

Sold to the Night Lord

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Chapter 171

Elara

Before reaching my true destination, I run into Silas. His appearance is nothing like the brother I've known all my life. He looks tired and sad, with two dark bags under his eyes, dull blonde hair, and thinner cheeks. A sharp pang hits my chest, and I taste the guilt in my mouth. At first, neither of us knows how to start the conversation, but eventually, I take the first step.

"How are you?"

"Maybe I should be asking you that. I'm not the one who came back from the dead."

"Well, technically, I wasn't dead."

I draw a small smile, hoping to lighten the mood.

He responds by mimicking my smile with a small one that almost reaches his eyes.

"Have you been comfortable here?"

"Much to my regret, Cassian knows how to be a good host." He ruffles his hair with his hand, as if embarrassed by something. "I've been fine."

"Things are going to be a bit weird now, right?" I bite my lower lip. "Even though we're not blood siblings, I..."

"You don't have to say it. My feelings for you haven't changed."

I nod.

"I'm glad to hear that, because mine haven't either. For me, Abigail, Mom, Dad..."

"I know."

I swallow the lump in my throat before I turn into a tearful mess in the hallway and make this moment even stranger than it already seems.

"I need to talk to Evanora, but if you want, we can chat later."

“Whenever you want.”

I continue down the hall, not without glancing over my shoulder to check if Silas is still behind me. In the depths of my heart, I feel like I’ve lost him too. A part of us died that day; maybe our ability to be siblings was one of them, and no matter how hard we try, we’ll never be those

two kids again.

Evanora’s room is still in the same hallway I remember, and I know it because Drystan is standing in front of it, debating whether to knock or

not.

I clear my throat to announce my presence, and he startles, looking at me, surprised.

“Am I interrupting?” I ask..

“Not at all, I was just leaving.”

He steps away from the door and smiles faintly as he walks past me. I give him a curious glance, sure that the vampire had been standing there, gathering the courage to do something. I close the distance and knock, waiting for a response that doesn’t take long to come. I open the door and peek my head inside.

“Am I catching you at a good time?”

Evanora is sitting in front of the balcony of her bedroom, wearing a gray dress that accentuates her chest, and the albino snake is playing with her hands, winding around her arms and hissing at the air.

“As good as any other time, you wouldn’t believe how bored I am sitting here every day.”

I step inside and close the door behind me.

“Lucky for you, I come bearing an adventure proposal.”

“I don’t know if your adventures are something good for me.”

For a second, I worry, but seeing her smile, I realize she’s just joking. I sit down in front of her and smooth out my dress to stretch out the

moment and think about how to say what I need to say.

“It must be a good adventure if you’re thinking so much about it.”

“I’ve been thinking... You know that supposedly I can conceive Purebloods, and if that gets out, they’ll try to force me to do it.” I raise my

gaze to lock with hers, which reflects concern. “I don’t want to be used.”

“Cassian wouldn’t let that happen.” She extends her hand, free of the snake, to hold mine. “That man is crazy about you.”

“I know.” I smile as if it pains me. “That’s the problem. I know he’d do anything to keep me safe, even putting himself in danger. I’ve lost

important people because of me; I don’t want to lose him.”

“And what else is left, Elara? You can’t be a secret forever, that’s no life.”

“What if I couldn’t have children?”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Make it so I can’t have them, do whatever you have to do so that no being can be born from me, make life unable to take root inside my

body.”

I grab her hand more tightly, desperate. She pulls back in her seat, as if I’d just punched her in the gut. She shakes her head and looks at me

as if I have two heads.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Is it better for me to be raped for their purposes?”

Her face wrinkles when she hears the word.

“Would you give up what the future could offer you?” she asks with a soothing tone.

“Wouldn’t you like to have a family with him, with

Cassian?”

“I don’t know the future or what it might hold, but I do know Cassian, and that’s what I don’t want to lose.” I place my hand on my belly. “What could be doesn’t matter if Cassian goes to war with his own.”

She looks at where my hand rests, and stays silent for so long that I start to fidget uncomfortably in my seat. I don’t interrupt, afraid that anything I say could convince her

not to help me with this. I watch her whiter-than-ever hair under the sunlight and the pale scars around her

mouth, exposed in the intimacy of her room.

“It will be painful,” she says. “And we’ll need to go to the camp; I can’t do it. I don’t have the necessary knowledge; I could kill you.”

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don’t want **him** to know anything about this, plus I don’t think he’ll let me leave the castle with everything that’s going on. Maybe Drystan...”

“What does Drystan have to do with this?”

I don’t miss the hint of irritation in her voice when she says his name. The question I want to ask is at the tip of my tongue. I’m curious to know what has both of them moving so carefully around each other.

“Maybe he could come with us. The Twisted Forest isn’t a place for just the two of **us**.”

“It won’t be necessary.” Seeing my confused face, she adds: “Naja has **a** portal, I’ll contact her and get everything we need to open it on this

side.”

“When?”

“I’ll need a few days to gather everything.” She sighs. “**In** case you haven’t noticed, Cassian doesn’t trust me much. It’ll take me **a** while to gather what’s needed. In the meantime, act normal. The last thing we need is for him to suspect, or he’ll tie you to his bed, and I’ll lose my

head.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” I say, annoyed.

“Little Elara, you haven’t witnessed his fury this past month; I have. I assure you he’s capable of that and much more.”

“Fine.” I stand up from my seat and tap my dress nervously. “Then I’ll act normal, will this...? Will it take long?”

“If everything goes well, you’ll need to stay there for a few days to recover.”

“I guess we’ll worry about that when the time comes.”

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She smiles, not very convinced. I know I’m asking too much, that helping me could cost her Cassian’s fury when he finds out I’ve disappeared. I hope she can understand my reasons and realize that this has all been for a greater good. I’m sure the fact that I’ll never be able to have children won’t be the problem; rather, it’ll be the fact that I’ll be away from him for a few days, not knowing the reason for **my**

disappearance, that will drive him crazy.

“Thank you so much.” I place my hand on her shoulder. “I know I’m asking a lot. Again.”

She looks at my hand for a few seconds, then at my face. Her blue eyes are brighter than ever.

“I helped you because I wanted to.” She stretches the corners of her mouth, this time her smile is sincere. “And I’ll help you now because I know what it’s like to have your body used against your will.”

