

## My Sister 283

### Chapter 283 THIS VERSION

#### SERAPHINA'S POV

You'd think by now I would be used to surprise parties, but for half a second, my brain simply...stalled.

The shout hit first—loud, chaotic, layered with laughter—then the glare of light, then the sudden, overwhelming presence of people.

Familiar voices collided around me, overlapping and calling my name, filling the house I'd just imagined as hollow and resentful.

I stood frozen in the doorway, one hand still on the handle, my heart slamming so hard it hurt.

“Oh my gods,” I breathed.

Maya was the first one I actually saw—of course she was. She stood dead center of the living room like a general surveying her victorious battlefield, arms flung wide, grin feral and unapologetic.

“Welcome home!” she hollered.

I laughed—and then promptly burst into tears.

It was mortifying and utterly unstoppable. One second, I was blinking furiously, the next, my vision blurred, my chest folding in as the weight of everything finally landed.

The room, the people, the fact that I wasn't alone. Hadn't been, even when I believed otherwise.

Maya was on me in an instant, wrapping me in a fierce hug that squeezed the breath from my lungs.

"Okay, okay," she murmured into my hair, squeezing harder. "Cry it out. This is exactly what I planned for."

I let out a watery laugh against her shoulder. "Of course you planned this."

She pulled back, eyes gleaming. "You wouldn't let me throw you a goodbye party."

I narrowed my eyes. "Because I didn't want one."

"Correct," she said cheerfully. "But you said nothing about a welcome-back party."

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And don’t you dare forget it.”

Behind her, the room gradually sharpened into focus.

Talia leaned against the couch, eyes bright as she waved excitedly.

Finn stood beside her, hands buried in his pockets, posture stiff—until our eyes met and his smile cracked into something soft and unguarded.

Roxy lingered by the kitchen island, already clutching a glass of champagne.

She lifted it in a toast when she caught my eye. “Judy sends her love. If she missed Christmas, her mother would flay her.”

I laughed, my gaze drifting to the figure pressed against the far wall—not seeking attention, not fading into the background.

Lucian.

His posture was composed as usual, watching me with that steady, knowing calm that always made me feel like he could see five steps ahead.

Our eyes locked, and it was so similar to my dream that something inside me jolted.

“You’re late,” he said mildly, his lips curved.

I snorted, swiping at my cheeks. “I almost died in the airport.”

Leona stood near the stairs, hands clasped loosely in front of her, expression careful. When she caught me looking, she inclined her head slightly.

“I’m glad you made it back safely,” she said.

“Thank you,” I replied. And I meant it.

My gaze flicked, instinctive.

One absence rang louder than all the voices combined.

My mother wasn't there.

The thought brushed against me—not sharp, not surprising. Just a soft, familiar ache. I thought of our last call, of words left unsaid and things still broken. Of the daughter she'd once again chosen.

‘Not tonight,’ I told myself firmly.

Tonight was about the people who'd left their families and packs on Christmas to welcome me home.

I let myself take it all in—really seeing it this time.

The fairy lights strung along the ceiling. The tree in the corner sparkling with mismatched ornaments. The table groaning under the weight of a small feast.

My house—full. Just like my heart.

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KIERAN'S POV

I didn't step into the center of the room.

I told myself it was instinct—old habits, battlefield awareness, the Alpha's tendency to anchor the perimeter instead of drowning in noise.

But the truth was simpler.

I wanted to watch her, unburdened by anyone's gaze but my own.

Sera stood near the doorway at first, still half-caught in disbelief, Maya clinging to her like a victory banner.

As unfiltered as Selene's video had been, it hadn't prepared me for seeing her in person.

She looked...lighter. Not unburdened—life was not that simple—but unarmored in a way I'd rarely seen.

Pride and relief rose first, hot and instinctive, followed closely by the bitter realization that this was not a version of Sera I was familiar with.

This version of her smiled without restraint, eyes shining like stars. Not the careful, contained smile she wore at Nighthfang parties.

This version of her laughed with her whole body, shoulders relaxed, hands moving freely as she took in the room. Not the polite warmth she wore like a shield.

The realization struck, sharp and unwelcome: she had never looked this at ease with me. Not in our home. Not even in the early days, before resentment hardened into habit.

It was as beautiful as it was devastating. Because it meant she had learned how to breathe freely—just not with me.

