

# Sold to the Night Lord

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 11

Cassian

Everything around me bows before me, including the minds **of** people. I mold them **at** will, implicate

can wander through them **as** I please. And **yet**, she fights to **resist**.

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memories or thoughts that never existed, and I

No matter how much I try to enter it and crush it, to shatter it until her mind is nothing but dust and she a hollow shell, her will is made of iron and manages to repel me. However, she doesn't know that from time to time her thoughts come to me like whispers in my ear, that all the anxieties that arise from the possibility that I am in her head **at** that very moment **reach** me.

**Mavka's** blood has filled my goblet for over an hour, and just the thought of letting it slide down my throat no longer **excites** me. Instead, that other neck-long, creamy skin, and **delicate** lines—seems **to** sing to me like a siren, tempting me *to* go against my own rules. Only three days have passed, and the edge of my fangs already bothers me every time I imagine sinking them into her and seeing that face trapped in horror.

“Cassian.” The voice of Drystan, whose parents must have loved our land to name him that, reaches me from outside my room.

I murmur my reply, knowing it will **reach** his ears.

His straight, black hair down to his shoulders soon appears. He walks toward my desk with his hands clasped behind his back, eyes serious and lips pressed into a line.

“I’ve been observing her during the **day**, just as **you**

**asked**,” he informs. “She usually spends the afternoons in the library or exploring the **castle**.”

“What about my wing?”

“She doesn’t **go** near it.”

I rest my chin on my folded hands **as** one corner of my mouth lifts in satisfaction. Seems my threats had the desired effect.

“Has she spoken to anyone?”

“Only with her maids.”

“Good.”

Drystan shifts where he stands, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. I narrow my eyes, knowing my friend’s behavior—this Pure who’s been at my side for half **a** lifetime—can only mean something that might enrage me. And when I’m enraged, the world risks being split in two. Because that’s one of my gifts: to manipulate the composition of things, of matter, even of what seems to have no true form. The mind is one of the things I enjoy playing with the most. It’s like a tangle of strings made by **a cat**, so fragile that a simple movement of my hand could unravel all those connections, everything that makes it work.

“Are you planning to keep dancing on my floor, or is there something you want to say to me?”

The vampire’s eyes, black as obsidian and cold as death, land on me. He licks his dry lips before speaking.

“The other bloodmaids won’t stop whispering.”

I **wave** my hand dismissively.

“Since when do I care about their whispers?”

“Mavka is poisoning the thoughts of the others.” He tilts his head slightly with curiosity. “They’re not happy with how the girl is being treated.”

“They don’t need to be happy.”

“They’re threatening to kill her

Laughter bursts from my throat with force.

Kill her? Them? None of them will rob me of that satisfaction, and if any **dare**, I’ll make sure to break every bone in their bodies. Elara is my prey. and I won’t let anyone take her from me.

“Ring Mavka’s bell,” I command. “I’ll give her a warning.”

He nods in obedience and takes a step back. A smile appears on his lips—a mischievous and wicked one that reveals his fangs.

“Dropping the formalities for a moment.” He raises one of his thick black eyebrows.  
“What are the girl’s privileges about, friend?”

I throw the quill resting beside the desk at him as **a warning**—and as part of our games. He catches it before the **tip** pierces his **eye** and smiles arrogantly.

“Nothing in particular

“You never let them wander so freely around the castle,” he points out, twirling the quill between everywhere.”

his

aegers. “You hate the smell they leave

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True. Although the smell of blood drives our kind mad, it repulses me. I feel a deep hatred and contempt for **every** single one of those insignificant beings. That’s why I avoid feeding directly from them. The one who’s come closest to breaking that rule is Mavka. She’s managed to surprise me by lasting in my territory longer than anyone **else**. Obedient, healthy, and with a sick devotion.

“My dear friend, it hurts more to **cage** an animal that has already known freedom,” I say.

“You seem to hold a special hatred for the creature.”

I don’t respond, though my thoughts revolve around his remark. **Yes**, it’s true that the moment I saw her, I felt the need to break her. To make her bones crack beneath my fingers like miserable **twigs**, to shatter her mind until she went insane. Perhaps it was the **fact**

that in her **eyes** I saw the same thing I **see** every time I look into mine. Hatred, hatred, hatred.

We both hate what the other **is**.

Drystan clicks his tongue, **as** if my silence **is** enough of an answer, and turns toward the double doors of

my room.

“I’ll summon Mavka.”

When the door closes behind him, I lean back in the chair in front of the desk and close my **eyes**. I dive into concentration, projecting my power outward as if I could give **it** shape and make it a living being. A being that walks, seeking its target. I **traverse** the long corridors of the castle,

descending countless spiral staircases until I reach one of the underground **levels**. Curious that Elara has chosen one of the most hidden and ancient libraries. I follow her scent, searching for her among the tall dusty shelves and the musty smell of old books. I find her sitting **cross**-legged, which completely wrinkles one of the dresses I took the trouble to choose. In her hands rests a heavy book with worn leather **covers** and yellowed

**pages**.

Her finger trails along a line **as** she **reads it** aloud softly.

I push against her mind, attempting to enter it and unsettle her. To my surprise, she senses me.

“Leave me alone.”

If I had a physical form, I would narrow my eyes and cross my arms, mocking. She purses those full lips while scanning the air around her with vacant **eyes**. Her entire appearance **is** empty, dull, and colorless. Black hair, opaque and lifeless, gray eyes, skin white **as alabaster**-even her lips seem pale. And yet, she managed to attract a lot of attention at the auction. Including mine.

# Sold to the Night Lord

## Chapter 12

I acted like a damn fool, throwing hundreds of rubies at a scrawny, **graceless** girl just because I thought I saw something in her gaze.

I brush her mind again with my invisible fingers.

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“I said stop.” She slams the book shut with a sharp sound. “Don’t you have your favorite **toy** to **play** with, cold and stiff, **sir**?”

She nearly makes me laugh.

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I glance at the book resting now on her lap. I'm surprised to **see** that she's reading about us and our history. I slowly withdraw my fingers from the surface of her mind, which today seems impenetrable. That frustrates me. The arbitrariness of her mind. On the first day in the castle, her mind **was** wide open, and now it's locked tight.

The slam of my bedroom door breaks the connection. I abandon the library and my incorporeal form and return to sitting hands folded beneath my chin.

The one responsible for the noise is Mavka, who stares **at** me with wide **eyes**.

Her blood is souring from fear.

You called for me?" The words leave her lips in a weak stammer.

"I did." I make a motion with my index finger, inviting her closer. "Come."

She walks toward me with short steps, keeping **a** cautious distance.

She knows I'm not pleased—my face **is a** perfect mirror

at my desk with my

of

my emotions.

"I've heard of certain behaviors of yours that displease me." I run my tongue **over** one of my fangs. "How many times must I tell you I don't like childish behavior?"

"But **sir**, I..."

"Do you feel threatened by that little girl?"

The pounding of her blood reaches my ears. She clenches her fists around the silk of her dress. She doesn't look me in the eye, keeps her gaze down while a soft blush covers her cheeks.

"They're calling her the ruby queen, **sir**."

"So?" I reply, narrowing my eyes. "Queens wear **crowns**, and the only thing that the peasant had on her head when I bought her was a tangle of hair. Don't be pathetic, Mavka. You're my favorite because of your intelligence, Don't ruin it."

That last line makes her lift her chin with a mixture of shame and rage flickering in her amber **eyes**, which **creates** a wild contrast with her tanned skin and thick black hair. Many times, when I look at her, those eyes remind me **of** some of my natural enemies.

“I won’t disappoint you again.”