A bitter pill settles at the back of my throat, and I force myself to swallow it. I want to offer her my comfort, but I know she doesn’t want it, and surely doesn’t need it. Evanora is a strong woman, a survivor, and someone I admire. Her scars don’t make her weak, they enhance her fighting spirit and make her beauty strange and incomparable. I clear my throat and turn my gaze away from her face.

“Still, thank you so much. It means a lot to me.”

“

That’s what friends are for.”

I slowly slide my hand off her shoulder, leaving it by my side.

“Are you already hiding from me?”

I jump slightly when I hear Cassian’s voice inside my head.

“I guess I have to leave now,” I say quickly, heading for the door. “Let me know if you need anything.”

She nods with an amused face, as if she knows exactly why I'm in such a rush. I leave and close the door behind me, leaning against it.

"I doubt there's anywhere you can hide from me without me finding you."

I've barely taken two steps down the hall when a small draft blows my hair away from my face, and it gives me goosebumps, though the sensation doesn't last long. The warmth of another body presses against my back.

"Correct," Cassian murmurs against my neck. "You can run, but you'll never hide from me."

He wraps his arms around me and follows me down the hall, kissing my throat. I let out a laugh as I feel the tickle of his breath in such a sensitive spot. I lose track of my steps, allowing him to guide us. He corners me against one of the walls, slips his hand under my dress, and

caresses the skin of my thigh.

"Cassian... they can see us."

"I'll tear their eyes out and break their minds so they won't even remember you," he growls against my skin, marking it with his lips.

His hand gets dangerously close to the area that's begun to burn with desire for his touch. I move my hips forward, seeking him. He groans, more than satisfied with my body's reactions to a simple touch of his fingers. He traces the outline of my underwear, tempting me.

A clearing of the throat brings me back from the lustful bubble and makes me let out a small scream.

"I haven't seen anything, and I want to keep my eyes where they are," says Drystan, looking at the ceiling. "But Cassian, I think *you* should

come with me right now. There's something you need to see."

"It better be important, for your eyes' sake," he responds through clenched teeth.

"Come and judge for yourself."

Drystan gestures behind him for Cassian to follow. However, before he walks away from me, I grab his hand tightly, forcing him to look at me. He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear and smiles at me.

"I'll be back soon, little lioness."

“Can I come with you?”

He glances at Drystan, then looks back at me.

“Of course.”

He gives my hand a squeeze, and we set off. We head toward Cassian’s wing, to a room I haven’t explored yet. There are men stationed on either side of the door, and when we enter, I see more men, some with serious and worried faces. My eyes fall on one of them who, with a sweaty face, holds a chest from which thick liquid is dripping. As we get closer, I smell the blood.

Cassian gestures with his fingers for them to open the chest, and once its contents are visible to everyone, I bring my free hand to my mouth.

The image is grotesque. On a small cushion rests the severed head of a young man, his eyes lost and dull, his mouth open in an expression of pain, and his skin ashen, with purple stains around the flesh of his neck.

“It’s one of our scouts,” Drystan informs. “It doesn’t look like it’s been long since they cut his head off.”

“Where did you find him?”

“Another scout found him by his sleeping tent. Not far from here.”

“They’re close, and they want us to know,” Cassian growls.

“That’s not all.” The right-hand man rummages inside his jacket. “I had them examine everything thoroughly before showing you. This was

inside his throat.”

He extends a small yellowed piece of paper with bloodstains on it. I watch closely for every small reaction in his eyes, which go from curiosity to surprise and then to rage. He crumples the paper into a fist and laughs.

“That bastard wants to die.”

“What’s on the paper, Cassian?” I ask through our bond.

He looks at me as if for a second he forgot I’m right next to him. He extends the crumpled paper to my hand, and with trembling fingers, I

unfold it and read carefully.

The shapeshifters won't wait forever.

Don't mention anything about this note, I want to help you.

Meet me where the water is red on the next new moon.

Eleazar.

Tú dijiste:

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I blink several times, thinking I must have read it wrong, but every time I do, I see the name of the Diluido leader signing the note more clearly. I swallow, hoping to moisten my suddenly dry throat.

“What are you going to do?” Drystan gestures for everyone to leave and leave us alone. Probably the entire room has been protected against eavesdropping, as if I pay close attention, it's evident this is a war room. “It could be a trap.”

“I know.” He flexes and extends his fingers, as if needing to destroy something. “He's also shown that he switches sides easily.”

“It could be our chance to catch him and make him pay.”

“It might be.” He turns towards me for a second before moving to one of the windows and looking outside where the day is slowly starting to fall. “I'll think it over, and when I know what to do, I'll let you know so we can come up with a solid plan.”

“As you wish.”

When silence stretches and no one seems to want to break it, Drystan decides to leave, but not before throwing me a look as if begging me to **look** after his friend. I smile in response and gesture with my head to let him know he's right to leave and leave us alone. He exits quietly, only the soft click of the door marking his departure. For a while, I watch Viktor's figure, outlined by the last light of day.....

I wish I had the ability to read his mind, to dive into the chaos and help him untangle the knot of thoughts. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like that's possible, so the only thing I can do is stay by his side. His body radiates fury in waves, and I approach like an injured animal, although I know his rage will never be directed at me. I place myself next to him, brushing my arm against his, and smile so he knows I'll always be here.

“Please, don’t ask me to take you with me,” he pleads through gritted teeth.

lift my hand and pass it over his arm like a caress.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

He sighs, relieved.

“Good, because I don’t want you near him.” As if he has the ability to read my thoughts, he adds: “And it has nothing to do with jealousy or possessiveness. I don’t want you near a traitor, someone who was capable of handing you over to the enemy. I don’t care if it was for his son.”

“Does Eleazar have a son?”

“Evanora told us he went to the camp asking for refuge for the child, but apparently, they refused. You know how much they despise the opposite gender. Eleazar must’ve made some kind of deal with the shapeshifters. Desperation makes people stupid.”

“Refuge from what?”

He stops looking out the window to focus his attention on me. He wraps an arm protectively over my shoulders and pulls me closer.

“From us, from me, from the world. We’re in a hostile world; no one is safe, especially not children.”

“Does he think you’d hurt his son?” I ask, alarmed.

A bitter laugh escapes his lips.

“Darling, I’m a monster. Of course, he thinks I’d go after his son.”

“You wouldn’t hurt an innocent child,” I reply.

His face relaxes, and his gaze softens in such a way that even the blue in his eyes seems to clear, turning into the color of a clear sky. I think! could catalog hundreds of different shades of his eyes and link them to an emotion or moment. He runs his free hand over my cheek, brushing my skin with his knuckles. I press myself even closer to him, longing to be so close that it hurts.

