

Being

Book I

KEDI DANIELS



kediduide

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BEING

For little Kedi

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Prologue

MIL GUNDE WAS looking down at someone. Or something. He brushed his forefinger against his peppered designer stubble. His eyes were intense and focused, already lost in what he was about to say.

What he had to say.

He ground his teeth while shifting his weight to his better side. There was a beat of stale silence before his voice hit the air as if his lips were moving.

"You're not good..."

He paused a moment as that truth sat between him and his eager audience, wishing he could see the look on the creature's face.

"Since our initial meeting I've felt this...I've known good, in all its forms and you've not even managed to fall short. It feels to me as if your morals are muddled, and no matter how long you endure what you try to imitate, I don't believe you'll ever be a person. You're just not right..."

A stiffness planted itself between the disks in the shadow's back as Mil's words took shelter in the hidden thing's temple.

"You've been indifferent with this life — something you didn't ask for but also never bothered to earn — allowing what you've acquired a taste for to devour you from the inside out."

He stopped to prolong the effect he'd created, studying the dangling black strands of hair momentarily trembling as if a chill had swept between them in a fury.

"But not after this moment." Mil straightened up as the words invigorated the nerves in his spine. *"Something has come for us. Something new and pure, and right. You will be humbled and I pray transformed into this semblance of a human being. Something your Creator can marvel at again... Wouldn't you like that?"*

They were in a small, dark outhouse just lit by a camp light. A few yard and power tools were faintly seen on a wall behind Mil, and in front of him was the bowed figure. His face shrouded, he remained in a servile position.

"I would," the figure thought, the words filled with a depth that nothing on Earth could reach.

Mil turned around in his folding chair and began scribbling in a notebook as if he'd been doing that before he got interrupted.

"Ah. I almost forgot. You know your brother is coming."

The figure stopped himself from lifting his head.

"I understand that you and he think on a plane that is far above my comprehension. But his presence is vital, so I'll manage to reach that plane by whatever means." He glanced back at him, picking up his pen as if to think. *"...Well, I'm not sure if I should even ask this of you."*

That stiffness fought to loosen but had lost.

"Ask of me," the figure pleaded, ravenous.

Mil attempted a smile and pivoted in his chair to face the being.

"Look at me."

He lifted his head, his countenance barely veiled, divine and ageless. With an eternity glistening in his eyes, he

longed hopeful as he fixed on his master. His pupils dilated, smoldering, awaiting his next order.

"Thiere..."

Chapter I

KSHH! KLSSH!!

Iela shattered a couple of plates and glasses as she teetered onto her creaky dining room table. She clutched her burnt almond knees wide open, like she was in stirrups, bracing herself. Her jeans cut around the meaty part of her calves, she had on no underwear and her shirt clung to her with sweat.

"Get a fuckin' towel. Hurry up!" she barked at a middle-aged Roxa, who was about ready to slap the mess out of her.

The aged woman's biting scowl took over the bottom half of her face as she hustled to a basket of folded laundry to get a towel.

"I know what the hell to do. You lie down and breathe until you can't no more."

Iela's breaths stuttered as Roxa pulled her jeans down some more.

"I can't believe this shit," she muttered. "Been tryin' since I was as old as you and ain't never. Now, here you go again..."

"Shut the fu—" she gasped as her eyes darted toward a black duffle bag near the front door. "Where's my bottle? Get my bottle."

"Not till I see the head—"

"Get it—"

"No! Now, shut up and push!"

Iela's eyes watered as she bit her tongue and her head fell back from exhaustion. Roxa tried to hide her satisfaction, but she'd never mastered concealing her truths and didn't plan on learning anytime soon. Iela was the most hardheaded person she'd ever met, her extenuating circumstances only making it worse.

"We shoulda went to the hospital. Or at least a church—Keep pushin'." The woman steadied Iela's knees as she matched her breathing.

"Fuckin' church," Iela griped. Just the thought made one of her elbows buckle and she had to catch herself.

"Almost."

Iela was biting her face off at this point. Her canines pierced the skin just under her bottom lip and she held her breath.

