

My Sister 342

Chapter 342 THE HUNTING FESTIVAL

SERAPHINA'S POV

The Elysian hotel had not changed over the last decade.

The same ivory façade rose into the Los Angeles evening, gilded balconies catching the amber wash of sunset.

The same towering glass doors reflected the red carpet unfurled across the entrance.

Even the chandeliers inside—visible through the high windows—glimmered with the same ostentatious brilliance they had eleven years ago during the Blood Moon Hunt.

I had known the Hunting Festival would be hosted here.

But no amount of mental preparation could shield me from the tidal wave of dread now crashing through me.

As Maya, Ethan, and I stepped out of our limo, I hesitated mid-step, my heels pausing on the pavement.

The air reeked of jasmine and luxury, but beneath it all, memory stabbed—a younger, shattered me, clutching silk sheets to preserve what was left of my dignity, heart in splinters as I was cast as the villain in my own life.

For an agonizing instant, the weight of the past crushed tight enough that I nearly buckled.

Then warm, slender fingers slipped into mine.

I glanced sideways.

Maya didn't look at me. She kept her chin lifted, posture impeccable, gaze forward like a Luna accustomed to scrutiny.

But her thumb pressed reassuringly against my knuckles, steadying me.

“You're not her anymore,” she murmured under her breath.

Her voice was barely audible over the hum of arriving guests, but it was enough.

I straightened.

No, I wasn't that fragile, trembling twenty-year-old Sera any longer.

The woman who had stood here eleven years ago had been uncertain, wolfless, desperate to be seen.

The woman who stood here now had been tempered by fire into something formidable.

I squeezed Maya's hand, exchanged a small smile with Ethan, and together, we stepped forward through the entrance.

My gown shimmered, deep obsidian blue silk catching silver like liquid midnight.

A fitted bodice flowed into a sleek column with a subtle thigh-high slit. A thin silver cuff circled my wrist; my hair fell in loose waves, pinned on one side with a butterfly clip.

The marble foyer overflowed with crystal light. Wolves of every rank and territory filled the space, Alpha insignias gleaming, Betas poised, high-ranking traders and envoys sparkling in gemstones and tailored suits.

Heads turned as we entered. The world inside my mind had quieted since Alois told me to reinforce my barriers, but it was not silent.

Emotional currents brushed against my senses like soft wind against skin.

A young Gamma whispered to his mate, admiration bright and unfiltered.

An older Alpha from the East Coast eyed me with skepticism and grudging respect.

Two socialites radiating thinly veiled envy.

But I sensed no threat. No spike of hostility. No psychic distortion.

So far, so good.

But my composure wavered the moment I saw him.

Kieran stood near the central staircase, dressed in a tailored charcoal suit that fit his broad frame like it had been sewn onto him. No tie—just an open collar that made him look both dangerous and debonaire. His hair was styled back, exposing the sharp cut of his jaw.

He looked every inch the Alpha of Nightfang—dominant, regal, invincible.

And his eyes were on me.

Not the casual once over he afforded the guests as he politely greeted them. His gaze pinned me to the spot like a butterfly on the wall, and the intensity of it heated my skin beneath the silk of my dress.

I couldn't look away, no matter how much I wanted to.

But I managed to narrow my eyes and silently pass the message: Careful.

We had agreed. We were nothing more than former spouses navigating cordial coexistence. No whispers of reconciliation or affiliation—not until we'd snuffed out the big bad.

But Kieran's eyes didn't leave me.

If anything, they darkened as they slowly trailed down my body in a look so possessive and hungry, he might as well have been touching me with his warm, rough palms.

I shifted slightly, turning my body in Maya's direction, pretending to react to something she'd said.

Then I lifted my eyes again and met his directly with a subtle lift of my brow.

He didn't move. Didn't blink.

And then—barely perceptible—his jaw tightened.

He turned slightly to engage the Alpha beside him.

Maya leaned closer. “There are a lot of things that can be made erotic. I did not think staring contests were one of them. That gave a whole new meaning to the term ‘visual porn’.”

Heat climbed my neck. “Shut up, horndog.”

With her heat approaching, I’d lost count of the number of sexual innuendos I’d been subject to.

She laughed softly as she leaned into Ethan. If my brother noticed the silent exchange between Kieran and me, he didn’t comment.

At that moment, music swelled from the ballroom signifying the opening dance.

Ethan offered Maya his arm even as he looked at me. “You’re good on your own?”

I nodded, waving them away. “Go, have fun.”

“Don’t get into trouble,” Maya told me lightly as Ethan led her to the dance floor.

“I won’t.”

They moved toward the dance floor, blending into the swirl of silk and tuxedos.

They made a perfect picture—his black suit sharp and understated, her midnight-blue gown echoing the silk of his pocket square.

They moved in perfect sync, his hand firm at her waist, hers resting over his heart.

The way he looked at her—unapologetically devoted, faintly possessive—and the soft, knowing smile she gave him in return was almost sickening.

