

Sold to the Night Lord

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 191

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I smile to myself and continue until we reach a secluded area where no one will disturb us or be frightened by what they see. I sit in a small chair while the god chooses to cross his arms and lean against a rock ledge.

“Today I want to try something different,” he informs me.

He snaps his fingers and before us appears an animal. My first thought is that it’s dead; however, after looking more closely, I notice a faint movement in its body. Almost imperceptible. If I focus on the sound of its heart, I hear its beat is weak.

“Close your eyes and tell me what you see.”

At first, I frown, not quite understanding what he wants, but I obey and *close* my eyes. I focus on quickly searching for that web of threads that connect its soul to its body. With much more speed and ease, I avoid the little traps the soul sets to keep from being found. When I find the glowing thread, I see that it’s frayed,

unlike the others I’ve seen, whose bonds were strong and steady.

“Unlike other times, this living being is at death’s door, its soul slowly leaving its body,” he points out. “Most

of the souls you’ve taken so far were well tied to their owner—you cut them without issue. Now I want to

see if you’re capable of the opposite action.”

“You want me to bind the soul to its body?” I ask, eyes still closed.

“That’s right.”

“How?”

“Let your instinct speak.”

I squeeze my eyelids tighter, making a superhuman effort to find a way to do what he asks. I visualize the web again, locate the frayed thread, and hold it in my hands. I feel the warmth fading little by little, the cold creeping in, and the constant, steady detachment of the animal's soul. I imagine cradling life in my hands, protecting it. Then, I realize I have no idea what to do with it.

Atarothz senses my nervousness and confusion and places a hand on my shoulder to instill a bit of confidence.

I try something different, conjuring different threads from my fingers and, though I don't know how to weave, I imagine myself doing so, reinforcing the fading glowing thread. I grow desperate, tugging at those imaginary strands, trying to do what seems utterly impossible. The glow keeps dimming, each second more, like an hourglass shedding its last grains toward its end. Until it happens—it goes out, and without opening my eyes, I know the subtle movements of the animal have ceased.

Air escapes my lungs slowly; the disappointment, however, stays rooted within me.

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"It was a good attempt," Atarothz consoles me.

"Not good enough." I turn to him, but on his face I find no disappointment—only an encouraging smile. "Could you have saved it?"

"Perhaps it was already too late."

"I want to keep trying."

Atarothz shakes his head.

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"When you are focused on your power, sometimes you lose track of time." He gestures with his chin. "It's later than you think, and you've spent more time than advisable probing your power. In your state, it's not

safe to overdo it. Besides..."

He presses his lips together, seeming unsure if it's wise to say whatever he was about to say. I raise an

eyebrow.

"Besides?"

“I didn’t intend for you to succeed. I wanted you to experience the difficulty of preserving a life compared to the ease of ending one. Perhaps the ability isn’t even in you, and if that’s the case... you mustn’t interfere

with destiny. We must let life run its course, for better or worse.”

I arch a brow and cross my arms.

“Saving a life is interfering with destiny, but stealing a soul isn’t?”

“I am teaching you to protect yourself. Interfering with a life that is destined to end does not protect you in any way—in fact, it’s the opposite. It would exhaust you, and sometimes there is a price to pay.”

“Being able to master that side of my powers could help us against what’s coming.” Rage boils in my chest. “You spent eighteen years of my life not caring about me, don’t try to play the hero now. If you truly care, help me with this.”

I fall silent as I study the emotions crossing his face. My words are low blows I can’t hold back. I suppose I’ve been bottling up too many grievances. His showing closeness now and offering me his help doesn’t erase the past, all the years when I could have felt more understood, less alone. Perhaps the betrayal I feel toward the Voss family would be lighter, perhaps Abigail’s death wouldn’t hurt so much. I might have fled in time, never formed bonds. It’s a selfish thought, I know, but I want to avoid pain. I’d rather feel emptiness in my chest than drown in grief.

“Elara, it’s not your duty to bring anyone back if the worst comes to pass.”

“Are you suggesting that if Cassian died, I should simply accept it?” I snap. “Are you capable of accepting that my mother chooses to return to the arms of her torturer again and **again** instead of standing by your

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side and fighting?”

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I can’t stop my sharp words. For a god who claims not to feel many emotions, pain is easy to read on his face. His throat works as he swallows, his fists clench tightly as he absorbs the truth in my words.

“You’re linking two completely different things,” he finally says.

I can't believe the calmness with which he speaks.

"That doesn't make them any less true. For the people we love, we are capable of doing whatever it takes. Waiting eternally for them to choose us and remain by our side, or giving our last drop of life trying to bring them back." I square my shoulders, determined not to let him intimidate me. "I intend to keep trying, Atarothz. Whether you like it or not. If bringing someone I love back is even a possibility, I will not let it go. You can help me or let me do it alone. That's your decision. I've already made mine."

He shakes his head, and despite my harsh words, a small smile curves his lips.

"You're stubborn."

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It's not that I don't understand his reasons for feeling wary. Having within reach the possibility of preventing the death of a loved one is too tempting a fruit not to fall into temptation. Sometimes life must be allowed to take its course, but I am not willing to accept an early end for those I love, especially not because of a war whose main cause is me. As much as this means playing with destiny, before me lies a possibility impossible to ignore. We walk back to that little cabin by the sea that is now my home here. We stop at the threshold, and for a few seconds it feels as though we both want to say something but neither dares to be the first.

I take a breath. I begin to feel a little guilty for the words I hurled in a moment of anger, though no less sincere for it.

"Where is she?"

There's no need for me to specify for him to know who I mean.

"Do you remember the cabin where we first met?"

"In that sort of limbo?"

He nods.

"She's there, regaining her strength." His face darkens and his gray eyes shadow until they're nearly black. "She needs to be in the best condition to face what will undoubtedly be something harsh."

"How do you endure it?"

“I don’t endure it,” he confesses. “Every time I see her give in and abandon me, my heart breaks a little

more.”

“Why don’t you stop all this?”

“She wouldn’t forgive me. This world as we know it wouldn’t survive such a battle, and for some time now, I’ve had more things to fight for. You.” I want to believe his words so badly that it hurts. “Now also the child you’re **going** to bring into the world. I wouldn’t forgive myself for putting you in danger that way either.”

