching me from the conversation at hand. I had failed to realize it then. It scarcely registered now.

The man had possessed no presence.

“War,” Sylvester muffled as he threw his head back and swallowed a mouthful of bane. “This is my warning to you both. Prepare yourselves.”

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### Chapter 3

#### LORENZO DEVON

The CEG skyscrapers were equally daunting as they were lackluster. They parted the sea of trees and concealed the burning afternoon sun. They stood as the middle point between Albany, the human city, and Syracuse, the vampire city. But everything inside it was plain. Cookie cutter. Stark white.

And every time I visited, an eerie chill crawled up my spine. It was a warning, but for what?

Six years and I still didn't have the answer to that stupid question.

Distant, obscure memories danced in the back of my mind, a gust of wind speeding past me as sliding doors parted. Not much had changed in the last five months since I left for my post. From the bustling employees to the mishmash of half-humans, humans, and slightest hint of vampires in the air.

With consecutive short-term posts, it meant my senses became accustomed to human scents enfolding every corner. No half-humans. Definitely no fucking vampires. But their rot-like scents filled my nostrils the moment I entered CEG territory. Why was it so strong?

'Cause you fucked up.

A crisp, clean scent drowned the muddled smells in an instant. It was a wave that

cleared my surroundings and brought focus to one thing. One person.

“Lorenzo.”

Lace’s voice had a way of creeping up on me since his smell hit me first before anything. By the time words escaped his lips, my stomach had already tightened into itself. And when I faced him, my skin welcomed a running fever.

But it all diminished the moment I processed the formal way he called me.

“Lace.”

Alongside the CEG population, he was average height, defined by lean muscle and deep, tawny skin, and while many shrunk when next to my towering height, he didn’t. His head met right above my shoulder, but it didn’t deter him. He held himself as if we were eye to eye.

‘Cause we were.

Instead of the gym clothes he liked to wear to unify himself to guardians, he wore a crisp suit, similar to the ones his brothers and father wore. He even had a stick up his ass in the way he strutted.

A sudden spike of awareness cleared my vision.

“Good to have you back,” he said as he extended a hand. His grip was tight enough to cut my circulation.

“Good to be here.” Something going on? I scrunched my eyebrows at him.

He squeezed once more and released, warm, hooded, brown eyes meeting mine. Can’t

say right now.

My senses sharpened to my surroundings. At first, nothing was out of place. But then—there. The rot-like scent grew overwhelming. Guardians were recognized as half-humans because of the way they were engineered to take vampire blood as an enhancement. Never did they smell like this. Neither did the CEG-employed vampires.

And if Lace's second brother was building a new force, I would have known by now. Lace wouldn't have kept it from me. We didn't lie to each other.

"Let's meet in my office to discuss a few matters."

An elevator beside us dinged open and Lace took the opportunity to waste no more time. His crisp scent renewed the enclosed space, but tension strung the air around us. It shadowed us as we stepped through windowless hallways parted by closed doors, except for one at the far end.

His office was never changing, a disaster with papers crowding the floor, but he knew how to go around. Even with the years, I still couldn't make my way through it without his lead. The one time I diverted, stacks on stacks of files tipped over, resulting in a disaster.

Never again. Especially thanks to my cousin.

The only one who knew how to operate in this space beside Lace was her. If Nina hadn't been assigned to . . . wherever she was outside of Syracuse since Lace couldn't tell me the exact location, she would have tagged along to ensure I didn't make a mess. It was a habit she developed, especially since Lace had a tendency of guilt tripping her into organizing his office.

After closing the door, I stepped closely behind him and took the seat in front of his desk. He hovered beside it.

His soft yet gruff voice broke the strained silence. “There’s been an increase in visits.”

“From the Ministry?” Vampire blood was all the same to me, no matter if “royalty” or not. But status was everything in their world; parting elite vampires from the lower class was like night and day. They carried themselves like they owned the world with elaborate outfits and a matching attitude.

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*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

Fucking pampered pricks.

Like your doll?

The man from the vampire parlor had that air around him, confidence lining his posture and sustaining each stride, but. . .no. No way was he a part of the Regal Families.

They were the elite of the elite. And based on what Lace has told me in the past, they didn't frequent those "offensive" locations.

"Yes. The Two-Species Treaty feud has worsened. The Premier is trying with all his efforts to make amends to avoid war, but he continues to meet opposition from both sides—mostly the vampires because of the Mubaraks' disappearance."

I lowered my gaze at him. "They care about one little royal family enough to spark a second Cold War?"

"It's not about care. It's about sustaining power where imbalances divide the world," Lace affirmed.

The roll from my eyes went far into my skull. It's the same spiel as always. It didn't change my cemented opinion: power was as sensitive as the ego.

"Enzo." There it was. My name on his tongue. The way to reel me back to him. Warmth flooded my system every time I heard it. It was like coming home to a heated blanket under a cold night. Comfort and security bundled into one.

I cleared my throat. Since when was something lodged there? “I know, I know. It’s just, Lace, doesn’t it sound ridiculous? One family vanishes into thin air and the entire vampire political state goes haywire.”

“The last time this happened, a Vampire Regal Family ceased to exist.”

“The Epides.” History wasn’t my thing, but when my boss loved emphasizing the repercussions of losing a Regal Family, I had no choice but to know it by heart.

“With the years, the Vampire Ministry has hardened the remaining six pillars, but it doesn’t mean they’re made of impenetrable stone. While the foundation of their body can withstand one missing family—one pillar—it can’t do another, because then it tips over and everything crumbles.”

“Has Mallory played a role?” My jaw hardened. Just saying his name set me aflame in the worst way possible. The only loose end that escaped me.

After that night, the week of my last post dragged like hell. Every waking moment was spent beating myself up over it.

Which meant it was all fucking day and all fucking night.

I should have killed him when I had the chance.

“No,” Lace released with a heavy sigh as he shook his head. “Like I’ve told you countless times, Enzo, no one outside the Vampire Ministry knows about the Mubaraks’ disappearance. Mallory went radio silent after your visit and hasn’t made an appearance since. You accomplished your mission. Don’t waste more time worrying about him.” His words echoed, exhaustion carving lines next to his eyes.

Even as his words of affirmation warmed my skin, the situation shrunk me into a pit

of shame because I'd failed. I had never failed a mission—or Lace—ever.

An itch crawled in the back of my mind as something else withered inside me ever since Mallory. He was able to debilitate me with a piece of metal. The sharp ringing was one I'd never heard before, and the pain? Worse than anything my body has gone through. It was enough to blur my surroundings.

“Did you find the device?”

He shook his head. “Since we disabled the cameras, it's been hard to trace it. I've had different groups sweep the parlor from all corners and nothing. Are you sure he dropped it?”

“Lace,” I muttered, an edge sharpening my tone. It had been a split second, but I saw the device vanish from Mallory's hand.

A sharp grin relieved his hardened expression, a glint shining in his dark hooded eyes as he raised his arms. “You're right. I'll send another group. Hopefully, it turns up.” He cleared his throat. “Moving on. There's a new assignment that came up relating to the Premier.”

He placed a few sheets of paper on the table, each one filled with information covering front to back. I'd just got back and he already wanted me to do the worst thing imaginable: homework.

“What's the rundown?” I grumbled. No need to pretend I was interested when Lace knew better.

“With opposition comes death threats, and these threats have extended to his children. There has been an attack on the Sephtises. Thankfully, only one guardian sustained an injury.”

“How many guardians are posted currently?”

“Two-hundred and thirteen.”

“And they need one more?” While it was a ridiculous request, it wasn’t unheard of. These pompous vampire fucks thought everyone was out for them—human and vampire alike. I couldn’t blame the Premier, the head of the Vampire Ministry, but it was a little overkill.

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“No, but I do,” Lace stated, his eyes leveling onto mine. “It’s for Nina. She’s stationed there.”

I hadn’t seen or spoken to my cousin ever since I left for my ongoing post five months ago. While I’d received updates through Lace, it didn’t bury the worry I always had for her and her. . .condition. Although she forced Lace to promise not to tell me, I recognized her signs.

Maybe we weren’t exactly the same, but we were similar. And that was a blessing and curse all on its own.

Tension lined my muscles as panic twisted in my gut. “What happened to her?” A deep edge coated my voice.

“She’s okay. She handled the situation as a guardian should, but it triggered her other state. The fact she hasn’t been feeding also didn’t help.”

“What?” I roared. “What about the medication?” It was a never-ending battle between us. She hated taking pills, but it was the only fix that helped maintain her condition. She had a chance to be stable. I didn’t.

“Increased, but she’s been consistent on taking it for the past few months since she’s stationed under the Sephtises.”

Inhaled. Exhaled. The red that stained my gaze vanished as I regrouped myself. “So, you need me to keep an eye on her?”

He nodded. “And the Sephtises. They’re known to. . .play games on their indoor guardians.”

“What type of games?”

“The ones where they manipulate their targets into thinking they’re an item and get heartbroken at the end.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, now would I?” He smirked, any form of amusement absent. He pulled out a few sheets from the stack, showcasing detailed assessments of past guardians assigned to the Sephtis family. “Don’t be fooled. Their mind games are so deliberate, guardians vanish into thin air once they return. Our reputation has deteriorated because of these men. You leave on Thursday.”

A sigh escaped me. “You think I can get a new one, then?” I pulled out the phone from my back pocket. While it still worked, the glass pinched my skin every time I used it. It was starting to piss me off.

“Anything for you, Enzo.” The usual warm smile reflected on his face.

My cousin always had a certain gleam in her gaze when she was with Lace and me. Not because of how we were as a trio, but how me and him were as a duo. She never verbally said it, but it was all in the way she observed us, as if there was more to our relationship. As if I had a crush on Lace.

But she was wrong. What I had for Lace was nothing more than admiration. Respect. Duty. He took my cousin and me in after Mom died when no one else did.

I owed him my life. I couldn’t fail him.

“And please,” Lace’s voice softened with each word, “promise me you won’t tell Nina I sent you to keep her in check. I don’t want her thinking we don’t trust her.”

Whatever was lodged in my throat earlier tripled in size, my swallow dry. It was another truth I had to omit from my cousin. Not by want, but by necessity.

“Of course, Lace. I promise.”

Deafening roars oozed from my motorcycle and echoed into the looming forest. Woodstale, a small settlement outside of Syracuse, was known for its greenery. But there was a side to it that no human knew about. And for the most part, based on Lace’s report, vampires were kept in the dark to keep the Premier’s heirs safe from threats.

But my take? Lace was doing a favor to vampires by keeping the Premier’s seven offsprings away from civilization. For once, the clients’ reputation made for entertaining homework.

The Sephtises were nestled deep in the wilderness, where mountains stood proud, and bodies of waters mingled. Musk and cedar fought for dominance. Tranquility was supposed to be in the passing wind. But instead, dense air pressed against my shoulders as I drew closer.

A tall, dark gate with a security house neared in the distance. Suited bodies loomed across the grounds. Lace probably notified them about my arrival since it was protocol, but I swiftly turned out of view.

Guardians weren’t supposed to have transportation outside of the CEG assigned taxis and drivers. And while Lace gifted my baby to me after my first year at the CEG, he was strict on keeping her out of sight. I was the secret exception, and to keep Lace out of the limelight, my outside work needed to be under wraps.

“Where to head now?” my whisper drowned as I closed in at an edge of the territory. There wasn’t much of a road left over so I turned my baby off. The remaining dirt path merged into a dissipated river and led to a dead end that—wait.

In a swift motion, I parked and retrieved the map from Laces’ documents. It detailed most of the terrain and routes in and around the Sephtis property. He’d lent it to me to study since I’d be stationed as a new offensive guardian, focused on ground protection. I kept it to probe the area for my baby.

Nowhere did it show a cave carved into the side of a mountain.

Perfect.

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With a large opening, lance-shaped glossy green leaves crawled on it. Moonlight crept into the wide space and reflected on the limestone with a small glow, highlighting flowers in the dirt. They reached my thigh in height, but I nearly stepped on them since their pitch-black petals camouflaged in the dark.

Humidity clung to the damp air, a slight powdery-like scent trailing the deeper I walked inside. Why was it familiar? I shook it away, my line of focus centering as I tugged my baby inside through thin layers of mud. At the far end, where shadows met, the sleek exterior of my motorcycle obscured itself.

There was no way the naked eye could detect it.

With suitcases in hand, I headed back the same route, but instead of entering from the front, I eased into the off-end entrance. Guardians were taught to distinguish camouflaged doors at any corner, but this one wasn't supposed to be easy for half-humans. It was for superior eyesight that could notice the minuscule difference in the hardware, the obscure hollow outline that appeared from three meters away.

But why?

I stored that thought for later. Right now, I had a different priority. And I'd wasted enough time, so each security point would be handled tomorrow.

A four-story building met my eyesight as I stepped through. Further down, another tall gate enclosed the space, guardians posted within centimeters of each other. But what caught my attention was the short figure with black hair that, even in a high braid, reached below her kneecaps, as she crossed and didn't notice me in the

distance.

Adrenaline pumped through my chest as my body sprinted into action. She stopped before the other tall gate in high alert, shoulders raised and back straightening as she faced me. Quickly, I closed the gap between us as she whirled right and into me.

Furrowed, soft, yet angled features against deep, umber skin suddenly eased. Wide forest green eyes fell on me. Recognition softened her gaze and plump lips pouted as she jumped onto me. Her short, muscular build easily weighed into my embrace.

“Lorenzo!” Katerina Eli’s familiar low, silvery voice reverberated in my ears.

“I’ve missed you, Nina.”

My cousin pulled away and hopped onto the ground. It had been months since we last saw each other, yet there was a different air to her. In gym clothes, she’d always been relaxed. Casual. But with the newest edition of the black guardian uniform, she stood taller and authoritative. It had also been a while since I’d seen her in uniform.

Her eyes shimmered as they took me in, but a hint of wariness shadowed them. As if I was a ghost from the past. Like I was the last person she was hoping to see.

I lifted the metal suitcase that had weighed down my ride. “Don’t think Lace didn’t warn me about your non-feeding habits.”

“It’s not a habit,” she said as she took it from my hand. Ah, there was the typical defense. “It was a mistake.”

I wrapped an arm around her neck and smoldered her into my chest. My other hand rubbed against the top of her head like I always used to do as a kid. She hated it. I loved it. “Cause of that, you owe me two laps.”

She tugged, trying to get away from my hold, but that only worsened my grip on her. “But! You just got here!”

“There are no buts, Nina,” I said and pulled her away from wherever she thought she was going. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

## Chapter 4

### CHRISTOPHER SEPHTIS

October was a month of temperate weather, dedicated to fun, celebratory observances for humans. Vampires were known to partake in particular celebrations for further assimilation, however, under the Sephtis household, the tenth month of the year was the beginning of tumultuous measures in the act of revenge.

The schemes begun as a means to release anger between the seven of us, to showcase the suffering that our society and That Man had bestowed on our mother. The message was never received, and in turn, the schemes simply increased—from staged, small scuffles in social events to arguments targeted toward Ministry members to destruction of property that infiltrated national news and resulted in permanent bans.

For five years, amongst ourselves, the schemes were our source of entertainment. Until it wasn’t. And nearly two weeks ago proved so.

Kaleb, the third oldest of the Sephtis name, acted on pure impulse to repair his inflated yet sensitive ego, utterly ignoring the positions I’d set in stone. Schemes, with their rigorous mechanisms, could never simply be enacted by one or two. All were to contribute their part to balance its scales—because if the equilibrium unsteadied, all collapsed.

His scheme wasn't merely for entertainment. Dragging Alek, the fourth oldest, permanently rooted in the middle, was dense. Nearly unjustifiably killing two of our guardians was senseless. However, committing to all of this and endangering the Ambrogio sisters was pure homicide.

Thankfully, through the help of Anabella, I'd secured their words that the actions of that day wouldn't escape the household's walls. But even the simplest favors had the heftiest dues.

A swift knock reverberated from my chamber's door. There was no need for a response when this territory harbored one person who warned rather than sought approval when entering.

"Sonia."

Our Senior Guardian was as unchanging as this household. Dark, metal-black hair withstood gravity in a sleek ponytail, the waist-length, pin-straight strands unmoving along her broad back as she paused. Large mirrored-shades enhanced her sharp cheekbones and contoured her cool amber flesh as she bowed.

Over two decades stood no ground against her and the vibrant, ruby red lipstick she appeared to live in.

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“Christopher.” Honorifics were dropped long ago in the chaste separation of That Man. Her tone perpetually carried a monotone pitch to it like the rest of the guardians. However, whenever she uttered my name, there was a certain rare chime to it similar to our mother. As if warmth seeped through its crevices.

“Did you receive the invitation?” I asked.

Visitations to Le Maudit weren’t done through biddings. All vampires were welcomed regardless of their social standing. But to visit with a guardian or human was rare, and as a result, required a proper and special request in a timely manner that was scarcely granted.

She retrieved an envelope from her guardian uniform. I recognized the owl sigil imprinted into a magenta wax seal.

Based on Anabella’s urgent notice, the night ahead of me would likely be long. Relief eased the tension in my knuckles, yet the strain in my muscles persisted.

“The limousine is waiting outside the guardhouse.”

Hesitation weighed each step like a chain as I followed her lead. Presences didn’t hang in the air, but rather, the penetrating silence this household harbored. With its dark interior and low lighting, there was a sense of dread that coated its bones, a hollow shell of what it once was. Years had slipped through the cracks, but the caging misery remained the same.

I took my accustomed seat in the burnt burgundy velvet-lined compartment. The door

behind me shut, and shortly after, the front echoed as Sonia settled into the passenger seat. A frosted partition divided us, but the driver's thick presence and Sonia's cut-throat response confirmed the company I'd be subjected to until my arrival.

To the eye, the scenery between Woodstale to Ottawa shared no differences with its towering trees and jagged mountains, heightening a newfound sensation.

"You owe me a debt."

One that heated my flesh and set my veins aflame.

"A debt that can only be redeemed with a name, Doll."

Anticipation.

"And I have no plans on giving you that."

The man had taken residence in my mind, the ghost of his body and the whisper of his lips etched into my flesh.

A hand traveled to my pocket and met the cold device I'd collected thenight I saw him.

I'd never been kissed in that manner. Never been aggressively handled the way he had done. And yet, it would be an utter lie if I'd thought I hadn't liked it.

I had, too much, and it was all-consuming.

That imbecile.

The limousine halted, the force of its harsh brake alerting my attention to the side.

There, before Le Maudit's grand entrance, stood Anabella in a periwinkle, floral lace dress. She frequented the parlor more often than I did, on the weekends nevertheless, yet the gravity of her stare screamed anything but pleasure.

"I'll remain here," Sonia noted as I stepped outside. The invitation was a security measure and granted her leeway inside, but the three of us understood the stares we would receive if she entered. It was in our best interest to ward off prying eyes. Before parting to the limousine, Sonia added, "You have until the morning."

Anabella's tight smile vanished the moment we entered and the main door shut. "You couldn't have brought the other guardian with you?"

"Mr. Amelle is still healing."

A shadow of worry glazed her obsidian eyes. "Is he alright?"

"He's fine," I corrected myself. The Chief Guardian had received the brunt end of my brother's poor excuse of a scheme, hauled as a pawn like Alek. "He's been relieved from the majority of his duties until he's fully recovered, but he's out and about."

Half-humans had exceptional healing capabilities through their intake of vampire blood. However, his injuries were like no other. From the simple glimpses I'd stolen in the aftermath, they were enough to mark his death. Details outside the necessary weren't shared and in truth, Sonia's assurance wasn't enough to subdue my suspicions toward the new guardian who had done such a number.

What was Katerina Eli?

"Oh, that's good to hear." She attempted to conceal her alleviation and guided us into an inhabited den. "Christopher, there's something we need to discuss."

“Is it about the marriage arrangement?” After the sisters visit, the pressure unfolded overnight with the Mubaraks disappearance and That Man’s failed attempts to sustain human relations in addition to the Two-Species Treaty. Two months weren’t enough to make a decision, particularly when an engagement was meant to be announced during their annual Christmas Ball, the grandest event for vampires and humans alike.

“No, as we've talked about this countless times before. My decision still stands and it’s in your grasp.” She avoided my gaze as she looked forward into the venereal act across from her, the unspoken words hanging between us. “The Ministry is after Mal.”

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“Why?” No one in our society paid mind to Sylvester, especially those of the highest standing. Yet, it was still of importance to be conscious of our relationship with him since harboring a slight connection with someone as scandalous as him was scorned upon. Though it would have no impact on my name, it carried enough weight to destroy Anabella’s.

The Sephtises had long been condemned and high-powered, growing greater after That Man’s position as Premier. The Ambrogios, however, were held to a particular light of immortalized resilience, as Anabella’s father, the head of the Ambrogio family and Secretary of the Ministry, was second in command after the Premier.

“There’s whispers of his correlation to the Mubaraks’ disappearance.” Her tone lowered. “They say he’s behind it.”

“How is that possible?”

“I’m not sure. But Christopher,” her whispered words reduced at each one as she closed the gap between us, skin to skin, and continued, “when I arrived here today, I discovered this in my accustomed domain.”

Slender fingers reached into a hidden pocket at her hip and retrieved a pale envelope, familiar black letters encompassing the front. The lines and curves were sloppy, illegible. But only one individual had that handwriting.

“That’s Mal’s.”

She nodded. “And it’s addressed to you.”

Silence deafened my surroundings, the sudden shift in the air bringing focus to the envelope in my hands.

“Why?”

“I-I don’t know.” Anabella stared at it with the same bewilderment emitting from my gaze. They shook as she glanced at me. “But, Christopher, if what they say is true, then Mal’s disappearance might not be coincidental and neither is this invitation.”

Society believed secrecy wasn’t in Sylvester’s arsenal since he was a newsmonger and all. But after that night and the scene I witnessed. . .was it intentionally painted that way?

“If you accept this, you’ll sign your death away.”

Confusion tightened her features, however, not my own. This wasn’t an accident. It was orchestrated.

He knew I saw them.

My nostrils flared as I inhaled a sharp breath and pocketed the envelope, the weight of the matter settling in my muscles.

“Christopher,” she choked out, her tone clipped. “Listen, I lo?—”

“You know what occurs to those who share those words with me.”

My strained relationship with my brothers never equipped us to understand those three little words. Our mother had taught us the dangers of such a phrase, never uttering them and staying true to her word.

“You must find someone who sees you as an equal and values you to your very core. Not your status or goods,” she’d said. “But never let love infiltrate such parameters, because once you do, everything will be wrecked. You will crumble like I did.”

The depths of Anabella’s eyes darkened as she cleared her throat and rested her frigid hands on my own. “I care about you. You have been my betrothed since birth, but my friend first and foremost. My happiness is yours if you desire, but I cannot see you digging your own grave.”

The distant echo of my mother’s voice burrowed into the void in my chest. In my youth, my mother’s words were a shadow that always hovered but never influenced—until she uttered those three words. The shadow of her touch and metal frames grazed my palms. That Christmas night, hope had flourished through celebrations, only to be crushed and disposed of when we’d returned to a manor where she had laid lifeless.