Not performative. Not strategic. Just painfully, disgustingly in love.

My chest clenched. If there were no rogues, no elusive, powerful psychics to worry about—

“A pleasure, truly, to finally corner you, Ms. Blackthorne.”

I turned at the sound of my name spoken with polished confidence.

A woman stood before me—elegant, composed, entirely self-assured.

She looked to be in her mid-fifties, though time had been generous. Silver-blond hair was swept into a sculpted chignon, her emerald gown cut impeccably to flatter without begging for attention.

She offered her hand, and my brows shot up before I could stop myself.

Seven gemstone rings adorned her fingers.

Ruby. Sapphire. Emerald. Onyx. Topaz. Amethyst.

And at the center, larger than the rest, a moonstone set in platinum.

The stones caught the chandelier light in deliberate flashes, sparkling like a mobile kaleidoscope.

“Astrid Volker,” she said smoothly. “President of the New Moon Trade Alliance.”

I took her hand. "Seraphina Lockwood," I corrected.

She didn't miss a beat. "Of course. Individuality is a woman's strongest weapon."

I dropped my hand. "So," I started. "I guess Corvus got tired of having his emails ignored and gifts returned, so he sent in the big gun."

After our initial meeting after the LST, Corvus Amand, the representative of the New Moon Trade Alliance, who had approached me, had been relentless.

He'd invited me to conferences, panels, private dinners disguised as "informal discussions."

His persistence only made me less willing to indulge him.

Astrid's smile didn't falter at my jab. If anything, it sharpened.

"Corvus is thorough," she said mildly. "But thorough does not always mean effective."

"And I guess that's where you come in?"

A faint hum of music swelled from the ballroom as a new song began. Around us, laughter rippled, glasses clinked, alliances were built and broken in murmurs.

Astrid adjusted one of her rings, moonstone catching the light as her thumb brushed over it.

“I’m here to show my sincerity,” she said. “I hoped you would find my own invitation more...enticing.”

I tilted my head, letting my expression soften. “I’m flattered,” I said, allowing just enough warmth into my voice as I sent out mental feelers.

No spikes of hostility radiated from her. No psychic distortion. Her emotional state flowed with mechanical steadiness—regulated, disciplined.

She inclined her head towards the dance floor. “May I?”

I blinked.

A woman dancing with a woman at a gala was novelty—conversation fodder—but harmless.

I’d promised Kieran I wouldn’t dance with anyone, but this felt like an extenuating circumstance. Plus, I definitely needed to study Astrid more.

So I nodded. “Why not?”

I slipped my hand into hers and let her guide me to the middle of the dance floor.

Astrid’s hand rested lightly at my waist, her other hand taking mine as we started to move together.

She was a capable partner. Steady. Measured. Her steps precise without being rigid.

We moved through the waltz seamlessly.

“Your refusal intrigued me,” Astrid murmured as she guided me into a slow turn. “Most at least entertain a little courtship dance before outright rejection.”

“Most enjoy being courted,” I replied lightly. “I don’t.”

A faint smile touched her lips. “No. You’re a woman who needs to be earned.”

Her grip at my waist adjusted—subtle, controlled.

“Do you have any idea the effects of the LST?” she continued, voice smooth as silk. “Territories recalibrated. Supply chains rerouted. Influence redistributed.”

So that was the language she spoke.

Commerce. Positioning. Value.

“And you believe I’m...what?” I asked, arching a brow. “A commodity?”

Her eyes gleamed—not offended. Amused.

“An investment,” she corrected. “A very lucrative one.”

We pivoted together seamlessly, skirts whispering against polished marble.

“The Alliance thrives on alignment,” she said. “We partner with individuals who alter the board simply by standing on it.”

“And what return are you expecting on this investment?”

Something sharpened beneath her smile, and I felt it then—a crack in her mechanical composure.

Greed—pulsing beneath her aura like a second heartbeat.

“The Alliance does not enjoy watching value appreciate from a distance,” she replied evenly. “Especially when others are circling.”

We slowed as the music softened.

“I don’t belong to any table,” I said mildly.

“Yet,” Astrid murmured.

The final note rang out.

She released me with perfect poise and dipped into a graceful curtsy, gemstone rings flashing.

“I look forward,” she said, looking up at me through silver lashes, “to the next time we meet.”

“Likewise,” I replied, mirroring her curtsy.

She withdrew.

Dancing with Astrid opened the floodgates of invitations.

I declined politely.

Again.

And again.

And again.

By the sixth refusal, my cheeks ached from smiling politely.

I slipped toward the restroom corridor, grateful for the reprieve.

The mirror inside the restroom reflected a woman flushed—whether from nerves or exertion, I couldn't quite tell. I pressed cool fingers to my pulse and forced myself to breathe evenly, drawing in a slow breath before letting it out just as carefully.

When I felt steadier, I stepped back into the corridor.

I had barely taken a step when a familiar scent enveloped me, announcing the presence standing before me.