

Sold to the Night Lord

No one should be planning their suicide before reaching adulthood.

I have.

Tonight will be the longest night of the year and will also mark my birthday. I had never **feared** the arrival of **a** day the way I fear this one. Since I can remember, I've been warned about my terrible fate—the one that awaits all firstborns in this new society.

“Elara!” My mother’s voice pulls me from my daydreams. “Dinner is ready!”

I look at my reflection one last time before rising from the vanity and descending the rickety stairs to the living room where my family awaits. The stairway is lit by a half-consumed candle resting in a wall sconce. Since their arrival, progress *has* stopped. We’ve been condemned to live their way. Damned nostalgics with an aversion to technology. Everything I know about the “advanced world” is what I’ve been able to read in old books or seen in photographs that are already beginning to fade and crack. We’ve spent over a century going backward in time, adapting to their way of life: we travel by carriage, wear pompous and uncomfortable clothes, and communicate by letter. I was born when computers, cell phones, and gasoline-powered cars **were** already just **a** memory in the minds of the oldest people.

I step on the last stair, which **creaks** under my weight, and find my entire family gathered around the table. My mother serves soup with a ladle, filling the bowls with **a** smile, because being able to offer us this meal tonight is not something common. We are not a wealthy family, not even middle class.

“Sweetheart, sit down, it’s getting cold.”

I take my **place next** to my seven-year-old sister, Abigail, a little girl with copper-toned curls and honey-colored eyes. She smiles at me with her gap-toothed grin.

“Don’t be nervous, maybe they won’t choose you.”

My father’s voice is sweet, **just** like he is. Sometimes I think he’s like that with me because I’ve been marked since birth. Being the firstborn had branded me and condemned me to a miserable fate. **A** fate where I’m seen as a mere source of food for those cold, sadistic, soulless beings.

“I’m not nervous,” I lie. “I’ve spent eighteen years preparing for this.”

I know the smile doesn’t reach my eyes, though I try to convey as much calm as possible. This isn’t easy for them—how could it be for any parents? In a few hours, it will be my eighteenth birthday, and in just a few days, there will be a full moon, which means

entering the Red Auction. **If** you're lucky, maybe no one will buy you, but clinging to that hope is foolish. We're products, we're just blood. They'll end up buying us, whether you're attractive, bony, or sickly. Sooner or **later**, someone will be willing to feed on you.

"To be exact, it's been seventeen years and three hundred and sixty-four days," says my brother, trying to lighten the mood. "Don't ask me to be more precise with hours, minutes, and seconds because on that I might fail you."

I roll my eyes; this **is** typical of him—resorting **to** silly humor when situations overwhelm him. Silvano—whom we all call Silas—is my younger brother by ten months, yet he insists on acting older than me. He has **a** broad, stocky body, straw-golden hair, and honey-colored eyes like Abigail. Mine **are gray**, empty, without color. Everything about me seems to **lack** brightness, from my eyes to the dark shade of my hair.

I grab the spoon and take a bit of soup. My mother's gaze is on me, waiting for me to say something or **react**

in some way. I smile at her, and she seems to **relax** in her **seat**. Her hair is the same color as my brother's, slightly graying and tied in **a low** bun at the nape of her neck. And although her **gaze** is the sweetest I've **ever** seen, it's also the saddest.

"It's delicious, Mom."

I force myself to keep eating, even though my stomach **is** closed from **nerves**. I'm a terrible daughter and **sister** for what I plan to do tonight. Surely they won't be proud to have raised such a selfish daughter, willing to end her life out of fear of living it **to** the last breath with those insatiable, sinful

creatures.

"So you say you and Lea are going for **a** walk **near** the lake..." says my father. "You know you shouldn't come back **late**, it's getting dark. No matter what they promise, they're dangerous."

"I know, Dad, don't worry, **we'll** be fine."

He strokes his several-day-old beard with his fingers while examining **me**. Does he know my true intentions? Do I wear them all over my face? Finally, he turns his attention back to the bowl.

"Can I come?" asks Abigail. "Please, **please**..."

"No," **we all** answer **at** once.

Abigail pouts and goes back to her soup. The atmosphere is more tense than expected; it shouldn't be like this, but the threat **is** in the air, and no one **is** willing to ignore it. In four **days**, I'll leave this **house**

, most likely for the rest of my life.

I don't leave a single drop in the bowl before standing. I look at my whole family, imprinting them on my memory. I wish I could **tell** Silas **that I** hope he forgives me someday for **what** my **death will** cost him, for the **way** it will condemn him. I wish I could explain **that I've lived** with **fear** for

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many years, and I can't bear it any longer. That death feels like a walk in the park compared to the fate life has in store for me.

I do none of that. I just smile at them one last time, run to my room, and there I grab a fur-lined cloak that Lea gave me years ago and which I've kept carefully, as it's one of the few valuable things I own. After a few minutes, I slip out the door under everyone's gaze. The cold air kisses my cheeks, and although the first snowfall hasn't **yet** come, I **fear** it won't be long. I walk the path to Lea's house, located a couple of streets from mine. The last workers walk the streets, eager to take refuge in the warmth of their homes, some women finish gathering the laundry they hung out this morning, and shopkeepers are closing up their businesses.

Lea is right at the entrance of the little path to her house, waiting for me, all bundled up in her cloak, her nose red from the cold. She smiles, and even if she doesn't mean to, it's **a** sad smile. Her orange hair frames her face.

"Elara!" She runs a **few** steps toward me. "I thought you weren't coming!"

"Sorry, I got a little delayed." I link my arm with hers, and we start walking through the dirty village streets. "How's the family?"

"Same **as** always. Mom's still waiting for Sophie's letters every week, but it's been two weeks since the last one."

"The **roads** are bad, mail hasn't been arriving often lately," I try to reassure her.

Sophie is Lea's older sister. A year ago, she entered the Red Auction and was bought. Not everyone is lucky enough to have owners who allow them to stay in contact with their families. Most are torn away from them completely, considered dead to the world. Sophie is lucky—she was bought by one who doesn't care about anything other than having a midnight snack.

The lack of mail might just be a coincidence or, in the worst-**case** scenario...

“Mom’s going to fall ill if this keeps up, and Dad’s been working too much. I think they’re starting to **fear** the worst, and I... I don’t know how to feel.”

“I’m sure she’s just delayed a little, don’t lose hope.” I stroke her hand with mine, giving her little pats. “How are your latest readings?”

I try to distract her by talking about those huge books that talk about the world before. Lea is a curious girl, ever since she learned to read she’s loved scouring the little market stalls for books that tell how life used to be. I love that about her—I like sitting by the lake shore and listening to her ramble for hours about how people our age used to relate, about fashion, **so** changing, fleeting, and much more comfortable than today’s.

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Chapter 2

We reach the lake, walking arm in arm, and I end up getting **lost** while staring at the **water**. Lea is lucky. Her sister’s sacrifice meant her family’s Libris **was** sealed.

Once sealed, it’s considered that the family has already paid enough. The parents give up their firstborn, and in return, they get the certainty that they won’t lose any other children, and a little pouch of coins **to** feed themselves for a year. A small alms in exchange for losing a child forever.

*Are you listening to me?”

I blink, coming out of my thoughts.

“Sorry.” I smile, embarrassed. “What were you saying?”

“Don’t worry.” That sad smile again. “I’m sure you **have** a lot on your mind. I was saying that yesterday, during the walk with my mom, Felippo, the baker’s son, stopped to chat with us for a while. He couldn’t stop looking at me, maybe...”

“Maybe...?” Her cheeks turn pink. “Do you like Felippo?”

She tries to ignore me, looking at anything but me. Still, I don’t give up and start poking **her** in the side, forcing her to look at me between laughs.

‘Don’t be silly, Felippo **is** too much...”

“Too what?”

“Too right.”

“Not right?” I raise an eyebrow. “You’re the most correct person I know.”