“Words aren’t enough, Mavka.” I click my tongue. “Only I play with my toys. Don’t try to poison the minds **of** the others again. If you do, I’ll strip you of the arrogance that allows you to speak to the others that way. And **believe** me, you won’t like what you’re reduced to.”

“**It was a**

mistake. It won’t happen again.” She lifts her gaze slightly without meeting my eyes. “I let my human emotions get the better of me.”

“Of course it won’t happen again”

I stand, dragging the chair from the desk. She flinches, scared by the abruptness of my movements, and squints. I pace through the room, in no hurry to reach her. Her blood’s scent travels through the air.

I stop in front of her. Her face comes to my chest; she doesn’t dare look at me **again**, and I end up grabbing her chin between my fingers with enough force to draw a grimace of pain, but not enough to break the bone.

“If I hear again that your damn tongue **is** spouting nonsense, I lean in until **we’re** breathing the same air, “I’ll rip it out for the crows to **peck** at and turn you into a Broken like others before you.”

Broken

That word makes the blood drain from anyone’s face just by hearing it. That’s what we call the poor wretches who manage to anger me or whose existence seems so useless I end up destroying their minds. I **erase** everything that made them who they were, leaving only an empty, useless shell that, with **time**, ceases to exist. My reputation for being insatiable is true—many die from failing to satisfy my hunger. But many others, **many mure**, die from the consequences of my gifts.

I extend my power into her mind, always wide open to me. I brush its threads with my invisible fingers, making them vibrate like the tense strings of a harp.

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12:18

“Cassian...”

My name escapes her lips tinged with panic. She knows I’m toying with the fragility of her mind.

“Have I made myself clear enough?”

She nods, still ashen-faced and trembling.

“Then get out. Out of my sight.”

She pulls **away** from me abruptly, clutching the skirts of her dress with trembling hands before running out of the room, her black hair swinging over her bare back.

I look at my reflection in one of the windows facing outside and see my eyes glowing with pure rage. The intense blue has been nearly swallowed by the black of my pupils. I cross my hands behind my back and gaze out, where the light of dusk bathes the gardens.

Mavka’s scent has begun to repulse me—more than usual. Meanwhile, the new addition, the little ruby queen as the staff insist on calling her, has a sweet scent, and the vein on her neck won’t stop calling me to caress it.

This thought makes my blood boil. I slam my fist into the window, which shatters into hundreds of tiny crystals.

Let Lilith protect that creature before I make her limp neck dangle from my hands.

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## Sold to the Night Lord

Elara

Wandering around the castle comes with certain limitations, not just the one about Cassian’s wing, located in the west wing. To that is added not being able to leave these walls without the company of guards. Most of them are Diluted, and although they seem to be equipped with full armor that protects them from the sun, they don’t seem very willing to fulfill my wishes. So that limits my outings to nighttime walks. Except on some occasions, when a tall man, with hair as black as his **eyes**, has offered to accompany me. Despite being a Pure, his presence is not entirely unpleasant to me; he limits himself to letting me walk while following several steps behind, silent and barely making a sound as he moves. You could say we tolerate each other.

I'm sitting on a small stone bench beneath the shade of a large tree from which violet flowers fall, resembling wisteria. Every now and then, I think I see them move out of the corner of my eye without the breeze stirring them, but I tell myself I'm just imagining things because of this place.

Everything seems sinister, unreal, or magical. I wouldn't know which word to use to define it.

The sound of the fountain, where the water pours from the jug of a small cherub, is relaxing as I read an old book from the library, History of Drystia.

Drystia was formed approximately one thousand three hundred and fifty-four years ago. Very few remember the name the continent used to bear, and no book bothers to mention it. For the most part, it is ruled by vampires, or as the book calls them, the children of Lilith. The north and the south are at odds; the Twisted Forest serves as a border barrier between them. The south is dominated by rebellious Diluted who want to impose themselves over the Pures, whom they accuse of treating them poorly, vilely, and despotically. The Pures control the north; a powerful family, supported by other well-established ones, governs among them.

But, as the pages clearly state, they are not the only ones on the continent. There is mention of a small territory located in the west, near the Corrupted Waters, where women who court death dwell.

"Reading when you have so little time left to live is a waste."

I snap the book shut and place it on my knees, startled. I push a strand of hair behind my ear as I lift my gaze to Mavka. I recognize her because ever since I arrived at the castle six days ago, her laughter while writhing on Cassian's lap during dinner has been something that drills into my

**senses.**

"Hello, Mavka." I put on my most polite tone. "Out for a walk?"

I look over her shoulder, searching for her escort, but she's alone, along with her intricately embroidered parasol. Her off-the-shoulder dress, floor-length sleeves, and silky yellow fabric create a lovely contrast with her tanned skin and amber eyes.

"Don't look, there's no one else here but us." She makes a mocking gesture with her hand. "It's one of the perks of being the master's favorite."

Ah, I see.

Mavka is like Bianca, the daughter of one of the biggest merchants in Ravag, my small village. Always with airs of grandeur, flaunting the fabrics her father brought her from



distant lands I'll never get to see. She loved to show off in front of the others, boasting of her wealth. **Mavka** is the Bianca of this place. The queen bee.

And the queen bee seems to feel threatened by a mere worker bee.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

I try my best not to sound smug, just kind. I don't want trouble—just to **read** quietly under the tree, endure dinner as best I can, sleep, and repeat the same process until my final day. Which, according to Cassian, doesn't seem far away.

"There is." A wolfish smile stretches her lips. "The rest of the bloodmaids wonder why you're **so** intent on not spending time with them. I, too, find myself wondering." She taps her chin thoughtfully. "Is it that you think we're beneath you and not worthy of your presence?"

"What?" My voice rises an octave. "No! Of course not!"

"You haven't wanted to come to any of our card nights."

"It's just that I stammer. I prefer to be in my quarters."

"Don't lie," she snaps. "It's obvious the maids' gossip has gone to your head."

"What gossip?"

She lets out a bitter laugh as she narrows her eyes at me, something like hatred burning in them.

"As if you didn't know." She clicks her tongue. "The innocent ruby queen..."

I wrinkle my face at the nickname. Yes, it's true that **from** time to time, that name comes whispered on the wind. It feels more like mockery than flattery. A constant reminder that I was bought.

**12:18 PM**

"That's just nonsense from the maids," I reply.

With every second, her face seems to burn brighter with rage. Her eyes are now mere slits, her lips curled clenching so tightly.

"What do you have that the rest of us don't?"

The tone of her voice makes the sparrows drinking at the fountain scatter in fright.

“Mavka I think you’re exaggerating...”

“Exaggerating?” she spits the word. “Exaggerating? It’s your fault the master spoke to me like that!”

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a sneer, and her fists are white from

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I frown, not understanding what she means, and I’m about to press the book to my chest and walk back to the castle when Mavka lunges at me. The handle of her parasol hits me, and I instinctively reach for my temple, where a small blot of blood stains my fingertips. I look up, frightened, at the push her off. My seated position on

exact moment her hands **wrap** around my neck. I grab her wrists, digging my nails into her skin as I struggle

the bench puts me at a disadvantage. I try to stand as I fight for a breath of air.

“Why you? What’s so special about you?”

Seeing that her hands aren’t loosening at all, I go for her face, scratching whatever I can reach. She lets

out a sharp

p her hands to her

jeyes.

“Mavka!”

We both turn at the authoritative voice of the Pure with black hair who now stands just meters away, on the other side

of the fountain. He looks *at* the dark-haired, golden-eyed woman with an impassive expression, only the tension in his **jaw** betrays his true anger. The penetrating gaze he casts makes the hairs on my neck stand on end. I don’t want to be the target of such wrath.

