

My Sister 259

Chapter 259 AN UGLY THING

LUCIAN'S POV

I woke with the taste of cold ash at the back of my throat.

For a disoriented second, I thought I was still in the forest, still walking that impossible loop of mist and twisted paths, still chasing a silver shimmer that never drew closer.

My muscles ached with the dull, protesting burn of overuse. My head throbbed, heavy and stuffed, like I'd been bludgeoned and then swaddled in wool.

I cracked my eyes open.

An office resolved slowly around me. Vaulted ceilings etched with ancient-looking sigils, tall windows veiled in pale morning light, shelves upon shelves of bound volumes.

It smelled like old parchment, mountain herbs, and ink.

I was sprawled on a narrow couch set against the far wall, boots still caked in mud, my coat abandoned somewhere out of sight.

I pushed myself upright, every joint complaining.

Memory crashed into me in jagged, ugly shards.

The barrier. The fog. The looping path.

My breath turning ragged as hour after hour passed with no progress—only that gnawing certainty that I was being obstructed. And the resulting stubbornness that I wouldn't give in.

I dragged a hand down my face and laughed under my breath, the sound rough. “So that’s how you do it,” I muttered. “You don’t stop a man by blocking his path. You let him exhaust himself trying.”

“You were quite determined,” a calm voice replied.

I looked up.

Sunlight cut across the edge of the desk, catching the silver in Alois’ hair where he sat behind a large mahogany desk, hands folded, posture relaxed, expression mild to the point of aggravation.

“How long?” I demanded, swinging my legs off the couch. “How long was I parading around in your clever little illusion?”

“Long enough,” he replied, not sounding the least bit remorseful. “You collapsed shortly before dawn.”

I stood—too fast. The room tilted. I caught the arm of the couch before my knees could betray me.

My jaw tightened. “Where is she?”

The silence that followed was deliberate.

“Seraphina has already departed on the next leg of her journey,” Alois answered at last.

His words struck like a blow to my jaw.

Departed. Gone.

A wild, searing heat shot up my spine. The room snapped into focus, every edge too sharp, every sound too bright. I straightened, fists curling at my sides.

“You let her go,” I said, voice low and shaking with restraint. “You stopped me, and let him—”

Alois raised a hand. "I let neither of you reach her."

My laugh was harsh, humorless. "Don't insult my intelligence. Kieran was allowed to sit beside your precious moonstone and pour himself into the bond. You barred me from the mountain entirely."

"Kieran did not enter," Alois said evenly. "He did not see her or speak to her. He steadied her—nothing more."

"But that was more than you let me do!" I snapped, the words burning on the way out. "How is it my fault that fate chose to hand him a tether and leave me clawing at air?"

Alois regarded me for a long moment, eyes thoughtful. "You believe I am siding with him."

"I believe," I said through my teeth, "that you decided which male was worth indulging."

He leaned back, steepling his hands on the desk. "You are mistaken."

"Oh?" I took a step forward. "Because from where I'm standing, you've decided the fated mate gets to offer comfort, while I'm reduced to wandering illusions until I collapse."

"I am not helping Kieran," Alois said, his tone firm now. "And I am not hindering you for his sake."

“Then why?”

“Because neither of you was suited to see her.”

My eyes narrowed. “You don’t get to decide that.”

“I already did.”

Rage flared bright and fast. “You don’t get to make that choice! Only Sera gets to decide who is suited for her.”

He arched a brow. “Oh? And you don’t seek to influence that decision in any way?”

“This is none of your business to begin with,” I hissed.

He shrugged. “You’re right. I’m cursed with the burden of seeing too much, knowing too much.” His lips curved into a wry smile. “And I’m afraid I have a problem with keeping my opinions to myself.”

I scoffed. “Fine then. Say what’s really on your mind. You’re afraid she’ll choose wrong. That’s what this is. You’re afraid she’ll turn away from destiny if given the chance.”

“No,” Alois said quietly. “I am afraid you will not.”

Something in his gaze shifted—subtle, precise—and I knew he was narrowing on a target to shoot his damn psychoanalytic arrows.

“You see Kieran as the obstacle,” he continued. “The bond. The title. The inevitability of what fate prefers.”

My chest rose and fell too quickly. “Because he is.”

Alois shook his head once. “No, Lucian. The obstacle has always been you.”

