

My Sister 326

Chapter 326 THE TERMITES

LUCIAN'S POV

I woke to light filtering through the tall windows in a pale, washed-out spill, still bright enough to sting my eyes when I opened them.

For a moment, I lay there disoriented, staring at the ceiling, my thoughts sluggish and heavy as if I'd been dragged up from deep water rather than sleep.

A glance at the wall clock opposite my bed confirmed what I already knew.

Noon.

Again.

The realization settled with a familiar, sour weight in my chest.

I'd been sleeping too much lately. Deep, dreamless stretches that swallowed entire mornings, sometimes whole days.

It wasn't restorative. It was...avoidant, my body forcing shutdowns my mind refused to grant itself.

That wasn't a healthy sign. Not for an Alpha. Not for someone who was a guest in a lion's den.

I shifted slightly—and froze.

Zara lay tucked against me, her head resting just beneath my chin, pale hair fanned across my chest. One arm was draped over my torso, fingers curled loosely into the fabric of my shirt like she'd anchored herself there sometime in the night.

Her breathing was slow, even. Peaceful.

For a heartbeat, relief washed through me.

She was still here. Still breathing.

Still...real.

Then my skin registered the cold.

Her cheek rested against my collarbone, and even through the barrier of fabric, the chill seeped in, unnatural and wrong. A cold that didn't belong to a living body.

I carefully lifted my hand and brushed my knuckles along her arm. Her skin was smooth. Familiar. And icy.

A sharp ache punched through me, so fierce it made my throat close and my eyes sting.

It was a cruel reminder that Zara wasn't sustained by life. She was sustained by will. By power. By something external and precarious.

By Marcus.

Whatever he'd done to anchor her here, to hold her together, it had come with conditions—limitations that screamed of control.

I stared at the wall beyond the bed, jaw tightening.

He thought he'd collared me.

And maybe, on some level, he had. Zara was leverage. Effective, cruel leverage. Marcus had taken someone I loved more than myself and turned her into a leash.

But he'd underestimated me.

If I were the kind of man who surrendered easily, who bent at the first sign of pressure, then OTS would never have grown under my leadership.

I hadn't built it by complying. I'd built it by adapting. By always planning several moves ahead.

By letting my enemies believe they'd won long before they realized they'd miscalculated.

Marcus could keep thinking he'd underestimated me. The more confident he got, the less attention he paid.

Zara stirred slightly, a soft sound escaping her lips. She nuzzled closer, her forehead brushing my throat.

"Luc," she murmured sleepily.

"I'm here," I whispered, pressing a light kiss to her hair.

Her lips curved faintly, satisfied, and she settled again.

I stayed like that for several minutes, breathing carefully, memorizing the fragile rhythm of her presence.

Then, gently, I eased myself free, replacing my arm with a pillow so she wouldn't wake.

She didn't stir.

For a moment, I just stared at her sleeping figure. Like this, with her breathing so low and shallow, she looked like the Zara from that night all those years ago: lifeless. Gone.

I turned away, pulled on a jacket, and grabbed my phone from the bedside table.

The screen lit up—and the first thing I saw was a notification of a tagged post.

I would have swiped it away, but then I saw who owned the account: Maya.

The photo had been posted barely an hour ago.

She was laughing, head tilted back, Ethan's arm wrapped protectively around her waist.

And there, unmistakable even in the filtered light, was the ring on her finger—simple, elegant, catching the light of a dozen lanterns.

A disbelieving gasp slipped out of me. Maya had gotten engaged.

I felt it then—happiness, a genuine warmth unfurling in my chest, gentle and almost startling, reminding me I was still capable of feeling.

It surprised me how clean it felt, how briefly the noise in my head went silent. For a moment, it was enough just to be glad.

But beneath it, something else coiled.

Awareness.

I'd missed this, and gods knew what else.

While the world kept moving, I'd been...here. Sleeping through days. Locked in a gilded cage of my own making.

