

My Sister 449

Chapter 449 A BATTLEFIELD

CELESTE'S POV

I had never thought of a kitchen as a battlefield before.

Not the kind with blood and claws, but this—this felt perilously close in its own way.

The clatter of utensils, the hiss of heat, the sharp, watchful glances that slid toward me and then quickly away, all pressed against my nerves in a way that made me wonder if a battlefield wasn't easier to bear.

I stood there anyway.

Because walking away would have been easier.

And I was done choosing easy.

The knife felt unfamiliar in my hand at first, its weight slightly off, the balance something my fingers didn't quite trust.

I adjusted my grip, forcing myself to slow down, to pay attention the way I had during Sera's mind-wandering sessions—deliberate, grounded, present.

"You're holding it too tight."

I flinched before I could stop myself, the blade pausing mid-air as I turned toward the voice.

One of the older kitchen staff stood a few feet away, her expression carefully neutral, though there was a flicker of something softer in her eyes—concern, maybe, or cautiousness.

"I'm fine," I said, voice tight and brittle.

Her gaze lingered for a moment longer, then she inclined her head. "If you say so."

She didn't come closer.

None of them did.

They gave me space—wide, noticeable space, like I might shatter if they brushed against me too hard or, worse, like I might lash out.

A part of me didn't blame them.

Another part of me hated it.

I exhaled slowly, unclenched my jaw, and deliberately dropped my shoulders.

The vegetables in front of me blurred for a second before coming back into focus. I shifted the knife in my grip, loosening my fingers just slightly and then placing the blade in position to continue cutting.

I brought the blade down in a steady rhythm, each cut cleaner than the last.

There.

Better.

This wasn't me.

Or at least, it hadn't been.

Once, there had always been someone else to do this for me. Servants, attendants, people whose names I hadn't bothered to remember because they never mattered more than if they were punctual with my meals or not.

All of that was gone. The kingdom I had built for myself had crumbled.

I swallowed against a sudden lump in my throat and kept cutting.

Sera's voice echoed faintly in the back of my mind, calm and steady the way it always was when she guided me through the fractured pieces of myself, separating what Catherine had planted as illusion.

'Focus on what's yours. What's real.'

The kitchen.

The knife in my hand.

The scent of herbs and heat rising into the air.

My breath slowed.

It worked.

It had been working more often lately.

The sessions were exhausting in a way I couldn't quite put into words, like clawing through fog and broken glass at the same time, but they had given me something I hadn't realized I'd lost.

A sense of...solidity.

Of being someone instead of something hollow and splintered.

My memories still weren't whole. They came in pieces and flashes, like dreams that slipped through my fingers the moment I tried to hold onto them.

But some of them stayed. Most of them came back as dreams.

Especially the ones with Sera.

I paused, the knife hovering again as a memory surfaced unbidden.

Sunlight.

Laughter.

The feeling of small fingers laced with mine as we ran through grass too tall for our legs.

I blinked, and the kitchen snapped back into place around me.

The lump in my throat grew, raw and aching.

I set the knife down carefully and reached for an onion, my movements slower but more certain this time.

This mattered.

Not because the dish had to be perfect—it probably wouldn't be—but because I had chosen to do it.

Because I had decided that I wasn't going to keep running from the things I'd done...or the things I hadn't done.

Mireya.

Her name alone made something in my chest tighten.

The guilt her presence had elicited had sat in me like a stone for days, heavy and suffocating.

But it had been...quieter lately. Less sharp. Less all-consuming.

I could think around it now, could breathe without it choking me.

And with that clarity had come something else.

Responsibility.

I hadn't been the one to find her. Hadn't been the one to pull her out of whatever nightmare she had been trapped in.

But I was here now.

It wasn't enough, but it was all I had to work with.

I finished preparing the dish, my hands moving with more confidence than I would have thought possible an hour ago.

Around me, the kitchen had settled into a careful rhythm, subtly curving around my presence.

The others still gave me a wide berth, their movements adjusting just enough to avoid brushing too close, their voices dipping whenever I passed.

I let the quiet distance exist without letting it unravel me, focusing instead on the steady rise of steam from the pot and the simple, grounding certainty that, for once, I had seen something through to the end.

The scent rising from it was warm and rich, unfamiliar yet oddly comforting.

I was making creamy chicken and mushroom stew with herb bread—or at least trying to.

Olivia had served it to me once. She'd been so delighted when I cleaned my plate.

'Mireya loves it too,' she'd told me. 'It's her favorite thing to eat after a long day.'

My chest tightened again, but I let myself breathe, pushing through the ache of the memory.

“I hope I got it right,” I murmured under my breath.

Carefully, I scooped the food from the pot with a ladle and transferred it onto a tray. I arranged each portion with more attention to detail than I’d expected from myself. My hands trembled slightly as I shifted the last piece of bread into place, but I steadied them with a slow inhale, pressing my palms briefly against the tray’s edges before lifting it.

This wasn’t about perfection.

It was about...trying.

That had to count for something.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, glancing toward the staff.

A few of them looked startled.

The older one who had cautioned me earlier nodded.

I adjusted my grip on the tray, making sure its weight was balanced securely in my arms, and then turned toward the exit, attention fixed ahead as I stepped forward.

Most of Nightfang was awake, the golden morning light seeping through the windows, casting everything in soft gold and shadow.

Just like in the kitchen, the pack members I encountered gave me a wide berth, but I was used to that by now.

I was about to turn toward the stairs when I froze.

I frowned, wondering what caught my attention.

Then I smelled it.

It was faint at first.

So faint I almost dismissed it.

But then it brushed against my senses again, sharper this time, threading through the familiar scents of the pack with something else—something that didn't belong.

My fingers tightened around the tray as my pulse hammered.

It didn't belong, but...

It wasn't unfamiliar.

In the worst possible way.

My pulse stuttered.

I had no business at the reception. I knew Kieran and Sera had important visitors this week, and I had no intention of crossing paths with any of them.

But my feet moved anyway, slow and cautious, drawn by something I couldn't ignore.

The scent grew stronger with each step.

And with it—a memory.

Darkness.

A corridor.

The muted elegance of polished floors and dim lighting.

My breath caught as unease prickled at the back of my neck.

I was there again. I could feel it.

The unease that had prickled at the back of my neck.

The split second of awareness before everything had gone wrong.

My heart started to race.

No.

No, no—

A hand clamping over my mouth.

The sharp, suffocating scent filling my lungs as I struggled—

My vision blurred.

My grip slipped, my arms jerking as the tray tipped off-balance and dropped from my hands to the floor.

Porcelain shattered against marble, the sound loud and jarring in the quiet space, food scattering in every direction.

I didn't even flinch.

I was too focused on that scent.

On the way it settled deep in my bones and poured ice into my veins.

It was the last thing I'd smelled in the hall of the Vesper Grand hotel before everything went black.

“They’re here,” I whispered, my voice barely audible even to myself.

The person who’d kidnapped me—who’d slammed a hand over my mouth and carried me out of the hotel—was here.