

Sold to the Night Lord

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Chapter 181

I feel the salty water rush in, filling my mouth, my throat, flooding my lungs. My nails press into Evanora's flesh so hard I'm sure I have her skin under them. I scream again, shake my head to free some strands stuck to my face, and then I see a black stain pour from my mouth. I *no* longer **know** if my screams are from drowning or from the fear of whatever is coming out of me. My spine arches, and I feel something inside me is wrong, as if an animal were clawing at my stomach to get out. Tears of pain dissolve into the sea. My body loses its strength and slowly goes limp, giving in. My vision clouds, and I'm sure my next blink will be my last—until Evanora grips me firmly and hauls me out of the water. I cough uncontrollably, expelling the last traces **of** that black liquid along with the seawater. Her hand rubs circles on my back, urging me to keep coughing and spitting. My throat and lungs burn, each

breath like fire.

"It's over, shhh... easy. It's over, everything's fine."

I cling to her tighter because I feel my legs could give out at any moment. A small sob escapes my

throat.

"I'm sorry, Elara." She presses a kiss to the top of my head. "I know it's unpleasant. You have to be clean inside to receive that kind of magic."

I hear her without really listening; I'm lost, in an almost catatonic state. In fact, I don't even feel it when we leave the water. I think I'm walking purely on inertia, mechanically. The banshee throws me a few worried glances as we make our way back to Naja.

We enter her hut, neither of us caring about the mess our wet dresses leave in our wake. I've never seen the room she leads me to. It's flooded with the light and heat of candles, and in the center is what looks like a chair designed for torture. My head snaps into high alert. I'm *not* sure I can endure this.

"She's clean," Evanora reports.

Naja is lighting the last candles. Her hair, full of beads and braids, is tied in a high bun. The moment her eyes fall on me, my whole body shudders, and I fear it's not from the chill of my wet skin.

“Sit down, dear.”

She gestures to the chair, but I stay frozen. Naja notices, frowns, and rolls her eyes, as if I were a spoiled child.

“I won’t lie to you. It will hurt.” She places her hands on her hips. “You asked for this, girl. Don’t expect it to be a walk in the park. You’ll beg me to stop, you’ll cry, you’ll want to tear your own skin off, but in the end, you’ll have what you want. Nothing will grow inside you—your womb will be dead.”

A bitter lump lodges in my throat, and I have to force myself to swallow it. Step by step, with trembling knees, I move toward the chair. I sit down, and when Naja slides the straps over my wrists, securing me in place, my body jerks involuntarily. She does the same with my ankles.

My mouth feels dry, my stomach churns.

“Put this on her,” she tells Evanora. “We don’t want her biting her own tongue.”

With reluctance, my friend approaches me with a kind of gag. She places it between my teeth and fastens it behind my head. A cold sweat trickles down my neck.

The witch gives me one last look before cutting both her palms, squeezing them into fists to make the blood flow. Her chanting revives the flames, making the place so bright it’s as if the sun itself had taken residence in the room. The heat causes a thin sheen of sweat to cover my skin. I squirm in place, wondering when the pain will start. All I feel is heat—intense heat—and nausea. I pray it won’t get worse, or I’ll choke on my own vomit. What a pathetic way to die.

Naja reaches toward the banshee, who joins her in the chant. The words echo in the room, drilling into my ears. My vision darkens in waves, and with rapid blinks I try to stay conscious, though I know it’s only a matter of time before this sensation shaking my body drags me into unconsciousness.

The witch’s eyes move restlessly under her eyelids, blood pooling into two small puddles, sweat beading on her forehead. The heat **in** my womb intensifies, making me arch my back. I dig my nails into the armrests, bracing for the inevitable pain. I clench my teeth against the gag, and **just when the burning** in my womb becomes **too**

much, the entire room goes dark, plunging into shadow. I hear the ragged breathing **of** both the witch and **the**

banshee.

“I can’t.”

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“What do you mean, you can’t?” Evanora asks.

“I can’t do it,” the witch repeats. “Not without her knowing the truth.”

I blink in the darkness, seeing nothing until a snap of Naja’s fingers lights some of the candles again. The banshee’s face is one of total bewilderment, while the witch looks scandalized. She quickly approaches me and removes the gag from my mouth.

“What is it? Why did you stop?”

I think, for the first time, the witch looks at me with something like concern. She brushes a sweaty strand of hair from my face and strokes me in a maternal way.

“Girl, what kind of mess have you gotten yourself into?”

I search her face in confusion.

“What have I done?”

Her hand stops caressing my cheek and slowly moves down my body until it rests on my lower abdomen—right where the burning had just vanished.

“You’re pregnant,” she says softly. “You carry Cassian’s child, Elara...”

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Elara

I dig my nails repeatedly into the palms of my hands, hoping somehow to wake from this dream or is it a nightmare? No matter how hard try, mill here, sitting in this chair, tied up, with Naja and Evanora’s faces watching me expectantly. I open my mouth to speak, but the knot in my throat stops me I close my eyes and force myself to swallow, though my throat is dry. Only air passes through my esophagus,

I dig my nails in again, hoping that the pain will wake me.

Only one word comes to mind.

“Ta...,” I take a deep breath. “Take it out.”

I look at the clothes hiding my belly, horrified.

“Take that thing out of me.”

“Elara?”

Cassian’s voice rings in my head, and it’s all I need for the glass vessel holding all my emotions to finally shatter. A sob rises in my throat, but I suppress it by biting my lips.

“You’re in shock; this isn’t the time to make such an important decision.”

Naja caresses my sweaty face, and after looking at me for a few seconds, she begins undoing the bindings holding my limbs.

When I am freed, my body doesn’t respond—I stay there seated, limp, as if my life had been drained.

“This can’t be true,” I whisper. “No, no, no, take it out, Naja! You have to take it out!”

“What do they have to take out, Elara?”

Without realizing it, I’ve projected my words through our connection. I go pale, not knowing what to say, what is appropriate to share. If this is real, I don’t want it.

“Cassian...”

“I’ll kill the banshee for taking you from me, and you, Elara, will owe me many explanations.”

“Don’t hurt her! She only wanted to help me... I’m sick,” I lie.

Naja brings me back to reality, holding my hand in hers and stroking the back with her thumb. From time to time, my body shudders with a kind of electric shock that makes me tremble from head to toe. My teeth chatter.

“She’s going into shock,” Evanora points out.

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“Listen to me, Elara,” the witch asks. “*You* have a few days to think about this, not too many, since a pregnancy like yours isn’t a hu grow quickly. Your body will start changing soon and at a rapid pace, but you still have a few days. Think carefully about your decision, and whatever **it is**, I’ll help you carry it out.”

“This is impossible, Cas...” Istammer. “Cassian, take a tonic.”

The banshee positions herself next to me and places her hand on my arm in a comforting gesture showing her support.

“Are you sure about that, Elara?” she asks. “Maybe he lied, maybe this was his intention from the start.”

I shake my head over and over, knowing he would never do something like that to me. He would never toy with **my body and my choices** this way. **I know**

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what everyone thinks of him, but I’ve seen parts that no one else knows.

“No, he wouldn’t do that to me.”

“Maybe he forgot to take a dose or the tonic isn’t entirely effective. Mistakes happen,” Naja adds.

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It’s a possibility. I prefer to think that. I pull myself together as much as I can and stand with Evanora’s help. For a moment, the room spines, **and I** have to hold onto the banshee tightly. The witch disappears for a few moments and returns with a series of herbs and tonics.

“Make sure she takes this,” she tells Evanora. “She’s weak from the magic, and the pregnancy will soon progress, requiring a lot of energy

“The pregnancy won’t progress!” I scream.