“I cannot dig into what was already framed for me.”

The commute back to the household hadn’t changed, each turn the same as from the departure. Why did the road suddenly seem to be endless underneath the depth of night? Why was the envelope which bore my name straining my pocket?

Neither Anabella nor I dared opening it to reveal the contents in such a public setting. But by not doing so, the responsibility of what Sylvester addressed to me now burdened my shoulders.

A hand traveled to it, but a cold device with a button met my touch.

“Investigate the mechanisms of this,” I said and placed it in Sonia’s palm once the limousine vanished from the inner gate and beyond the outer. “Report as soon as you uncover everything.”

“Is there anything of importance I should know regarding it?”

“Be sure to not press it.” Hesitancy itched in my fingertips. While Sylvester and I were not affected by it when he had activated the device, the man’s sudden shriek and paralysis was drastically polarizing. It wasn’t worth experimenting if half-humans were affected by it or not.

With a swift dismissal, Sonia bowed and faded into the darkness, toward my opposing direction. Still, I wasn’t alone.

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*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

Guardians surrounded both gates like statues, their threadlike presences blurring into one another. Unlike humans, theirs weren't concentrated, but it always hovered like a cloud of smoke. Elusive yet dense. Never-changing. If devoted to differentiating them, their presences could be plucked one by one.

Yet, that's not how I recognized the broad outline in the distance. It was through the craving that sparked awake through his familiar, reverberating footsteps, walking toward the same direction of Sonia—to the employee base.

The Imbecile was here, in Woodstale, on Sephtis soil, where all debts must be paid.

### Chapter 5

#### LORENZO DEVON

Never had I been bored at a post before. Sometimes, there was danger. Other times, there were problems that needed to be resolved. But neither were happening at the Sephtis mansion—it was as if two-hundred and fourteen guardians were posted here for ghosts, to waste time staring off into space and pretend like they weren't breathing beings. Lace had assigned me here to keep an eye on Nina. Besides her feeding habits—which she had fixed with Lace's care package—nothing had been out of ordinary. . .except for her random sneak-aways when no one was watching.

I'd only caught her twice in the past week. But three was a lucky number, right?

Nina lurked into the employee quarters, bright white lights similar to the CEG's gleaming against her swaying long braid.

I sprinted to her and caged her in my arms. She kicked with half of her force as I lifted her into the air and onto my shoulder. Thankfully, this place was always deserted in the middle of the day. “Didn’t think you’d want to run those laps already.”

Her legs halted mid-air, and for a split second, I thought she wouldn’t retaliate. But who was my cousin if not a fighter with the snarkiest comments?

Sharp fists pounded into my shoulders blades until I placed her on her two feet. “You’re insane.”

There it was.

“With those actions and language, I might as well double it.” Although my words were coated in seriousness, I couldn’t help but break into a smile as warmth spread in my chest. “But I’ll be lenient because we’ve been apart for five months.”

“Wow, sir. You are too kind, sir. Thank you for sparing me you, kind, considerate, most?—”

Yup, definitely missed this.

“You’re still giving me those two laps. But training will do for now.”

While exercising was an expectation for guardians, I didn’t see it as a chore. With movement came resilience, and the best form was through running or weight training. Years of bodybuilding taught me so. And beside me, my huge build also seemed to shrink Nina.

Underneath a tight long sleeve, veins popped through, my bicep the size of Nina’s head as I wrapped it around her neck. She was average height and had a muscular

build that wasn't obvious to the eye. But that didn't mean she was weak. While she didn't have my hulking sturdiness, her strength met mine as I dragged her. Each turn, from the common area and cafeteria to the stairs, was met with pressure from her grip.

She could throw me over and drive me into the floor at any second—just like I had taught her.

The training floor was as empty as the first floor. Murmurs and hums from the televisions filled the space, but it didn't erase the stretched silence between us.

“How have you been?” she asked as she began her angled bench press, her tone soft. Careful. The mirrors reflected how she tried not to look at me.

“I visited Mom's grave.” Even though Nina never asked about her aunt, I forced myself to talk about her. If I didn't, the memory of her would be lost. She'd be reduced to only my mind, to a blurry figment of my imagination.

No. She's more than that.

Hesitancy coated Nina's voice. “How was it?” Her and Lace had a bad habit of tiptoeing around the topic of my mom. Lace because he didn't know how to go about it although he tried his best. But my cousin? Without fail, her muscles tightened as if mentioning her was a threat.

It was why she never visited Mom's grave.

Irritation lined my face, but I hid it through a scoff. “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.”

“You blabber it but never do it. So much for being a man of your word.” The uneasiness in her muscles loosened as she smiled.

Before I could debate it, I muttered, “I also tried tracing our old house while up there. All I stumbled on was an abandoned hospital.”

Our life before the CEG was a blur and for one, Nina barely brought it up. What was the point when Lace gave us everything we needed? But one day, I’d arrived early to pick up Nina at a CEG-facilitated medical center. Before they switched her to medicated treatments, she used to have behavioral therapy sessions that went on for hours. I’d gone to check in on her and overheard mentions of her dad—my uncle—only meant for her and her doctor.

“Every time I get likethis, I always think of him. I don’t know why but. . .I think his death might be the reason.”

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*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

Her words had stuck out to me, but her voice had clutched my chest in a way I still felt to this day. The low, shaky tone completely lacked the confidence my cousin always had.

A fire I didn't know existed ignited that day because, like her, I didn't remember him. But he was real. Just like Mom. Hence why the search for a piece of our past continued.

“Watch it. I know that face.”

She shook her head as if that removed the inquisitive expression I knew too well. “What face? I'm not making a face. You are.”

Pictures flashed against the mounted television on the corner wall and a red headline appeared underneath the news anchor.

Company of Essential Guardianship: Who will essentially take over?

With Lace's phone calls decreasing, the missions stopped. It wasn't unheard of, but silence wasn't always good.

Especially when he wasn't picking up my calls.

“His father is close to deciding on the CEG's shares and inheritance.”

“Is Lace going to inherit the company?”

I nonchalantly gripped the heaviest dumbbells. “With the guardians vouching for Lace, maybe. He’s been sufficient and competent compared to his brothers.”

I’d run into them a few times. Lace spoke highly of them, their work proven in the success of the CEG, but his brothers were more like puppets with distressed gazes than the supposed geniuses they’ve been displayed as.

“The Bureau is trying to meddle?” Nina asked as her eyes were glued to the screen. “Of course, they are. At least the Vampire Ministry is staying out?—”

“You can catch up on politics later.” Politics that Lace doesn’t want anyone to know about. “There’s something else we need to talk about.”

She settled into her set with weights but suddenly stopped any movement when I spoke. “I know about the scheme the Sephtis boys pulled on you, Nina.”

Maybe it wasn’t the best way to bring up the conversation, but if it weren’t for me, she’d never talk about it.

She scoffed. “And I thought Lace sent you here to reunite us.” She dropped the dumbbells on the mat floor.

“He did. But I also know of your non-feeding habits.”

“I’m not up for a lecture right now.”

I grabbed her wrist before she could run away. “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.”

Her strength overpowered mine as she tugged away. “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?"

Gross. And she's missing the point. "No, Nina. If those Sephtis guys do something else, it'll affect the CEG and Lace. Nothing can happen until his dad makes the final decision." I sighed. "We can't ruin Laces' shot."

Lessons came with being a guardian. One, in particular, being not to argue with Lace. He was older by a few months, which made him think he had all the wisdom in the world. Maybe he did in our friendship. But at the forefront at work, I listened to him as my boss. Sometimes, the two intersected, and it benefited me more often than not. .like when it came to posts.

While I was here as an outdoor guardian, in charge of observing the exterior premises, and as Nina's support, my posts were conditional. Through Lace's orders, I stepped in when short on the ground or whenever I desired. Most nights, I did my job since I was hired to do so. But some nights, when the shimmering moon was set in the dark depth above me, I checked up on my baby who hadn't been touched since my arrival.

Tonight was supposed to be the night I broke her out for a ride. But—there it was.

The powdery-like scent, weak within the crisp rain. A smell that didn't belong in the earthy musk that coated the forest. It trailed like a shadow behind me for the past week.

And the beast hadn't let go of it.

Claws itched against my fingertips, but I tightened my fists, the tips digging into my palms. Heat vibrated off my skin as a cool breeze passed through, irritation lining my muscles as the scent persisted.

A crawling sensation hovered over me like a blanket, weighing each calculated footstep I took.

It's time to put a stop to this.

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I followed the dirt path from the Sephtis mansion to the cave. It was a few kilometers away, an hour on human feet. But, for me, it was accessible within minutes. Instead of partaking on my usual runs, I drew this journey out to study my prey. Why not test their limits if they were testing mine?

The air swelled when I passed the second kilometer, sharpening the clean scent against the damp mud. Light flickered against the dissipated river. Within the short distance, the beast sprinted awake—to lure out our prey.

Wind rushed past me as feet pounded against the ground. My senses focused, adrenaline pumping through my veins. Leaves crunched, twigs snapped, heavy breaths echoed in the distance. Fuck. The chase wasn't raising my hairs in notice. They were raised by the excitement of instigating whoever stalked me. To the thrill of inviting the prey to follow the predator.

At the speed of light, my body turned into the dark cave, concealing itself in the deepest corner until the body entered. I pounced without hesitation.

My arms wrapped around a slender body and turned them into my chest. Strands of platinum blonde poured as they came undone from their braid. Their back crashed onto my chest and their head slammed onto my shoulder.

The prey I held wasn't a stranger. It was him.

My doll.

“How did you fucking find me?” I bit out, each word rougher than the last. There was

no controlled gruffness in my tone. It wasn't mine anymore. It was other. Amplified. Brusque. Growly.

The beast's.

Magnetic sage eyes held mine captive. The refined powdery smell drowned my nose, straining the strength I seemed to lose with him on me. It was like that night, when his plump lips had met mine. When his face and that. . . kiss infiltrated my mind during the day.

In and outside my dreams.

Fangs flashed underneath the hint of muted light as he huffed. "You came onto our territory to work directly under us. Tell me, who found who?"

"What are you talking about?"

Although I had only been posted at this assignment for a week, gossip confirmed what I'd already suspected: the Sephtises barely left their tower. Some did visit a nearby hospital, but as a whole, they mostly stayed inside.

There was no way he was one of them. How was he able to trail behind me without alerting the other guardians across the grounds? And escape under their radar?

Then, it hit me. The parlor, his stiff demeanor, the similarities in his chiseled features to the Premier's from all the news channels back in the CEG?—

"Fuck."

Sharp pain shot through my abdomen as an elbow jabbed into my skin. While it deterred me, it wasn't enough to make me lose my balance. But it gifted him the

perfect opportunity to twist me around onto the wall, sharpened limestone stabbing my back as an arm pressed against my throat.

The roles reversed. I couldn't tell if it was embarrassment or awe that burned my ears as I glanced at the cockiness across his expression.

“You owe me a debt, Lorenzo Devon.”

I sneered. “With what proof?”

“You're my guardian.”

“One of hundreds, for you and your brothers. Doesn't mean I'll follow you like a lost dog, Mr.Sephtis,” I emphasized.

His face suddenly hardened, fangs elongating, erasing the small sliver of entertainment that had flashed across his gaze. “Under our manor, you follow what we direct. And you, Mr.Devon,will call me by my name.”

“And what is that, Doll?”

His eyes sharpened as his hold tightened against me, blocking any air from entering. Awe heightened the heat on my skin. “Christopher.” With a final push, he took multiple steps away from me, his broken composure fixing itself back into the pompous fuck I recognized from the parlor.

The very one I fucking kissed and haven't stopped thinking about.

Fangs vanished as he said, “You're going to help me find Sylvester.”

“And what makes you think I'll say yes to that?”

“Because I have proof of your attack that night.” He fished something out of his pocket. Photos? Not in the best resolution, but I could make out Mallory’s face and my height.

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Lace had insured they had all been disabled, so how was this possible?

Unless he lied.

No. Lace would never do that.

“You’re bluffing.” Me or him? I wasn’t sure as fear crawled up my spine and crushed my chest.

“Bluffing holds no place in my existence. The CEG, however, continues to poison it. With the proof I possess, I’ll be rid of one pest.”

His voice was grounded—his heartbeat as steady as a vampire’s could be. Of course he was telling the fucking truth.

“How do you expect me to find that fuck?” He’d vanished like a ghost after my visit. Lace confirmed it. But he was the only one who knew. Christopher could twist the truth and ruin Lace’s chances of getting what he had been working for his whole life, to erase how much guardians had been vouching for him.

I couldn’t have that.

He pulled out an envelope with a sheet of paper. “You’re the Hound, are you not?”

Silence densified the air. My answer was clear as day and the motherfucker knew it.

With a humorless sneer, he said, “You are to tell no one. We begin tomorrow,” and

vanished.

## Chapter 6

### CHRISTOPHER SEPHTIS

Reading was a form of escapism that didn't require travel nor structure. Outside the bounds of continuous studies, it was the break I longed for during gathering days, the only liberty I could afford under the shackles of my existence. A dream that warranted no sleep and didn't feed the belief that drove our mother to her death: optimism.

Walnut bookshelves enveloped the first and second floor of the library, each possessing endless reams of aged, bounded literature, touched by perished family members we held no relation to outside of name; waded through by eyes that could no longer recount the words embedded in faded pages.

After our mother's death, my brothers no longer explored the library, which I silently deemed my sanctuary. No one was to enter unless allowed through my permission. Each of us possessed one within this manor—a refuge outside our chambers and common spaces. When a space didn't reserve the leisure I craved, I went to the other.

There were moments, though, where dusk and dawn strenuously muddled into each other, where neither my chamber nor the library could offer me solace. The more I required this form of escape, the least it appealed to me.

I settled into the grand chair before my antique, deep cherry desk, the wood glistening underneath the low lighting above. A force tugged my gaze onto the spiral staircase nestled in a shadowed corner, the dark metal railings pausing beneath the high ceiling. To the naked eye, it was supposed to be a route that led nowhere, that possessed nothing. But beyond the concealed access door rested the spirit of our

mother, the one I'd known before the light in her eyes diminished.

That Man had led her to her demise with each child. Unlike humans, full term vampires came to be in twenty-seven weeks; however, recovery was fourteen weeks. Bearing vampires was known to be life-threatening and took a toll in all aspects—physically, mentally, spiritually, politically. It was the reason why our society bore polyamorous marriages, how every Regal Family had multiple heirs. That Man, on the other hand, only had our mother.

Sophia Sephtis was the first successful human-turned-vampire and had withstood more than any born-vampire in history.

In calculated accordance, after each birth, Ministry-sent attendants arrived to further the Sephtis lineage through artificial insemination. That Man had never visited the mansion or our mother after stepping into his role in the Ministry twenty-two years ago—as Premier a decade ago—and it was That Man who sealed away the faint remnants of our mother after she passed.

Dense regret tugged at my chest as fingers traced the frames that hung from my neck, resting against the key that granted me the little leverage in this cage. The very scripture that mother instructed me to risk my existence to keep. A piece never to be revisited unless life depended on it.

The History of Vampires.

A warning knock trembled against the library entrance and silent footsteps followed soon after, Sonia entering and swiftly bowing as the door closed behind her. Half-humans varied in harboring a strong footing, yet, in our Senior Guardian's case, her footing was comparable to a vampire's. Years under this manor played a role, however, her presence was one I'd always noted: she never held one.

Similar to Lorenzo.

I swallowed the thought away. “Anything to report?”

She slowly unraveled the device I’d given her and placed it on the desk. “I can note it’s a clicker not for human nor vampire ears to hear.” She didn’t concern herself with expanding her hanging statement.

“Then for who?”

Sonia was rather quiet, but never non-vocal when it came to matters I requested. She always had an answer to my questions. Never. . .silence.

“Is your answer classified information?” She nodded. “From the CEG, or you?”

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She leveled her head, the large, broad shades mirroring my reflection. “Both, Christopher. I’ve said enough by revealing it to be a clicker.”

My name along her tongue held a thrum that revived the pain I had buried alongside our mother. But it was an unceasing reminder that pain didn’t die, it simply awakened when least expected, to twist and batter what little remained of my heart.

Yet, as her heartbeat remained steady in the tense, silent air, at the same pace every half-human bore, within the tight crevices of her words hid an emotion she had never exhibited before.

Fear.

“Would you disclose if I were to ask where you discovered this?”

“If you reveal how this pertains to you.”

“The CEG has?—”

“They,” I spat, “are not who I asked about.”

The tension between us grew palpable as she settled into the unbearable silence these walls harbored. “Balance will crumble and there will be no restoration.”

Another hanging statement, this more obscure than the last, yet this held a weight that I couldn’t decipher.

“You’re dismissed.”

Humans had many misconceptions of vampires, fed through fear-mongering folklore and baseless lies. Coffins were our place of rest only in death. Wooden stakes pierced through our skin but did nothing to destroy our existence. Religious implementations were a creative illusion to a science-based species. Garlic was an erroneous assumption. While human food was edible, it was deeply disgusting. Human food warranted death only when ingested in continuous large amounts.

However, the few characteristics that withstood time were our heightened abilities, cold temperatures, and sensitivity to sun. Media portrayed us as beings who erupted into flames underneath the sun’s potent heat. But all we harbored was an allergic reaction if under daylight for too long, a sting that swelled our skin. Modern sunscreen prevented that; however, our susceptibility still remained during the day.

During the night, though, those chains didn’t trail along. They were utterly broken free.

A haloed ring of light parted the dark sea in the sky and obstructed the shadowed clouds. My surroundings reflected the same depth, but it made no difference to the vampiric eye. Trees and leaves sharpened against my gaze, the trail apparent as I followed it to the cave. Chilled wind crawled along my skin. There was no desire to shorten this walk as a new unease twisted my chest. It had begun the moment I saw Lorenzo at his post.

From my chamber, in the far distance from the outer gate, I had found him instantly, a force tugging me to him like a string. His expression hadn’t faltered, stone-still alike the rest of the outer guardians. Yet, the heat of his gaze met mine through tinted windows. He’d found me just like I did him and this realization seeped through my skin, burrowing deeper as I stepped into the cave’s opening and met him.

Whenever he looked at me, a part of me craved to be uncovered. Which piece could that be? I wasn't sure.

Lorenzo brought forth a sleek motorbike, its dark polished exterior complementing his attire which molded to his body—one utterly similar to a guardian's uniform.

“You can't wear that.”

He stopped before me with an arched brow. “And why's that?”

“We're going to Le Maudit. They'll immediately recognize you as a guardian, and you hold no invitation for tonight.” It had been short notice, and without the proper time frame, it was near impossible to request one. Practically inconceivable to receive one for a guardian who had no history underneath our name.

“The vampire parlor? Mallory must fucking love that place.” He rolled his eyes. “I'm not changing.”

“Then you can wait outside,” I retorted. Truthfully, the best for Lorenzo would be to remain yards apart from Le Maudit. Tonight's activities weren't keen on prying eyes without actions following suit, and if Lorenzo was to witness such a thing, it could result in him participating or attaining extraneous attention.

Irritation jabbed at my chest at the very thought of him accepting an invitation from copulating vampires.

“Pompous fucks.” He raised the cushioned seat and dragged a familiar trench coat, his arms swift to pull it around and on himself. While the leather obscured his bulky chest, it enhanced his stature, especially once he buttoned the front lapels. How could one appear larger in size and swallow his surroundings in a fraction?

“There. Quick fix, yeah?” A hard helmet met my abdomen, my hands quick to wrap around it. “Let’s go.”

Lorenzo placed his on and tightened the chin strap, the face shield hiding his eyes as he angled his face to me. I placed mine on with a slight daze, provoked by his harsh beauty obscuring my sight within the helmet. The uneasy sensation twisted into a flare of carnality, burning bone-deep once I settled behind him onto the soft seat. Large hands swathed around mine and forced me against his back as he wrapped my arms around his waist.

“Hold on tight,” he muffled through his helmet, “We don’t want any casualties under my guardian supervision. Ain’t that right, Christopher?”

The intensity of my name on his tongue pierced my skin, the mocking tone one that carried enough weight to irk me. However, warmth alike the sun’s kiss flooded my system, followed by a churning feeling that heated my abdomen whenever literature spoke to me.

I wasn’t sure what was worse; the fact I liked it or knowing I shouldn’t?

“Imbecile.”

Laughter vibrated off him as the engine roared to life. He yanked us from the humid cave and into the cold night. Frigid wind stirred around us as he curved north onto the bypath behind the household, the mountains broadening the deeper he maneuvered through the snaking road, time slipping throughour grasps until flat lands leveled. Sparse trees enclosed us as Lorenzo slowed the motorbike’s speed until he fully broke.

“Where are we?”

“A pit stop,” he remarked as he parked and we dismounted. We removed our helmets, a sharp grin decorating his expression yet no jest flaunted at the corners. “Stay here.”

Lorenzo motioned forward, trekking through grounds embellished with slanted and wedged headstones that meagerly hinted from the ankle-length grass. Unlike the cemetery at the household, where the fence and our mother’s mausoleum marked passed members of the Sephtis name, this one bore nothing. The grass bled into the exterior woodland.

Lorenzo stopped in the midst of the growing fog, broad shoulders blanketing the single standing headstone as he lowered. Though his back was to me, I recognized the manner his hands gestured, how they carefully traced the rough sides of the singular protruding stone, the manner his jaw moved as if he spoke soft words.

Why was my chest suddenly tightening?

The sight was one I'd never expected to witness. Yet, as quickly as it appeared, it vanished when Lorenzo walked back. When he paused before me, I said, "We're not to leave until you tell me why you brought me here."

"Why? Is the little vampire scared of the dark?"

The desire to roll my eyes had never existed prior to this moment. "Although you are a guardian under the Sephtis household, outside the bounds of those grounds, that does not guarantee my safety under your observance." My head tilted to further take in our surroundings. Fields spanned for miles, trees burying the decrepit buildings that stood by sheer chance underneath the cloak of night. "For you, to bring me to a setting never disclosed, where no living being resides, is anything but innocent."

Although Lorenzo's expression remained hardened, within the glint of his heavy gaze, an edge softened. His nostrils flared as he uttered, "As much as I'd love to tear you apart, Doll, I don't think doing so in front of my mom would be satisfying."

Realization struck me, a chill freezing over my flesh. "Then why would you bring me to such a place?"

"It's on the way." He shrugged his shoulders. "Decided to kill two birds with one stone, especially when I don't get to see her often."

He settled onto his bike and slipped his helmet into place. I remained standing close to the cemetery's main entrance—if it could be considered so with its crumbling ruins on the ground. Lorenzo gripped the helmet I had used and motioned it to me without turning.

"Don't make me regret my decision now."

Truthfully, there was nothing to regret. While his mere shadow was irksome,

something of this altitude was never to be twisted into egocentric retributions.

After a moment of shared silence that buzzed with tension, I took the space behind him, and once the helmet rested on my crown and my arms wrapped around his waist, Lorenzo veered onto the familiar route.