“Isn’t there any way that...?”

“Don’t worry about that now,” he cuts me off. “You have more pressing battles to fight, don’t you think? Your mother and I will find a way, but not now. The priority is something else, it always has been.”

The rest is implicit in his gaze i smile, though it’s a smile halfway between sadness and remorse. I grasp the doorknob, and giving him one last look, I step inside the cabin where the fire is already lit. Cassian is standing before the flames, his face thoughtful I approach slowly, though I know he’s aware of my presence. I wrap my arms around his body and rest my cheek against his back, inhaling the scent of the dark night that always clings to him.

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“Drystan is here,” he announces.

His tone is solemn, and I know the bubble is about to burst. I squeeze my arms tighter around him.

“What’s going on?”

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“I don’t know, I haven’t spoken to him. I was waiting for you.” He turns slowly and covers my hands with one of his. “He’s at the camp’s edge, waiting. They won’t let him through.”

“Then let’s see what happens.”

I am more than determined to head out the door when Cassian holds me back, pulling me until I’m completely engulfed in his body. He tightens his arms around me and rests his chin atop my head. I think I can feel him breathing in the scent of my hair while his hands continuously move up and down my back and arms, as if no caress is enough. I bury my

face in his chest, hoping his attentions will comfort me a little. I hear him exhale slowly and then seek my face, cupping it in his hands.

“Now we can go.”

A small smile spreads across my lips. I nod, clinging to his hand as we walk in silence through the camp until we reach the end. Evanora is already there, arms crossed over her chest and her expression stern. Though invisible to the eye, it's clear there's a barrier separating the camp from the rest of the world, and Drystan is unmistakably on the other side.

“Does he know?” I whisper.

“I thought it best to tell him in person, since this concerns both of us.”

Cassian releases my hand to step closer to the boundary, while the banshee retreats toward me. The right hand of Cassian cannot contain his smile at seeing his friend and, fleetingly, he casts me an affectionate look, to which I respond with a small nod.

“What's the matter?”

Drystan rummages **inside** his jacket and pulls out a small rolled piece of paper. He tries to hand it to Cassian, but sparks flare at the first attempt. A faint trace of smoke curls from one of the paper's corners.

“I suppose I'll have to tell you myself,” he says, throwing a glance at Evanora. Something tells me this was just an excuse to come and be near her. “The Council is calling a meeting with you.”

“For what?”

“To discuss the future of the Pure now that it's known the shapeshifters have grown stronger and, of course,

to speak about... Elara”

“There's nothing to discuss about her.”

“Cassian, think about it—maybe you won't get another chance to sit at the table and negotiate. Next time you may face them in the middle of a bloodbath. You have to go, explain to them what Elara is, what she's capable of, and make the limits clear. You'll have Ciro and Abraxas's support, I'm sure. In case of a vot-”

“Elara is not going anywhere,” he interrupts.

“But you have to-”

“She’s pregnant.”

I see that moment as my chance to step in. I walk toward them, knowing my dress hides the small bump of my belly. The Pure’s gaze travels down my body with absolute disbelief. I have to bite back a laugh at how his face pales even further. He opens and closes his mouth like a fish out of water, unable to find words. Evanora lets out something like a snort as she walks behind me, like a guard dog.

“You’re joking.”

“I hope you won’t say the same when you see a little Draven running around,” Cassian says with sarcasm.

Drystan pinches his arm, not once but twice, checking he isn’t in a dream. He still looks like he’s seen a ghost, unable to tear his gaze from one place in particular: my belly. A small blush warms my cheeks. I place my hand over it and draw a shy smile.

“In case you were wondering, it was an accident.”

The silence stretches for several tense seconds before everyone, including Evanora, bursts into laughter at my comment. Cassian quickly regains his composure, straightens, and his face sharpens back into

seriousness.

“Now that you know, I believe you understand why we can’t expose Elara this way. I’ll have to convince them there are greater threats than her on my own.” He casts me a fleeting look. “When will the meeting take place?”

“I’d say we’d better leave as soon as possible.”

And then the bubble bursts. Even knowing the moment would come when we’d have to part, I can’t help but feel as though cold water has been poured over me. Cassian seeks my hand and, without saying anything to the others, draws me aside just enough to make it feel like we’re alone, even though we’re not.

“I won’t be gone long.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Do you hear me? Erase that sad expression.”

“Let me be sad,” I mutter like a small child.

“You can be sad, but not because of me.”

A tender smile pulls at the corners of his lips, and unable to resist kissing that smile, I grab the lapels of his

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jacket and rise on my toes to reach his mouth. The kiss is sweet, slow, nostalgic, as if we already missed each other. He pulls away before things become harder. I think he'll cross the barrier and leave, but instead, he turns back toward me, his steps deliberate. He stops and casts a fleeting glance into my *eyes* before lowering it to my belly. He places his hand there for a moment, closes his eyes, takes a breath, and then, finally, he leaves without looking back.

Drystan gives me a farewell smile, and both of them vanish in seconds. I remain standing there, overcome by a terrible cold, not even feeling my friend's hand as she sets it on my shoulder.

"Everything will be fine."

I close my eyes and pray, not knowing to which god, that it's true—even though deep down I know none of them truly hear my prayers, not even Atarothz.

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Cassian

The wild scent, mixed with that of daffodils, follows me like a person throughout the entire journey back. Every now and then, I find myself glancing over my shoulder as if I might catch a glimpse of Elara's black hair or any trace of her. Truth is, those sights would be far better than what lies ahead. We make our way slowly through the Twisted Forest, refraining from using our speed so as not to alert the Kraugs of our presence. The stench of rot is unbearable, and coagulated blood clings to the soles of my boots with a repulsive sound. I wonder who the poor souls were that dared to enter. Undoubtedly, they had no chance of escape.

A snap echoes, and both of us turn our gaze toward the bone crushed under Drystan's weight. We exchange a look, holding our breath, ears sharpened, waiting for any sound. At first, nothing seems disturbed, but minutes later we hear the faint noise of earth shifting, as if something were dragging itself across it. What follows is the foulest stench I have ever smelled, growing stronger with every second.