I can’t believe the word “pregnancy” came out of my mouth; it sounds unreal. Both of them stay silent, digesting my words. Naja steps back **with a small** nod and leaves us alone. Evanora guides us out, and I feel deeply grateful to feel the night breeze on my skin. I try to take a deep breath, fill my lungs with air. I need to feel serene and whole again. My hands tremble persistently.

“Elara, talk to me.”

The desperation in Cassian’s voice pierces me. He’s all I want and need right now; I’d love to tell him everything and hear him, to be calmed. **Yet**

, I’m scared. What if he agrees with this and forces me to have it? It’s his child, and I don’t know if I’m ready, if I could love it.

It’s also your child.

My subconscious whispers it, as I can't stop thinking of it as something foreign to me, as if I had nothing to do with its conception. I step away **from my** friend; I need to be alone, although in a camp it's hard to find a place where no one is watching me.

"I'm fine, I started feeling ill this morning, and Evanora brought me with the banshees," I lie.

"Right now, I think her skin would look beautiful decorating the floors at the entrance."

"Don't be mad at her, please. She did the right thing; I promise I'll be back soon."

"No, I don't like this at all, Elara."

A small silence falls.

"Keep talking to me; I plan to be there as soon as possible."

"It's not necessary, Cassian. I'll be back sooner than

you

think."

I keep lying, knowing I'll spend several days apart from him. I need to think about myself, my future, the consequences of all this. Unconsciously, I place **a** hand on my belly. I observe that spot, as if I could see through the skin to find what grows inside me. I draw a circle over the clothing and search for a sign, some bulge to confirm this is real because I still can't believe Naja's words. What would I do if I found proof? Would I try to take it out **with** my own hands or remain absorbed, watching it? Bile rises in my throat, and I cover my mouth with my hand to avoid vomiting. In the back of **my** mind, **a** voice whispers that I should feel differently; however, I'm terrified—not because my maternal instinct urges me to care for what grows inside **me**. On **the** contrary, those impulses, that dark side that takes *possession* of me just before claiming a soul, urges me to get rid of this

It puts us in danger; it will make us weak.

I hear a noise behind me, and wrapping my body protectively, I turn around. There are several stacked **boxes, looking** like **they haven't been**

touched in a long time, but what truly catches my attention is the small little head hiding behind them. The child's eyes are like **two headlights, bright and golden**. **He** looks at me, fearful, thinking he did a great job hiding. I approach slowly and crouch down. I tilt my head and observe him **with the same curiosity with** which he watches me.

"I'm Elara."

When the child **doesn't** make a move to **come** out, I add, "I've seen you."

He responds with silence.

"It's a little rude not to answer." I purse my lips.

The child comes out of his hiding place, though he still doesn't speak. He drags his feet on the ground, looking down, as if he just got a serious scaling fear he'll look at me with those golden eyes full of tears and throw a tantrum at any moment. I try to set aside all the stress and be pleasant, so I draw the best smile I have in my arsenal.

"What's your name?"

I extend my hand, hoping he will take it and introduce himself. I treat him as if he were an adult, knowing children like that. They want to feel older **than** they are, unaware they're living one of the best stages of their lives.

He looks at my hand as if it had a contagious disease.

"My name is Elara."

"You already said that."

I'm surprised to hear that his voice isn't as high as I expected; it sounds more mature than he looks.

"Khaos."

He slides his hand over mine and gives a quick squeeze before pulling it back to his side.

"Is your name Khaos?"

He nods.

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"How old are you, Khaos?"

"Four."

"Have you gotten lost?"

He begins to shake his head when footsteps catch our attention. A young girl with black-blue hair appears out of nowhere, visibly upset. Her skin is as white as snow, and her lips are so red they seem covered in blood. I am lost in my scrutiny until I look into her eyes and freeze. The girl seems to notice and looks at me with a sad smile tugging at her lips.

“One eye in the present,” she says, pointing to her only

“And the other sacrificed for the future.”

The only eye that meets mine is the color of the forest,
green.

“So here you were, little one.” She places her hands on her hips. “I’ve been looking for you for a while. Come on, it’s not the hour to be wandering around. Dawn will be here soon. You should be sleeping.”

“And my dad?” the child asks. “When is my dad coming?”

“Soon,” she replies. “But you have to be a good boy until then.”

The sadness on the boy’s face cannot be hidden. He walks with his head down toward the girl and does not protest when she takes his hand and begins to walk away. I think I will be left alone with my thoughts again, but they both stop when the nameless girl glances over her shoulder.

“You must be Elára, right? I’ve seen you coming for

“And you must be the seer.”

A soft, warm laugh escapes her lips.

days.”

“That’s me.” She nods toward the front. “Will you come with me?”

I thought she wanted to be alone; however, the moment I hear the seer’s request, I do not hesitate to follow her a few steps behind. Perhaps what I desperately crave is a distraction. To forget that the world is collapsing around me.

“Have you crossed the Twisted Forest, Elara?” asks Cassian in a threatening tone.

“No, we used a portal.”

“Good, we will talk about this when we meet in person.” Silence.

“I see you have no trouble abandoning me.”

“You’re an exaggerator.”

“You left.”

“I left a note.”

“It’s not enough.”

I bite my lip and completely disconnect from the conversation when we stop in front of a hut. From the outside, it looks exactly like all **the** others, **and to** be honest, once I step inside, nothing seems different. There are two cots, one smaller, where Khaos immediately throws himself down. **The** fire **fills**

the room with warmth and orange light.”

The girl gestures with her head, and I follow. She pulls a curtain that separates what looks like a kitchen from **the** rest **of the hut**. **She sits at a round table**

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and motions with her hand **for** me **to** do the same. I sit across from her, unsure if it is appropriate to look at her directly:

“**My name is** Viatrix,” she offers a small smile. “And you can look me in the face, you don’t have to stare at *my* kitchen. I know it’s not **spectacular** –

“**Do** you read **minds?**”

“**No**, I’m just used to discomfort,” she responds with a soft, sweet laugh. “I’ve been watching people try not to look at me, thinking it bothers **me** want the truth is that looking everywhere else when they talk to me is what really annoys me. Please, let’s avoid that.”

“Okay.”

“You have an important decision ahead of you, don’t you?”

“Do you know what decision I’ll make?”

I don’t want to appear as desperate as I feel.

“Yes.” Before I can say anything, she adds, “However, telling you would interfere with fate. This is something you must do alone.”

“None of this was in my plans.” I stand up. “I didn’t want this.”

“Usually the best things happen when we don’t expect them.”

Her words make me feel uncomfortable and betrayed. Leaving all my manners behind, I turn and head toward the exit. I glance at the cot, where the boy is already asleep, clutching the blankets to his chest. I hear Viatrix’s footsteps behind me.

“Are you his mother?” I ask.

She shakes her head, though I can see the affection in her face. Without saying more, I leave the hut, knowing I have been very rude. I would have liked **to** stay, talking and asking questions. I have never met a seer, to be honest, nor did I even know they existed. Yet I feel misunderstood. Nobody says it aloud, but I feel that everyone expects me to move forward with this. Again, my hand rests on my stomach, as if a magnet connects it to her.

I would give anything to go back a few days, to stay in Cassian’s arms, laughing in our bubble that keeps worries out for a while. Now I am here, facing an important decision, one that could change my life forever. I let myself fall onto one of the logs next to an extinguished fire, silently mulling over my thoughts. No one comes near me, as if they can sense that I am a natural disaster about to strike. I can feel it under my skin, all the energy coursing through my veins in waves. I bite the inside of my cheek *to* suppress the urge to scream at the sky and demand answers from whoever is listening.

Suddenly, a weight falls onto my shoulders, and when I look back, I see Evanora, who wraps a blanket around me.

“You’ll catch cold.” She sits beside me. “The fire is lit inside, and I prepared some broth.”

“Things didn’t have to turn out this way,” I murmur.