“You!” Mavka turns back to me with a trembling chin and the skin around her eyes red. “You knew he was watching!”

“I never said you were alone,” I reply, tired of her accusations.

With a childish grunt, she grabs her parasol and walks away, dragging the hem of her dress across the stone floor. She lowers her head as she passes the Pure, shrinking considerably. I stand up, keeping my gaze down, smooth my skirts, and clutch the book tightly to my chest, as if someone might rip it from me at any moment.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 14

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He simply **gives** a small nod of his chin. The events don’t invite me to remain here, and the orange hues beginning to streak the sky warn me that Cassian **will** soon summon me to the dining hall. Even though the sunlight poses no problem for him, he seems to refuse *to* live beneath it.

I glance over my shoulder more than once, afraid someone might try to attack me again. I don’t trust this being the only attempt from Mavka. I climb the stairs, making sure my shoes don’t make noise, and walk down the **east** wing’s hallway to my chambers. The guards don’t even flinch at my presence—I can’t say the same.

I sit at the vanity and examine the pink marks around my neck. I still feel the warmth of her hands, and the touch of my cold fingers makes me wince. Some scratches sting.

“Miss Elara!”

Clarissa gasps as she walks heavily toward the vanity. Naida closes the door behind her. Clarissa’s hands, wrinkled with age, sweep the hair from my face and lift it into an improvised bun. Naida joins her and lifts my chin **as** she inspects the severity of the wounds.

“It’s nothing,” I try to reassure them.

“Nothing?” Clarissa exclaims, upset. “I can’t believe Miss Mavka did this.”

I’m not surprised,” Naida shrugs. “It’s obvious she feels threatened—**she sees** her position as favorite at risk.”

“Threatened? By me?” I laugh incredulously. “Cassian hates me, he doesn’t even look at me. She’s the sun while I’m just frost. Please, it’s ridiculous.”

“Frost is beautiful—remember it shines like hundreds of crystals, even diamonds.”

Clarissa begins to run her fingers through my hair, undoing some knots before grabbing the brush, while I see Naida open the double wardrobe doors and take out a deep purple dress.

“You forget that frost melts when the sun comes out.”

We fall silent while they work on my appearance. My hair falls straight down my back and only a bit of powder is applied to my cheeks. Out of the corner of my eye, I glance at the little bell next to my bed, which still hasn’t rung despite my nearly week-long stay in the castle. The relief I feel each day will only make the panic greater when it does ring. Without a doubt, Cassian’s hatred for me **is** something I’ll feel the moment he

summons me.

A look of understanding and affection softens Clarissa’s eyes as she ties a black velvet ribbon around my neck and puts on the ruby earrings—pure provocation. The dress **is** such a dark purple it could be mistaken for night. The skirts hide my flat shoes, and the sleeves reach the floor. I still haven’t gotten used to these loose dresses, lacking petticoats or **corsets**. The fabric clings so much to my skin it feels as if I’m wearing nothing at all.

“How did you know what happened?” **I ask**. “Do news really travel that fast in the castle?”

“Drystan summoned us,” Naida answers, and seeing I don’t recognize the name, she continues, “The Pure who accompanies you on your daytime walks, Cassian’s right hand.”

“Oh, great, so I’m under total surveillance by his henchmen.”

I press my lips together as I finish examining my appearance. Every night my **two** maids—apparently the only two people who like me, though it may just be out of duty—work magic on me. They transform my wilted appearance into something somewhat presentable.

“Drystan is a good ma...” Naida turns toward me but quickly clears her throat and corrects herself, “He’s kind.”

Was she going to say he’s a good man? Can one even say he’s a good man when he rips out throats, buys us like cattle, and takes away our freedom? Though I suppose the little history they share makes **her**

think that way of him.

They both stay in the room when I leave for my daily meeting with Cassian.

“I love that you think of our dinners **as** a date.”

I freeze in the middle of the hallway, which earns me a look from one of the guards. I project all my hatred as I keep walking and descend the steps one by one. His deep laugh melodically echoes in my **head**. I hold my breath.

“Though our big date hasn’t happened yet.”

I growl before the double doors of the great hall. The guards open them for me, surely thinking I’ve completely lost my mind.

The dim candlelight hanging above makes the place seem warm, despite housing death within its walls. Cassian greets me with legs sheathed in leather riding pants, boots gleaming as if freshly polished, and his shirt with the top buttons undone. His posture is relaxed, one leg slung over the armrest of his seat and one hand lazily holding a goblet that threatens to spill.

The blinding brightness of his blue eyes is amused, he almost looks intoxicated. When he sees **me** enter the dining hall, an insincere smile pulls at his lips, revealing the white of his teeth and the length of his fangs, ready to strike at any moment.

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“How **is** the little beast of this castle?”

My chair is pulled out, and I sit. I go with the strategy of ignoring him. For **six** nights I’ve endured this torture: being under his scrutiny, listening to his spiteful comments about me, and watching him feed with a churning stomach.

He snaps his fingers, and the servants immediately place dishes on the table, while from a door behind the

him, enters a radiant Mavka. She wears a

kind of veil over her eyes. Even so, I know she must be glaring at me. I try to ignore her **as** she drops into Cassian’s lap and runs her fingers affectionately through his black hair.

“What’s wrong, Mavka?” Cassian **asks**

in a honeyed voice. “Your choice of outfit surprises me.”

“Forgive me, sir, today I don’t look my best,” she apologizes. I can hear the falseness in her voice, though she tries to sound pitiful. “I wouldn’t want to displease you with my appearance.”

I try to hold back a retort to her idiotic remarks and focus on the meal in front of me. I take a bite and

my **eyes** meet **Cassian’s** cerulean ones. Something in the way he looks at me, that brief glance at the ribbon on my neck... he knows. And a wolfish smile crosses his face as the realization

hits.

I expected nothing less. Did I think he would defend me? I’d swear he made a bet with her to see how mine are twins.

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I don’t look away **as** the **claw**-shaped ring on his finger slices Mavka’s wrist, and blood begins to fill the goblet. I take another bite without lowering my gaze, and he responds by bringing it to his lips. He sips silently, and as he lowers it, a drop escapes the left corner of his mouth and slides down to his chin. The glint of his fangs flashes, and his eyes have turned such an intense blue it seems unreal.

The air gets stuck in my lungs.

“Mavka has an exceptional taste. I’m dying to discover yours.”

His voice sounds inside my head as if he were next to my ear, purring each word in a rather lascivious tone.

“Everything all right, sir?”

“All fine, Mavka, you may go.”

“But **sir**... you’ve barely...”

“I’m not thirsty today.”

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## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 15

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The bloodmaid **takes a** considerable **few** minutes to accept defeat and climb off his lap. Her **face** turns toward me and, even though it's hidden, I know her eyes must be narrowed and her mouth twisted in a sneer. While she's being dismissed, I'm here, sharing dinner after dinner with the man who seems to be the center of all her dreams. I smile brazenly and give **a** curt nod in farewell.

She spins on her heels and disappears the way she came.

“I've been told you've been studying our history.”

“**Is** there a problem with that?”

“Not at all, I just find it curious that you bother to **get** to know us when it's obvious you

**hate**

*us SO*

much.”

He rests his cheek against the knuckles of his hand, and the gesture captures me for a few seconds. His skin is extremely pale, **even** more than mine, and not a single **flaw**. He looks like delicate porcelain, and to break that contrast, the lines outlining his face **are** harsh, High, prominent cheekbones, **a** straight chin, and thick eyebrows that are usually furrowed. It's beautiful how only dark, dangerous, and twisted things can be so.

“I have to spend my free time here doing something.”

