

Sold to the Night Lord

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 101

The warmth of his breath grazes my lower lip as he leans in closer. I don't look away, and neither does he. His fingers on my nape stroke my skin almost hypnotically. The moths eating at my insides are more alive than ever. The velvet of his lips brushes my lower lip and my entire body trembles. Desire wants to win, wants me to close my eyes and let myself be consumed. Instead, what happens is what always happens -I'm expelled from this dream, from this connection with him, and I wake up with my breath racing and my skin drenched in sweat.

I recover as quickly as I can and use the water from the jug to splash my face and wet my wrists. I feel dizzy. I run my hands over my clothes in an attempt to smooth the wrinkles and leave the room, following the noise of people outside. On the deck, the air is cold and the sky is a dark blue. Night has already fallen, and winter makes the days very short-fortunate for the vampires. The number of humans has decreased; now, the presence of Diluted ones is predominant. When I feel awake enough, I look for Eleazar. It doesn't take long to find him sharpening one of his knives against one of the ship's posts. He looks up, much more clear-eyed now that he's tied back some of the strands falling over his face.

"Ready?"

Before I can answer, he throws the knife he's holding toward me. I manage to catch it by the handle without cutting myself, and I have to make an effort not to let out an exclamation of surprise at my reflexes. Eleazar tilts his head in acknowledgment, adopts a defensive stance, and pulls another knife from his belt.

"Now attack me."

I hesitate, looking at the knife I hold in my hands. Until now, we've only focused on correcting my stance, my balance, and technique. He's taught me a few sword moves and, overall, the basics. I take a deep breath and adopt the offensive posture he taught me. I grip the weapon

tightly, studying it in my hand, getting used to its weight. I raise the knife to eye level and take a step forward. Eleazar positions his arms to

block any potential attack.

"Attack, Elara, we don't have all day."

His tone isn't kind—this isn't the chivalrous Eleazar. Now he's my instructor, and he's trying to press the right buttons to awaken my worst

side.

"You'd already be dead," he says. "Don't you want to be able to defeat Cassian? Wouldn't you like to defend yourself against him? Stand up to him? Prove to him you're not a weak, pathetic human."

I hope my face doesn't fully reflect my anger as I take another step and end up lunging at him. He blocks my blow with his weapon at chest height. The blade of my knife trembles. I leap back and observe my opponent. I remember his words: I'm small, fast, slippery. I try again, this time attempting something different. At the last moment, I grab his arm and use it to propel myself beneath him. I repeat to myself that I'm fast and use that to circle around and touch the center of his back with my knife—without stabbing the blade in.

Laughter shakes his shoulders, and before I can react, he turns and grabs my wrist tightly to make me drop the weapon.

"You learn quickly."

"I don't have time to waste," I reply.

His smile grows wider. He crouches and picks up my knife from the ground. He places it back in my hand and wraps his fingers around mine. We spend hours like that, switching from offense to defense. He corrects my technique and teaches me new ways to push my attacker to the limit. By the time we finish, I'm breathless, and Eleazar doesn't even look slightly affected.

"Let's have a drink with the others."

I don't know what he means until he takes me to a secluded area where several Diluted ones are holding cups and drinking while leaning against anything nearby. The whispers vanish when they see me arrive, but there's something in their leader that encourages them to carry on. He serves me a cup himself, and the fruity scent tells me it's wine, not blood, that I'll find in it. I can't say the same for the others. I move,

toward the forthen ores and lean apple the railing, bringing the top to my tim. Eta exchange a few words with his purple before JONNE ME

you don't have to be with me, you know?" I say, "You don't have to play friend to the weird girl. I can be alone

can, but something tells me you don't like it."

"Sometimes solitude is liberating."

He doesn't reply. He takes a sip from his cup and looks beyond those around us, fixing his gaze on the horizon. I let him get lost in his thoughts, as I so often do myself. I focus on the others, who—although they try to be discreet—I know are keeping an eye on me. Most are men, though there are also two women, Diluted, with a protective arm draped over their shoulders. They don't seem uncomfortable at all. They smile at me, their expressions reaching their eyes.

"I'm Elise," says one of them.

"Elara, 1 reply.

A small giggle escapes her.

"I think the whole camp knows your name." She slips from her companion's arm and steps a little closer to me. She doesn't seem to mind Eleazar's presence at all. "Sorry if we haven't been exactly welcoming."

"Don't worry, I didn't expect otherwise. I don't think I'd be very hospitable either if it were the other way around."

"Nonsense, we all want to be accepted." She waves toward the other Diluted. "That's Zara. Forgive her, she's not very talkative."

"Let's just say Elise is the welcome committee," the mentioned one comments.

"Honestly, I didn't introduce myself earlier because this guy here wouldn't let me." She points at Eleazar with her finger. "What did you say? Oh yeah, that I'm too intense and would scare the girl." Now she looks at me. "Are you scared?"

I glance sideways at Eleazar.

"I'd say no. Why would I be?" I give a small smile. "I think Eleazar forgets who I've lived with."

Elise's eyes widen, as if she too had forgotten that little detail. She grabs my hands, cradling them between hers, and gives me another perfect-toothed smile.

"I almost forgot myself." She takes a little step even closer. "What's he like? Is he really as cruel as they say? Eleazar never lets me go to his meetings."

The others don't seem comfortable with the topic of conversation, so they drift away, leaving the three of us alone. Elise looks slightly embarrassed, while Eleazar doesn't seem the least bit perturbed. He takes another sip from his cup and crosses his arms, waiting for my

response.

“I suppose he’s everything they say about him,” I simply say.

In the back of my mind, there’s a voice whispering that I’m a liar. Cassian is much more than what they say—I’ve seen sides of him that aren’t sharp or lethal, though maybe it was all an illusion, a performance meant to trap me in his lies.

“Oh, come on, don’t leave me hanging, there must be something juicy you can share.”

“Come on, Elise, it’s obvious Elara’s not comfortable talking about him,” the vampire scolds her.

“Did he hurt you?” she asks, scanning my face.

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“No.”

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She glances over her shoulder to where the others have disappeared, who knows where. She releases my hands, letting them fall back to my

sides.

“I think I’ve been too nesy.” She steps back. “I’d better go see if they need anything from me—the ship always needs attention!”

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She leaves without letting her smile fade, only pausing once to wave her hand in my direction at farewell. She detaches a few cap and the crown of her head disappears. I feel a movement behind my back, and before I can react, Flexzar’s lips whisper in my ear

guess there are wounds in the heart that can’t be seen”

For some reason, that makes me feel furious. I don’t want people thinking my heart is broken because it’s not. I won’t deny that maybe a small spark of emotion ignited in it, and Cassian himself made sure to douse it with a bucket of cold water, but it wasn’t love. No, love isn’t

like that.

“My heart is intact.”

itum, lifting my chin so I can look him in the eyes better.

“I don’t believe that,” he says mockingly.

“I don’t care what you believe.”

Without breaking eye contact, he takes a step forward, and his chest brushes against mine. I have to tilt my head to see him properly.

“You think ‘I can’t read you, but I know you care too much about pretending Cassian doesn’t affect you.’ He licks his lower lip. “And he does. A lot, actually.”

“You have no idea.”

