

My Sister 421

Chapter 421 BAD DECISIONS

SERAPHINA'S POV

Morning light filtered through the tall glass panels of the New Moon Institute, clean and clinical, as though the building itself had decided that whatever chaos had torn through Moonlight Alley did not belong within its walls.

I had no idea if the fire had touched the institute, but if it had, order had reasserted itself.

There were no scorch marks. Any broken structures had been repaired or replaced.

Scholars moved through the corridors with the same quiet purpose as before, their conversations low, controlled, almost deliberately detached from the memory of fire and smoke that still lingered faintly in the air if you paid close enough attention.

Kieran walked beside me, his presence a steady weight at my side.

His shoulder brushed mine occasionally as we moved through the institute, subtle and unintentional, yet each contact anchored me more firmly in the moment.

"You're thinking too much," Kieran said, his voice low.

I glanced at him. "I'm about to walk back into a place that nearly killed me."

"Funny, when I mentioned that same issue, you didn't seem to have a problem with it."

I snorted. "It's easy to be brave from a distance."

His hand slipped into mine and squeezed.

"I'm here," he murmured. "You can be brave when I'm here."

A smile tugged at my lips, and I squeezed back.

We reached the rear exit of the institute and stepped out into the open air, where the mountain path began its gradual climb.

The trees grew denser the farther we walked, their trunks older, thicker, their presence pressing in with a quiet gravity that made the air feel heavier.

The world seemed to narrow, as if everything beyond this path had fallen away.

Kieran noticed it too. I could tell from the way his posture adjusted, his awareness sharpening, his gaze flicking to the shadows between the trees before returning forward.

We didn't speak until the cabin came into view.

Smoke curled lazily from the chimney. The familiar chopping block sat near the door, the axe embedded in its surface exactly as I remembered.

The wind chimes stirred, bone and stone clicking softly together in a rhythm that felt older than the forest itself.

And on the porch was Elias.

He looked up the moment we stepped into the clearing.

At first, his expression was unreadable. Then, surprisingly, a smile spread on his face.

"Well," he drawled, pushing himself to his feet, his metal leg shifting with a faint, clanging sound. "If it isn't the stubborn girl who refused to die."

I greeted him with a smile of my own. "It's good to see you again, Elias."

He snorted, stepping forward, his gaze sweeping over me. His smile had disappeared as quickly as it appeared.

"I'd say the same, but actually, it's too soon to see you again."

His attention shifted to Kieran.

"And you brought company," he said, voice appraising.

"Kieran Blackthorne," I said simply. "My mate."

Elias's gaze flicked between us once, then settled back on Kieran with renewed interest.

"Hmm," was all he said.

Kieran inclined his head, calm, unbothered. "Elias."

"You know who I am."

“I was told.”

“Good. Saves time.”

Elias’s attention returned to me, his expression bearing something familiar: suspicion.

“So,” he said, crossing his arms. “I know you didn’t come all this way just to visit.”

“No.”

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me—”

“I’m going back in.”

Elias stared at me as if I had just announced my intention to walk off a cliff.

“I’m giving you time to retract that statement.”

I shook my head. "I'm entering the Archives again."

"That's not how this works," he snapped. "You don't just stroll back in whenever you feel like it. Your body barely survived the first visit."

"I know; I remember."

"Clearly not well enough."

"I'm not here to argue about what already happened," I said evenly. "I'm here because I have another question."

"And that question is important enough reason to risk tearing yourself apart again?"

"Yes."

His jaw tightened.

For a moment, I thought he might refuse outright.

“You’re reckless,” he said flatly. “Even more than your father.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

I shrugged. “Agree to disagree.”

Elias took a step closer, his presence suddenly sharper, more imposing.

“You don’t understand what that place does,” he said, voice low. “You got lucky once.”

“I like to think some of my resilience was involved.”

He snorted. “Barely.”

His gaze searched mine, as if looking for hesitation, doubt—anything he could use to push me back.

He wouldn’t find it.

“Does Alois know you’re here?” he demanded.

“Yes.”

“And he approved this?” There was disbelief in his tone, edged with irritation.

“Yes.”

Elias exhaled sharply through his nose, muttering something under his breath that sounded distinctly like a curse.

Despite the tension, a flicker of relief loosened something in my chest.

He wasn’t refusing.

His gaze shifted again, landing on Kieran before returning to me.