I shrug, and my response seems to amuse him.

“And what conclusions **have you** reached about **us** with your readings?”

He shifts **to** a new posture, leaning forward **over** the long table, his fingers interlaced and his chin resting

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“If you’re trying to mock me, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until tomorrow.” I make a move to stand. “**I’ve** finished my dinner.”

“I’m serious. I haven’t opened one of those history books in decades—maybe a century.” His **gaze** softens slightly. “Tell

With a sour face, I fall back into the **seat**. I don’t think refusing **is** really an option. If I say no, will he just let me go quietly back to my quarters? I doubt the answer is **yes**.

“I’ve been reading some history books that say the northern and southern territories are enemies and separated by the **Twisted Forest**. It seems that inside it there **are creatures** that **scare even** the...” I hesitate, “even your kind.”

at the end of their “The Kraugs,” he clarifies. “They’re creatures that frighten most, but not **all**. They look similar to snakes, with a huge stinger bodies. They’re coated in a kind of mucus that apparently comes from the decomposition of their victims’ **corpses**—hence the disgusting smell.”

“And a vampire **can’t** kill a Kraug?”

“That depends on the vampire,” he replies arrogantly. “A Pure has **a** chance. A Diluted should consider himself dead the moment he even sees one.”

“They don’t sound like very pleasant creatures.”

“They’re not,” he confirms, “They’re **fast** and use their bodies to trap you as soon as they get a chance. Their stinger **secretes** a paralytic venom that leaves you completely useless. In the best-**case scenario**, they might not even bother using it and **just** rip your head off in one clean move. If not... you’ll be praying for **a** quick death.”



“What do they do?”

My curiosity makes me **lean** slightly forward over the table, captivated by his explanation.

“They’ll eat you little by little, prolonging your death for weeks, or in the worst **cases**, months. Your body will begin to rot once it’s been exposed to their mucus for too long. And crows and rats will stop by from time to time to try to take a piece of **you**.”

A shiver slowly runs down my spine. The expression of disgust and **fear** on my face seems to **please** Cassian. That dangerous smile doesn’t fade for a second.

“That’s absolutely disgusting.”

I wrinkle my nose.

“What else **have** you read?”

“A family of Pures, supported by other **well**-established families among them, **leads** the northern territories, and in the south live the rebellious Diluted ones—those who find the **way** they’re treated unfair.”

The mention of the Diluted makes his **lips** press into a thin line. He crosses his arms over his chest and slumps into his seat.

“A real nuisance.”

12:19 PM

Curiosity takes hold of me.

“How many important families are there among you?” He raises an eyebrow and his eyes

“Truly important? Just three.” He gestures dismissively. “And what have you read about the

“Other **creatures**?”

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“Tritons, lamias, shapeshifters, banshees....” His **eyes** widen at my incredulous **face**. “Do you really know nothing about the others? I see our existence has entirely filled your mind. I hate to disappoint you, but there are plenty of horrible things besides

I’m left speechless. In Ravag, **we’ve** lived isolated from so many things, and **I**, for my part, never tried to learn more. Not even Lea’s books contained information about this. She never told me of the existence of other beings. We’ve **never** seen any—only pale-skinned figures with sharp fangs whose footsteps barely make a sound.

Overwhelmed by this new information, **I** scrape my chair back, intending to leave.

“Leaving already?”

“I’m tired.”

“Then you should rest. Fatigue affects the **taste** of blood.” He flashes all his teeth in a smile. “And have high expectations about the flavor of the Ruby Queen.”

He **uses** the name those who **gossip** about me have given. It sounds like an insult, **a** mockery. I clench my fists and return to my chambers, where my maids **wait** to help me undress. Too much attention for someone like me. I let them work in silence, and they leave when they realize I don’t intend to talk tonight.

I slip under the sheets with this new information. I tell myself that tomorrow, right after breakfast, I’ll run to the library to find book that

**any** speaks more about all the creatures I don’t know. Apparently, the arrival—or rather, the reappearance of the vampires wasn’t the only one.

”

I lie on my side and **rest**

on my elbow to blow out the candle on the nightstand. A book catches my attention- -one not even remotely like the one I **was** reading earlier. This one **is** bound in red-dyed leather, a worn black thread tied around it as **a** closure. I pick it up and examine it, frowning.

No title.

I open it cautiously, curious. The pages are yellowed with age, yet it’s clear the book was well cared for. No tears **across** the elegant handwriting and begin to read.

Or

damage.

my

fingertip

“Adam, unsatisfied with Lilith’s lack of submissiveness, did not hesitate to inform his creator of his discontent. God decided to expel Lilith, who had been created in the same way as Adam and saw herself **as** his equal, incapable of submitting to him or declaring herself inferior. Lilith wandered outside paradise for days, without food or water, facing the harsh climate, without shelter or anything to defend herself. The demons saw in her an easy prey, for her desperation **was so great that** the gates of her soul were completely open.

That **was** how Lilith ended up corrupted.

And from it, she shed **six tears** of blood, from which her **six first** sons were born.

These wandered the Earth without food for decades, sustained only by what their mother could provide, until the Creator’s children—those weak humans who could break with a mere touch from Lilith’s children—populated the **Earth**. That was when Lilith’s children, whom humans now call ‘**vampires**’ discovered how to survive and realized that humans were nothing more than cattle. Eventually, these children had children of their own, giving rise to three bloodlines: the De’ath family, the Amery, and the Draven family.

These families...”

I **slam** the book shut.

I blink several times and even reopen the book to reread those last lines.

Cassian Draven.

**Cassian is** a direct descendant of Lilith.

I don’t know what’s more overwhelming the origin story, or the **fact** that I’m currently under the roof of not just any Pure, but one who comes directly from the very first vampires who walked the Earth.

Who’s to say he wasn’t one of them himself? How long **has** Cassian been roaming the Earth, reaping souls? And this book? How did it get here?

Lexhale sharply.

It was him. Always him. With his tricks, he left the book on my nightstand, knowing my **eyes** would immediately **recognize** that it **wasn’t** the one I had been reading. He’s **given** me a more-than-complete answer to my question about **the** most important families among them. He did it so I’d know exactly who I’m dealing with.

2/3

12:19 PM c

He threw his surname in my **face** like a full-blown threat.

\*

## Sold to the Night Lord

Cassian

I keep reading, turning page after page, feeling their roughness on the tips of my eyelids warns me that it's time to **rest**.

my fingers. From

to

time,

?

yawn finds

me, and the heaviness in

I close the book cover, leave it where I found it, and **take** refuge under the sheets, searching for the most comfortable position. I had barely closed my eyelids when a gust of icy air hit my face. At first, I think it must be one of the many drafts that sometimes **pass** through the castle, but this feeling lingers so much that I'm forced to sit up in bed.

I let out a sharp scream at the presence at the edge of my bed.

the app

He's wearing his shirt open down to his sternum, the front stained with what at first I would have taken for wine. The mic smell tainting the air tells me otherwise. His **eyes**, **as** blue **as** the ocean, now look **as** black as a raven's and stare at me with a mixture of amusement and ravenous hunger.

"Cassian?" My voice comes out strangled. "What are you doing here? Get out! This is not **at** all chivalrous

of

The depth of his laugh sends chills through my body. I shrink back on the soft mattress, trying to press myself as **far** headboard of the bed. I hear the wood knocking against the wall. There's no more space I can put between us, and he

What must I have done for the little beast of the castle to think I'm a gentleman?"

as

the phie

possible against the

**seems** re

ready to close it.

"Leave. Please."

He places his hands on either side of my legs, covered by the quilt. His body leans over like gesture makes his eyes travel to my neck. I hold my breath.