He tilts his head to be closer to my height. His nose grazes mine, and the scent of apples tickles under my nostrils. One hand grabs my elbow, and the other presses against the small of my back until we’re so close not even a pin could fit between us. Panic and the urge to run activate inside my body. To my dismay, no one but Cassian has ever made me feel safe in their arms. Eleazar won’t be the exception.

“If I kissed you, would you feel something?” His lips hover mere inches from mine. “Or would you be imagining him?”

“What am I? A damn game between the two of you?”

“It’s a shame he met you first,” he says, ignoring my questions. “When I saw you for the first time at his table, I knew you’d be his downfall, and I think I wasn’t wrong. He’s going mad trying to reach you.” The hand on my elbow slides up to my wrist, his fingers pressing it as if he’s monitoring my pulse. “I wonder what would happen if you allowed yourself other options. Would you be my downfall too? Would you lead me to war? Destroy me? I think you were born to bring chaos.”

“Stop talking, Eleazar,” I say through clenched teeth.

“In just a couple of months, you’ve brought him to ruin. You don’t even realize the power you have.”

“I don’t have any power.” I try to pull away. “You just want to find a way to hurt him, and you think I’m the answer.”

“You have power over him. You’ll come to realize it.”

“You sound like a madman.”

“I thought those were the ones you liked.”

His lips try to brush mine; however, I’m quick and take a step back. I hurry-away—I don’t want to be near him any longer. I look for the stairs

to descend to the cabins and enter mine, slamming the door shut. I lean against it and take a deep breath.

I don't know what I hate more—whether it's the fact that Eleazar seems to want something more from me or that a pair of blue eyes crossed

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my mind when I felt the threat of other lips on mine.

A hysterical laugh escapes me. I bury my fingers in my hair and pull at it. I look at myself in the cracked mirror and keep laughing, caught in the irony. I don't know what I did in another life to deserve such a sentence, because without a doubt, the desire of a vampire is not a good thing. They are vile, obsessive, insatiable beings, and I'm afraid I don't have enough to give,

“You don't even realize the power you have.”

I don't feel powerful. On the contrary, there are other words that fit better: ruin, chaos, disaster, death.

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Cassian

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I don't remember if the castle has ever been this silent—maybe it always was, and I just didn't care. Now I do. The silence is unbearable, the worst form of torture. I'd almost prefer to hear her shouting and insults over this perpetual silence that's accompanied me for two weeks. Sometimes I find myself cursing the day our paths crossed—I never imagined someone like her could awaken longing in me. I'm familiar with some emotions, most of them twisted, but this one is different. I'm thirsty all the time, and I no longer know if it's just for blood or if I crave a specific presence. My thirst is insatiable, and I fear I've found the only person who can keep it in check, even if that makes me weak.

She haunts me when I least expect it, appears out of nowhere and vanishes just the same. I try to hold onto every detail and relive them when I'm alone in my room. Sometimes she shows up there too, and her skin brushing against my fingers feels *too* real to be a dream. Am I going insane?

Without Drystan as my voice of reason and with Ank punishing me with the whip of her indifference, my cruelty demands release. I've attended a few meaningless meetings

hoping to catch a trace of Elara's whereabouts—or, failing that, of the Voss family—and I always end up exploding at the edge of my patience. I can't say I haven't caused destruction during these past two weeks—I've reverted to being the unpredictable, volatile Cassian I once was. Before Elara, I was bored with monotony. With her, the fun of earning her next sarcastic reply had reignited me. Now I'm furious, irritable, uncontrollable.

"Sir, no one seems to have seen her around the Twisted Forest."

I hear my teeth grinding.

"I didn't tell you to search around the Twisted Forest. I want you to go to the banshee camp and don't stop until you get the White Banshee and her mentor to tell you where the hell Elara is."

"But, sir..." The Diluted one hesitates. "It's nearly impossible to survive the Twisted Forest."

"And?"

Realizing there's nothing he can say to make me reconsider, he walks off with his head down, certain he's walking straight into death. I've never been a good man, not even a kind one—and I'm afraid that if there ever was a chance for that, it died long ago. With some resignation, I reach for the decanter, which mostly contains blood if we overlook the small splash of alcohol that doesn't come close to dulling my senses. I pour myself a glass and sit down, staring at the candle's flame.

"Ank," I say solemnly.

I suppose I never tire of our little game. I ask, and she limits herself to ignoring me—at best, giving a vague answer. At worst, I get nothing but suspicious glares. Ank doesn't forgive my actions. Sometimes, I don't either, even though I know why I did what I did. My father became weak—and that's not something I want for myself, especially not because of a woman. Yet maybe it's already too late for that. If I looked in the mirror, I'd probably see someone pathetic and miserable begging for the return of his human. My human.

Fated.

I keep thinking about that word. The first time we met, I felt something strange that I'd never experienced in all my years of existence. It wasn't something foolish and romantic like love—it was something stronger. I felt she was me, and I was her. Different species, but cut from the same cloth. I felt Elara was my destiny, and I was hers.

"Ank," I repeat.

Knowing it's best to make an appearance, Ank appears in the flame of the candle sitting on the desk. Her lips are pursed, and her arms are crossed over her chest. She sits down, slowly melting the wax, and crosses her legs, tapping her foot as if waiting for something.

"Have you seen her?"

Chapter 35

The answer is still the same she replies sharply

Something escapes my mouth halfway between a laugh and a snort. I lean back in my chair, getting comfortable, and try to appear calm and in control.

"Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?" she shoots back.

If she were anyone else, I'd likely have retaliated by now. But I suppose Ank isn't just anyone. Her close relationship with my mother makes me feel a certain attachment to the little fire salamander. Still, her incessant refusal to give me the answers I want keeps fraying my nerves.) let the air out of my lungs slowly, through my teeth.

"I can't find her without your help." I decide to strike differently—maybe a blow of honesty and vulnerability will be more effective with her. "My men can't find her. No one knows anything about her. I've tried myself, and failed. I know she's alive—but I can't find her if you don't help

me, Ank."

"Maybe she doesn't want to be found." She turns her face away.

"You're the one who most wanted her to be here—with me. You said it yourself."

"Before you ruined everything." She raises her voice. "That poor girl, even knowing how you are, started to open up to you. She saw the same thing I see deep in your heart—and even so, you treated her like something wrong."

"She is wrong for me. Don't you understand, Ank? She softens my sharp edges. She makes me want to be merciful. Someone like me, in the situation we're in, can't afford that."

"But?"

"But I think I'm starting not to care." I sigh. "I think I'd rather let her destroy me completely if it means having her by my side. I'll probably screw it all up again eventually—it's in my nature. I'm cruel. Even so, I want her with me. By my side. Maybe a good man would let her go, but we've made it clear—I'm not that man."

“Cassian, there are good parts in you. They’ve just hardened over time. You’re not beyond repair—you’re just a little crooked. And with the right hands-”

“She shouldn’t have to fix anything, do you understand?”

“I suspect she’s already changed things in *you* without you realizing.” She straightens and stands up. “Answer me this: if you found her and she begged you to let her go, would you release her? Would you defy the Treaties?”

Deep down, it’s not a hard question to answer, because weeks ago I was asked something similar, and I thought the same thing. I don’t want to let her go, but I don’t think I could deny her anything if she asked. These months with her have made me not want her to suffer—especially not by my hand. I was a fool to do what I did. I hurt her feelings, lost her trust, and deserve her contempt more than ever. Since the moment she met me, Elara decided I’d be the villain—and I did nothing but confirm it. I’m not a hero—not even close—but I hope I can uncover those

good parts Ank talks about and accept the many monstrous ones.

