

My Sister 245

Chapter 245: BEAUTIFUL TORTURE

SERAPHINA'S POV

Maxwell stepped out into the light, surprise flickering over his features before it melted into a warm, familiar smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes and softened the sharpness of his posture.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, stepping forward. "Seraphina Blackthorne."

I blinked at him. "I didn't expect to see you here."

He chuckled. "Likewise. Maya mentioned that you traveled, but I never in a million years thought this would be your destination."

I shrugged. "Self-discovery and whatnot. I heard this place has every answer to any question a werewolf could ever ask."

Maxwell nodded. "You heard right."

"So, what brings you here?"

He shrugged. "I have some business to take care of in the area, though you're a far nicer surprise."

That tugged a smile out of me. Then I glanced behind him, bracing out of instinct.

"Are the twins with you?"

"Gods, no." He shook his head. "Can you imagine if I brought them here? They'd destroy hundreds of years of history in one afternoon."

I snorted. "Smart choice."

He spread his arms in a grand gesture toward our surroundings. "Welcome to the New Moon Institute. Need a guide?"

I arched a brow. "You're that familiar with this place?"

His smile turned a little wistful. "Yeah, I am actually."

Part of me hesitated. After all, I came here to find who I was outside of the influence of my old life. But I had to admit, it was nice to see a familiar face.

And I realized, accepting a tour wouldn't compromise my quest for self-discovery. And I did need help getting my bearings.

So I nodded. "Sure. Why not?"

Maxwell motioned for me to walk with him, and we fell into an easy stride along the cobblestone path.

The energy of the town wrapped around me.

It was...different here.

Not like Seattle's coastal bustle, or LA's constant, pulsing chaos.

Here, everything felt grounded. Intentional. Soft around the edges.

People strolled, not rushed. Students debated passionately on benches. Professors sipped tea outside cafés overflowing with books instead of electronics.

Everyone's eyes seemed lit from within—with curiosity, wonder, purpose. The air tingled with it.

Maxwell glanced at my expression and smirked. "Feels different, huh?"

"It does," I admitted, unable to keep the awe out of my voice. "Feels like the whole world is sleeping and these are the only people awake."

He hummed. "That's the New Moon institute for you. Willow used to say this place was for people bold enough to look behind the veil."

I tilted my head. "Willow...?"

The name rang a faint, distant bell. Where had I heard it before?

For the briefest moment, something flickered across his face.

Nostalgia. Fondness. Pain.

He didn't elaborate right away. Instead, he pointed ahead. "Come on. Before you get too philosophical, you need to try the best ice cream on this side of the mountains."

He wasn't exaggerating.

The ice cream parlor was a tiny little space tucked between a bookstore and a plant shop. The fact that it wasn't a nationwide franchise was criminal.

“Oh,” I moaned after my first bite of lavender-honey ice cream. “This is phenomenal. Daniel would love this.”

“Of course he would.” Maxwell laughed softly. “Kid has taste.”

I nodded, shoving another spoonful in my mouth. “He’d devour an entire tub.”

“Bring him here next time,” Maxwell said. “My treat.”

I laughed. “The twins might get jealous.”

“Are you kidding me? I don’t know what voodoo Daniel did on them at his birthday, but now they worship the ground he walks on. It’s always Daniel this, Daniel that.”

A relieved laugh spilled out of me. “What can I say? My baby has a way with people.”

Maxwell chuckled. “He definitely has a way with my boys. And that innate talent for relating with people is going to make him quite the Alpha.”

Pride unfurled inside me, warm and fierce. “Yeah, he’s going to be something.”

We drifted from topic to topic—how Daniel was adapting after the ceremony, how the twins were proudly calling themselves Daniel’s “loyal lieutenants,” how they’d recently built a makeshift hockey rink in the backyard and nearly broke a window.

After ice cream, we tossed our cups in the bin outside and drifted back onto the cobblestone path. The late-morning sun filtered through the maple trees, scattering warm light over the old stone buildings.

As we walked, Maxwell gestured casually at a few spots—a courtyard where students were gathered around a professor, locked in an animated debate, a tiny café with notebooks stacked in the windows, a bridge overlooking a narrow stream that glittered like glass.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” I said, after he pointed out the ‘best coffee shop on this side of the mountains,’ “but your familiarity with this place seems a little more...intimate than usual.”