2

predator stalking

swallow hard, and the

His body is nearly on top of mine, his breath **so** close **I** can **feel** it brushing my cheeks. The heart in my chest beats rapidly, betraying me. He doesn't know how much this harms **us**—my pulse **is** calling to him like a siren's song to a sailor. The darkness in his eyes gleams while the white of his fangs shows in **a** chilling smile. I watch his tongue slide along the edge of one as he scans my horrified **face** and lowers slowly to my neck. He stops where my pulse is pounding.

"We're dragging this out too long, little beast." He leans over me, and the edge of his nose brushes my chin. "It's

time you let me taste you."

My muscles go rigid, and I become aware of his weight on top of me. Even though his frame isn't particularly broad and he doesn't look like a warrior, the weight and hardness of his body reveal a defined musculature beneath his clothes. Plus, his nature makes him stronger than humans. He could rip a tree from the roots with a mere flick of his wrist.

“I don’t want to—I’m not ready,” I blurt out like an idiot.

“I don’t care.”

His gaze drops **a** few centimeters, pausing on the slight curves of my **breasts** that the nightgown does little to hide. I cross my arms over trying *to* cover my body and near-nakedness. A new, deep, and masculine laugh **leaves** his lips, making my stomach flutter.

my chest,

I bump the back of my head trying to pull **away**, and **that** brief moment of confusion is enough for Cassian to pull me down **so** that I’m lying completely on the mattress, his body over mine.

“Get out!” I pound at his chest. “You disgust me! **Get** away from me!”

His laughter drills into my **ears as** I feel the tickle of his breath against my skin and the brush of his nose, inhaling the scent of my neck.

Wasn’t he supposed to hate my smell?

That thought is pushed aside when I feel the edge of his fangs grazing the delicate skin of my throat, followed by the moistness of his tongue, as if tasting what he’s about to sink his teeth into. I writhe beneath him, trying to kick and hit him. Nothing seems to faze him—his body is **a** slab of granite on top of mine.

“I promise you’ll squirm more from pleasure than from pain,” he murmurs against my skin. “Stop being stubborn and enjoy.”

I’m about to scream something when his teeth sink into me.

I scream like **a** madwoman—and then I wake up.

It **was** a dream.

The sheets are a complete mess tangled between my legs, and it takes me a while to free myself from them. My nightgown clings to my sweaty back, and the **hair** on my temples seems to have met the same fate. I light a candle and approach the dressing table, which reflects my worn-**out** appearance. I’m covered in sweat everywhere, and my skin has taken on **a** yellowish hue.

I can’t help stretching my neck to check for any marks, something **to prove it wasn’t a** dream, but my skin is smooth and unbroken. I run my fingers over it, thankful that everything remains intact. **The** idea of being bitten by Cassian terrifies me—the warnings that his thirst is utterly insatiable

1/2

12:19 PM

1. O.

echo in my mind all too frequently.

+15

The sun has **yet** to rise, and though I try to sleep again, the nightmare seems to replay every time I close my eyes. I recall every second, every word, every gesture. I can still feel his breath brushing my skin, the coldness of his body against mine, the sharp edge of his fangs.

I toss and turn in bed until dawn arrives. Then I begin to clean myself up as best I can, and I don't know if they making at the vanity, but Clarissa and Naida appear to help me.

Soon after, I leave my room with the intention of visiting the library, certain that Cassian is currently

*in*

sense the mess I'm

his chambers, likely

I go down the main stairs and look for **the** hidden ones behind them that spiral down to a deserted, dusty, forgotten library. In my first days, I explored the castle looking for secret spots and remote places, and I ended up finding this staircase down to the library. There are others scattered throughout the **castle**, **as** much to my surprise—Cassian has a fondness for books. I don't know if he's an avid reader him look smarter and more sophisticated.

Or

simply thinks they make

Upon entering, the air was heavy with the smell of old books and dust, welcoming me. I wander through the shelves might explain more about what Cassian told me during dinner. Reading the book from my nightstand is not something I'm

I run my fingers along the spines until I stop at one with golden script. The Image of the Species.

looking for

Tor right

that

now.

I hide away in what has become my reading nook: the ledge of a boarded-up window with no view outside. wooden table where a candelabrum rests. I'm surprised someone bothers to come down here every day to light the candles.

*I*

Sir

on

it and glance

mall

round

I bring the flames **closer** so I can **see** and open the book.

a

"Vampires are considered the dominant **species** and **see** the rest of the creatures **as** inferior beings, lowest among them the humans, whom *they* use **as** a food source without hesitation. Ruled by the night, shapeshifters and vampires are natural rivals. Throughout the centuries, there have been numerous wars between the two sides with considerable losses, the last being the most devastating for the shapeshifters. The Draven, supported by the other ruling houses, managed to mobilize all their kind to wipe out most of the shapeshifter population and condemned the few survivors to live on the small island of Wasteland, hostile to all life forms. These events have only worsened tensions between the factions, and it's unknown how many more decades this fragile truce can last. The lack of a common enemy for the vampire race may have triggered the many internal disputes that have clearly divided them into **two** sides: the Diluted and the Pure. The former have taken action, forming small rebel groups in the Southern territories, while the **rest** continue to live under the constant scorn of the Pure."

My

## Sold to the Night Lord



I run my fingers across the lines, looking for a paragraph that talks about creatures other than vampires and their clear rivals, the shapeshifters. I've never heard of them, much less seen one, though they must be intimidating if they're enemies of the vampires—whose presence alone already chills my blood.

Suddenly, I feel the presence **of** someone else in the library. Without closing the book, I look to my right, scanning the aisles formed by the shelves.

"Is someone there?"

The only reply I **receive is** silence.

I decide to continue reading. I run my finger down the lines, looking for what I want to read today.

"Here." I smile in satisfaction.

"... Among the long list **of species**, we find fairies, with their countless subspecies, and although their appearance may be charming and friendly, they should not be underestimated. They **are** deceiving in looks, and their mastery of natural elements makes them dangerous. In the water, we find mermaids and tritons. Their beauty is hypnotic, and their yearning to walk on land makes them harbor resentment toward the rest of the beings, so they use every opportunity to drag them to the ocean depths. Few survivors are known to have escaped an attack by these creatures..."

skip a few lines.

"Witches have been nearly annihilated; few remain among us. Mainly human in appearance, they stand out for their mastery of magical arts and their long life expectancy. A distinction is made between white magic and black magic witches, although both are scarce nowadays and extremely hard to spot. The last witch was seen two hundred and sixty-four years ago."

Again, that feeling of being watched. I close the book, clearly annoyed. I let out a loud sigh of frustration as proof. I almost expect to feel the icy chill that accompanies Cassian's presence in my mind or to hear him start rambling inside it.

I set the book down on the ledge and stand, ready to rid myself of that feeling. I walk between the shelves, searching for the culprit, but I find only emptiness and dust motes dancing through the air.

I return to my nook and sit, legs crossed. The candle has burned down quite a bit, and I'm about to move it closer when I think I see something in the flame. I blink several times, thinking I've gone mad. It's impossible that I'm seeing tiny eyes.

I bring the flame close to my **face**, **well** aware I might **set** my hair on fire. I squint, not believing what I **see**.

“This can’t be,” **I say**, trying **to** convince myself.

From the flame begins to emerge **a** small body with yellowish skin, hair **as**

red **as** blood, and fire burning in her eyes. Her skin resembles that of a reptile, with small **scales scattered across** her body, and I’d almost dare say the strange addition of the afternoon is shaped like a woman.

“Not eating breakfast this morning is making me see things,” I mutter. “Damn hallucinations.”