“Yes.”

“There’s your change.”

Without saying anything else, she merges with the flame and disappears once again. Today won’t be the day I get answers. However, opening up like this with Ank might make a difference next time. I know I’m close to getting what I want. It’s not like anything I said was a lie. Elara makes me want too many things—awakens parts that someone like me buried long ago. And I think I’m becoming addicted to the feeling of being with her. I’m in a prolonged period of withdrawal.

As if all this had summoned her, Flora appears before me. I’m behind the deck and the stand is just a few meters away, near the door. We plunge into our usual battle of stars—neither of us willing to be the first to take away. As time has passed, the no-fanger looks surprised by our encounters. Now she seems more resigned. I suppose neither of us is capable of escaping the other. We’re tied by something stronger than hate, desire.

This feels so real; I can hear the best of her heart.

“You seem upset.” I comment. “Any particular reason?”

“Besides your unwanted presence?”

“Unwanted...” I savor the word in my mouth. “That’s not what I’ve been feeling all this time.”

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I don't know what drives me to tempt her with my words, to earn her reactions fueled by rage—I just know I can't stop. I see her inhale deeply through flared nostrils, trying to control herself. Maybe she's already realized she's the perfect aphrodisiac for someone as messed up as I

1. am.

"Where are you, Elara?" I get up and round the desk to approach her. "Let's stop playing. You meet me every day. You know you want me to find you."

"That's the last thing I want."

She almost sounds sure. Almost. There's a small part of her that hesitates. I decide to offer her a piece of information that might shake her.

"Are your parents with you?"

"You know damn well they're not."

"Why would I know that?" I shrug. "They've disappeared too—just like you."

It flashes through her eyes so quickly I might've imagined it—but if there's one thing I know how to spot the moment it shows, it's fear. She hides it quickly and adopts a tall, confident posture. She challenges me by lifting her chin.

"You're lying," she spits. "You're trying to make me come back using your dirty tricks."

"You like the dirty things I do—admit it." I curve my lips into a smug half-smile. "I wish this was my doing—you know how much I love being bad—but this time, I had nothing to do with your parents."

"You're despicable." She clenches her teeth and storms toward me, stopping just inches away. "If you've hurt my parents, I swear I'll—"

"You'll what?"

I hear the faint sound of her skin tightening over her knuckles, the rub of her teeth grinding, the thundering beat of her heart driven by fury, and finally I see the flame of rage ignite in her eyes. I'm so distracted watching her expression that I don't realize her hand is moving toward my chest, holding a letter opener. It manages to stab a couple of

centimeters in before I stop her attack by grabbing the sharp blade. The flesh of my palms splits, and the blood from my wounds mixes with what spills from my chest.

She can't hide her surprise at what she's done—and I couldn't be more aroused by her outburst. Her fingers are stained with my blood, and she lowers her gaze to see what her fury has led her to do. With my free hand, I press against the small of her back and pull her close.

The letter opener in my chest shifts slightly, drawing a grunt of pain from me. Her lips tremble, as if she's holding something back.

"Don't worry, there's nothing here, darling." I lower my gaze to the point where our bloodied fingers touch. "And if there were, you'd be the only one I'd let break it."

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you."

The blows of her hand on my shoulder make me hiss in pain.

"Shhh... I know, little wild thing." I slide my hand from her back to her nape and pull her closer and closer. "I know."

I close the distance between our mouths and trap her lips with mine. At first, she resists, but a gasp escapes her throat as her hand tries to push me away. She twists the letter opener in my chest with no success, as I only press her closer to me.

I feel the exact moment her will breaks beneath mine. Her lips become compliant, her tongue tentatively licks mine, and her breathing

quickens, seized by excitement. My hands roam her body, unable to stop even for a second—I don't want to leave a single inch untouched.

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Nothing feels like enough; I want to wrap her completely, to caress every centimeter of her being, to brush her skin with sin engraved in my fingertips.

She sinks her teeth into my lip with enough force to taste my blood. I only need the slightest touch of my fangs to slice her lower lip, soft and plump. The burst of her wild-flavored blood awakens my senses even more. Our tongues tangle, tasting each other, creating a lethal cocktail.

"Come back to me, Elara," I whisper, my voice hoarse.

My hand moves down her back, tracing the curve of her spine. The shirt she's wearing does little to hide her figure—I can feel the warmth of her skin beneath my fingertips. I go lower and lower until I cradle her ass. One of her hands remains pressed against my chest, and the other, tangled in my hair, pulls me closer.

“What do you really want from me?” she asks, her voice laced with pain and desire.

I grip her flesh tighter and end up lifting her off the ground, forcing her legs to wrap around my waist. I can feel the sting on my lip and the hot trickle of blood that runs down it, but I don't care in the slightest. I dive into her mouth again, trying to silence every question, every doubt, everything I don't want to answer. I move us across the room until her back rests against the wall.

I don't know if she's aware of how her hips seek out my touch. My cock is about to burst inside my pants, and her movements only heighten the agony.

“This isn't real,” she says against my mouth. “This isn't real.”

I won't let her taint this moment by saying it's just a dream. She knows as well as I do that this is real—I don't know how it's possible, but she's here.

My hands move to her breasts, which, despite the fabric, can't hide her arousal. I feel her nipples hard against my palms and go lower until I find the strings keeping her pants tied.

“This is very real, Elara,” I growl. “Let me show you how real it is.”

I manage to loosen the ties and create enough space to slide my hand inside. She's not wearing underwear, and that allows me to instantly feel the softness of her folds. She's soaking wet and slick.

“You're so wet, Elara... I bet if I slipped a finger inside right now, you'd squeeze it tight.”

“Shut up,” she hisses.

“I could go down and put something in my mouth that would keep me quiet.”

I don't wait for her next clever comeback. Instead, I slide my fingers along her slit, spreading her wetness from top to bottom. I hear her

uneven breathing, and it only pushes me to keep going. I purposely avoid her clit, wanting to drive her mad. With my fingertip, I trace her

entrance several times, teasing her, promising to fill that emptiness—until I do.

I sink my index finger all the way in and feel her entire body tense and relax within seconds. She stretches completely, leaving the column of her neck fully exposed to me. I

trail my tongue across it, lick her skin while I move a finger inside her, opening her enough to slide in another.

Her moans grow louder. She digs her nails into my shoulders and moves her hips in rhythm with my fingers going in and out of her.

“Come back to me, Elara,” I murmur against the thin skin of her throat. “What I said wasn’t true—I want you close.”

“Why?” she asks between moans.

I curl my fingers inside her, pressing against the rough patch where her pleasure point lies. I add my thumb to her clit. She bites her lips. Her hips ride my fingers at a frantic pace, and my nostrils flare when the evidence of her orgasm spills over my fingers and fills the air.

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The erection in my pants presses hard against the fabric, and I don’t know how much longer I can contain it, I slowly pull my fingers out, and her cheeks flush when she sees the unmistakable evidence of her desire on them. I bring them to my mouth and suck them as if they were ambrosia. I don’t break eye contact with Elara for a second, and because of that, I can see how her eyes darken with desire—still unsatisfied, still hungry for more.