“They never do as we expect.”

“How much time do I have?”

She exhales before continuing.

“A human pregnancy lasts about nine months. A vampire’s lasts barely four.” She lowers her gaze over my body. “I’d have to **see** you naked to be **more** precise, but I’d guess you’re a few weeks along, maybe a month. During the time you were with Ciro, you saw Cassian, right?”

The memory of the first time we met, just after I woke from my comatose state, flashes in my head. The hungry kisses, the furious thrusts, **the sharp**

words.

“Yes,” I admit.

“Then it’s possible you’re a month along, which corresponds to about three human months.” She looks **at** me for permission before placing her **hands on** my stomach. She remains silent while pressing certain areas. “Yes, I think I’m right.”

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So, how much time do I have?”

“A few days. I wouldn’t wait too long. At most a week.”

I must not be as closed-off as ‘think, since she reads me easily.

“I know this is a complicated decision. No one expects it to be easy, but if we wait longer, things could go wrong. Your pregnancy is already **a fish** in sif

“What do you mean?”

“Vampire pregnancies carry more risk. The female body has to adapt quickly; sometimes the fetuses grow too fast for the mother’s body. I swallow the lump in my throat. “We also don’t know what repercussions this will have on you. But if you decide to have it, Maja and I will do everything we can to keep both you and the baby safe and healthy.”

I don’t know if it’s my hormones, fear, or her words that make my eyes fill with tears. I blink rapidly to get rid of them, but not fast enough to avoid the banshee noticing. She wraps me in her arms and pulls me close, so my face rests against her shoulder.

“I don’t want you to think I’m telling you this to influence your decision. Do *you* know why I gave my soul to Lilith? It wasn’t to be accepted as one of her daughters, nor to gain access to magic—it was to get my daughter back.” Before I can ask questions, she continues, “A long time ago I lost her. She died a few months after birth. That was too long ago. I’ve lived more years than you can imagine, yet I cannot rid myself of the need to have her back. I gave my soul to Lilith, but everything comes with conditions. I made a mistake. She brought her back, but I could never be her mother. Her nature was human, fragile, and my world is merciless to those who aren’t strong enough. Lilith promised me the girl would live a full life without me near her.” She sighs heavily. “I just want you to know I understand. Being a mother is hard, whether you want it or not, and whatever decision you make will be the right one -for you, for the moment, and for the circumstances.”

“Did you want it?”

“It was one of my captors.” As if thinking of them awakens old pain, she traces the scars on her mouth with her fingertips. “There was a time I asked the same question in my mind.”

“I’m so sorry for everything that happened to you, being kidnapped, losing your daughter... Does she...”

“Yes, she has her own family, children, even grandchildren...”

“Ragna was referring to her when she said ‘she has your eyes,’ right?” I ask. She nods. “Everyone has their demons, right?”

She curves her lips into a smile so sad my heart breaks a little.

“Let’s go inside, Elara. It’s time to eat.”

We walk side by side, wrapped together under the blanket. When we enter her hut, the heat from the fire hits me; however, it is not uncomfortable, quite the opposite. I hadn’t realized how the cold had seeped into the marrow of my bones during the time I spent outside.

She places a bowl in my hands. I take a sip and feel it warm my stomach.

“I’ve met the seer,” I say.

“Viatrix.”

“Yes.” I take another sip. “There was a boy with her. Khaos, she said his name was.”

“Naja mentioned something to me.”

“Whose child is he? I’ve never seen men or boys. Only women.”

“Banshees do not have the capacity to give birth to men.”

“Then...?”

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That boy does not belong to any of us. She gives me **a look** I cannot decipher. “He is Eleazar’s son.”

I swallow a gasp.

Of course he is Eleazar’s son; those golden eyes seemed far too familiar. I am about to ask more questions when the ground beneath our feet best to **shake**. The bowl in my hands

slips to the floor, and the beads hanging from the ceiling keep clattering together. I grab the cot with **one hand** for stability. and with the other, once again, cover my stomach.

We both look at each other, confused, waiting for the other to give an answer.

“An earthquake?” I ask.

Evanora remains silent, and for a moment I think I see her sniff the air.

“I smell power. I don’t think this is a natural earthquake.”

I hold my breath as I realize. I know no one else capable of doing something like this except him.

“Evanora...” I say, my voice guilty. “I think I know who it is.”

“Me too.” Her expression is serious. “Did you ask him to come?”

I shake my head.

“Then he won’t enter until you want to see him.”

“He’s going to kill us all.”

“Good thing I’m friends with his companion.”

She winks at me, and an involuntary smile escapes my lips. I don’t know what I will decide, but I know there are people who care about me, who will respect my choice, starting with the brute who has shaken the camp. I know him in a way that sometimes surprises even me; nevertheless, I know we are a team, I am his equal, and he will support me. Always.

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Cassian

I can’t sleep.

Not because the ground isn't comfortable which it isn't—but because my head won't stop thinking about Elara and whatever made her go to the banshees. She says she's sick, but a part of me wonders if I really overwhelmed her, if she realized that I'm not what she wants in her life. That **thought hits** me hard.

I toss and turn, the stones digging into my back with every movement I make. I won't move from here until they let me see her. I stare at the sky long enough that, when the edges of my vision darken, I think it's because sleep has finally decided to come to me.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

That darkness swallows everything and is thick like syrup. I feel it sticking to my skin and spreading across my vision until I can see nothing. My breathing quickens, and I would feel fear from my panic if I weren't far from curious eyes. Soon I'm no longer in the shadows and look around me—everything seems the same, except for the figure standing in front of

1. me.

On impulse, I stand and bare my teeth, more than willing to leap at her and tear her neck apart with my fangs.

“Not happy to see me?”

Ragna's voice would sound sensual to anyone else, but to me, it only makes me want to shred her body with my hands and bathe in her blood. I look around in every direction; I can't comprehend how I didn't sense her arrival. My thoughts must be fully visible on my face.

“Want to know how I got here?”

I bare my teeth again, and she responds with a wide smile, showing perfect teeth and a pair of fangs longer than mine.

“It must be very frustrating for you that things aren't under your control, isn't it?” She walks around me like a predator, searching for the exact moment to sink her claws in. “And even more so now that Elara seems to have **run** from you... again.”

“Shut your fucking mouth.”

“Why? I'm just giving voice to your thoughts.” She stops in front of me. “It only took you leaving her alone for a few hours for her to run away.”

Her words fuel the dark thoughts in my mind, though something worries me even more: how does she know all this? Maybe she has a

spy among mine. That's something I'll have to fix as soon as possible.

She keeps walking around me, studying me.

"But don't worry, I've brought her back."

I frown and follow her with my eyes until I turn around and find the last thing I expected: in front of me is Elara, with Ragna's claws pressing against her neck. Her expression is a cocktail of emotions, including rage and despair. She struggles against the shapeshifter, trying to break free. I step toward her, but Ragna hisses; it's clear that any move on my part will not be welcomed.

"Give her back, Ragna. None of this will end well if *you* hurt her."

"No situation involving you will end well as far as I'm concerned. Don't take me for a fool, Draven."

"Cassian..."

My name on Elara's lips is tinged with panic. Her eyes move frantically, trying to tell me something I can't decipher.

"Tell *her* the truth, Elara," the shapeshifter croons. "Tell her you left at the first opportunity because the very idea of spending your life with **him disgusts** you."

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Her **eyes** fill **with** tears, and she looks at me as if feeling guilty.

"**You're** not capable of saying it." Ragna laughs. "You don't have to protect her feelings, Elara, He doesn't have any, It's **not** like he cared about yours

He didn't care about breaking your heart." **every**

time he despised you or when he made you see someone else leave his room.

A shadow crosses Elara's gaze, and I start to fear that the words of that harpy will stir old feelings I thought were buried.

