

## **My Sister 250**

Chapter 250 THE TALISMAN

SERAPHINA'S POV

Ava didn't resist when I asked her to lead the way.

I followed behind her as she walked, quick and small and silent, her shoulders hunched like she was bracing to be struck from behind at any moment.

Moonlight Alley grew narrower the farther we went. The lanterns thinned. The shops disappeared. Cracks split the pavement in jagged lines, and the buildings sagged under the weight of years and neglect. The scent of damp stone and stale air clung to everything.

Ava stopped in front of a crooked wooden door beneath a rusted staircase.

"This is it," she muttered.

When she pushed open the door, a wave of sour, sickly air drifted out—sweat, herbal poultices, and the unmistakable scent of fever. A frail cough rasped from inside.

Ava's chin quivered before she masked it with defiance and stepped in. "Grandma? I...I brought someone."

I don't think her grandmother cared—or even heard what she'd said.

The old woman lay on a lumpy mattress on the floor of an otherwise empty room, damp gray hair plastered to her sweaty forehead, breaths shallow and uneven.

Ava knelt beside her, smoothing the thin blankets with small, shaking hands. "She gets worse at night," she whispered, voice cracking at the edges. "Sometimes she can't breathe right."

My stomach twisted.

This wasn't just a mild illness. It was dangerous. And this young child was carrying the burden alone.

I pulled out my phone. "We're calling a doctor."

Ava's head snapped up, alarm flashing in her eyes. "We can't afford one."

"I can."

She stared at me like I'd announced the moon was moving into her kitchen. "Why? You don't even know us."

"The world would be a pretty awful place if people only helped those they knew."

Before she could argue, Maxwell picked up on the second ring.

"Maxwell, I need your help," I said without preamble.

"Sera?" His voice sharpened at the strain in mine. "What happened?"

"There's a girl—Ava—and her grandmother is seriously ill. She needs medical attention immediately. They live in Moonlight Alley."

A soft curse slipped down the line. "Moonlight Alley? What are you doing there?"

"That's not important, Maxwell. Can you help me or not?"

He sighed. "Send me your location. I can't come myself, but I'll get a doctor there in fifteen minutes."

I sagged with relief. "Thank you."

True to his word, fifteen minutes later, a physician arrived with two apprentices.

There didn't need to be much by way of an exchange—their assignment here was clear.

Ava hovered anxiously, clutching her grandmother's hand as the doctor examined her.

The diagnosis was quick and grim: severe pneumonia compounded by malnutrition and exhaustion.

But treatable.

They gave her injections, started her on fluids, and moved her to a small medical lodging Maxwell had arranged. It was clean, bright, and warm—a place where she could heal.

Ava watched every step with wide, trembling eyes.

When the doctor said her grandmother would recover with proper care, Ava slumped, as if a string that had been pulled too tight for too long had finally snapped.

She wiped her eyes quickly with the heel of her palm, pretending she wasn't crying. "Thank you," she mumbled.

"You don't have to thank—"

"No," she said sharply, cutting me off. "I do."

She reached into her pocket, pulled out a scrap of paper and a stub of pencil, scribbled something quickly, then shoved it toward me.

"Grandma's number," she said. "So we can keep in touch, and I can pay you back."

I blinked at the grown-up child before me. "Ava—"

"I'll pay you back." She pressed the paper into my hand, stubborn. "Just...give me time. Once I have money—"

"Stolen money?" I teased gently.

Her cheeks flushed. Her gaze darted away. "I don't like to steal. I just..." She kicked at a loose tile with the toe of her shoe. "I've never been to school. I don't have any skills. No one ever taught me how to earn money the right way."

"Something inside me softened.

I bent slightly. "Question. Did you make those traps yourself?"

"You mean the ones you ninja'd your way out of?"

I couldn't help but smile. "The very same."

She shrugged. "Yeah."

"Then I think I can argue that you do have skills. Brilliant ones."

I reached out and ruffled her hair. She flinched at first, and I thought she might pull away. But then she leaned into my hand, just a little.

"And if you ever want to learn anything else," I said softly. "I'll help you. I'll call your grandma's number so you can have mine and you can reach out anytime. I'll make sure you get schooling, training...whatever you need."

Her head lifted. Her eyes were a mixture of suspicion and something heart-wrenching.

"Why?" she whispered.

“What?”

“You paid the doctor a lot of money to take care of my grandma, and to keep checking up on her, and now this. Why are you being nice to me?” she demanded, voice shaking. “Do you want something? Do you expect me to work for you later?” She stumbled a step back, panic flaring in her eyes. “I-I’m not gonna be anyone’s slave.”

