

## **My Sister 340**

### Chapter 340 TACTICS AND STRATEGY

#### SERAPHINA'S POV

"Sera? Are you okay?"

Only when Kieran called my name did I realize that I'd been staring at my reflection from the blackened laptop—eyes wide, lips parted, chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

My thoughts were scattered, looping back to the words Lionel had spoken as if they were hooks lodged deep in my chest.

'There's a fire. Moonlight Alley.'

"I'm fine," I said automatically, even as my pulse raced.

Kieran's eyes searched my face, doubt flickering, suspicion deepening in his furrowed brow.

"No, you're not," he said, voice soft. "The news about the fire affected you. Why?"

I swallowed and dragged a hand through my hair, finally turning away from the laptop. I rose, crossed the room, and leaned against the edge of his desk, grounding myself in the solidity of something bearing my weight.

“Moonlight Alley,” I said slowly, “is where Alois sent me months ago. For a trial. It was a step I had to take to reach the Origin Archives.”

Kieran leaned forward, focusing the entirety of his attention on me. “Tell me what happened.”

I drew a breath and began from the beginning—about the puzzle with no edges, the vague instructions, the way Moonlight Alley had felt like a world forgotten on purpose.

I told him about the child who had crashed into me, the chase through narrow alleys, the traps she’d set with ingenuity no one had ever bothered to nurture.

“Ava lives there with her sick grandmother,” I went on. “Pneumonia. Malnutrition. Ava was carrying all of it alone.”

My voice faltered, thick with sudden emotion that threatened to spill over despite my efforts to bite it back.

“She can’t be more than nine years old, Kieran. She’s so small, and she was already convinced the world wouldn’t help her unless she took what she needed.”

His hand curled slowly into a fist in his lap.

"Maxwell helped me get her help," I said. "A doctor. Safe lodging. Food. I forgot about the trial entirely." I huffed a breath that wasn't quite a laugh. "Turned out helping someone in need was the trial."

Understanding flickered in his eyes.

"So when Alois's assistant said there was a fire on Moonlight Alley..." I trailed off, shaking my head. "All I can think about is Ava and her grandmother. Whether they were able to get out in time."

My head dipped, shame burning in my throat, tightening my chest, and sending a sting to my eyes. "With everything that has happened since I left, I haven't even spared them a second thought. I promised I would be there for her and I just...forgot."

Kieran stepped closer, his presence solid and protective in a way that made my chest ache.

He wrapped his arms around me, and I didn't hesitate to lean into him, letting his warmth and scent ease the guilt swirling inside me.

"I'm sure she's fine," he said. "From what I just heard, she's extremely resilient."

"She's just a child," I whispered.

“I’ll send a small team to assist the Institute. Medical aid, evacuation assistance, and perimeter security, if needed. And we’ll find out about Ava and her grandmother.”

I pulled back to look up at him. “You can’t divert Nightfang resources for this. Not now. Not with everything else unfolding.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “You underestimate how much strength this pack actually has.”

I arched a brow. “Still. If you’re stretched too thin—”

“Nightfang isn’t fragile, Sera,” he cut in gently.

Then his gaze shifted into something thoughtful. “But...we do need to adapt. We’ve been holding the line for years, but lines don’t hold forever if they’re not reinforced.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

His tone turned contemplative, as if the plan were forming as he spoke. “The New Moon Institute has always been neutral, and we respected that. Let them play Switzerland while the rest of us bled around the edges. But that luxury is fading.”

I straightened. "You think they can't stay neutral much longer?"

"I think," he said slowly, "that neutrality becomes a liability once monsters stop respecting borders."

The words sat heavy between us, and it confirmed that Kieran's train of thought matched my own: that fire didn't feel like coincidence.

"We have powerful alliances now," he continued. "But I sense that what's coming can't be solved with brute force. We need to adapt, take on a different strategy."

"What's that?"

"Two things," he answered. "First, we offer the Institute aid, and in the process, broach an alliance. Secondly, we snuff out the enemy before anyone else gets hurt."

He nodded to himself, as if the final piece of the puzzle he was forming just clicked into place. "And the upcoming Hunting Festival is the perfect ground."

My pulse picked up. "Of course. Whoever is circling us won't be able to resist attending."