"Elara, you know that's not true. You know why I did what I did. You know my feelings for you."

She shakes her head.

Ragna digs her nails into her flesh, and I see tiny drops of blood sliding down the paleness of her neck.

“You don’t believe her words, I know. That’s why you left. Deep down, you know Cassian is incapable of loving anyone. He can’t even stand himself.”

As much as it hurts me to admit it, even if only to myself, the shapeshifter is right. Sometimes I can’t stand myself. I look in the mirror and hate what I see. I hate the times I was weak and didn’t do enough for my family and for myself. Sometimes I even hate myself for what I did to Elara. The right **thing** would be to let her go, but I’m the villain in her story; I can’t pretend to be a hero without selfish motives.

“Say it out loud, Elara. Tell him you hate him and that you’d rather die than live by his side.”

I watch her throat move as she swallows, seeming to choke on unspoken words. My gaze turns pleading, though I don’t know to whom I’m begging- Elara so it isn’t true, or the shapeshifter so she leaves it alone. Instead, she only presses her claws harder, as if wanting to rip the words from her throat.

“Say it. Don’t be shy now. You had no problem being foul-mouthed with me.”

I narrow my eyes, feeling that something is off. Still, I’m so focused on the two **of** them that I fail to see the signs.

“Cassian.”

I start shaking my head.

“I’m not sick,” her voice sounds tired. Blood decorates her neck, falling faster and faster. “I had to run.”

“Run from what?” I ask, knowing the answer.

“From you, don’t you see? I can never be happy by your side.”

The shapeshifter’s smile twists into that of a deranged sadist, and her eyes meet mine with a cold gleam. She licks her lips and, without breaking eye contact, finishes what she started: she slashes Elara’s throat from end to end, reopening old wounds. She falls to the ground like a ragdoll, but when I try to go to her, *hold* her in my arms, stop the bleeding somehow, her body fades through my fingers.

Ragna’s laughter transforms into a deep, guttural cackle. She wipes a tear with her knuckle and looks at me with false empathy.

“In war, love never wins, Draven.” She tilts her head. “Do you know why?”

I hold a growl in my throat.

“Because love is a distraction no one can afford on the battlefield. Love softens you, makes you weak and vulnerable.” She strikes my kneeling knees with her foot. “Look at *you*. A shadow of what you were. Reduced to a mediocre being for loving a woman who will never love you back.”

“You only know how to lie, Ragna,” I spit. “Everyone who’s afraid becomes a compulsive liar.”

I rise to my feet, reclaiming the strength that for a few minutes her words as sharp as knives had taken from me.

“Me? Afraid?”

My body leans over hers, engulfing her almost entirely.

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“**You’re** terrified. You know **you’ll** lose. If not, **why** hide behind the tricks **of** your blind mutt?”

And at that very moment, my hands tear through the shapeshifter’s body completely, and she evaporates into the air as if **she** were nothing but air can **finally** breathe. None of this was real—just one of her filthy tricks to invade my mind, break my resolve, plant doubts in my head **that could** eat me alive. I clench my fists and scold myself for even doubting Elara for a second. That old version of me is gone and cannot return

I watch the smoke vanish, though her words do not leave my mind. Ragna’s intentions toward me are clear. She must already know I have Eleazar in my power; fear is gnawing at her, and she wants to wage a psychological war against me before seeing me on a battlefield. She knows she will lose

Because, contrary to what she thinks, my feelings for Elara make me more ruthless, capable of obliterating everything that stands between her and **her** happiness.

I was never a hero, and I’m not going to start being

one now

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 185

Elara

Cassian doesn't give up easily; I wish I could say the jolts stopped and I could have a peaceful sleep. The truth is far from that. I could feel his nervousness through our connection, not only in the moments we communicated, when his voice trembled with anger, but I could feel his emotions in a completely inexplicable way. Perhaps at some point I transmitted my own feelings to him, because there was a brief moment when I could rest.

Now, sitting around Evanora's table, with a small breakfast in front of me, I wonder if the right thing would be to let him in, tell him everything, and take refuge in his arms hoping that all of this is a bad dream. Just as that thought crosses my mind, I feel a small pang in my heart. I think knowing I'm pregnant does strange things to my mind; little by little, I feel more connected to what's growing inside me, and thoughts like that make me feel guilty.

Surely, the longer I take with this decision, the harder it will be.

I look at my breakfast and taste one of the peeled fruits, but it tastes like ashes the moment I chew it. My stomach churns, and the little appetite I had disappears completely.

"Do you know what decision I will make?" I ask when I see Evanora entering the hut with wet hair. The banshee gives me a confused look. "I mean, have you asked Viatrix what decision she has seen me choose?"

"No," she replies. "I have no need to know the future."

"Have you seen Cassian?"

"Briefly. I went to tell him he will not be allowed to enter until we consider it appropriate."

"And what did he say?"

"That he's going to tear my skin off in strips."

"Very much like him."

I get up

from my seat, smooth my dress, and prepare to go out for some fresh air. I'm going to need many walks to clear my mind.

"If you want, I can heat water so you can take a hot bath," offers the banshee.

"I'm fine, I think I'll take a walk." I bite my lower lip. "Do you think he'll see me if I go out?"

“The camp’s protections are for both annoying intrusions and curious eyes. He can’t see anything that happens in

here.”

I nod, letting out a sigh of relief. The last thing I need is for Cassian to go crazy if he sees me. I really want to see him, but I know that doing so is the easy choice. He will tell me everything is fine, and I would easily get lost in his warmth and forget the problems, the fear. However, I must face this, make my decision, and only then can I return

to him.

1/3

14:15 Thu, 21 Aug

“And Drystan? Was he with him?”

This time I ask to see her reaction, which, as I expected, is much more revealing than she thinks. For a moment, all her movements stop, and I hear her breath hitch, though she quickly disguises it, pretending that what she’s doing requires her full attention.

“No, he was alone.”

“Evanora,” I say in a serious tone to get her attention, “will you ever tell me what happened between you two?”

“There’s not much to tell,” she replies casually. “He thinks he can fix broken things without getting hurt, and I’m tired of people trying to fix me.”

I want to talk, to sit with her and converse, but I know that’s not what she wants. She makes it clear when she leaves for the kitchen with a mortar and some herbs between her fingers. I hear the sound of her movements while working and the beat of her strong, steady heart. I moisten my lips, take one last look at her back, and leave, knowing I also have a lot to put in order.

I head toward the beach, hoping the breeze and the sound of the waves will help me. I take off my shoes and feel the wet sand beneath my feet. I roll up the hem of my dress, which at this point is far from being saved by a simple wash. I walk aimlessly along the shore until I reach some rocks where the waves crash forcefully. I stand there, listening to the sound of the waves dying, feeling small drops splash on my cheeks. It feels like centuries have passed since I tried to end my life in the water. Yet, I find some peace here.

I take a deep breath and feel a hand on my shoulder. I turn, expecting the banshee, who may have gone out for a walk to clear her own mind, undoubtedly tormented as well; instead, I find a pair of eyes like mine and a violet

aura.

“Atarothz? How? What are you doing here?”

“Your discomfort speaks louder than *you* think,” he says kindly. “I feel there’s something tormenting you, and I’ve promised myself to be a better father *to you*.”

“I thought no one could enter the camp.”

“I’m a god, Elara. There’s little that can stop me from doing what I wish.” He strokes my hair and gives me the closest thing to a smile I’ve ever seen from him. “Do you want to tell me what’s troubling you?”

“Don’t you know?”

He presses his lips into a thin line and exhales deeply, his shoulders dropping.

“I have an idea,” he shrugs. “But I think it would do you good to say it out loud.”

I take a deep breath.