She unlinks her arm and starts walking backward, spinning slowly **as** she talks.

“Yes, that’s why I want someone who’s rebellious, adventurous, someone who makes me feel alive. I don’t want something traditional and typical—I want someone who pushes me to do new things.”

“You want to give your parents a heart attack,” **I** say.

She laughs again, twirling on **herself** while walking along the rest of the path. We reach the end, the **sign** that it’s time to turn back and return to the comfort of **our** homes. **I have** a different idea for tonight. We retrace our steps and, when **we reach** the end, I stop in front of Lea and look her straight in the **eyes**.

“Tonight I’m going home alone,” I announce. “I need a **few** moments to myself.”

“Elara, that’s not **a** good idea. **It’s** getting **dark**, you can’t go back alone...”

“Lea, please...” I say pleadingly. “I don’t **have**

much time left, soon I won’t **have these** walks, I won’t have time for myself. Not even to think.”

The rustling of the hem of her **dress** sounds on the **gravel as** she comes **closer** and hugs me tightly. I let her comfort me, inhaling the sweet violet scent of her hair. I feel the tremble in her shoulders, and then I know she’s crying. I try not to let the **tears** cloud my eyes. We’ve been friends all our lives, and one of **us** has to **say** goodbye forever to the other, even if she doesn’t know about my definitive intentions. She won’t receive my letters, because I’m so terrified of my fate **that** I plan to run from it like **a** coward.

“There, there...” I stroked her back in a soothing gesture. “Everything will be fine, I’ll write to you and tell you what my new home is like. It’ll be like I’m here.”

The lie **tastes** like ash.

She pulls away from me, unable to hold **back** the sob that **escapes**. I wipe the tears running down her cheeks with my thumbs and **give** her **a** small smile.

“I’ll write you so **many** letters,” she promises. “So many **that** you’ll get tired of me.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I’ll tell you all about what I discover in my books, **I’ll** tell you about Felippo and any other who comes around during our walks...”

“**I** want the wedding details with Felippo,” I tease. “You’re blushing again!”

“You’re **an** idiot!”

She hugs **me** again and ends the **farewell** with a little wave of her hand and an exclamation.

“**See** you tomorrow!”

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As she walks down the path, she turns to look back several times to **see** me, and I stay in place until her orange waves disappear.

I let out the air I was holding in my chest and collapsed to the ground, where the vegetation is dull and dry. I don’t bother gathering my skirts—how dirty my dress gets no longer matters.

The **sky** slowly turns a dark blue and the only sounds accompanying me are the breeze, the moving water, and the treetops being shaken. The lake is at one end of the **village**, in the most uninhabited area. The first occupied house is probably hundreds of meters **away**. It’s not proper for young ladies to come here, much **less** stay alone in such a remote and lonely **place**. My parents would not approve of this.

I kick off my round-toed shoes and then my tights.

I feel the earth beneath my **feet** as **I** begin to walk toward the shore.

My body doesn’t get **used** to the cold—the icy December water **feels** like hundreds of needles stabbing into me. As painful have a **goal** and I’m not going to abandon it.

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take another step, and then

it **is**,

I stop. I

past my chest, and

My chest protests **as** my shivering body presses the boning of my corset into me. I keep moving forward, the water covers me my teeth won’t stop chattering. I can’t feel my toes,

and it's hard to move my hands. I keep advancing a little more, struggling to stay on the surface.

Each minute **is** like a grain falling from an hourglass, marking the countdown.

Little by little, my whole body goes numb, the cold clouds even my mind. Small clouds of breath escape my trembling lips.

There comes **a** moment when my feet feel so heavy that **I** stop moving them and remain still, letting my head sink, inch by inch.

Air rushes from me when I dive under. The shock of being fully in this cold water is brutal. The **excess** calm in it **is** even unsettling.”

I sink slowly, suspended in the water, watching my hair float around me while neither my arms nor **legs** can make the effort **to** swim surface. The cold stabs into me like **ice stakes**.

My chest protests. It burns, and I swear hands are pressing against **it**, compressing it.

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I open my mouth involuntarily, searching for air and finding only water. I choke. **A** spasm shakes me, my vision blurs, and the weight of keeps dragging me deeper and deeper.

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More spasms run through me, breaking the stillness of the water, and no matter how hard I try to move my arms, they don't respond.

Even if I want to die, the survival instinct is strong, but I remind myself over and **over** that this **is** what I want.

My vision turns treacherous, showing me what looks like a face that vanishes **as** quickly as **I** blink.

The edges of my vision go dark, like the borders of a photograph burning.

“You must live, you **have** to **live**...”

The words are whispered in the **water**

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“You have to **live**, **you** must live.”

The weight of my eyelids gets heavier, and so does the feeling that something **is** coming toward me.

“This act of cowardice disappoints me.”

Something in those words makes me seethe.

They pour into me like acid corroding my **veins**.

A wave of **shame** overwhelms me.

I can't do this. **I can't** do this to my **parents**. To my siblings.

The Libris isn't scaled—Silas **will** have to enter the Red Auction **because** of me. **I** can't condemn him to that—this is my burden, mine alone.

Try to open my **eyes**, to fight against the **water**, but it's too late.

No matter how hard I try, my body refuses to respond.

“Stupid girl.”

Hysteria makes me open my mouth again, and water gushes into me, filling my lungs and silencing my screams.

Hair crosses my vision, wraps around my neck like **a** noose.

i look up and all I see is black. I'm far from the surface.

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That mysterious **face** is getting closer, closer, closer...

I lose consciousness momentarily and when I come to, my face **is** against the shore of the lake, stained with wet dirt.

My dress still floats in the **water**, and my legs **are** still numb.

I press my elbows into the earth to drag what's left of my body out of it.

My hands tremble, and when I glance at my fingers, **I see** they're purple.

I roll onto my back, with the **sky** growing darker and the moon more **present**.

My breathing isn't normal—it's ragged, and my chest makes sounds of agony.

I try to bring my hands up to my mouth to try and warm them.

My legs don't obey my commands, and my feet are a purplish hue.

The breeze shakes the treetops, and with it, a new whisper reaches me.

"Accept your fate."

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 3

I look in every direction searching for the source of the voice, but only the trees and the lonely path answer me.

The words crash into me with weight, and my shoulders shake **as I** break into **tears**.

I've been **so** selfish, such a terrible daughter and sister...

I almost condemned my siblings to my **fate** and my family to disgrace.

I cover my eyes with my hands, trying to hold back the tears, but they come out with force, unwilling *to* stop.

I don't know how long I'll **stay** sitting there before Silas appears.

"Elara!" My brother's steps grow louder and louder. "Elara! What happened?"

The warmth of his arms surrounds me, and instinctively, my hands try to cling to him, seeking comfort.

I bury my face in his chest, soaking his shirt with my hair and wet clothes.

He murmurs something I can't make out while rocking us both gently.

"There, there, Elara... It's okay now."

I feel his fingers tangle in my hair as he strokes it.

His embrace is **exactly** what I needed—and I didn't know it until this moment.

Small clouds of breath form in the air with each of my ragged breaths.

His hands massage my feet and ankles, trying to get my circulation back to normal and drive out the sickly color.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

I shake my head, and he doesn’t push.

That’s what I like about him, the bond we have, the mutual agreement not to push each other when the questions are too painful to answer.

We spend a long while on the shores of the **lake**—

me clinging to him, trying to absorb some warmth, and him checking to make sure the circulation in my limbs returns to normal.

“I hope you know you’re going to **cause** quite a stir when we get home.”

One of his arms goes around my back, the other slides under my knees, and he lifts me from the ground.

“Mom and Dad are going to lose their minds when they see you like this.”

I nod. My parents will definitely make a fuss when they see me like this.

It’s obvious I’m already in trouble for not coming home before dark, and showing up like this **isn’t** going to make things better.

