

My Sister 330

Chapter 330 THE EMPTINESS

LUCIAN'S POV

The moment I saw Sera, I knew something had changed.

It wasn't the way the moonlight clung to her, silvering the edges of her silhouette.

It wasn't even the ease in her—how she stood without tension, as if she no longer needed to brace herself against the world.

It was the pressure. A quiet, undeniable gravity that rested the way power does when it's finally allowed to settle into its rightful shape.

Her presence was layered now, deepened, humming with a resonance that made my chest clench with fierce pride.

And regret.

I'd missed this. Missed the becoming.

I hadn't allowed myself to actively think about her over the time I was gone, because I didn't think I could bear the weight of my duality, especially when Zara hardly left my arms.

But at the sight of Sera, the tension that had been coiled tight beneath my ribs for days finally eased a fraction, as her aura brushed mine.

Along with it came a sense of relief that she was unharmed.

All the storms I'd been wrestling in my absence, all the dangers I'd danced too close to—none of them had touched her, thank the gods.

"Sera," I called out, stepping into the light.

She turned at the sound of my voice, and for a heartbeat, something flickered in her eyes—recognition, relief, maybe even warmth.

Then it smoothed into a blank canvas.

"Lucian," she replied.

Her voice was calm. Even. Carefully composed.

Ironically, that was what set my nerves on edge.

“I’m sorry,” I said immediately. The words came out rougher than I’d intended. “For disappearing without an explanation.”

She studied me for a moment, as if weighing the sincerity of the apology against the man delivering it.

Then she nodded once.

“Okay.”

Just...okay.

I expected outrage, disappointment, maybe even icy dismissal. I didn’t know what to do with the emptiness of ‘okay.’

We stood side by side beneath the lamppost, moonlight pooling at our feet, close enough that I could feel the faint edge of her warmth, but there was distance there all the same.

It wasn’t similar to the distance I felt from her after the LST, but this one felt different. Wider. Intentional.

"I'm sure you've been busy," I offered, grasping for something neutral to bridge the gap. "With training, and I heard about Maya's engagement."

"Something like that," she said in that same bland, empty tone.

"Sera," I sighed, "I know I disappointed you by missing our date, but—"

"I think we're better suited as friends."

Her words pierced between my ribs with cold, surgical precision.

Friends.

I forced my expression to remain neutral, even as something fractured beneath the surface. "I...see."

Her gaze flicked toward me then, sharper than before, as if she could hear the frustration in that single syllable.

And then, gods help me, she reached for me.

Not with her hands.

With her power.

It was subtle. A gentle press, warm and grounding, sliding so carefully past my defenses, a less sensitive person would have missed it.

She didn't invade; she soothed. Smoothed the jagged edges I'd been holding together with sheer will.

My breath stuttered.

Her growth hit me all at once then—the finesse, the control, the compassion woven into her strength.

And she might not have seen it all, but I knew she could feel the effects of the exhaustion I'd buried. The strain. The nights spent beside a ghost, the compromises I'd swallowed whole.

“Lucian,” she said softly, her brows creasing. “Have you...run into trouble lately?”

The question was gentle. Earnest. And far more dangerous than accusation.

For a split second, I was tempted to tell her everything.

Marcus. Zara. Jessica. The leash disguised as a miracle. The data requests. The rot creeping through places I'd built with my own hands.

But the image of her caught in that web—used, targeted, leveraged—was enough to choke the words before they could form.

“No,” I said instead, shaking my head. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

She didn't argue, but something dimmed in her eyes.

“Umm.” I cleared my throat. “Can I walk you to your car?”

Her gaze flicked to the parking lot, then back to me, and she shrugged. “Sure.”

We began to walk, the compound paths stretching ahead of us in quiet curves, the sounds of OTS settling into the background.

Our steps fell into an easy rhythm, like they always had.

"If I hadn't missed our date," I asked suddenly, the question tearing itself free before I could stop it, "would things be different?"