“I’m pregnant.” I pause for a moment; it feels strange to share this with him even before the child’s own father knows. When he says nothing, I continue pouring out all my thoughts: “I don’t know if I want to have it. I came here

14:15 Thu, 21 Aug f

precisely to avoid being used. What will happen when I show up with a child?”

“You don’t know if it will be a Pure.”

I raise an eyebrow.

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“Lilith was very sure of what would happen, so you know better than anyone that I will have a vampire child and a

Pure.”

“Maybe it will be like you.”

“I don’t think it makes much of a difference.” I sigh, mentally exhausted. “In fact, it may even be worse. They will

be afraid of it, just as they are afraid of me. It will be a threat, one they will want to eliminate from the moment

they know of its existence.”

“If you want to have that child, you will do everything possible to make them understand.”

He places his hand on my shoulder again, giving a warm squeeze. “Don’t let that interfere with your desires.”

“I don’t know if I want this; that’s the problem,” I say with resentment in my voice. “I never thought about being a

mother, I never even thought it was a possibility for me.”

Deep in my heart, I feel once again that I am being deprived of choosing, of guiding my life, of making my own decisions. It feels like I’m running against the clock. I am furious.

His features soften in a way I never thought I would see. Gone is the god capable of judging souls, devouring them, sacrificing them; I only see a man, my father. He looks at me as someone who suffers for me, who watches over me, and who would do everything in his power to make me happy.

“There are many things you never thought you would live through.” He opens his arms, inviting me to take refuge in them. I don’t know if it’s my condition, the fear, or simply that I am softening toward him, but I approach and let him embrace me. I rest my head on his chest and let him comfort me like a little girl. My eyes sting thinking that it is the first time someone who truly is my family hugs me.

“You thought you would die soon. Deep down, you even wished it. You never stopped to think about what you liked, to look for a hobby, to play an instrument, to learn to cook, to imagine yourself in another place, traveling, discovering new places. You never considered the possibility of having your own family, of truly loving someone, of having someone whose world you are. But the reality is, all of that is within your reach now. You can learn to play the piano if you want, pursue things that excite you, think about tomorrow, next month, or the next ten years. Just

it’s wh

asy

Comment

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 186

“You know as well as I do that I cannot take tomorrow for granted,” I whisper.

“None of us can.” He caresses my back softly. “Maybe you’ll have to fight a little longer; however, no one has as many loved ones as you do. If you can’t secure tomorrow on your own, you have us ”

I close my eyes, feeling the wetness slide down my cheeks. I cry in silence, knowing that here I am safe, that my tears won’t hurt him and that my sobbing won’t be judged. For a moment I think of what a miracle it is, with my tears being so dangerous, that life has given me the comfort of being able to cry in the arms of the two men who will mean the most in my life. One conquered me without permission, and the other has been part of me since my conception. As resentful as I sometimes feel, Atarothz’s presence in my future seems inevitable.

My body shakes with a sob. Yet, he does not try to stop my crying, instead letting me break as much as I need in his arms, because when I finish, I’ll have to piece myself back together and make a decision.

“I won’t let them hurt you.”

The hardness and firmness of his words make me believe him. I cling tighter to his torso and bury my face in him as if I could disappear from this cruel world. Suddenly, I feel a tug on my skirts, I look down and find a pair of golden eyes.

“Khaos?”

I pull back, wiping my tears with the back of my hand. He’s wearing a small cape that covers part of his body. I would laugh at how funny he looks if it weren’t for the whirlwind of thoughts in my head, I look up at the sky and notice it’s cloudy.

“You shouldn’t be outside,” I scold him.

“But there’s no sun! And I’m bored!”

I glance behind me only to see Atarothz has disappeared. I let out a breath and kneel down to be at the boy’s height.

“And what do you want to do?”

“Chase the waves!”

He starts hopping around, impossible for me to control. He runs along the shore, kicking up sand with his little steps, and I can’t do anything but laugh at his energy attack. I watch him throw stones into the sea, making them skip several times across the surface

before sinking; every so often, when he beats his own record, he sticks his tongue out at the sea in defiance. I cover my lips with my hand to hold back a laugh each time he does it.

I don't know why, but Khaos somehow reminds me of Silas—maybe it's his blond hair or the determination he shows despite being so small. Without much effort, I can imagine this as just another scene from my childhood, when we used to play together and he was definitely the more temperamental of us two. He too would have dueled with the sea. I think of Abigail, of the contrast between our three personalities. Where I am quiet and reserved, Abigail is cheerful and lively, and Silas, blunt and serious. **The** smile on my lips fades when I realize I thought of her in the present tense.

"You look ugly when you're sad," the little one says.

I look at him, faking a smile. They say children always tell the truth, and clearly, they do. Khaos **has no problem saying the first**

thing that crosses his mind, without sugarcoating **it**, without worry.

"You shouldn't speak **to a lady** like **that,**" I say, **crouching and tapping his nose with my finger,**

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TU18 FM, 22 Aug

"My father says you always have to tell the truth."

"And your mother? What does she tell you?" I ask, taking the chance to probe.

"I don't have a mom."

He shrugs, brushing it off. I watch him for a while, waiting for any sign of sadness; however, the boy seems to have fully accepted that fact in his life, and he doesn't look disturbed by my question or his answer. I wonder what happened, who she was, how she managed to catch the interest of a man like Eleazar.

The earth begins to shake, as if Cassian knew that for a second my thoughts had strayed toward another man. It's not that I feel anything romantic for Eleazar, he simply intrigues me—he always has. Perhaps I might have fallen prey to his mysticism if he weren't what he is and I weren't who I am.

Yet I know that never would have worked.

Cassian's claws are too deeply embedded in me.

The ground trembles again, so I take the boy's hand, who still doesn't seem to have had enough fun, judging by the way he twists his lips and looks at me reproachfully. I manage to recall the path back to Viatrix's hut, who doesn't seem the least bit surprised to see me at her door with Khaos by my side.

"Would you like to come in?"

I shake my head.

"I have things to do."

She nods, as if she knows perfectly well what things I mean. Possibly she does. I head toward Evanora's cabin, where I find her in the middle of what seems a fascinating task. She's weaving at a loom, and for several minutes I stay there, watching her absorbed in something that may look simple and dull but that she executes with an almost invisible smile on her lips.

She senses my presence.

"I prepared a hot bath. I suppose you're not in the mood for a cold one," she murmurs without lifting her eyes from her work.

Sometimes I forget that here they live in the most natural and rudimentary way possible. Without using Naja's magic more than necessary, perhaps out of fear of draining it. Her appearance doesn't show it, but she is a witch much older than she seems.

Hot baths are too laborious to have every day, so most take cold ones. Everything my eyes see here has been crafted by these women's hands, and the food I eat has been raised or grown here, through their effort. I can't help but feel admiration.

I smile, though she probably doesn't see it. I wander into the small room where I find a small tub, just big enough to sit in. I undress and do just that, pouring the steaming jugs of water inside. I scrub myself eagerly, and when I think I am clean enough, I allow myself the luxury of resting my head on the edge and relaxing. Or at least I try, because quickly I find myself searching for Cassian inside my head, waiting to feel the strength of his power pounding against the walls of my mind. To my surprise, he seems to have calmed. For now.

At some point, I fall asleep, and when I wake the water has long stopped being hot. I get out and dry myself as much as I can. I freeze before a full-length mirror. Some parts are broken, as if someone had struck it, angry with what they saw. Still, it's **whole** enough that I can see pieces of my reflection. Droplets of water stream freely from my wet hair to my breasts, slide **down my** stomach, pool in my navel, and then fall lower, between my thighs.

I fix

my gaze on my stomach, bring my hands to it, and begin to touch, searching for the **sign that**

something is growing inside. I'm

sure I won't find anything, but I'm wrong. There, in the lower part of my abdomen, beneath my fingers, I feel **a harder area**, a small lump. I stare at it as if it were an animal latched onto me, feeding on my flesh, on my blood.