Silas doesn’t speak again; he carries me silently along the path until we reach the empty village **streets**.

The cold still lingers deep in my bones and I don’t know what else to do to warm up.

I sigh in relief when I see our house in the distance, casting an orange light through the windows.

When we reach the door, Silas kicks it open, and the avalanche of my family’s concern begins.

“What happened?” my father asks, rising from his chair beside the fire.

“Elara!” My mother’s cry cuts through the air. “My girl! What happened? You’re **soaked!**”

“Bring as many blankets as you can,” Silas orders as he carries **me** toward the fire.

I don’t even get to feel the relief of being near the fireplace.

I pass out on the way to it, and the last thing I'm aware of is my head falling backward with **a** sharp jolt.

As expected, I spent my birthday and the following days in bed with pneumonia that made the air coming out of my chest sound like a horse's neighs. Four days later, my appearance hasn't improved much, and I hope this will **serve as** an **excuse** so no one buys me tonight.

My thick black hair **has**

been **neatly** gathered at the nape of my neck with small floral pins. My skin **has** a lifeless tone, and two **small** purple **grooves** 1/3

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rest under my eyes.

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"My little girl..." **says** Mom through tears **as** she pinches my cheeks to give them some color. "I'm not ready for this moment. None of us are."

My chest tightens with each word, I blink **several** times to chase away the urge to cry. My tears will only make this harder.

"Don't worry, Mom. **Maybe** I'll be lucky and no one will find me appetizing enough tonight."

My mother's eyes look at me without humor, red and flooded with tears.

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"Whether they buy you or not, this **is** the last night you'll spend under our roof." Her hands rest on my shoulders, and she pulls me into her arms. She gently strokes my back. "Stay healthy—not for them, but for yourself, Elara. Write to us, let us know somehow that you're still alive."

"I'll try," I reply without conviction.

Most of us already know the fate that awaits once we're bought.

Each vampire **is** supposed to have **a** certain number of "feeders" according to their rank. No more, no less, as long as they remain healthy and capable of fulfilling their duty.

They're not allowed to hurt us, overstep, or hasten our deaths. But those are just words, laws written by their ancestors and ours to guarantee peace.

In practice, many of them overdrink, leave us dry, discard us, and quickly find a replacement, with the cooperation, of course, of corrupt Red

Auctions.

Mom leaves me alone for a few moments, which I use to try to burn into my memory every detail of what has been my bedroom for eighteen years -my place of **rest**

and confessions.

I'm wearing the prettiest and **newest** dress I have in my closet.

One that squeezes my chest so tightly it's hard to breathe.

It's made of green velvet with golden thread embroidery, the neckline is square and reveals the curves of my breasts. I get up from the little stool in front of the vanity and grab the shawl.

I give myself one **last** look in the mirror and involuntarily pass my fingers along the curve of my neck, as if I already knew I'd never see it intact again. I wrap the shawl over my shoulders, hold it tightly, and leave the room.

I descend the stairs, listening to **every creak** of the wood, and see all the **faces** of my family waiting at the bottom.

"You look beautiful," says **Silas**, his eyes shining.

"Elara always looks beautiful."

Dad takes my hand as I **step** down the **last stair** and pulls me into his **chest**, hugging me so tightly my bones protest.

Still, I say nothing.

I stay there for several breaths, knowing this will be the last time I'll be in my father's arms.

It's painfully hard to pull away.

"Elara?" a child's **voice** calls.

My little sister looks up **at** me from a few heads below. Her huge honey-colored eyes gaze at me, frightened, and I smile to reassure her. I hug her, cradling her face against my chest and stroking her copper curls.

I'm going to miss so much...

I won't be there to soothe her scraped knees the next time she falls playing, there will be no more candlelit stories, and I won't be around when she starts smiling because of some boy.

Our parents watch the scene with true anguish, and Silas joins our **embrace**, wrapping his arms around us both and shielding us from the world with the breadth of his body.

I inhale the **scent** of home while holding back **tears**.

The sound of a bell breaks the silence.

The Red Auction is open to receive **us**.

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Chapter 4

Each chime falls over us like a bucket of cold water.

Mom grabs Abigail's hand, and my father offers me his arm to walk.

Silas stands to my right and opens the door, letting in a **gust** of freezing air.

We all seem to hold our breath for **a** second and then begin to walk.

The street is empty, although dozens **of** pairs of eyes watch us from **their** windows.

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Every full moon is an event that **everyone** watches from the **safety** of their homes, with goosebumps and aching hearts, because every time one of **us** enters the Red Auction, it reminds the others of what will one day come to their own homes.

Many other auctions are taking **place** tonight in hundreds of cursed **villages** like ours.

We walk in silence, hearing windows close and the meow of a stray cat.

"If you ask me now, I'll take you out of here," Silas whispers.

We'll run **away** from the village, go into the forest, and with the money **I've** saved, we'll cross the **ocean**."

My heart skips a beat, I look around, hoping no one is close enough to **have** heard his boldness.

“Don’t **say** nonsense.” I grit my teeth. “Don’t even think of suggesting something like that again. It would be treason.”

He tries to speak, but a single look from me **is** enough to silence him.

He can’t be serious about this.

Going against the rules and the system is treason.

They’d kill our whole family—or rather, drain them like pigs in the village square.

The world has changed; **we’re** no longer the cruelest living being. Now **they** are.

They let us dream of a world where humans ruled everything, and crushed that fantasy with a simple **wave** of the hand.

“There doesn’t seem to be much of **a** crowd at this auction,” Mom comments from behind, worried.

Fewer people **at** the auction means more **chances** of being bought.

I swallow with difficulty, trying to dissolve the knot in my throat.

The peaked roof of what used to be **a** church **is** already **visible at**
the end of the **street**.

After the vampires’ arrival, everything **related to** religion was burned and destroyed—**except** churches.

They found it ironic to use them for auctions.

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As if to say: “Look, God, here’s **where** I buy your beloved children to **treat** them like animals, to **feast** on them and break their souls.”

What they don’t know **is** that their arrival sparked, for many, a deeper need to believe—to cling to a merciful being who watches **over** us.

The church doors **are** wide open, and from within, **an** intense orange light spills out.

We stop walking and look at each other, knowing they **can’t** follow me any further.

Once again, Mom begins to **cry** and throws herself into my arms.

“I’ll pray every night for you to be safe, healthy, and strong.”

“Mom...”

“Darling, don’t scare our daughter anymore,” says Dad, **wrapping** his **arms** around Mom as she tries to hide in him.

“She’s strong and will fulfill her role, **She’ll** manage to write to us and bring us words of relief, right?”

I nod.

“Sister, show them how tough the Vosss **are**.”

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“You got it.” I smile.

“Don’t encourage your **sister** to do anything **reckless**,” Mom scolds.

“Daughter, you must be submissive—even if they promise not to hurt you beyond... **well**, you know their word doesn’t mean much. They could still hurt you.”

“I know, Mom,” I **say**, even though I’m more than willing to be reckless.

“I’ll be good.”

“That’s my girl.”

I kneel down, aware that my skirts are getting stained with dirt.

I kiss Abigail on the crown of her head and whisper something silly in her ear to make her laugh, then hug Silas, and finally around my parents and hold them tightly.

“I’ll **be** fine, I promise.”

“We love you so much, daughter.”

I give them each a loud kiss on the cheek and, clutching my skirts, I head toward the entrance of the old church.

don’t look back—their sad **faces** would break me.

I quicken my steps and **cross** the threshold of the door.

The cold inside **steals** my breath for a moment.

Despite being inside a church, little remains of its original contents.

It looks nothing like the images in books.

Everything that could have had religious meaning is gone.

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Where the baptismal font should be, there's a pyramid of **goblets** filled with crimson liquid; the walls bear no saints, only portraits **of pale** faces.

The **Pure**, the elite among vampires, the highest authority.

