

My Sister 143

Chapter 143 MEAT FOR BRAINS

SERAPHINA'S POV

Facing off against Brynjar and his Shadow Claw thugs in a hotel lobby surrounded by spectators—aka: witnesses—was one thing. Facing them in the lawless, cold walls of the Trials was fucking terrifying.

As they stormed into the chamber, the atmosphere thickened like smoke choking a fire. Dust billowed in from the shattered entryway, carrying the acrid stench of scorched stone and the metallic tang of blood.

And, oh gods, they looked like hell.

Cuts striped their arms and faces and torsos, visible through their torn shirts. One guy's sleeve was slick with crimson from a wound that hadn't even clotted yet.

I could practically smell the charred singe of burned fabric where one of them must've triggered a fire trap.

It was obvious that this band of meat-for-brains wolves had strong-armed their way through the maze, triggering gods knew how many traps to get here.

Yet despite the evidence of their struggle, Brynjar's grin spread wide.

His dark eyes landed immediately on the Altar behind me, and for a flicker of a second, I saw his triumph falter into rage.

Because we were already there. We'd made it before his team.

"Well, well," he drawled, his voice dripping with both exhaustion and arrogance. Mainly arrogance. "Looks like the pups beat us to the feast."

His teammates spread out, boxing us in like hungry hyenas circling a meal. Shoulders squared, fists flexing, their battered state doing nothing to soften the menace radiating from them.

"Back up," Roxy growled, her voice vibrating with the promise of violence. She planted herself at my right shoulder, chin lifted, hands curling into fists. "You're not touching this Altar."

I could feel the heat of her anger, ready to ignite at the slightest spark, and it was reassuring. But only slightly.

As strong as I knew she was in combat, as good as I was, the five of us didn't stand a chance against the five of them.

A fight would only end with several broken bones and my team's blood coating the Echo Altar.

“Easy,” Judy murmured, stepping close enough to Roxy to lay a grounding hand on her arm. “Don’t let him rile you.”

Brynjar’s lips twisted, amusement flickering. “Cute. You really think you can keep us from it?”

His gaze flicked over us, settling on Finn and Talia where they lingered just behind me—instantly sniffing out the weakest of us.

He smirked. “You nerds already worked out the sequence, huh? Hand it over, and maybe I’ll let you walk away.”

I moved before he could take another step, instinct shoving myself between Brynjar and the two other people who knew the sequence.

“Not happening,” I said flatly.

Finn’s hand brushed my back, steady, but I didn’t let him step out from behind me. Not a chance.

Brynjar tilted his head, eyes narrowing. “I have no problem taking what I want. In fact,”—he cracked his knuckles, his lips curling menacingly—“I look forward to it.”

For a terrifying heartbeat, I thought he'd lunge.

His shoulders rolled with barely contained impatience. His men tightened their circle.

But then Judy stepped forward.

"Or," she said coolly, "you could do things by the rules for once in your life."

Brynjar snorted. "Rules?"

"Yes," Judy said, her tone sharp, deliberate.

She squared her shoulders, looking every inch the warrior she was training to be. "The Trials allow challenges between competitors. If you're so desperate to prove you're better, then call off your pack of dogs and face me one-on-one."

My stomach swooped. "Judy—"

She ignored me and instead stooped, dragging the edge of her boot against the dusty stone floor.

Everyone watched with bated breath as she moved, until a rough circle enclosed the space between us and the Shadow Claw wolves.

“Circle challenge,” she announced, lifting her chin. “Step out of the boundary, and you lose. Winner claims the altar.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, my eyes widening as the challenge hung in the air.

Silence followed, broken only by the grinding shift of the maze’s distant walls. Brynjar’s lips curled slowly, baring his teeth.

“You against me?” He chuckled, the sound thick with disdain. “You’re smaller than my shadow.”

“Size doesn’t matter,” Judy shot back. “Unless you’re afraid of being outsmarted by an Omega?”

The air seemed to crackle with tension as Brynjar reeled from the jab. He quickly recovered and barked out a laugh. “Afraid? Not a chance.”

He cracked his neck, then gestured to his men to step back.

“Fine. I’ll knock you clear out of your little circle,” he snarled. “Maybe break a couple of your twig bones while I’m at it.”

She snorted and took a step forward. I caught her wrist, staring at her boot within the circle's boundary with trepidation. "Judy. Think this through."

She turned to me, and our eyes met. I blinked at the sheer confidence I saw there, not a lick of fear in sight.

"Trust me," she murmured under her breath.

And gods help me, despite how ridiculous and scary the notion of her facing a walking boulder like Brynjar—I did.

So I nodded and let my hand drop to my side. "Kick his ass," I whispered.

Her lips twitched. "You don't have to tell me twice."

They squared off inside the circle. Brynjar rolled his shoulders, cocky swagger dripping off every movement.

Judy, in contrast, stood light on her feet, eyes sharp, calm as a blade balanced on a fingertip.

Of course, Brynjar lunged first, all brute strength and no restraint. I winced as his fist cut through the air, aiming straight for Judy's head.

She ducked in one fluid, effortless movement that would have made Maya proud.

His momentum carried him dangerously close to the circle's edge before he caught himself and spun around with a snarl.

Judy danced just out of reach, forcing him to chase her within the circle.