“Why do you want me close?” she asks again. “Say it.”

Her hand drops again to the letter opener and twists it, thinking she can force me to surrender to her will. It should be easy to pour out my deepest thoughts, but the problem is I don’t know if I’m ready to show myself like that to her—or to anyone, really. She must see that reflected in my eyes, because the flame of desire vanishes from hers and is immediately replaced by stormy skies threatening to bring a downpour.

“You can’t say anything,” she says through gritted teeth. “Because you don’t feel. Everything’s a game to *you*.”

Despite her disheveled hair, she manages to look regal before me.

“You won’t have me, Cassian—though thank you for the orgasm.”

And just like that, she’s gone. It’s almost laughable how easily she disappears during the most important moments. I’m left with empty hands -her body no longer in them-and in front of me there’s only the wall.

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Chapter 105

A deep sigh isn't enough to release all my frustration. I clench my fists until my knuckles go white, and unable to contain my rage, I shatter one of the sculptures standing in the corner. Controlling my gift at times like this requires immense patience.

There's a knock at the door. I think I grunt some sort of response, though I'm not entirely sure, and then I see the last person I want—dr expect to face right now.

Narkissa enters, wearing a green dress embroidered with gold thread. She's kept out of my sight these past few days, though I suppose it was too much to hope she wouldn't appear at a moment like this. She's never had a great sense of self-preservation.

"What do you want?" I ask with feigned calm.

"There was a boy at the main gate." She steps toward me and holds out a white envelope. "He brought this for you."

I grab it and check for anything written on the outside, but it looks untouched. I don't open the flap.

"Did he say anything else?"

"No, just that." She nods toward the envelope.

"What have you done with the boy?"

"Captured him, of course." She smiles proudly. "Right now he's in the dungeons with our guards, waiting for whatever your orders are."

"Good." I deliberately avoid looking at her. "You may leave, Narkissa."

Overconfident, she takes another step toward me and reaches out to touch the collar of my shirt. I step back and move away from her touch. Far from looking wounded, she seems amused. She curls her red-painted lips into one of her seductive smiles—one that might have tempted

me before, but now feels as empty as any other.

I admit that Narkissa had something that made me keep her in my bed longer than the others, not discard her immediately. Yet even she paled when the little gray-eyed wild thing burst into my life.

“Isn’t there anything I can do for you?” she purrs.

She tries to touch me again, and this time I don’t hesitate to push her away. She doesn’t let a wounded expression cross her face, though I

know her well enough to see that her pride now lies shattered at her feet. She can’t stand being replaced by a human—just as I can’t stand

that Elara holds such power over me.

“I believe the last time we spoke, I was very clear with you.” I return to my place behind the desk. “You may go, Narkissa.”

With a grimace meant to be a smile, she bows her head and exits the way she came. She should be grateful I’ve allowed her to remain here despite her actions. I could throw her out, send her to the streets with nothing and condemn her to sell her body for shelter or food. If I were merciful, I’d spare her all that and end her life.

I open the envelope. Inside is only a small piece of paper with a couple of sentences—but it’s enough for me to recognize the handwriting.

I have her.

Find me. I think she’s a good enough reason for you to consider negotiating.

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A searing rage like I’ve never felt before flows through my veins. I crumple the paper in my hand until it becomes nothing but dust between

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Chapter 10%

my fingers.

“Ank!” I bellow, knowing full well she’ll hear me.

The little salamander doesn’t take long to appear in the wall sconce

“You knew he had her?” I snap. “Out of everyone, you decided it was a good idea to let Eleazar be near her? Really, Ank?”

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The flames in her hair shift from their usual orange to a bluish hue. She doesn't dare answer, confirming that all this time she's allowed Elara to remain in the hands of the rebellious Diluted ones.

"He's the enemy, Ank!"

"To her, so are you!"

"They're going to use her against me, put her in danger—and if there's one thing I can say *for* certain, it's that I never would've played with her life that way. I hurt her with words because I'm an idiot, but I've never deliberately put her in danger—and that's exactly what Eleazar is going to do with her." I clench and unclench my fists nervously. "Where are they? I know you've been watching."

This time, Ank doesn't seem willing to argue. She disappears for a few seconds and reappears with a pale face—if that's even possible for a creature like her. Her flames are dimmer, lacking strength, barely warm.

"Where are they?"

She cowers at my tone.

"You won't like it."

"I figured that much."

I don't need her to say it. I dive into her mind and can see through her. Dry land stretches to the horizon, a gray sky threatening storms, and the sea rougher than ever. I see Elara leaning against the ship's railing, speaking with Eleazar. He places his hand on her neck, like the gentle touch of a lover. The image shifts, as if someone had grabbed the candle from which Ank observes everything, and they disappear from view.

I exit her mind, and this time my fury makes me smash the door to my room into splinters.

Behind the empty frame stands a disheveled Drystan, his hand raised midair, about to knock.

"I suppose I picked a good time *to* return."

He doesn't lose his smile, despite how tired he looks. I look at him, and though I don't show it, I'm relieved to have my friend and greatest confidant back. I walk to him, place my hand on his shoulder, and look him in the eyes.

"Ready the men and the ships. We're going." Desperation leaks into my voice. "They have Elara."

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Sold to the Night Lord

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Chapter 106

Elara

I wake up startled, with the sensation of damp fingers.

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When I look, I realize I'm gripping something tightly in my hands. I lift them to eye level and see the letter opener, stained with blood. My breath escapes in short bursts. I did it. I stabbed him—and I enjoyed it. I liked hearing him hiss in pain, liked having power.

But if that was real, then everything else was too. I don't know why I feel the need to confirm it, but I lower my gaze to my unfastened pants, and a slight movement confirms there's moisture between my thighs. I blush, remembering what happened. My body doesn't seem able to- resist his touch, the way he makes me feel.

I slide my legs out of bed and take a few minutes to calm down, splash my face with fresh water, and wash my hands, where the blood's stickiness still clings stubbornly. I scrub, trying to get what's left from under my nails, and when I'm satisfied, I dry my hands on the fabric of my pants. I sigh and step outside. Daylight still lingers, promising at least a little time free from the Diluted—and most of all, from Eleazar,

I stare at the surface of the water, trying to sort my thoughts and emotions. The physical attraction Cassian exerts over me is undeniable; however, that doesn't have to mean anything else. My heart is safe, isn't it? It has to be. I can't give it to someone like him. He'll crush it in his hands, twist it, fill it with perversion, and when he decides to return it, it'll be something deformed, monstrous, broken. If he even has the

decency to give it back when he's done playing.

If I know all of this, why does my head tell me his words are sincere?

“You’re the only one I’d let break it.”

“Come back to me, Elara,”

“What I said wasn’t true—I want you close.”

The organ in my chest stirs foolishly at the memory. My eyes well up, and I dig my nails into my palms to hold back the tsunami of emotions. I don’t want to think about how painful his absence is, or the absolute betrayal I felt when I saw him with another, or the ecstasy I felt when I kissed him again. No. I don’t want to, because if I keep thinking, I’ll reach conclusions I’m not ready to face.

“You woke up early.”

I flinch at Eleazar’s voice. I see that the sky has darkened. I must’ve been lost in thought longer than I realized. I clear my throat, my mouth

dry.

“Elara...”