She gave one last inhale.

One last push.

"Ahhg!"

Roxa swiped the towel and was at the receiving end to bundle the child, but something was strange.

It was silent and still.

It didn't cry and move the way a new life should when entering an unfamiliar world. And that wasn't even the strangest part.

The child was glowing.

The skin over the area where her heart was sheltered had a light emanating underneath as if due to some form of toxic radiation.

Iela and Roxa stared in awe. The light was bright, but not so much that it hurt the eyes.

"...We gotta go."

Iela could hardly get it out, she was so shaken to the core.

"Yeah, to a hospital—"

"No."

She slipped a knife out of her pocket to cut the umbilical cord. Then, flinching and sopping wet, she tried to shimmy back into her soiled jeans but slipped off the table.

"We gotta get that sack out!" Roxa urged as she went to help her with her free hand. Iela refused and used the slimy table to get back onto her wobbly legs.

"It's not just for you!" Roxa exploded. "Look at ya. You can't take care of yourself, how you gon' take care of her?"

Iela's head dropped. She got lost in the blood in her lap and the tears began to fall. She quickly wiped her face, struggled onto one of her knees, but it gave out and she collapsed into a heap. Her cries crept into the silent room on tip-toe, knowing it wasn't invited. She wasn't someone who cried and found her own behavior a nuisance, but she couldn't stop it.

Roxa went to her and kneeled. "Lord, if you cryin'..." She waited for her to lift her head, but instead of meeting her gaze, Iela's attention went to the child. They both stared holes at the quiet thing, who was just content as can be.

Iela finally fixed on Roxa, eyes wide.

"...We need to get her safe."

Roxa's shoulders leveled, but her jaw remained locked. "Safe from what? What you done?"

Iela didn't answer at first, hypnotized by her radiating seed.

"...I don't know."

That helpless look on her face was enough to put a fire under Roxa's sneakers. She shot up and hustled to the front door to grab the duffle bag.

"No. I'll get the bags. You get the car."

"You can barely stand."

With a grunt and a grand appearance from the veins in her neck and temple, Iela got to her feet and finished pulling up her jeans. Roxa watched her jaw lock as she made it to the bags as fast as she could. She checked on the life that was breathing quietly in her arms before she headed to the bedroom to get her own packed bag out of the closet.

In less than an hour, Iela had heaved the last of their apartment in the trunk of her black car. It was her unofficial first child. When Roxa found her that's where she was sleeping. It was hers now and she held onto it like no previous owners existed.

"Give me the keys."

"I'm drivin'. Here."

Roxa held the child out to Iela but didn't miss the brief pause when she placed the bundled joy in her arms. They got in the car and sat there a moment, minds racing.

"Where we goin'?"

"Just head south. You'll know when to stop."

They met in the rear-view at the exact same moment.

"Are you sure?" Roxa asked.

Iela instinctively pulled the child closer to her chest. It looked like they didn't have a choice.

Suddenly, a sound seeped into the car, filling it with a rumbling bass.

It was humming. Out of nowhere. Not any specific tune. It just hummed. Steady and soothing. Neither Iela nor Roxa seemed to hear it as she started up the car.

The hum, the voice, was strong. It drowned out the engine and the tires, but the child's ears had perked up as she looked around in wonder. She was the only one that

could hear The Voice. It was like a lullaby. The glow began to soften as if it really was being calmed.

The black car disappeared out of the apartment complex and down the street amidst the humming and into the unknown. Into another town and another life.

A few sparse rows of common garden flowers added color to a dark cement tower that was at the epicenter of a dead-end street.

Azaleas. Baby's Breath. Gardenias.

The house was tiered, but modest. Iela's car rested in the curve of the inner circle just nearing past where the neighbor's fence separated both properties. Iela most likely parked there on purpose. They were the only Voids on the block as far as she could tell. If there were others, they'd take a bullet before admit it.

The Voice was humming again, a familiar tune this time, but a tad different. It had grown to fit the one being comforted. What once floated, was now leaden with a sort of redundant triteness.

Swish!

