

My Sister 442

Chapter 442 A TRANSACTION

ASTRID'S POV

I ended the call with a smile on my lips.

The curve of amusement lingered as I lowered the phone from my ear and rested it against the table.

Seraphina Lockwood was...refreshing.

Dangerous, certainly.

Refreshing, nonetheless.

My thumb brushed the moonstone ring on my middle finger as I considered my stolen—now recovered—shipment.

“Well,” I murmured, almost to myself, “that settles that.”

“What settles what?”

I lifted my gaze, my thumb still resting on the stone.

Damian Rooke sat opposite me, one arm draped lazily over the back of his chair as though this were a casual meeting between friends rather than what it actually was.

A negotiation that had already begun to unravel.

I leaned back in my chair, crossing one leg over the other as I studied him openly. There was something different about him today—not in appearance, but in the way he held himself.

Taut. Restrained.

Like something violent had been forced into confinement, waiting for the right moment to break loose.

Interesting.

“Unfortunately for you,” I said. “Your offer has become...unnecessary.”

His gaze darted to the moonstone on my finger, then back to me.

“How so?”

“You came all this way,” I continued, “offering to locate my missing shipment in exchange for my assistance in finding your...Omega. But now, I have my shipment.”

I let the implication settle between us: this negotiation was over.

Or rather, it should have been.

But Damian didn't look ruffled in the slightest, a factor which sharpened my attention.

Because men like Damian did not take losses quietly. Not without compensation.

“You're dismissing me rather quickly,” he said.

I cocked my head. “Oh? Is there another stolen shipment I'm unaware of?”

His lips curled, not a trace of amusement to be seen. “Precious stones are not the only thing you value.”

I scoffed. “What would you know about value? The most important thing in your life held about the same worth as a stray dog.”

His humorless smile disappeared in an instant, a flicker of anger and what looked like pain tightening his jaw.

“Careful,” he warned.

I scoffed. “I can’t imagine hurting me will serve as an incentive for me to help you.”

Damian leaned forward, his gaze sharpening in a way that charged the air.

“No, it won’t.”

“So,” I said, “I’m intrigued—what else do you have that I could possibly want?”

He rested his forearms against the table, his posture no longer relaxed.

“I wonder,” he began, “does the grief of loss truly get better with time?”

I stilled. "Excuse me?"

"It's been what—twenty years now?" His lips curled again, a sinister smile that dropped the temperature in the room. "Do you miss Esme and Rhysand less than when you first lost them?"

The world didn't stop.

The air remained the same.

The light didn't change.

Nothing shifted outwardly.

And yet, everything narrowed. Sharpened. Condensed into a single, red-hazed, precise point.

"What about poor little Evelyn?" Damian continued, a wicked glint in his eyes. "Does the guilt still keep you up at night? Are you still haunted by her mysterious disappearance?"

"You're treading on dangerous ground, Rooke," I said, my voice a soft, dangerous warning.

Damian's smile deepened. "Am I?"

Something dark and violent unfurled beneath my ribs, and for a fleeting moment, I considered it.

How quickly I could close the distance between us.

How easily I could end him before he had the chance to finish whatever game he thought he was playing.

He knew it too.

I saw it in the slight shift of his posture, in the way his muscles coiled—not in fear, but in readiness.

Of course he was prepared. He wouldn't have said it otherwise.

"Tell me," I said, my voice still deathly soft, "you have all these resources—enough for you to uncover a secret that my closest lieutenants don't know. Why can't you find your little Omega yourself?"

The smug look on his face was briefly eclipsed by rage so molten the temperature picked back up.

“My failsafe...failed,” he ground out.

I bared my teeth in a shark-like smile. “Bummer.”

“Listen,” he said, “it’s not in my best interest to launch an open investigation into her whereabouts. I wouldn’t come to you if I didn’t have a choice.”

The rage cracked, just a little, to reveal the grieving man beneath.

I recognized that look—I’d worn it for several months as I teetered between rage and sorrow.

Sometimes, out of nowhere, I could still feel the lingering heat in the air from the fire that turned my sister and her husband into charred husks.

Sometimes, when I looked down at my hands, I could still see the soot that coated my palms and was buried underneath my nails after hours spent sifting through ashes for my niece’s tiny body.

I’d always prided myself on having nothing in common with Damian Rooke. I guess I was wrong.

We both knew loss—varying levels, maybe, but loss all the same.

“Help me find my mate,” he said. “And in return, I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

I leaned forward. “And what exactly do I want to know? Who killed Esme and Rhys? Who took Evelyn? Where is she? Is she dead or alive? Exactly what question do you have the answer to?”

He leaned back, a smug smile settling on his lips. He knew he had me. “I guess you’ll just have to find out.”

I didn’t respond immediately.

My mind was already moving—dissecting, reconstructing. Working through what he’d revealed and what remained unsaid.

Damian Rooke did not bluff without purpose, and he did not gamble without leverage.

He knew something. Something specific enough to risk saying what he had just said.

“Dangerous offer,” I said finally.

“But enticing, no?”

I leaned back slowly, my gaze never leaving his.

“You’re asking for my resources,” I said. “My network. My reach.”

“Yes.”

“To locate someone who would rather be anywhere but with you.”

“Yes.”

“And in return,” I continued, my voice softening just slightly, “you offer information that may or may not be useful.”

“It will be.”

I tilted my head.

“And if it’s not?”

“Then you can kill me,” he said simply.

Then, almost as an afterthought—

“Though I’d prefer you didn’t.”

Despite myself, a faint breath of something that might have been a laugh escaped me.

Bold. Reckless. But not foolish.

Damian was not someone who bared his neck to the wolves. He wouldn’t risk his life for a game.

I let the silence stretch, deliberately this time, letting him sit in it, letting the weight of the moment settle fully before I spoke again.

“You understand,” I said, “that this does not become a partnership.”

“I’m not asking for one.”

“Good,” I replied. “Because I have no intention of being entangled in whatever...operations you and your associates are running.”

Damian and I were not strangers, though I would not have called him an ally.

We operated within the same world—one defined by leverage, information, and calculated risk—and our paths had crossed often enough for a certain understanding to settle between us.

We had done business a handful of times, each arrangement built on nothing more than clean, mutual benefit.

There had never been trust between us, nor any illusion of loyalty beyond the exact terms negotiated.

Under my leadership, the New Moon Trade Alliance maintained a careful distance. Our reputation was far too valuable to be entangled with someone like Damian, whose dealings thrived in shadows I could not afford to openly acknowledge.

“This is a transaction,” I continued. “Nothing more.”

“Agreed.”

I studied him for one final moment.

“Very well.”

Relief didn't show on his face, but I saw the figurative dark clouds in his eyes part.

“And you,” I added, my gaze sharpening once more, “will tell me everything you know about what happened twenty years ago.”

“I will.”

I leaned forward again, resting my hands against the table as I met his gaze head-on.

“Because if you don't,” I said softly, “I won't just take your life.”

His expression didn't change, but tension coiled in his shoulders.

“I'll take everything you've built,” I continued. “Piece by piece. Until there's nothing left of you but the memory of a mistake.”

Tense silence followed.

Then, his lips curved.

“Fair enough.”

I leaned back again, the faint smile returning to my lips, though it no longer carried the same warmth it had before.

Because the game had changed.

The stakes had shifted.

As my thumb brushed the moonstone once more, I allowed myself—for the first time in twenty years—to feel a twinge of hope.