Le Maudit possessed no difference in its exterior nor interior, yet, after my last visit, I looked upon it in a different light. One that the envelope seemed to want to expose.

I pulled it from its place in my trousers, Lorenzo's heat radiating onto my flesh as he shadowed behind me. "Are those coordinates?"

"Yes." I had only unveiled its content last night, and after a quick study, the structure manifested like a puzzle piece. But something was missing. "Le Maudit matches the first row perfectly, but not the bottom one."

45.630389228055996, -75.73509936682271

He plucked it out of my hand in a swift movement. "'Cause it's not a coordinate."

"Then what?"

Lorenzo shrugged and looked at the entrance. "Only one way to find out."

"Before we enter?—"

He broke away and stepped into a scene I had yet to warn him about. He froze at the sight of debauchery at the forefront. Once a month, outside the accustomed control patrons abided by, façades shed to challenge the lecherous capabilities of vampires. Consuming each corner with untamed orgies invoked as such, and by stepping through, patrons gifted fixed consent.

Bitter-sweet blood sloshed in goblets, deep red streaks decorating sharpened fangs and flesh. Moans coated in lustful symphonies drowned the air and blurred what constraint I thought I held on a tight leash.

As an overseer, I had expected this. Nights like these held no bounds to a hierarchy that plagued our kind, titles and status reduced to bodies with one desire. However, I hadn't anticipated that very lust thrumming through my veins.

Had this been a mistake? Should I have stretched my patience one more night? But it was the only moment I could visit without risking crossing paths with Anabella. Though she partook on a typical night, this was beyond the ordinary. It was pure eroticism that had the might to muddle everything and nothing at once, to bury intuition and withdraw vampirism in its carnal form.

Lorenzo's wide shoulders rolled back as he angled his face to mine. Anger flamed his gaze, but something more clouded his hardened expression. Before he could speak, my hand intertwined with his and tugged him upstairs where there would be the least activity. Those who visited tonight desired to be front and center—not hidden away in the shadows.

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“Let’s get this over with.Quick.”The habitual rasp in his tone faltered, seized by an edge that hitched his breathing. Tension lined his muscles as we stepped toward the fourth level, his eyes stealing glances at our surroundings, as if. . .curious.

Impossible.

No difference marked the den of that night. If the coordinate was correct, then what did the last four digits pertain to?

And why had Sylvester entrusted me with this?

My relationship with him stood because of Anabella, however, we never sought each other like she and him. Itwasn’t until the past year where we shared a word or two in commodity, and if this pertained to his disappearance, there was no substantial reasoning to justify it.

Thus, why me?

Lorenzo’s nostrils flared as he tipped his head upward. “I smell him.”

“What?”

He brought the sheet with the coordinates to his nose. His eyebrows met as he sneered in disgust and pushed it to me, an empty hurl escaping from his lips. “Fuck. It’s all over this. But in this room, too. He fucking reeks even when he’s not physically here.”

Lorenzo emitted heavy sniffs as he walked around with flared nostrils, a low growl vibrating off him. He paused before a painting along the wall that was familiar in brush strokes, the messiness similar to Sylvester's writing.

"That's his piece," I mumbled with inquisition trailing in my tone.

"Makes sense." Lorenzo reeled back, the lines of disgust between his eyebrows seemingly permanent. "He's all over this."

"How did you do that?" Regardless of a vampire's heightened senses, scents were the peskiest one of them all since they seeped together into a muddled mess. Vampires relied on recognizing presences as they were one of a kind, tailored perfectly to every being. Had half-humans possessed the ability to track one down through smell? Tristan nor Sonia had ever done so.

"What are you?"

Bronzed eyes burned with a fire that heated this room as they clashed onto mine. "Tonight's not the night to test me more than you already have, Doll." Though his voice hadn't altered, a resounding thrum transcended.

I accepted the warning and moved forward, though my tongue ached to query.

"Why does this place have his art? I thought your kind didn't like him."

"Because he owns the establishment," I whispered. "He made sure to never exhibit so. However, when his pieces slowly trickled in here and there, particularly in hidden corners, the answer was unveiled." Truthfully, if it wasn't for Anabella's affirmation, it would have remained a suspicion. "The once renowned artist Sylvester Reynard-Mallory had a particular touch only he bore, one so grand that vampires and humans alike sought his work as if it was food for the hungry. Yet, one day, when it had all

shifted, there was no explanation, and all who owned a piece disposed of them. To detect them here was bizarre—unless the very owner was placing them.”

No one, not even Anabella, knew what flickered his career to plummet or how he was reduced to nothing in our society. The speed of it all didn’t allow anyone to question—or process for that matter.

Lorenzo bent down as he studied the piece. “That fucker’s devious,” he grunted and pointed at the right-bottom corner. “This wasn’t a coordinate; it was his signature. His initials are coded.”

I leveled myself to take in what he indicated.

“One could be an ‘S,’ nine an ‘R,’ four an ‘M.’ But what’s five?”

The realization dawned on me, the picture sharpening as I glanced opposite of the signature to the left-bottom corner. “It’s the number of the piece. If this is four, then five must be?—”

Words ceased to exist on my tongue as my head turned to Lorenzo, our lips a breath away from meeting. His heat blanketed my body as our gazes met. Bronze exploded into the medallion yellow with viper-like slits from our first night.

The familiar vivid possessiveness entranced me, reeled me away from reality and to some other realm. Something that snapped my existence from its deprivation to its rightful place. One in which was born through Lorenzo.

Thoughts held no weight in my actions. I plummeted forward, impulse and lust rushing through my veins as I seized his lips. His captivating tongue charged the electricity that had consumed us the moment we stepped inside. Hesitancy didn’t occupy a chair at this table—it was fierce awareness.

Large arms swooped around and under me, my legs wrapping around his waist as he pressed his rigid groin into mine. A wall met my back, our lips never parting. Lorenzo assured me by deepening the kiss, teeth trailing along my lips as my fangs extended to its full potential.

More. I needed more.

A possessiveness escaped my touch as hands traveled up his shoulders and fisted around smooth leather, his tongue pursuing a trail from my cheek to my neck, down, down, down, until my collarbone grew exposed to his heat and?—

Shattering glass pierced through the air. Lorenzo suddenly pulled away and dragged me behind him, his broad back widening as he swiftly shielded me. Adjacent to us was a couple that stumbled through the hall to the staircase, taking every decorative piece with them in one form or another.

Heavy breaths filled the space between us.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” he growled without turning back, his amplified voice brusque. “Whatever the fuck this is needs to stop.”

### Chapter 7

#### LORENZO DEVON

In this new world, power was important. Politicians spent all their lives leaching after it, fighting over the reins even after attaining it. The CEG was stuck in the middle of its crossfire, so it was only logical for them to be diplomatic. Peace obviously depended on them—on us. Hence one of the biggest lessons for guardians. Tact was everything. Without it, there was no real grasp of power. And what power I thought I had shredded in seconds.

November was two days away, and the last five days I had spent locked away in my empty bunk. Fuck duties. How could I do them when I was going mad? When the beast hovered over my skin and filled my nostrils? Itched across my veins, demanding to be released? When the hunger deep in my belly wasn’t for food, but something else? Something new, intoxicating, dangerous?

The beast was out of fucking control for the first time in twenty-five years— and there was one damn reason for it.

Christopher. That kiss. It had all happened too quickly. How had we even gotten there in the first place? My body said one thing, but my brain said another.

Mom's grave.

Why had I thought it was a smart idea to take him there? I could have visited her after, once he was hidden away in his little tower. There was no need to have him there. A place that I'd never taken anyone—not even Nina.

Every waking moment was spent processing it, replaying it over and over?—

“That's enough!” I shouted, the guttural, husky voice echoing in the room I didn't share with anyone. It felt cramped with the looming beast that craved blood and ached for murder. Who was supposed to surface only when necessary.

Not when I was fucking aroused.

Yeah, I'd had relations in the past, all to tame that itch I got once in a while. They never required kissing or dealt with emotions. Definitely never brought up the beast. But this? With these muddled feelings in my stomach and the constant shadow of Christopher's lips on mine. . .this was different.

My skin fevered. This was beyond embarrassment. This had never happened before. A cocktail of confusion and annoyance disoriented me.

Fingers ran back and forth through my scalp, prickly short strands meeting my touch. Elbows dug into my upper knees as the moment replayed in full clarity.

One second, Christopher's silvery voice had filled my ears, then suddenly, his sharp gaze had fallen on mine and softened as he studied my lips. The next second, our surroundings had turned invisible and he had claimed my mouth like I had done his the first time. Not as ferocious, but he shared the same excitement, erasing any leftover reasoning I tried holding on to the minute we stepped into the cursed parlor.

Sure, vampires had their ways to satisfy their sexual means just like humans. I never thought there would be a day I would witness it, though. To step into that scene was completely unexpected, but what really caught me off guard was what it triggered.

Desire for Christopher, one that had been growing the night my eyes laid on him.

Fuck.

That restraint had vanished. As if the tight chain I developed on the beast the past decade never existed, somehow breaking five nights ago.

Why had our silent ride back irritated me? Why had his lack of touch pissed me off as much as it equally worried me? Why did the physical ache in my chest continue to grow like a tumor as if I missed him? I barely fucking knew the guy! What was there to even miss? He fucking threatened me to work for him.

Christopher brought out feelings that went against everything I knew. There was no way this was anything more than the effect of our surroundings and my lack of action. With tensions rising in the CEG, it had been months since my last fling.

Fuck, what if he used this as blackmail to ruin Lace and the CEG? Lace hadn't been returning my calls. Did something already travel back to him before I could reach him? No. That wasn't possible.

"Shit."

Clear the air. Apologize. Do whatever to fix this before it backfires on the man you owe everything to.

I rapidly grabbed the blueprint that was stuffed in my bookbag alongside the map and stomped toward the mansion. There was supposed to be some important Regal

Vampire Family visiting in the next few days, so this had to be cleared tonight. As soon as possible. If anyone got in my way, I'd deal with it later.

The main entrance was off limits. Too central and in view of all the outdoor guardians that were currently posted. Although I hadn't stepped foot inside the mansion, I saw Chief Guardian Tristan and Nina exit through the underground hatch enough times.

Stepping below ground, a long, dark tunnel stretched before me. One side held a drowning abyss that lacked life while the opposite was poorly lit. I followed the only side that was reflected on the blueprint and walked through a revolving door that camouflaged into the wall.

Once on the other side, droplets swished onto the tiled floors a few meters away from me, a dark-haired man swimming laps in the large pool. Noah Sephtis didn't detect me as I snuck toward the spiral staircase and onto the main level.

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Darkness shrouded the mansion, deafening silence and dust coating the air. Did these guys forget to pay their light bill and cleaning lady?

Christopher wasn't on the first floor. His light scent trailed from the second floor where my feet followed hushed giggles.

Nina came into view, her back to me as I paused next to the nearest corner on the left hallway. She'd been staying here since she was an indoor guardian, but it didn't mean I liked it. Especially when the boy next to her was too close for fucking comfort. Even with slouched shoulders, Alek, the fourth Sephtis kid, was no different than his brother. The pompous fuck carried himself exactly like Christopher.

She stopped next to a door and after a few minutes of their wide smiles and hushed whispers, he entered and she stepped toward the one on the opposite side. Her body halted and her shoulders straightened. Right as she glared to the side, I hid behind the wall I rested on. No footsteps resounded my way as a door closed in seconds.

For once in my life, I counted to ten. Was it because I didn't want Nina to see me? Or was it because I knew I wasn't supposed to be in here? Couldn't be either. But once I hit ten, I poked my head out, the coast clear. A breath of relief escaped my nostrils.

I unraveled the blueprint in my hand. There were eight bedrooms in total, all on the second floor, and while they didn't declare who stayed where, Christopher's scent flowed from the other side of the mansion.

Although my desire to question Nina grew, I stuffed it away for another time. Right now, there was one priority.

The faint powdery smell emitted from the door on the left side, my body pausing before it with a raised fist but no knock. Instead, something else caught my attention.

Another scent. A warm musk that dampened the air just like the rain. One I hadn't smelled ever since Mom died.

It emitted from the chained-up towering doors at the end of the hall. Many things were wrong. For one, the burnished chains that tightly wrapped around the iron handles weren't any silver. They were silver nitrate. Lace's brother had discovered it not too long ago, and apparently it was silver's stronger variant. Vampires as a whole were secretive already. It made sense they knew of its existence before we did.

From the few times I've seen silver nitrate, it was hard to tell them apart since the metals looked practically the same. But it was all in the touch and smell.

It oxidized the air and froze my fingertips. While silver nitrate was known to be the only object that could penetrate and kill vampires, it didn't affect me. Against my strength, it snapped in half.

The other thing that piqued my curiosity? This room wasn't in the blueprint.

What am I doing?

Before I could convince myself to turn back and ignore the nostalgic scent, I stepped into the room and faced a copycat of the vampire parlor. It was as if that cursed place had thrown up here.

Deep red and black speckled wallpaper covered the walls and high ceiling, a large gothic chandelier hanging above the king bed. Burgundy canopies draped around the mahogany bed frame and enclosed the matching velvet bedding. Even the floor was buried in ruby red carpet, but hollow stains stopped me in my tracks. A closer look

confirmed what I already knew.

Remnants of putrid blood drowned the air, the majority concentrated at the opposite side where a black chaise lounge chair rested. Death hung like a shadow.

Whoever died hadn't done so under normal circumstances. They'd been murdered in cold blood.

The warm musk amplified when I closed the distance and leveled in front of the chair. Something else dangled underneath. I grasped it, a light leather-bound notebook weighing my palm. What was this? Opening it to the first page I noticed small, scribbled initials.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Instincts kicked in as I whipped around and stuffed the diary into the back pocket where the folded blueprint hid. Adrenaline raced through my veins as Christopher came into view. He didn't step inside. What was stopping him? Instead, he hovered by the door, eyes wide with burning anger.

I cleared my throat. Since when had a lump formed? “Got lost.”

“Searching for what? Our mother’s death place?”

Dread washed over me. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “No. I was searching for you,” I quickly said as I stepped toward him, his body recoiling as I tried to close the distance. “Listen, I just wanted to apologize for yesterday’s?—”

Words died on my tongue as Christopher pulled a silver device from his pocket. It was small and round, with a centered button his thumb rested on as he held it up for me to see.

This was the fucking device Mallory had used on me that night. And it was in Christopher's hands, ready to be activated.

Lace failed to find it because the device had already been found. Had Christopher had it this whole time?

Fingers curled and tightened into fists on my side. I bit away at my tongue, the bitter blood and echoing pain enough to subdue the tremble that seized my body.

"Lorenzo. Get. The. Bloody. Hell. Out," he said through clenched teeth. "Or I will make you suffer for your despicable actions."

Christopher's fixed composure persevered, but with every passing beat, it slowly crumbled, his body vibrating with unfiltered rage. Muted green eyes darkened as he stared at me with detachment, the very sight of me disgusting him.

Without responding, I followed my employer's command.

### Chapter 8

#### CHRISTOPHER SEPHTIS

The Ambrogio sisters were notorious for their calculated appearances. It began sporadically after our mother's passing, their mothers sending all seven daughters during a time meant for mourning, when the silence that now harbored the household's walls arose. Their intention was as conspicuous as our involuntary correspondence in age, fully confirmed three years ago on Anabella's twentieth—two weeks after I had also come of age.

Whispers of our marriage arrangement turned into persistent chatter, intensifying each year as a brother and sister followed in coming of age. Two weeks ago, before Kaleb's disgraceful scheme deferred our discussion, it was meant to be the prime focus, yet it hadn't.

We were to make a decision in less than two months, before the Christmas Ball, but their mothers were expecting a swift commitment as four prospects conveyed multiple avenues. But how could one proper pairing be chosen when our existences were more of placeholders than of that to duly rule our kind? When this matter should be one to ponder, yet I continue to let thoughts of Lorenzo consume me after our breaths married? Particularly when I'd sensed him through pure intuition.

My hand intuitively traveled to the pocket that housed the clicker I'd threatened Lorenzo with. His reaction flashed in my mind with clarity.

He'd flinched, a deliberate expression shadowing his hardened features when those godforsaken words escaped my lips. Then, his eyes went dark, as if a switch had flickered, and he responded like a conventional guardian.

A sunken sensation consumed my chest.

"Why do they continue to curse us with their presence?" Kaleb uttered through an exasperated exhale behind me. The household's enveloping darkness shrouded the wrinkles lining his charcoal gray dress shirt and paired trousers as he descended the stairs to the last step, pausing before the foyer. Though they were minuscule, the insolence of his shabbiness grew egregious with each visit. Yet, one didn't have to look at him to assume so.

It was evident in his suffocating ego, the very air around him intense enough to unsettle those in close proximity. Though I had no reaction to it as he settled in his accustomed place on the last step, the twins did as they silently trailed behind in similar indigo collared shirts. Habitual unkempt dirty blonde hair was styled into a quiff, the short tips peeking behind their ears.

Greetings from the second and third youngest were prompt, Jacob's and Jacque's gaze never meeting mine. When Kaleb's head meandered to them, their presences peaked. Jacob's distinctive self-possession knotted, and in contrast, Jacque's overweening presence swelled. The twins were thought to share many qualities, one mind to a certain extent. It was far off the mark, and in truth, they possessed a singular affinity: their muscles stiffened whenever in Kaleb's vicinity.

Air brushed my side as broad shoulders sped past, a body sliding off the banister and landing on carpeted floors in one swift motion. An oxford blue dress wrapped around Noah, the second oldest, and elongated his torso and slim hips as he claimed his fixed place between Kaleb and I.

“Oh, my Bethany. She can’t seem to be apart from me any longer. You know, she last took me?—”

“Do not,” Kaleb hissed, his fingers combing back his walnut brown waves, “finish that sentence. I’ve heard enough of those little adventures your dearest embarks you on.”

“But Christopher, nor the twins, have heard it!” Noah frowned as he leaned forward and glanced at the twins. “And you’d like to hear, would you not?”

With a stiff smile that struggled to meet his ears, Jacque said, “Yes.” Jacob, on the other hand, simply nodded.

Raven-black hair swayed along Noah’s shoulders as he turned to me and pouted, fangs shadowing his bottom lip as large cobalt blue eyes widened. “Will you let me share, Dear Eldest Brother?”

Evolution was the observation of species, the foundation of our biological basis. Vampires were rooted in such adaptation, the flowers of success in our assimilation to humanity and society. However, many disregarded the key factor to our kind's advancements: façades. Without the many masks to face the reality of the world, vampirism wouldn’t be what it was today. For some vampires, it was a disguise to conceal the truth they held dear; for others, it was deeply ingrained, bound to the individual.

What Kaleb nurtured was innate; for the twins, it was survival. However, for Noah, it was neither. And there, within the glint in his eyes, surfaced the shadow he tamed underneath this performance everyone believed to be true.

Screeching tires scratched the air as footsteps resounded outside the household. Light crept in as Sonia swiftly opened the towering doors, an outline following her.

Raphael, the youngest of the Sephtis name, stepped away from behind her and briskly bowed to us without a proper greeting. Kaleb's and Noah's eyebrows rose, and before I could notice, mine did, too.

Raphael kept his head leveled to the floor and his steps calculated, jet-black curls concealing his eyes. However, his tightly entwined fingers against his abdomen raised prickly silent questions.

I glanced at Sonia, her impassive features furthering them. She had received notice of the fourth oldest feeding complications an hour ago. Yet, why had Raphael only arrived now from his feeding?

And where was Alek if he wasn't with Raphael?

Noah widened his mouth, yet no words escaped him as the familiar engine ceased beyond the entrance. Presences drowned our surroundings as bodies entered the household, my abdomen intuitively twisting at the sight of all seven Ambrogio sisters.

They bore harmonious outfits, each sister donning an array of colorful dresses that emphasized their shared ice-blond hair and distinctive features. A silent indication thrummed in the air as each sister stood before their match, and synchronously, we bowed—except for one.

Davina, the fourth oldest of the Ambrogio name, stared at the vacant place between Jacque and Kaleb meant for Alek. Though her jaw hardened, she did not bring attention to herself; instead, all eyes fell at the body as he stepped through.

“My apologies,” Alek muttered swiftly, a scattered flush painting his pale flesh. At first glance, it appeared in the same manner it did to vampires of fair tones—like ourselves—who were underneath the sun's rays for longer than ought to be.

However, the spotted black veins that webbed around his eyes and temples told otherwise. They were eerily similar to Kaleb's and Noah's whenever altercations occurred.

He had fought.

“Let's move over to the dining room, shall we?” At my words and direction, everyone followed suit, tension weighing between our bodies.

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“What’s going on?” I whispered into Anabella’s ear as I assisted her into her seat. This spontaneous visit was one I had prepared for the moment Sonia received notice. In spite of that, it didn’t calm the nerves that tightened my abdomen as we had a deal.

I had to approve calculated appearances before they could occur.

Anabella’s gaze roamed on each sibling as they settled around the extensive, iron-forged table. Conversations between pairs filtered around us. “Where have you been? You haven’t visited Le Maudit.”

“I . . .” What was I to tell her when I couldn’t fathom answering the question for myself?

“Father’s pressuring our mothers regarding the marriage arrangement. Tensions continue to rise between the Ministry and the Human Bureau. They need an answer.”

“We have until the Christmas Ball.”

“Yes, but. . .” An exasperated exhale escaped her, and servants silently entered, resting blood-filled goblets before us. Her voice thinned. “I’m worried, stressed to the bone. They’re going mad, and in turn, I’m going mad. The Mubaraks are gone. The Premier seems to be operating on havoc instead of restraining it. There’s no trace of Mal, and Christopher, they’re hunting him like lunatics. They’ve visited the parlor more than I would like. What if he truly is connected to the Mubaraks’ disappearance?”

Before my tongue could form a consolation, eyes fell on us, particularly the three

youngest: Esmeralda, Fortuna, and Gia on the opposite side of the table.

Anabella promptly buried our subject by announcing, “The ball’s underlying theme has been approved.”

Catalina’s murmurs chimed, yet her words were inaudible underneath Noah’s resounding voice as he leaned into Bethany. “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.”

Anabella added, “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. Even close servants that assist them,” Bethany said.

A sharp smile stretched across Davina who sat at the opposing corner of the table before Alek. “All high-ranking guardians are to attend. Which includes the one behind us.”

Eyes whipped to the foyer and onto the body that suddenly halted, the familiar outline carefully turning to the dining room. It was the guardian who was put at risk after Kaleb’s scheme, the one who had put my very brother in his place at our first meeting.

I wasn’t one to appreciate a guardian overstepping their bounds, but in that instance, Ms. Eli earned a sliver of my respect.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” she asked, almost adrift.

“It’s quite simple.” Davina’s slate eyes fell on her. “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 commented.

Davina added, “You, deary, must take a spot.”

Anabella vibrated beside me as she spoke, desperation oozing between words, “Father wants us all to showcase our unification. 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.”

With a narrow yet possessive gaze that stumbled on Alek, clouded emerald eyes glinting, Ms. Eli crossed her arms against her chest.

A murmur silenced beneath Kaleb’s mockery, “So not only will guardians be guests but still operating like usual.”