I feel his body move closer to mine, and that’s when I finally look him in the eye. He looks regretful, and from the way he shifts his hands with nothing to do with them, he seems nervous too. He scratches the back of his neck and twists his lips before speaking.

“I think I went too far earlier,” he admits. “I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

My fingers grip the wood of the ship. I want to say so many things, but I also don’t want my face to give away more than it should. My dreams -those where I meet Cassian and we touch skin to skin—are mine. Something I don’t want to share with anyone.

“You were right,” I say. “Cassian affects me more than I want to admit.”

“No, you don’t need to explain anything,” Eleazar tries to interrupt.

“I’m not explaining it to you. I think I’m trying to explain it to myself.” I turn my attention back to the sea. “For as long as I can remember, I was determined to end my life before the day came when I would belong to a vampire. I was set on it—until I wasn’t. Because of my brothers.

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I couldn’t condemn them to my fate, so I had no choice but to face it. When Cassian bought me, I was told I’d die quickly, and I was almost grateful for that. Then he began

turning our encounters into little games of push and pull, made me burn with rage—made me feel something that wasn't fear. I guess I became addicted to it, just like I did to those fleeting moments of freedom. It's pathetic, I know—to grow attached to your captor just because he lets you out of your cage once in a while.”

“You'd be surprised how often that happens.”

“I suppose it wasn't love, but it was close enough—for me, at least.”

He steps closer, and his touch on my cheek catches me off guard. He lifts my chin so I don't avoid his gaze.

“And him? Was it the same for him?”

“How could I possibly know?”

“By the look in his eyes.”

His eyes are level with mine, molten gold threatening to burn through the gray of mine. We're so close his scent tickles my nose. His hand slides to the side of my neck and keeps me anchored in his gaze while his thumb softly strokes my cheek.

“Sometimes our lips aren't able to say the right words—because even we don't know what we're feeling,” he says, stepping even closer. “But what the mind can't understand, the heart can. And there's no door more direct to it than the eyes, Elara.”

His words throw my heart into a war within my chest—they raise the flag the blue-eyed vampire lifted without permission.

“Are you talking about Cassian... or about yourself?” I ask, my voice trembling.

I know he's attracted to me. But my mind is consumed entirely by someone else—someone who's sunk his fangs into my thoughts and won't let me forget he exists.

“Have you thought of me that way?” he replies.

“Do you think I've had time to?” I lean my body against the railing, as if I'm too tired to stay upright on my own. “I'm exhausted—physically and mentally. Not a second of my life goes by that he doesn't dominate it in one way or another. No, I haven't had time to think of anything

else, Eleazar.”

“Does he enter your mind? I know it's one of his gifts.”

“It’s something beyond that,” I say, thinking of our most recent encounters—fully corporeal appearances where I could feel his skin. “Do you have any gift?”

A mischievous glint crosses his eyes.

“We Diluted have no gifts, Elara.” His tone is like someone speaking to a child. “We’re cursed by the sun, have no powers, and possess a much more fragile immortality than theirs.”

“Ah, right—the white oak stakes to the heart...”

“Nothing is eternal. Even they can die—they’re just good at hiding their weaknesses.”

“Do you know how?”

I turn to look at the twilight horizon, afraid his answer might be yes. I hate myself. I hate myself in a way so intense I don’t have words to describe its depth. I hate feeling panic over what his answer might mean. I hate not wanting Cassian to vanish, despite what his presence in my life entails.

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if he answers, I don’t hear it. The outline of land starting to appear before us captures all my attention. I frown as I begin to see things that don’t match the descriptions I’ve always heard of the Far Lands. It was supposed to be a warm place—peaceful, bursting with bright colors.

But before my eyes stretches and land that seems to go on forever. And that’s not even what worries me most. Small figures stand waiting, staring straight at us, and beside them are what appear to be enormous, four-legged animals.

Sold to the Night Lord

I take a step back, struck by reality. The words I read during my time with Cassian stir in my memory. I know what I’m seeing, yet I look to Eleazar for answers anyway.

“What is this, Eleazar?”

2

His hands are raised in a soothing gesture; however, his gaze doesn’t calm me. He steps forward, and I retreat until the wooden railing digs into my lower back. If I step back again, I’ll fall overboard.

“Elara.” He tries to touch my arm. “You have to keep your mind open, please. I don’t want to hurt you, and they won’t if you do as they ask. I’ll make sure of it. I hoped to have more time—I think I’ve delayed this moment too long.”

“You’re scaring me.”

My body trembles in agreement. I hug myself and dig my nails into my skin, trying to keep my hands occupied and still. Eleazar wets his dry lips and looks past me.

“Don’t be afraid.” I don’t have time to react before his hands are on my cheeks and he traps my head to force me to look at him. “They won’t hurt you—I promise. Just do what they ask and everything will be fine. I want you to know I really care about you—this has nothing to do with...” He leaves the sentence hanging. “I’m sorry.”

Quick as a viper, his hand leaves my cheek and presses a point between my neck and shoulder. The last thing I feel before unconsciousness takes me is the complete loss of strength—and the sharp pain that spreads through me as my knees hit the floor.

I think arms catch me, but everything is too dark to tell.

must be dreaming. I see myself as a baby. I recognize myself instantly—wide-eyed, intense gray irises. I babble endlessly while waving my hands in the air, trying to catch a small bird fluttering around me. I watch the scene with confusion, not understanding this dream. The bird, with brown and red feathers, chirps nonstop until it lands near my restless little body. It happens fast—and abruptly. The bird stops chirping, its wings lose their shine, and it falls to the floor with a dull thud. The dream-me begins to cry loudly, and what once was a bird becomes

dust.

The scene disappears, dragging me back into thick darkness—but I know I’m not alone. I can feel something breathing at the back of my

neck.

“You are salvation and ruin,

something new,

something old,

the apocalypse dressed as a woman.”

The temperature plummets, It’s cold—so cold. I think I curl into myself, though I’m not sure anymore. I imagine cold fingers that, when touching my skin, trace patterns of fire—

blue eyes like frozen lakes and a smile as sharp as a knife that, somehow, is the only thing warming

me inside.

. My body hits something, and that's when my mind returns from wherever it went. I'm no longer on the ship, but slung like a sack over

someone's shoulder. My head sways from side to side, and I feel a sharp pain in my temples. Everything around me moves with the rhythm of whoever is carrying me. I try to speak, but my vocal cords refuse to cooperate. Only a ridiculous mumble escapes. I see dry ground until darkness swallows me again and spits me out who knows how long later.

I'm on the floor—cold, shiny tiles. I try to lift myself, but my stomach turns and makes me vomit. Someone lets out a disgusted sound that echoes off the ceilings. I take time to raise my head and look around, but my attention locks on the woman sitting in the middle of the room,

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wearing a golden dress and a condescending gaze. Her skin is dark, and her eyes shine so brightly I can make out their color even from here. One is gold, the other olive green. Judging by the seat she occupies a kind of throne made of twisted horns and fangs—I'd say she's someone with power. And if there's one thing I've learned, it's that powerful people never want anything good from people like me.

By pure instinct, my body scoots back on the floor until I bump into something—or rather, someone. One glance upward is enough to see a burly man. I move away from him.

“Oh, for God's sake, someone lift her—I'm starting to feel pity.”