“You’re the only one who believes I can be good,” he confesses. “And you don’t know how much it hurts to disappoint you.”

I know what his words mean, and yet I’m not willing to believe it or be deceived by his mouth. I know there’s a good part of Viktor, *no* matter how stupid it may seem to think so.

It sounds like a cliché, but I know it's there. I cover the hand that's wandering across my face with mine.

Took over his shoulder, noticing all the scattered maps, the little figurines here and there, the letters piled up under a gargoyle-shaped

paperweight, ink stains, scattered feathers, strategy books...

"We're in quite a mess, aren't we?" I nibble my lower lip. "How are we going to get out of this without dying in the process?"

From his expression, I know he's asked himself the same question several times and hasn't found an answer. We're surrounded, we have fronts open in all directions. The shapeshifters want to use me, the Purebloods fear me, and they don't even know the whole truth. I fear what the fear of the unknown could lead them to do. The only thing I'm sure of is that I'll do everything possible not to be used by any of them.

"Don't worry about anything," he says. "You've been through too much, and I'm not going to let this harm you any further. For now, I'll see what the traitor Eleazar wants."

"So, the decision is made. You'll meet with him?"

"For better or for worse, I think it's the first step I have to take. He might give us valuable information, or it could be a trap. In that case, I'll be ready to catch him. He won't escape twice."

"What will you do with him?"

"Darling, don't ask questions to which you already know the answer."

I stay silent, unable to comprehend why part of me feels bitter thinking about the possible death of the Diluido. He used me, traded me to the enemy. I should hate him. Viktor sees the change in my expression and shifts his position, wrapping his arms around me and putting us face

to face.

"Everyone is responsible for their actions, Elara. He doesn't deserve your concern." Reluctantly, I nod and force myself to stop thinking. "There's something I've been wondering."

"What's that?"

"Truth is, I was hoping you'd tell me, but curiosity is killing me." For a moment, he avoids my gaze as if he's embarrassed. "What did Ciro

say?"

A malicious smile wants to curve my lips, but I try to keep my face as innocent as possible, enjoying his apparent discomfort.

"When?"

"You know when," he answers, frowning.

I stand on tiptoe, leaning close to his ear and making sure to tickle him with the brush of my lips. His chest puffs out against mine.

"He told me he would never be afraid of me. He apologized for pushing me away from you, thinking he was freeing me when he was really causing me pain. He asked me to bend and break the bars of my cage."

"And does that cage have a name? Is it me?" he whispers.

"You're not my cage; you're the impulse to fly." I wrap my arms around his neck and caress the back of his neck, listening to the soft purr that escapes his lips. "My cage was myself."

"And have you broken the cage?"

"I'm working on it." He laughs tenderly against my neck. "What do you think, should we have dinner and then go to bed?"

"We could also go to bed and then have dinner..." He gives me one of his wicked looks. "I have to make sure I memorize your body well before I leave, so I can visualize it perfectly when I..."

"Don't finish that sentence."

"Don't you want to know how many times I've had to visualize you in my mind when I was alone? Even when I thought I hated you, when others were in my sheets, when I refused to think about you, you snuck in without permission."

"Well, I'm really sorry for those women. I don't think there's anything worse than sleeping with a man who's thinking about someone else."

His wicked smile widens as he narrows his eyes.

"You're jealous, Miss Voss."

"I'm not..."

I don't have time to finish the sentence before he grabs me in his hands and throws me over his shoulder. I make a feigned attempt to straighten up, but the simple movement makes my whole head spin. I try to complain, yell at him, though my laugh soon joins the mix. As he carries me toward his room under the curious stares of the staff, I can't help but think that when he returns from his meeting with Eleazar, it's possible that I won't be here.

The perfect moment for what I need to do will be when he leaves.

And there will be no turning back.

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Elara

"Miss Elara, there's a man at the door who says he's here to visit you."

I glance over my cup at Cassian, assuming he'll have some kind of objection; however, he gives me an expectant look. Apparently, he's waiting for me to say or do something. It's still hard for me to shake off old habits, those where I would remain silent and listen **to** him constantly direct things. Now, Cassian is keeping his promise, we are equals, I am the owner of myself, I am capable of saying, doing, and

undoing as I please.

I leave my breakfast on the table and flash a smile at the servant boy.

"May I know who it is?"

"It's one of the Amery heirs, Abraxas." He doesn't look me directly in the eye at any point. "Should I let him in? He says he's here for your daily appointment, miss."

I furrow my brow, while Cassian lets out a growl. I guess the moment of being mature and civilized has come to an end.

"Appointments?" he asks.

"It's not what you think," I sigh. "He's referring to our training."

"You're training?"

I smile from ear to ear at the astonishment on his face.

“Yes,” I respond with pride. “I want to be strong, I want to be able to defend myself if my powers won’t allow it. I’ve improved a lot since I

started.”

I completely omit the fact that Eleazar has also been teaching me, I don’t think it would be beneficial to have an overly jealous Cassian right now. It’s better for him to stay calm, focused on what’s ahead. Also, if his jealousy takes over, I won’t be surprised if he kills the vampire the moment *he sees* him, without waiting to extract any valuable information.

“Can I accompany you?”

“No,” I say firmly.

“Why?”

“Because you distract me!”

Slowly, his *lips* curl into a mischievous smile. He raises and lowers his eyebrows like an idiot, and I can’t help but laugh.

“So, I’m a distraction...”

“You know full well that you are.”

I give him a swat on the shoulder, only to find myself quickly trapped in his embrace. He hesitates **to** let me go, **but after a few minutes—and several** kisses later—he finally lets me leave. I follow the servant boy, who leads me to a small area **in** the garden **reserved for tea. It’s almost** comical to see Abraxas in such a delicate setting. As soon as he spots me, he heads toward me.

“That was fast, I didn’t think we’d meet this easily.” I flash him **a** sly grin. “Were you already **missing me?**”

An

More like I was worried that your extracurricular activities with Cassian were distracting you too much,” he **responds,**

mirroring **my smile** i wouldn’t want you to lose the progress you’ve made so far by fooling around in the sheets.”

I avert my gaze from his, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks. A chuckle shakes his chest as he begins walking **with** confident **steps,**

“Do you know where you’re headed?”

“If Cassian has any brain, I don’t think his gardens are much different from ours. He must have a training field nearby.”