The room seemed to still.

“You fear,” he said gently, “that if you truly believe her choice could overcome fate’s arrangements—and you give yourself to that belief fully—you will have no refuge if destiny proves cruel.”

His words slipped beneath my armor, finding every seam and slicing deep.

"You hedge," Alois went on. "You love her, yes. But some part of you remains braced for loss. You keep an exit. A reason. A quiet, poisonous if."

I opened my mouth to deny it—and nothing came out.

"You tell yourself you are being cautious," he said. "Practical. Realistic. But what you are truly doing is protecting yourself from total surrender."

My hands trembled. I clenched them tighter.

"That is why you cannot accept waiting. Because waiting requires faith. Not in fate—but in her."

The strength drained out of me all at once.

I sank back onto the couch, elbows braced on my knees, head bowed.

And I don't know what it was. Maybe it was exhaustion from my effort in futility last night, or maybe Alois' talents didn't just see into minds, but loosened lips, too.

Whatever it was, it wrenches the confession from me, as if ripping something vital from my chest.

“Yes,” I rasped. “I’m afraid.”

The silence that followed was different now. Not confrontational. Not sharp. Expectant.

“I have seen destiny,” I said, staring at the floor. “I have watched it reach out and crush people who believed they could maneuver it.”

Zara’s face rose unbidden in my mind—beautiful, brilliant, stubborn, burning with questions that had set her apart from the moment she knew she was different.

“I helped her,” I whispered. “Too boldly. Too publicly. I thought knowledge was neutral. That seeking truth could only strengthen us.”

My throat tightened.

“In our bid to find the Origin Archives...” My voice broke and I inhaled deeply to steady myself. “It was too public a search. The questions we asked drew the wrong attention. If we hadn’t...she might not have been targeted...attacked...she might still be alive.”

The office blurred at the edges.

“And after,” I went on, “I couldn’t escape the thought that I’d held her back even before that. Her bloodline was exceptional. She was destined for unimaginable greatness.”

I swallowed hard.

“Yet, she chose me. Alpha-adjacent from some nowhere pack. And I kept wondering whether someone like Kieran, even like William—someone born into power, into legacy—would have been more fitting.”

I pressed my palms to my eyes.

“And yet,” I breathed, “I could never accept that choice should be stripped from me simply because of where I came from. If fate is so immovable, so infallible, then what was the point of building OTS? Of carving out space for those without crowns or power arbitrarily handed down by gods?”

The words tumbled out, years of restraint splintering at last.

“I told myself that this time I would be careful. I was protecting Sera by holding parts of myself back. Parts of herself, too. By guiding her quietly, secretly. By never forcing her hand.”

A bitter laugh broke free. “I was terrified of repeating my mistake. Terrified that destiny would notice and snatch her away too.”

I dropped my hands and stared at nothing.

"I thought secrecy was strength," I murmured. "But all it did was widen the distance between us."

And there it was: the truth. An ugly thing when laid bare.

Alois said nothing for a long moment.

When he finally spoke, his voice held something I hadn't heard from him before. Compassion.

"You are wounded," he said. "And you have been strong for a very long time."

I didn't look up.

"It is obvious why she would be drawn to you," he continued. "But love that fears exposure cannot deepen. True lovers must touch each other's wounds if they wish to touch each other's souls."

The words lodged like thorns in my chest.

"Fate," Alois said, "is not immovable or infallible. But neither is it easily defied. The fulcrum is human resolve."

I lifted my head.

“If choice has power,” he went on, “then it must be allowed to exist without pressure. Without suggestion. Without fear masquerading as protection.”

Understanding crept in, a hard pill to swallow.

“You stopped me,” I said, “because my presence would have tilted her.”

“Yes.”

“And you stopped Kieran from reaching her directly because the bond would have done the same.”

“Yes.”

My breath left me in a long, shaky exhale.

“She needs to choose,” Alois said, “with no voice in her ear but her own.”

He rose from behind the desk, his movements unhurried. "If you believe in the power of choice, Lucian Reed, then you must believe it can withstand waiting. That it can stand toe to toe with fate."

He paused near the door.

"And if it cannot," he added, "then you have to make peace with the fact that it was never truly yours to begin with."

The door closed softly behind him.

I sat alone in the hush of the office, his words sinking deep, heavy as stone in my bones.