“And him?” Elias asked. “He’s going in, too?”

Kieran answered before I could. "If permitted."

Elias huffed. "The Archives decide that. Not me."

Kieran nodded. "Then we'll let it."

Something unreadable passed through Elias's eyes.

"Fine," he said gruffly. "If Alois signed off on this madness, I'm not standing in the way."

Relief settled in fully this time.

"Thank you," I said.

"Maybe you should be saying goodbye instead," he muttered. "You might not walk back out this time."

I didn't respond. I refused to consider that possibility.

Elias jerked his head toward the path. "Come on. If you're determined to make bad decisions, at least don't waste daylight doing it."

Kieran's hand brushed against the small of my back as we followed.

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ELIAS' POV

The Origins Archives Room was...awake.

Not fully. Not the way they stirred when they judged or burned something out of a soul. But aware in a way that made the air feel tighter against my skin, like the space around the hollow had drawn a slow, deliberate breath and was holding it.

And it wasn't for the girl.

Seraphina Lockwood had already been marked once. The Archives knew her. We'd crossed that line already, and I understood how it watched her now—measured, expectant.

This wasn't that.

My gaze shifted, settling on the man at her side.

Kieran Blackthorne.

I let the name sit in my mind for a moment, turning it over against the weight of what I was feeling now, testing it against instinct.

Most people, even powerful ones, felt it the moment they stepped near the tree—the instinct telling them, in the oldest language we had, that they were standing before something that could unmake them.

He stood too easily in this space.

Because he wasn't being rejected.

The hollow stirred. It was subtle, a faint shimmer along the edge of the opening, like light bending over water—a shift in air pressure that rolled outward and then paused.

I had seen that before.

Not often.

Not in years.

Recognition.

Well, now, that was...interesting.

I watched him more carefully after that, studying the way he held himself, the way his attention fixed on the hollow—not with fear, not even with caution, but with a kind of steady awareness that didn't belong to men who didn't understand what they were looking at.

Theresa would have noticed it faster than I did.

The thought came uninvited, sharp and familiar, cutting through the moment with the familiarity of an old wound that never quite healed right.

She had always been better at this part—reading the things that didn't speak, recognizing the patterns hidden beneath power.

And she had believed in things I didn't.

In crowns. In bloodlines. In the old systems that most of us had long since stopped trusting.

I didn't share that belief, but I recognized what it looked like.

And what I was seeing now...

I shifted my weight slightly, adjusting the placement of my prosthetic, and let out a slow breath through my nose.

"Not many get noticed like that," I said.

Kieran didn't react the way most would.

No pride. No curiosity. No immediate question.

Just a simple acknowledgment, like it meant exactly what it was supposed to and nothing more.

That, more than anything, confirmed it.

Whatever ran in his blood, it wasn't ordinary.

And the Archives knew it.

I wasn't Theresa; I didn't bow to ghosts or traditions that had outlived their usefulness. I didn't kneel for titles or lineages that had done little but fracture the world we were all still trying to survive.

But I respected power when I saw it.

And, more importantly, I respected what the Archives chose to acknowledge.

I dragged my gaze away from him and looked between the two of them instead.

"Whatever you think you're walking into," I said, my voice steady and firm, "it'll be different."

Seraphina didn't flinch.

I let my eyes linger on her for a second longer, measuring—not her strength, not her resolve, but the way she held herself now compared to the girl who had stood here before me the first time.

The Archives had taken something from her.

And given something back.

Whether that was a blessing or a curse remained to be seen.

My gaze shifted back to Kieran.

“This place doesn’t care who you are out here,” I continued, my tone even, deliberate. “Rank, power, blood—it means nothing unless it decides it does. Don’t assume you’ll be treated gently.”

He nodded. “I don’t.”

A corner of my mouth twitched. “Good.”

That was the last of it.

I’d said what needed to be said. Something about the two of them standing here together made the space feel...alive in a way I didn’t entirely trust, and I wasn’t about to linger long enough to find out what that meant.

I stepped back, clearing the path to the hollow, the motion instinctive after years of doing the same thing for people who thought they understood what they were asking for.

Most of them hadn't.

Some of them hadn't walked back out.

I glanced once more at the dark opening beneath the ancient tree, then at the two of them standing before it.

The Archives had already begun to watch.

To weigh.

To decide.

"Go on, then," I said, jerking my chin toward the hollow. "It's waiting."