On a small chair, I see what appears to be a dress and a soft robe. I take only the robe and tie it around my waist. I throw **one last** glance at the mirror and walk out with determined steps. Evanora is still at the loom, absorbed in her threads.

"Is it time?" she asks without even turning to look at me.

I wet my lips.

"Call him."

She stops everything she's doing and, without another word, leaves the hut. The moment she disappears from my sight, nerves begin to sweep through me from head to toe, devouring me alive. There's a shift in the atmosphere, as if for a few minutes the air were lighter. I can only assume it has to do with this place's protections, which must have weakened enough to let him in.

I clench and unclench my fists, full of nerves. I stare at the cabin door, knowing I'll see him walk through any moment. It feels like a lifetime has passed when it's only been a couple of days since I last saw him. Need competes with nerves. I start pacing the room in circles, impatient, until I feel another change in the air. This time electrifying. His scent rushes straight into my nostrils, and the unshakable force that is him rattles me to my core when he enters the room.

I turn, and see how his eyes search for mine and lock onto them with relief. His whole body visibly relaxes, and before I know it, I'm running into his arms.

"Elara."

"Cassian," I sigh against his neck.

He grabs me effortlessly, lifting me so I can wrap my legs around his hips. I lace my arms around his neck and rest my face against the curve where it meets his collarbone, seeking all the strength I need in the security of his body.

There's a sound behind us, and I know it's Evanora leaving to give us privacy. I hear Cassian inhale sharply, filling himself with my scent the same way I do with his. We are addicted to each other.

I place a kiss in the hollow of his neck and feel his whole body tremble with desire and need. I pull back just enough to look at his face, and in it I find all the answers I need. Perhaps it is fate, and I am incapable of fighting it, just as I couldn't fight the undeniable pull between our bodies and hearts. He strokes my cheek with his thumb while his other hand secures my body against his.

He frowns, surely able to see all the fear reflected in my features.

"Who do I need to kill, Elara?" Concern drips from his voice. "What's wrong? I thought you were fine..."

I shift in his arms so he'll set me down. I don't speak or answer his questions. Instead, with trembling fingers, I begin undoing the knot of the robe. He watches me with clear interest, and desire clouds his gaze as soon as I let the garment fall to the floor and stand completely naked before him. I hesitate a second before taking his long, cold fingers. There is no trace of his usual gloves, as if he wanted to avoid any interruptions when he is with me.

If he already looked consumed by curiosity, the moment I guide his hand to my stomach, his entire expression transforms into something words cannot convey. His gaze flickers from my nearly flat belly to my face, waiting for my confirmation.

I nod, a tear slipping from my eyes and falling into the void.

"Elara."

10:18 Fri, 22 Aug

My name leaves his lips like never before. Terror, love, confusion, plea all captured in these five letters. And with his **hand** will n me, he falls to his knees.

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 187

Cassian

The first thing that invades my body after hours of uncertainty, of imagining the worst possible scenarios, is relief. A relief that runs through every one of my limbs, evaporating all the tension that had built up in me until now. Then, when I see her eyes, that mix of emotions gives way to fear. A different fear.

A fear that makes my legs fail me and bring me down to the ground.

My hand is in contact with Elara's skin, I feel that small bump, something that we placed there between the two of us, something that grows each day. My mouth goes dry as my mind begins to form thousands of questions. The most important one, the one that repeats the most: what the hell am I going to do? How am I going to protect her? A note different from Elara's usual scent dances beneath my nose. It's a fine scent, very subtle at first, until I focus, and then the aroma of daffodils explodes.

The fear does not vanish, it remains, but more emotions join it, so many that I feel I might drown. I look at Elara, my chest about to burst with the need to be with her, to kiss her, to caress her, to protect her, to tell her how special she is and how stupid I was to deny it from the start. Her hand squeezes mine tightly and another tear slips from her eyes and falls onto them.

"What do you want to do?" I manage to ask, forcing the dryness from my throat.

I don't rise from the floor; I couldn't even if I tried. I've lost the last trace of strength I had left after hours and hours of trying to get in. Slowly, Elara crouches down and wraps me in an embrace that feels like consolation. Shouldn't I be the one to hold her and comfort her? I react late, enveloping her in my arms, inhaling the scent of her hair.

"The most sensible option is not to have it," she says almost in a whisper. "The war is knocking at our door,

the shapeshifters want me, the Pure fear me—though it's only a matter of time before they want to use me. When they find out I've managed to get pregnant, the countdown will begin." She sighs. "I've spoken with Atarothz, Cassian. He told me things that made me think."

"We'll do whatever you want, little beast."

My hand slides up and down her hair in soothing strokes. Her body softens against mine, letting what

torments her evaporate—or at least disappear for a while.

"It's yours. It's... ours. I've never wanted or desired anything because I thought it wasn't within my reach. Why think of love if I would never have the time to live it enough? I believed I was condemned not to live, or to live only fleeting things, and now I have the chance to dream, to want, to desire. What I want most is to live, all the experiences within my reach. To love and be loved so much it hurts, and this baby is unexpected, too soon, but I want it. I was trying to lie to myself; however, I want it, and I haven't even seen it. Maybe it's because it's yours and I want everything that comes from you. The good, the bad, and the in-between. Or maybe it's because, though tomorrow isn't guaranteed for any of us, now I have the will to fight to reach it."

I brush her tears away with my thumbs and fix my gaze into her eyes.

“I’ve never stopped to think what kind of father I would be. I had an exceptional family, though I always thought I wasn’t worthy of them. Before you, I wasn’t happy, I was an endless pit, never fully satisfied. Women, deaths, wealth—it didn’t matter. Everything was darkness until you came with your colors. I don’t know what kind of father I’ll be, sometimes I don’t even know if I am the man you deserve, but I am too selfish, too cruel, to give you up. What I do know is what kind of mother you’ll be. I’ve seen the pain in your eyes for your family, your strength, your determination, and if I have to bring a child into this world, I want it to be with you. Possibly it’s the only way for a villain like me to do something good.”

A laugh escapes between her sobs.

“I know what you are, Cassian, and I choose you. Today and every day.”

I cannot hold back my urge to embrace her, so tight I almost feel her melting into my body. Her warmth is still greater than mine, but I want to strip off all my clothes to be closer and burn if I must. I grip her cheeks and draw her closer to my mouth to taste her lips and devour all doubts. Between kiss and kiss, Elara lets out her fears, whispers all her thoughts, all the worries she had been facing alone. Now she isn’t anymore, and I won’t ever let go of her hand again. I sink my tongue into her mouth and dig one of my hands into her waist, pressing her tighter against me. Air becomes secondary; our bodies are more concerned with consuming one another.

“Ribcage was made to cage hearts like yours, Elara Voss,” I murmur against her. “So fierce, so untamable, so

wild.”

I hear her whimper against me and shiver in my hands. I’m about to lay her down on the ground and do all the things I’ve imagined these past days. Instead, Evanora seems to have other plans. I hear the banshee clear her throat from behind the door, as if she could feel where my thoughts were heading. Reluctantly, I leave Elara’s lips. She gives me a tender smile that warms the coldest parts of me.

The door finally opens, letting in the cold.

“I take it you’ve already made your choice, haven’t you, Elara?”

She smiles broadly and nods.

“Well then?”

She searches blindly for my hand and intertwines her fingers with mine.

“Explain the whole process to us, please.”

Evanora nods, hiding her smile, and gestures for us to follow her outside. Everyone watches us from inside their houses, too afraid of me to step outside. I'm aware of the feelings I inspire in these women, so none of this surprises me. The banshee leads us into a hut larger than the others. Inside, I hear the sound of beads shaken by the breeze and some restless animals in their cages. Darkness poses no problem for my senses; I

10:42 Sat, 23 Aug

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stride easily into the room where I perceive a different scent. We see a woman whose aura tells me she is much older than she looks. She lifts her gaze from whatever she was doing, and I see eyes with elongated pupils, like a reptile's. Her lips stretch into a wolfish smile.