A suppressed Beretta sliced through the air, hoping to silence what was now incessant white noise, but it kept going as the barrel pointed to different hours of the clock.

This was Mary and her wielder was a now seventeen-year-old Caiden Waters.

Her big, knowing eyes, soft and ingenuous, hadn't yet been touched by the sad truths of the universe. She got lost in the sound of the wind breaking in half by her own power,

and as if she remembered why she was breathing, her hand faltered.

"Could you please be quiet? You're putting me to sleep."

The humming ceased before she could finish.

"It's what I do," The Voice said. "Especially when you're on edge like today."

"I know. But not now," she said softly.

There wasn't an instance in her memory where she never heard The Voice. It's always been there, doing what Iela or Roxa didn't have the ability to do. A little understanding is all Caiden wanted. Roxa was the only one that tried. Iela gave birth to her so she already figured that made up for more than what anyone else could do. Caiden didn't have enough gall to tell her mother that wasn't enough. Iela had snuffed that out before she even knew she had any to begin with.

Caiden glanced down at her watch and quickly jumped to her feet. Not a second passed before a bullet grazed her cheek and she dropped to a knee. Wide-eyed, her head jolted around. The scar burned hot as she touched her face. She felt her eyes change instantly. She was bleeding.

She stared down at her hand as if it wasn't her own blood. It wasn't supposed to be. Mary was aimed, but her target was nowhere to be found. Her eyes followed the contours of the house and dashed from the clump of the small thicket on either side of it.

Nothing.

"I hope you get her this time," The Voice said.

She remained quiet. Shaking. Sensing.

"I keep telling Roxa Mary's too good for you."

Caiden spun around at the sound of the taunting voice, but as soon as she did, another shot. She jumped out of

the way and pointed the weapon in the direction where she heard her mother's voice. She went to the side of the house and hit the corner.

No Iela.

Then, the sense snuck up on her. Iela was near, but by the time she figured out where she was, it was too late. Her legs were kicked out from under her and Mary knocked out of her hand. She bolted for it, but Iela latched onto her shoulder and slammed her on her back.

She was about to connect her boot with Caiden's face, but she blocked with both arms, flying up at lightning speed.

Iela, glaring down, dropped her foot to the ground instead. Her hard eyes, permanently taugth, were now staring, steely, at her daughter's knee-jerk defense.

Caiden was trembling. Her heart pounded in her ears and adrenaline was like acid in her veins. She put her arms down and saw her mother standing over her, composed. Her tresses whipped her shoulders from the slight breeze, her eyes red afire. She was a towering inferno.

Caiden managed to follow her eyes, which had moved again to her weapon. It was so far from where it was supposed to be.

"You're too lax in execution."

Caiden knew she should look at her when she was speaking, and she did if only just.

"Your guard is fine. Excellent. But Mary doesn't feel safe in your hands. Which is why she's way over there."

"I had you, but—"

"You never had me, because you didn't get me."

Caiden's breathing steadied as she internally kicked herself.

Iela's gaze had now moved to the cut on Caiden's cheek. She kneeled over her daughter and reached out. She lightly touched her face and Caiden tensed up. This show of intimacy was foreign to both of them. If Caiden couldn't look Iela in the eye before, she definitely couldn't do it now, so she tried to focus on a blade of grass, a broken twig, Mary, anything until it was all over.

"I hope when the time comes, you won't hesitate so much," she prayed.

Iela stared at her a moment more, then she finally got up, eyes averted, and headed toward the house.

"Oh, and happy birthday."

Caiden crawled to Mary with a look on her face suggesting that's something she completely forgot.

"Roxa cooked, so hurry up and get ready."

She reached Mary as Iela went inside.

"Are you all right?" The Voice asked.

She touched her cheek again, wincing.

The sound of a barking dog revived her trigger finger. She found Mary aimed at Zinc, a white bear of a thing, who'd poked his head out through the bushes.

Caiden relaxed.

He seemed to be checking on her.

