

## My Sister 281

### Chapter 281 TO FRIENDS

#### SERAPHINA'S POV

I didn't sleep. Not really.

I drifted in and out of something like rest, but every time my body tried to settle, my mind lurched and pulled me somewhere else.

First, it was filled with Lucian's dark blue eyes.

Not angry. Not cold. Just...quietly disappointed.

I faced him in a vast, echoing hall, desperate to explain, but every word I tried to speak vanished into mist before it could reach him.

He watched me with that infuriating patience of his, as if he already knew how the story ended and was simply waiting for me to catch up.

He didn't accuse or demand—only stayed back and let the space between us stretch until it hurt.

Then the scene fractured.

And there was Kieran.

The sharp line of his jaw, the way his shoulders bowed ever so slightly, as if holding himself upright required constant effort.

His obsidian eyes fixed on me, braced for impact, as if waiting for me was a storm he'd chosen to weather with no protection at all.

I reached out, fingers aching for the familiar solidity of him—

And he stepped back.

The dreams tangled after that.

Lucian and Kieran kept swapping places. Disappointment, anger, pain—emotions blurring until their faces became shapeless shadows.

One moment, Shadowveil's cold stone pressed against my feet, the next, I wandered Nightfang's halls, then Seabreeze's endless sky spilled into everything, until I couldn't tell where one place ended and the other began.

Fate. Choice.

Every time I thought I'd landed on one, the other dragged me under.

When morning finally arrived, it felt as if I'd been hauled through a gauntlet of barbed wire.

I stared at the ceiling, listening to the house wake around me: muffled footsteps, far-off laughter, the gentle hush of the sea beyond the windows.

My chest ached as if I'd spent the whole night holding my breath.

Eventually, I gave up on the idea of more sleep and got up.

The kitchen was quiet when I padded in, wrapped in an oversized sweater. The windows were washed in late-morning light, bright enough to strip the edges from shadows and remind me of my late start.

I busied myself with the coffee machine, grateful for the simplicity of the ritual. Measure. Pour. Wait.

My hands, however, wouldn't stop shaking.

“Bad night?”

I flinched at the sound of Maris’ voice, then let out a breathy laugh. “Is it that obvious?”

She leaned against the counter opposite me, hair loosely braided, mug already in hand.

I envied the calm that radiated from her, as if she’d made peace with herself ages ago and never lost sleep over the weight of decisions.

“You look like someone who fought an entire war before breakfast,” she said lightly.

I poured the coffee a little too fast, then winced as it sloshed over the rim. “Didn’t sleep much.”

“Mmm.” She studied me over the edge of her mug. “Bad dreams?”

I hesitated. Then, instead of answering directly, I said, “Can I tell you a story?”

Her lips curved. “I love stories.”

I wrapped my hands around my own mug, grounding myself in the heat.

“Say there’s a girl,” I began, staring into the steam. “She’s been walking along a path her whole life. She didn’t necessarily love it, but it was all there was. It was...safe. Familiar. Hard, but predictable.”

Maris nodded but didn’t interrupt.

“And then one day,” I continued, “she realizes that path isn’t as straightforward as she thought. That she didn’t choose it—not really. It was chosen for her. And suddenly there’s another road. Unmarked. And it has a hundred branches, a million micro-choices. No guarantees. Just...possibility.”

I swallowed. “She doesn’t know whether staying on the old path is loyalty or fear. Or whether stepping onto the new one is courage or recklessness.”

Maris’ smile softened. “Sounds like your friend is very tired.”

I huffed out a laugh despite myself. “That too.”

“And she’s asking herself whether love is something you accept because it’s given to you,” I went on, “or something you build because you choose it.”

Maris took another sip of coffee. “And what does your friend want to know?”

“How to tell the difference,” I said quietly. “What’s the secret to happiness—fate or choice?”

For a moment, Maris was silent. I half-expected her to gently call me out, to say my friend sounded suspiciously like me.

Instead, she said, “If your friend is thinking about accepting new love, she could always ask Brett.”

I blinked. “Brett?”

She nodded, utterly calm. “He’s...uniquely qualified.”

I lowered my mug so the steam no longer blurred her face. “What do you mean?”

Maris watched the steam curl from her own mug, expression thoughtful. “We’re just like Selene and Adrian. Before me, Brett had a fated mate.”

The words landed softly—and still knocked the air from my lungs.

“Oh,” I breathed. “I didn’t...I thought you two...I had no idea.”

“Most people don’t,” she said. “It’s a part of his life he doesn’t like to look back on.”

I hesitated. “And you’re...okay with that?”

Maris smiled—not bright, not defensive either.