“Oh my, what a brilliant idea!” Noah bounced in his chair and clapped enthusiastically. “Continuous labor disguised as fun.”

There was something familiar about Ms. Eli’s demeanor, the way she carried herself in a room where she was meant to be reverent—not bold.

Catalina quarreled, “No, you idiot. It’s not an undercover job. But if by chance something out of the ordinary occurs, then the already stationed guardians will have reinforcements.”

The soft lights within the dining room contoured Ms. Eli’s umber flesh as her expression suddenly melted, admiration dilating her pupils in a way I’d seen before in the murkiness of a cave.

“Not in the mood to bite today?” Davina challenged.

Catalina scoffed to herself. “She shouldn’t be. A mutt should know its place.”

“Don’t call me that,” Ms. Eli rapidly bit back, irritation binding her words to stand her ground. It was practically identical to the guardian I hadn’t seen and?—

Metal clinked against the table as Noah rested his goblet. “Ah! There’s that gleam we all favor!”

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Ms. Eli widened her mouth, but Mr. Amelle made an appearance, silvery golden dreadlocks twisted in a large bun high on his crown as he bowed. “Pardon my intrusion.” Mirroredshades concealed his eyes, and though his voice carried a consistent steadiness, it faltered.

Heavy breaths plunged his chest, the tactical vest emphasizing his slouched broad shoulders. Sweat lined deep sepia flesh and glistened across his freckled cheekbones underneath the low lighting.

He appeared as ruffled as Alek.

“What do you require, Mr. Amelle?” When had my tongue dried to this extent?

“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 mentioned.

“I’m afraid that the request is coming from the Senior Guardian. I’m only the transmitter, Ms. Ambrogio.”

Noah shook his head with exaggeration. “Oh, no fun! It was just growing interesting.”

I nodded, and in sheer abruptness, they vanished, yet the question remained.

Whydidshe remind me of Lorenzo?

As the eldest, I did not get called upon. This was an insolent act under the vampire hierarchy, my seniority rooted deep in the very basis of our society and set principles. Age came after prestige, and as the first born of the Sephtis line, heir to the Premier title, I possessed both underneath this household, my authority greater than all my brothers combined.

However, at rare times, a brother could request my time. In the cases that it occurred, it was for one or two reasons: someone had dirt on someone, or there was a matter at hand with That Man.

Yet, the prickle in my abdomen denied the two as I entered Noah's domain the day following the Ambrogio's spontaneous visit.

Purple-toned lights radiated around the barren vault, accentuating the corridors surrounding the prodigious pool. A lone body swam to the edge, the water's pale surface intensifying Noah's gape. In a wink, he lifted himself and grabbed a towel from the camouflaged benches along the wall.

"Eldest brother! So lovely to see you here at such an hour."

"You requested this."

"Maybe, but you didn't have to say yes to it. Aren't you the one with the authority under this household?"

"Authority is figurative." Before our mother's passing, these vampiric practices were simply taught, never thrust down our throats. It wasn't until after our mother's passing we began playing into these hierarchical games. On which grounds? Unbeknownst to us all. It was from one night to another, a result of the consolation none of us received. It had been the only support we possessed to upkeep a sense of balance, a trap that, once discovered, was ingrained too deep to alter these dynamics

that society had imposed on us.

“Sure, sure. Would you like a drink?”

Lips widened but quickly shut as the taste of distant metal coated my tongue and abruptly churned my body. A dry heave knotted at the base of my throat. At that moment, it struck like a viper.

When had I fed last? What had led me to stop?

Burning bronzed eyes lined with possession and allurements flashed within my mind.

Since that night.

I cleared my throat. “No.”

“Then I shouldn’t either.” Noah winked with a wide grin, fangs gleaming. Then rapidly, he swept something from the bench and threw it in my direction. My hand caught it before my eyes could register what it was. But there was no need to when my touch recognized the rounded structure.

I opened my palm to the cold clicker. “How?—”

“Next time, you hold something of value, Eldest Brother,” Noah said, “don’t drop it.” There was no jest in his usual tone. The performance had vanished the moment I stepped foot inside, the Noah before me pensive and firm.

Panic bubbled in my throat. “Did you press it?”

“I may act like an imbecile, but it doesn’t signify that I am one. I don’t test my luck with items that I’m not familiar with.” A smirk flourished across his pale complexion

underneath the low lighting. “Though it was Bethany who pointed out what this little particular device entailed.”

In a moment, the air shifted to a pensive buzz, a weight burrowing into my abdomen. To ask was to dig my grave deeper; was it worth doing so when Sonia had denied such a thing?

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“What does it entail?”

“You know that’s not how it works, but,” Noah tilted his head, “you still are the eldest. And for that, I will keep it simple. So, Christopher, what do you think—a question for a question?”

Silence was the only answer I offered.

“The clicker neutralizes our enemies, the very one’s humans created,” he noted. “Lycans.”

Lycans had gone extinct after the Cold War, utterly erased from media and memories alike until they were believed to be a myth. In our mother’s teachings, she’d mentioned them a handful of times, though they held no place in our vampiric scriptures since they were seen as unworthy of the past, present, and future.

I’ve read instances of when one’s reality overturned, how the world tilted and spun, reality suspending into a state of upheaval. Never had I felt such sensation. . .until now.

Every moment spent with Lorenzo caved, knotting and threading into a tight grip around my chest.

“Now, tell me, do you know of a lycan?”

A burrowing pit caved into my body—a body where its existence dangled further from a reality that seemingly thinned.

“I suppose so.”

## Chapter 9

LORENZO DEVON

Danger was imminent as a guardian. Part of our lessons taught us how to navigate it, because one slip up not only reflected us, it reflected the CEG, the very one that granted us a chance in a world where our existence was looked down upon.

In a world where I shouldn't exist.

The CEG gave me everything I had. The only payback I could afford was to protect it. But how could I strive to ensure its safety when homework was my fucking pitfall?

High standing guardians were expected to learn the ins and outs of politics, to keep track of everything going on between the Vampire Ministry, Bureau, CEG, and everything in between. It wasn't an easy task. . .and that's why I preferred listening to the important bits and pieces. But to study texts that clustered together and barely made any sense?

It was the fucking worst.

Lace typically gave me run downs. But here, in my cramped room which felt smaller by the second, I had no choice but to dive into new homework that no one could save me from: the notebook I'd tried to ignore ever since I found it.

Two nights going back and forth between what to do. Three twilights I spent locked in this room. Four fucking days with Christopher's voice stuck in my mind like a broken record.

“Or I will make you suffer for your despicable actions.”

His anger echoed in my ears with a fiery cloud. No matter how many gym sessions, I couldn't force it out. And the beast wasn't helping with his persistent inkling that itched at my fingertips.

Look inside.

There was no need to when an internet search answered the question etched in my mind after Christopher caught me.

SS stood for Sophia Sephtis, the Premier's wife and the Sephtis' mom. But Sophia Sephtis wasn't just that. Based on Lace, to guardians, she was the scientific—and societal—breakthrough that led to advancing half-humans. But to humans and vampires, she was the first human to marry into a Regal Vampire Family and successfully transition. But the last one to do both.

Right after her transition, the Interchange Act was passed. No more human and vampire marriages were allowed.

Temptation hovered over my thumbs as I glared at my phone screen. My gut twisted at the blurry picture of a sickly pale woman with sharp cheekbones and ash blonde hair who stared back at me. A mini version of her stood on her side, the very one I hadn't stopped thinking about.

Even though her eyes were mid-blink, I recognized the way they slightly narrowed the same way Christopher's did.

If this notebook was hers, why was it hidden away in that room? How had no one noticed it?

The answer is probably inside.

Fuck it.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

I flipped onto a random page, the familiar scribbled writing occupying the first four lines. This wasn't an ordinary notebook. . .it was a diary.

Sonia? Ms. Hoko? The NWE? What was she talking about? What the fuck did I get myself into?

"Too late now," I whispered to myself as I flipped through the thin pages, the writing fluctuating. Some had short pieces, barely more than four lines. Others had pages on pages of writing, to the point sentences jumbled onto each other without clear direction.

Until something caught my eye, words I'd heard from Mallory, written in Sophia Sephtis' diary.

Cold dread washed over me. Mallory was connected to all of this, but how?—

Lace's name appeared on the blackened screen as my phone vibrated. Hesitation froze my muscles. Why? This. . .has never happened before. I've never reacted to his phone calls like this. Why now?

I answered before the call could go to voicemail, my eyes glued to the diary. "Devon speaking."

"Lorenzo." It had been nearly two weeks since the last time we spoke on the phone—if the few words we shared as a check-in could count. But that warmth was gone. Instead, a heavy weight pressed against my shoulders until everything else numbed.

“Hello? Shoot. Not again. I thought I had fixed this problem after Nina’s call disconnected. . .” he remarked, his gravelly voice pulling me away from whatever was going on with my body.

“What happened with Katerina?”

I hadn’t seen her since I stumbled on her with that Sephtis boy inside the mansion. I should mention it to Lace. He was level-headed and saw everything clearly no matter what. He never let his anger get to him—if he ever got angry. He would know what to do in this situation. Right?

But this was something I needed to deal with. Maybe I should get clarification first. Talking to her—how she liked to call it, lecturing—was overdue, anyway. On top of those laps she still owed me.

But I hadn’t gotten to any of them because I kept thinking about?—

He cleared his throat, his tone careful as he said, “We spoke on Friday but the call kept breaking up.”

A hollow pit dug into my chest. Of course, he was checking up on her. It was a given with her condition, especially since he wasn’t next to her. Unlike me.

The tell signs were obvious back then when she used to miss her medication. A distant look on random occasions. Stand-offish appearance. Bitterness in her voice. The wood-musk scent that used to blanket her skin.

Humans couldn’t distinguish scents beyond the surface level. Vampires didn’t need to since they focused on presence. But for half-humans, it was rare, but possible if trained properly. This ability was instinctive to me. . .and my cousin.

Like me, she recognized scents. She didn't have to tell me; it was in the way her head always tilted up, how her nostrils flared. She also knew how to mask herself. It was all about control, and when she'd skip her pills, her scent would slip up.

"I don't get it. I thought I was fine. Can't I stop taking it once I'm good?" she'd asked once during one of my many "lectures."

"It doesn't work that way."

She'd rolled her eyes. "It should."

Nina hated medicine as much as I did, and while she was more stubborn than I was, with the years, she had matured. Thankfully, she kept her promise to Lace, and her end of our bargain. As long as she took her medication and properly fed, and she didn't regress, I wouldn't ask about her condition, especially since Lace didn't want to give me possibilities. He wanted concrete answers, and until then, I'd keep my trust in them.

But one possibility I had, the reassurance I kept near, was of a cure for Nina. I couldn't have one, but she could. That's all I needed, alongside my treatment.

I had consumed everything and anything possible in the hopes of some remedy, I never found it. . . until Lace sent me on missions. My condition was alleviated through inflicting pain and in some cases, death. Whatever she had was not what I had. And if she needed a babysitter to keep her in check, then so be it. I'd do anything to give her a chance at normalcy that I could never be granted.

"Is she okay?"

He chuckled. "Yes, Enzo, she's fine. There was something I wanted to talk to her about, but I'm glad I didn't. It's better that it comes from you."

“What is it?”

“There’s a new product for guardians,” he introduced slowly. “It’s still in its early stages since my brothers are still working on its mechanics, but, with the tensions between the Ministry and Bureau, the Two-Species Treaty, all sides want assurance.”

Every year, the CEG released one upgrade for guardians. The new uniformed vests were last year’s, and while, in my opinion, they were useless, it showcased the desire the company had to enhance protection at all costs. I don’t know what else they could improve. . .unless they were bringing in something new. Like the silver nitrate Lace’s brother discovered. “And how will the CEG ensure that?”

“Weapons.”

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Silence echoed between us. Weapons had always been a topic that the CEG played around with but never settled on. Guardians were engineered to protect, that in itself a weapon. We were disliked as it was. Adding weapons into the mix would create more fear.

“I hope that silence is filled with happiness?” he joked.

“Just confused. What type of weapons are we talking about?”

“I understand. I was reluctant to the idea, but with both governments introducing it, the CEG is playing around with a kit belt. Knives and batons are more likely to get greenlit. But my brother is looking at something else that can fully concentrate the silver nitrate. Like guns.”

“Why?” Irritation lined the edges of my question, but I tried biting it back. Guns were already seen as unsafe. To have guardians—who have been positioned in a neutral place since the birth of the CEG—carrying one would open the door to backlash.

“Ammunition has been the easiest form to mold it into. There's a fast turnaround when in the line of action.” He sighed. “Listen, your hesitation is normal, but this would be the best way for the CEG to expand. You trust me, right?”

There it was. The question he'd asked me six years ago, when I'd arrived after Mom's death, with only my clothes on my back and my cousin, lost and hazy. The very one that opened the doors to my new life as a guardian and our friendship.

“Of course, I do.”

“Good, because I’ll need you to break it to Nina if it moves forward. And, if it does, Lorenzo Devon, I want to recruit you for the training and weaponry trails.”

“Even if I don’t have any experience with weapons?”

“Especially because you don’t have any experience. It’s all new. To you and me. This means you’ll be able to retire from your. . .other missions.”

My eyebrows raised. Those missions had been a part of my life for the past four years. I never questioned what would come after, or even if there was an after outside of them. “Really?”

“Yes. This is more crucial, and it means we’ll be in this. Together.”

“Together.” Those words were meant to send a wave of relief, but I felt nothing. Until my eyes fell on the diary in front of me. “But Lace.”

“Yes?”

In our relationship, we didn’t lie, but we also didn’t hold back information. There was never no need to. But I couldn’t help but think that foundation was crumbling, piece by piece as I uttered, “Nothing. Never mind.”

Hours after our phone call ended, when light vanished and darkness consumed the sky and my room, a knock against the door yanked me away from the desk. I hadn’t noticed the ache echoing in my muscles. Especially not the soreness on my backside until I inched the door open to peek out.

I wasn’t sure who I was expecting, but it definitely wasn’t the Senior Guardian.

Sonia bowed and I responded the best way I could: with a swift nod. When she

straightened herself, she said, “Good evening, Mr. Devon. I apologize for the late visit, however, I come with a last-minute summons.”

I spoke to Sonia a handful of times, and unlike other guardians, a few things stuck out to me.

One: she didn’t have a scent. She must have been one of the first guardians to be fully trained on how to conceal it.

Two: she never removed her sunglasses. Some guardians opted out of them like Katerina and me. Other guardians retired them after their post. She didn’t. They always sat perfectly in place against her flat bridge.

Three: she had a habit of closing the distance between us. Compared to her interactions with other guardians, where she kept them at a considerable arm’s length, with me it was as if she wanted to be close enough to sniff me. Weird, but I’ve experienced weirder in past posts.

Four: even though I couldn’t see her eyes, I could feel them on me, studying, attentive. Any movement I took—whether that be to breathe or glance around—they tracked me like a hawk. The intensity was always present, but somehow, it wasn’t in the same way a guardian would have over subordinates. It was nostalgic, warm, and piercing.

And five: every time we spoke, a chill crawled up my spine. It wasn’t the same chill that took over whenever I visited the CEG. Nor did my hairs raise as when I chased prey. They were completely new.

“From who?”

“Christopher Sephtis.”

Huh. He couldn't even come to see me himself. Cowardly, pompous fuck.

I nodded as I ignored the warmth that spread through my chest and poured into my veins. "Thank you, Ms. . ." What was her last name again?

"Sonia." Her voice faltered, the serious tone diminishing as she spoke, "Sonia is fine."

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My lips pressed against each other. “Thank you, Sonia.” With one more bow, she left, leaving me alone with my screaming thoughts.

Do I go to Christopher? He was still my employer, and as a guardian, rules had to be followed. Never had I broken them before—except for Lace.

But fuck that. I wasn’t going to run to Christopher like a fucking dog. If he needed to talk to me, he could find me. But that had to wait. Something else needed answers. Tonight.

Leaves crunched beneath my steady footing as I followed the passing wind, cold air brushing the short hair on my scalp. I’d never gone longer than two weeks without shaving. But thinking about everything that’s happened in less than a month, it slipped my mind.

That needs to be fixed. After.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins as my legs pumped faster, each push blurring my surroundings. Trees parted the deeper I ran into the crisp night, rich woodsy scents mixing with the damp air. Running was the only release the beast and me could fully surrender. A freedom that sharpened all of our senses yet numbed our thoughts until I could only hear my pounding heartbeat.

Our relationship had always been complicated. Confining. I reigned the chains around his neck, but on nights he came out, my hold thinned. But running was the compromise that didn’t gamble it.

My lungs strained. The beast hovered over my skin and darted forward. Further. Faster. Until the parlor came into view. With heavy breaths, I pulled Mallory's note from my pocket, his signature taunting me. But Sophia's written words diminished them as pieces slowly came together.

A vampire-born hybrid led the Forgotten Wave. Mallory was a vampire, but he was ostracized by his kind. Could it have been because he turned into a hybrid?

Search the painting and find his whereabouts.

Vampires pranced around the entrance, forcing my body to turn onto a side wall where trees concealed me. Fire lined my cuticles, claws emerging as flesh colored nails blended into my skin. I pounced onto the stone wall, and when I reached the fourth floor, I tugged at the window. Surprisingly, it was open, but why wouldn't it be when these vampires didn't have an ounce of regard for their safety?

A familiar painting came into view next to the window. That was number four. So where was five? My nostrils flared as I tracked the air, Mallory's scent leading me down the hall and into the opposite den, a single painting decorating the dark empty space.

It was creepy as fuck. Reds and browns fused into an animal—if it's supposed to be one—the mangled form contouring with exposed teeth as it devoured a body.

And the corner of the painting, there it was.194.5.

The beast's whispers grew louder, an instinct seizing my fingers as I stepped forward and ripped the horrifying painting apart. A piece of paper fell on the floor.

Hairs stood on my arms and a tingle pulled my attention to the side. A body thudded onto the floor. The stranger's round face missed the carpet by a hair, the flush in his

sepia skin deepening as he tried to stand. Short, dark hair swayed as he tried to find his balance.

He was the bartender from the first time I visited Le Maudit. Unlike that night where he was collected and proper like a vampire, right now, he was a mess as he tried to unsteadily walk toward me.

He audibly gagged into his fist. Gross. “Didn’t think this liquor could do this much. Sorry, buddy. Didn’t mean to scare ya,” he said, his words slurring.

Suddenly, my body froze, anger boiling my skin and seeping into my words. “Don’t fucking call me that.”

“Didn’t mean to piss on ya.” His head lolled to the side, his gaze widening. Slate-gray eyes fell on me as recognition glazed over. “I remember. You’re from that night, yeah? What’s ya name? Mine is Ian.”

“None of your business.” I pushed forward, my legs stiff as the word echoed in a different tone. Why did it sound too familiar? Memories blurred in my mind, figures clashing, and as I pushed through the fog, a headache pulsed.

Before I could pass him, a forceful hand met my chest, stopping me in my tracks. The man’s shoulder met mine as he turned his head to me. Those blank eyes suddenly sharpened. “I thought you’d play nice after finding ya mate.”

“I’ll show you a fucking mate?—”

Everything blurred as his hands wrapped around my shoulders and hurled me through a window. Glass pierced my skin and floated all around until my back tumbled onto hard ground. Pain exploded and seeped into my bones, muscles instantly throbbing.

“Fuck!” I bellowed into the frigid air. Every movement forced the sharp glass pieces deeper into my torso and hips as I tried to stand.

Feet pounded onto the gravel, the fucker straightening himself with ease. There was no trace of his lowered eyelids and stumbling body. He was tall and intense like the shadows hovering in my head.

“What do you want?” I growled, the beast’s voice surfacing. Shit.

Ian pointed at the paper still in my grip. “That.”

“Over my dead fucking body.”

“Nothing’s stopping the Wave from crashing. Especially not that fox Syl. A changed mind won’t change the ripple.” Ian glanced up at me, amber gleaming in the silver pools of his eyes. “Then so be it.”

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Clothes ripped apart as his body expanded. Human teeth tumbled onto the ground alongside strands of hair. Bones cracked and snapped, his chest and height doubling. Dark fur rapidly covered skin in patches. Nails lengthened into sharp tips, the ends keen as knives. His human face morphed, the lean form vanishing into a long snout. Amber eyes stretched into the darkening scleras, parted by black slits, and razor-sharp fangs crowded his mouth.

The beast was standing right in front of me, but it wasn't him. The bartender was never a vampire, he was a lycan.

How? They'd all died off.

He pounced and attacked. Ferociousness burned in his gaze, paw-like hands swinging with precision. My body instinctively reacted, but not fast enough. Nails grazed my skin and dug, his force greater than mine. This was strength I'd never experienced before. It was raw and feral. And he was going to kill me.

The beast emerged and ripped out of my grip, the pain in my chest exploding. His heart took over and mine hushed. The two weren't at war anymore—they came to an agreement.

My vision sharpened. Everything attuned to my senses. A wave of nausea surpassed me. Bones cracked and blood spilled as fire scorched my veins. Gums throbbed while teeth tumbled out of my lips, spilling onto the ground where paws trampled. Canines rapidly assumed their place. Fur enveloped the stretching skin that now housed the bloodthirsty beast.

A snarl escaped my mouth as I sprang onto Ian, meeting each of his swings with my own. The figure of the beast was taller than man, more monstrous than those wolf-like creatures humans liked to depict. Aggression and thick rage erased logic. Pungent iron coated the passing wind. Was it mine or his? It didn't matter. All I needed was to take his last breath.

Keen canines landed on skin and yanked, flesh flailing and blood gushing. Intense ringing echoed in my ears as my vision blurred. Lights flashed as Ian stumbled backward, his humanform slowly reappearing as it grew brighter. Had the sun come back? And why was it so fucking loud?

Footsteps echoed in the distance as parked cars came into view. The hair on my neck rose and a voice sharpened.

Run.

I sprinted, ran until my lungs clung for air and my feet numbed. Everything dimmed. A crisp scent filled my nostrils.

“Lorenzo!”

I knew that voice, how right my name sounded whenever Christopher said it, but why couldn't I see him? “Doll?” The voice was a croak, a void that had no embodiment.

“You're going to bleed out!” Christopher's voice was frantic, as if afraid. Slowly, his face came into frame. I could make out his outline, the framing blonde strands, the harsh lines that dimmed his expression. His knitted eyebrows and shaking gaze.

Even when painted in fear, he was beautiful.

Chapter 10

## CHRISTOPHER SEPHTIS

“Lorenzo!” I tumbled to his side as a sense of despair smeared the startling tone that escaped me, a name spoken in the past but never in this manner. Anguish wrapped its fingers within my chest, sinking its nails until pain echoed in my bones. Never had I worn a mask before him. But in this moment, my very being wished I could fortify myself as the small fragments of composure disintegrated.

After discovering Lorenzo in That Man’s chamber, thoughts had haunted me without avail. Questions regarding his motive floated like a fickle speck of dust, materializing abruptly when the sun poured into my chamber. Theories loomed when sleep was unfeasible.

