

My Sister 137

Chapter 137 SIDE BY SIDE

SERAPHINA'S POV

Need proof that this was an illusion and someone somewhere was controlling the fog?

As soon as I recognized William, he turned in our direction. We would have remained hidden, but then the fog shifted, curling like restless spirits around the clearing, and we were suddenly exposed.

Our eyes met and, for a tense heartbeat, the forest itself seemed to hold its breath.

Then William's shoulders loosened, his rigid stance softening.

"Seraphina," he said, voice warm enough to cut through the chill. "It's just you."

Relief flickered in his expression, chasing away the hard mask of an Alpha on guard, and I found myself relaxing slightly.

For a moment, I almost forgot we stood in the middle of a brutal competition.

He looked like the man I'd met at the gala—gracious, steady, carrying his brother's sharpness in his jawline but softening it with his own brand of kindness.

"William." My voice came out steadier than I felt. "You startled us."

His lips twitched with the faintest smile. "The feeling's mutual." His eyes flicked past me and hardened ever so slightly as he assessed the rest of my team.

Judy bristled like a cat, her hand still on her blade, Finn's stare was cautious but unblinking, and Talia shrank behind them. Roxy, mud-stained, yet defiant, folded her arms and looked ready to snap if he so much as breathed wrong.

William spread his hands in a nonthreatening gesture. "We don't need to be enemies here. Not when the woods themselves are enough of one."

The tension in my chest loosened another fraction, and I took a shallow breath. I gave a slow nod. "Agreed."

His team emerged from the haze—five in total, including William.

They looked like warriors bred for endurance: broad shoulders, sharp eyes, every movement deliberate.

But there was strain in their pale faces, a tightness around the mouth and eyes. The fog was clawing at them a lot harder than it clawed at us.

The smile William gave me reminded me longingly of Lucian. “We should move together. Strength in numbers and less chance of ambush. What do you say?”

I hesitated.

It was a risk. Traveling with another team meant exposing our strengths and weaknesses— and splitting any discoveries.

But it also meant security in the face of predators—both human and otherwise—that may lurk in the fog.

We’d been lucky so far, but just because the fog didn’t affect us didn’t mean dangers didn’t exist that could.

I measured his expression, looking for the flicker of duplicity, the calculation of someone ready to use us. What I found instead was sincerity. And the quiet trustworthiness I’d glimpsed before at the gala.

“Okay,” I said at last. “Until the shards are gone.”

He inclined his head, sealing the verbal pact. “Side by side.”

We set off together in a wary procession of near strangers united by necessity.

My team stayed close together, vigilantly watching our surroundings, while William's group moved out slightly ahead, scanning the path and maintaining vigilance, their formation signaling practiced coordination.

It was almost peaceful for a stretch. The damp earth squelched beneath our boots, the mist swallowing our outlines and spitting them back in fractured silhouettes.

Our breaths mingled, warm against the cold bite of the woods.

Then one of William's men staggered.

"Mark?" William turned sharply, just in time to catch his comrade's shoulder. The man's eyes rolled back, his knees buckling, before his body slumped fully into his Alpha's arms.

"Shit!" one of the others cursed, rushing to help.

"Maven!" William barked, and a woman with dark braids tied back tightly and eyes shadowed with fatigue surged forward, dropping to her knees at once.

Her hands worked with brisk efficiency as she checked the man's pulse, lifted his eyelids, pressed fingers against the side of his throat.

"He's breathing," she announced, though her voice carried a thread of unease. "But he's not conscious. His symptoms are worsening."

William's brow furrowed, his grip tightening on his unconscious teammate.

"Symptoms?" I asked. "What symptoms?"

Maven didn't answer. Or perhaps she couldn't—her hands trembled faintly as she reached for her satchel, pulling out herbs and salves with jerky haste.

We'd all been given the same resources in packs, but she didn't look like she knew what to do with theirs. Sweat gleamed along her brow as her shaky fingers fumbled with the vials.

I exchanged a glance with Judy, then with Finn. Our gazes all said the same thing: Something wasn't right.

"It's the fog," another of William's men—Bob, I recalled dimly—suddenly growled.

His eyes burned with suspicion as he turned on me and my team. “The Omegas. Look at them. They’re fine. Too fine.”

The others shifted uneasily, their gazes sliding toward us, replicating Bob’s suspicion.