The pews have been replaced by luxurious armchairs, the altar is now just another table, and **a few crosses** remain in place, turned upside down in mockery.

A woman with an oval **face**, dressed in **a** red velvet gown, approaches me when she **sees** me enter.

"Your Libris, **please.**"

I search in the small pouch hanging from my wrist and pull out the book that contains all my data.

The woman opens it and reads with **a clear** look of boredom.

She observes me briefly from under her **lashes**, evaluating me.

"Follow me."

She starts walking down the **aisle**, and before **we reach** what was once the altar, we veer toward a small door.

I start hearing my own heartbeat.

The cold is **still painful**, and **I** wonder how she shows no signs of discomfort.

She's human—the blush in her cheeks and her lack of pallor confirm it.

We emerge into **a** room dimly lit by candles, and other faces **stare back** at me,

There are several girls and boys, **all** with wide, fearful **eyes**.

"Take off your dress and put that on," says the woman, pointing to a red cloth.

I look around, searching for a screen to change behind.

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“There’s no.”

“Modesty and shyness **are** things you can no longer afford from now on,” she cuts me off. “**Get** changed quickly, they’re about **to arrive**.”

I take the red silk garment and, glancing quickly at **my** companions, I see that it does little **to** cover our nakedness.

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The men’s chests are **bare**, and they wear a strange piece of clothing from the waist down.

I blush and quickly avert my gaze.

Everyone avoids eye contact, gripped by shame.

I try to undo the **laces** of my **corset**.

“One **last** question,” the woman in the red dress **says** before disappearing down the hallway. “**Is** your virtue intact?”

I blink.

“What does my virtue have to do with any of this?”

“They like the taste of virgin blood,” her tone is haughty. “Your virtue will **increase** your price.”

“Damn pigs...” I mutter.

“The answer **is** simple: yes or no.”

She arches an **eyebrow** at me, impatient. I square my shoulders and lift my chin.

Yes, my virtue is intact.”

She nods **as** if pleased with my answer and disappears.

Just a few minutes **have** been enough to classify her **as** someone I dislike.

corset, I allow myself a deep sigh and let it fall to the floor. I slip off the dress and remain in only a thin undergarment.

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I hug my body before taking that off **as well**, leaving me naked. I **stare** at the wall, pushing aside the shame, and without letting myself lower **gaze**, I pull the red silk over my head, which falls softly and clings to my body.

Sold to the Night Lord

A door opens on the other side, revealing a woman dressed entirely in black. Her face **is** covered by a lace veil, as if she must hide her identity to avoid being recognized by one of us and facing retribution.

“You’ll go out one by one,” she informs. “You can’t see them, but they can see you. Stay still and silent on the other side of the glass. It’ll be over before you know it.”

Her voice sounds very mature.

She says a name, and out of the corner of my eye, I see it’s a tiny, petite girl who, by the way she hunches her shoulders, must be terrified.

She walks out the door, and it closes forcefully behind her.

The woman stays in the room with us, and even though I can’t see her, I feel she’s subjecting us all to her scrutiny.

Maybe ten minutes pass when knuckles knock on the door, calling the next one.

Little by little, the room empties, and the air becomes heavier and more uncomfortable.

“For some of you, today will be a special day,” the woman says suddenly. “I’m sure of it.”

Maybe this woman is an old lady who’s begun to lose her mind. A special day? Being bought like pieces of meat?

How special can it be to know that the rest of your life will be dedicated to letting them sink their fangs into your neck?

“I seriously doubt it, ma’am,” I **say**, unable to hold back.

I know her **eyes** land on me, and the rest of those still in the room look at me in disbelief.

“Do not **dare** contradict my word, young lady.”

“What’s so special about being bought?”

The woman decides I’m not worth her time or the effort of wasting saliva on me. The door opens again, and then she turns toward me.

It’s my turn.

It’s hard to put one foot in front of the other, and yet I manage.

I pass by her, and a musty smell hits me. Without needing to **see** her, I know she must have a smug smile on her face.

As I step out, the light is so blinding that I have to close my eyes—I’m not used to this artificial light that only **a few possess**

.

My eyes sting and tear up, and a stranger’s hand is necessary to guide me to the center.

After **a few** blinks, **I realize** I’m standing where the pulpit of the church used to be, and **where** now there’s nothing but floors **covered** in plush red **carpets** and a massive **glass** pane that **reflects** my image.

They’re there, behind it. Watching me, evaluating me, trying to smell my blood.

The lights dim, and only a single spotlight remains above my head, displaying me as if I were an expensive vase.

I don’t allow myself to lower my **gaze** or blush, knowing that many pairs of eyes are seeing my barely covered body.

“**Elara** Voss,” speaks a voice I recognize as the woman in the red dress. She sounds loud and confident.

“Healthy, weighs fifty-one kilos, presents no **physical** anomalies, her blood type is O negative, and... her virtue is intact. Bidding starts at fifteen blood rubies.”

I can’t see anything happening on the other side.

Gentleman number five offers twenty blood rubies. Does anyone offer more?”

My eyes dart around, searching for something behind the glass.

“Lady number ten offers twenty-five blood rubies.”

Amounts continue **to** be announced.

Men and women. Numbers and more numbers...

My legs buckle from time to time, and I

feel completely overwhelmed knowing that the control of my life **is** slipping through my fingers and that

in a few minutes I'll have lost it entirely.

My vision blurs, and I blink quickly to chase away the sensation.

"Number twenty-eight offers fifty rubies—any higher?"

Fifty?

How ironic that I'm being bought here for blood rubies while my family will receive only a pouch of coins.

With just one of those precious stones, my family could live peacefully for years.

"Seventy blood rubies."

A shiver runs down my spine.

"Eighty blood rubies!"

This **is so** sadistic and inhuman.

"One hundred blood rubies!"

shrill sound interrupts the sequence of bids, silencing the woman who kept torturing me with her voice.

I stay in place, waiting for an explanation.

Seconds pass, then whole minutes.

"The bidding has just ended," the woman's voice now reflects delight.

"Miss Elara Voss has just been purchased by Cassian Draven for the price of six hundred blood rubies."

The spotlight above my head turns off, plunging me into absolute darkness.

The creak of a door opening reaches my ears, and several pairs of hands grab me by the arms, pulling me out of there.

I don't know if I should resist, but I let myself be dragged.

As they take me to another room, I realize that the lights had been warming me, and now the cold embraces me once again.

I find myself with the rest of the companions who were shown before me.

They look at me with wide eyes, and at first, I think it's because of the fear they must have experienced out there, but after a few minutes, I realize

it's because of me.

"What's going on?"

None of them dares to say a word.

I look at myself, searching for something out of place—a wound, or maybe my clothes got disheveled, showing more than they should.

Everything looks fine.

I lift my eyes, seeking answers.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?"

Agonizing minutes pass until the petite girl I saw earlier, the one with hunched shoulders, dares to speak.

"We heard it."

"Heard what?"

"Who bought you?"

"What about it? It was some Cassian Drakov... Drakon or something."

"Cassian Draven," she corrects me. "Is it possible you're this ignorant?"

"Excuse **me**?"

"Cassian Draven," **says** a boy. "He's a soulless monster. The worst of them. He's ruled by **an** insatiable thirst."

“Aren’t they all like that?” I reply.

12:18 PM

“Not like him,” adds the girl again. “Your life ended the moment he bought you.”

“I think that goes for all of us here.”

“What we’re trying to say **is**... You probably won’t live to see the next full moon.”

3/3

Sold to the Night Lord

Elara

*

+15

The revelation falls upon me, chilling the blood in my veins. The silence **is** such that the air leaving my lungs in a ragged gasp seems to echo throughout the room. All eyes are on me. I dig my nails into the palms of my hands, holding back the urge to scream at everyone to stop looking at me as if I were already dead. Until my heart says otherwise, I’m very much alive and ready to fight. I won’t let them destroy me **so** easily.