Kieran nodded. "An excellent way to take everyone's measure. Find out who's an ally and an adversary."

His gaze lingered on me then, sharp and assessing in a way that had nothing to do with tactics and strategy.

“You’ll attend,” he said, “right?”

“I will,” I replied calmly. “But not with you.”

Kieran’s eyes darkened, jaw tightening.

“I know I said you could bring whoever you wanted, but that was before—”

I laughed, placing a gentle hand on his chest. “Relax, Alpha. I’m not bringing anyone.”

He relaxed ever so slightly.

“I’m coming on my own,” I said. “As a Lockwood. Which also means I have to go back home.”

I felt Ashar instantly—the sudden flare of wounded, possessive heat.

Kieran's lips pressed into a thin line. "That's a terrible idea."

I lifted my hands, cupping his face. His skin was warm beneath my palms, but a shiver still ran through him at my touch.

"This isn't rejection," I said softly. "It's strategy."

"If you go alone," he said tightly, "every predator in attendance will see an opening."

"Yes," I agreed. "That's the point."

His eyes narrowed.

"We already know I matter to the rogues," I continued. "And we know someone went to extreme lengths to tamper with a member of your pack. So am I the target? Is it you? Nightfang? Are we dealing with two different forces or one? We can't find out if we're glued at the hip."

Kieran's jaw clenched.

“Not to toot my own horn,” I said, “but I’m in high demand. Someone—or someones—wants me, and I’m sure they don’t want me affiliating with anyone else. Not to Nightfang. Not to Frostbane. They’ll want to assess. Probe. Maybe even recruit.”

“So,” I finished, “if I publicly maintain distance from you, it creates uncertainty about my loyalties. The ambiguity will make others more likely to approach me, revealing their intentions. It gives us a better chance to identify threats and uncover hidden agendas.”

Silence stretched.

I could feel the war inside Kieran—Alpha possessiveness crashing headlong into strategic necessity.

Finally, he exhaled through his nose. “I hate that you’re right.”

I smiled faintly. “I know.”

He stepped closer, eliminating the minute space that existed between us. “Fine. You can play whatever role you want in public,” he said, voice low and commanding. “But there are rules.”

I tilted my head. “Oh?”

“You’re attending alone,” he said. “I expect you to be alone in every sense of the word. Single females are—as you said, ‘in high demand’ at events like this. You will entertain no one. No dancing, no accepting drinks, no polite conversation. Nothing.”

I chuckled. “Why not shackle my ankles and slap duct tape over my mouth?”

His eyes flashed. “Don’t tempt me.”

“I’m just saying,” I said with an innocent shrug, “it might be hard since I’m so charming and desirable.”

Teasing him was a mistake.

The next thing I knew, my breath was knocked clean out of me as my back hit the surface of the table behind me.

Kieran’s weight followed, bracing himself over me with one arm while the other captured my wrists above my head.

“Infuriating woman,” he murmured, mouth already descending on mine.

His kisses were not gentle.

They were claiming, heated, the kind that left no room for doubt or hesitation. I melted into them, a soft sound escaping my throat as his mouth traced a scorching path along my jaw, down my neck.

“Kieran,” I breathed, half warning, half plea.

His answer was to kiss me harder.

As his tongue explored my mouth, his hands roamed, bold and unapologetic, skimming beneath the hem of my shirt, tracing my curves with growing impatience.

“Kieran,” I panted, arching despite myself. “We should...stop.”

“You realize,” he muttered against my skin, “the barrier hasn’t failed. No one would know.”

He was right; the barrier around the room held steady, humming softly. The world outside was oblivious.

“That’s not—” I gasped as his mouth found a particularly sensitive spot underneath my ear. “That’s not the point.”

His hand slid lower, hovering at the hem of my skirt.

I caught his wrist just in time.

“Kieran,” I said firmly, breathless but resolute. “Stop.”

He lifted his head to look at me, frustration and desire warring openly in his eyes.

“Why?” he demanded softly. “I know we agreed to take things slow, but...you want this.”

“I do,” I admitted, cheeks aflame. “But if we have sex now, your pheromones will cling to me for days. Baths won’t help. Barriers won’t hide it. And then our carefully constructed strategy falls apart before it even begins.”