My stomach clenched, and suddenly pairing up sounded like the stupidest thing I’d ever done.

“What are you suggesting?” I asked, calmly stepping between their accusing stares and my team, despite the nerves flaring up under my skin.

Bob sneered. “I’m suggesting this isn’t an accident. I’m suggesting that your precious Lucian Reed designed this fog to cripple the strong and let his little pets waltz through unharmed.” He scoffed bitterly. “Poison masked as a trial. A rigged game to guarantee OTS’s victory.”

Roxy bristled, stepping forward with her fists clenched. “Hey, watch your fucking mouth—”

“Enough!” William barked.

He shot a reprimanding look at Bob. “Take heed how you speak. Lucian is my brother and a former member of our pack. Don’t forget that.”

Bob ducked his head. “I understand, Alpha...but,”—he pointed at Talia, at Finn, at me—“they’re walking like the fog’s nothing. Our brothers are collapsing, and they’re barely blinking. You call that a coincidence?”

William’s jaw flexed, and he said nothing, uncertainty flickering in his eyes.

For some reason, that doubt in his eyes scorched me. I wanted to rush to Lucian’s defense; he would never do something so underhanded...

But hadn’t I myself had the same doubts about the strategy behind the fog?

But whatever reason Lucian had, I wouldn’t stand here and listen to his name be tarnished.

I folded my arms and met the heat of Bob’s glare with ice. “Do you have proof of your accusations?”

Bob’s mouth opened—then closed.

All the fight left me as his hands twitched, as if grasping for something invisible. Before he could muster words to further fuel his argument, his body jerked violently—and he crumpled.

Maven let out a strangled cry, dropping her herbs to reach for him. But even she swayed on her knees, her breath hitching, skin paling to almost translucent.

“Shit,” Judy hissed, drawing closer to me.

I crouched immediately beside Maven, my voice sharp with urgency. “Finn! Do we have anything that can—”

He was already moving, slipping his pack from his shoulders, retrieving a vial of pale powder and a small jar.

“Here.” His voice was calm, practical.

He pressed the jar into Maven’s hands, steadying them when they shook too badly to hold it. “Breathe this in—slow, not too deep. It’ll ease the pressure for now.”

Her eyes fluttered shut as she obeyed. Her breathing slowed, steadied faintly.

Finn turned to William, his tone respectful but firm. “She’s overexposed. They all are. This isn’t sustainable. They need proper treatment, not makeshift remedies.”

Silence fell heavily.

William's gaze lingered on his fallen men, the fog curling around them like vultures circling prey. He looked much older in that moment, weighed down by more than the forest.

Finally, he exhaled, slow and pained. "We withdraw."

The word hung between us like a death knell.

"No," one of his remaining men rasped. "Alpha, we can still—"

William cut him off with a single sharp look. "No. I won't gamble your lives on pride. We're leaving while you all can still crawl out of here."

He turned to me then, and I was surprised at the warmth still lingering under his exhaustion and frustration. "This isn't your burden, Seraphina. Don't carry the weight of my choice. I'll get the truth from Lucian myself. Whatever his reasons for designing this,"—his jaw flexed, but his voice remained steady—"I'll hear them from his lips."

I swallowed hard, and even though he'd told me not to feel otherwise, I couldn't help the guilt knotting my insides. "William—"

He lifted a hand, forestalling me. "No regrets. Just finish this. Secure your place. One of us must advance, and right now that has to be you."

The words settled into me like stone—equal parts blessing and command.

And then the forest itself cut short any reply.

The broadcast voice thundered through the fog, metallic and merciless:

“Attention competitors. Eleven teams have completed the challenge. One advancement slot remains.”

A shiver rolled down my spine. One left. And every step mattered.

William gave a wry, weary smile. “There. The decision is made for us.”

I nodded, my throat too tight for words. “I’m sorry you had to withdraw like this.”

He clasped my shoulder, firm and warm. “Don’t be. Now go. And may the moon favor your path.”

As his team began to gather their fallen, lifting and supporting those who couldn’t walk, I turned back to my own.

Judy's eyes gleamed fiercely with renewed determination. Talia looked shaken but nodded, whispering hopefully, "We can still do this."

Finn adjusted his pack, calm as ever, while Roxy muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like, "About damn time."

I drew in a long breath, as if daring the fog to try its worst on me.

One shard left. One slot left.