What nonsense am I thinking? For God’s sake, he’s a vampire. He could break all my bones with a simple movement of his hand.

Other doors swing wide open and instead of allowing in a new member of our club of newly purchased lambs, a rather large group of women bursts in. Their dresses look expensive, made of the finest fabrics by the finest tailors, surely, with lavish necklines and sleeves ending in cascades of lace. The excessively red shade of their lips is the first thing that puts me on alert, followed by the cold touch of a hand on my elbow.

“Come,” **says** one of them without barely looking at me. “We must prepare you for him.”

They tug at me without any delicacy. My feet anchor to the ground for a second, the time it takes to remember the situation I’m in, and then I let them lead me away. I cast one last glance at the others before the doors shut tightly behind me. I observe the woman and the rest of the entourage. All of them have faces white as **alabaster**, smooth skin without imperfections and lips **as** red as poppies. Vampires, **all** of them are.

A shiver tiptoes down my spine.

“Hurry.” She pulls harder on my arm. “It’s better **if** you don’t make him wait too long. You won’t like the consequences.”

Another one steps forward and pulls aside a thick curtain of shiny red velvet that conceals a bathtub with enormous golden feet.

Several hands begin to roam over my body, getting rid of the silk that covers me. I am naked within seconds, and their lack of control over their strength makes their grip painful. I suppress a whimper as they force me to walk and immerse myself in the water.

What I can’t suppress **is** a moan of pure relief when my skin touches the hot water. They scrub my arms with such force that they quickly turn red. They make me feel **as** though I had walked all my life with a layer of filth on my skin. They scrub and scrub, while other hands massage my hair and rinse it with water.

With the same strength as before, they make me stand and wrap me quickly in a silk robe.

“A tied-up hairstyle will be the best option,” says the same woman as before. “It will help mask her scent a bit.”

I don’t miss the way she wrinkles her nose **as** she says this. I

stare at her, captivated by her beauty. Are all these monsters this beautiful? Her hair is the most intense red I’ve ever seen, and its exceptional shine creates an incredible contrast with the paleness of her angular **face**. She has eyes the color of summer meadows and voluptuous lips.

The rest obey the orders of the one I’ll now consider their leader. They pull at my hair, making my eyes water more than once. They brush, shape, and arrange the strands to their liking. They examine my hands, file my nails, and smear ointments on them.

“The master wants her to wear this dress,” says another, bringing the garment wrapped in tissue paper.

At the same time, other hands begin to roam my body, sliding fabrics that even my fingers hesitate to touch for fear of damaging them. I don’t know how much time passes under the attention of these women, but eventually, the woman with the intense **green** eyes uncovers a full-length mirror where **I can** see my appearance.

My hair is gathered in elaborate braids ending in a low bun at the nape of my neck. I’m not wearing a corset or anything like that, and I feel strangely free. My back tingles with cold and a glance confirms it **is** completely bare down to the curve of my buttocks. I blink in disbelief. This dress is nothing like the ones we **wear** in the village; **it’s** different.

The sheer fabric is a grayish blue, with cords tied around my neck. I can’t see my feet, hidden by the hem of the wide skirt. They place high heels in front of me and quickly put

them on me. Everything seems to have been chosen in my **size**. They throw a black cloak over my shoulders and deft fingers tie it **at** my chest.

“We’ve done what we could.”

“Let’s hope **it’s** enough.”

“The appearance of his bloodmaids is very important.”

I don’t know if they’re talking to me, among themselves, or just voicing their thoughts aloud.

“Come, we must go.”

They grab my elbow again, forcing **me** to walk **so** quickly that I stumble and bump into the red-haired woman’s back. **She** gives me a **severe** look and bares her fangs in warning. I stare back at her, refusing to lower my **gaze**. She doesn’t yield either, staying in the same position until another **of** the entourage touches her shoulder soothingly and **urges**

us to continue.

As soon as **we pass** again through the **velvet** curtain, a large, broad-shouldered man walks by us. He moves quickly, with a **regal bearing**, and his

1/2

12:18 PM

body language makes it clear he’s not pleased. I keep staring at him and it seems like his eyes meet mine

In his **irises**, I find the coldest blue I’ve **ever seen**.

as he

passes.

I lose my breath, and the others seem to mimic me.

“Master,” they whisper in unison.

I look around, not understanding anything.

“Hurry,” they scold me. “The carriage **is** waiting.”

I do as I'm told and exit through the back door of the church. In front of us rests **a** carriage in the shiniest black with intricate silver carvings. A coachman opens the door for me, but **I** can't enter without first looking back. I know it's foolish, **I** know no one I know will be behind me. Still, I do it, as if my family **were** watching.

My eyes fill with tears when all I **see** is the empty street and the light from inside the building reflecting

2/2

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 7

I place my foot on the carriage step and, bowing my head, enter. **It's** dark, but when I lift The air leaves my lungs **as** if I'd been kicked in the chest. I sit with my back very straight!

gaze, I make out a large shadow, shaped like a man. shoulders stiff. I try not to look directly at the shadow.

"Let's go," he says, knocking on the roof with a calm but strong voice. **It's** masculine and hypnotic. "*I*

His wish is my command.

to get home **as** soon **as** possible."

The horses neigh as the whip **cracks**, breaking the night's calm. We speed off, accompanied by the thunder of hooves against the cobbled road. I look out the window, avoiding what truly awakens my interest and my fear.

About an hour passes during which my **rear** suffers with every bump in the road. The silence **is** suffocating, but I suppose **I else**. It's not like this predator-and-prey relationship is going to be friendly and cordial. I shift in

my seat

find a **better** position."

expect anything

Five minutes later, I shift again.

"Stop moving," he says sharply. "Your scent is coming to me."

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

Now it’s he who moves, stepping out from the shadows when the moonlight illuminates his face. It makes him look even paler. **It’s** him. The man from earlier. And once again those blue, cold eyes make the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. There’s no life in them, they’re empty, dead. He has thick lips pressed into a firm line, high and sharp cheekbones, and a neatly trimmed beard of a few days. My eyes can’t stop looking at him, completely stunned by his beauty. These monsters truly are beautiful. Beautiful to lure, to hunt, to kill.

I realize during my scrutiny that his **eyes are** also looking at me and I blush instantly. I look away toward the window. Even his gaze on me. I play with my fingers, count the bumps that shake the carriage, anything to distract myself from him. His

weight in the air.

He slides his long, graceful fingers to the carriage window and I see him open it a few centimeters. The rush of cold tighter to my cloak and wrap myself in it. His rigid posture relaxes slightly as his chest deflates with a deep exhale.

—

I **feel** the weight of

presence is SO tangible it’s

air

that enters makes me cling

Maybe another hour **passes** before the carriage stops and the coachman’s voice reaches my ears. Curiosity pulls **at** me and I discreetly try to see out of the corner of my eye what lies outside. I can’t make out much, only the thick trunks of trees and wild vegetation. A few minutes later we’re on the move again, and we pass through gates covered in vines. The carriage tilts slightly, indicating the path is **steep**. My companion remains impassive, not moving an inch.

As if fate hadn’t punished me enough tonight, a series **of** misfortunes follow: the **steep** path, a bump, and my clumsiness. The **carriage** jolts body shoots forward, crashing into something extremely hard.

and

my **gaze**, afraid.

The fingers, more like **claws**, with how deeply they dig into my shoulders, push me away quickly. My head **is** far below his, and I lift His **eyes** stab into me like **daggers**. My **heart** skips a **beat** when I **see** his hardened **expression**, flared nostrils, **tense** jaw, and lips curled in displeasure.

“Wasted rubies.”

He pushes me away from him as if my closeness **were** a physical ailment. My **back** hits the wooden seat and little **black** spots dance in my vision.

“No one asked you to pay so much for me,” I mutter angrily.