He’s right. It’s not one of the areas I’ve paid much attention to, but many times, in the middle of the night, I’ve heard the groans and heavy breaths of men training. We wander around a bit more, the vampire listens attentively to *some* of my directions, and before **long**, we’re **both** standing in front of a space similar to the Amery villa.

He walks through it with determined steps, plants himself in the center, and gestures for me to imitate him. I position myself in **front of him**, feet shoulder-width apart. I’m expecting him to pull a wooden sword from his belt and hand it to *me*. Instead, he remains **silent**, observing me, almost studying me. I squirm uncomfortably under the weight of his gaze. I’m about to open my mouth to ask if something’s **wrong when** I see him lunge toward me. My survival instinct kicks in, and I dodge his body with a speed I’m still not used to.

Surprise is reflected on Abraxas’ face, but it quickly gives way to an amused expression.

“Interesting,” he comments.

He lunges toward me again, and it becomes clear that today, we won’t just be training with swords; our bodies will be our weapons. I dodge every one of his attempts, and each time, I feel more comfortable in my skin.

“You can’t just limit yourself to dodging my attacks. You need to find a gap in my defenses and attack, Elara. Knowing how to be defensive is crucial, but if your opponent is superior in strength, it’s only a matter of time before you wear yourself out.”

I listen carefully to his instructions, searching, as he says, for a gap in his defenses. It seems impossible to find, and I don’t think this time I’ll be lucky enough to have an animal distract him. I also don’t think that will happen in a real battle. *So*, I keep circling him, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. He tires of my attitude, grows more aggressive, and tries to land a blow. With my palm, I circle his fist and close my fingers firmly. I feel powerful, stronger than ever. His eyes meet mine as I twist his hand into an angle that would be impossible to endure. I take a step back as I release him, with a smile on my lips that’s impossible to hide.

“You’re a lot like us, Elara.”

I can see all the implications of that sentence, though I won’t deny or confirm anything, no matter how much I trust him. I don’t feel ready to reveal more, but I know Abraxas won’t tell anyone about this. Maybe I’m naive, too innocent *for* this world of cruelty, betrayals, and intrigues, but deep down, I believe he cares for me, that he feels something similar to the friendship that has begun to blossom in me.

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Maybe he's lost in his thoughts, mulling over the new discoveries about me, because I see that crack in his defenses he was talking about. The predator instinct within me takes over. I lunge at his back, wrap my arm around his neck, and place my other hand on his head, forming a grip that could snap his neck without even trying. He digs his fingers into my flesh, struggling to free himself or find room to breathe.

"Speed, strength..." he growls with effort.

"Let it go, Abraxas."

With my legs wrapped around part of his torso, I force him to bend. I won't lie, even I'm surprised by this strength I didn't know I had. I start to think that recent events, the fact that I'm here, a place I've started to consider my home, have made me shed the false skin I used to camouflage myself.

When his knees hit the ground and his face begins to take on a strange hue, I drop my arms from his neck. He takes a deep breath and it only takes a few seconds for him to compose himself. He stands again before me, his imposing posture back in place.

"I must say, I'm frankly surprised."

"Really?"

He puts on a serious face

"You're strong and fast, qualities I wouldn't have attributed to you before. Slippery, maybe." Seeing my annoyed expression, he smiles playfully and shrugs. "I'm just being honest. Your combat skills against a vampire were pretty disastrous. It's not your fault, nature made us predators and you, prey. Though it would be wrong to think that now, wouldn't it? I get the feeling you're no longer that."

"Don't make me lie, Abraxas."

"Don't trust me?"

"I trust you, but my secret is too big to make you carry it too."

My response seems to satisfy him, his shoulders relax and his features soften to appear more friendly.

"How's Ciro?" I ask to divert the attention.

“He misses you.” The green in his eyes looks at me intensely. “You’ve become a great friend to him, and even though it’s been such a short time, your absence is noticeable.”

“And you? Do you miss me?”

“Do you think I would have come to this fucking castle of horrors if not?”

“Hey! This castle is beautiful, don’t be jealous.”

“I’m sure Cassian has a dungeon where he lets loose with his sexual perversions.”

I open my mouth to retort, but someone beats me to it.

“Do you want me to show it to you?” Cassian’s voice has a playful yet sensual tone.

“You know I’ve never really been into men, but looking at you closely, I might make an exception.”

For a moment, I feel like an intruder, I clear my throat to get their attention.

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If *you* want, I’ll leave.”

Cassian rolls his eyes.

“Don’t be silly, I wouldn’t touch an Amery with a stick.” He looks at me in a way that almost consumes me. “Speaking of truths, I wouldn’t touch anyone at all.”

“Don’t let it be you,” I think.

Now it’s my friend who clears his throat to get our attention. I can’t help but blush a little.

“I see I’m the odd one out here. You’re in that destined couple stage where you can’t stop fucking like rabbits.”

“Abraxas!”

“What?” He puts on his most innocent expression while Cassian laughs. “I’m just speaking the truth. You reek of sex.”

“I think it’s better you leave.”

Now the two of them laugh at my expense. I cross my arms, pretending to be angry until Abraxas steps forward and engulfs me in a hug. At first, I play hard to get, but eventually, I uncross my arms and wrap them around his waist. I rest my head on his chest, noticing

the lack of a heartbeat. In my mind, Cassian's fingers brush the surface, making me aware that he's not too happy about our closeness. I stifle a laugh and

break free from the embrace.

"Don't forget about your friends, alright? Try to get out of that sexual dungeon of that depraved man and come train every once in a while.

It's nice."

"Don't push it, Amery. I don't like sharing his attention."

"You're like a little kid, you know?"

"I have only-child syndrome."

Cassian shrugs, as if that justifies his sometimes selfish, jealous, and spoiled behavior. Our companion rolls his eyes and, throwing one last smile my way, disappears, leaving behind only a small cloud of dirt.

"I think Abraxas suspects what I am," I say, moving closer to Cassian. "He's noticed I'm faster and stronger..."

"You can't hide what you are."

"More like I don't want to have to."

He nods in agreement.

He gives me a light tap on the shoulder, trying to dissipate the gloomy atmosphere that has settled in just seconds before.

"I saw *you* won the fight... What about a second round?"

"With you?"

"Are you afraid I'll beat you?"

"Egocentric," I scoff. "What do I get if I win?"

"I'll tell you between the sheets."

He winks at me, gets into position, and shows me that he's a lethal weapon in every way.