She pulled herself up and went inside, but gave Zinc a few scratches on the head before closing the door behind her. Roxa was too busy setting out plates to notice her just yet. She rolled her eyes as Iela strolled in and threw her jacket on the table. Caiden instinctively braced herself.

"She's all yours."

Roxa balled up the jacket and slung it on the couch.

"Hurry up if you want time to eat." Roxa glanced at Caiden and quickly grabbed her chin. "What the hell is this?"

Caiden's eyes shot to Iela's back.

"It was an accident," Iela tossed back over her shoulder as she disappeared down the hall.

"That's all she do is have accidents. She don't know how to do nothin' else," she said to herself, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Roxa, I'm fine. I have to hurry up."

Caiden quickly climbed the stairs as she heard Roxa slamming nearly everything she touched in the kitchen. She got to the top of the stairs but stopped cold.

The double doors across the hall from her bedroom beckoned to her. She walked up to them and hesitantly hovered her hand close to one of the knobs.

"Is there something wrong?" The Voice said.

"No," she replied but didn't sound sure.

There was a warmth emanating from the knob and door. Just like before. Like The Voice, it was something that had always been there.

She looked down at the tattered watch on her wrist.

"The time," The Voice warned.

"I know."

She backed up and went into her room to put up Mary before heading down the hall to the bathroom to shower and brush her teeth. She soon found herself staring in the mirror. She leaned closer to get a better look at her wound. She opened a drawer and found an antibiotic ointment to dab on her cut. Her hand went to a box of bandaids but she didn't pick them up.

"Don't give 'em a reason Cai..." she told herself and closed the drawer.

Those deep russet eyes caught her in the mirror. They caressed the wet curly baby hair plastered to her forehead

and followed a bead of sweat as it slid off the curve of her collarbone and down her cleavage. She opened her towel and her moist body shocked her into what she was doing. Caiden wrapped herself back up, tight, and went back to her room to get dressed.

Black jeans, thick opaque top, and boots. Iela wanted to make sure that no one even suspected that her daughter had a flame as a heart.

Her room was windowless. A bed, a desk with a lamp and chair, and a closet were all there was. Caiden swiped a Pessoa off the top of the stack of books occupying the small space between the wall and her bed.

"Do you have all that you need?" The Voice asked.

Caiden raked her hair back into a low ponytail and smiled as she opened the book.

"Yes, Roxa."

"Forgive me for making sure you're prepared for your first day. You aren't worried? You're reading Pessoa..."

She smiled faintly, remembering what she was about to do today, and propped herself up on her elbows. "You worry enough for the both of us. I did ask for this, so I'm more excited than worried."

Caiden jerked and jumped out of bed. She opened her closet and grabbed Mary out of a steel lockbox. The weapon was cold as she slid it in her back holster.

Knock. Knock.

She quickly pulled her sweatshirt down over the gun and threw herself across the bed to start reading again. "Roxa?"

The woman came inside with a floured apron on. "Every time I come in here I get a knot in my chest."

"And so do I," Caiden said as she sat on her knees. "I like how my room is."

"Cuz you don't have a choice." Roxa closed the closet door and put her book back in its place. "If you was my daughter..." She stopped and eyed Caiden.

"Roxa."

Roxa went to the girl and embraced her so tight, she heard her back crack.

"...Roxa?"

"Nope."

It was a second before Caiden felt her backside had lightened. Roxa had snatched Mary out of her holster and was checking to see if it was loaded.

"I need her," Caiden stated in near physical pain.

"I have a briefcase for your books and chicken salad for your lunch waitin' for you downstairs." Roxa eyed her like she was crazy. "You won't make it through the front door with this thing. I'm talkin' about my front door."

"What if something happens?"

That gun was both her peace and pride. She rarely went anywhere without it. When she did go somewhere that is. High school was going to be her first venture out alone and from all the cautionary tales Iela has been feeding her since she began asking to attend school, she would need all the protection she could get.

"Relax, child." Roxa sat next to her on the bed. "You have all the weapons you'll need if anything should happen."

Roxa looked her over, particularly at her top. Caiden instinctively put her hand over her heart.

"This..." Then, she suddenly panicked. "Can you tell?"