“I wasn’t at first. I was jealous,” she admitted. “Not of her, exactly. But of the certainty. The idea that someone else had been written into his story before I ever existed in it. Unlike Selene and Barry, Brett and his fated actually mated, so her impact on his life was...heavier.”

She shrugged. “It took time to realize that choosing him didn’t mean competing with a ghost.”

“And the fact that you weren’t fated?” I asked carefully.

She met my gaze, eyes steady. “Does that make our bond weaker?” She pursed her lips. “I don’t know. But I believe in my choice, and I’m willing to live with the consequences of it. Whatever they are.”

There was no bravado in her words, no attempt to dress it up as something prettier than it was.

Before I could respond, footsteps sounded behind us.

Speak of the devil, Brett entered the kitchen carrying a small plate laden with sugar-dusted pastries, his presence filling the space without overwhelming it.

He leaned in to brush a kiss against Maris' temple as he slid the plate onto the counter beside her.

"Morning," he said, voice warm. "I rescued scones before the kids could demolish them."

Maris laughed and nudged his hip with hers. "My hero."

He beamed at her as if that were the highest praise imaginable.

She refilled her coffee mug and handed it to him.

Their fingers brushed as he took the cup from her with a sigh. "Thank you."

She nodded. "I'll check on the kids. Dora's been suspiciously quiet."

As she passed me, Maris squeezed my shoulder once, a silent gesture of encouragement, then disappeared down the hall.

And then it was just Brett and me.

The air shifted, not quite uncomfortable, but humming with a new awareness.

Brett noticed immediately.

“Relax,” he said easily, sliding the plate of scones toward me. “Maris told me you might feel awkward.”

I raised a brow. “She did? When?”

He chuckled and tapped a finger against his temple. “Mindlink.”

My eyes widened. “You’re already—?”

“Mated and marked,” he said, nodding. “Her idea.”

“Really?”

He leaned against the counter, eyes fond. “She could tell I was holding back. Afraid of what it meant to be with someone after...everything.” His smile softened. “She didn’t want me doubting my place with her.”

I shook my head, half in awe. I thought of how Selene, too, had boldly marked Adrian against all odds. “Seabreeze women are terrifying.”

Brett laughed. “You have no idea.”

His ease helped me relax, too. I took a breath. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“How did you move on?” I asked. “After your fated mate?”

For the briefest moment, something flickered across his face—not pain, exactly. More like...disorientation. As if he’d tripped into a memory he hadn’t expected to revisit.

Then it passed.

“My fated mate was...” He trailed off, as if trying to find the right words. “Ambitious,” he settled on. “She wanted many, many things, and the only thing I could give her was my heart.”

He let out a bitter chuckle. “It wasn’t nearly enough, but that’s a story for another day. I was able to move on by realizing that staying would’ve destroyed us both,” he said simply, his voice lowering ever so slightly. “And that leaving didn’t mean I’d failed.”

He studied me with quiet attention. “You don’t have to overthink everything, Sera.”

I smiled faintly. “I hear that a lot.”

“Because it’s true,” he said gently. “Every choice has reasons, and they’re often simpler than we think. I left because I reached my limit. I hesitated to love again because I was afraid of repeating the same hurt.”

His gaze was steady, perceptive. “Maybe that’s the same for your...friend?”

A small laugh fell out of my lips. “Something like that, yeah.”

He nodded, his lips curving slightly. “But choosing someone—old or new—is a beginning. Not a continuation. Or a repetition.”

Something in my chest loosened, like a knot easing under careful fingers.

"I have no right to tell you fate is overrated," he went on. "But what I can tell you is that the first step in letting someone in is you facing and overcoming your inner fears. And whoever that is has to be someone who sees those fears and is willing to walk through them with you."

My grip on the mug tightened. "And if I don't find that?"

He shrugged lightly. "I never thought I would find a second chance, and I was content in that. There are other ways to be happy."

He angled his head as he looked at me. "Something tells me you'll be just fine, regardless. A resilient soul like yours doesn't break easily."

I swallowed. "You barely know me, how can you be so sure?"

"It's not that hard to see—how different you are," he said, and there was something layered in the word that made me pause. "Not better. Just...built for more than one kind of life."

I exhaled slowly, letting that sink in.

"Thank you," I said finally. "That helped."

He smiled. "Be sure to pass the information to your friend."

I laughed. "I will. I'll let her know I got such invaluable advice from another friend."

Brett lifted his mug, his smile deepening. "To friends."

I clinked my cup against his. "To friends."

And as I took a sip, warmth spreading through me, I felt...maybe not clarity—but courage.