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Cassian

Elara's pale and flawless skin contrasts sharply with the black strands that frame her face. Her body is naked under the sheet, and although she clings tightly to it in her sleep, I can perfectly recall every curve and line that shapes her figure. I run my knuckles along her shoulder, listening to her steady and heavy breathing as I drink in her image, engraving her serene and soft face into my retinas. I hope it will be enough to endure my time away from her. I have to head to the Blood Lake, the journey will still take time even with my speed, and I'd like to be **back** as soon as possible. That's not counting potential complications, like a fight. Nothing would please me more than spilling the blood of **that** bastard rebel Diluido leader, but I don't want to delay, and his death cannot be slow.

A small sigh escapes her lips. I get closer to her, brushing my lips against the crown of her head, leaving a kiss on it. It's harder for me to walk away from her than I'd like to admit. I've never been a committed man or a generous lover. Now I find myself reduced to a poor devil who would give up the whole side of his bed just to make her a little more comfortable. If the Cassian of the past saw me, he'd laugh and point his

finger at me.

She flutters her eyelashes, slowly opens her eyes, and looks at me with that storm hidden in her eyes.

"Are you leaving?"

I soothe her by stroking her hair.

"I'll try to be back as soon as possible. I'll be so fast that you won't even have time to miss me." I place a kiss on her forehead. "Keep sleeping,

Elara."

"You're lying, because I already miss you."

She curls up, tucking one hand under her chin and the other under the pillow. She falls back to sleep quickly, and like an idiot, I stay a little longer, watching her, delaying the inevitable. The twilight will soon give way to a sunny morning, and by then, I should be on my way, not engraving Elara in my retinas so I can still see her even with my eyes closed.

I clench my fists, get up, and walk to the wardrobe, covering my nakedness with one of my shirts and a pair of pants. I avoid making the slightest noise when I close the door

behind me and walk down the hallway, quite sure that the wild scent of Elara has adhered to my skin and will accompany me throughout the day.

Drystan is waiting for me; however, the moment I make eye contact with him, he avoids my gaze, which reminds me of something Elara has been doing these past few days. She's nervous, more than usual, though I want to think it's because of the situation and not something I

haven't been informed about.

"Any news?" I ask as I approach the door and slide my hands into my leather gloves.

"The group of men we sent to scout the area has informed us that there's been no unusual movement."

I nod, though it doesn't completely relieve me. It could still be a trap. A few days ago, we decided to send some men to keep watch until we could join them. Part of me had hoped we would see Eleazar sending his people to hide and set up an ambush, at least that would give me the perfect opportunity to kill him and release all my pent-up tension. Instead, it seems that, if everything remains the same, I'll have to wait until he speaks before I kill him.

When we leave, I observe those who will accompany us. I've made sure to select some of the best men, leaving others **in charge of**

Elara's security. I won't leave a group of incompetents in charge of protecting her.

"Let's get moving, I'd like to sleep in my own bed tonight."

Drystan smiles, agreeing with me completely. I scrutinize him, narrowing my eyes and wishing I had the ability to **read his mind. I walk** past and leave all my men behind, taking the lead. I glance back at the castle one last time, knowing that **I won't see her again for a while. She's**

under the sheets, I hope she's having a pleasant dream.

I smile to myself, exhale, and begin the march. Our footsteps make a loud noise, and though running like this has **always given** me some pleasure, a way to forget, to see everything fly by around me, today it's not what I want to do most, nor what brings me the most peace. Every so often, we stop to check the surroundings and put myself, or rather me, in contact with the men already at the Blood Lake, hidden and waiting for any sign of a threat to inform me.

By the time we arrive, the sun is setting, painting the sky orange and red. We're close to the Twisted Forest, I can hear the low growls of **those** creatures born from the worst nightmares. Ancient legends say the lake got its name from the blood that flowed like

a **river** from the forest and ended here. The reality is that it's an optical illusion caused by the color of the stones and the sunset.

"It doesn't seem like anyone is here," Drystan murmurs next to me.

The rustling of the bushes makes me turn my attention fully to them. My shoulders relax when I see one of my men emerge.

"Sir, we haven't detected any suspicious movement."

"I see he hasn't arrived."

"No, sir."

I focus my attention once again on the surface of the water, briefly remembering that beneath it dwell dangerous creatures.

"He'll probably come when it's fully dark."

I sharpen my senses as I do my own reconnaissance, searching for any threat like a madman, but find nothing. I could think I'm just being paranoid, but trust is something I cannot afford. Besides, trusting the word of a traitor is absurd. All my men remain silent, listening attentively to any noise that seems out of the ordinary. *There* are small snaps of branches being stepped on by forest animals, the water breaking the surface, and the sounds coming from the night birds that have started to wake up.

I'm leaning against the bark of a tree when, after several tense hours listening carefully, I hear quick footsteps approaching. Gradually, all **my** men hear the same thing I do and take their positions. *By* the time the golden-haired vampire appears, there's not a single corner **of** this forest he could escape from, not without my men catching him.

"Well, a lot of people to welcome me," Eleazar *makes* his appearance and mimics my posture, leaning against a tree at a prudent distance. He smiles, like the bastard he is, and runs his fingers through his straw-colored hair. Despite his smile, I can see the fatigue reflected in every feature, and his cockiness can't hide the tension in his body.

"I see you're not very talkative," he adds, in response to my silence. "How's Elara?"

He knows that by just mentioning her, he'll get a reaction from me, but before I can open my mouth and issue a threat, it's Drystan who takes charge of the matter.

"Enough with the provocations, Eleazar. We're here, just as you asked. Say what you have to say."

His golden eyes *study* me a little longer, measuring me. I see his nervousness, and although a blind rage takes over me every time I **think** about his role in Elara's suffering, I force myself *to* remain visibly unaltered.

"I want to help *you*."

Sold to the Night Lord

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I burst out laughing.

"Help us?" I reply. "How? Do you want to hand us a hostage as a bargaining chip? I'm sure that will help us a lot. Not to mention that the way you set up this meeting wasn't exactly peaceful."

His face twists. He pulls his body away from the tree, standing tall in front of our eyes, trying not to show how messed up he is.

"None of this should have happened. I didn't plan for it to go this way. And regarding the note... the shapeshifters were determined to leave a message in the messenger's throat; I just made sure to replace it with a better one."

"That's the problem, you planned everything," I say with a laugh. "You're an idiot, and idiots like you shouldn't be allowed to do anything."