The woman's tone is haughty, not at all kind. The man behind me grabs my arm roughly, digging his fingers into my flesh. I grit my teeth to hold back a cry of pain. The woman on the throne narrows her eyes as if analyzing every detail. With what little strength I have left, I force my shoulders straight and adopt a defiant posture.

“I fail to understand what the fascination with you is...” She tilts her head slightly, making all the ornaments in her brown hair jingle in the room. “Did you know Eleazar asked me not to be cruel to you?”

I refuse to answer.

“Don't speak then, I've always liked being shown respect in silence.”

“Respect or fear?” I say, raising my voice a little.

A predator's smile tugs at her lips, revealing a row of white teeth and sharp fangs. They aren't a vampire's, nor a human's. Nothing about this woman seems human. Her gaze glows with anger, her nails are long and pointed, her body slender with long limbs, but I can tell it's not delicate. Something tells me she can be ruthless, she looks trained for war.

"Do you know why you're here?" she asks, and seeing that I have no intention of replying, she rises from her throne and descends the steps that kept her elevated above us. She walks barefoot, adorned with anklets. "No, of course you don't."

She grabs my chin, her nails digging in.

"I admit that at first I thought it was just the ramblings of a senile old man. It wasn't until certain rumors reached my ears that I started to think maybe it wasn't just delusion." She brushes aside the hair tangled around my neck and fixes her eyes on it. "I'd love to say I regret what my people did to your skin, but I'm afraid I can't feel remorse for things like that when it comes to the survival of my race."

She caresses the scars on my neck, and although her skin is warm, I can't help but shiver.

"What do you want from me?" I manage to say.

"For you to help me end those who almost wiped us out."

I hear footsteps behind us, and when I glance over my shoulder, I hold my breath. A wolf with golden eyes and scars enters the throne room, and beside him, another wolf, this one with white fur.

If I had any doubt where I was, it vanishes now.

Wasteland.

The territory to which the shapeshifters were exiled long ago.

I try to recall all the details I learned in my hours of reading. Shapeshifters are very temperamental, capable of transforming into the primary animal of each of their clans—the most common is the wolf. Beyond their grotesque and powerful form, they have the ability to heal very quickly. I don't know if they possess any gift like Cassian's.

"I can't help you. I don't know what kind of power you think I have over Cassian, but I'm just a human, one he wouldn't hesitate to kill if it came to that."

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everything remained the same, until I sent my men to watch Cassian Draven, one of our main enemies that you were there was completely unexpected, but imagine the magnitude of my surprise when one of my men, hidden in the woods, saw you kill one of his contrades with hardly any effort isn't that what they told you, Rhory?"

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 108

The white furred wolf sheets his animal form, and in his place stands a naked man with a beauty almost painful to behold, I on his eyes as white, and one of them is crossed by a grotesque scar. He's blind. His cheekbones are high and sharp as blades, and his hair is a bluish black I avoid looking below his face, and he ignores me entirely, as if I'm not even in the room

"It's true," he confirms.

"At first I didn't know what was happening, however, I had a feeling this was what my grandfather spoke of I sent my men again, and the surprise was greater when one of them returned unharmed after facing Cassian's powers directly. We analyzed every little detail from that night and came to one conclusion: your blood. That night my man slashed your neck and licked the blood from his claws. After that. Cassian's powers had no effect on him."

"You're speaking nonsense," I growl. "You're raving just like your grandfather. Let me go!"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. I can't let you fall into his hands again."

"I'm not going to be in anyone's hands, especially not yours!"

"You never had another choice, Elara. You've always been a pawn in this game—your birth was already marked." She lets out a laugh that chills my blood. "Only you weren't a gift for us, but for them. Too bad no creation is perfect."

"You're insane."

"Don't play the naïve one." She taps my chin. "A little bird told me what you did recently at the camp." I feel the sting of betrayal in my chest. "You are death, Elara, but also life, and I can't let them have you precisely because of that. You're the key to the perpetuation of their race. That's why Lilith bore you—for her sons. A perfected version of what she already made."

Her expression darkens and takes on a different tone. Her hands slide down my arms, as if trying to console me.

“I know you hate them, surely you don’t want to help them by being their breeding bitch.” She spits the words. “Think about it. With me, together, we could eliminate what has always haunted your life. You’d finally be free.”

Now it’s me who laughs. I can’t control the hysterical laughter that bursts from my throat and echoes through the high ceilings of the hall. I sound deranged, and I don’t think I’m far off.

“You think I’m stupid enough to believe that things would change with you? I’d just be a means to an end. Don’t make me believe I have a choice when I clearly don’t.” I smile defiantly. “You may think you’re so different from them, but I think you’re the same—a monster in

different skin.”

Our staring contest is brief. She slaps me hard, knocking me to the ground again, and though she looks down on me, I refuse to be crushed. I don’t lower my gaze. I’m certain of what I said. The shapeshifters haven’t given me any reason to think they’re different from the vampires. In fact, I believe no supernatural being would hesitate to kill humans. After all, we are the lowest rung on the pyramid. We’re sheep waiting for

the slaughterhouse.

“You’ll do it the easy way, or the hard way—and I assure you, death will feel like a gift.” She looks to the shapeshifter from before who, to my surprise, is now clothed. “Take her. Maybe in a little while, she’ll be more reasonable.”

The man obeys immediately. He grabs my arms behind my back and secures them with heavy, cold shackles. He shoves me forward, and deciding this isn’t a battle worth fighting, I comply and walk ahead. The doors to the chamber open and I see two men stationed outside. They seem like guards, and they’re not the only ones I spot as we walk. Several others are positioned throughout the hallways we traverse. We pass through a wide foyer with a staircase in the center that splits into two. I glance up and see that the ceiling isn’t intact—there are collapsed sections, and that’s not all. As we move farther in, we pass crumbling walls and shattered windows.

Wasteland is a place where life has no place, and this building doesn’t seem like it can survive here either.

Chapter 30s

hary’s heavy hand presses down on my neck, forcing my head to bow as we descend a steep staircase into a damp, poorly ventilated area: now it’s the dungeons even before we pass several cells from which skeletal men with dead eyes stare out someone is already waiting in the last one, and as soon as I recognize him, I feel the sting of betrayal in my chest.

thory steps away a few paces, giving us privacy with an expressionless face,

“It’s not what you think, Elara.”

I scoff

“You sold me,” I say, voice dripping with disdain. “I guess it’s my fault. I’m always so naive, always expecting good from everyone even you f was wrong. You’re not different. You’re worse than Cassian.”

“I’m nothing like him!” Eleazar snaps.

“You’re right—at least he doesn’t pretend to be something he’s not.”

“I had to do it.” He clenches his fists at his sides. “There was no other way to keep us safe. If it weren’t for the help they’ve given us all this time, both the Diluted and the humans escaping would be dead. The shapeshifters are the ones keeping us safe when our limitations don’t

allow us to.”

The memory of the map spread across his table returns to my mind. The marked points, the conviction in his voice when I asked how they stayed safe during the day. I had no way of knowing the reason behind that confidence was that he had shapeshifters on his side. Or maybe I just wasn’t observant enough?

“If you do exactly what they ask, they won’t hurt you. Please, Elara, comply. They’ve promised you’ll be safe, but if your stubbornness blinds you, I don’t know how much I’ll be able to do.”

“Promises mean nothing.”