"To what do I owe the honor of having the great Cassian Draven in my presence?"

Evanora seems to have taken on the role of mediator and conciliator, as she steps between us and gives me

a timid smile.

"Naja is a witch," she explains. "As you know, the only one known of in a long time. We banshees are used to assisting in the births of other women, but a pregnancy like Elara's is special."

"I know," I say. "When my mother... well, when I was young, I heard several stories. I know it carries risks."

"In truth, all pregnancies carry risks, but that of a Pure especially so. The body has to adapt quickly, it almost goes against nature. We will have to take great care of Elara, not subject her to stress, and make sure she has plenty of rest. It's likely that in a few weeks, the changes in her body will cause her pain that forces her to spend much time in bed."

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Sold to the Night Lord

Her words instantly trigger my protective instinct. I squeeze Elara's hand, still in mine, and for a moment I consider stopping all of this. Her eyes and her small smile are what keep me moving forward.

“We will try to make the process as smooth as possible, Cassian,” adds the banshee. “I know you are worried, and it’s logical that you are. Naja has attended births like this before, so I think the best thing is for Elara to stay here. She will be in the best hands.”

“You must promise me that I will be granted entrance and exit to the camp.”

“Please...” Elara whispers.

Evanora and Naja exchange a glance.

“You will have to request it from the Elder.”

I grimace, remembering the only time I exchanged words with her. Not long ago, when Elara fell ill, we had to come for help. It was strange enough that she agreed to help us then. I’m surprised we’re even here right now. It doesn’t seem to be a problem for them that Elara remain in the camp. I can’t say the same for me.

“I will see to it that your request reaches her,” Evanora says with a tense smile.

“Is there anything else I should know?” Elara asks.

“Everything will be fine, Elara.” The banshee’s hands go to her cheeks and caress her as a mother would. She winks before returning to her serious, measured demeanor.

“How far along is she?” I ask.

“We believe almost a month.”

I hold my breath, knowing that gives us little time to prepare. In just a few months, it won’t be just two of us. It won’t be just her that I must protect. All the threats and problems flood my mind; it’s hard to push them aside knowing that at this very moment we have few allies and many enemies. I suppose it’s that knowledge that drives me to place my hand on Evanora’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” I say with complete sincerity.

“Elara is very special. We will take care of her and bring that child into the world safe and sound. You are not

a man I’m fond of; however, that little one has not had the chance to choose his father.”

Elara stifles a gasp in her throat, and Evanora raises her hands, asking for calm in the room. Contrary to what might be expected, I don’t erupt in anger but instead let a laugh escape my chest.

“I think it’s best we leave now.”

The banshee pushes me, placing her hands against my chest and steering me toward the exit. At no point do I release Elara's hand, and when we are outside the hut, I see her body even more relaxed. I move closer, drape my arm around her shoulder, and pull her to me. We walk through the camp as any normal couple would on any given day, and then I know I will fight for this not to be something rare, but our normality.

Elara presses her cheek to my chest, seeking my warmth and affection. A whistle pulls me from my thoughts, and I quickly catch what the banshee tosses to me. I open my fist and see what looks like a key.

"It's yours for tonight." She smiles. "It's the cabin you'll see near the sea."

As soon as she disappears from sight, I scoop Elara into my arms and, laughing, carry her to the little house

by the sea. It's small and a bit old, but when we enter, we see

they've cleaned it and prepared it perfectly for us. I'm used to opulence; however, this place does not repel me in the slightest. I don't think I could be more

comfortable right now, here, with Elara and with a strange yet pleasant sensation in my chest.

"It looks as if you're about to cry..."

I blink and look down, where Elara remains within the circle of my arms.

"Then you are the only woman capable of making me cry."

"Are you happy?"

"With you, I am always happy."

I close the door behind us and press her against it before lowering my lips to meet hers. My hands roam her body and, unconsciously, one of them rests over her stomach. She moans against me when my fangs graze her lower lip. Her hips move against mine, searching for friction. Blood roars through my veins. I nip at her flesh with my teeth and taste a small drop of wild flavor on my tongue. I lick the wound, lift her into my arms, and pull her against me, erasing every inch of space between us.

For a few minutes nothing exists beyond her mouth and mine. Our kiss mixes with blood while her fingers

wander down to my trousers, loosening them.

"Cassian... we have to talk about something first."

Yet her words don't match her actions. Her mouth says we need to talk even as her hands search for my

cock.

"Are you sure you want to talk right now?"

I feel my erection twitch in her hand, Between kisses, I nearly manage to undo the knot of her robe. Her breasts come into view and the temptation to take one into my mouth is too great.

"How did I get pregnant, Cassian?" she asks between gasps.

"Do you really need me to explain that?" I reply as my tongue circles her nipple.

"You take a tonic to prevent it."

With her nipple in my mouth, I freeze. I hadn't thought of that—I'd let myself be carried away by all the emotions of the moment and hadn't stopped to wonder how we found ourselves in this situation in the first place. I don't get a chance to answer, because a deep voice clears its throat behind us. Elara cries out and I immediately cover her nakedness with my body. I glance over my shoulder to see a man with black hair down to his collarbones and eyes gray as storm clouds.

"I think I might have an answer for that."

"Father!"

Surprise flashes across both our faces at the word that leaves Elara's lips. She quickly averts her gaze to the ground, embarrassed, while the god cannot hide his wide grin.

"Better now than if I had appeared a few minutes later."

He turns away, granting her privacy to compose herself and tie her robe. I do the same without bothering to hide the effect his daughter has on me. I sit in a chair across from him, refusing to let his presence intimidate me. I know he expects his title as a god to cow me; that's because he doesn't know me.

He raises an eyebrow, defiant, and I curve one corner of my mouth in an arrogant smile.

"What do you mean, you might have an answer for that?" Elara asks.

She walks toward us, the most adorable blush decorating her cheeks. I catch her wrist and make her sit on my lap. If she was already flushed before, it's nothing compared to now. She places a hand on my neck for support, and without realizing it, her nervousness makes her toy with my hair.

“I believe this all has to do with your mother, Elara.”

“Lilith?”

“I heard she escaped the Pits,” I comment.

He nods.

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 189

The god snaps his fingers and then, before us, appears a woman of exquisite beauty, bound and gagged. Her gaze is fierce and defiant, promising war the moment she is freed. Her hair is the color of blood and her eyes a vivid green.

“Tell them what you’ve done, Lilith,” Atarothz demands.

He removes the gag, freeing her to speak.

“There’s no need,” Elara says. “I recognize those eyes. I saw you.”

Lilith’s lips curl into a dangerous smile.

“You were the servant, the one who carried the tonic to Cassian. You manipulated it.”

At Elara’s words, my full attention locks onto Lilith, and I quickly find the similarities to the new servant at the castle. She seems to notice the exact moment I piece everything together, and her smile widens, making my skin prickle.

“I must admit it was far too easy to deceive you.” Her voice is silky, designed to seduce. “I had to do it, since it’s more than clear you do not understand the importance of your role.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand.” Elara rises from my lap to face Lilith—her mother. “You have no

right to decide for me, for my body. This wasn’t your decision. It was mine, and you stole the power of choice from me again.”

“Stole it?” Lilith retorts. “I gave you everything.”

Both Atarothz and I remain silent, watching closely the confrontation between mother and daughter. It's

clear he feels great affection for Lilith; however, it doesn't seem like he's going to take her side in this dispute. As for me, I am more than certain I won't, even though the child growing inside Elara doesn't displease me at all—it wasn't the right time for this, nor was it a decision to be taken from us this way.