We quicken our pace, knowing one of those creatures is coming toward us. We try to *move* without further incident, avoiding even the smallest obstacles on the ground. Just

when we think we'll make it through without getting our hands dirty, we come face-to-face with one of those creatures that haunt children's nightmares.

"I know I've been a very bad boy, but a little bit of luck now and then wouldn't hurt," I mutter.

We both turn to each other, sharing a complicit smile. I grab Drystan's hand, using it as leverage to propel myself into the air, right to the height of the creature's fangs, and land a kick that sends it crashing into several trees, splintering them beneath its weight. Thanks to that move, we've opened just enough distance for me to gather the few seconds I need to focus. I fix my gaze on its serpentine body ending in a scorpion's stinger, its half-human torso and face, and with a flick of my hand, I make it vanish. Neither of us escapes the splatters, some burning into my skin as if they were acid.

"It was too much to ask to show up clean to the meeting," Drystan grumbles as he dusts off his jacket lapels.

I let out a ragged breath before straightening and scanning both sides for another threat. Everything seems quiet and empty, but I don't allow myself the luxury of relaxing. For the rest of the trek, I keep my senses sharp, my head snapping toward every faint noise, expecting another Kraug to pounce on us. When the density of twisted branches begins to thin, light filters in, along with fresher air, free of nauseating stench. Once outside, we abandon our restraint and head toward the De'ath mansion, where the Council meeting will take place.

The journey lasts longer than I'd like, though shorter than one would expect. The astonishment is plain on the faces we pass as they watch me stride up the mansion's imposing steps and make my way to the chamber I know so well. Along the way, my eyes meet Walter's, and for a moment, an idea flickers in my mind—one I'm not sure I should act on

I push open the chamber doors, Drystan close behind me, and though my presence must have been announced, some faces still seem surprised to see me. I take my usual seat at the head of the long meeting table, Ciro on my left, Aeron on my right, and my friend standing behind me, guarding my back as always.

"Here I am, just as you requested."

I tug at my shirt sleeves, trying to appear unshaken. I notice a small stain and glare at it, as if I could make it vanish by sheer will. There are few things I despise more than showing up unpresentable. Presence is a weapon, just like words. If your opponent believes you are lesser in appearance, in speech, in thought, in wit... your confidence crumbles. You are nothing more than a puppy begging for scraps of affection.

"Well then." Aeron forces a tense smile. "Now that we're all here, who wishes to be the first to voice their concerns?"

A murmur ripples through the chamber until one of them—his surname unworthy of remernbering—puffs out his chest and speaks.

“The girl.” His voice is raspy, the sound of a lifetime smoker. “She killed a Diluted one without even blinking. What the hell is she? She’s supposed to be human, a feeder!”

Ciro shoots me a sidelong glance. Just then, I hear someone else slip into the chamber, and from the faint scent, I know it’s none other than Abraxas, who promptly positions himself beside his brother, ever the loyal guard.

All eyes are on me, waiting for my response. If my heart beat, it would be racing, knowing that my next words could carry heavy consequences. I draw a slow breath and release it, steadying my temper.

“She is not human,” I begin. “Nor is she a threat to you.”

“Forgive us if we doubt that,” someone protests.

“Let him finish!” Aeron cuts in, motioning for me to continue.

“Elara was born of the union between Lilith and Atarothz, disguised as human so she wouldn’t be hunted for her nature until she was old enough to defend herself—and to... find me.”

“Atarothz?”

“The God of the Between,” Ciro interjects. “One of the Ancient Gods, the forgotten ones. Said to be the judge of souls.”

“That’s right,” I confirm. “Elara inherited some of his gifts. She can eradicate souls—that’s what you saw her do.” Faces pale even further. “But I swear to you, she is no danger to any of you. She is learning to control her powers, and so long as you do not harm her, she will not harm you. She is one of us.

”

“She is not one of us,” another spits with disdain.

“She is,” Ciro interrupts, casting me a look.

“As I said, she is Lilith’s daughter—our creator. Each of us, no matter how long our bloodlines stretch, are connected to her in some way. Elara is her direct daughter and shares traits we possess—speed, immortality, heightened senses...”

“And what did you mean earlier by ‘find you’?”

Ciro studies me as if he already knows the answer, as if he's digging into the depths of my soul and sees it plain as day. I shift uneasily in my chair, fists clenching before continuing with words I'd rather keep only between the two of us.

"Lilith knows our problem—the constant dwindling of our numbers after the last massacre of the Pure. So when she conceived Elara, she destined her for me, in hopes she would strengthen the bloodline."

"Are you saying she can...?"

"Yes," I cut firmly. "And she is mine. None of you will lay a hand on her."

A silence like no other I've ever heard fills the chamber. Everyone searches their companions' eyes for answers, clarifications, the next step to take—but no one knows what to do. Nothing is stronger in the universe than the thread connecting two destined souls, and mine leads to Elara. A mate is not something easily found among our kind, accustomed as we are to debauchery, excess, the pleasures of the flesh and desire. Not all of us are destined to find a mate, and many don't want one. But from the moment two destined souls become aware of each other, they cease to breathe for themselves—they breathe only for the other. The universe ceases to make sense without that person in sight, and they would do anything for them. Kill, lie, betray—anything to keep them

safe.

That's what they're all thinking now. Some may look at me with envy, others with pity.

10:48 Sun, 24 Aug

Oh, little devil, reduced to the existence of a woman.

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What they don't understand is that Elara and I go beyond even that. She was literally made for me, as twisted as it sounds, as difficult as it is for me to accept sometimes.

"If you have anything else to say, say it now."

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The one who seems to have taken the lead among the lesser families fixes his eyes on me, smiling nervously.

"That all sounds very nice, but we have no guarantee that it's true." He spreads his hands toward the rest of his companions. "The last image we have of that... of her, is with a vampire at her feet. As you can understand, we don't feel safe."

“I think there are other threats that require greater attention.”

If they knew what a single tear of Elara could do, the repercussions it would have if it fell into the wrong hands... That would be a real reason to be afraid. I know Elara; she won't harm anyone unless she feels they're a threat, though perhaps right now her measure of what is or isn't dangerous isn't entirely reliable, given the circumstances. Both she and I no longer think only of ourselves.

“Perhaps it would be a good show of faith if she herself sat at this table and gave her version.”