"No. And they won't be able to either."

Caiden's brow furrowed.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Her eyes attempted to change to another color.

"You can't lie, so stop tryin'."

"I don't wanna be late, Roxa."

They locked eyes, but somehow, Roxa knew. She gently took Caiden's hand in her own. "Iela taught you everything you need to know. You gon' be fine. Okay? Say 'okay'."

Caiden couldn't bring herself to believe that but nodded anyway. "Okay."

"Now, get your butt to the table. I cooked."

"You always cook."

She followed Roxa out of her room, with her nose in the air, but as they got downstairs, her appetite diminished. Iela's boots were propped up on a chair, her face hidden behind a newspaper. The headline "*Brint Infects The South*" was blazoned on the front page of the business section. It was above a picture of a sultry pin-up styled woman.

Today it was business, yesterday it was real estate. Caiden had no idea why her mother was reading the paper. She didn't need to work because she was allegedly on disability. Caiden had no idea what disability her mother had, but Roxa always joked and said it was for being too hard-headed. Caiden was forever curious about the real reason, but nothing concerning Iela was ever her business, even if it had something personally to do with her.

She sat down across from Iela and began to nibble.

"What kind of a name is Brint, anyway?"

Roxa brought a tray of assorted teas to the table. Her mouth twisted when she saw how comfortable Iela was with her handcrafted oak chairs.

"Sound like a typo— And get yo' filthy boots out my chair."

There was a defiant pause before Iela's boots slid to the floor.

"I think I should start walking," Caiden cut in.

"Eat," Iela said, as she turned a page.

"You'll need extra strength for all the lyin' you gonna be doin' today."

Iela daggered the woman a look before going to Caiden again.

"Eat some more."

"Yes, ma'am."

Caiden started forcing down more food as she and Roxa watched Iela get up from the table first. The Voice began to hum softly in her head and she chewed in rhythm with it until she couldn't eat anymore. She grabbed her briefcase, a functional look-at-me sign that belonged to Roxa's dead husband, and stepped outside into the peeking sun rays. It was hard to be nervous when the weather was like this, but she was a natural.

She saw Iela leaning in her car, rummaging in the glove box.

"Are you okay?" The Voice asked.

Caiden answered as low as she could, "I don't know yet."

She was about to be on her way when Iela got out of the car. She looked like she wanted to say something, though Caiden already knew what it was. She'd been hearing it all her life.

"Remember what I've been saying." Her tone was firm and rehearsed. "You don't exist. So act like it."

"Yes, ma'am."

And Iela didn't look her way again.

She looked around at the houses as she started on her way. The beaten bricked faces were as emotive as the people

that used to live in them. As far as she knew, they were the only Voids that lived on the dead-end street, maybe in the entire neighborhood. It was difficult to keep track of the Void population because anyone could become one at any time, according to her mother. The only other Void that Caiden had intimate contact with was her mother, so that made her ten-minute walk to school even more nerve-wracking.

Myerworth's steps were teeming with students, diverse, and somewhat cliqued off. They were posted up against the medium-sized brick building, at a perfectly convenient distance, so it could be known who associated with whom in a couple of glances. Even if you were in a class with the girl or boy next door, that didn't mean that you had any automatic rights to a friendly nod.

Caiden's strides started to slow and as if on cue, she quickly became self-conscious.

"Go on," The Voice pushed. "Though your pace was like the beat of a death knell, you've managed to be on time."

"How did you know—"

She sucked in her words as a boy with ombre locs slid her a weird look before crossing the street. She eventually followed after him and joined the crowd heading to the front door, until something hit her.

Hard.

A wave shot through her.

Pure energy.

It hit like a wall, damn near staggering her. She had to stop.

She *needed* to stop.

Caiden felt an urge to search the crowd and that's when she found herself being drawn to a boy. He was looking

down, his face being struck with every thought that crossed his mind, so he barely lifted his head. She watched him for a moment, making sure he was indeed the cause of this lightning bolt. He got in the crowd next to an all-American type. Their hands interlocked, warm and brief, before breaking as they entered the building.