“Ragna is a woman of honor. She gave me her word she won’t hurt you, but you have to cooperate.”

“What does she want from me?” I ask warily.

“We still don’t know the full extent of your powers. However, Ragna is certain you’re the key to killing them.” He tries to grab my hands and I pull away before he can. “Killing a Pure is difficult, not impossible—but we believe with you it would be much easier. If you are life, you are also death, and we both know you can kill without effort.”

As if those words were a signal, Rhory steps forward, and when I see what he’s holding, my eyes widen in fear and I try to back away, pressing my back to the cell bars. The little door opens and I retreat fully into the wolf’s mouth—and the only place where I can take refuge.

“It’s just for safety. You don’t have control over your power and might do something you regret.”

Rhory’s hands reach me and he handles me roughly, giving me no chance to resist. The tension in his jaw and the coldness in his eyes promise he’ll kill me without hesitation if I become a threat. He lifts a kind of muzzle, and I try to fight it, scratching every bit of skin I can reach in hopes that something so simple might stop him. One of Rhory’s arms pins me against the wall while the other holds the muzzle, which, once near my mouth, comes alive and sticks to my skin. This is magic. I almost release the air trapped in my lungs when I feel a searing pain. Whatever is happening, it burns the skin of my mouth.

“Your physiological needs will be covered intravenously. We can’t be sure you won’t try one of your tricks on us.”

With hot tears in my eyes, I touch the muzzle. The material radiates heat. It’s hard to breathe, and the effort not to sob makes everything

worse.

I watch Rhory walk out of the cell and lock the door behind him. I don’t follow, I know with absolute certainty that I won’t escape. I fled from what I thought was the worst monster only because I had help—but I won’t escape this one.

Chapter the

Fieaza: seems like he wants to say something, but the pain and contempt in my eyes nitence him. He turns around and leaves me alone in This cold, damp hole. The magic seating my lips burms, making me want to cry from sheer pain. I pull my knees to my chest and curd into a ball, recking back and forth look at the torch outside, watch its flame, and rage only makes me think about how happy I’d be setting all this on fire

The pain—not hist in my mouth but in my temples—is draining my energy. I feel it in every fiber of my body as I go limp with each passing second, my eyes begging to close. Maybe it’s a delinum, or maybe the tiny eyes I think I see in the fire are real.

Whatever it is, it’s not enough to keep me awake.

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 109

Cassian

As soon as I board one of the ships heading toward the Wasteland, I feel Drystan flitting around me, moving from side to side, looking for the right moment to speak. I bark orders

here and there to the Purebloods in charge of the sails and keeping us on course. In the holds, there are others—many Diluted who remain loyal to me. Ank emerges from the flame of the candle, catching my full attention.

“What did you see?” I ask immediately.

Her flames turn a bluish hue. She shakes her head from side to side and covers her face with her little hands.

“Ank.”

“It’s terrible, Cassian.”

Her voice fades just as much—or more—than her flames, and my mind begins to conjure up thousands of grotesque images. A knot forms in my throat, and I struggle to swallow properly.

“Explain,” I demand, my voice choked.

“They have her in a cell.” -I clench my fists- “They’ve put something on her... a kind of muzzle over her mouth.”

“What?” I exclaim.

“It hurts her, Cassian. I saw it in her eyes—whatever that thing is, it’s causing her pain.”

hadn’t realized I was gripping the ship’s railing until I hear it splintering in my hands. I look down and see how my fingers have sunk into the

wood and are covered in blood. Drystan steps forward, places himself next to me, and rests his hand on my shoulder as if that could calm me right now. I think only once before this, something in my life had turned my vision completely red and made my thirst for blood take on a wholly different meaning than usual.

“I don’t understand,” I say through gritted teeth. “Why are they doing this?”

Drystan clears his throat beside me.

“I think I might have some answers.”

I turn toward him, still gripping the wood beneath my fingers—though I doubt I could let go without destroying something else. I narrow my eyes, waiting for him to speak.

“Before Evanora slipped away from me, I had the chance to ask some questions and get a few answers,” he explains. “From the beginning, her reasons for coming with us seemed suspicious to me—and I was right in the end.”

“What do you mean?”

He holds a few seconds of silence before continuing.

“It wasn’t a curse that was making Elara sick—it was her true nature revealing itself. Your presence was awakening it, killing her human side.” -He swallows like he’s afraid of how I’ll react- “Naja, as Lilith’s servant, knew it instantly. What they did was completely break the seal that

bound her to her human side.”

“What? What do you mean ‘her human side’?” -My thoughts pile one over another- “Elara is human. If you kill that, you kill her.”

He shakes his head.

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“She’s not human, Cassian.” If the ground opened under my feet and swallowed me, it might have a similar effect to his words- “Evanora was using her potions to prepare her for the final transition. There have already been small manifestations of her nature—you know this.”

It’s true that there were things that didn’t add up for me—like how she managed to escape by bending the gate at the castle entrance, which is sealed with very strong enchantments. There was also that time in the forest, when she escaped her captor without telling me exactly how, the sudden change in the taste of her blood, and that small but significant detail of her resistance to my powers and those of the others, even if she’s shown some weakness at times by letting me into her mind.

I swallow, trying to push aside the knot in my throat and regain composure.

“What is she exactly?”

“She is... the daughter of Lilith and the middle god.”

The middle god: Atarothz.

I’ve never been one to believe in the Ancient Gods, but I do remember the names they were given, even if most have been forgotten. It’s said that Atarothz was responsible for judging souls before sending them to the afterlife. People feared him—beyond his judgment—because he could destroy a soul. If there’s anything more terrifying than death, it’s ceasing to exist completely. It’s been a long time since anyone talked about the gods—they’ve almost become a children’s tale that fairies tell their young before bed.

I don't know why the idea that Elara has something to do with him seems like total madness—and yet, I don't see it as entirely impossible.

I can't control my reactions. A rough laugh escapes my chest, and Drystan looks at me with panic-filled eyes. He probably thinks I've lost the last shred of sanity I had left.

“Lilith made her for you.”

That cuts my laughter short immediately.

“No.”

“Yes, Cassian,” he insists firmly. “Evanora told me. It's written in her destiny to meet you. Lilith conceived her with the idea of you two

together. Elara is the key to our survival as a race.”

I don't want to believe it. I shake my head as if that could erase his last words. Memories overwhelm me, one after another. The pull I felt the

night I claimed her—it was fate. It was Lilith pulling the strings, playing with us like puppets. I lift a hand and slam it against the wood again, splintering it further. I clench my teeth so tightly that I feel my fangs digging into my flesh.

I don't want to think about it—but I do. If this is Lilith's doing, it means even our own feelings might not be real. Why does that hurt?

“If she is the key to our survival, they'll want her dead.”

“If that were entirely true, they would have done it already,” he argues. “There must be more that we still don't know. What we do know for sure...”

“...is that she's the bait,” I finish for him.

“They might not know that we know this about Elara.”

“That's too hopeful.”

He falls silent and lowers his shoulders, clearly not knowing what else to say to me. I look at Ank, who seems just as stunned as I am. I offer her my finger, and she, somewhat hesitant, eventually climbs onto it. I bring her close to my eyes and stare at her intently.

“I need you to tell me everything you see,” I ask her. “And everything you hear. You are our eyes and ears right now, Ank. Thanks to you, we

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can better know what to expect.”