“Is mine not enough?” I reply, tilting my head in a predator's gesture. “Do you think my version is wrong?”

“No, of course I don't mean that, only that...”

“Gentlemen, if you don't mind, we'd like you to leave us alone,” Aeron intervenes, wearing his best smile.

I see them about to protest, but they must think better of it, because one by one they rise and leave the room in silence.

“Ciro. Not you.”

The pink-eyed vampire drops back into his seat. We wait until we are completely alone and the door clicks shut. Ciro signals to Abraxas, and I know without words that he wants him to ensure there are no curious ears nearby. As soon as the click of the lock echoes within these four walls, Aeron fixes us with a fatherly look.

“You knew all this?” he asks Ciro in a reproachful tone.

“No.”

“And your interest in her?”

“She's a beautiful and intriguing woman,” he replies with a shrug.

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I arch a brow in his direction, promising him a slow death if he ever dares speak of her that way again. He responds with a smile that clearly says I owe him for standing on my side in all of this. Aeron shifts his attention from him back to me.

“If what you say is true—” I roll my eyes. “—then does Elara have the ability to bear others like us?”

“I suppose I shrug. “Lilith thought of it, no doubt.”

Aeron exhales a sigh of relief, and I’d almost swear he’s on the verge of tears. A genuine smile breaks across his lips as he pats my forearm

“She is our salvation.”

“I will not force her into anything, do you understand?” I lock my eyes onto his. “Elara is not a factory for little vampires. Is that

clear?”

“I understand.” Still, his smile does not fade. “I’ll simply wait until the biological clock coines knocking. I can’t promise you the

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others will think the same. There will be attempts to take her.”

“She is my mate, Aeron. Something like that is immoral even for us. Nothing is more sacred. We can walk this Earth for hundreds of years, but the moment the other begins to exist, you feel something inside you is incomplete. It’s no wonder I didn’t know of her existence until much later—I have always felt incomplete. You spend your life searching for it, and when you find it, suddenly everything makes sense again. The air fills your lungs with ease, and the only beat of your immortal heart is the moment you see her face for the first time. Now I wonder if that pull I felt at the Red Auction was that heartbeat, and I simply didn’t recognize it until now. Of course, there are those who resist it, who run the other way, hoping distance will be enough. But it is a curse—a slow death of the soul. And it isn’t metaphorical. There are rumors of a pair who refused to accept their bond, who did everything possible to avoid it, and their fate was a slow death by grief. They didn’t even know that what was eating them alive was sorrow. If there is another way to kill a Pure, it must be that.”

My parents were one of those pairs who embraced it immediately, without resistance, and I know of no greater example of love than them.

“Yes, under normal circumstances, but these are not normal. And you haven’t exactly been a saint—there will be those who wish to make you suffer.”

“Then I’ll show them that everything I’ve done until now was child’s play. I can be very creative when it comes to inflicting pain.”

“Let’s hope you don’t have to go that far.” Aeron rises from his seat and pats me on the shoulder. “I’ll expect you tomorrow with the others to continue discussing the rest of the matters that need attention, since today’s meeting seems to have reached its end.”

With that, he disappears with the calm that always defines him. Our dynamic has always been this way: Aeron is the voice of reason, the serious and measured member of this trio I never asked for. Ciro is the jester, the youthful spirit, always trying to provoke my exaggerated reactions. And I am the chaos, the venomous beast, the natural disaster waiting to happen.

For the first time since Elara returned with me, Ciro and I are alone in a room.

“Is she alright?”

“Yes.” I lace my fingers in front of my face. “Let’s be direct—are you going to be a threat? Tell me now, so I can kill you and spare us

the back and forth.”

“You can’t kill me.”

“I can make you useless,” I reply with a smile.

“And you’d break poor Elara’s heart.” He chuckles just long enough before letting the laughter die and returning to a serious expression. “I won’t be a threat to her, Cassian. You may find it hard to believe, but I care for her.”

“You care for her?” Lecho.

“Not in the way you think.” He sighs. “I won’t deny I would have loved to steal her from you completely, to claim her feelings, her heart, but I never stood a chance. You’re a lucky bastard. I care for her as a friend, one I’d protect if necessary.”

“And so would I.”

We all glance at the door where Abraxas has now entered. His face is nondescript, one I think I’ve seen before, and I know without mistake it is *not* his own. It’s *too* ordinary, too plain to be an Amery. I dip my chin in a brief nod and rise from my seat, closing the conversation.

“If you care for her as you say, then I expect you to support nie from here on out.”

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“So long as it’s for the best, I will.”

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Cassian

I wake up startled, with a fist clutching the heart in my chest.

I try to draw air into my lungs, which seem to have forgotten how to do it. My clothes are wrinkled, dirty, and sweaty. The fabric sticks to my chest and with trembling fingers I brush away the hair clinging to my forehead. I don't know what I dreamed, what tormented my sleep, I only know it left a horrible sensation deep in my bones.

Automatically I close my eyes and the first thing I do is search for Elara, pounding my fists against the firm walls that only she has managed to raise against me.

Despite the sweat, my body is cold, frozen, but as soon as she lets me into her mind, I feel a warm embrace surrounding me. Our connection is not limited only to being able to feel her or speak to her, I see her sitting in a rocking chair by the fire and little Khaos is at her feet, playing with wooden blocks. Elara's profile is cut by the flames, which bathe her in golden light and give her a healthy, happy appearance. My whole being relaxes, flooded with relief.

"I feel your worry, is everything all right, Cassian? Is it about the meeting?"

I take a step toward her, I want to place my hand on her shoulder and feel her skin, even for a second; however, my fingers seem to pass through her flesh and disappear into nothing. I frown, confused. Perhaps it is the result of exhaustion.

"The meeting went well." I smile, although she cannot see me from behind. "I just had a nightmare. What do you have there?"

Over her shoulder I see scraps of fabric resting in her lap and what look like two knitting needles. It doesn't resemble anything I recognize as a garment and a quick glance at Elara's frown confirms what I already suspected. She is as good at knitting as I am at being good. I press my lips together, forbidding myself to laugh, and fail.

"I'm not made for knitting," she grumbles. "I just wanted to keep myself busy with something. I'm bored here. Isatt ge home."