"Everything?" Elara clenches her fists. "You condemned me."

"Don't speak to me of condemnation," Lilith snaps back, a trace of pain in her voice. "You have no idea. Do you think it's easy for me? Being here now will only bring me pain later. I am in the hands of a man who hates me, despises me, tortures me simply for existing. The only thing that keeps me sane is thinking of the little moments in which I manage to escape. And even that gives me no peace, because I see you dying, little by little, one by one. I will not allow that to happen, I won't let them win and get their way, Elara." She steps closer and places her bound hands on her daughter's belly. "This is a gift. You don't see it now, but you will. Then you will understand me—in the moment it takes its first breath, you will do anything for it: kill, betray,

lie. All so it will live."

"I am your daughter too."

"If I thought this truly posed a risk to you, I wouldn't have done it." She tries to caress Elara's face, but she pulls away. "You are stronger than any of them, you have your father's gifts and my spirit. I didn't let myself be trampled, and neither will you. I saw you stand up alone when you fell to the ground and wiped your knees as if nothing had happened, only to mend your torn clothes by yourself. I saw you plunge into that freezing lake because the very thought of another person ruling your life burned your insides. I know that determination, that fierceness."

"You saw me?"

"Did you think Atarothz was the only one watching over you?" *For* the first time, her features soften, taking on the appearance of a truly concerned mother who feels affection for her daughter. "I've made many mistakes, I'm sure, but I never did anything without considering what could go wrong and what could go

right."

"I can understand your pain and your sacrifices; however, that doesn't change things. You haven't been a mother to me, Lilith."

Immediately the air shifts, the atmosphere turning bleak. Gone are those softened features on Lilith's face, replaced instead by the one I'd already seen: warrior, merciless, cold.

"I will take care of her, Elara."

Atarothz places a hand on his daughter's shoulder and gives it a small squeeze before stepping toward Lilith and vanishing with her. For a long while, neither of us says anything. I let Elara process everything that has just happened—her encounter with her mother and all the words they exchanged.

"Cassian."

"Yes?"

"Take me to bed, it's been too long a day."

"As the Ruby Queen commands."

I lift her into my arms and carry her to a bed large enough for us both. I free one hand to pull back the blankets, gently lay her down, then lie beside her and cover us. Without warning, the logs in the fireplace ignite, filling the room with the warmth of their flames. I make a mental note to thank Ank for that.

Elara places her hands on her chest and seeks to hide within my arms. I let her do exactly that.

"Don't let me be a bad mother, Cassian."

"You could never be a bad mother."

"I don't want to be her."

"You are not her. You are better. Always."

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She stays silent so long I think she has already fallen into Morpheus's arms, so when I hear her murmur something against my chest, my first thought is that she's talking in her sleep. I tilt my head closer to her so I

can hear clearly and unravel her little whispers.

When I catch every word, I cannot hold back the small smile that curves my lips.

“I love you, Cassian.”

“I love you, Elara,” I whisper in her mind.

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 190

Elara

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I know the moment when Cassian will have to leave again is drawing closer. It's unreal to think we can live forever in this bubble; at some point one of us will have to burst it, though I think we both hope the other will be the one to do it. Is it so bad that I want to live in this fantasy? My mind and my body feel as though we've never had even a single moment of peace, not only now but since our very first breath. Always worried about the day I would come of age. Afterwards, angry at everything and everyone for the life I'd been forced to live, and now I am... afraid. I don't think there's a better word to describe it. They tell me I am powerful, that I am a miraculous being, but I don't feel like that at all.

A cheerful shout pulls me out of my thoughts.

“I still don't quite understand why you're the one taking care of him, he has a father for that.”

“A father who happens to be captive right now, if I remember correctly.”

“And my dad?” asks the boy, as if realizing who we're talking about.

Khaos holds my hand as we walk along the beach shore. I'm wearing a short dress that leaves my feet free to get wet as much as they want without me worrying about the consequences. The boy's golden eyes shift from my face to Cassian's, who doesn't look his friendliest at the moment.

“On vacation,” he answers.

I throw him a warning look. The boy already has to live without a mother; he doesn't need to be frightened further with the fate of his father. Why am I the one taking care of him? It's as simple as the fact that I want

1. to. I have nothing better to do here—two days have passed since I shared the news with Cassian and, as much as I love lazing in bed, that is not our reality, no matter how much we wish it were. With each sunrise

and sunset, I hold my breath, waiting for the next difficulty, the next attack, the next threat.

"Be good," I whisper in his ear.

I feel the brief flex of his fingers at my waist before he steps away from me with a wicked smile.

"You ask the impossible of me, darling"

"I trust you,"

The boy and I walk off hand in hand, chasing the waves. From time to time, I can't help but reach for that bump growing in my belly, more noticeable with each passing day, I won't lie—I'm afraid. The changes happen too quickly; they give me a sense of vertigo.

"You're prettier today," the boy says quietly.

"Oh, really?" I reply, holding back a smile.

"Yes, you're not sad."

I remain still for a few seconds, letting his words sink in. There are no words purer or more sincere than those of a child. I can't hold back the smile tugging at my lips. I crouch down to his level, brush aside a strand of golden hair, and graze his cheek, paler still under the moonlight.

"You're not bad yourself," I say. "You'll be a very handsome man when you grow up."

"I'm already a man."

He puffs out his chest, presses his lips together, and raises his chin.

"Of course, forgive my mistake."

At first, he doesn't seem too convinced and shoots me a suspicious look, but finally he goes back to playing, trying to catch the waves that crash on the shore and retreat as

quickly as they come. When I hear his laughter, my chest tightens, instantly thinking of my little sister's laugh. Hers was like his—carefree, joyful,

innocent.

As if Cassian could sense the path of my thoughts, he comes to my side, wraps his arm around my shoulders, and draws me closer to his body.

"We have to stop all this," I murmur. "For us and for people like him. We can't let innocent people suffer."

"I know."

"Don't let him grow up without a father, Cassian."

I lock my eyes on his, knowing that right now he's thinking about what my words are truly asking of him.

"This tender heart..." he says, placing a finger over the organ responsible for my heartbeat. "It's going to be my undoing, little beast."

"I'm not asking you to trust him, only... don't kill him." I imitate him, placing my finger on his chest. "Search for your capacity not to do it, so there won't be more children who suffer like you, so you won't feed the hatred any further."

He averts his gaze to the sea, staring at it so long I almost believe he won't say another word. Every now and then, the sound of Khaos's laughter reaches us—no matter how many times he gets wet, he can't contain his excitement each time he feels the cold touch of water.

"The world doesn't deserve you," Cassian finally says. "But I'll do what you ask. For you. I'll put him to the test, see if his intentions are true, and if he can be of help to us in all this." He sighs. "If he puts you in danger again, if he does anything to harm you, I swear to you, Elara, not even that boy will be able to stop me. Nor your heart."

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I place my palm against his cheek and caress his skin. I know it's cold and yet, in some inexplicable way, I feel that any contact with him warms me.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I think it’s time for Elara and me...”

Cassian rolls his eyes before turning his attention to Atarothz. Again, he comes to visit me every day to continue working on my powers, with which I now proceed with more caution. I withdraw my hand and give Cassian a chaste kiss on the lips before stepping away.

“Will you look after him?” I ask, pointing to Khaos.

“I promise nothing,” he says through pressed lips.

I shoot him a narrow-eyed look that promises, without the need for words, unbearable pain if anything happens to that little one in my absence. Cassian raises his hands in a placating gesture and winks at me. I leave, closely followed by Atarothz, though I can’t help glancing back a couple of times to see Cassian watching the boy with an interest he tries to hide. I wonder if he’s thinking about the future, about living a similar scene when we have our own family.