Whatever she saw in Elara’s eyes affected her deeply—and even though just knowing she’s suffering drives me Insane, I can’t afford to lose my mind entirely, or I’ll never get it back. I don’t care if she hates me and refuses to come with me—I’ll get her out of there, and I’ll deal with everything else afterward. My priority is freeing her from the shapeshifters’ grasp—and from that damn hypocrite Eleazar. What fantasies and lies has he whispered in Elara’s ear? Just thinking about the two of them together turns my stomach.

Ank nods and melts back into the flames. She reappears now and then.

Sold to the Night Lord

There are many of them from what reauté ees through one of the metalik torches they’ve multiplied during this shoe They’re Hiring. Shi dritic ins has men theright helfare continuing “They’re led by a woman, seated on a throne of fangs and claws, with a white wolf b her site and mother with golden eyes and scars.”

Wert you able to hear anything)

“Eleazar was spending with her Apparently, he’s not happy about what they’ve done to Elara, and they were arguing. The deal was that he would bring her to them and in return, they promised not to hurt her.”

“He’s even dumber than I thought if he believes the word of one of them means anything, I say, my voice full of disgust. “Anything elser

“They believe she is the key to eliminating the Purebloods.”

Drystan and I look at each other, knowing it’s as strange as it is possible. If everything Drystan has said is true, Elara is something unknown- something that could have unimaginable abilities and gifts. A feeling I thought I’d never feel again overwhelms me.

Fear. Fear of what Elara is not because of what she might do to me, but because of what others might do to eliminate her, use her, possess

her.

The truth—the mystery we Pures have hidden for so long—is that only that which gave us life can take it from us. We were born from Lilith’s tears, and only her tears can bring about our death. Years ago, humans, through pacts with demons, managed to obtain them. They used witches—whom I later annihilated—to create weapons that, with a single tear, had the power to kill us. The boldest injected them into their blood and killed many of us who fed on them, unaware of what they carried. The image of my mother with a dagger in her heart, her skin turning gray and her eyes filling with blood, will never leave me—nor what they did afterward with her body and my father’s.

I move away from Drystan, Ank in my hand again. When I’m sure we’re alone, I let the thought torment me aloud.

“Let me see her.” —She shivers—“Is it as horrible as it sounds?”

“She has fear etched in her gaze.”

“Let me see.”

Because of Ank’s close friendship with my mother and her loyalty to me, I promised never to enter her mind without her consent—so when she lowers her head in agreement, I dive in and search through her latest memories. I see a room where, as she said, a woman sits on a throne, guarded by two wolves. Despite my curiosity, Elara is more important now. I search and search until I find exactly what I want. Elara’s gaze is fixed straight ahead. A horrible muzzle covers the lower part of her face, and from its color, I can tell the metal is burning. She has

dried tears on her cheeks and bloodshot eyes. Her nails are broken, and the pain is so intense that she’s dug them into her skin until she bled.

I want to reach out and touch her cheek, but this is only Ank’s memory. Reluctantly, and with my heart in a state I can’t even name, I exit the

salamander’s mind.

“Please, stay alert, and if anything happens that I need to know—inform me immediately.”

I return Ank to the flame and she vanishes until further notice. I move across the deck barking orders, organizing how we’ll act with what we now know. It doesn’t matter that I want to get there as fast as possible—there are things even I can’t fight against. We still have a long journey

ahead.

Day turns to night, and several Diluted relieve the Purebloods so they can rest and feed. I wish I could say the same for myself; instead, I stay awake the entire time reviewing old maps hidden in one of the drawers in my cabin. Drystan and I plan several strategies,

though we both know they're expecting us—and there's little we can do against that. We're clearly at a disadvantage without the element of surprise.

During one of the moments I'm alone, I try something I haven't been able to do since last time. Elara's mind has remained closed to me,

but I

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make one more attempt, thinking it will fail. But it doesn't. I manage to be there, sitting beside her, the cold sorting into my skin but!

don't care.

"Elara..."

reach toward her and gently brush one side of her head with my fingers, careful not to startle her. Only her eyes react to my call, everything else remains the same. Her body doesn't move, and her lips have been denied the option of speech. I feel her body trembling beneath my hand and, by pure instinct, I pull her small and fragile frame toward me. Right now, I hate not being someone warm. I don't know if my embrace can soothe the cold—just know I can't watch her tremble.

"Hold on a bit longer, little wild thing," I murmur into her hair. "I'm on my way, and when I get to you, I'll make them pay."

I run my thumb down her cheek until it reaches the horror on her face. The contact is hot—abrasive. I don't even want to imagine what that thing is doing to her skin. I'll make sure they pay, and then I'll have someone erase every trace of this torture. I won't let her live with the reminder of this.

She moves against me, raises her gaze, and in it, she shows me all her fear. It lodges in my chest like a heavy slab.

"If I hadn't been such an idiot with you, you never would have left," I whisper. "No words I can say now could express how sorry I am. I'll never forgive myself for this."

She blinks, brushing away the tears that threaten to fall from her eyes. I don't know where she finds the strength—and even more, the desire—to touch me, but that's what she does. She places her hand over mine, and I can feel that she's comforting me. This girl is far too good for

someone like me.

On the tip of my tongue, so many words gather—among them, the ones that would let me tell her that we’re *not* just a simple coincidence. We are the result of a destiny twisted by vile hands. Instead, I decide she’s had enough. She doesn’t need me to add more to her fragile mental state. I don’t know how much she knows—but I won’t be the one to drown her in information.

I caress her hair again and again, with the urgent need to feel connected to her in any way I can during the time I have left. I curl up next to her and let her fall asleep against my shoulder. I look around at everything, memories of my youth assault my mind and make me sick. Attentive to her heartbeat and steady breaths, I begin to speak to the void.

“There are many emotions I haven’t felt in centuries, and now you make me feel so many, so fast, that I’m terrified. I don’t want to think we are a result of fate, I want to believe I would have chosen you myself in any circumstance, because you can’t just be something designed for me. You’re Elara, with all the things that make you who you are. Just like I’m Cassian, and I hold hope, in the atrophied organ in my chest, that one day you will accept me—your enemy, your nightmare. I believe I would die for you, I’d put the world at your feet, little wild thing, and I don’t have the courage to say it when you can hear me. You make me a coward.”

Her breathing grows heavier, and her body moves toward mine, seeking me. A solitary tear escapes from the corner of her eye, and I catch it before it continues down. Could her tears really be lethal? I rub the moisture between my fingers in anger, swearing I’ll make rivers of blood run over the floors of this place. I realize there’s blood dripping from the edge of the muzzle, staining one of my hands. I close my eyes, see everything in the red of rage, and wait patiently *for* her to wake. Many hours pass, but I don’t care—there’s nowhere else I’d rather be right

now.

When she begins to stir at my side and opens her gray eyes again, I lean down and press a kiss to her forehead.

“I’ll be back soon,” I say, feeling a tug pulling me somewhere else. “Be that little wild thing that tormented me in the castle, okay?”

I can hardly see anything of her face and it drives me mad. Reluctantly, I leave, exit her mind and find myself back in my cabin, alone.

Someone knocks on the door. On my way to it, I run my fingers across my face and pause at my lips. I can taste the distinctive wild flavor of her blood. I try not to think about why I’m stained with it and open the door.