It hurts me not to be able to touch her cheek the way I want to.

"You'll return and fill the castle with baby cries, I can't think of anything better," I say with a teasing smile. Nonetheless, we both know it's true. "What about your lessons with Ataroth?"

"They're brief. He's afraid I'll get too exhausted. It's not good for me or the pregnancy."

I nod, agreeing with her father. A time will come when Elara will be tired all the time, so it's better she doesn't waste

unnecessary energy.

“Are you sure the meeting went well?”

“Sure,” I say with false conviction. “No Pureblood will harm you. They don’t know anything about your pregnancy and I’ll keep it that way until we return.”

“And when they find out?”

I crouch down in front of her, but avoid touching her so she doesn’t notice that my touch is not real like other times. I look at her utterly serious, though my lips don’t want to cooperate, fighting to curve into a soft smile. The kind that belongs only to her.

“You are mine, Elara, and so is that child. No one will come near you.”

“Ours,” she corrects.

“Ours,” I agree. “And I am yours.”

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Her gray eyes reflect more life than ever when she smiles and crinkle, drawing small wrinkles at the corners. The fire tyres color to her cheeks and she looks like the same dirty, rebellious girl I saw the first time. Khaos drops a wooden block on the floor, breaking the spell I was caught in try her eyes.

“He has trouble sleeping,” she says. “He wants to see the sun”

“You know he can’t.”

“It breaks my heart that the closest he’ll ever be to feeling the rays is this fire.”

“We all suffer corruption in some way, it leaves its marks.”

The words leave my mouth as I look at the boy and feel a small wisp of compassion. “At least he was born that way, it hurts less if it isn’t something you’ve lost once you had it.”

Elara nods and keeps watching the child for what feels like hours. Neither of us says anything, we remain in complete silence and little by little, both he and she fall asleep to the warmth of the flames. I try to arrange the blankets for both of them and my fingers pass through the fabric, making me feel powerless. I grind my teeth and squeeze **my** eyes shut, leaving her mind and returning to my lonely room. My body is still on the bed, with the difference that the sweat has dried on my skin. I get up and, as if Ank were able to read my thoughts, I find a bath of hot water waiting for me. I thank **him**, whispering

silent words to the flame of one of the candles on the candelabrum. I undress and immerse myself **in** the water and, by the time I come out and prepare for a new day, I know clearly what my first step will be.

Without the presence of the other feeders, the castle feels deserted. Before I could hear their murmurs, they thought **my** hearing wouldn't reach all their whispers, their conversations under the sheets where they imagined that one of them **might** be able to win the heart of an immortal and that he would grant her the gift of eternal life. Now all that is gone, **giving** way to calm. Only Elara's scent bathes these walls, I can sense her absence and picture her in every corner without anyone else interfering and making noise in that image.

I go down, without much hurry, to the small guarded door that leads to the renovated dungeons. I must admit the efficiency of my men, or maybe I should pat myself on the back for sowing enough fear to make them work miracles. I pass by the cell where Mavka is once again, who survived the explosion. For a few seconds I don't see her, but the comatose Eb. 7 *for* instant guilt scratches at the walls of my heart.

I shake my head, pushing that thought away. She is not Elara. She deserves this. I keep walking and head straight for Eleazar's cell. I find him lying on the cot, his legs and arms crossed and his gaze fixed on infinity. As soon as he senses me his body straightens and he gives me a lopsided smile.

"I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me. Honestly, you hurt my feelings."

"Luckily, I don't care." I lean against the wall across from him, cross my ankles and put my hands in my pants pockets. "I've been taking a look at the plans you've drawn."

"Isn't Elara going to come visit me?"

His arrogant smile tries to get under my skin.

"You've got a pretty mischievous son, you know?" I reply.

His smile vanishes completely, as does any room for jokes and provocations. I flash a victorious smile.

"He's got your eyes, by the way."

"All right, all right, message received. No talking about your girl."

"Tell me everything you know."

"I already told you what I know."

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I raise a brow. Maybe he thinks he can fool me, that he's cleverer than me, but the devil knows more from being old than from being the devil, doesn't he?

"I think little Khaos has taken a liking to me, do you think he'd like to come with me on a little trip?"

"All right!" He sighs. "I don't trust you, Cassian, and I was keeping this in case I had to use it. I suppose you know that there aren't only metamorphs born in wolf form, there are those with the ability to turn into other animals. It seems they're joining together, sympathizing with their cause."

"So what?"

"The white-haired blind one, remember him? They say he came back from the dead and that he has the ability to drown you in your worst nightmares. Seems he's not the only one capable of doing terrible things. I think they've got more like him and they won't hesitate to use them when the time comes. War is imminent."

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Sold to the Night Lord

I ponder his words while we stare at each other. I admit I don't handle surprise and uncertainty well. If what he says is true, we don't know what gifts they have and the damage they can do in battle. It's already bad enough that our gifts don't work against them and, unlike them, I have no intention of bleeding Elara dry to protect all the Purebloods. There will be those left exposed to the metamorphs. I know it's selfish, but I can't use Elara.

"What will you do, Draven?" he asks as if he were reading my thoughts.

"What would you do?"

He steps up to the bars of his cell and grips them with his bronzed hands.

“Promise me peace with the Diluted and we’ll fight,” he says. “I know you have something to fight for, Elara means to you as much as my son and the people who have entrusted me with their lives mean to me. I can see the doubt and the fear in your eyes, you know people will die and you don’t want her to be one of them.”

“If I promise you peace, you’ll have to promise me to follow the rules.”

“As long as they’re fair.”

“Fine.” I nod. “The Diluted will fight by our side. What do you think is best?”

“Are you asking me for strategic advice?”

“Do you want that peace or not?”

The things I do for you, Elara.

Eleazar’s laugh is warm and brief.

“The metamorphs have Elara’s blood and its properties, though I don’t think they have enough to make them all fe They’ll bluff and that’s exactly what we’ll do too. The strongest fighters need to be immune. Cassian.

“I’m not giving you her blood.”

“I’m not telling you to let us bite her, I know you wouldn’t allow that.” He looks at me with eyes that no longer hold a hint of amusement, rather he seems to understand all the reasons for my refusal and regret having to ask re nonetheless. “Deep down you know as well as I do that it’s necessary. We’ll be exposed. If your gifts don’t work against them and theirs do, we’re dead.”