How had Lorenzo broken through the chains? The night That Man had them installed after our mother’s passing, it smoldered our flesh with second-degree burns. Lorenzo, on the other hand, had remained unmarked.

After sending Sonia to face what I couldn’t bring myself to, it did not alleviate the foreboding that had overhung like a shadow, intensifying with each passing second that trickled into the dead of night, when a sudden intuition tugged at my veins. In a daze, it dragged me under the blanket of light rain, droplets caressing my flesh until the moon-lit cave emerged. A blood trail streamed inside, revealing a figure I never thought to witness in my lifetime.

A lycan, sculpted in bulging veins and protruding bones, contoured by muscle and fur, encapsulated between the tangible and the mythic. A lycan that I recognized in scent and shadow.

Lorenzo’s motionless body transfigured. His lycan-lined features mutated, snout and paws reverting to the human form I recognized. Amidst his largely naked build, hollow eyes darkened as pupils dilated and gaped beyond me. Blanched, copper flesh

hung from the lower side of his neck to his collarbone, scarlet-red blood pouring from the monstrous wound. Spindly muscle and veins dangled over his bare shoulder. Grime stained his fingers, particularly the black sharpened nails that curved at the tips. Lorenzo's elevated chest caved at every inhale, each shallower than the last.

Until he ceased to breathe.

"Oh no." A harsh ripple of memories awakened a heaviness from five years ago with full strength. It was too similar to the night we discovered our mother, bloodied and lifeless on the floor of That Man's chamber, during a night that was to be festive and enjoyed. "No, no, no!"

Instinct drove me on him and propelled trembling hands onto his chest. A string of life dangled, thinning by the second.

Beneath the pulsing wound, veins steadily connected. Traces of mangled muscle rejoined, yet his flesh remained unmoving. If lycans possessed similar capabilities as vampires, then he would be able to regenerate. But at the rate his body was healing, death would consume him before so.

"He needs to feed," I whispered to myself, the frigid air stiffening as the realization dawned. Intuition whispered.

Within our society, vampire blood was regarded highly due to its vigorous make up and strong regenerative abilities when ingested, especially to humans. In old tales, consuming our blood after a bite was assumed the elixir to vampirism. In the current age, vampires reveled in such lore to dupe humans.

However, in both of our societies, the realities of transitioning have never seen the light of day. Regal Families were to know, yet many remained uninformed. The few who did know were out of reach, like That Man, or long gone—like our mother, the

first successfully transitioned vampire.

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However, the knowledge our society was well-versed in were feedings. Sharing our blood amongst each other during intimate moments was a norm, a stimulant that fine-tuned and enhanced our systems. In contrast, when done with humans, it was a criminal offense. Vampire blood was the most potent opioid a human could acquire and resulted in implacable hysteria.

Would it incur the same to a lycan?

The risk to ascertain the notion was greater than life.

So be it.

Adrenaline pumped into my gums, fangs extending from their pockets. Before others, they were always evident especially when feeding, to further cement the image I must upkeep. In private, they drew back based on pure instinct. Never had I forced them out in this manner, but as I punctured through my flesh, familiar frenzied sensations webbed around my eyes.

Hunger. Desire. Tenacity.

Copper clashed on my tongue, droplets carving lines on my pale wrist as I forced it to Lorenzo's paling lips. His nostrils flared yet his mouth didn't part. "You bloody imbecile! Be stubborn to live, not to oppose me!"

Determination imposed my streaming wound to his pressed lips. Unyielding, he rejected my demand with a slight shake of his head.

“This isn’t a request, Lorenzo.” A deep timber vibrated in my tone. “Feed!”

He stalled by weakly turning his face, but as the uncertainty on his expression dissipated, his lips took my wrist. Everything in existence impetuously snapped into place.

The world's axis tilted as the night, the cave, the humid air, all eroded, senses unraveling to attune to the jolt of his Adam's apple, pulling and gulping my blood as though it was the essence to his existence. His possessive growl entranced my body, a calling my veins thrummed to.

Air escaped me as Lorenzo dug his teeth deeper, taking with all his might. Scorching electricity infiltrated every crevice of my being.

Unprecedented pleasure skirted toward desire, flaming as I slumped forward on the floor and onto a wall of muscle, heat and sweat enclosing me. Darkness spotted my vision.

“Fuck. I got carried away,” Lorenzo cursed as he pulled away and straightened. His tone echoed, yet there was a rough, gravelly edge to his amplified voice. Skin fully patched itself on his neck, appearing as if nothing had occurred.

My lips parted, but scrambled thoughts struggled to string words as the familiar intuition clicked, heightening a sudden pull that craved to meet Lorenzo’s propelling right shoulder.

“Take, Christopher.” The darkness consumed my sight as my nose nuzzled against where blood coursed, the curve of his shoulder. His heat swelled and my tongue cried to drink him in.

If a gap existed, it was rapidly closed as I followed Lorenzo’s directions, fangs

sinking into shoulder and crunching beyond his flesh. Sweet liquid burned my throat, but the searing sensation numbed as I took, took, took, amplifying the ever-growing electricity that awoke me from a slumber I hadn't known I was under.

Life was insignificant compared to this. This was more than the essence of it, more than Lorenzo and I compared, burying what I thought to have presumed.

A groan forced me to withdraw in a harsh drawl; however, it was the sudden jab against my abdomen that widened my eyes in a panic.

Vampire heartbeats were known to be vastly different from a human's. For humans, their heartbeats changed the slightest depending on their intentions. However, a vampire's was regarded as inaudible due to being customarily slow and heavily moderated.

It rarely changed in its tune, but before Lorenzo, underneath the veil of night and secured between his lap and broad arms, my heartbeat did the inconceivable—it echoed in my veins.

“Your heart is beating pretty fast for a vampire, Doll. Think you need to see a specialist for that.” Lorenzo's teasing tone filtered through the scraping grittiness in his voice.

“You almost died, you imbecile.” Though I tried to match his bite, it faltered as the weight of the situation fully cemented. Anger charged through me like a live wire. “What the bloody hell did you do?”

The wound had fully closed as if it had never existed. In its wake remained dried blood smeared along his neck and chest, and two tooth wounds against his collarbone, perfectly symmetrical.

Where I had bit and consumed him without qualms.

Lorenzo leaned to the side and slowly pulled at the leftover clothing material hugging his hip. Between his index and middle finger rested a slip of paper with Sylvester's handwriting.

"What is this?" I unfolded it. "Silverman's Island?"

"Went back to the parlor and uncovered this by chance. I got this shit in return." He pointed to the non-existent wound. "A lycan nearly killed me to get that piece of paper."

"Lycan?" My eyebrows scrunched together. "There's more?"

"Apparently so and one with a loose screw since he started babbling about finding some mate nonsense before he mauled me."

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Mates? My body stilled. Such a thing didn't exist in our world of science and logic. While our mother entertained the idea once or twice in my youth, it was a simple illusion painted for entertainment. There was no possibility of it—

Lorenzo inhaled sharply as he straightened himself. While it had been over a week since our last visit, why had Lorenzo gone without me? A tinge of dejection tugged at my chest. "Why did you go back?"

"W-Why?" His complexion darkened and a smirk played at my lips as I gazed down at him. Was Lorenzo Devon capable of blushing? "Wipe that smirk off your face."

"I will once you answer my question," I responded and quickly pressed my lips together to hide the smile that wished to deepen.

He rolled his eyes and gazed away, but his hold tightened around my waist. "I was pissed off 'cause you were all I thought about. You requesting me through Sonia sent me over the edge."

His heartbeat hitched as the flush traveled to his temples. We had yet to discuss what occurred that night in That Man's chamber, but such thoughts washed away as my gaze fell on his full lips, the pronounced Cupid's bow that pursed.

"Christopher?"

"Yes?"

Worry hollowed his gaze as they caught on mine, his jaw slightly hardening into a

contour. “What you saw tonight, you can’t share with anyone. No one knows about my lycan side.”

“You have my word, Lorenzo.” Lycans were portrayed as extinct, but in truth, they were ostracized into extinction. They had ceased to exist to the eye, but the media never candidly confirmed nor denied their current existence after the Cold War. Mother assured as such through her teachings, sharing how she herself wasn’t entirely sure of the matter.

With such realization, a weight pressed on my shoulders. It was one that dug through flesh and throbbed within my muscles, a sensation like nothing felt before. It would be an honor to carry it for Lorenzo, to share a secret only for us.

“Thank you,” he whispered, his tone a rasp against my flesh.

My eyes traced the outline of his sharp features, the short stubble tracing his cheeks and jaw and fading into his clean-shaven head. Melting medallion yellow eyes possessed me inwardly and outwardly.

Lorenzo was a furious storm that disturbed the peace I had solaced in. The opposition to my accordance in this society. Rugged yet flawless—a transpiring calamity that possessed the power to drift me apart from all I’ve known and have existed for.

Yet, my bones didn’t drum with the inclination to distance myself. Something else—that sixth sense—whispered to plunge with abandon.

And I did.

Sensations crashed onto me as my lips took his, fangs further elongating and nipping without breaking his flesh. Lorenzo responded in his touch, hands rummaging upward my spine and onto my neck. Fingers wrapped around my nape and pulled me

deeper, his nostrils flaring as he took me in with his tongue.

“You smell so fucking good. Likemine.”

Awareness sparked my flesh as he lifted us in a single swoop and pushed me onto a soft curve of limestone. Its frigid surface had no effect on me as Lorenzo’s heat enveloped my body, as if melding into my own.

But it wasn’t enough. With him, more was requisite.

I pulled away, a low growl escaping Lorenzo’s lips. They stifled when his gaze fell on my fingers as they undid my buttons. My pale blouse was discarded in the blink of an eye, bare flesh meeting Lorenzo’s as I brought him to me, his large length grazing mine.

He didn’t fully settle as doubt lined between his eyebrows. “What do you want?”

“You,” my response was fluid, one that needed no reconsideration. An attraction had always existed between the two of us. This was more than that. It was beyond primal lust and impulsiveness. It was the light out of the void I had been sustaining myself in. “And a shower after we finish.”

“If we do this, there’s no going back.” A shadow casted over his gaze, the nervousness persisting as his pupils expanded. Gooseflesh followed his wake as his fingers trailed from my arms and up my shoulders, meeting at my nape. Light touches slowly unraveled the braid resting on my back.

“Says the one who wanted to stop it all before it could fully start.”

He rolled his eyes, a playful grin softening as he tugged off my glasses from my chest and leveled them. “Be honest, do you actually use these?”

“I do, but not because I need to.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Then why?”

“Because they were my mother’s.” The distant memory was of one of my youth, one that I had long forced myself to forget. Before it could be burrowed, my lips spoke, “She used to have them near her at all times up until the twin’s birth. She never wore them out of necessity. At times, she used them when she read because she missed the feeling. But it was a token from her human life, and a gift to me before her passing.”

Lorenzo’s facial expression softened, his eyes flaring with compassion and awe as he nodded. “Then we should keep this safe, yeah?” He tucked them away from us. “You know, you may have been a pompous fuck, but I knew from the beginning that you were more than that.”

“Is that so?”

He lowered his head and softly nuzzled his nose on my neck, hovering. Trailing. “More than a doll, actually. You’re the torment that calls to all of me.”

Warmth flooded my system in waves, each one greater than the last as his words echoed. “Then have me.”

At that, Lorenzo made quick work at my trousers, removing them and disposing of what little remained on him. Pale blonde waves framed us as large palms studied my spindly figure. Each probe fueled the electricity that had long become one with me. Moonlight contoured him and deepened his gaze. Beyond the possession and lust, came forth a refined yearning that swallowed me whole.

Intricate lines carved Lorenzo’s abdomen, his robust build narrowing to a taut waist that emphasized his prominent length. The heavy weight of his possessive stare was shadowed by his pants. Doubt obscured the air of confidence he carried moments ago.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmured.

The uncertainty in Lorenzo’s furrowed expression washed away. “You drive me crazy.” Fondness warmed his voice, then it suddenly shifted. “But as much as I want to hear you scream in pleasure, there’s still guardians a few kilometers away. So Christopher,” he said lowly, “if the pain becomes too much, you bite me. Got that?”

“Yes,” I said through a breath, what little remained vanishing as Lorenzo wrapped his

hand around my length. The flesh on his palms were rough. His touch, however, maintained a steady, soft rhythm, fulfilling each desire that burned within me. His fingers pressed through my entrance and stretched. Moans escaped our lips, Lorenzo seizing them in a harsh kiss, his stubble marking my flesh.

The loss of Lorenzo's lips and fingers struck at once. He reeled back, the top of his tongue caressing my neck in a trail until they drew to his fingers and sucked. "Someone was prepared. Eager, much?"

I partially rolled my eyes, the sight of his beautiful smirk captivating me alike his hold on me. "I haven't fed."

"Because you were hoping for this?" His snarky tone still sparked the prickly irritation in my abdomen.

"That's not?—"

His hand vanished behind me and followed the curve of my back until it discovered my entrance again. There was no need to probe when I accepted his touch. "No need to deny. I know this is exactly what you wanted. I did, too." My body unfolded layer by layer, beckoning him closer, firmer, as my back grazed deeper into the limestone.

Stretched and primed, Lorenzo angled his tip, his girth easing in until he could dominate. Pleasure laced in pain exploded within my abdomen as my body naturally molded to his length with each stroke. It was all too consuming; familiar yet anew. My fangs responded, lifting and sinking into his flesh. Piquant blood crashed on my tongue, the familiar force sparking my veins. Sex was an act to momentarily revel in pleasure. But this couldn't be described as such. This was beyond the means of two bodies honoring a transaction. This was a descent to somewhere unknown, somewhere only we knew, where we would live for eternity.

Twenty-four years of existence no longer felt aimless. I existed for him. Him for myself. In return, I had him, and we both relished each other until we couldn't no longer.

Sleep was one escape many sought after, the cure to problems which dawned on the conscious. To a great degree, vampires didn't desire sleep. It was a chore that we abided by, revitalizing ourselves like humans. Yet, while humans depended on it in excess, vampires could endure days without such a thing before fatigue claimed us. By the principle, to crave sleep was rare, and to be enthralled by it even more.

However, with Lorenzo, this phenomenon arose.

Heat blanketed my body and tugged me awake. Warm arms wrapped tighter around my frame, shoving me into the sculpted chest vibrating with low snores. Lorenzo's prominent Adam's apple raised and lowered with each swallow. He remained undisturbed in my twisting form, his hold cradling my stature as I tugged. Though I wished to remain in his touch, if this continued, we would stay in this cave for another day, somnolent and buried away from the reality that persisted.

Sun rays crept through the dirt, stretching to the dark corner where obscure flowers stood beside Lorenzo's motorbike. Dark windmill-like petals blossomed, distant light unveiling a violet undertone. These were ones the household's garden didn't harbor, but I recognized them nevertheless; our mother had frequented the outer grounds in search of them.

"Dahlia's are not native to this land, yet, they thrive," she had whispered to me one morning when I had followed her to the neighboring forest in my early years, before guardians monitored us closely. The break of morning had splintered the sky in hues of oranges, the prickle of its beams forever imprinted on my flesh. "It makes you wonder how they arrived here. Who brought them. Why they came to be. There is always more than meets the eye—especially when it's under our noses."

A mild bitter fragrance danced in the humid air, yanking me from memories buried in the deepest depths. Sorrow pinched behind my eyes and a slight heaviness weighed my chest, the dense mass of regret echoing in my bones. The resounding pain held me captive, crawling underneath my flesh until a deep inhale caught my attention.

“He has awakened,” I jested, the humor peculiar on my tongue. Inversely, the unwavering warmth belonged in my chest.

Dazed bronze eyes slowly widened then narrowed onto me. “And he has already started. Do we have to go another round to shut that mouth of yours?” This deep, gravelly voice was unlike the one he harbored last night. Though the possession still lingered, it lacked the amplification that parted his fixed tone. Nevertheless—alongside the vivid thought of doing more with Lorenzo—his voice sparked my arousal. The hold his fingers owned in my crown said so as well.

“Though it would be an admirable way to start our morning,” I said as I parted from him and began dressing. “I need to meet with Sonia.”

An unsatisfied groan rolled off him. “Fine.”

A slight cold weight pressed against my thigh. Noah’s words rung in the back of my mind, the warning ever-present. “Next time you hold something of value, Eldest Brother, don’t drop it.”

Lorenzo’s gaze remained on me, a slight tremor in his eyes as they fixated on my sudden motion.

“A peace offering,” I mentioned as I bore the clicker. “Though I don’t expect it to be needed, I hope.”

Lorenzo rapidly stood, towering beside me as he closed the distance I had placed to

keep my hands to myself. Sharp teeth grazed my bare shoulder as his soft caress accepted it. “I’ll take whatever you offer.”

His flesh burned into my veins before he parted and sauntered to his motorbike. He rummaged through the seat compartment, retrieving dark leisurewear. “But don’t think this will make me forget to pick up where we left off. Maybe I’ll get the chance to tear you apart.”

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“Then we shall meet in my chamber. I’ll call for you when I conclude.” Although an ache hammered at my backside due to Lorenzo, the strain on my shoulders and back was the result of the hardened ground we slumbered on. I wasn’t opposed to continuing our rendezvous here, however, until after the soreness vanished from my body.

Lorenzo brought me to him in a swift pull and kissed me. Tongues whirled as his body pressed into mine, and before we could tear down the progress we’ve made, we parted, a sunken sensation consuming me the further I walked from him.

It caved as I prepared myself for what was to come, washing away remnants of Lorenzo until all that remained was the phantom of his touch beneath my flesh. Had Lorenzo returned? Though he was wholly healed, I couldn’t help but?—

A heavy clank beyond my chambers caught my attention and reeled me onto the hallway.

Though our chambers were soundproof, this creak was impenetrable, unlike the silent hums of my brother's doors and our mothers old chamber on the opposite side of the household.

Within the darkness, my gaze drifted away from Kaleb’s and Noah’s closed chambers to That Man’s. Neither of my brothers had perceived the undone chains of That Man’s towering wooden doors, nor when?—

The door was ajar. The chains, gone.

How?

After the night I'd stumbled on Lorenzo, I'd made quick work of shutting that burdensome entrance before my flesh could react, ensuring no trace of my presence.

Someone had taken the chains, and wedged a leather bound literature between the doors as if it was a stopple. But it was anything but that.

Jagged yellow pages decorated the fore edge, the dark front cover bearing scars of age and bruises of common wear in which belonged to one piece of literature under this household, the very one that had haunted our youths through teachings.

And haunted me now, after nearly five years, when it was meant to be stuffed away in the depths of the library's third level.

Who did this?

Thoughts ceased to exist as I gripped the literature and stormed out the household, confusion and anger tangled as I whisked past the posted guardians and inner gate, beyond the Sephtis cemetery's metal entrance, and stepped into the mausoleum, the sun above prickling beyond flesh.

"Why?"

Our mother's soul-stirring soft voice, her request for this work of text. . .it was to never be revisited unless life depended on it.

The History of Vampires fostered the power to end me. End Lorenzo and my brothers alike.

Why had it all appeared now, when time had enshrouded it all? Unless. . .

No.

“What were you thinking, Mother? How could you abandon us yet forsake us with traces of your presence?”

A gust of wind gave rise to gooseflesh as I stepped forward and my hands tossed the heaving weight. The thick piece of literature bounced against the cement ground, a resounding thud echoing within the caving mausoleum. Had it always harbored such a narrow path with bright walls? When had it become so suffocating in the last year?

A familiar presence swelled behind me, quaint and smoldered, indistinguishable within the air if not studied. His presence thinned amongst Noah’s and Kaleb’s, theirs exuberant and vain, but I recognized it in moments where I visited our mothers mausoleum every year, lingering from the flower-filled vase at the centered podium.

I didn’t turn to face him as Alek asked, “Where did you get that?” His tone usually held a habitual serenity, seldomly quiet and apathetic when spoken to. In this moment, it was elevated and sharp, rumbling with rage underneath the contained surface.

“It was mother’s.”

Short, cedar waves and hardening sharp features met my sight, Alek’s dark brown eyes growing pitiless as they widened. “We all witnessed the destruction of the book, the fire that encapsulated each page until it was ash on the ground.”

The night a few days after our mother’s burial still reigned lifelike in my memory, the fire’s hovering heat a shadow on my flesh.

“We did.” My gaze fell on him as I fully turned, tension warping the space between us. “But that wasn’t the true edition.”

“Why?” he gritted with a hardened jaw.

“Many things that cannot be disclosed, Alek,” I responded, a shiver crawling on my flesh. Though this was not an outcome I was expecting during this unbidden visit, it was one I needed to rectify immediately. Alek’s knowledge of the literature’s existence doubled the risk—if another brother discovered it, death was absolute by the Ministry.

I lowered to grasp the wretched thing, but Alek kicked it, the piece flying behind me and onto our mother’s resting place.

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“No,” he stated, his gaze capturing mine. “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 piece of obstruction, or I risk all of our lives.”

Never had he spoken to me in such a manner—notwithstanding, had spoken in such lengths. Though irritation ran through my veins, there, underneath the adrenaline, spiked a sense of respect at his intrepidity.

“Watch your tongue. I’m the eldest, and if you don’t obey my word, then you will be met with repercussions.”

He inhaled sharply. “I’d rather meet with repercussions on my own terms than yours or anyone else’s.”

“Then what do you ask for, Alek? An explanation in exchange for your silence?”

His consideration befell us. “In exchange for keeping the whereabouts of the book silent, you’re going to assist me with dismantling Kaleb’s authority over all of us.” Caution echoed within the fortified words. “If you don’t choose wisely, brother, then the first to discover your possession will be the Ministry.”

The weight of his threat amplified the self-imposing pressure, my grave more apparent by the second. Kaleb’s torment had once been miniscule. He’d inflict dirty tricks, and though our mother handled the majority, the few that slipped under her nose were the ones that heightened with time. After our mother’s death, his attention had slowly transferred over to the schemes. There were less whispers between the

younger siblings and notifications from Sonia of Kaleb's doings.

And as the burden of the marriage arrangement persisted after Anabella's and I's blood compatibility failed, I didn't concern myself with Kaleb. In truth, it wasn't a responsibility I could bear.

But now, as I took in the harsh lines along Alek's pale flesh, guilt tugged at my chest. Had he been the only brother who Kaleb continued afflicting misery upon? Had it existed before the Ambrogio visit that left Mr. Amelle injured?

The damage stood before me with a fiery gaze, warning the very air of his pending incineration.

I couldn't undo the damage that was done to him—the one I allowed with mere ignorance. Atonement was in my grasp.

I met him with what I knew best as I gripped the book: a silent agreement in which bestowed him the authority to subjugate my existence.

## Chapter 11

### LORENZO DEVON

Two and a half weeks away from Christopher shouldn't have compelled me to take on more rounds across the grounds. Nearly eighteen days away from Christopher shouldn't have exerted bone-tiring runs and gym sessions day in and out that wedged the already strained relationship between Nina and me. About four-hundred-twenty hours and thirty-nine minutes away from Christopher shouldn't have me searching for a crumb of him in every corner like a madman.