“Think I’m a hallucination if that makes you **feel** better.”

The **creature** walks on her toes, arms extended to the sides **as if** she’s balancing. She’s about the size of a finger and absolutely adorable.

I

“This can’t be **real**.”

“Said the girl reading **a** book about supernatural creatures.”

Her voice is high-pitched but not annoying. She **speaks** with **a** teasing tone.

“What the hell **are** you?”

I pull my knees **up** to my chest as far as I can.

“Don’t I appear in that book?”

She sounds annoyed. She starts hopping on the candelabrum, lands on my lap, and climbs onto my knee to **peek** at the pages of the old book. I **feel** heat where her feet touch the fabric.

“No, there’s nothing about you, she huffs. “You should find a better book on fairies.”

“So you’re a fairy?”

“Well, I’d **say** I’m something more wonderful, impressive, and majestic.” The creature spins in a ridiculous little dance. “I’m a salamander.”

“A salamander?”

She sighs deeply, like she's had this conversation **before** and is **clearly** annoyed to be **repeating** it. The flames in her **eyes intensify**.

12:19 PM

**“Yes, a salamander.** A spirit of fire, though many people consider us fairies.” Suddenly, she spreads tiny wings in shades of red and orange and begins fluttering around me. “And I was already bored of watching you read for hours. You come here every day.”

“I like this place,” I simply say.

“It’s quiet.” She gives something like a shrug. “Too quiet for my taste.”

I frown. I bend slightly toward this strange creature.

“And why are you still here?” I ask. “You have wings—you could go anywhere. Not like me. I can’t escape this place.”

“That’s a story too personal for you to hear just yet.” A laugh, like the squeak of a mouse, escapes her lips. “Salamanders aren’t easy beings—we don’t like humans very much.”

I narrow my **eyes**.

“Then why are you talking to me?”

**“As I said, I was** bored.” She waves a hand dismissively. “No one’s come down here in a long time. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to my flame. I’m getting a little cold.”

The comment makes me smile. Her whole body looks like a flame, and she says she’s cold—it’s at least comical. With little hops and flutters, I **see** her return to the candle flame. Her fiery red hair swirls around her, defying gravity.

“Can I know your name?”

“My name?” Her tiny fingers touch the flame. “Is it important?”

“I’d like to know what to call you. I’m Elara.”

“Oh, I know who you **are**, Elara. The one the whispers of the wind call ‘the Ruby Queen.’”

I click my tongue, a bit annoyed by that name that seems to have followed me since I arrived here. It’s a complete joke to call a queen someone who barely had enough to eat.

“Well, I’m Ankhiale.” I open my mouth to try to say her name, but she cuts me off before I even try. “Better call me Ank.”

## Sold to the Night Lord

+15.

And just like that, as quickly as she appeared, she vanishes. The candle flame flickers, and no matter how close I bring it to my face, I can no longer see Ank anywhere. It’s as if she became one with the fire, and thinking about it, that would make perfect sense. After all, she said she was a spirit of fire.

I try to return to my reading with no **success**. My eyes keep darting from the pages to the flame, hoping to see her again, hopping or fluttering back onto my lap.

Possibly **several** hours **pass**—too many—and my eyes only jump from one word to another. Witch, banshee, death, ghost. That last

them—unnerves me.

one grabs my attention a bit more, as the revelation that ghosts do indeed **exist**—and aren’t just made-up Parents tell their children to scare

Who knows if I wasn’t right all those times I thought I was seeing things that weren’t there?

My stomach knots just thinking about it.

Afer this, being alone in the library no longer fel s relating to head back to my room. Heave the book on the splintered tab spiral stairs, lifting the hem of my skirt a bit. This place definitely needs a good cleaning.

P

table and climb the

I’m surprised when I reach the entrance hall and see the doors wide open. Drystan, Cassian’s right-hand man, is there apparently giving orders to the guards inside the castle, who avoid stepping into the sunlight. My presence draws no attention from anyone. I’m about and disappear into my room when I hear footsteps.

to *climb* the *main* stairs

Cassian, clad in a black coat down to his knees with beautiful silver embroidery on the fabric and gleaming leather boots, comes down the stairs calmly. He looks straight ahead and doesn’t seem to notice me until he reaches the last step. He gives me nothing more

than a glance before continuing to walk. Just a few meters behind him, I see Mavka descending, wearing a lovely new dress, her chestnut hair cascading i her back, and a new parasol in her hands.

waves down

No doubt the marks from our scuffle have been covered with makeup, and she passes by me giving no more attention than Cassian did

It's clear how insignificant I am to them.

I climb the stairs quickly, unable to resist glancing at Cassian bathed in daylight. It's quite an experience to see him during the day; this I'd only seen him by candlelight, and the truth is, the sunlight makes him look like a porcelain figure. So perfect, so pale,

But all of that is a lie. Cassian is not perfect or delicate. He is a soulless monster, ruthless and without scruples.

so delicate

**Weel**

Inside my room, Clarissa and Naida are waiting for me, as if they knew I needed some distraction.

"You're pale, girl."

"I think I'm suffering from an overload of information."

I fall onto the bed with a big sigh.

"Of course, so many books..." murmurs Naida.

I look at them more closely and **realize they're** in the middle of a card game.

"Did you know that ghosts exist?"

They both nod at the same time.

"And fairies?"

"Of course," confirms Naida.

"Am I the only one who **was** unaware of all this?"

ww

Clarissa drops her entire hand of cards on the little **tea** table **near** the balcony, which, seven days after my arrival, is still tightly shut. Naida lets out a victorious cheer.

“I think **you** haven’t had much time to bother thinking about your surroundings,” Clarissa begins. “Being born knowing your fate is sealed, that you’ll end up becoming what you **are** now, would kill anyone’s curiosity.”

“Of course, you’ve spent your entire eighteen years thinking about this moment,” adds Naida. “**It’s** normal you didn’t notice everything around you.”

“Do other people know about it?”

“I’d **say** many suspect it and quite **a few** know. Would it really be so strange for there to be other beings besides vampires? To me, it would be stupid

to think otherwise.”

“**I’ve** never seen anything the books mention,” I protest.

**12:19 PM**

“Well, it’s not like they want to draw much attention either, and you certainly weren’t using the right perspective.”

“The right perspective?”

– Es you weren’t really looking. You didn’t expect to see something like that, so you simply

Resigned to accept that this new world I’ve been born into **is far**

more complex than I imagined, I fall back for what feels like hours. Clarissa and Naida whisper about things that seem irrelevant *to* me. A new cook, shade of lipstick that would go well with my skin tone...

g attention,” Clarissa clarifies..

onto

the

+15

the “mattress. I stare at the ceiling fabrics for the next dresses, the latest

“Where did Cassian go?” I **ask**.

A clear image of his **face** bathed in sunlight flashes through my mind, and I blink rapidly to push away.

“When did you **see** him?”

“On my way back here. He was with Mavka and looked like he was about to leave.”

“Surely to one of those wild parties.” She waves her hand. “You shouldn’t envy Miss Mavka one bit. Like I said, they’re wild parties, is quite prone to chaos and **excess**. Mavka will probably need a few days to recover.”

“What happens at those parties?” my curious streak **asks**.

“Everything, little creature, everything.” The small wrinkles at the corners of Clarissa’s eyes deepen a bit as she looks ever witness, things that corrupt the soul.”

Mr. Cassian

at

gs *no*

lady should

executor, covered

My imagination runs wild, conjuring hundreds of scenes, each worse than the last. Grotesque, merciless acts with Cascian as the in blood, his fangs sunk into Mavka’s torn neck. Even if she’s not someone I like, I wouldn’t wish that kind of fate on anyone, such a horrific end

“What are you imagining now?” Clarissa pinches my cheek. “You’ve gone nearly gray.”