He lunged blindly, ego and rising fury carrying him, and she always ducked, just slightly out of reach enough to infuriate him further.

She rarely struck, but when she did, it was quick and surgical—an elbow to his ribs where a bruise was visible through his torn shirt, a kick to his thigh where a gash shone through.

Hits that would never have fazed a powerful Beta like Brynjar slowly but surely affected him, each jab pulling a pained grunt from him and adding to his imbalance.

The Shadow Claws shouted in outrage, but I raised my voice above them. "It's a fair challenge! You interfere, and I call the judges."

I had no idea how I would get the judges involved, but that shut them up, though their glares promised violence if Brynjar failed.

And fuck, was he failing.

Again and again, Judy baited him into overcommitting. His strikes were wild and increasingly erratic, while she slipped through the gaps, making him stumble closer and closer to the circle's edge.

"Stand and fight me!" he roared after she ducked another swing.

"Not the point of the challenge," she said evenly, sidestepping as he lunged with all his weight.

She twisted, hooked his leg, and gave the barest shove to his already unstable balance. His boot skidded over the line. Half a step—but enough.

"Out," Judy said, her voice steady, as the chamber erupted in gasps.

Brynjar froze, chest heaving, eyes flickering between disbelief and outrage. "You cheated," he snarled. "You tricked me—"

"No," I cut in, stepping forward before he could spit more lies. My voice rang with steel I didn't even know I had. "She beat you fairly, within the rules."

“Screw the fucking rules!” he snarled. “When I’m through with you Omega filth, they’ll be able to fit all of your remains into one bucket.”

My breath lodged as, simultaneously, all five Shadow Claw wolves charged at us.

But an electrical crackle charged the air. “HALT!”

The five of them froze like they’d slammed into an invisible wall.

“Shadow Claw wolves,” a disembodied voice echoed all around us, bouncing off the walls to create an almost ominous effect. “The challenge was legitimate. Victory belongs to the contender. Honor the terms of the challenge.”

Brynjar snarled, glaring up at the sky.

“Furthermore,” the voice continued, “your team has repeatedly violated the Labyrinth’s protocols—forcing passages, triggering traps intended to be navigated. One more offense will result in official sanction, the public tarnishing of your pack’s record, and the possibility of elimination from the Trials.”

Brynjar froze. His men shifted uncomfortably, the weight of the warning crushing their bravado.

I saw it—the raw hatred twisting his face. He wanted to tear us limb from limb, but the rules he hated so much shackled him.

His fists clenched at his sides, knuckles white. “This isn’t over,” he hissed, low enough for only me to hear.

“No,” I agreed quietly, meeting his gaze without flinching. “It’s not. But today isn’t yours.”

With a wordless snarl, he spun and stalked toward another exit, his humiliated teammates trailing after him. The maze swallowed them, their curses fading into the grinding of stone.

The moment the last Shadow Claw vanished, I released another heavy breath of relief.

“Holy shit,” Roxy muttered, eyes wide as she turned to Judy. “You absolute fucking legend.”

Judy shrugged, though the faintest smile tugged at her lips. “He made it easy.”

“Easy?” Roxy barked a laugh. “You just played that gigantic hunk of muscle like a fiddle. I’m never talking back to you again.”

Judy snorted. “You probably will.”

Despite the tension, laughter rippled through us, loosening something tight in my chest. We were still standing. We'd survived Brynjar's fury. And now—

I turned back.

The Echo Altar pulsed with faint light, still waiting. Finn met my gaze, his expression calm but expectant.

"It's time," I murmured.

My hands hovered above the symbols. The rhythm we'd pieced together thrummed in my mind, a silent drumbeat guiding my fingers.

Tap. Tap-tap. Pause. Slide.

The tones resonated through the chamber, notes vibrating against my bones, echoing off the walls. A deep hum joined, rising, swelling—until the final strike reverberated like thunder rolling across mountains.

The Altar blazed.

Stone groaned as the exit door carved itself open, slabs shifting aside to reveal a tunnel glowing with golden light.

We had done it.

Applause erupted—not from my team, but from beyond the chamber.

As we stepped into the light, I realized we weren't just exiting into another corridor. The passage spilled out into the Arena's stands, where spectators roared in celebration.

I blinked into the brightness, heart pounding.

All around the stadium, other groups were lingering, clapping themselves on the back, and jubilating. I recognized Cypress Vale, Seabreeze, and Granite Fang, who'd exited the Labyrinth ahead of us, but then I scanned the floor again, searching.

And it hit me—Jessica's team wasn't here.

We were the first OTS team out.

Roxy whooped, throwing her fists in the air. Judy laughed with unguarded joy. Talia clung to Finn's arm, wide-eyed, as if she couldn't tell if this was real.

And me—I turned slowly, letting the moment wash over me.

That's when I saw her.

Celeste.

She stood with the Frostbane group, in the center, her golden hair immaculate despite being coated by a light layer of dust, her lips curved into that familiar, smug smile as she drank in the applause.

Our eyes locked across the distance, and for one brief, sharp instant, the roar of applause dulled to silence.

Her smile didn't falter. Mine didn't, either.

But my stomach twisted.

I'd known that, with Celeste's participation in the LST, a confrontation was inevitable.

The trials—mine, at least—were far from over.