"I don't expect you to understand. It's clear that someone who's never cared for anyone, who has no children or family to call their own, can't understand the desperate measures you're willing to take in a moment of danger."

"You're wrong, I do have someone I call family. You were just a selfish piece of shit."

"When did you realize that? Before or after you hurt her and left her at the edge of my territory?" he retorts. "You! You're going to talk to me about selfishness? None of this would have happened if you had been willing to discuss the Diluido issues with me."

"You're the ones who caused a problem with us."

"You kill us, Cassian! Indiscriminately. Sorry if, in a moment of total desperation, I thought finding refuge for my son was the most important thing."

"At the cost of an innocent girl's life?"

“You’d understand if you had children,” he concludes.

His words are followed by a silence so heavy that even the wildlife seems to hold its breath. His chest rises and falls, agitated.

“How do you plan to help us, Eleazar?” Drystan asks, the only calm and responsible person in this encounter.

“I’ve discovered some things.” He looks away from me. “I know I made a mistake, I’m not going to ask for forgiveness, I know it won’t mean anything, but if this can help...”

“Just say it already,” I snap.

The sound of my gloves creaking as I tighten my fists alerts everyone. Just having him planted in front of me is driving me crazy, but his words... Oh, his words are making everything go red with rage. Playing the card of the son with me won’t work; just like I told Elara, I’m the monster everyone thinks I am. Without scruples.

“They’re convinced Elara is the key to destroying you, and they won’t stop until they get her. They’ve managed to make several doses with the blood they stole from her. They realized that diluting it still has the same effect. They’re preparing to make more attacks and...” He sighs. “They want to capture one of yours to torture them and extract all your secrets.”

“Our secrets won’t be exposed, no matter how hard they try.”

“You’d be surprised what a person can do under the right amount of pain and torture.” He locks his eyes back on me. “Besides, I’ve heard whispers that they believe Lilith has escaped from the Pits. They want her.”

“If Lilith had escaped, I would know.”

Because she would go looking for Elara, right? If she’s her mother, logically she would want to see her daughter, even if just for a few minst though I almost forget that Lilith expects her daughter to help us reproduce, I don’t know what kind of love she has **for her**

“It could just be a rumor,” Eleazar agrees. “Still, it’s only a matter of time before they attack you again. What happened recently **was** just a foolish attempt to recover Elara. I think they’ve realized it’s impossible now. Unless they finally know your weakness. Also, **they** have someone powerful in their possession.”

“Powerful?”

“They call her The Destroyer.” Before I can ask my next question, he keeps talking. “I don’t know exactly what her powers **are, but I can**

guess.”

“What made you come and tell us all this? As far as I know, you still have a son to protect.”

“I’ve found a way to protect him.”

“Where are they hiding, Eleazar?” Drystan interrupts.

“Underground. They’ve been building an endless network of tunnels for years.”

“Is there any way to find them? A map?”

“If there is, they won’t leave it within my reach.” He scratches his eyebrow. “Every time we go **in or** out, they blindfold me, though I’ve tried to memorize the movements.”

“Do they know you’re here?”

“They think I went to take care of my son.”

“They might have followed *you*.”

“Negative,” he says firmly. “At first, they followed me, until they realized I always take the same route with the same objective. I’ve waited long enough to do this without raising suspicions.”

I take a deep breath, raise one of my gloved hands, and gesture with two fingers toward him. My men quickly interpret this and come out from their hidden positions. The Diluido’s eyes widen in surprise when he sees that I’ve brought more men with me than he imagined. He doesn’t resist when two of my best soldiers step forward and restrain his arms behind his back.

“Everything I’ve said is true,” he growls.

“We’ll have to verify that,” I respond. “Until then, I’m not letting you go back to them and reveal anything that could condemn us.”

“You’ll leave me exposed to them. I’m more useful as a spy.”

AD

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 178

I shrug while watching them drag him away effortlessly, his hands tied behind his back and a blindfold over his eyes. I won't let him see anything until I have him securely locked behind the bars of a cell. He does everything he can to not seem disturbed; however, I can smell the fear and uncertainty emanating from his pores.

"And your son, Eleazar? Should I find him and punish him for your sins too?"

"I know you wouldn't." A small smile that makes me want to punch the bastard curves his lips. "You want Elara's affection too much to risk it by harming an innocent child."

I feel the dagger stab and twist in my gut, though I try to hide it with an agonized laugh. The worst part is that he's not wrong; I'm a monster, but what I would do for that woman. I would tear my skin off in strips, pull my fangs out with my own hands, chain myself in the darkest cell if that's what it took to stop being the monster I am. The problem is that she needs this monster, she needs me lethal and cold, because the

world wants to devour her alive and spit out her bones. So, I'll be her monster. Always.

"Don't put so much hope in me. I can't be redeemed."

With that, my men take him away. I turn, facing the water's surface, now a dark shade that keeps me alert to the possible creatures hiding beneath. I take a deep breath, feeling like my head is about to explode.

"It's very quiet," Drystan points out. "My theory is that the banshees have your son. Their camp is one of the few places supernatural creatures can't easily access."

"Yes, I remember well."

And so it is. Still, if I make a small effort, I can feel the electricity that ran through my body every time I tried to break through the barriers to

the banshee camp. The intensity kept growing until it was paralyzing. I wouldn't recommend the experience.

"Shall we go back?"

I nod, look for a few seconds at the lake, and then head home. It feels strange to think of the castle as my home. Until now, it was just a place I knew I had to return to in order to protect my legacy; now I want to return, and it has nothing to do with duty.

It's late at night, and I know I'll arrive with the dawn of a new day. I just hope to find Elara in my sheets, naked and with that almost imperceptible smile tattooed on her lips while she sleeps. The journey back feels eternal, it's as if my legs aren't running fast enough or the path, though I know it's impossible, has gotten longer. I can't believe the moment when I finally see the castle's perimeter in the distance. As we approach the gates, I become more impatient.

All enthusiasm is cut short when I spot a familiar figure in front of them, arguing with one of the guards.

I slow my steps to make sure my eyes aren't playing tricks on me. What is he doing here? Does he have suicidal tendencies?

"What are you doing here?" I snarl.

Ciro turns around, and his body visibly relaxes as if seeing me is the best thing that's happened to him. He takes a few steps toward me, running his hands through his hair, messing it up in all directions. His pink eyes are filled with worry. Or is it fear?

"I know you won't understand anything," he starts to say. "To be totally honest, neither do I. I just know I had to come here. Something's wrong, something related to Elara. I felt something."

