

My Sister 144

Chapter 144 TRASH TALKING

SERAPHINA'S POV

I broke eye contact with Celeste first as my team was ushered towards the rest area, the roar of the crowd still ringing faintly in my ears.

Our surroundings buzzed with the restless energy of teams regrouping, healers weaving between them, and spectators craning their necks from the terraces above.

My lungs burned, my ribs still throbbing from the desperate dive I took to avoid the Labyrinth's traps. Each breath scraped against exhaustion and raw relief.

My teammates clustered close. Judy was flush with delight. Roxy stretched her shoulders like she was still spoiling for the fight she hadn't gotten. Finn looked pale, but his eyes gleamed with pride, his hands twitching nervously as though he was still working out combinations in his head. Talia lingered at the back, chin raised despite the tremor in her legs.

But the glow of triumph flickered out as a too-familiar perfume cut through the salt-scented air—jasmine with the bitter edge of snake venom.

I braced myself. Here we go.

“I guess congratulations are in order.”

Celeste’s voice was honeyed, sweetened for the audience, but the toxin beneath it was unmistakable.

She swept into view with the grace of someone who had never once fallen in the mud she ordered others to clean.

Where the rest of us looked like we’d crawled through a brutal sand storm, she looked like she’d walked out of a ballroom.

Not a strand of hair was out of place, and her white blouse—fucking white!—gleamed, untouched by the grit and grime around us.

I gritted my teeth and didn’t reply, clinging to my composure. I could sense my irritation rising, waiting for her to add the barbed tail of her statement.

Dear Celeste didn’t disappoint. She held her hands out in front of her, positioning her fingers like a square frame, and chuckled as she peered through. “What a sight. The triumphant little underdogs.”

Her lips stretched as her gaze swept over us—scuffed boots, sweat-soaked clothes, tangled, dust-coated hair, blooming bruises.

“Disheveled doesn’t even begin to cover it.” She dropped her hands and shrugged. “Though I suppose that’s what happens when one takes on a challenge they aren’t qualified for.”

I exhaled slowly through my nose and chanted loudly in my head, ‘Don’t bite. Don’t give her the satisfaction.’

But then she leaned back, pitching her voice just loudly enough for nearby ears to catch. “Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised you managed to stumble out of the Labyrinth alive. I suppose we have Lucian to thank for that. Without his... special attention, I can’t imagine how you would have survived in there.”

Heat prickled up my neck. My fists clenched, nails biting into my palms.

This was exactly why Lucian and Maya had had to distance themselves from me, so that vultures like Celeste wouldn’t pick apart their honor—and mine.

“Careful, Celeste,” I said evenly, though my voice was tighter than I wanted.

She scoffed. “What? Like it’s news that you’re Lucian Reed’s favorite little pet project?”

She leaned in, sneering. “Everyone knows the truth, Sera. Whatever you and your motley team accomplish in these trials isn’t earned by your own merit.”

My teammates shifted, and I could feel their gazes on me, waiting for my response.

My heart battered my ribs as the heat spread to my chest.

After what we'd just gone through, the idea of Celeste—or anyone—insinuating that we didn't deserve to pass made me want to breathe fire.

The injustice of it burned, tightening every muscle in my body and threatening to unravel all the pride I'd felt moments before.

But then I glimpsed the delight in her icy eyes, saw how much pleasure she took from riling me up—and decided to give her a taste of her own medicine.

So I took two deep breaths to calm myself down, and I crossed my arms. A spark of satisfaction went through me when she blinked at my sudden switch-up from ire to ease.

"If we're talking about special treatment," I continued, forcing my voice steady, "then let's not forget that Kieran himself drilled me before the Trials. Or that our dear brother Ethan spent hours teaching me strategy. So if I'm accused of being 'favored,' at least let's not pretend it was only Lucian." I smirked. "Seems like I've been collecting wisdom from all the golden Alphas."

Of course, that was all a bald-faced lie. Kieran hadn't so much as given me stance tips, Ethan had crashed one lesson, and Lucian hadn't trained me since Maya took over.

But ohhhhhh, the look on Celeste's face!

Imagine a tomato. Then poke a hole in it. And pump juice in. More. More. Till it's so full it's about to pop.

Now, give it curly golden hair and glacial blue eyes.

So. Fucking. Worth. It.

I had to clamp my mouth shut to keep from bursting into laughter as satisfaction rushed through me.

My teammates had no such reservations. Judy snorted outright. Roxy smirked. Talia turned, clamping a hand firmly over her mouth to muffle her giggles. Even Finn cracked a small smile.

For a second, there was only the sound of Celeste breathing like an overheated engine, her tomato face looking primed to burst.

I tilted my head, raising a brow in mock concern.

"Problem?"

Her mouth opened and closed, and I saw the exact moment she realized that she had nothing in her arsenal that could counter my attack.

So she turned to my teammates.

“Tell me this...” I stiffened as her gaze slid slowly, pointedly, across each member of my team. “How does it feel, following someone wolfless? Someone so fundamentally incomplete? Someone who’s basically dead weight?”

Each question landed with the force of a meteor, and I had to press my hands tightly against my thighs to keep them from trembling.

“Does it inspire confidence?” Celeste’s expression morphed into one of pity. “Or do you simply grit your teeth and pray she doesn’t drag you down?”

And there it was—proof that no matter how much I reinforced my armor, Celeste would always find the chink, the entryway to wound me.

A familiar ache pulsed in my head—my wolf’s silence, the hollow where her voice should have been.

I didn’t turn to my team. This time, I didn’t want to see their reactions.

Jessica, even Roxy herself, had pointed out the disadvantage of a wolfless leader, but this was the first time it actually hit home. And, gods, I hated how familiar the sting of humiliation felt.