“I have **a** bit of a twisted imagination.”

She laughs heartily.

“Since Mr. Cassian has gone out, I doubt he’ll return for dinner. I could bring yours up here if you want.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’ll eat downstairs, alone. I’d like to enjoy the place now that he won’t be around.”

“As you wish.”

Hours later, seated at the grand hall’s table, with the meal waiting to be devoured, I feel such peace that it’s almost strange. I’m so used to his feline gaze watching every move I make, threatening to snap my neck at the slightest misstep, that now that the seat across from me is empty, I feel odd. Still, I intend to enjoy dinner. I eat in silence, savoring each bite and occasionally observing the room I’ve entered for seven nights and haven’t bothered to admire much.

Like the rest of the castle, the room exudes power, elegance, and extravagance. It’s painted in cream tones, with expensive tapestries everywhere, sculptures of women with bare torsos, paintings on the walls, and solid gold sconces with candles bearing beautiful designs.

I finish dinner and, on my way back, I see a woman in the corridor with a cascade of red curls falling down her back.

She stops mid-step to glance back. Narkissa, the one responsible for the new feeders, gives me a look I can’t interpret.

We stare **at** each other for a bit too long before she breaks eye contact and walks on.

That **was** strange.

In my room, I don’t find Clarissa or Naida, so I undress on my own and finally slip into my nightgown. I consider reading that book on my nightstand but decided against it. I try to fall asleep, but I toss and turn, haunted by the nightmare from the previous night.

Here, in the privacy of the room, with only the candle’s flame for company, I begin to relive the scene. His body on top of mine, his fangs gleaming white, his eyes swallowed by black pupils, the hunter’s glint in his gaze.

I scold myself again and squeeze my **eyes** shut. I count mentally, and when nothing works, I try to relax my mind. Eventually, I do fall asleep, but not for long. A scream, high-pitched and feminine, shatters the night’s calm.

I wake up, terrified and with my heart racing. I clutch the blankets tightly and don’t dare set a foot out of bed. Another scream, far worse than the first, shakes me to my core. It sounds like pure agony, like the wails of an animal, like the creaking **of a** door, like something breaking.

And speaking of doors, Clarissa and Naida burst into **the** room **in** their respective nightgowns. Seeing the panic on my face, they rush to my side and run soothing hands



down my arms. I don't have time to ask why they're here or if watching over me is one of their duties, because there's another question at the tip of my tongue that begs to be answered.

"Don't listen," Clarissa murmurs into my hair. "**It'll** pass quickly."

2/3

12:19 PM

"What's happening?" My voice trembles.

Naida pulls me into her arms and rests my head on her chest.

"Don't worry, it'll be over soon."

Another scream. So loud and gut-wrenching that all three of us flinch.

"It never gets easier," Clarissa mutters. "It's horrible."

"What's going on?" I try to pull away from their arms. "Tell me something."

The tremble in my fingers **gives** me away, and they both look at me with compassionate eyes. I return a look filled with fear, reproach, and emotions **I** can't even name. Outside this room, someone is being torn apart in pain at the very least. Those screams aren't normal.

"Stop listening."

"Stop listening to what?"

Clarissa takes a breath before continuing.

"Girl." Her hand covers mine, trembling and cold. "It's **never** wise to anger Mr. Cassian. This is only one of the many atrocities his power." A cold **sweat** runs down my spine. "What you're hearing... **is** the sound of a person being completely broken."

AD

## Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 19

Elara

I'd be lying if I said that after the screams, sleep came to me as if nothing had happened. The truth is that both Clarissa and Naida fell asleep on either side of me, and I stayed there with my **eyes** wide open like an owl. Almost afraid to blink, thinking that millisecond might be enough for Cassian to appear at the foot of my bed.

+15

That's why today I'm up much earlier than usual. **It's** just dawn, and I'm already in the gardens, wandering from one side to the other, nervous, restless. It's no surprise that Drystan is about ten steps behind me, always watchful. A part of the gardens **is** completely off-limits to feeders, just like the **west** wing of the castle. I can't help but walk very close to the boundaries, trying to catch a glimpse of something. There are large stone statues where vegetation has grown over the years. One of them catches my attention—it's incredibly beautiful and sinister at the same time. A woman with parted thighs in a sensual pose, straddling a stone seat. She has generous breasts, scandalous curves, and two twisted horns protruding from her head.

"You shouldn't get **so** close," warns Drystan's voice. "If your scent reaches Cassian's gardens, he'll skin us both alive."

They must be pretty close for him to call him by name; here everyone calls him "**sir**," always with a voice tinged with fear. Though it's hard for me to imagine Drystan feeling fear. His body is slender like Cassian's, with long limbs and absolute paleness. But it's the black of his eyes that makes you think twice before contradicting him. They look like night itself, the rawest void.

I'm just looking," I **say** weakly. "Seems like you all love having women unclothed, even in the gardens."

I tilt my head toward the large stone statue. I think I see the shadow of a smile curve his lips, but it vanishes in less than a second. With his perfect posture and hands behind his back, he shakes his head, amused.

"She's not just a naked woman. She's our creator, and the one we worship. Mother among mothers. Show more respect—some would punish you for even the slightest offense."

I remember what I read in the book that rests on my nightstand.

"Then that statue represents Lilith," I venture.

"That's right," he **says** proudly. "The first woman."

I don't dare mention what Lea once told me she read in one of those old books everyone thought lost. She said it almost sounded like a fairy tale, and in it they spoke of the first woman, someone named Eve.

“Do you have powers too?”

“Besides my senses and strength?” I nod. “No, I don’t have gifts. Not all vampires do. They usually manifest in the most powerful ones, especially if they belong to an original family.”

“And how did you end up being his right hand?”

“My parents were advisors to his. We’ve known each other since we were young.”

“You still seem young to me.”

“You’d be surprised at my age.”

We fall silent and I resume walking, with him watching my every move. I end up beneath the same tree as always, next to the fountain where birds come to drink. I take the chance to bathe in the sun **as** much as I can, pleased with how its rays kiss my skin. If Drystan is bored, he doesn’t say anything. He stays there with his arms crossed behind his back, observing the surroundings. I don’t know how much time passes—I’m sure it’s at least a couple of hours—until I hear a small gasp of surprise.

I turn immediately and see how Drystan’s pose has shifted into an even more rigid one.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“I think it’s best **we** go back inside.”

“So soon?”

”

My shoulders slump in disappointment. The idea of going back inside does not appeal to me in the slightest. The days feel terribly dull, and now that I’ve heard the screams Cassian can cause, I don’t feel safe. Not **even** in my favorite corner of the library.

“You’re better off in your room today, trust me.” He steps **aside** to clear my path. “I don’t think Cassian’s in the best mood today.”

“So what I’ve seen so far... **is** Cassian on a good day?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see him stifle a small smile.

12:19 PM

“You could say that.”

“Very reassuring,” I mutter.

(15)

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We enter the castle and I immediately feel the temperature change. Outside, the sun had warmed me, but in here it’s freezing. My skin prickles and I hug myself as I climb the stairs to my room. I **sense** more activity than usual. Halfway there, we pass a small group of feeders whispering and looking at me boldly **as** I pass by. I don’t lower my gaze, even though my nerves are killing me.

Before entering the room. I turn to look at Drystan, who clearly won’t move until he sees me go in. He’s beautiful, in

everything about him radiates hardness, though his facial features are fine and delicate.

“I didn’t thank you for stepping in during the argument with Mavka.”

He shows no emotion.

“There’s no need to thank me.” He starts to back away. “I did it for Cassian.”