But it had. Whatever I was fucking feeling—the blanketing rampant fever that seeped

into my pores, pulled at the beast—was beyond hyper fixation. Past obsession. It was an addiction that sparked my veins to life, one I hadn't known I needed but was damn happy to have obtained. Even if it tore me apart. Begged me to chase Christopher.

As a form to distance the thought of Christopher as much as I could, I forced myself to complete everyday tasks. The small chores that I wished I had more of. Shaving, for one, since my hair always rapidly grew back after transformations until it regressed to its normal stage.

And studying every map in existence day in and out thanks to Mallory's damn note. Old. New. Fictional. Real. Silverman's Island was nonexistent. The coordination pinned the middle of the Labrador Sea, inching closer to Northern Canada than Southern Greenland. Nothing breathed there. No one visited that area.

If I'd known this devious fuck's disappearance would create more homework than humanely possible, I would have hunted him down. But Lace thought I had accomplished the mission. If I went behind his back, I would prove the failure that I was. And. . .

My stomach constricted at the thought of Christopher. The homework and headache Mallory was causing was worth it all for my doll, but there was a sliver of frustration that wanted to hate Sylvester Reynard-Mallory more than I did.

"You are to tell no one." My doll rang distantly in my mind. He'd imposed this promise during a time I had to follow his orders as his employee, as a way to keep the CEG safe. But now, I kept that promise because it was one Christopher expected of me—of us. I kept it because if I told Nina, she'd potentially put my doll at risk by slipping it to Lace. She'd already done so with her little theory of my "feelings" for our boss, my comrade and best friend.

The fear of losing Christopher was greater than the unease that I wasn't the only

lycan alive.

Eyes stumbled on the diary hidden in the bottom drawer. Somehow, Sophia Sephtis kept proving she had all the answers. I'd already looked once—why couldn't I look again?

I carefully scanned through, a sliver of guilt crawling into my chest. It vanished when I found exactly what I needed.

Flimsy and debatable, but it was a start, and if all roads pointed the same direction, the answer was right in front of me.

An eerie chill crawled up my spine as I stared at the diary. Questions tugged at me as details pieced together.

That lycan—Ian—had called Mallory a fox, too. Maybe this was a coincidence, but what wasn't was the repeated names within bookmarked sections. I hadn't read the diary from page to page, but I didn't have to in order to see the repeated pattern.

NWE. Sonia. Ms. Hoko. Mir. Mallory.

Three were obvious: Mallory, the missing person. Sonia, the Senior Guardian on the Sephtis grounds. And one that filtered the screens all across the CEG and even here, on the employee quarters, the Premier of the Vampire Ministry, Mir Sephtis.

Ms. Hoko was a faceless person who definitely existed. But what about the NWE? There were no specifics as I flipped through. My take? Sophia, Sonia, and Ms. Hoko were a part of an organization with their own agenda, similar to the CEG. Lace had mentioned one or two existed in the beginning. Whatever it was, it connected to Mallory and Mir Sephtis, and unlike the CEG, it seemed to go against the world.

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Had Christopher known about this? No, there was no way. Validation settled in my chest. But I still needed concrete proof; not a feeling.

Pocketing the diary in my uniform, I made my trek across the grounds, eyes vigilant on the surrounding guardians underneath the cloak of night. If I sped, I'd trigger them, so I kept a healthy pace although my feet craved to run. Once hidden below ground, I sprinted through the dark tunnel and silently met Christopher's door. A fist rested in the air with no ounce of power in its hold.

How do I approach this? The last time I'd been here, I'd nearly burned the bridge I didn't know had existed with Christopher. It was already enough that an offensive guardian was inside. Unless directed otherwise, we weren't meant to step inside. If we got caught it would destroy?—

The light oak door stretched open, Christopher's muted green eyes widening as they fell on me. They quickly snapped behind me as he removed his glasses, and before I could say anything—was my tongue nonexistent now?—he harshly pulled me inside and into his embrace.

His room was an organized disaster. Books were stacked into towers, some tall, some small. I knew the ground was there based on the small path in-between the stacks that led to two staircases at the end. Even the stairs were covered in books, all up to the loft. But somehow, unlike Lace's, it was organized. It fit him.

“How did you know which one was my chamber?” he whispered into my ear, the touch of his breath intensifying the heat on my skin.

“I—” The blueprint wasn’t a plausible reason since it didn’t state whose room belonged to who, aside from Nina’s, of course. And, deep down, the thought of lying unsettled my stomach. “I can hear you.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Slightly, if I’m close enough to the door.” I cleared my throat. Damn this stupid knot. “But. . .I’ve also been watching you.”

The heat grew, especially in my cheeks. Was it normal for them to get so hot?

Christopher pulled away. I was taller than him by two centimeters, but as a small smirk stretched across his face, he appeared taller. Bigger than life. “Is that a fact?”

“I had to know why you were ignoring me for almost three weeks,” I teased, but the words barely concealed the bitterness in my tone. With the increased rounds, I was able to sneak peeks into the mansion. As a guardian, it was normal to keep an attentive eye on the visitors that were in and out throughout the days.

What if whatever they were doing with those pins and needles were used as weapons? What if one turned out to be another attacker like the one Nina handled? What if they snuck into Christopher’s room late at night or to his library early in the morning?

Guardians protected with body and heart. While Sonia or Tristan were near in most fittings, it didn’t hurt to be cautious.

But you’re not doing this as his guardian.

The realization pinched at my chest as Christopher studied me, the cheery glint in his gaze gone. His skin was always pale, but somehow, he was gray. Vampires didn’t typically get too much sun, but he desperately needed it with the way his dark purple

veins were about to pop out.

The room froze over. “What’s going on?”

“My apologies, Lorenzo. The Christmas Ball is upon us and it was not my intention to keep you in the dark of this. There has been?—”

Christopher’s voice diminished as his body tumbled onto me. My legs leveled us before I could fall onto one of his stacks, arms wrapping around him. His skin grew colder and clammy. He tried to keep his eyelids open, but his eyes rolled back.

Just like Nina when she’d gone months without feeding.

“Christopher,” I muttered, “when was the last time you fed?”

His words were strained. “Not since our night together.”

Guardians didn’t need to feed. To upkeep their enhanced abilities, the CEG administered steroids—or crossbred injections like Lace’s brothers called them—every few months. It removed the aspect that teetered guardians closer to half-vampires and ensured they stayed half-humans. But, I didn’t know how often vampires needed to feed. Was it weeks? Months? More or less? Fuck, maybe doing my homework during the CEG training days could have benefited me more than I?—

Wait.

Nina fed. Thanks to Lace’s hints, I knew she needed to feed at least twice a month. While her situation was different from Christopher’s, it was the only thing I could pull from. Maybe vampires needed blood more often? Whatever the case, I would give Christopher all the blood he needed.

I unzipped the tight guardian uniform and exposed the shoulder with his bite marks.

Thankfully, they hadn't vanished.

Christopher's nostrils flared as I brought him to the spot—his spot. His fangs stretched and punctured, adrenaline racing through my veins as he took from me. A sense of lightness coursed through my body and soothed all nerves and thoughts. When he stopped, disappointment swallowed me.

“Why haven't you fed?” I bit out. Christopher's gaze focused as he straightened, color flushing his skin. Although the idea of him feeding on someone else stained my eyes with red, I'd rather him do it than be like this. That pain would be manageable. This was not.

“I'm not sure. . .” His eyes shook as they stumbled on mine, veins still obvious under his temples. These were different, though. They weren't a sickly purple anymore. They were black and webbed across his face and into his eyes, drowning his scleras in pools of darkness.

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This happened the first time he'd fed, too.

Did all vampires look like this when they fed? Did they hold the same captivating beauty as my doll?

I shook my head. There was no way anyone could match Christopher. No one.

He cleared his throat. "However, what I have discerned recently is that, ever since we met, my ability to feed on others has ceased to exist."

"What do you mean?"

"Before you, I habitually fed. After you, the appeal and the drive to fulfill my hunger receded, until our night at the cave." His eyelids lowered as his gaze traveled from my face, down my neck, and onto his spot—his bite. The wound closed the moment his fangs withdrew from my shoulder, but the bite marks remained. Were they permanent? The idea drove me crazy. I fucking hoped so.

His tongue lapped his lips, removing remnants of my blood. The sight multiplied the need to take him, resistance thinning by the second.

His tone lowered as he said, "The very thought of feeding from someone other than you is repulsive to me."

All reason left my body as I aggressively took Christopher's lips. Fangs and tongue met my exchange as I lifted him off the floor and beelined for his bed. Somehow, I didn't mess up the stacks around us as we reached the second floor.

Christopher shed his clothes the moment I deposited him in his mattress. I made quick work with my uniform, a thud rebounding on the floor as everything came off.

Fuck. Why did I come here in the first place? There was no point in figuring it out when Christopher jumped onto me and wrapped his bare legs around my waist. His length pressed against my abs, frigid skin melting against my growing heat. My hands trailed down the sharp angles of his stomach until they gripped his hips. Before he could fully settle, I flipped us, our bodies never parting from our kiss. My doll rested on top of me, those eyes shadowed with need meeting mine as his eyebrows met.

“Ride me.”

Moonlight painted Christopher’s fair skin, black veins webbing around his lust-filled gaze and emphasizing the delicate contours in his stomach and arms. My fingers traced them in slow strokes. Fuck. His beauty was otherworldly. I equally wanted to tear him apart as I wanted to protect him, both tethering on a fine line.

Christopher lifted his hips in his straddle and I cupped him, fingers working his entrance until I could rest my tip against it. Maybe I should have been more patient, but how could I when I wanted every single piece of him? Especially when he prepped without me as he accepted my length.

“You were ready?”

“I must, especially when missing you is as great as the need for release.”

He settled down slowly, taking me inch by inch. Our moans vibrated against the walls and with each minute, my restraint snapped.

“You sure no one will hear us?”

“Lorenzo, the chambers are soundproof.”

I smirked. “Then prove it.”

He didn’t respond with words. Instead, his hips rolled with abandon, taking me exactly as I was—his. A cold hand rested against my chest as the momentum grew, my hands searching. One wrapped around his length and stroked with rough pressure. The other grabbed his waist and pressed down. My eyes rolled back as he squeezed around me, rolling and taking.

“Fuck.”

He took my lips, fangs poking through my thin skin. Our breaths became one. His moans became mine. Mine became his. We were a whole piece that neither of us knew was missing.

Pleasure erupted from the base of my spine, waves crashing until they settled. Christopher followed soon after with convulsions, ropes of his release painting my skin. Mine dripped from his behind as he fell into my arms, the two of us settling in our mess. Before either of us could grow too comfortable, I carried him off to the dimly-lit bathroom where I settled him underneath a lukewarm shower—just like he liked it.

After minutes of silence, I said, “You know what’s one thing I’ve noticed? You guys love low lighting.” Thankfully, with my sharp vision, I could make out every curve and line on his face. But the light made it easier.

His chuckle vibrated off the walls. Was it possible to bottle up someone’s laugh? Or just voice overall? “Our mother was quite sensitive to it after her transition. Though we didn’t harbor such attributes, the habit translated over to us. Vampires aren’t particular about lighting except for the sun since we are sensitive to it.”

It's why half-human guardians wore sunglasses outside. "Kind of like an allergy, yeah?"

"Exactly like that. But with sunscreen, sunlight doesn't burn as much as it used to."

"Vampires wear sunscreen?" I smirked and rubbed the foamed soap across his torso.

"Many do. Unlike humans who are supposed to use it as well, it's become a common practice." He rolled his eyes, but a glint shone in them as he took the soap and returned the favor. "My skin is the only shield I harbor. I want to protect it as best as possible."

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We stepped into the running water and I brought him into a hug. He fit just right as his cheek rested on my shoulder, our bodies molding into each other. I nuzzled my nose into the crown of his head, a floral scent itching against my nostrils as my finger twirled his hair ends. “Then I’ll be your sword.”

The rest of November was spent chewing over how to bring up everything to Christopher: his mom’s diary, Mallory’s location, the connection between him and Sophia Sephtis. A piece of me craved to blurt everything out during our late nights. But how could I ruin the peaceful moments when he was curled into my chest whispering sweet nothings? We’d just pieced ourselves together. I couldn’t bring myself to ruin it. For once in my life, I was a selfish bastard.

And while it took up most of my headspace, the rest was spent being hyper aware of one thing: Nina.

Not only had she been ignoring me—effectively at that—she was spending more and more time with Alek. They were constantly together—by the lake, on the grounds, inside the mansion—and even having dance lessons. Actually, he was giving her lessons from the looks of it. And besides, I knew my cousin. She was good at fighting, but not dancing. Lace had teasingly diagnosed her with two left feet—even though he was not any better.

They’re known to. . . play games on their indoor guardians, Lace’s voice echoed.

My gaze fell on Christopher’s window as I stopped in the trees inside of the second gate. Sweat coated my back and temples. In the distance, I could make out his outline next to his desk, hovering beside the very brother that my cousin had eyes for. At

Alek, the deeply rooted dislike for vampires reignited. Doubt flooded my system alongside pure disgust.

The feeling had always felt like it was instilled by someone. But it never made sense. Especially now with Christopher. He was still a vampire like his brothers, part of the same family that treated their guardians like shit. So what was setting Christopher apart from the rest? Why didn't I hold him with the same doubts I had for vampires?

The same questions irritated me whenever I was away from him. Although my mind was still clouded when not with him, I could force myself to think straight. . .even if I craved to focus on him and only him.

Any plausible answer felt wrong. Nothing fit him.Us.It was illogical and absurd. Somehow, though, not having an explanation felt like the most natural reasoning. But it didn't diminish the tug of war that waged inside of me.

Like the prickly concern for Nina.

Noon sun rays shone across the grounds. She wasn't on her usual round route. Where was she? She wasn't in her room, either—a quick eavesdrop told me so after sneaking out of Christopher's room.

We hadn't talked ever since I'd taken out my anger about Christopher on her. When I projected my feelings onto her—even though we were not far apart.

She was showing signs of liking Alek.

“Okay, what's up?”She'd blurted out after we'd finished our run.

“What?”

She motioned her head at me. “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.” Frustration with everything piling—my feelings, the diary, Mallory’s disappearance—had been piling, but for it to tip over and like this. . . it was unnecessary. At the moment, I didn’t realize this. Now I did.

I’d concealed the projection by opening a constant wound.

“You’re off.”

Yes, I’d notice her lack of concentration. The exhaustion that darkened her eye bags. But to throw it in as a deflection of my own problem was cheating—especially when our time was limited and needed to be preserved. Not thrown out the window.

I couldn’t blame her for ignoring me. The last time I caught her outside after that debacle, she ran from me, luckily saved by Alek calling her over to their massive garden. Even with the tall sunflowers, I’d noticed the way he glared at me until Nina met his side.

Bitter with a hint of confusion.

Mom’s voice, distant and staggering, hummed after six years. Distant memories with her hazy face shadowed my mind. But my bones still housed the hollow hole she left after her death.

What if Nina was gone just like Mom?

Rapid heartbeats thrummed in my veins and drowned my ears. A sudden numbness rendered me motionless. Shortbreaths escaped me as my throat tightened. Darkness

erased my surroundings and crumbled the ground beneath me.

“Katerina’s missing.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

A blurry figure stepped in front of me as a muffled noise filled the air. Fuck! I needed to focus. I forced my throat to swallow through the tightness, shoving away at everything that seemed to close in on me.

Mr. Amelle’s cool voice penetrated through my heartbeat. “I’m sorry, Mr. Devon, but there have been no?—”

“She’s my cousin. You need to find her. Please.” Slowly, the darkness broke apart, Tristan’s light tan skin paling as he nodded. He left before I could tell him something—anything—else. I needed to walk. I needed to dosomethingbefore this fucking panic attack took over.

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I ran. I picked up speed as everything hazed around me—as the feelings kept swallowing me until I crashed onto familiar cool skin. Hands gripped my shoulders and pulled me forward, my body meeting a lean figure.

“Lorenzo!” A faint, powdery scent covered the damp air around us.

“Christopher.”

Arms wrapped around my shoulders and tightened. “Bloody hell, are you well?”

I snickered, my vision slowly coming back. “What do you think?”

He didn’t respond. Instead we settled into a comforting silence until my surroundings came into focus. The darkness was gone, alongside the crushing feelings. A stale aftertaste settled in my tongue as I pulled away and met the cave’s bumpy wall, my body sliding until I sat on the ground. Christopher followed and took a seat beside me. Slender fingers caressed my thigh softly.

“How’d you know where?—”

He cut me off. “I felt you.”

That wasn’t the response I was expecting. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not entirely sure myself, but the only explanation I can offer is. . .” He turned to me, sincerity lining his expression. “I harbor this sixth sense when it comes to you. I can sense you without qualms even as you harbor no presence. It’s a sensation like no

other.”

“Really?”

“I wish I could give you a more concrete answer, Lorenzo, but it’s the only truth I possess.”

“I know.” I rested my head on his shoulder, the coolness emanating from his skin easing me. “I also have it with you.”

It rooted itself into me before I could pinpoint it. It had existed the first night we met and continued to grow with every meeting. The moment we fed from each other, it exploded into an instinct that called to the beast and me.

Addiction didn’t cover it anymore.

“Generally, it’s a sudden pull that I let dictate me. But this time, it was a sharp pain that hijacked my being into a haste-like state.” His heartbeat was at a normal pace, but as he spoke, it amplified. “What’s occurred?”

No one knew of my blood relation to Nina. Since the CEG didn’t require more than immediate family members to be on file for guardians, we opted to keep it between us and Lace. He was the only one who needed to know since he was the one who helped us.

“My cousin, Katerina, is missing.”

“Ms. Eli?” I leveled to look at him. There, in his gaze, a shimmer coated his eyes. “That explains why she seemed so familiar.”

I grinned. “That better be a compliment.”

“Let’s say it is,” he responded, his tone mocking, but it suddenly dimmed. “Is she also like you?”

I hadn’t moved, but my body froze. “No, she’s not.” The air stilled as my words cemented. No, Nina wasn’t like me. Thankfully, she never will be because of her medication.

“She shares many attributes that are like you,” he noted.

“Like what? Our good looks?”

He shook his head, but amusement bounced off his words as he said, “More like her directness. She’s quite outspoken, though not to your extent.”

“What did she do?”

He recounted a day when they received a sudden visit from one of the Vampire Regal Families. She’d stumbled onto the scene when she wasn’t supposed to. I could imagine her face faltering the moment she was called over. She was professional, but at times, careless.

Laughter rolled off me. “She did learn a lot from me. I’m not surprised she stands her ground with pompous vampires.”

“Pompous vampires that extended an invitation to her and other guardians to the Christmas Ball.” He scooted back, hesitation lining his expression. “An invitation I would like to extend to you, Lorenzo.”

Parties weren’t my thing unless a mission required it. And even then, it was an in-and-out situation. This wouldn’t be quick.

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I'd be stuck in a room jam-packed with vampires. The potential ways the night could end sent a wave of unease. But the thought of letting Christopher attend without me by his side tightened my stomach. With the current tension between humans and vampires, what if something happened to him?

Anger swelled as the beast's growls itched my throat. I cleared it but the beast persisted. Maybe. . .it would be best if Idid attend. Plus, my Doll has proved notallvampires could be pompous fucks.

But I couldn't fully agree as distrust filled my system. "I'll think about it."

Late that night, Mr. Amelle gave me the best news: Nina was recovering in the Sephtis' private infirmary after rescuing Alek from drowning in the lake.

On the first day of December, I bit the bullet and visited Nina.

The moment between my room to hers was a blur. Once the door shut, I finally took her in.

The dim light in the room contoured Nina's umber skin and highlighted her green eyes that brightened the moment they fell on me. Her long, black hair poured around her and cloaked her body, nearly touching the ground as she stood.

Nina wasn't gone like Mom. She was alive. She was safe. And after what felt like an eternity, I finally breathed.

## CHRISTOPHER SEPHTIS

In the years following our mother's passing, it was expected of me to foster the role of caregiver as the eldest and the first heir to the Premier title. However, it was a part I could never acclimatize myself to, a mask I could never bear.

The near nineteen years I shared with our mother, I witnessed her growth and descent alike. But one particular element that was never changing was her lack of maternal instinct. Child after child, the world worked against her. She grew more detached, her focus simply on That Man. In truth, a fragment of myself understood. She was never meant to succeed. She was expected to fail.

However, the other fragment I possessed resented her for it.

Because like our mother, I was not fit to nurture, in the past nor in the present. We weren't born with such inclination. It was a skill which required calibration through immeasurable love. Love held no ties in my existence. But abnormally, it had on our mother.

And the day she had displayed such boundless feelings, she vanished.

Yet, as her fifth death anniversary approached, her presence continued to influence all around me.

Possessing the History of Vampires and revisiting its scriptures led me to my library, where I discovered what I gravely needed answers to.

Mates.

Soon after Lorenzo's departure this morning, the thick literature pulled at me, my eyes scanning until they stumbled on a brief description that resembled Lorenzo's and

I's relationship. Though it targeted vampires, I couldn't deny the uncanniness. Yet there was nothing in our collection.

"Christopher," Sonia said as she bowed before my library desk, the persistent chime in my name amplifying the tenacious thrum in my chest. "We must speak."

Ruby red lips thinned into a line as large mirrored-shades fell on me. In the depths of the library, where leather-bounded text crowded towering shelves, no solace was bestowed upon me through my increased visitations. My chamber lacked such support, too; however Lorenzo's company during the dead of night atoned for it, a gift that continued to give when ponderous thoughts burdened my mind.

Yet, every morning, foregoing the guardian shift change, such affliction heeded in his departure, the loss of his warmth the foundation to my descent.

As the overseer amongst my brothers, my role in our schemes entailed a seamless implementation. Success was vital. However, what Sonia's concern laid in was a matter I had no way of succeeding—the very weight I had unconsciously buried during fittings with Ms. Hoko in hopes it would result in a nightmare rather than the driving wedge of my relationship with Lorenzo.

The final verdict of the marriage arrangement.

With the Christmas Ball less than a month away, its weight now cemented itself amongst my brothers, and particularly, Sonia, as That Man thrust on to her the dreadful task of reporting such pronouncement.

The Lower Belt, consisting of Elected Officials, and Cabinet, composed of Representatives and Heads of Ministry, alike were to hear of the decision the night of the Christmas Ball; High Parliament was to hear of it the night before.

“Has Anabella reported anything?”

Her father was surely as restless as his wives, who continued to pester their daughters onto us in recent visits.

Though it was expected of us, the Sephtis, to make a decision, it was up to the Ambrogios to accept or reject it. In turn, High Parliament would only be notified of such a decision after a sister supported the resolution—or simply denied it.

Sonia shook her head. “Nothing has changed, which is not good. Christopher, whispers are spreading of the Mubaraks’ disappearance. Vampires are slowly uncovering it and humans are nearing it. The stability of the Ministry and the Premier’s ruling rests on you, and if they do not receive an answer, then Heads of Ministry will step in.”