"You? Why would you feel anything related to Elara?"

For a brief moment, a thought crosses my mind, making me act like a madman. I close the remaining distance between us and grab him by the neck, making sure he can feel my fingers pressing against his trachea. I grind my teeth, knowing I must look like a completely unhinged

person right now.

"Did you drink from her? Did you do something to her?" I growl.

"What?" he spits, struggling. "No! Of course not! I would never touch her without her wanting..."

Texamine his eyes, looking for any trace of a lie, but he seems sincere. Reluctantly, I release his throat and pull away from him.

"Explain yourself," I demand.

"I don't know, Cassian. I just felt a pull in my guts, and Elara's face projected in my mind. Then I came running here, but they won't let me see her. Not without your consent. I've been waiting for hours."

I shove him aside with a swipe of my hand. The guards, as soon as they see me, step aside and open the doors protected by new enchantments. I rush inside, debating in my head what Ciro just said. I don't know if I'm more worried that he might feel something related to her and I don't, or if something has really happened in my absence. Without stopping to look at anyone, I storm into the castle and head straight for my room. I throw open the doors wide and see no trace of Elara. I tell myself not to worry, maybe she's sleeping in her room. Deep down, I know it's not like that—why would she sleep in her bed, when she could sleep in ours?

When I reach her room, the door is ajar, and as I expected, she's not there either. I keep moving forward, searching for Evanora. My suspicions are confirmed when I don't find the banshee either. I grunt, knowing that no matter how much I keep searching, I won't find her.

“Drystan!” I growl.

I move toward the banshee's bed, perfectly made, and find a note. I hold it between my fingers and read it carefully.

“If you find this, it means I haven't returned yet. Don't worry, I'm fine. There's just something I need to take care of.”

PS: You hurt me too, always.

Elara.

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 179

Elara

I wait until I hear the pounding footsteps of Cassian Draven's men before getting out of bed. Even then, I make sure by looking out the window, and indeed, there's no trace of any of them, including Cassian. I close my eyes, remembering his gaze and the way he touched me before leaving, just hoping that when he discovers what I've done, he'll still look at me the same way.

A get dressed without worrying too much about my appearance and head toward Evanora's room. I try to be as stealthy as possible, afraid of being caught long before I can carry out my plans. Luckily, the castle is silent and practically deserted. When I reach the banshee's chambers,

don't bother to knock; instead, I slip inside quickly, knowing she's waiting for me.

“Right on time,” she says as soon as she sees me.

Around her, I see hundreds of objects and ingredients whose purpose I can’t begin to understand. A series of white stones are placed on the floor, spaced evenly to form a circle. Between each gap, there’s what I think is white salt. In her hands, she holds a small mortar where she’s making a paste with a disgusting appearance.

“It’s to enhance my powers,” she explains when she sees my look of disgust. “I’m half witch, remember?”

I nod, too surprised by all this to be able to form a full sentence. I can’t help but glance over my shoulder from time to time, expecting to see Cassian with a reproachful look, but every time I do, obviously, I find nothing, I know he’s fighting his own battles while I fight mine.

Evanora sets the mortar aside and glances out the window for a moment.

“It’s time.”

The morning light enters in reddish tones through the large window, reflecting on the stones she’s arranged on the floor. With studied movements, she draws a series of symbols on her forehead with that blackish paste, then reaches beneath her dress to retrieve a dagger and makes a cut in her palm. Blood flows slowly, splattering the floor.

There’s no turning back now, I know it, so I take out the note I made sure to write when he wasn’t around and place it on the bed. I hope that, even if he has a fit of rage, he’ll be able to find it. It won’t do anything to calm him down—I know him far too well. I just want him to know that I’ll come back, that I’m not abandoning him, that I’m not leaving him alone.

The banshee’s blood evaporates with each drop that hits the ground.

“Is that normal?” I ask, speaking for the first time since I entered.

“Yes. Don’t worry.” She squeezes her fist harder so the blood keeps falling. “I need you to stand in front of me inside the circle.”

Tobey without objection. I place myself before her, watching as the crimson liquid forms a small pool between us and slowly evaporates, as if the floor were burning. She grabs my hands and interlaces her fingers with mine. She starts chanting in a language I don’t understand.

Adjura lete cahza nostro yenu.

Adjura lete cahza nostro venu.

Adjura lete cahza nostro venu,

Her eyes roll back into her sockets, leaving a terrifying image before me. For a moment, I want to scream and shake her so she'll return to normal. Her hands are rigid in mine, as is the rest of her body. She doesn't stop her chant, repeating the same words over and **over**. The windows are closed and yet, somehow, a breeze manages to slip into the room and brush the hair from my face. I intertwine my fingers more tightly with Evanora's and wait, tense, for whatever is about to happen **next**.

The stones begin to glow, at first almost imperceptibly until they reach such a brightness that I have to close my eyes to avoid being blinded. The current of air grows stronger, making the skirts of my dress billow and preventing me from hearing clearly.

"Evanora!" I shout.

I try to open my eyes, but I have to shut them again when I see nothing but white everywhere. It's like trying to stare directly at the sun. I don't know how long we stay there, shaken by the wind, with Evanora's chanting as background noise—it could have been hours for all I know. When the air stops, so does she; she releases my hands and collapses to the ground. Or rather, to the earth.

A quick glance is enough to realize we are no longer in the castle.

"Hey!" I kneel beside her. "Are you okay? Evanora!"

I shake her unconscious body in my hands. There's a trace of blood coming from her nose.

"It's the magic," says a voice behind me. "It always takes something from us. She'll need a few minutes to recover."

I look over my shoulder and find Naja and her chilling eyes. Her posture is relaxed despite the fact that her hand is also bleeding.

"I see you no longer pretend to be a poor sheep," she notes, watching me with interest.

"You've shed that skin."

"You said I wasn't special."

"I lied."

"I've already figured that out."

I place Evanora's head on my lap. Gently, I brush her hair aside and stroke her in a soothing rhythm. No one seems inclined to help me carry her, so I'll wait.

"..." I begin to say.

“I know why you’re here.”

“Evanora told you?”

“No, our seer.

She saw you coming.”

I fall silent as the banshee stirs under my fingers and slowly opens her eyes—this time completely normal, her blue irises visible. She tries to sit up and lets out a small gasp when her wounded palm brushes the ground.

“It’s been a while, White Banshee,” Naja greets.

I stand and offer her my hand to help her up.