“What did you **say**?”

Keeping silent would be the most sensible option and the one that would guarantee I stay alive tomorrow, but if you think about it, I already tried to end my life once. The suicidal impulse seems to be wide awake within me.

“What **I** said is that no one forced you to **pay such** an amount of rubies for me.”

He **narrows** his eyes and tilts his head slightly with a certain amused air.

“The gazelle speaking informally to the lion,” he says **with** a mocking tone. “Perhaps you’ll serve me better as a **jester** than as food.”

A flush, having nothing to do with shame, unts my cheeks. I bite my tongue not to speak further, so hard I might **even** draw blood. My fingers fumble **at** the seat behind me, looking for **support** to get up.

“Your heart is beating so fast it’s almost like you’re begging me to let you taste my fangs...” He leans in his **seat**, looking down at me from his dominant position while I’m still sprawled on the floor of the **carriage**. I see his tongue caress one of his sharp fangs. “...on your neck...” His **eyes** darken **until** that cerulean liue almost vanishes, or maybe on other, more tender parts.”

We stop again. This time it seems to be the final stop, as the coachman opens the door and **makes a** deep bow, waiting for his master. He **gives** me something resembling a mocking smile and steps out of the carriage. I breathe again when his presence recedes and **I** exit as well, where the group

of **women** from before awaits me.

12:18 **PM**

O

I place a hand on my heart for a moment, trying to regain my composure.

So that man is Cassian Draven, my jailer and the one in charge of sinking his fangs deep into your neck.

I **shake** my head at that thought—where did it come from?

The vampires give a small curtsy **as Cassian passes** without even glancing **at** them. him up... and up...

+15

see

him

climb the small **staircase** quickly and my gaze follows

When I realize what's before my **eyes**, I can't help but open them so wide they nearly pop out. This **isn't** a house or a regular mansion—it's a damn castle. The walls are gray stone, impenetrable-looking, the steps to the main entrance worn with

the garden. I spin around, the gardens stretch beyond what **I can** see. I hear the sound of water,,me, and stone statues are scattered throughout

breeze.

caw

of a crow, and the rustle of leaves in the

I focus again on the imposing building before me. There are large arched windows, the cornices are decorated with open jaws, and in the center of the façade is a stained **glass** rose window. Robust statues are scattered here and **there**, presiding over the rooftops, and two **are** stationed on either side of the stairs, as if they were guardians of the main staircase.

“We don't have all day,” **says** the red-haired vampire. “You'll have time to admire the beauty of this

place.

“Or not.” Says another, covering her mouth to hide a giggle.

My

My fingers tingle with the urge to slap that perfect face. I'm sure I'd leave visible marks. The idea tempts me

fart

too

I try not to show that her words affect me, much less that they awaken my most violent side. I place my **first** foot on the **stairs**

“and begin to climb, slowly at first and then faster. I'm not surprised that, upon entering the castle, the atmosphere is as cold or even colder than outside.

“**Leave** us,” the redhead orders. “I'll take her to her chambers.”

I look around, not to admire the luxury and beauty of the place, but searching for blue eyes. He's nowhere to be

seen, I suppose I won't see him

much.

Only when he wants a quick sip.

Those stupid thoughts again.

I snort, which earns me a reproachful look from the redhead. Once we're alone, she starts walking and I follow her.

Sold to the Night Lord

“My name is Narkissa.” She doesn't say it in a friendly tone. “I'm in charge of preparing the new ones. I'll take you to your quarters and explain what you need to know.”

She lifts her skirts **as** she begins ascending a new **staircase**. This one **is** covered with a red carpet, and at the top hangs a portrait. As we approach, I begin to distinguish Cassian's features in it.

“Are you coming?” the vampire prompts me.

We move quickly through corridors lit by candles resting on ornate, jeweled sconces. We stop in front of a double **black** wooden door with the same fanged design from outside. She enters the room, lifting the white sheets that cover the furniture **as** she passes.

“Honestly, we didn't **expect** Cassian to take on another bloodmaid.”

“Why?” I dare to **ask**.

She moves forward and pulls open the curtains. I walk through the room with heavy steps, venturing into the wolf’s mouth.

“We were returning from a trip, we **weren’t** supposed to attend any Red Auction tonight.”

So fate had a lot to do with this. She turns with her hands on her hips.

“Let’s see.” She exhales a breath. “You already know your job is to feed the master. She points to the side of the **large** bed. “That bell there will ring when he needs you. There will always be someone outside to take you to him, though he usually feeds in the grand hall.” I swallow hard as my head tries to process the information. “Also, it’s your duty to stay healthy—we don’t want low-quality blood. You’ll **receive** regular medical checkups, be fed a rich and balanced diet, and have **access** to all the gardens for walking. Always accompanied by the guard posted outside the door.”

“I didn’t **see** any when we came here.”

“This wing of the **castle is** empty, but don’t **worry**. Now that you’re here, you’ll **see** them.”

Her face **is** expressionless **as** she waits for me to **say** something. I **twist** my fingers in front of me.

“How... how am I supposed to feed him?”

One corner of her mouth **curves** into almost a smile. She approaches and takes my wrist.

“Generally, you’ll cut here.” She points **at** my bluish veins. “And pour your blood into his cup. It’s simple.”

I **narrow** my eyes, confused, I didn’t **expect** something so...

“Disappointed?” she replies with amusement. “Cassian doesn’t sink his fangs into **just** anyone.”

“I thought for them...” I look **at** her. “Well, for you... feeding **directly was** more...

..pleasurable.”

“**It is.**” She walks to the wardrobe, opens both doors, and runs her fingers across dozens of dresses—I can **see** from here how majestic they are. “Most feed directly by sinking their fangs in. Cassian is **special**. He feels a **greater** aversion to humans than the **rest**.”

The spark of anger lights again. He feels aversion toward us? Him? Aversion is what we feel—they're the unnatural ones. Their hearts don't beat, their bodies **are** suspended in time, they don't even **have a** soul. The one who should feel disgust is me, not him.`

"Only his favorites **have** that privilege," she adds.

So Cassian has his favorite little lambs. I'm not **surprised**.

"I see."

*You must **always**

be available," she continues. "Cassian handles most of his duties and **pleasures** during the night, so I recommend you adjust your lifestyle to his."

"Anything else?"

I sound irritated without meaning to. Narkissa raises an eyebrow in my direction.

"**Cassian may** sometimes take you with him, outside the **castle**." She points with her chin toward the outside. "You probably know his reputation- he's never satisfied. His thirst is **never** quenched. **So** it's not unusual for him to take a bloodmaid with him."

I'm not going to contradict her, even if the truth is **I've spent** my whole life running from **them** to the point that I **don't even** know the names of the most important ones. And apparently, Cassian Draven is one of them. Just look **at** where he lives.

"Although I wouldn't worry about that. He **always** takes his favorite on those occasions."

12:18 **PM**

I **narrow** my eyes slightly. Why does **that** sound like provocation?

"**How** many bloodmaids does Cassian have?"

Her chest swells like a peacock's, her chin lifts even higher—if that's possible—and she smiles at me with arrogance, showing me her fangs for the second time.

"Twelve."

A heavy weight settles in my stomach along with the information. It expands and **twists**. Twelve bloodmaids

"Are that many **really** necessary?"

is a

for

one man. It's not fair.

"Of course," she replies.

"Without that many, you would all fall ill quickly because you'd be too weakened. That's why Cassian keeps so many—to rotate and prevent your lives from ending sooner than expected. Even **so**, many still die. I suppose **it's** hard to keep with him."

up

"I thought the rules said our buyer must take care of us, not end our lives." I **cross** my arms beneath my chest. "Besides, twelve bloodmaids **is... excessive.**"

"The rules are rewritten if they have to be applied to Cassian."

Without another word, she turns and walks to the threshold of the door. She grabs the handles of the double doors and see **a sliver** of her face when she speaks again.