Sera slowed.

I kept my eyes forward, afraid that if I looked at her, I'd see the answer before she spoke it.

"Would you have chosen me?" I added quietly.

The regret in my voice must have been audible because when she answered, her voice was soft and careful.

"No," she said.

Not cruel. Not sharp.

Yet that solitary syllable landed like an anvil on my chest.

"I think I might have given you the wrong impression with my call," she continued, her tone tinged with remorse. "I didn't end my bond with Kieran so I could be with you. I did it for myself."

A lump formed in my throat, preventing me from speaking.

“I meant it when I said I thought about joining Shadowveil,” she admitted. “About what it meant to belong somewhere by choice.” A small smile tugged at her lips. “I think that’s why it was tempting. For the first time, I felt...seen. And I will always be grateful for that.”

She paused.

“But even if I were going to join,” she went on, “I would’ve waited. Until Daniel came of age. Until his responsibilities stabilized. I would never have left him without the certainty that he didn’t need me anymore.”

The subtext of her words wasn’t lost on me.

‘Thought.’

‘Even if I were going to...’

Past tense.

During my absence, she explained, clarity had settled in. She spoke of gratitude and debt and the thin line between reliance and love, her words careful, almost clinical in their precision.

“You saved my life,” she said. “You helped me when I was powerless. You gave without asking for anything in return.” Her gaze met mine fully now. “I will always be grateful for that.”

The lump in my throat burned.

“But gratitude,” she finished, “isn’t the same as love. Not the kind you deserve.”

Silence swallowed the space between us.

I watched her watch me with a held breath, waiting for my reaction.

Hearing her answer after all this time of waiting was like finally releasing a held breath, only to find out I was underwater, and there had never been any air to begin with.

But I was Lucian Reed, and when I didn’t have anything, I had my composure.

So I forced down the fireball in my throat and forced out a hollow laugh, shoving my hands deep in my coat pocket, so I didn’t give in to the urge to punch something.

“Then I suppose we’re back to being friends. Permanently this time.”

She winced. “I’m so sorry, Lucian. I know this is not the answer you wanted, but it’s the one I can give.”

“As long as you’re happy with your decision,” I added, forcing the words past the burn.

Something flickered in her expression—regret, affection, sorrow tangled too tightly to isolate.

She opened her mouth, closed it again, then simply said, “I hope you find someone who loves you the way you deserve.”

Pale hair and cerulean eyes and icy skin flashed through my mind, and the burn twisted sharply into bitterness.

“Good night, Lucian,” Sera whispered. “It’s good to have you back.”

She hesitated, and I thought she might cut deeper—might grind more salt into my raw wound—but her lips pressed together, and she turned away, footsteps echoing off the floor with a finality so sharp it hollowed my chest.

I clenched the bracelet hidden in my sleeve, fingers tightening around cold metal as I watched her go.

Maybe this was for the best. With all the new burdens bearing down on my back, this was a relief, one less problem to worry about.

This was good. This was the moment to let go. I couldn't chase both the ghost of the past and a phantom future.

Even as I thought that, I couldn't keep my eyes from tracking Sera's movement as she walked across the parking lot.

She paused in front of a dark car waiting at the curb. She stood for a few seconds at the back seat, glancing at the car's windows, before finally opening the door and sliding into the passenger seat instead.

After a couple of minutes, the engine turned over, headlights cutting through the night.

The car rolled forward, passing beneath the streetlight, and the driver's profile came into view.

He was wearing a baseball cap pulled low and dark sunglasses, despite the time, but his profile was unmistakable in the same way you could always pick out which apple was rotten in the bunch.

Kieran Blackthorne.

Something uncontrollable surged through me—dark, sharp, bitter, and icy enough to drown out the burning spreading through me.

Betrayal.

'I didn't end my bond with Kieran so I could be with you.'

But she'd ended things with me to be with him.