She continued to stand there as the feeling subsided the further away the boy got. There was nothing else she could do and she stood there in a daze.

"Caiden," The Voice called.

She snapped out of it and cautiously made her way inside.

To say things got worse would be an understatement. This new world engulfed her all at once.

The emotions.

They were electric, hollow, and potent. They were exactly what emotions sounded like when you felt them.

Caiden was trying her best to keep up with the bustle but was experiencing an empathic sensory overload. She had to find some refuge.

Small relief washed over her when she got to her first class. The teacher was already writing on the board. She noticed his sleeveless vest and glistening Oxfords and for some odd reason found it strange. Not exactly on a teacher, but on the man himself.

Caiden walked into class to a few curious eyes, mostly to her briefcase, and headed straight to an empty seat in the back.

"Good morning. Welcome to your last year of high school. I'm Mil Gunde," he said as if he was starting a keynote presentation. "Or Mr. or Prof. Gunde, and this is Government."

There was some light chatter as most of the students already knew each other. Caiden just kept her eyes forward.

"Let's not waste any time and get the business out of the way first."

Mil motioned with a stack of papers to someone sitting in front of Caiden. She wouldn't have paid them any mind if it weren't for their ice cream melting smile and the obviously heavy bun on top of their head, fighting a tattered ribbon, bouncing down the aisles.

It wasn't until Caiden received her sheet of paper that she noticed that the person was a boy. She tried not to stare.

"Welcome to Myerworth," he whispered, leaning slightly down for a second.

Caiden gave him a faint smile as he noticed the wound on her cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered back.

"Looks like that hurt."

Before she could stop it, her hand went straight to her cheek and her eyes shifted like a switch. She hid immediately as a reflex, but the boy had already seen it. He gave Mil a look, who acknowledged him but didn't return it.

Caiden ducked her head in her briefcase to hide her face and to get something to write with. She spotted a black box with a note on it.

It read: "*and one to grow on.*"

She opened the box. It was a brand new shiny watch. She managed to smile to herself. Roxa remained consistent with her practical gift-giving.

Then, almost abruptly, the atmosphere turned on a point.

Faint, muted screaming flooded the classroom just like the emotions. Caiden's head jugged around, but it was only calm. She was the only one that could hear it.

Mil eyed her briefly as he continued to take out another stack of papers.

"Keep it."

Caiden saw a pencil placed on the edge of her desk. Not sure of her eyes yet, she didn't lift her head to see where it came from.

"Thank you," she said, just under a whisper.

She put her new watch on and tried to look up at the girl who came to her rescue. She wasn't sure how she would react if she did see her changing eyes, but she assumed that she probably wouldn't still be smiling at her like she was doing now, so everything seemed okay.

But when their eyes met, the screaming entered the classroom again. A loud, alarming force.

"I'm Alise."

All Caiden could do was stare into her eyes.

Friendly. Human.

She wasn't even sure she heard her name.

Caiden had to look away. She dropped her head to her paper and began filling it out. Alise assumed she didn't want to risk getting in trouble and began working on her own sheet.

Caiden read over everything, which seemed basic at first until she came across an odd question: "*What kind of being?*"

She hesitated. Torn.

The pencil between her fingers became moist with sweat as it contemplated checking the left or right box.

"If you're finished, please pass your papers forward and I'll collect them," Mil said at the board.

She quickly checked the box labeled "Void".

"Finished?"

The boy had turned around in his chair, not checking once to see if she was, but watching her face.

She didn't look up but handed him her paper. He looked it over like it was his own before he glanced at the front of the room. He got the most subtle of go-aheads from Mil. It was like an exchange didn't even take place.

The boy erased the checkbox marked "Void" on Caiden's paper and checked the "Human" box instead.

"Alise, do you mind running these down to the front office after class?" Mil asked.

"Sure, professor."

Caiden turned away from her class to look out of the window. Everything slowly began to fade into the background as she continued to focus on getting her bearings. Her eyes, a striking shade of amber, hadn't completely gone back to their dark brown yet.