It was one thing to hear the teenage Omega in the alley say similar words, but hearing it from someone so little, someone whose innocence had been snatched away by life’s cruel hand—it stabbed something deep in me.

I crouched down to look her in the eye. “Ava, no. I don’t want anything.” I gently put my hands on her thin shoulders. “I’m helping you because it’s the right thing to do. And you remind me a little of myself.”

She scowled. “I’m not rich or pretty or tall or—”

“Not like that,” I said, smiling despite everything. “I might not have had to steal on the streets to survive, but I know what it’s like to feel alone in the world. To be overlooked. Dismissed. Told what you’re not instead of what you could be.”

Ava’s lip wobbled.

“And,” I added softly, “because I’m a mother. I can’t walk away from a child who’s suffering.”

Silence stretched.

She swallowed hard. "I'll...think about the school thing," she muttered. "After Grandma gets better. I'm not leaving her."

"Good," I said. "That's a good plan."

Outside the clinic window, the sky was lighting up. Dawn was approaching.

My heart stuttered.

I had spent the whole night with Ava and her grandmother. My side quest had taken over my main goal.

Alois.

The talisman.

Shit.

I straightened. "I need to go."

Ava followed me out the door. She looked uncertain, biting her lip as if debating something.

"I don't have anything to give you...to thank you," she said, voice small.

"I don't need anything," I assured her.

But she shook her head. "Grandma always says, even if you have nothing, you can still give something."

She took my hand. Her small fingers were cool, a little rough.

She closed her eyes, concentrating hard.

Then she pulled out a stub of charcoal from the pocket of her frayed shorts and rubbed it between her fingers.

With careful strokes, she drew a symbol on the inside of my arm. Although a little clumsy, the lines were intricate, forming a shape I didn't recognize.

A soft warmth spread from her touch, tingling faintly beneath my hand.

“There,” she said, pulling back. “A blessing. Grandma taught me when I was little.”

Emotion caught me off guard as I stared at the pattern. “Ava...it’s beautiful.”

She shrugged one shoulder, embarrassed. “It’ll have to do for now. Till I can pay you back properly.”

I smiled. “You don’t owe me anything.”

She shook her head. “I owe you everything.”

We exchanged a small, wordless farewell.

Then I ran.

\*\*\*

By the time I reached the director's garden, the horizon was a pale wash of gold and lavender. Dawn edged upward, slow but unavoidable.

Alois was already there.

He stood with his hands clasped behind him, watching the sunrise as if greeting an old friend. He didn't turn when I walked up, but he spoke as soon as my foot touched the gravel path.

"You cut it close."

I grimaced, breathless. "I know. I'm sorry."

"The talisman?" he asked mildly.

My heart sank. I straightened, running a hand through my hair. "I...failed. I didn't have time to even—"

"Show me your hand."

I frowned, my hand freezing in my hair.

“My hand?”

He nodded.

Slowly, I untangled my fingers from my hair and extended my right hand.

Alois’ gaze dropped to the faint symbol drawn on my skin.

The mark pulsed softly as the light rose.

The director’s smile bloomed, slow and full of approval.

“You found it.”

My breath caught. “What? No, this isn’t—” I frowned down at the drawing. “This was just—a little girl I helped—she gave me a blessing—”

“A talisman,” Alois corrected. “The Moonlight Alley talisman exists only in the hands of its true keepers. It cannot be bought or bartered. Only earned.”

My mind spun.

“And the only way to earn it,” Alois continued, “is to show kindness freely. To help without expecting anything in return. To protect the vulnerable.”

He looked at me then, and his pale, ancient eyes softened.

“You have passed my test, Seraphina.”

Warmth spread in my chest, the reality of his words making me dizzy.

But Alois wasn't finished.

“There is but one more obstacle,” he said, and my stomach dropped.

Lovely. Yet another barrier.

“The Origin Archives Room has a gatekeeper. Elias. A brilliant man. Loyal. Unyielding. And unfortunately...” His sigh was weary. “...deeply prejudiced. He's half human and has always held a bias against purebred wolves.”

My stomach tightened. It was almost comical that I was prejudiced according to whatever bias was convenient.

If I stood in front of a low-born wolf, they sneered at me for being Alpha-born. If I stood in front of a purebred, they looked down on me for not being complete.

“So he might reject me.”

“He has the right to deny anyone entry,” Alois said.

A cold breath of apprehension slipped down my spine.

“So what do I do?” I whispered.

Alois smiled.

“That,” he said, “depends entirely on your fortune.”

I looked at my hand again, at the tiny talisman Ava had drawn, glowing faintly in the newborn sunlight.

Well, then, here's hoping I still had some of that cosmic luck.