“I’m afraid we don’t have time for formalities, Naja,” Evanora says. “We need your help with something rather delicate.”

Naja’s reptilian gaze moves from one of us to the other, then she makes a small gesture with her chin for us to follow her. She leads us to her hut, the same one I visited last time. This time I don’t bother looking at everything around me, as my mind is consumed with other worries. I’m scared, terrified, and I feel like my legs might give out at any moment.

Once we reach a more spacious room, Naja signals for us to sit. Evanora does so gladly, almost collapsing onto the chair, exhausted. I’m more hesitant, but in the end I sit down too.

*Tell me

Naja gets comfortable, mimicking our posture, and reaches out toward my friend. From her sleeve emerges the albino snake, which wastes no time slithering toward the woman. The banshee is so tired she doesn’t even seem bothered by how easily her pet leaves her for someone

else’s hands.

“Considering you’ve been under Lilith’s orders all this time, I suppose there’s little you don’t know.”

“I know that Lilith, mother of all mothers, has great plans for you.”

“That’s what I came to talk about.”

Naja seems to sink deeper into her chair as the curious pet flicks its tongue in the air and looks at the three of us with its small, bottomless black eyes.

“I don’t want those plans for me,” I continue. “I won’t subject myself to being used to breed and strengthen this race.”

“Are you going to let her children die?”

“I’m her child too!” I snap. “I can’t understand how she could do this to me, put me in such danger, use me this way.”

“A mother will do anything for her children.”

“I’m her child too,” I repeat, this time with a tired voice.

“You’re one child, compared to hundreds of them.”

Sold to the Night Lord

Her words pierce me like shards of glass. It hurts everywhere. So much that for a moment I can’t breathe—or maybe I’ve just **forgotten how**. I **place my** hand over my heart, then quickly lower it so she won’t see how much her words wounded me. I meet her eyes without wavering.

“If you **don’t** want to be part of your mother’s plans, what do

“I want you to help me. Make me incapable of conceiving.”

you want?”

A raspy, incredulous laugh leaves her lips. Evanora looks at me sadly, as if she already considers everything lost. But I’m ready to fight for what I **want** with tooth and nail. If they think I’m still that defenseless human, they’re very wrong. My mother may want my body for other purposes, **but** she gave me enough strength to use it—and my gifts—as a weapon.

“You’ve completely lost your mind,” she says, still recovering from her laughter.

“Maybe.” I grit my teeth. “Maybe I’ve gone crazy, but I know for sure I won’t let them use me, touch my body, treat it as if it were theirs.”

“Why would I go against Lilith, girl?”

“Because you’re a woman, just like me. Aren’t you supposed to live away from men because you fear them? You live in community, helping each **other**, a strong and united group. Will you abandon a woman who only asks you to help her so men won’t use her?”

“You don’t know if that will happen.”

I start to see doubt in her eyes.

“They’re desperate, dwindling every day—do you really think they won’t do whatever it takes to preserve themselves?”

There’s a change in her gaze, and I know, in that precise instant, that I’ve won. She presses her lips into a thin, straight line and returns the snake to its owner, who looks at me as if she can’t believe I managed to convince her leader.

“You could lose your life, you know that?” she asks.

“The alternative waiting for me wouldn’t be life, so I’ll take the risk anyway.”

She nods, radiating seriousness from every pore. She rises from her seat and gives me one last look.

“We’ll do it tonight.” She turns to the banshee. “Make sure she’s ready when the time comes.”

She doesn’t wait to hear her answer; instead, she disappears into another of the rooms. That’s our cue to leave. I follow Evanora’s steps and, with great effort, try to remember this place from the last time we were here. The banshees still look at me with suspicion, as if they can smell the trouble radiating from me. I immediately recognize my friend’s small house. She opens the door effortlessly. I’m surprised by the level of trust they have among themselves, enough to leave their possessions so unprotected.

I sit on one of the two small cots,

“What did she mean by making sure I’m ready?”

“There’s a small ritual we have to do before you put yourself in her hands tonight.” She begins rummaging in a chest. You have **to** understand **it’s risky**- they’re going to take from you what could make you a mother.”

“A mother isn’t just someone who gives birth or has the ability to do so,” I protest.

She twists her lips, as if regretting what she just said. She keeps rummaging in the chest while I think about **the** question that’s **been circling in my head** for days. Every time we talk about this, a shadowed expression transforms Evanora’s features.

“You don’t agree with what I’m going to do, do you?”

”

That’s not it,” she answers without looking at me.

“Then what is it? I feel like you’re not okay with any of this.”

“What I think doesn’t matter,” she says sharply. “Don’t dwell on it.”

“I want to dwell on it. What is it, Evanora?”

She slams the chest shut, sits on top of it, and runs her hands over her face.

“I’m jealous, Elara.” She avoids my eyes. “I dream of being a mother, and that possibility was taken from me.”

“What do you mean, it was taken from you...?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She gets up, and suddenly her face shifts so completely it’s as if her confession never happened. “Come here, we **need to** start as soon as possible.”

With several things in her hands, she gestures for me to follow her. We leave her hut, walk through the entire camp, and little by little approach one of the coasts that borders the area. The roar of the waves grows stronger with each step we take, and the smell of salt—which already permeates the whole place becomes even more intense. My new sense of smell only makes me notice all the differences even more. The sea looks furious, and the color of its waters could easily pass for black. I take a step back, a gesture she doesn’t miss.

“Don’t be afraid, I’ll be with you every moment.”

I follow her, not entirely sure what I’m doing. The banshee moves even closer to the water, seemingly unaware that the hem of her dress is starting to soak. I hesitate until I finally realize that if I don’t imitate her, all of this will have been for nothing. I step beside her and feel my dress getting wet. The water is so cold it’s like hundreds of needles stabbing into my body from different directions. I hold my breath when Evanora interlaces her fingers **with** mine and leads us farther in, slowly submerging us in these furious waters. When it reaches above our waists, she hands me a small vial.

“You have to drink it. It will expel from you any sign of corruption.”

I close my eyes and swallow the contents without breathing. When I open them again, I feel her hands on my shoulders.

“Do you trust me?” I hesitate for a few seconds before nodding. “I’m here, don’t be afraid.”

Little by little, she pushes me down into the water. My nails dig into her wrists, my hair drifts across my face, blinding me. I try to hold my breath as **long** as I can, but my lungs burn, and my mouth desperately urges me to open and inhale. I kick without success until I can’t take it anymore and my lips part

in a silent scream.