I pull the

closed. I only

"And one more thing, you're expected in the dining hall to have dinner with him." I blink, bewildered. "There **are** things you **staff** will come to prepare you soon."

to **discuss**. The

IF

The door closes with a loud bang. I turn around, taking everything in and examining my new cage. There's a wide vanity table where it looks like there **are** hundreds of creams I wouldn't know how to use. I throw myself on the bed, confirming it's the best thing my back has ever had the **pleasure** of resting on. It's soft and wide, with a canopy cascading around it.

The wardrobe still displays dozens of dresses inside. I get up and run my fingers over the delicate **sleeves**. There's no other light than that of the candles, and the night **is** already far advanced—dinner now? I suppose getting used to this new way of life is going to be strange.

How long has it been **since** I **was** separated from my family? Four hours? Maybe **five**? And already it feels like an eternity has passed.

I approach the windows that lead to a balcony and immediately confirm what I already suspected—they're locked. Outside, the night is **less** dark thanks to the dozens of torches that draw the path to the entrance and hang from the walls.

い

The doors open again and two women, human, **enter** the room. One of them looks a few **years** older than me; the other **seems to** be a lady in the fifties. They don't dare lift their **eyes**.

"Miss, **we've** come to help you **get** ready for dinner."

2/2

Sold to the Night Lord

+15

I nod as I **watch** them move. The younger one has coppery hair; she reminds me of Abigail's curls. A feeling of closeness forms in my chest. She takes out a long white dress, as sheer **as** the one I'm wearing. The older one approaches me with hesitant steps and gestures to begin undressing me.

"It's okay, ma'am, I can do it myself."

"Oh, miss, don't **call** me ma'am." She tries to undo the knot of the dress at my neck. "And don't

The garment falls and pools at my feet. I **step** aside, and then the younger one crouches to remove

"**May** I know your names?"

"Our names aren't important," says the younger one.

"I insist. I'd like to know who I'm dealing with." I hesitate a moment. "Besides, you're human."

"We are." They nod. "I'm Naida and she's Clarissa."

"**Elara**," I reply.

this is

my shoes.

our job.”

We know.” Clarissa **places** her hands on my head. “The whole **castle** whispers about you and the six hundred rubies

your hair—loose or tied up?”

“Loose.”

Cost. How

would you

like

The woman nods and begins to undo the crown of braids that rested on my head. Meanwhile, Naida slides the dress over my body. It **leaves** shoulders bare, and the **sleeves** cling halfway down my arms before falling in a cascade. She wraps a jeweled belt around

my

Wais

“Aren’t these **dresses** a bit too much?”

“The master likes you to wear them.” A coppery lock falls over her forehead and she tries to blow it away. “He wouldn’t let someone **saw**

you in rags, it’d be **a** disgrace.”

you

dress

poor

If

she leads me

I feel my hair tickle my **back as** the last of the braids is undone. Clarissa massages my scalp, and when she sees I’m fully **dressed** again th

to the vanity stool. I look at my reflection—I look **flawless**. Those vampire women did a good job trying to hide my deplorable appearance. Four **days** of illness don't **leave** you with the best skin or undereye circles in **great** shape.

One of them brushes my **hair** while the other retouches my face powder and applies red lipstick with soft dabs on my lips.

N

"You said the whole **castle** whispers about me—**isn't** this normal for you? **I've** heard that **Master** Cassian changes bloodmaids quite frequently.

They exchange **a** meaningful look.

"He's never paid that much for anyone, considering how fast they wither." It's Clarissa who speaks while her fingers work to gather some strands and clear my **face**. To be bought for that amount, and by a Pure no less..."

of

my

Of course, it's obvious he must be **a** Pure. A Diluted one would never **have** so many **privileges** or riches. Pures are those who are born as they are, obviously from the union of two other Pures. On the other hand, there are two ways to **get** a Diluted one. The first is if a vampire and a human have a child—something that rarely happens since **it's** considered a disgrace to the race. The other is when a vampire turns a human, which sadly happens often.

I don't know many differences, just the most important **ones**. A Diluted can never walk in sunlight unless they want to turn to dust. That's why Pures are so dangerous—you can find them anywhere, **at** any time. A Diluted can be killed with a white oak stake blessed with holy water.

Yes, that water **that's** becoming scarce **since** no one blesses it anymore. A Pure? No. Among them, two factions **have** formed that are usually bitter enemies. **I've** heard that sometimes, when we feel the earth shake, it **has** nothing to do with Mother Nature—it's them, fighting each other.

"I don't feel honored," **I spit**. "I didn't want this—no one does. It **doesn't** matter who buys me or for how much, I still feel miserable."

"Of course." She corrects herself immediately. "I didn't mean to offend. I understand no one would choose this fate."

Naida looks at her companion disapprovingly.

“Is the **entire** staff **human**?” I ask in **an** attempt to **ease** the tension.

They nod silently.

“I thought they’d be of his kind.”

Silence follows, and then they burst into laughter, which **they** quickly **suppress**, looking around to see if anyone else witnessed their outburst.

“Miss, the things you say The younger one crouches and adjusts my neckline. I look at her strangely. “Vampires think our **work** is **far** too low **for** them. They would never work with their hands. The only task **they** consider worthy enough to do themselves is security.”

12:18 **PM**

That makes me feel more contempt for them. My parents are humble people who work to keep three children fed, and knowing they think that’s something disgraceful boils my blood.

“And how did you end up working for him?”

They share **a** knowing glance.

“I asked him for the job—or rather, **I** asked his right hand,” Clarissa **answers**. “At first the master **was** reluctant to have human employees, but he eventually accepted. After all, we make his life easier. We do what they don’t want to do with their hands, things that aren’t worth their unlimited time. Back then, my mother **was** very ill and I needed the money to buy medicine. When she died nearly ten years ago, with no children or husband waiting for me, I saw no reason to leave this place.”

Naida clears her throat, trying to dissipate the melancholy that’s wrapped around the three of us.

“Drystan brought me here. He found me in an alley after some drunk men beat me and stole everything

I cover my mouth with my hand.

“God, that’s awful, Naida...”

“Don’t mention God—he hasn’t listened to us in a long time.”

I had-

-even my clothes.”

struggle

We fall silent, as if that last sentence was a blow to the head. They continue working on my appearance with such diligence that I str recognize myself **each** time my eyes briefly meet my reflection.

“You’re ready now.”

to

Ysternum

They encourage me to stand, move the stool away, and I gently touch the fabric of the dress. The V-shaped neckline plunges down and stops at my waist, where the stones on the belt shine. I’ve never looked so beautiful and elegant before. I smile at my reflection and quickly wipe it away when the feeling of hypocrisy overwhelms me.

“One **last** thing.”

Their hands approach me, one working on my neck, the other on my ears. When they step back, a ruby necklace **rests** on matching earrings.

“Rubies for the ruby queen,” Clarissa jokes.

my collarbo with

+15

They vanish quickly the same way they came, offering a small curtsy before leaving. The door remains open, and one of the famous guards appears -the ones who will now be responsible for watching over my safety... or for keeping me in **place**, without any chance of escape.

I take a deep breath and leave the room, passing by the guard. I don’t need to look closely—one small movement is enough to tell he isn’t human. If the bloodmaids’ security were left to humans, it would only be a matter of time before one sympathized and helped you escape. I walk down the **hallway** following his **steps**, and soon another joins **us**. They flank me on either side. We descend the grand staircase, and I see the candle flames flicker in the enormous rustic chandelier, where crystals fall like drops—**so** shiny I wouldn’t be surprised if they were diamonds.

I take my final steps toward the dining hall where I’m **expected** for dinner, heart pounding. I feel it in my throat, threatening to fall to my feet if I dare part my lips. One of the guards opens the door for me and waits. I hesitate for a few seconds, and the sound **of** a shrill giggle is what pushes me forward.