Maxwell stopped walking. A shadow crossed his features, and I got the sense that I’d stumbled upon some kind of line I had no business crossing.

A long silence passed before he finally exhaled and leaned against the low stone wall separating the walkway from a sweeping view of the valley below.

“This place,” he said at last, gesturing his chin to the town around us, “is where it all began.”

“...what?”

“Where I met Willow,” he said her name like a sigh. “My mate. My ex-wife.”

My breath caught. The pure agony that flashed across his face made something tighten in my chest.

It was too familiar, hit too close to home.

I said softly, “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “No need to be. I’m always thinking about Willow at every given time, so...” His shoulders lifted in a helpless shrug.

I didn’t want to pry. Truly, I didn’t.

But there was something in the way he spoke her name—like saying it brought back memories both precious and painful.

So gently, I asked, “What happened?”

His lips curved into a sad, wistful smile.

“Well...it’s a story.”

I offered a small smile. “I have time.”

He huffed a little laugh. “All right.”

He leaned back and folded his arms, and his eyes seemed to glaze over, like he was slipping into a memory.

“Back then,” he began, “I had just taken over some of my Beta responsibilities. One of them was overseeing freight shipments that passed through the Institute. And on my third week, my transport crew messed up. Badly. They damaged a crate of archaeological equipment belonging to one of the Institute’s research teams.”

“Oof.”

“Exactly. And guess who was put in charge of that equipment?”

“Willow?”

“Willow,” he confirmed, his lips twitching. “She stormed into my temporary office like a literal force of nature. This tiny scholar with ink on her sleeves and murder in her eyes.”

I snorted. “Sounds terrifying.”

“Oh, she was.” He finally let the smile unfurl. “And that, of course, is the exact moment the mate bond snapped into place.”

My eyes widened. “During a confrontation?”

“During a verbal assault,” he corrected. “I swear to the Goddess, she nearly ripped my spine out through my throat while lecturing me about cultural preservation.”

The story was funny, but instead of mirth, a cold twinge of envy spread in my chest.

Was I jealous that people like Lucian and Maxwell had such dramatic, world-altering encounters with their mates?

Maybe.

But I pushed the green-eyed monster aside and asked, “Did the bond mellow her at all?”

“Oh, hell no.” Maxwell chuckled. “Not even a little. I had to work with her team to fix my team’s mistake, and everyone else immediately took me in like a stray puppy. Willow? Definitely a cat person.”

I snorted.

“It was torture,” he continued with a wistful smile. “Beautiful torture. But torture, nonetheless.”

He went on, describing how he practically became an unpaid intern—repairing equipment, hauling crates, helping rebuild broken dig sites, even calling in personal favors to replace items that had been damaged beyond repair.

And yet Willow remained steadfastly unimpressed.

“She had such a gentle name,” Maxwell murmured, eyes softening, “but she was...indomitable. Sharp. Logical. Brave. She challenged me in ways no one ever had.”

His voice turned quieter. “I admired her long before she ever returned a single ounce of affection.”

My heart tightened.

“So when did she finally...”

“Come around?” He smiled faintly. “The day I was supposed to return home. My Alpha summoned me back. I went to say goodbye to the team, and one of the research students slipped and got dragged into the rapids.”

My stomach flipped. “Oh gods.”

“I jumped in,” he said simply. “Didn’t think. Just moved.”

“And you saved them?”

“Barely.” His jaw tightened. “I nearly drowned in the process. I woke up coughing on the riverbank with Willow screaming at me—for risking my life, for scaring her, for attempting to leave without letting her say anything.”

He paused, breath catching on the memory.

“She kissed me before I could even sit up properly. Then admitted she had fallen in love with me. That she hadn’t acknowledged the bond because she believed in making decisions based on her own agency. With or without the bond.”

My chest warmed.

“That must’ve been—”

“The happiest moment of my life,” he said softly. “Nothing else comes close.”

Several seconds passed in silence.

My mind swirled around his story. Willow had fallen in love with him of her own accord, not letting the bond influence her heart.

And yet...

Then, gently, I asked, "If you loved each other so deeply...why did you divorce?"

Maxwell's smile faltered.

Pain flickered behind his eyes—quiet, old, but still there.

He looked down at his hands, then out at the mountains.

And when he spoke, his voice was a low, steady ache.

"That," he said, "is a longer story."