

My Sister 257

Chapter 257 A TRUE MATE

KIERAN'S POV

The barrier breathed.

That was the only way I could describe it—the way the silvery lattice of magic above the ravine pulsed, slowed, then gradually exhaled into something gentler. Less violent. Less excruciating.

The air no longer screamed against my senses. The pressure behind my eyes loosened, retreating inch by inch.

The agony that had been tearing through my chest for hours softened, like a muscle finally unclenching after being held too tight for too long.

It didn't completely disappear. It lingered, dull and tender. But it was no longer consuming me whole.

My breath stuttered out of me.

“She’s...” My voice broke, weak and hoarse. “She’s fine.”

The bond no longer convulsed. It hummed—weak, distant, but alive.

Alive.

I pressed my palms harder against the moonstone, feeling its steady pulse beneath my skin. For the first time since I'd arrived, my hands stopped shaking.

Not far away, Alois straightened where he stood at the ravine's edge. The lines etched into his face by age and years of scowling over manuscripts eased, if only a little.

He exhaled as well, quiet and measured, but unmistakably relieved.

Seeing that relief on his face sealed what the bond had already told me. Whatever trial Sera had endured behind that barrier, it had ended.

I pushed myself to my feet.

And although I knew that Sera was no longer in pain, every instinct I had still roared in the same direction.

See her.

Touch her.

Make sure she was breathing, standing, whole.

I took one step toward the barrier.

“Kieran.”

Alois’ voice cut through the clearing like a drawn blade.

I didn’t stop.

“Do not take another step.”

I spun to face him, fury crackling now that fear had loosened its hold. “Don’t you dare,” I snarled. “The trial is over.”

“For now.” Alois nodded. “That does not grant you the right to charge in.”

“My mate—”

“—is not your property,” he interrupted, eyes flaring pale amber. “And that”—he pointed towards the mountains and thick forest that hid Sera—“is not your battlefield to storm.”

A harsh laugh tore from my throat, ragged and raw. “You think I came to fight? I just want to see her. To know she’s safe.”

“And in what capacity do you intend to do that?” he asked calmly. Too calmly. His consistently placid countenance was really starting to piss me off.

“Ex-husband? Alpha? Unaccepted mate? Or another block placed back onto her path to freedom?”

The words landed like blows.

I clenched my fists. “That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” Alois tilted his head. “You rush in now to offer her what? Comfort? Or gravity?”

My jaw tightened. “I’m still her family. I’m still Daniel’s father.” The name grounded me, sharpened my voice. “My son is at home, terrified because he sensed something was wrong. I owe him an explanation. I owe him reassurance.”

Alois' expression didn't change, but something like pity flickered in his eyes.

"Do you truly believe," he said quietly, "that Seraphina would not consider her child?"

I hesitated.

"She has left her son behind," he continued, "but she has not abandoned him. She has never stopped being a mother. She will be the one to reassure him."

My teeth ground together. His words rang true. Of course Sera would reach out to Daniel as soon as she could.

Yet.

"I've already come this far," I said, more to myself than to Alois. "I can't just...leave."

He regarded me for a long moment. Then he sighed, the sound weighted with age and knowledge.

"Tell me something, Alpha Blackthorne," he said. "What do you believe the mate bond represents?"

The question caught me off guard.

I opened my mouth—and closed it again.

“Commitment,” I finally said, after too long a pause. “Fate.”

“Fate,” he echoed, just shy of a scoff. “And what else?”

“Connection,” I tried. “Two halves—”

“—becoming one,” Alois finished. “A popular misconception.”

I frowned. “Isn’t that what it is?”

“No,” he said simply. “A mate bond is a gift. A bridge. But it is not a replacement for respect. Or growth. Or agency.

“A true mate,” he continued, “is not a reflection meant to complete another. The ‘one’ is not formed from two halves; it is formed from two wholes. A true mate is a whole being choosing, again and again, to walk beside another whole being.”

His words made my stomach hollow.

I thought of every time I had framed the bond as something owed, something inevitable, a guarantee. Proof that no matter how far Sera wandered, she would circle back to me.

I had seen the bond as insurance. I had called that certainty love.

Now it sounded uncomfortably like control.

“You tell yourself you let her go.”

My jaw tightened. “I did.”

“Yes,” Alois agreed. “You didn’t force her. You didn’t bind her with command or claw or bond.” His gaze locked on mine and sharpened, as if he were looking back into that moment in Sera’s room through my eyes. “But tell me, Alpha Blackthorne—when you said you would wait for her, what did you imagine that waiting would look like?”

My hands curled into fists. “I was respecting her decision. Giving her space.”

"Yes." Alois nodded. "And time—on the condition that nothing else moved."

The truth of it struck hard.

I remembered smoothing her clothes back into place. Stepping away, but not truly back. Promising to wait. To protect. To be ready.

"Even in your restraint," he went on, "I'm sure she could feel the weight of you standing still, anchoring her to the version of herself she is trying to outgrow."

My throat burned.

"What Seraphina is doing now," he said, gesturing toward the barrier, "is not rebellion. Nor avoidance. Nor abandonment. Contrary to what you believe, it has nothing to do with you. She isn't running from you; she's running toward herself. Completing herself."

Silence fell between us, heavy and merciless.

Alois went on, a lecturer in his element, "She is not searching for an Alpha to give her answers or a mate to patch up the broken pieces of her soul. She is seeking the truth already beating inside her own heart.

"If you truly love her," he added softly, "do not ask yourself how to bring her back. Ask yourself how to become a mate worthy of standing beside her—whole, powerful, unbound—on equal footing. Do not let her return—grown and established—to the same version of you she left behind."

And with his lecture over, Alois stepped aside.

He no longer barred my path.

But I didn't move. I couldn't.

His words thundered through me, colliding with memories of our argument before she left. The way she'd looked at me—exhausted, determined, already halfway gone.

For the first time, I understood what I had never properly examined.

Loving Sera meant allowing her to shatter every cage placed around her.

Even—especially—the ones I'd unknowingly built.

It meant accepting that she might never return to the version of herself who had chosen me once, a long time ago.

And worse...

It meant accepting that she might never choose me again at all.

Alois turned away, already retreating into the trees, his part finished.

I stood there a long time, staring at the barrier that no longer raged, my fists slowly unclenching.

Then, finally, I turned back toward my car.

Each step dragged, weighted, and slow.

I slid into the driver's seat, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles went white.

"Do what you need to do," I murmured into the quiet. "Become who you need to be. No matter what version of you returns, I'll be here."

And I would do my best to grow, too. To become someone who could meet the new Sera as an equal, not a gravity well she had to fight to escape.

I thought of the years she had waited for me—night after night, believing I would come to her.

It was my turn.

And I would learn how to wait without certainty.

Without guarantees.

Without the comfort of inevitability.

Even if the person who returned had no place left for me at all.