That last word reverberates in my head like a damn gong. Dead. I can’t allow it. I don’t just want to stay here to live all the days ahead with her, I want to see what we’ve created grow, I want to be someone better for my family and for that I need

tomorrow.

“We should also have meetings between Purebloods and Diluted to plan the attack and coordinate. We must smooth things over and make sure we’ll have each other’s backs, without that, there’s no hope.”

“That may be even more difficult than letting you taste a single drop of Elara’s blood.”

“You’re their leader, aren’t you? Act like it, and while you’re at it, you could let me play my part too and mobilize mine.”

I growl, letting loose that more animal side I try to repress.

“You know where my son is, the color of his eyes, his name. You know he’s my weakness. I won’t do anything that puts him at risk,” he says, and I can feel the sincerity. “We both have someone to fight for. Let me do my part.”

My teeth grind and, although I know he’s right, a part of me would be glad to see him rot in here. I cannot forget the time of

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agony, the time I was separated from Elara because of his betrayal. Maybe everything would have led us to the same point, but I guess we’ll never know because the reality is he sold her to our natural enemies.

I clench my fists and give him one last look before turning around and walking out of there. I hear the slap of his hands against the bars of his cell.

“Hey! I thought we were starting to understand each other! Get me out of here!”

I glance over my shoulder and brush away some invisible dirt from my clothes.

“A night of reflection wouldn’t hurt you,” I say in a relaxed tone. “Besides, you don’t actually think I’d personally free you, do you? I have people to handle that, to minimize contact with the filth.”

I throw him my arrogant smile and leave, hearing the click of the door closing behind me. The look I give the guards is firm and, inside their heads, I plant in whispers the orders they are to follow. They nod and square their shoulders. I retrace the path back to my chambers, where I find Drystan and Ank engaged in what seems like a very interesting conversation. The little salamander is sitting on a candle on my desk, swinging her legs as if she were on a swing, while Drystan listens attentively.

“Women often just need time and space to know what we want.”

“I’ve given her time and space.”

“She needs more,” the salamander scolds. “You spent every day chasing her through this castle. Let her think. If she’s meant for you, no matter what happens, she’ll always find a way back to you.”

I clear my throat to draw their attention. They try to act as if they hadn’t just had a session of sentimental therapy. I circle my desk without taking my eyes off them, sit

down, and lace my hands in front of my face, waiting for one of the two to deign to explain what they're doing here.

"Isn't there something you want to tell me?" Ank asks, fluttering her lashes.

I raise my eyebrows in astonishment.

Little bold one.

"I don't know, you tell me."

"Weren't you going to tell me I'm going to be an aunt?"

I raise my eyebrows even higher and lean back in my seat.

"Last time I checked, I didn't have a sister, much less one from another race."

"Oh, come on, you know what I mean," she replies, waving her hand dismissively.

Drystan can't hide the tremor of his lips as he tries to contain his laughter. The seriousness on my face doesn't last long either, since it seems impossible to stay impassive for too long in front of Ank. She manages to make everyone laugh and look at her with tenderness, but I know it's all a façade. Beneath the adorable salamander, there hides an ancient power.

"Don't act offended either, I know you visit her through the fire."

"I can't let that little one catch a chill."

I extend a finger in her direction and she quickly gets the hint. She stands on her little legs and leaves the candle to perch on my finger. I bring her up to my eyes and with my other hand I stroke her flame-wrapped hair. Rarely do I allow myself the luxury of smiling in front of others, and this is one of those rare occasions.

"Thank you, Ank."

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I don't say it only because she takes care of Elara when I can't and worries as much as I do, but because I know she has always been here for me. Even if I released her from that promise she made to my mother, she would still be here. We've spent too many years together, sometimes with only each other's company. Sometimes in silence, other times listening to her scolding. I've broken her heart many times when I acted like a monster,

and that's why Elara is as special to her as she is to me. With Elara I am the person she always wanted me to be. Not for selfish reasons, but because she makes me happy.

"All for that little one," she replies.

I can see the blush on her cheeks.

Now it's Drystan's turn to clear his throat and pull us both out of this overly sincere moment.

"I heard you visited Eleazar."

"That's right," I say, returning the salamander to the flames. "We agreed that the Diluted will fight by our side."

He can't hide his astonishment, raising his eyebrows almost to his hairline. I smile, satisfied with his reaction.

"And what does he want in return?"

"What he's always wanted, I suppose. Peace."

"That's not a simple thing."

I review the maps on my desk and grab pen and paper to start scribbling down some notes that might be useful. Both of them watch me attentively, without interrupting.

"That's why it will be the first thing I put on the table tonight, at the meeting."

"Perfect."

I don't look up from what I'm doing, but I feel the exact moment when both of them vanish and leave me alone. Ser jotting down everything I find important on these maps. Laying an ambush for them in the network funnels would be a good possibility, though also a dangerous one. While I remain focused on it, I don't stop thinking about one in particular: Elara's blood.

It might be a bluff and the metamorphs may not have enough of it to make an entire army immune; nevertheless, are we willing to take the risk? If all of ours are left exposed, this war is lost. Even so, there's a feeling of possessiveness that prevents me from thinking rationally, it doesn't even allow me to present the facts to Elara because I know, deep down in my being that she would yield for the common good.

When I think I have everything ready, I leave my chambers and head for the entrance, where Drystan soon joins me. I roll up the paper and tuck it inside my jacket. As I leave and begin the route to our destination, I am unaware that all this is more difficult than I

think, that we will require more meetings to reach a common agreement, that strategies will be proposed and just as easily discarded, and meanwhile time will keep running, the weeks will keep passing.

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Sold to the Night Lord

Elara

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Weeks have passed since Cassian was with me, truly with me, not those furtive encounters in the nights where neither of us is really with the other. I have slowly watched fatigue take its toll on him. He is still the most handsome man my eyes have ever seen, but his dark circles cannot be hidden, even if he tries to deceive me by drawing smiles on his lips.