Absent.

I couldn't afford that anymore.

It was time to go back.

I slipped my phone into my pocket, cast one last look at Zara, and stepped out of the room.

Reece was stationed outside, exactly where I'd left him, eyes sharp despite the long hours. My Beta inclined his head the moment he saw me.

"No movement," he reported quietly. "No one in or out since you went down. Marcus' people kept their distance."

"Good," I said. "I need to speak to Marcus. Stay here and keep watch over her."

His brow furrowed slightly, but he didn't argue. "I'll be right here."

I turned and walked back down the corridor, boots echoing softly against stone.

The Silverpine halls felt colder today—less imposing, more calculated. Every shadow felt intentional. Every turn, watched.

Marcus' office door was already open.

He stood near the window, hands clasped behind his back, gazing out over the mountains like a man contemplating conquest rather than weather.

"Lucian," he greeted without turning. "I trust you slept well."

I kept my expression neutral. "Let's not pretend you care about my sleep habits."

He chuckled, finally facing me. "Straight to the point. I admire that."

"I'm cooperating," I said flatly. "You wanted sincerity. So do I. But I don't appreciate games."

Marcus tilted his head. "Games?"

"You're circling something," I said. "If we're indeed partners, I deserve to know the plan."

His smile deepened. "Oh, but you know the plan already."

I clenched my jaw. "Knowing your target is not the same as knowing how you mean to subdue him."

He shrugged. "It's nothing convoluted, really; our species has an age-old way of getting rid of our enemies."

"War against Nightfang," I gritted out. "Are you out of your mind? Blackthorne will squash you like a pesky bug."

He tsked. "Of course, I would not strike alone. Silverpine is not the only pack that has a bone to pick with Nightfang."

I scoffed, unable to believe the ridiculous conversation I was having. "Surely you're not foolish enough to believe that rallying a few disgruntled packs could topple a force like Nightfang. You think your allies can hold a candle to theirs?"

He cocked his head. "You disagree?"

"Of course I disagree," I hissed. "A termite doesn't fell a great oak through brute force. You infiltrate, you weaken from within, you—"

Marcus' soft laugh cut me off. "Very good, Lucian. You always did have a strategic mind. It's a pleasure to watch it at work."

It took all my willpower not to bare my fangs.

"You're right, of course," he continued, pacing slowly. "But just like I don't lack allies, I don't lack schemers either. No, that's not where you come in. That's not how you show your commitment."

"Then get to the point."

He stopped in front of me, eyes sharp now. "I need access to OTS data."

My pulse skipped, the audacity of his request catching me off guard.

"Monitoring records, training data," he clarified. "Particularly those tied to members from...privileged backgrounds."

I masked my reaction easily, schooling my features into a resigned expression. "OTS is made up of Omegas and outcasts, no matter how connected they are. That's like asking for information about the servants of the White House."

He cocked his head. "Let me worry about that. You just get me what I need. You do still want to keep Zara alive, don't you?"

I held back the surge of anger at the way he dangled my weakness before me.

I nodded slowly. "Fine."

The ease with which I agreed seemed to please him.

"Good," he said. "I knew you'd see reason."

I turned to leave, letting my shoulders sag and my steps drag just enough to sell the image of desperation. Of a man willing to give up anything to save the ghost in his arms.

Outside the office, I didn't go far.

I lingered just beyond the doorway, leaning against the wall as if gathering myself.

Then I shifted slightly, angling toward the mirrored panel across the corridor.

And there—

Someone slipped into Marcus' office, confidence in every step. But just before the door closed behind her, I caught her features and my breath stilled.

Jessica.

The same Jessica, who had been a probationary member of Shadowveil and had left OTS months ago after the LST.

The same Jessica whose exit had never quite sat right with me.

Understanding clicked into place with brutal clarity.

The termites had already begun burrowing. But it wasn't just one tree.