Fucking Celeste.

A bark of laughter startled me, and I instinctively turned towards the sound.

Roxy stepped forward, crossing her arms over her chest, her legs planted in a fighting stance. "Tell me this, you self-righteous harpy," she said, eyes gleaming dangerously. "What was the composition for the Echo Altar?"

Celeste faltered. "Excuse me?"

She flinched as Judy moved closer and grabbed a lock of hair in her hand.

"Barely any dust." Judy tsked. "I bet you just stayed safe and protected, trailing behind your team. What do you know about leading?"

Roxy smirked. "I doubt you could even lead an army of ants."

Judy snorted so loud I startled again. She and Roxy shared a knowing look.

Celeste's face was back to tomato red. "How dare—"

Roxy didn't let her finish. She gave Celeste a sharp shove to the shoulder, not enough to knock her down but enough to make her stumble half a step. "You wanna talk about dead weight? Look in a mirror, bitch."

Gasps rippled through the onlookers. Even I froze, caught between shock and a sudden, fierce swell of gratitude.

Roxy—snarky and reckless and hot-headed—was defending me. If I looked outside, I was sure I would see pigs flying.

Celeste's hand flew to her shoulder, eyes flashing with outrage. "You—"

"That's enough."

The voice was calm and measured, yet it rang through the courtyard like a gong.

A tall woman stepped forward from behind Celeste. Bronze skin slick with sweat, dark hair shorn to her scalp and crusted with grit, eyes keen as silver daggers. She exuded authority—the kind born not of bloodlines but of battle.

“Elara,” Celeste hissed, scandalized. “She just assaulted me.” She stabbed a finger at Roxy. “You’re just going to let her—”

“Considering you provoked it?” Elara arched a brow, a piercing glinting in the late sunlight. “Yes. I’ll allow it.”

The corners of my vision blurred as recognition hit me.

“Elara?” My voice came out softer than I meant, disbelieving. Awed.

Her gaze flicked to me—and softened. “Hi, Sera.”

I let out a disbelieving laugh.

Elara’s father had been my father’s Gamma. She’d been among the very, very few pack members who hadn’t shown me cruelty or treated me like I was a walking pile of steaming feces.

We weren’t exactly friends, but her presence had never made me want to cower in my skin.

I had only a handful of good memories from my Frostbane days, and Elara was in many of them. A kind smile in a sea of cruel faces. An outstretched hand after I had been kicked into the dirt. A slice of pie waiting outside my door the morning after I’d locked myself in my room to cry. A foot stuck out to trip the assholes who thought it fun to chase the wolfless outcast.

But then she'd enrolled in the warrior academy just before the Blood Moon Hunt. And of course, shortly after that disastrous night, I married Kieran and left my pack.

"You—" I swallowed, words tangling in my throat. "You're..."

"Ethan's Gamma now," Elara said simply, pride glowing in her voice. "Appointed last spring."

Celeste was still standing inches away, bristling with indignation. But that didn't stop the smile that spread across my face. "Elara, that's incredible! Congratulations!"

Her grin matched mine. "And look at you. Leading a team through the LST? I was watching the rebroadcast of your team's progress. Outstanding, Sera."

Never one to be shoved aside, Celeste cut in, acid dripping from her words as she sneered. "Oh, what a touching reunion. Shall we all sit in a circle and braid each other's hair next?" Her eyes narrowed at Elara. "Don't forget, Elara—we're rivals now."

Elara didn't even look at her. "It isn't challenge time," she said coolly. "And if I recall, the only one stirring conflict here is you. Do you know how annoying it is that a member of my team is too busy trash-talking to be present for debrief?"

Celeste sputtered. "I was—"

“You were provoking other teams, which is against regulations.” Elara’s tone sharpened. “We would have made better time, our overall scores would be better, if you spent half as much energy pulling your weight instead of posturing like a fucking peacock.”

Celeste’s face went rigid, her practiced composure cracking. “You—how dare you speak to me like that?”

“Easily,” Elara said almost boredly.

Celeste bared her teeth. I wonder if she knew how truly ugly she looked when she got like this. “You’ve forgotten that I’m your Alpha’s sister,” she spat. “And the future Luna of Nightfang pack.”

I refused to acknowledge the tiny jolt the last part of her sentence sent through me.

Elara wasn’t fazed in the slightest. “I’m only going to say this once, Celeste, so listen well. Here, your princess status means absolutely nothing.”

She took a step forward till her scruffy boots touched Celeste’s pristine ones. Celeste had to crane her head back to meet Elara’s eyes.

“I am the leader of the Frostbane team,” Elara continued, “and therefore, I am your superior. Put your stupid fucking ego aside and try not to drag us down any further. Got it?”

The courtyard went still. Even the murmuring spectators hushed, straining to catch every word.

For once, Celeste didn't have a ready retort. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again—but no sound came out. Her cheeks burned crimson, eyes glittering with humiliation.

Elara arched a brow. "Now, would you like to continue embarrassing your pack or do you want to focus on the final challenge?"

Silence stretched like a rubber band bound to snap at any moment.

Then Celeste spun on her heels, hair swinging behind her as she stalked back toward her waiting teammates.

Only when she was gone did Elara exhale, rolling her shoulders as though shaking off the weight of Celeste's tantrum.

She turned back to me and smirked. "On a scale of one to ten, how likely am I to be gifted a knife in my back?"

I laughed, a little breathless. "Eleven. But she's so braggadocios, she'd probably announce her attack to the world before she actually tried it."

Elara laughed. "I have to get back to my team before one of them loses their last shred of patience and strangles her."

I nodded. "It was so good to see you, Elara."

She winked as she began to back away. "We should catch up properly once this whole circus is over. Drinks are on me."

I smiled. "I'd like that."