The negotiations are proving to be more complicated than we expected, and my belly, which seems to grow a little more every day, is the constant reminder that we have much to lose if this goes wrong. I know fears torment his rest, that there are thoughts he cannot drive out of his head no matter how much he tries. He doesn't share that weight with me, thinking that in doing so he keeps me safe, when the truth is that my own sleep is filled with the same nightmares that plague his.

Naja's hands wander over my belly, palpating while she keeps her eyes closed. I observe intently. As I've been told, it wouldn't be strange for me to feel a kick or the baby's movements at any moment. That fills me with equal parts joy and sadness. Joy, because it would mean the baby is well. Sometimes I dream that what I carry inside me is a corpse, and no matter how much they tell me everything is fine, I can't quite believe it. Sadness, because if these first movements happen soon, Cassian won't be here to witness them, and there is nothing I desire more than for him to be here for all the first times.

Each night I notice the nostalgic look in his eyes when he sees my belly swelling more. He never comes near or tries to touch me, and that is beginning to affect my mood. I don't know if it's just the stress or if my pregnancy makes me undesirable.

"If you visit Viatrix, she can tell you the sex of the baby."

I shake my head, not entirely sure I want to know, and less so without Cassian by my side. In my head, I see a boy with eyes blue as the ocean and hair black as the night itself, and just thinking of it stretches my lips into a smile. I rise from the reclining chair where I've spent the last fifteen minutes, letting Naja study my body and give me all the tonics and brews that keep me strong. As the weeks have passed, I've found myself craving one thing above all else: blood. Food keeps me alive, gives me the nutrients I need, but it doesn't quiet my appetite. The thought of catching an animal and drinking its blood has crossed my mind more times than I can count; however, I always discard it in the end.

oses her eyes "Your pulse is fine." She pricks my finger with a small pin and takes the bloody tip into her mouth. Sh see them move beneath her eyelids until she opens them again, fixing those reptilian pupils on me. "Youood as have the right nutrients."

I try to hide the grimace of disgust on my lips.

"You're not very talkative today," she comments.

"I'm just tired."

"Tired or worried?"

"Both?" I reply, raising a brow.

"And I suspect it's not all because of this baby here," she says, patting my belly, "but has more to do with an egotistical and irascible vampire."

"You could try to get along with him."

"For that to happen, he would have to be reborn as something other than a damned leech."

"Vampires are not responsible for the witches' tragedy."

"My hatred isn't for the witches," she says while arranging some of her things, avoiding my eyes. "The banshees gave me refuge when I had nowhere to go, and seeing what they did to Evanora sowed a hatred in me that has only grown over the years."

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"Cassian wouldn't do something like that"

Naja lifts her gaze and looks at me as if I were a naïve little girl. Her smile irritates me.

“Darling, Cassian has done worse.” She shakes her head. “Love clouds your judgment, but loving him doesn’t mean he isn’t a

monster.”

Her words make my eyes fill with hot tears. I try to blink them away, but I know I’m not succeeding. Naja remains unshaken by my emotional outburst, in fact, she ignores me as she sees my intention to leave, not stopping me to apologize. She believes what she says.

I leave with my eyes blurred by tears and, not quite sure how, I end up in front of the sea. It has become the place I always turn to when I want to be alone, as if this breeze filled my lungs with a different air, one that allows me to breathe better. Sometimes, when I feel suffocated, the sea is my greatest confidant.

My gaze focuses on the horizon while Naja’s words repeat endlessly in my head. No one understands Cassian, no one understands my feelings for him. I see reproach in people’s faces; they wonder how one can love someone like him. They don’t know him as I do, they don’t see the soft surfaces that make up his being, they don’t understand the level of sacrifice he would be willing to make for me. They cannot see the will to live that being in his company **stirs in** me, they don’t know the dark pit my mind sank into right before I met him. Perhaps he was at first the cause of my sadness; nevertheless, now he is the reason for my racing heartbeat. I know the heart that rests in his chest, and I know there is goodness inside, no matter how much he and the rest try to deny it.

If he is a monster, then what am I?

Just another monster.

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Comment

Sold to the Night Lord

Something breaks the surface of the sea and catches my attention. For a second I think it was just a wave dying at the shore, until a different sound repeats. I sharpen my sight and, just as I’m about to blame it on my imagination or fatigue. I see the crown of pink hair. I hold my breath as I watch, with a mixture of fascination and fear, the mermaid who not long ago saved me from the raging sea slowly approach the shore. She doesn’t come out completely, part of her body stays hidden by the water. She curves her lips into a smile that chills my blood and waves her long, claw-tipped fingers in greeting

“It’s captivating, isn’t it?” she says in that velvety voice that seems almost to be singing a lullaby all the time. “How something so beautiful can be so dangerous, how something that inspires peace can become torment, how calm can turn into a struggle for survival. That is the sea.”

“Yes,” I answer, holding my breath.

“Many things have changed since the last time we met, Elara Voss.”

“You knew?”

“The sea carries everyone’s secrets.” Without warning, her hand grabs my wrist and forces me down **until** we are face to face. “Even those of the gods, dear.”

I notice her emerald eyes, in whose irises wild waves seem captive, giving her gaze a fierce aspect. Ancient books always showed me images of mermaids as beautiful, angelic beings, but before me I have a creature that from the very **first time** stirred feelings in me far from serene. Pink locks cling to her cheeks, and I can see how some objects cast into the sea have tangled in her hair.

“You owe a favor to the sea.”

“I owe a favor to you,” I say, stressing the final word.

“A favor to me is a favor to the sea. We are the same, we are one.”

“What do you want from me?”

The corners of her mouth stretch even further, if that’s possible, and any trace of beauty is replaced by something struggh out of my nightmares. Her hand tightens around my wrist. I struggle, feeling the claws of fear wrap around my throat 1 tip of one of her nails taps right against my belly and, though perhaps impossible, I feel she is pointing exactly where the baby’s heart beats.

“This.”

“My baby?”

“Our baby,” she replies.

The instinct of protection ignites through my entire body. I yank at my wrist, fighting to free it, but her nails sink into my flesh, tearing a gasp from me. My breathing quickens, I fear being dragged into the water, for I know with absolute certainty that would be my death sentence. Her teeth sharpen, reminding me of a shark’s. I keep struggling as the water rises higher, now reaching my thighs. I scream for help.