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Spiteful temptation snaked my veins. That Man deserved no more than to burn to the ground—to be left to suffer like he had done to our mother. Yet, decisions hailing from resentment would not result in my upper hand. It would further entangle myself—and Alek with his matter against Kaleb—and ultimately ruin Anabella.

I couldn't do such a thing to my only friend, the only companion that has stuck to my side.

Until Lorenzo.

A sharp pain sliced my chest at a dim thought deep in my mind.

There must be another way.

“If I may, I can assist?—”

She halted, an elusive presence sharpening as it crept up the staircase and drew near, the familiarity settling in the air.

“You may pay me a visit in my chamber during midday.”

Sonia's lips parted, yet no words left her as she bowed and vanished like a wisp of air through the separate staircase, descending to the first floor. A second later, a knock vibrated against the library's second floor entrance.

Tristan's broad stature obscured my view as I opened the door. After a brief greeting, he mentioned, “Alek is currently visiting the cemetery, but he should be finishing up

soon. Should he meet you here again?"

"No." I glanced behind me with straightened shoulders, the space stretching out of reach. "He can visit me in my chamber."

With Tristan's swift dismissal, my body tried to motion forward. I remained in place. A force pulled my gaze onto the access door within the ceiling at the end of the spiral staircase.

"Search through the pages until something catches your eyes," my voice rang beside my ears as if I had spoken.

"Why?" Alek had bit out, the familiar feelings of that day resurfacing.

The fourth oldest was silent and forbearing, an attribute that Noah regarded as a bore and Kaleb took as a challenge. In truth, all continued to bear the same qualities from childhood, in particular Noah and Kaleb with their continuous intensity and disarrayed selves. However, Alek had proved me wrong with his sudden resistance.

And the further the conversation went, the more astounded I had grown.

"You are undoubtedly digging your own grave, Alek." Anabella's voice had coated my words.

"You were the one that forced the shovel into my hands," he had said with more force, his mask shedding like a snake's skin. "We're allies. If questions are left unanswered, then this agreement is off, and we'll all be dealt with by the Ministry."

"Sit."

He had followed my order without qualms, his expression muddling when I

uncovered the note marked in blue ink.

“What is this?”

“An anonymous message. It was placed in my study, resting above that piece of work. Whoever it was knew the book was in my possession.” The rigidness from such discovery continued to line my muscles.

Alek, for the first time since our ally ship, had hesitated. “Why did you keep it?”

The stale taste of lies I had wished to counter remained on my tongue, the bare truth a knot burrowing in my throat. “Mother left behind many unsettled matters. 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.”

The household's resounding silence echoed Alek's words.

“How exactly can I help you, then?”

“Skim through the book.”

My chamber enclosed me, but the broken record of Alek's careful movements immersed my state. He had studied the scripture with such mystery, glanced at the history our mother taught us in our youth with awareness, childish drawings overshadowing the pages.

Dread had sunk to the pit of my stomach when Alek retrieved our mother's note—and apprehension thickly coated my flesh as my gaze trailed to the items on my desk.

“What is it?” I had alarmingly asked. As a response, he'd handed me the page he

pulled from the pocketed sheets with contents I least expected. “These are all books.”

“What types?”

“Ones she used to read to us as children.”

I had made quick work of searching for them. Alek had interrupted me by asking the dreaded question I yearned to never visit.

“How did you know I could uncover it?”

The truth festered as my lips unveiled what had never been spoken in the past—only unconsciously agreed upon. “Because you were mother’s precious child, Alek.”

“No, I wasn’t. How could you say such a thing?” The defensiveness had obscured the pain in his tone.

“It’s true. 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.”

“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.”

My voice had thinned into a whisper as I confessed, “I never once felt that way toward you, Alek.”

“Then why. . . why did you allow Kaleb to do such abhorrent acts to me?” The manner

such words had echoed then and now confirmed what I had overlooked: the pain in Alek's gaze, the exhaustion in his words, the very one my bones suffered from.

"I don't have an excuse. Nor do I have an explanati?—"

My reply had merely scratched the surface when Tristan's sudden appearance and Alek's retreat interrupted it. And swiftly after, I was pulled through that burrowing sixth sense within my body to Lorenzo, where I spent all night consoling him on Katerina—his missing cousin. Who then was reported to have been in the infirmary after rescuing my brother from the gaping lake.

Tristan was Alek's right-hand man, the only guardian to build a relationship with a brother apart from the established symbiotic bond. In no possibility would he allow Alek to touch the very lake he despised, one Alek knew how to survive, as all my brothers were skilled at swimming.

Suspicion resurfaced when the thought emerged, yet it didn't seize my regard. Instead, I studied the illustrated covers on my chamber's desk, the children's books appearing more like puzzle pieces I couldn't decipher.

Nor was my attention called upon by the knock from the first floor until Alek came into view.

"Sit," I muttered, my awareness sharpening to my softened tone of voice, one I harbored with Anabella. Alek took a seat with widened, dark eyes, his fangs hinting from his flushed lips. I removed my glasses, ice-cold fingers instinctively rubbing against the bridge of my nose as I shut the last book.

"What did you uncover? Is it about what mother left behind?"

"Yes," I said through an exhale that scarcely released the tension in my chest. "It

seems Mother had an obscure liking for puzzles and riddles.”

One by one, I collected pieces of paper from within the book's dust covers, each one penned in blue ink and scrawled in cursive, divulging a riddled text that shared a semblance to. . .

Why does it share similarities to Sylvester’s writing?

“Do you think Mother wrote this?”

I shook my head. “Her writing was sloppier and rarely this cohesive.”

His gaze fell on me. “Have you been able to decipher it?”

“No.”

“Then what’s with all the books?” He motioned at the vast works decorating my chamber in soaring towers.

“I read to escape from the bounds of continuous studies. What you see before you is what I relish in, not what I shackle myself to at times like these.”

“Then how can we know what the riddles refer to if you can’t even solve it?”

Suddenly, a gentle tap against my chamber door tugged our attention. It wasn’t an accustomed knock, but rather, a warning that I recognized.

What entailed Sonia to arrive ahead of time?

“It must wait.” I abruptly descended, Alek trailing behind me. Sunlight faded in the distance, the darkness in my chamber expanding as nightfall heeded. “It slipped my

mind that Sonia required my presence to discuss the marriage proposal.”

“Who are you planning on electing?”

An additional question I sought to deflect, though time was slipping from my grasp. While Davina and Catalina craved to entrap Alek and Kaleb, such pairs were the unlikeliest. On the other hand, Noah and Bethany seemed to be the pinnacle option with their amicable relationship that teetered on affinity. However, Noah’s instability was one too severe for the highest standing position of vampires. In truth, the remaining course of action was one I couldn’t bear.

I gave no response as Alek exited and Sonia took his place in my chamber.

“What are you doing here so soon?” I snapped. “I told you to visit later?—”

“Anabella has contacted.” The frailness in her tone froze my limbs.

“Is she alright?”

“Her mother has discovered her acquaintanceship with Sylvester.” Her nostrils flared as she exhaled, large mirrored-shades reflecting the bleeding expression that tore through my mask.

Distress carved darkness underneath my eyes. Fear contoured my cheekbones and jaw, clinched by an impending doom that caved my shoulders and chest.

Though not a soul was aware of his ownership, vampires who visited Le Maudit shared words with him, some out of pity, others out of curiosity. Every interaction we shared with the man was calculated, simplistic to the prying eye in the parlor.

“How?”

“Because Anabella has been handling his parlor ever since his vanishment.”

Anabella had a history of assisting Sylvester in times of desperation. In turn, it granted access to Le Maudit in ways no regular patron would attain in their lifetime. This was the manner in how I was able to review the video feed of Lorenzo’s attack on Sylvester and claim my evidence before it was erased.

Yet, never once had she hinted at such a thing to me. A cold wave thrashed my body.  
“What?—”

“Christopher, that should be the least of your worries. If you are discovered, too, and they decide to take it to the Ministry, you will be questioned for his disappearance and connection to the Mubaraks.”

“There’s no solid evidence.” When she didn’t respond, I hurriedly added, “Sylvester is nothing more than a dipsomaniac, incapable of lifting a finger to do such a thing. Anyone who has visited Le Maudit can attest to that.”

However, the memories in my mind noted otherwise.

“By you believing so it becomes a liability. Sylvester Reynard-Mallory isn’t known as a renowned artist turned newsmonger anymore. He’s the main suspect behind the Mubaraks’ disappearance. Anyone who shares a semblance of a relationship with him will be equally drilled.” Her shoulders rose as she deeply exhaled. “Whispers are saying the Human Bureau knows of their disappearance. They plan to strike down the Two-Species Treaty during the next assembly, and if this leaks, it will add more fuel to the growing fire. Your title as Premier’s son will not exempt you, nor Anabella as the Secretary’s daughter. The Ministry will not help and instead, due to their close ties, she will receive a decree to strip her Regal name.”

A question formed on my tongue. “How did you uncover all of this?”

“It is my role to do so.” She didn’t expand on her response as she cleared her throat.

“It’s also my role to know how to exit this situation safely. How to save her.”

An overwhelming sensation crushed my flesh and bones, sinking its teeth until every breath ached to draw, each second ticking away into an abyss, enshrouding the distant trace of intuition.

“Tell me.”

“The marriage arrangement. If she is next in line, her mother will not speak. Anabella noted it, but this is what I expected.”

The weight of the situation burrowed and twisted, what little control I believed to harbor slipping from my grasp. If this was taken further, and the History of Vampires was discovered, a stripping title would signify nothing when death would be inevitable.

But Lorenzo.

Anabella had protected me time and time again, the greatest burden she continued to carry in moments it crushed her. It was my turn to do the same. The simplest favors possessed the heftiest dues, and payment was necessary—even if it tore me apart.

We will find a way.

“Then tell her I’ve made my decision.”

That night, and the ones following, Lorenzo never came.

A week later, Sonia's heard whispers proved true, and my agreement cemented—even as I continued to ignore its existence in hopes it foiled.

## Chapter 13

LORENZO DEVON

Ringling echoed on the other side of the phone, tension stiffening my fingers when the same voicemail responded.

“You have reached Lace Fernandez. Sorry if I missed your call! Nothing personal—duty calls first. Please leave your name and number and I will respond as promptly as?—”

“Fuck, Lace. Please pick up.”

Fury raced through my bloodstream, unraveling something new, something crushing and engulfing that blurred my sight in waves. It fueled the urge to scream but kept my tongue frozen. It burned. It ached. And worst of all, it repeated Nina’s words.

“All you do is follow Lace like a lost puppy in hopes he’ll praise you.”

Small cracks pierced through the air as I squeezed my phone, glass pricking my skin. The phone didn’t light up anymore. And it was going to stay that way with how the piece of metal crumpled into itself like a piece of paper.

Shit. There goes my way of talking to Lace before I see him.

My jaw clenched, teeth clamping until my gums ached. I swallowed the frustrated groan that edged a scream.

“In hopes he’d give a shit about you like you do to him!”

My cousin's voice boomed against my ears. She wasn't in the training room with me like that day. Instead, it was just me, alone in front of mirror panels reflecting my frustrations. The room shrunk with every memory.

The way her face had twisted with a mixture of disappointment and anger. How her eyebrows furrowed and her lips thinned. The way her glossy eyes shook as if she was in pain. How she stormed away after I tried to reach out and fix. . .whatever I could.

"Don't talk to me!"

Nina had every right to be angry about Laces' decision with this new training and weaponry trial. The CEG took us in, but it was me who convinced her to become a guardian after Lace had taken me under his wing. He'd opened the doors and let us become who we were now. But the only way she had accepted it—accepted stepping up as a guardian—was through the CEG's oath to protect with body and heart.

She knew the realities of the world before we were exposed to it. Humans and vampires alike saw guardians as pests. But I knew they feared the new and unknown. Like half-humans. Like me. Like her.

Was it wrong for me to hold off for so long? She was never going to like it. That's why I had a plan in place; tell her in six days, right before I was scheduled to leave. But why didn't I wait? Lace was fine with my decision. As long as I told her what was going on. I stood firm on Lace's vision even if it went against his old ways. People's visions change. It was natural for Lace 'cause he was next up in line for the CEG inheritance. Even me. Possibly hers, too, with time.

But no. That wasn't the case, was it?

"I, Christopher Sephtis, accept the marriage proposal, and will marry Anabella Ambrogio."

Christopher's voice. Those fucking words.

For two weeks, I spent day in and out trying to bury them. Force them out anyway possible. Runs. More training sessions. Chores when I had none. Picking up rounds away from the stupid mansion after Nina's incident. But they stuck like glue. No matter how much I tried, they continued, replaying like a broken record.

Nina had a bad habit of stumbling on me whenever I was pissed. But I had the worst habit of taking it out on her by reacting on impulse.

This wasn't the first fucking time. But it needed to be the last.

Trekking out of the employee quarters, through the underground tunnel, and into the mansion, it took every piece of me to focus on the target at hand—even if Christopher's crisp scent called to me.

I shook my head. No. Don't you fucking dare.

I turned to the left hallway on the second floor, darkness coating every inch as if windows didn't exist. These fucking vampires and their love for the dark. No wonder Christopher wore glasses even if he said he didn't need them. He?—

Stop. Thinking. About. Him.

Nina's door was the first one, yet I didn't move. She'd be more pissed if I barged in. She never liked it back in the CEG, even though she used to do it to me all the time.

The least I could do is be on my best behavior.

I knocked lightly against the wooden surface. On the third one my hand missed the door as it creaked.

The door was open.

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*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

“Nina?” I whispered into the air. Instead of meeting a short, muscular build with black hair, I stumbled on an empty room. The last time I was here, she was bedridden, swallowed by the queen-sized bed that took up the majority of the room. The random wooden furniture cramped what little space this room offered.

Still, there was a sense of comfort to the fuchsia walls and deep plush carpet that the CEG dorms didn’t have. They were stark white and squared with a small bed alongside a nightstand. Sometimes a desk, but rarely since we weren’t meant to be stuck in our rooms. At least here she had a closet that?—

Wait. What was that?

A book bag rested on the floor next to a very familiar briefcase. The one I brought Nina on my first day. It was unlocked, and instinct tugged at me. I caved. Empty blood bags stared in response.

All three of them.

They were supposed to be stretched out until next month. Why had she drank them all? She never did so, unless she starved and hadn’t?—

No.

My gaze fell on the half-zipped book bag. Fingers pulled at them until orange jars spilled into my hands, each one filled to the brim with large, white pills. Pills doctors had prescribed Nina for her condition. The condition she could cure. The one Lace worked on tirelessly to help her with.

Pills she wasn't taking.

For how long?

My body tumbled onto the soft mattress, my weight pressing down on it as I stared into the dark closet. Footsteps echoed behind me. There was no need to turn around when I felt the shift in the air. The sharp inhale of Nina.

"You lied to Lace," I said, my voice distant. "You lied to me, Nina."

"No-no, I didn't!" She motioned, but suddenly halted when I met her gaze.

"Katerina. You promised you would take your medication no matter what. It was the price you had to pay to keep working."

I could excuse teen Katerina whenever she skipped pills or thought she could go without them. Resisting help in the beginning was normal. Diving into the unknown and being seen as weak was always the hardest. But now, after more than three years being prescribed medication, this was unacceptable. She had no excuse for this.

So why? Why would she regress when Lace and I wanted her to improve?

Unless she didn't want to.

No. I wasn't going to let her.

"I'm not going to tell Lace yet. 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."

"You can't do that. Please, Lorenzo. I have to go to the Christmas Ball." Her

expression faltered, the pain in her gaze caving.

I'd only witnessed her rampage once. It was a blur after all these years, but there, deep in my mind, a shadowed figure lived like Mom. Distant, irretrievable, but breathing with the little life it possessed. Always there—haunting.

Her figure cowered. Did the room suddenly shrink? “Who knows what could happen in a room filled with humans and vampires while unmedicated. I’m not putting that to the test just for you to have fun for one night, Katerina!”

My words echoed, but her whispered words punched me in my chest. “Did you ever really trust me?”

Our foundation was supposed to be built on trust. On days I thought it stood strong, something always wedged it, whether it was on Nina or me. We always played this tug of war, pulling at the remaining thin thread, always testing instead of fortifying it. It was why we fought about it. Why, even now, I couldn’t say yes or no.

“I can’t say. I never pestered you for answers. I respected your privacy and kept all my questions to myself, but if I can’t depend on you doing the bare minimum, there are no more excuses.” It was my problem to bear.

“What does that mean?”

And I needed to make sure no one got hurt.

“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.”

Tense silence wedged between us, Nina’s face completely hardening as I left and forgot all reason. Fuck all these stupid rules for guardians. No more sneaking through

the shadows. What would be the worst they'd do? Fire me? We were less than five days away from that Christmas Ball. Six days away from going back to the CEG. They'd be doing me a fucking favor at this rate.

Eyes fell on me as I pushed through the tall doors and exited the mansion, my feet walking to the employee quarters. But the last thing I needed was to be in that sad-of-an-excuse room. The gym wasn't going to help. Running would.

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

If it wasn't for the tail that stalked behind me.

The beast surfaced. I knew when a predator tailed a prey. It was in the way the air grew tense, how my sharp senses amplified and adjusted to my surroundings. While it was similar to the way it crackled when I hunted, this wasn't the case.

I was the prey now. In reality, I had been ever since I was assigned here.

First, with Sonia. She had stalked me ever since my arrival, but recently, she'd made it more obvious with more frequent run-ins across my rounds. With her, I wasn't as weary.

But with Mr. Amelle, I was.

We'd spoken only a handful of times, but not enough for him to be suspicious of me. Every interaction Christopher and I shared was planned. Precise. If it had been about that, Sonia would have brought it up already. Although I'm sure no one knew what was happening between us.

But that wasn't a problem anymore. I stopped seeing him after that night when I'd heard Sonia's voice and his response from behind his room door.

I will be accepting the marriage arrangement to Anabella Ambrogio.

So why was Mr. Amelle tailing me now?

Storming out of the mansion like that doesn't really make me look innocent.

I followed the path from the second gate to the first one, where it spanned to the quarters. Entering, I stepped through the lobby and sharply turned into a back hallway. Rows of empty offices occupied the space, but there, at the corner, was an undisclosed exit that faced the secret door I saw on my first day.

I took the chance. If it existed, it was for a reason—to help me.

Wind passed me in waves as I dashed through and around the surrounding forest until I reached the one place no one could reach.

The cave.

I'd lost Mr. Amelle, but found someone else.

“What are you doing here?” I spat at Christopher, his shoulders rising as he turned to me. Anger rushed through my veins but it wasn't enough to mask the overwhelming ache in my chest. It did nothing to erase the beauty that called to me. His intoxicating scent that fired up every piece of my body with electricity.

“Is everything alright?” His eyes were glued to my fingers. Suddenly, sharp tips dug into my skin. I released my fists, my normal fingernails gone, transfigured by the beast's claws that blended into skin and bled around the cuticles. “I haven't seen you in quite some time.”

I inhaled deeply. Held it. When I exhaled, the nails dwindled and revealed mine. “I'm fine.”

Did he notice I was lying straight through my teeth?

Christopher's eyebrows furrowed as he gradually stepped forward. “What is it? And don't lie this time. I can. . . feel when you do.”

“Of course you can,” I spat, although the sarcasm was beyond that since I felt it, too, in small increments. “You can do whatever your heart desires and fucking lie all you want, though.”

“What?” Sage green eyes deepened in disbelief.

Fuck.

“What are you talking about Lorenzo?”

“I heard you,” I muttered. “You’re marrying someone.” I didn’t know who, but I didn’t fucking care. It was someone who wasn’t me.

“It’s not for love. It’s solely political. Lorenzo, you must believe me?—”

“I don’t give a fuck!” Rage thundered through me and splattered my vision with red. Was this his plan all along? To string me along until duty called? But then why not make that clear from the start? Guardians could marry, but it wasn’t common. And for some likeme, who shouldn’t exist in this world dictated by politics, it was impossible.

His lips parted but he didn’t say anything. He took another step forward. My body responded by motioning away. “Tell me. Was any of this even real?”

“Lorenzo, yes, of course, but let me explain?—”

“No, let me explain one thing, Christopher.” Everything stilled. “This feeling I have for you—which pulses and grows—is beyond anything I’ve felt before. Something otherworldly yet not. And it has existed since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

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*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

Nina thought I loved Lace in a different way. But there was no way when I never felt it. Not before Christopher, where this feeling stood bigger than life.

He slowly shook his head. “Lorenzo, don’t?—”

The confession poured out of my lips with clear helplessness. “I love you.”

He stood awe-struck and silent.

“And if you knew you weren’t going to ever feel this way for me, then we should have stopped this when I said there was no turning back.”

When he didn’t respond—the fucker couldn’t even look me in the eyes—I added, “I won’t be going to the Ball and will be leaving the day after. This will be the last time you see me, Mr. Sephtis.”

And with that, I left, even if I didn’t believe all of my words.

December twenty-fifth rolled around in light rain and overcast, gloomy clouds. Everything was packed and ready to go. Except the loose end that stared back at me on my desk.

Mallory’s notes. The diary. The device.

I’d betrayed Lace to help Christopher. That was one mistake I couldn’t undo—but there was another I could fix.

By finding Mallory, I could complete the failed mission I kept from Lace. By using this chance in the new task force, I could atone for the lies I told my best friend. I'd deal with all and every repercussion for failing and lying. Even if it meant stripping my title alongside Katerina's. Even if it meant throwing everything I had with my doll away.

So be it.

I stood, but froze at a knock on the door. Nina should be holed up in her room right now, and given our last argument, she wouldn't come out to find me when we were giving each other the silent treatment. And with the Christmas Ball, everyone should be gone including Mr. Amelle. So who was it?

Sonia stood in the hall, my hands tightly closing my door as I stepped out. "Something has come up, Mr. Devon."

"What is it?"

She handed me a folded piece of paper, her fingers digging into the thin sheet with hesitation. "Although this is your last night, I hope you upkeep the rest of your duties until you're relieved tomorrow."

She bowed and parted before I could ask or say anything. In the quiet, I opened the note.

Two choices rested before me: finish my last mission that I had failed as the Hound, or follow my last assignment as a guardian.

The motorcycle roared to life, light December rain coating my skin as adrenaline raced through my veins. Wind gusted past me as I headed north to Silverman's Island, knots pressing into my stomach and hairs rising on my nape.

## Chapter 14

### CHRISTOPHER SEPHTIS

A day prior. . .

Raphael was the first one to enter the library, his presence a soft brush within the dense air, adding the slightest shift that may go unnoticed if not focused on. Had his presence always harbored such sheerness?

Deep auburn eyes stumbled on me, his body suddenly freezing then instantly bowing, each motion faster than the last. Round lips parted but ultimately shut and stretched into a fine line as he stepped toward the spiral staircase that met the ceiling. His inclusion was one I failed to grasp. Raphael was the puppet in our schemes who lived in the shadows, called upon only when necessary. This was no place for him. Why had Alek dragged him to this?

Realization twisted in my abdomen. The answer was in the very role we enacted on him.