I swallowed that ache and stayed where I was as she drifted deeper into the living room, people orbiting her as if she were their center of gravity.

I watched as gifts changed hands, Sera distributing souvenirs from her travels, pausing with each one to explain where it came from.

And then, at some point, Lucian pressed a steaming mug into her hands with the confidence of someone who'd already memorized her preferences.

Sera accepted it without hesitation.

I felt the jealousy before I could stop it—a hot, irrational flare that tightened my jaw.

He leaned in to murmur something to her, and she smiled in response.

Ashar stirred, low and restless.

‘Mine,’ he rumbled, reflexive and unhelpful.

I shoved the thought aside.

Thankfully, mercifully, Sera’s attention didn’t linger on Lucian.

Daniel had already latched onto her sleeve, tugging her insistently toward the Christmas tree.

“Mom, come see! Come see!”

She let herself be pulled along, laughing as she stumbled after him. They crouched by the tree, heads close, Daniel animatedly showing off the little train circling the base that he’d assembled himself.

Her laughter softened into something melodic and private, meant only for him.

I etched the moment into memory.

The way she brushed his hair back with gentle fingers. The way he leaned into her side as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

The quiet hum of their bond—mother and son—so strong it needed no words or scent to declare itself.

Would Sera and I ever grow a bond that deep, that effortless?

I exhaled slowly.

That was when I felt another gaze burning into my side.

Lucian had withdrawn too, settling on the far side of the living room near the bookshelf.

He didn't blend into the noise any more than I did—just watched, posture easy, expression unreadable.

Our eyes met across the room.

No hostility sparked. No silent contest of dominance.

Just awareness.

The moment stretched, strange and weightless, until something inside me shifted—an impulse I only recognized once I was already moving.

Lucian glanced at me as I stopped beside him, one brow lifting.

“Blackthorne,” he said mildly. “Enjoying the festivities?”

“More than I thought I would,” I admitted.

My gaze drifted back to Sera and Daniel by the tree. Lucian’s eyes followed without comment.

“She’s different,” he said after a moment. “Lighter.”

I nodded once. “It has nothing to do with either of us,” I said, the words bitter on my tongue.

“No,” he agreed calmly. “It doesn’t.”

A beat of silence passed.

"She gained something out there," Lucian continued. "Perspective. Space. Permission to exist without being pulled in opposing directions."

I held back a snort. He sounded like he'd also gone through a session with Alois.

His eyes slid back to me, guarded. "Are you fine with that?"

Gavin's report of the carefully compiled intelligence I'd asked him to make on Lucian Reed—the measured analysis of his expansion strategies, alliances, his relentless long game—surfaced unbidden in my mind.

After reading it all, I reached one conclusion: a man like him never acted without purpose.

I turned to face him fully, answering his question with my own. "What do you want from her?"

Lucian didn't bristle. Didn't deflect.

"I won't insult either of us by pretending I'm without self-interest," he said, his gaze sharpening. "But you're in no position to accuse me of anything."

The words landed cleanly. Fairly.

“At least,” he continued, “I have never harmed her.”

I clenched my jaw. “I’ve never harmed her.”

“Physical bruises are not the only ones that exist.”

That truth cut deeper than any insult.

I looked away first.

“The mate bond gives you a natural advantage,” Lucian added quietly. “But that doesn’t automatically make you the infallible choice.”

My fingers curled tightly at my side.

“Self-interests aside,” he went on, “I believe that I am better equipped to support the person she wants to become.”

I gritted my teeth—not in anger, but in reluctant acknowledgment. Because somewhere beneath instinct and regret, I knew he might be right.

Before I could dwell on that poisonous thought, a familiar hand uncurled my fist and intertwined our fingers.

“Dad,” Daniel said brightly, already pulling me. “It’s time.”

Sera was there beside him, close enough that I caught her scent, grounding and destabilizing all at once.

The bond flickered in response. A thread of concern followed—had she heard anything? Had she sensed the tension we couldn’t hide? I couldn’t tell.

Her brows lifted in silent question, and I had to mask my expression before it gave me away.

“Time for what?” she asked.

“The surprise,” Daniel stage-whispered, eyes sparkling. “The real one.”

He squeezed her hand, then mine, anchoring us both in place as the room shifted its attention our way.

The night wasn't finished yet.