

My Sister 425

Chapter 425 THE INN

SERAPHINA'S POV

The scent hit me before the inn came fully into view.

It wasn't particularly strong or terrible, just...unique enough to tell me we had crossed into a place where too many stories overlapped, where too many identities blurred together in ways that made instinct sharpen.

I slowed, adjusting the hood of my cloak as my gaze swept over the structure ahead.

From a distance, it looked unremarkable.

Two stories of timber and stone. A weathered sign hung slightly crooked above the entrance, its faded lettering barely legible beneath years of wear. Lanterns burned low along the perimeter, casting warm pools of light that softened the building's edges.

Ordinary—deliberately so.

"This is definitely not just an inn," I murmured.

Beside me, Kieran didn't break stride. "Definitely not."

His voice was quiet, pitched low enough that it wouldn't carry, but I felt the awareness and tension in it. Controlled, contained, but very much there.

Good.

Because this place was the last place to let your guard down.

I drew in a slow breath, letting Astrid's scent-masking perfume settle again against my senses.

The perfume was good for more than masking the scent of a partner's pheromones.

Right now, I didn't smell like Seraphina Lockwood.

And my partner didn't smell like Kieran Blackthorne.

The modification was unsettling, but useful.

The moment the door of the inn opened, the quiet tension outside gave way to noise.

Voices layered over one another, laughter cutting through low conversations, the clink of glass and metal, the steady rhythm of a crowded room.

My eyes adjusted quickly, taking everything in without lingering too long on any one point.

The room was full enough that no one person stood out unless they tried to.

Travelers sat at scattered tables—some alone, some in groups—cloaked figures beside merchants, hunters beside scholars, a mix that shouldn't have felt natural, but somehow did.

Kieran shifted closer to my side, just enough to reinforce the image we were presenting: a couple.

It wasn't a particularly hard façade.

I leaned into him, my hand brushing against his sleeve as we moved further inside.

A woman's voice cut through the noise.

“Can I help you?”

The speaker stood behind a narrow counter near the wall, her posture relaxed but her eyes sharp as they assessed us in a single sweep.

A nametag identified her as Kristine, the manager.

I stilled, glancing at Kieran before answering with deliberate hesitation. “Um, yes,” I said shakily. “We were told this place might help with...a problem.”

Her expression didn’t change, but her gaze sharpened even further.

“People are told many things,” she replied evenly. “What can I help you with?”

I curled my fingers into Kieran’s sleeve, grounding myself in the role.

“We’ve been searching for a long time,” I said quietly. “We were told if there was anywhere left that might have answers...”

I trailed off deliberately, letting the uncertainty hang. Letting the hope show just enough to feel real.

Beside me, Kieran's hand settled on my back.

His voice, when he spoke, was steady, edged with restrained urgency.

"We're just asking for information," he said.

Kristine's gaze flicked between us.

"How long?" she asked.

I blinked. "What?"

"How long have you been searching?"

"Three years," I answered without hesitation.

Her eyes narrowed. "And the person you're searching for?"

"My brother," I said, my voice softening just enough. "He disappeared. No trace. No body. Nothing."

“Names,” she said.

“Lena,” I said, letting the name settle naturally on my tongue. “Lena Hale.”

Kieran followed my lead.

“Seth Hale,” he said.

Kristine’s gaze lingered on us for a beat longer, like she was weighing the way the names fit.

“Where are you from?”

“North ridge territories,” I replied easily. “Small settlement. You wouldn’t know it.”

“Try me.”

I let out a quiet breath, my neurons firing overtime as I thought of an answer.

“Grey Hollow,” I said finally.

It was vague enough to exist anywhere, specific enough to sound real.

Her eyes narrowed. “Never heard of it.”

I offered a faint, tired smile. “Most people haven’t. As I said, it’s a small settlement.”

“Right.”

Silence stretched.

The noise of the room seemed to fade as my focus narrowed to the woman in front of us.

She studied us for another long moment, and for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what was going on in her mind.

It took all the restraint I possessed not to take a trip into her mind. Using my power here would be like lighting a flare in the middle of the room.

Finally, Kristine exhaled. “Follow me.”

I was careful not to let my relief show on my face.

We moved after her, weaving through the tables, past conversations that dipped slightly as we passed before picking back up again as if nothing had changed.

The manager led us through a narrow hallway at the back of the main room, the noise dimming with each step until it faded into something distant and muted.

Cool air brushed against my skin as we stepped into a small courtyard.

Stone walls rose on all sides, lined with ivy that softened the edges without completely hiding them. Lanterns hung at even intervals, casting steady light over a row of guest rooms that framed the space.

“This is as far as you go for now,” Kristine said, turning to face us.

“For now?” I echoed.

“You’ve been vetted,” she said. “That means you wait.”

“For what?” Kieran asked.

“For the owner to decide if you’re worth speaking to.”

“And if we’re not?” I asked.

“Then you leave,” she said with a shrug. “And you don’t come back.”

She gestured toward one of the doors along the courtyard.

“You’ll stay there. Food will be brought. You don’t wander. You don’t ask questions.” Her voice dropped.
“And you don’t try to be clever.”

I inclined my head. “Understood.”

She held my gaze for a moment longer, as if weighing something.

Then she nodded once.

“Success,” she added, almost as an afterthought, “depends on sincerity.”

And she was gone.

I exhaled, letting some of the tension bleed out of my shoulders.

“Well,” I murmured, glancing at Kieran. “That went better than expected.”

Kieran’s tone was dubious as he arched an eyebrow. “Did it?”

I shrugged. “We’re inside, aren’t we?”

“For now.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, pessimism is exactly what we need right now.”

He chuckled, but his gaze was already moving, scanning the courtyard, assessing every entrance, every shadow, every possible angle.

I stepped closer to the door we’d been assigned, my fingers brushing the handle before I paused.

Something tugged at my awareness.

I frowned, turning my head.

Across the courtyard, one of the other doors stood slightly ajar just enough to reveal a sliver of the room beyond.

And in that narrow gap, a familiar figure moved.

I stilled, my breath catching.

“No way,” I murmured.

Kieran’s attention snapped to me. “What is it?”

The figure shifted again, stepping slightly into the light, and I saw his face.

Recognition hit hard and fast.

“Maxwell?”