“For Cassian?”

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He doesn’t answer again. He simply turns and disappears down the long hallway, ignoring the looks the little group of girls shoot his way. Before they can shift their attention back to me, I shut the door behind me. I pace back and forth, casting fleeting glances at the little bell by my bed. Still silent. The book on my nightstand doesn’t seem like much of a distraction right now either. The last thing I want is to read about Cassian’s greatness and that of his kind. I walk over to the balcony, whose glass doors are still locked tight. I pointlessly *try* to turn the handle. Locked. I can

only settle for seeing a bit of the gardens through the glass.

There’s a knock at the door.

I instinctively think it must be Clarissa and Naida, coming to check on me or simply to chat while playing cards. I’m extremely surprised when the faces I see aren’t familiar. The feeders from the hallway are at my door, with innocent eyes and smiles that, to me, seem far too fake.

“Can I help you?” I ask politely.

“We were wondering if you’d like to come have tea with us,” says one of them.

“Tea?”

“We usually gather in the afternoons to chat.” She smiles even wider. “Being here can be really boring and lonely.”

She doesn’t need to tell me that. I know very well how boring and lonely it can be here. I size them up for a moment. One has a heart-shaped face, thick golden curls framing her cheeks, and very red lips. My mother would definitely say she looks like a doll. Beside her is a girl with olive-toned skin, almond-shaped hazel eyes, and straight hair resting on her shoulders. Beautiful, but in a different way than her companion.

“You’ve been here more than a week and we’ve barely spoken to you,” she insists. “We’re really curious to get to know you.”

“If that’s the reason, don’t worry. There’s not much to know.”

“It’ll be fun.” Her hand grabs mine with total confidence. “I think things started off badly because of Mavka. The rest of us aren’t like her.”

I glance at them again and, honestly, I highly doubt what she says is true. There’s something in their gaze I don’t like. Still, my mother always said appearances can be deceiving, and ignoring my instinct completely, I accept.

“Give me a second.”

They nod while I shut the door in their **faces** with no manners whatsoever. I rush to the vanity where I clumsily try to cover my dark circles with powder. I can’t even come close to improving my appearance like Naida would with her miraculous hands. When I finish, I feel like slapping myself for seeking approval from strangers.

I return to the door and find them just **as** I left them. The fake smile hasn’t left their faces.

“Come on, follow us.”

## Sold to the Night Lord

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I walk two steps behind them, and **as** we go, I realize their rooms must be in a completely different hallway than mine. I thought we were all in the same one, but apparently I was

wrong—and as we go further, I confirm it. This hallway of the castle has much more life and movement than mine. Along the **way**, I see several double doors wide open where girls are chatting. They look up when they see me and fall silent until I'm out of earshot. And so it goes, door after door, until we reach one in particular.

This room **is very** similar to mine. Same furniture, same style, except for the colors, which here are more vivid and loud. Near the balcony, which is just **as** shut as mine, there's a **tea** table filled with every imaginable delicacy. Around it are two more girls who look at me with curious expressions.

Girls, this **is** Elara," the girl with golden hair introduces me. "You know, the latest addition."

"Nice to meet you." I open and close my **fists**, nervous.

"Oh, how careless of me." She brings a hand to her forehead, giving herself a little slap. "I'm Dorothy."

I don't bother remembering her name. My mind has already dubbed her Goldilocks. The others introduce themselves, though I don't register any of their names. Quickly, each one takes a **seat** around the table. It's rather uncomfortable. Goldilocks sits to my left.

"Well, now we're all here," she says. "Do you take milk in your tea?"

No milk, thank you."

With perfect movements, she fills my cup without ever letting go of her smile.

"Where did you live before coming here?" asks the girl who came with Goldilocks, before taking a sip of her tea.

"Ravag."

"Is that one of the port towns? I've heard it's almost a replica of the Southern Territories."

"**Yes**, it's a port town and, honestly, I have no idea if it resembles the Southern Territories. I don't know what they're like and I've never been."

"To get there, we'd have to **cross** the Twisted Forest," notes Goldilocks as she serves me pastries on a plate. "And now that we belong to Cassian, we'll never set foot on those lands!"

I'm astonished by how easily the words leave her mouth. She seems to have fully accepted that we're mere possessions. I force myself not to say anything, clenching my teeth so hard I fear I'll break them.

“No doubt, none of you would want to cross the Twisted Forest,” **asserts** one of the girls, turning in her seat to look directly at me. “My village is almost at the border, and at night, the sounds we heard were chilling. And when a group of men dared to cross it...”

The ending is clear to us all. It ends in death.

“Let’s talk about less frightening things,” suggests Goldilocks. “I heard that **at** the auction, Cassian paid a scandalous amount for you.”

In the end, every conversation leads to the same place. **Yes**, he indeed paid much more than expected, but I thought this wouldn’t be the first time a man like him splurged. As he said, when you have so much, what’s the harm in wasting a little? His wealth won’t be much diminished.

“Rumor has it it’s because of your supposed chastity,” says one of them with narrowed eyes.

“There’s nothing supposed about it. I am chaste,” I say, annoyed at such a thing being questioned. “And I don’t think that’s the reason. I can’t be the only one in the same situation.”

“Oh, of course not. I am, and so are all of us here.” She lets out a giggle. “I **was** just trying to rile you up.”

“I’ve heard Cassian likes to be our first,” says another, speaking for the first time.

And what a **thing** to say. Just imagining myself in that situation drains the color from my face. That he would be the first and only—especially since I’ll never leave his side unless I die first—is devastating.

“Mavka said he did it with her,” Goldilocks murmurs, “and that they repeat it every night.”

Everyone’s cheeks turn scarlet.

“Putting that aside. Clearly, there’s something special about you. Maybe your scent **is** delicious.”

“She’s right, maybe that’s it.”

They move on to other things that honestly don’t interest me much, though I’m grateful not to be the main topic anymore. They **talk** about a new herbal tea they’re being made to drink to enrich their blood and keep them strong; apparently, **every** two days one of them **gives** a significant

amount of blood. They've **never been** touched by Cassian, and that reassures me a little—maybe his aversion to humans **is** actually convenient.

**12:19 PM**

“The only one who’s been touched by those attractive lips is Mavka...”

“Do you envy her?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

I can’t believe it.

“We’re doomed to stay here as long **as** we live, so why not hope for **a** little affection?”

“What are you saying? You can’t be serious!”

The blood roars in my **ears**, drowning out everything around me. I can’t believe this—have they all been brainwashed? Mavka’s attitude was enough, but apparently, she’s not an isolated **case**. They all long for something from Cassian.

“Let it go, Elara. Don’t try to understand it,” whispers the girl beside me.

After this, **a** silence as thick **as** syrup descends. We all shift uncomfortably in our seats, sneaking sidelong glances at break the silence, and it won’t be me.

“What do you think happened to Mavka?”

I lift my eyes from my lap, curious.

What happened to her?”

“Those screams could only be...”

“Could only be what?” I ask.

“Cassian’s power,” **says** one. “They **say** he can dig into your mind and destroy it.”

I each other. Someone has to

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“What does that mean?”



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They look at each other, paler than before. All fall silent, not uttering another word. The sound of hurried footsteps approaches the room—we all turn, and I see Naida’s **face** in the doorway. Her breathing is fast, and a soft flush colors her cheeks.

“Miss Elara, you must come with me.”

I rise from my **seat** silently, asking no questions. I excuse myself with a slight bow and mumble a quiet thank you for the invitation. Once outside, I have to walk quickly to match Naida’s pace.

“What’s going on?”

“Don’t talk. Just walk.”

**2/2**