The door closes behind me and the scene **leaves** me stunned, frozen in **place**. A golden-skinned woman with a dazzling smile **is** sitting on Cassian's lap. He looks at her with what might be a smile, although to me it looks more like the sneer the devil gives before consuming your soul.

The girl doesn't stop letting out flirtatious **giggles as** she shifts on his lap. Cassian **caresses** the bare skin her violet dress leaves **exposed** and looks at her with half-lidded eyes. Honestly, **I** think he's paying more attention to the vein in her neck.

I clear my throat to **catch** his attention and end this awkward moment.

"Elara." My name slips from his lips so slowly it seems like he's savoring **every** syllable. "Join us. I was starting to miss my new toy."

Sold to the Night Lord

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes and walk to the seat he indicates with his hand. It's at the opposite end of the table from where they sit, a relief for me. The girl on his lap glares at me with her eyes narrowed into **slits**, and the **absence** of her flirtatious smile already warns me we probably won't be friends.

A servant pulls out my chair, and another uncovers the dish in front of me. My stomach instantly

I watch my host, waiting for him to do something—starting to eat without him feels rude. Though what manners **are**. He's already made it clear by how he's treated me. He's a savage—not **even** a man.

, welcoming the rich aroma.

not human, surely he doesn't even know

I grab my utensils and cut the first piece of meat, put it in my mouth, and delight in the explosion of flavors on my tongue.

"I think it would be wise to **discuss** a few things." His ring-laden hand, adorned with gems of different kinds, **caresses** the base of the other girl's throat. "I like to be the first to **set** certain rules. I find it more effective."

"Is that a warning?" I reply.

"I don't warn. I threaten, dear."

"Expecting anything different from your kind would be declaring myself too stupid."

“Mavka thinks you won’t make it to the next full moon,” he comments **as** if it’s nothing. “I’m willing to bet you within these walls.”

He fixes his **two** sapphire **eyes** on me and raises his eyebrows in feigned surprise while letting out a low whistle. The other girl, leans in and whispers something in his ear. Cassian lifts the corner of his mouth arrogantly.

nameless

to

me,

won’t **last** more than

a

fortnight

“Nothing would please me more than to stop breathing the same **air as** you.” I give him a **forced** smile.

“Perhaps I should end your suffering.”

“Please, do,” I challenge him.

He starts to tut.

“Little wild thing, there’s something better than your blood.” The girl on his lap shifts a bit when he leans forward—it almost looks like he’s going to leap over the table. “Your screams. And I intend to revel in them as I **tear** you apart piece by piece.

Your blood will be the last thing on my mind.”

“Then what’s the point of buying me?”

“Do you need a reason when you have too much wealth?”

His way of speaking with such superiority, the way his eyebrows lift with arrogance—everything, absolutely everything, drives me mad. I focus back on my plate, cut another piece, and chew **as** if my life depended on it, not **even** bothering to look at him.

“What are you good at?” he **asks**, catching me off guard.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you play, sing, paint, write....? Is there something you’re good at?”

“I thought my job was to feed you, not entertain you.”

“With me, there’s always more to do.” **His** fingers stroke Mavka’s skin gently. “So?”

“No, there’s nothing I’m good at.”

Even he seems a little disappointed. Oh, **Cassian**, believe me, **I** feel more disappointed than you. Abigail sings like an angel, and Silas has a natural talent for carving. But I don’t know how to do anything. **I guess I never** let myself enjoy hobbies or show interest in something. After all, I wasn’t meant to live long enough to continue doing it. Or at least, that’s what I thought.

“Moving on to the things I wanted to warn you about...” his expression is confusing, “or threaten you with, as I said. First and I think most obvious: any attempt to escape on your part will be punished with death. I don’t care what those absurd rules my ancestors wrote say. I’ll end your life in an instant.” In my thoughts, I’m rolling my **eyes**. **Please**, I won’t **even** need to try escaping. I’ll die soon anyway. “Second, under no circumstance should you let another vampire feed on you. No one, **except** me, is allowed to sink their fangs into you.”

It sounds possessive and dirty.

“**Why?**”

“The blood can get contaminated,” he replies nonchalantly.

“Anything else?”

“**Yes.**” His eyes **roam over** my figure. “You may go anywhere within the castle and its surroundings as long as you’re accompanied by your guards, but **you** are forbidden from snooping around my wing. I can’t stand your human stench in the place where I rest.”

One more insult to add to the list Cassian Draven has already thrown at me in these **few** hours. I stink to him. Too bad I don’t care. I lower my gaze to the silver cutlery. So much for the theories that silver **affects** vampires. This knife won’t be useful for anything other than spreading butter; it’s not even sharp enough to try and cut my veins and end this agony. Cassian’s presence puts my nerves on edge. like this.

“Is that all?”

We don’t think I’ll survive even a week

“One last thing.” One of his fangs **greet**s me **as** his **face** adopts that mocking expression again. “You’ll have dinner with

“Why?” I protest, louder than I would have liked.

“You’ve been a **great** investment. Best to make the most of what will no doubt be a short time together.”

me

night.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I don’t get it. He hates me and yet he wants me to accompany him every night. No doubt his hatred

his desire to **see** me suffer in silence. He knows—he knows I can’t stand him.

“Mavka, feed me.”

My curiosity is my **greatest** flaw.

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isn’t **as** strong **as**

I try not to show that I’m looking through my lashes **at** how the beautiful Mavka **ris**es from his **lap** with a wide, beaming smile. **I** don’t understand what she’s so happy about. Cassian slips on a ring with a sharp point and brings it close to the girl’s wrist. The cut opens in less than a blink.

She stifles a whimper that might **as** well have been a sound of pleasure and raises her dripping **wrist over** Cassian’s mouth. The drops fall in an unrelenting rhythm. Some land on his lips and trickle down his chin, slowly staining his Adam’s apple, which moves up and down with each drop of blood sliding down his throat.

The food starts to churn in my stomach, and I wrinkle my nose with each trickle of blood escaping his lips. His eyes **are** not on the person feeding him; they’re fixed on me, defiant. He dares me to endure this, to remember what I’ll **be** expected to do, to look at how the creature I possibly hate most on this planet feeds. The blue of his eyes vanishes, replaced by the deepest black I’ve ever seen. I didn’t imagine black could darken further.

He brings his hand to **Mavka’s** wounded wrist and presses **it**, signaling that it’s enough. Without breaking eye contact with me, he brings **her** close to his mouth and **I see** him give it a seductive lick.

wrist

The way he looks **at** me **as** he does **it causes a** sudden **heat** to rise in my face. I press my legs together, embarrassed by my body's reactions, but eyes remain on him. His tongue roams over her skin again, **yet** he doesn't show his fangs at any moment.

What must it feel like to be treated that **way**?

There go those stupid thoughts again.

a

I remain staring *for* so long that **I** probably look **even** more idiotic than I already feel. **I scrape** my chair back with a loud screech, determined to leave. I turn away, breaking the **eye** contact between us, and walk off.

"I haven't given you permission to **leave**," he growls.

"The food didn't sit well," **I** reply again. "**I** wouldn't **want** to trouble you with **excessively** human issues."

I open the door and rush out. The guards follow closely behind. I climb the **stairs**, tripping on the **last few** steps. I pull myself together and keep wandering through the hallway, **desperate** to be within the four walls of my chambers. Though it's not like they'll protect me much.

I fling the door open, lock myself inside, and lean my **back** against it. My heart pounds furiously.

"You can hide, but **I will** always know where you **are**."

I didn't think that.

Am I delirious, or has he somehow gotten into my **head**?

I growl and finally scream like a madwoman, disturbing the **castle's** silence, I clench my fists and run to the bed, collapsing on it and beating my fists **against** the mattress. **I hate** them all, **I hate** this life, I hate this world.

And now, hating him is the only reason I'm still breathing.