“You won’t take him!” I cry, feeling the words tear my throat.

Her laughter reminds me of metal grinding against metal, leaving behind that sweet lullaby voice. Something inside me begins to bubble, perhaps my power or just the fear; nonetheless, she seems to feel it, for she lets go of my wrist. I clutch it to my chest, cradling it against me as I run out of the sea. The coppery smell of my wounds floods my nose.

“You won’t be able to stop it,” she says with her finger still pointing at my belly. “One day, the sea will claim its payment and you won’t be able to do anything to prevent it. Today is not the time, but you will know without a doubt that the sea has claimed what you carry in your womb the moment it is born.”

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Without another word, she departs, leaving no trace behind. The sea erases the marks of her tail on the shore and it’s as if she had never been there, as if she had never planted yet another seed of fear in me. I don’t know how much fear i can endure without breaking. Everyone tells me I am strong, powerful; I’ve wanted to believe it, but I feel vulnerable. More than ever. Not even when I believed myself human did I feel as devastated as now. Fear is like the sea, able to extinguish the flames of my courage.

My mind keeps circling her words. What does she mean by saying that I will have no doubt the sea has claimed my baby? Has she already done something even while it’s in my womb? Why him, among all the things I have to offer? Why would the sea want a baby? All the questions suffocate me, clog my throat. The edges of my vision darken and I begin to feel I cannot breathe. I clutch my neck, as if I might find an iron shackle there gripping my throat, when the reality is there is nothing. My body is rebelling against me. I collapse to my knees in the sand and feel pathetic as I sense myself fading, fighting for a small sip of air. Tears flood my eyes and fall uncontrollably, hot in contrast to my cold skin. I dig my nails into the sand, seeking the strength to stand or to crawl to whoever might help me, who might take this fear away,

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Sold to the Night Lord

Everything is dark, my only company the sea and the strangled sounds escaping from me. I press a hand to my belly protectively when hurried footsteps approach. For a moment I expect the worst until a familiar scent I have missed winds into my nostrils.

“Elara! Tell me who hurt you!” Hands settle on my shoulders and shake me. “Look at me, damn it! I’ll kill whoever is responsible for this. Just give me a name.”

At first I can't focus my eyes, too flooded with tears. My fingers scratch at the skin of my throat, searching for air, for my voice. His hands take mine away from my body. I feel kisses on my skin and light forces its way into my vision. Slowly, my sight clears and before me is Cassian, his face etched with worry.

"You're here."

"You wouldn't stop screaming my name."

I bite my lower lip to hold back a sob that, no matter how much I fight, forces its way out. Another follows, and before I realize it, I am broken, in small pieces he tries to hold together in his arms.

"What happened, Elara? Who do I have to kill? I'm... fuck." His breath brushes my cheek. "You've terrified me."

I dig my fingers into his clothes as I search for air and words. I lose track of time and of where I am, my body so numb that it takes me a moment to realize we are no longer on the beach but back in what I now consider our little cabin. The fire blazes immediately, I'm sure thanks to Ank. Cassian lays me down on the bed and wraps his body around mine. He strokes my back slowly, though his fingers tremble.

"Talk to me, love."

I press myself closer against his body seeking comfort. A long time passes before I can lift my gaze to his and stop trembling. I swallow hard, trying to steady myself and not break into tears.

"They want to take him from us, Cassian."

"What do they want to take from us, Elara?" He lifts a hand to caress my cheekbone. "I need you to be more specific so I can understand you."

"On the beach..." I begin, swallowing again. "The day I escaped the castle and threw myself into the sea, a mermaid found me and saved me from drowning. In return she asked me for a favor." I bite the inside of my cheek, feeling the again. "I didn't know she would ask me for this, if I had, I would have thrown myself back into the sea."

I shake my head, trying to rid myself of every word the mermaid spoke, as if that could make them less real.

"Don't you ever say that again." He lifts my face between his palms and forces me to look at him. "Your death wouldn't have solved anything, it would have broken me, and the world isn't ready for me to take it with me. Tell me, little wild thing, what did she ask for?"

“She wants our child.”

The blue of his eyes shifts, darkens. I see the twitch of his jaw muscle as he clenches it and the flare of his nostrils. Rage floods every cell of his body; yet his touch on my skin is soft and tender.

“She won’t have him.”

“How can you be so sure?” I reply, desperation in my voice and tears in my eyes.

“Because you are his mother and I am his father, that’s why I’m sure.”

Deep down I know his words are a way of consoling me, of soothing my nerves, and that reality is different. None of us can

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be certain. This is just one more thing added to the mountain of worries. Will we live in fear forever? Fear of the sea? Will the threats and enemies ever cease?

A shaky sigh escapes my lips, and though all I want is to bury my face in his shirt and forget the world exists, his hands *are* demanding, not letting me break eye contact.

“I will always find a way to protect you both,” he assures me. He brushes his nose against mine. “For now, just focus on being strong and resting. He’s grown since the last time.”

He places a hand on my belly and draws a circle with his palm. His smile is small and hesitant. I close my eyes, letting his touch soothe me, and brush my nose against his again.

“You said I was screaming your name, how did you get here so quickly?”

“I was near the camp, coming to see you. I wanted to surprise you, but you started screaming in my head and you wouldn’t answer my questions. You were killing me, Elara.”

His lips lower to a breath away from mine, and I feel his breath ghost across them.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry, I wish I hadn’t taken so long to come back.”

I open my eyes to look at him and see regret and worry etched into every feature of his face. I lift my hand, wanting to touch him, to feel that he is here, real, not one of those

fleeting encounters where he vanishes the moment I close my eyes Before my hand touches his skin, something moves inside me. It's a strange sensation, not painful. A small gasp escapes my mouth and I freeze completely still. It repeats, and this time the gasp gives way to a small laugh. The rage inhabiting Cassian vanishes entirely. He smiles, showing me his fangs, and his eyes gleam with renewed light.

"Did you feel that?" I ask breathlessly.

"Right beneath my hand."

I cover his hand with mine, waiting impatiently for the movement to happen again. The little one doesn't *take* leg

with a kick that steals my breath in pure astonishment. The knuckles of Cassian's free hand brush my cheek, and myself melt under his warm gaze.

"I love you."

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