Alek entered the library shortly after with a crisp white button down, in which matched Raphael's paling skin. The two shared unspoken words as Alek rested his hand on Raphael's shoulders and lightly squeezed. When Mr. Amelle and Ms. Eli settled into the room, his attention fell on all of us.

I had agreed to Alek's request to meet before the Christmas Ball due to its impending arrival. With less than twenty-four hours, each minute ticked away further from our grasp.

"The plan will go as such. . .

Katerina and Tristan will retrieve 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.”

His voice was the same, yet, there, in the depths of his words, echoed a resilience I never heard before as he filtered through our roles and designations.

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

“I will be focusing on the main entrance of the ballroom for Mr. Amelle’s and Ms. Eli’s secure arrival. If one doesn’t arrive, it will represent the failed attempt at obtaining the notebook.”

Kaleb had gone against my commands after his insignificant and senseless scheme, stomping on my cemented authority. Yet, his assertion and manipulation of Alek was accomplished by my failed observance. He possessed the ability to implement a new scheme—one as an act of revenge to Ms. Eli who’d shattered his inflated sensitive ego on her first day when all in our society treaded carefully—due to my negligence.

Alek’s newfound role—a role I never thought him to be the right fit for—possessed enough stability to rescind the authority of Noah, Kaleb, and I.

The three of us have continuously thrown Alek into the pits of hell. In turn, Kaleb’s demands and ego amplified, the unbecoming of him too large to control, too grand for me to cease as he harbored the notebook that could tear the Ministry and Bureau alike.

Another matter I had failed to acknowledge.

I’d known of its existence. Kaleb had a habit throughout the years of baiting it, particularly before Noah within our private interactions, but never did I think it would become what it was now.

Pages on pages of entries with tracked affairs, schemes, and underhand deals. A notebook harboring not just any leverage, but an upper hand no one else could conceptualize. In the wrong hands, it would lead to destruction.

By tomorrow night, it had to collapse and the notebook had to fall in the rightful hands.

A sense of pride surged when Alek cleared his throat. “Is anyone worried about their role?”

The formulated plan was meant to calm the torment that haunted my mind, but it did nothing as the crushing weight of what has occurred and what is to come burdened my shoulders. The leather-bounded literature was a feather in my hold as the pressure within the library intensified.

Synchronously, Ms. Eli, Mr. Amelle, Raphael, and I shook our heads.

Mr. Amelle straightened his shoulders. “Then Katerina and I will leave to discuss some protocols for the night.” The two bowed and disappeared into the outer hallway until footsteps ceased.

“Raphael, excuse us for a moment. I must speak with Alek.”

Raphael’s gaze traveled to Alek’s, the two sharing more unspoken words. Alek nodded, and he left after bowing at me. I instinctively removed my glasses and twisted the legs apart and closed them together, forming the key to my study.

Alek trailed behind me with careful steps. Distance was placed between us as I stepped away from the beaming light pouring through the main alcove and into the nearest bookshelf. When Alek paused amid the space, I tugged inside my trouser pocket, retrieving papers and unfolding each one. I laid them on the light blue cushion against the bench before us, coordinating the four of them by oldest to earliest discovery. The newest one was closest to me.

Alek drew near, his presence flaring.

“I discovered it during my early reading sessions.”

He studied them with an attentive, trembling gaze. “Where did you find this?”

“In my study,” I said as I peered at our surroundings. This room bore a singular entrance. Besides the three windows which plastered the bordering walls, each one was bolted shut. How could one enter if there were no signs of breaking? Furthermore, the entrance was obscure to the common eye.

“You didn’t see who left it?”

I shook my head. “I visited Mother’s grave right before my session.”

It was something that had sprung out of the blue, a visitation that I hadn’t planned. My body, on the other hand, had instinctively taken me to her after Lorenzo’s confession.

My words echoed in my chest into a hollow cave.

Why would you curse me with such a phrase that now imposes itself on the man I love? With this, he will meet the same fate as you. I cannot bear that.

Alek’s voice pitched as he asked, “You visited Mother’s grave?”

Lorenzo’s face appeared in mind, his body covered in mist as the memory of his visitation to his mother’s grave reemerged. It had haunted me the closer our mother’s death anniversary drew, instilling a desire that had always existed, yet had never tightened around my throat.

“I may harbor my own faults, but I never forgot her. But this will be a matter to discuss some other time, Alek.”

His shoulders lowered as his head turned to the notes.

“What are we trying to uncover?”

“A hint. 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.”

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

The recent note unveiled itself when I had escaped my chamber in the late hours of the night, when the depths of darkness cascaded upon me and tugged at the words I implored my mind to neglect. The gruff voice reverberated in my bones.

I love you.

More dire matters pressed before me. Despite such, those three words held power. They stirred all sorts of sensations within me, ones I couldn't think clearly with.

“How?”

I attempted to bury the feelings far from reach. They persisted as a thrum nestled in my throat, and in turn, my tone lowered. “The writing, for one, is the greatest indicator. 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.” Alek grasped the oldest and newest, leveling them before our gazes.

“Yet, two hold messages that contradict each other.” I seized the one in Alek's hand, studying each one closer as I assembled them.

Alek pointed at two. “These oppose each other. Then what about the other pair?”

A light flickered in his gaze. “One led to the other. All placed within differing ends of the household and timeframes.”

“The puzzle within the children's books was from our mother. The other three have

been strategically placed for us to find.”

Memories of each one flashed in my mind, a picture slowly unfolded, yet the contents themselves remained blurry. “There’s no denying it was recent, too. Someone on these grounds knows what we’re devising.”

“Tristan can investigate this,” Alek suggested.

I firmly rejected his offer as an exhale escaped me. Folding each note, I hid them in my pocket once again. “There is too much at hand currently. What’s been set in stone can’t be interfered with.”

Alek suddenly turned to me. “The first and latest notes were found here, which means they had access to your study. The only other person to have the key is That Man.”

The idea had briefly crossed my mind in the early hours, however. . . “Though it’s a slight likelihood, That Man hasn’t meddled in our affairs for the past five years. We’ll revisit this at a later time.”

We exited with careful steps, and once I reassembled my glasses, my gaze fell on Alek—who attentively watched me.

A thought occurred. “Have you thought about your alternative plan to take down Kaleb?”

“Not yet.”

“I suggest you get to it.” Though Alek’s plan appeared to possess all the attributes needed to succeed, it didn’t prove to be efficacious. If he sought to see this through, it was best he was prepared.

Alek's expression softened, his shoulders lowering. He nodded, and as a swift knock bounced from behind us, he uttered, "Are you still deciding who to appoint for the marriage proposal?"

The question was unexpected, one I couldn't bear to properly respond. In turn, I replied with what honesty I could endure. "Yes. 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?"

For vampires, we inhabited façades more than our authentic selves. Through the years, I'd adopted a mask that had become one with myself, the reflection that everyone saw, taking residence without deliberation.

I never had to wear such a thing with Lorenzo. Nor Anabella.

The thought brewed a spur of disorder, twisting and aching within me.

"Anabella and I underwent the process three years ago when we came of age. 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."

Alek stood motionless.

"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."

Sonia entered, breaking the moment between Alek and I, and as quickly as it came to be, it vanished when Alek took his leave.

“Sonia.”

“Christopher.”

“Anything to report?”

“The paperwork has been submitted and confirmed. Lorenzo Devon will be leaving back to the CEG after the Christmas Ball.”

Pain blossomed in my abdomen. Lorenzo never recounted an inkling of information regarding his reassignment back to the CEG. But it was one I wasn’t deserving of.

Lorenzo’s drastic lack of proximity possessed me during hours where sleep disregarded my pleas. All I wished to reveal to him about mates—about us. . . hovered. Yet, with the days wedged between us, no will mustered within me.

It was best for him to remain unaware. It was the only safety I could offer him—far from me.

The Christmas Ball was a demonstration of sorts. Although the underlying theme consisted of collaboration and distinction, it was nevertheless a façade for the true objective: power. Despite vampires ruling alongside humans, our kind held a firm establishment of power through the Regal Families that humans could never requisite.

Within the elaborate ballroom, each family stood distinctive within the crowd of bodies. The Puleluas roamed near the bar at the far end, opposing where the Nings stood alongside the main stage. The Lautaros hovered throughout, similarly to my brothers, but they didn’t match the Ambrogioses who were truly scattered. Thankfully, Alek and Raphael settled into their rightful places as smoothly as

possible. As did I.

I stood by the entrance, keeping track of Noah and the twins as I greeted incoming guests. Conversing with them when it called for it. Tiresome, but necessary as Anabella bore the same task.

“How are you?” I finally asked as we broke away.

Satin wrapped around her lean frame, exposing broad shoulders and her top-heavy chest, gathering at the waist into a layered train. Wisps of fabric sleeved around her toned arms and flared at her wrists, complimenting each light movement she exhibited. The muted, arctic blue her dress harbored aligned with my suit, highlighting our blonde strands and her boundless, obsidian eyes.

Her nostrils slightly flared as she exhaled, her mask intact. “Fine. Ready for tonight to be over.”

“And what of your mother? Did you let her know of your acceptance?” Although Sonia never reported if Anabella had moved forward or not, it was only reasonable to assume she did.

“What are you talking about?—”

My senses sharpened as a sudden tug in my chest, weakening her voice in my ears. No, it couldn't be. Lorenzo wasn't supposed to be here, yet the shadow that approached was one my body recognized before I could register as such. Anabella wavered as she was pulled into surface-level conversations by members of the Human Bureau.

Although Lorenzo bore the same suit as he did on the household's grounds, here, amongst others, he stood out in beauty and roughness. My body instinctively pulled

me to him. We met by the Ning family, where I easily fell into their conversation. The eldest, Ai, took the lead as the younger sisters, Fen and Yan, interjected. . . particularly when Liu, the sole son and the youngest child of the Nings, was spoken about since he usually vanished during social events.

Lorenzo's gaze was glued to the staircase, his back nearly to me. His heat was a blanket on my flesh. Eyes wandered, many remaining enthralled in their own conversations and liquor. Those who snuck a look at our direction settled on the muscular build shadowing me, obstructing the sea of rich clothes.

He'd always been a sight, but the gravity he held on me multiplied with an unyielding tug.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered for his ears, forcing my expression to remain neutral. Never was it a struggle in the past. It came second nature. But somehow, in this moment, it faltered.

"There was a last minute change. I couldn't deny it."

"What do you mean?"

Uncertainty hardened his jaw, but he pulled an envelope from his pocket and dragged it into my palm. My mask remained in place as I didn't turn to him, though it was difficult to not face Lorenzo. "I was going to finish what I had started with Mallory, but I decided against it. His location is here. It's up to you now."

"Was that all?"

His jaw hardened from the corner of my eye. "I had to see you again before I left."

"Lorenzo. . ."

Tristan came into view and suddenly yanked Lorenzo a few steps behind me. In an instant, I found Alek's gaze already on me and I excused myself, my feet following without a second thought.

"What's happened?" I gritted as Alek flashed to my side and we turned to Lorenzo and Tristan.

"Katerina vanished. Tristan thought it best to question her cousin."

"Why?"

He hesitated for a second before revealing, "We believe Lorenzo's the intruder."

I froze. “What significance does that hold?”

“He attacked Katerina during our hospital visitation in October,” Alek noted.

My negligence continued to disgrace me. Though it was absurd for them to think Lorenzo could do such a thing, I still hadn’t known about the speculation. Had Sonia? Impossible. A matter of this grand extent should have been reported to me.

“What?” Lorenzo growled as he stepped to my side, his tone sharpening around the edges. Tristan was at his feet and paused before us. Lorenzo’s fiery gaze probed Alek as he tried to collect himself by closing his eyes and taking in a deep breath. “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?” Alek rebutted, vexation oozing into his slouched shoulders.

“Sonia sent me,” Lorenzo muttered through gritted teeth as his gaze fell on everyone.

Tristan raised an eyebrow as he inched closer on Lorenzo’s side, further huddling us all. “She never misses an event. How can we believe that?”

“She gave me a note.”

“A note?” I asked. Lorenzo unveiled it from his pocket and Tristan unfolded it, my hands taking it to read.

We all fell silent as Alek took a step back, his expression hardening with thoughts. I,

on the other hand, did what I could to cool down Lorenzo with a slight touch. His anger simmered behind me, our fingers brushing alongside each other.

“This is ridiculous,” he whispered into my ear with a scowl.

“I understand, but you need to also see their perspective. The evidence pointed at you.”

“Yes, but the evidence is fucking wrong. I didn’t even know she got fucking attacked. I’m fucking fuming that she?—”

“Katerina?” Tristan interjected as his eyes fell on the staircase. Ours did the same.

Lorenzo tugged forward, my touch instinctively wrapping around him and keeping him to my side as Alek stepped to her. “You must control your anger. This is not the place to display it.”

His nostrils flared as he rolled his shoulders, his height realigning as he craned his neck to follow Alek and Katerina. The two walked from the main staircase to the center of the dance floor, seemingly a natural fitted pair compared to what Davina had chosen for him and her. Though the two were paired in deep plum attire, Alek’s velvet suit complemented Katerina’s flaring yellow, tulle dress better.

Alek’s attention was solely on Katerina, gazing at her as if she was the only being in existence, unaware of how eyes took in the scene. He showed no care to what could be potentially whispered as he smiled at Lorenzo’s cousin, fangs fully protruding. When had he grown the confidence to showcase them? Like our younger brothers, he would conceal them. Up until. . .he was next to Katerina.

A sense of lightness, leaning toward a newfound feeling, one of optimism and agency, coated my body at the sight of them. I glanced at Lorenzo, hope flickered

ever so slightly in his sturdy eyes.

Music poured, bodies surging the grand dance floor, following the slow strides of the thrumming instruments. Yet, the music didn't meet my ears as a pair caught my attention and the sounds tuned out.

Ms. Hoko hid in the shadows of the ballroom, a towering male figure beside her with a cloaked appearance. His head whipped away, yet the twist in my chest confirmed the silhouette I recognized from my youngest of years.

That Man's.

Lorenzo's nostrils broadened as his eyebrows furrowed. "I smell him."

"Who?"

"Mallory."

The fluttering harmony suddenly halted, and Lorenzo strode to Alek as Katerina and him finished their dance. Words left Lorenzo's lips, yet all that was heard was the echo of a microphone.

Davina took the stage with an ever-growing presence that drew eyes to her.

"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." Claps and cheers exploded, amplifying the sudden sharpness in my chest.

One similar to the night of our mother's passing, five years ago today.

“But, this isn't the grand news for tonight. Everyone, I'm proud to announce that I, Davina Ambrogio, am now engaged!”

How is this possible?

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*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

Heads turned to Alek, but my own settled on Lorenzo.

“A toast for those who have brought our kind together and to the one that has gifted me with the greatest act!”

The same hope I felt flashed in Lorenzo’s gaze, but it vanished when murder jabbed into the air and a shattering explosion blasted. Glass speared around us like rain, the dense weight of regret and an impending doom swallowing me whole.

Not again.

### Chapter 15

#### LORENZO DEVON

If I had the choice to be beside rotten human corpses, I’d choose that over drowning in rancid vampire blood.

But that wasn’t the case when bullets speared through the air in echoing waves. Vampires, half-humans, and humans dropped like flies. Royalty and not, reaching death or nearing it in seconds. Regardless of appearance, they all bled red.

Figures covered head to toe in black infiltrated every corner. Fear lined the guests’ faces as they scurried, bodies colliding like ants. Except Christopher. He stood next to me with hands wrapped around mine.

Screams reverberated around us. More rounds fired. If he stayed, I couldn’t ensure

anyone's safety. Because his was my priority.

"Get out.Now!" I gritted as the beast slowly surfaced, inching closer by the second.

"I can't leave you!" Christopher tried to hide his horror by biting back, but it was all over his trembling voice and intense cold skin.

"You will. There's danger, and if you don't leave, my focus will remain on you. This isn't a fucking request, Doll.Go!"

He hovered by my side, my back shielding us from anything and everything. His lips parted and hesitation hardened his face as fangs glistened underneath the bright white lights. When I thought Christopher would keep resisting, he left. He had no choice but to listen to his guardian. Because that's what I'd always been. His to use as a sword.

But I was his shield, too. He was mine to protect.

I fell into motion. Screams diluted in my ears as my main focus remained: get every breathing being in this ballroom out of here.

Nina got into action, too. We both fell into sync as the crammed crowd parted us. It was the first time my cousin and me fought together. Hopefully the last.

The same strain in her muscles lined my body. The same loss of breath from shock. While my offense was coordinated, hers was destructive. Messy. The Hound had gone through these motions countless times. She hadn't and I wasn't letting her go down this path. Never. Wherever this attack came from, it needed to be shut down—without the beast, even if he clawed to appear.

A towering body dressed in all-black and a hooded mask turned to me, aiming a gun

at me. Before their finger could press the trigger, I dashed forward. My moves were swift but harsh, the gun tumbling out of their grip. They bent and I drove my knee into their face. Their body slumped to the ground, out cold. . .but still breathing.

It was impossible to take over the hordes of attackers. While defensive and offensive guardians flowed through the chaos, it wasn't enough. With each neutralized attacker, more appeared, all varying in height and size.

But what remained the same were the guns they were relying too fucking much on.

Muscles stretched and expanded as I snapped the guns around me, offensive guardians taking note and following my unspoken plan. They handled those I left weaponless. It was flowing smoothly until guns aimed at my cousin, who had Alek and Kaleb, the third Sephtis kid, beside her shoulders.

Logic didn't exist in the face of death. Nina couldn't meet an end, especially not one like this.

I sprinted. My shoulders rammed into a back, guns rattling onto the blood-coated floor. Surrounding figures turned to me. Gunshots fired, but none tore my skin. There was no chance when I took every single fucker in my vicinity.

But they kept multiplying.

This wouldn't be a problem if you'd let me out.

The beasts crawled on my skin, echoed in my chest, but I bit it back. There were too many witnesses. The only way I'd let it happen is if I met death myself.

Another whisper emerged in the back of my mind.

You're about to.

Nina glided meters from me, her swift blows on a masked figure taking me by storm.  
She was way stronger than I thought. Had she always been like this?

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

Suddenly, the air froze as the man drew closer and her voice trembled.

“Lace?”

Everything tilted as a chill crawled up my spine, rendering me motionless. No, there was no way?—

Masked figures swarmed me by wrapping their hands around my shoulders and flung me, my body crashing onto the ground. A groan escaped my throat as pain spiked on my side, darkness spotting my eyes. . .until the unmasked person straightened.

Everything came crashing down.

Lace stood taller than ever before, his eyes never meeting mine. “It’s been quite a while since we last brawled.” The voice that came out of his mouth wasn’t warm or familiar.

It was emotionless. Distant. One I’d never heard before.

This Lace wasn’t the one I’d known for six years. He was someone completely different.

Nina’s eyebrows furrowed, the same doubt aching in my chest lining her face. “What? What’s going on? Why. . .”

“I’ve always liked a harsh brawl when the competition arises. I just never sought one out until now.” Lace motioned his neck to the side, guardians and masked figures

encircling us with heavy stomps. Two grabbed Nina's wrist while a few forced Alek and Kaleb on their feet—or tried to with the way he flopped around unconscious.

I barely took them into account as red seeped into my vision. Swallowing rage coursed through my veins, suffocating my throat as I tried to breathe in. But no air could calm the overpowering fury that grew, thickening to the point it became one with me.

“Lace. What's all of this?”

Burying the pain that caved my chest and pulsed in my bones.

“In the beginning, it was all a scheme devised by him.” Lace pointed the firearm in his grip at Kaleb. There was no care in the way his fingers loosely held the metal junk. “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.”

Feeding the purest form of anger that called the beast.

“What type of bullshit are you spitting?”

“Ah, ah, ah.” Lace waved the firearm in my face. Atme, his best friend and comrade of six fucking years. Where did that all go? Had it ever even fucking existed? “I don't enjoy it when obedient dogs bark back at their owner.”

The beast was here. He wanted to rip him to fucking pieces. And I had no sense of control—except a sliver in my voice.

“What the fuck are you?—”

Blaring gunshots exploded beside my ears. My fingertips froze. Fire spread through

my chest, flaming a trail throughout my skin. A metallic scent oxidized the air. A fiery punch echoed in my back as fear churned in my stomach. Where was this darkness edging the corners of my vision coming from? Words muffled as my surroundings blurred.

Hooded, brown eyes fell on me, the familiar warmth they had since the first day we met gone, replaced by a never-ending pit. Where was the boss that had welcomed Nina and me with open arms? Where was the best friend that spent countless nights listening to my worries and sharing advice to calm my nerves? Where was the comrade who'd given me my motorcycle after my first year at the CEG? The man I owed everything and more to? The Lace that saw my cousin and me as beings instead of?—

His lips moved, his eyes staring somewhere else, and the voice that spoke belonged to Lace, but the words didn't. They couldn't. How was that possible? "Lorenzo was ordered to be killed by the superior long ago. I, instead, kept him alive for my benefit. Yet, his feelings proved to be an inconvenience. We couldn't have an attachedhound, now, could we?"

My name was a poison he spat on the growing fog.

Suddenly, wisps of black strands fanned next to me, a small body sinking into the bed as a familiar face burrowed into my chest. Nina? Why was she so little? I tried tugging her closer, but then, she washed away, leaving me alone in the closing dark.

Shadows swirled, creeping from the soil and to the moon-lit gravestones. There had to be hundreds of them, but only one stood out as a pale figure beside it turned. Moss-green eyes settled on me. The hairs on my neck stood. Mom.

Who would clean her grave?

I forced my lips to part, but they didn't respond even as a mantra of Mom! Mom! Mom! echoed. She looked exactly like her. Dirty brown hair was pulled back into a bun, emphasizing the heart-shaped face that tapered into soft cheeks and thin lips. Yet, this wasn't the mom I knew.

Her smooth skin lacked the glow she always had. Her thin, dark eyebrows furrowed with irritation. And those eyes—they were hollow.

Everything stilled as light outlined her white coat, enhancing the words on the left breast pocket.

Cecilia Epide.

*Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:37 am*

No. This wasn't my mom. She couldn't be Elia Devon.

"You were a failure."

I had failed.

"Katerina, too, if she continues to be dormant."

No. Nina couldn't fail. She couldn't end up like me. No, no, no. There was no?—

A whisper crawled from my side. I tried to follow it, but numbness echoed in my fingertips, startling my skin into a state of stillness. There was nothing to inhale. Fear itched to the surface as voices blended into each other, but just as quick as it emerged, it vanished. My throat tightened as I tried to do. . . what exactly?

A distant roar echoed. Brightness in the form of sage-green blanketed the darkness in my gaze. Beauty wasn't supposed to be attainable in this world, yet I had witnessed it. Touched it. Loved it. Christopher had been mine and I'd lost him.

Everything washed away. A void sunk into me. Deeper, deeper, until only a brisk wave swept over me. I never felt cold, until now as it wrapped around my body. An empty silence descended, and I plummeted.

Luck had never shone on me. Succeeding was never in my cards. There was only one end I was supposed to meet.

Death.