

# Sold to the Night Lord

# Sold to the Night Lord

## Chapter 21

I shut my mouth and match her stride. We pass more feeders flitting from one room to another. Winter

of my room, and Naida nearly pushes me inside when she opens the door. I turn, irritated.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

turn the

heading into the quiet hallway

The door opens again, and a rushed Clarissa enters with her arms full of dresses and accessories. Naida grabs my shoulders and hurries me to the bathtub, where a bubble bath is already waiting. She undresses me and gets me into the tub. She scrubs my arms with vigor and enthusiasm.

“Naida!” I protest. “What’s going on?”

“Cassian is having a guest tonight. You know about the Southern Territories?”

I nod.

“Good, well, the representative of the Diluted is coming here—Eleazar Labrot.”

“And what about it?”

“He’ll arrive just in time for dinner, and it’s expected that you’ll be there. Orders from Cassian. So you’re going to witness one scenes imaginable. They hate each other like few people do.”

“I don’t think they hate each other more than I hate him,” I mutter.

*of*

the most hostile

Naida finishes my bath, helps me up, and wraps me in a thin silk robe. They lead me to the vanity, barely giving my hair, detangle it with a brush, and apply sweet-scented oils to my body.

me time

to breathe. They smooth

“Why all the attention? I don’t understand the need for these preparations.”

“Girl,” scolds Clarissa while braiding a crown atop my head, “even a feeder is a sign of Cassian’s power. Your presence, your appearance- everything, absolutely everything, is another show of his dominance.”

“Cassian may have a reputation for cruelty and needing many of you to satisfy himself, but he’s also known for offering the best quality of life. And today, with you at the table, he’s proving it. You look healthy, you’re in perfect condition, and that’s how they must see you.”

“Quality of life you only enjoy if you survive,” I point out.

“If you survive,” Clarissa agrees. “We’ll make sure you survive, we promise. Besides, he hasn’t claimed a single drop of your blood yet. Maybe he just enjoys riling you up.”

“If that’s the **case**, it’s not much comfort.”

With gentle taps on my arms, Naida makes me stand, and she slips a heavy red velvet dress over my head. I examine it as she cinches it to my body. It’s very elegant—so much so that it feels too grand for someone like me.

“Is there anything I should know?”

“Don’t be afraid.” Naida’s fingers stroke my cheek softly **as** she prepares my face. “They may be enemies, but neither has anything against you. You just have to sit at that table in silence.”

“Like a decorative ornament,” I scoff.

“Only speak if you’re asked to, and please, don’t contradict Cassian. Not tonight. For your own good.”

“I’ll be a perfect lady.”

“Perfect.” She has me close my eyes to apply kohl on my eyelids. “Eleazar is a charming man, don’t worry. And Cassian, though he’s not, is a master imitator. He can seem charming if that’s what’s needed.”

I nod while they work on me. The sun is setting outside the window, and I use the last remaining moments to tell myself again and again that this dinner is no different than the others. I just have to hold back my rebellious answers and everything will be fine. I already live surrounded by vampires—what's one more, even if he's Cassian's enemy? **In** any **case**, all vampires are my enemies. I've been living in hostile territory for just over

a week.

I finally slip into the small heeled shoes. Clarissa and Naida make me spin around in place while they offer their approving smiles.

"The prettiest, without a doubt."

I don't believe it for **a** second, but I won't **waste** my breath contradicting them because the truth is the work they've done on me is excellent. We wait a little longer until night has fully arrived, and then I leave the room, leaving them behind.

The hallways are silent, the guards glance at **me sideways** as I pass by, and some **even** show surprise **at**

seeing me dressed like this. I go down the

12:19 PM **C**

stairs feeling the cold on the back of

my neck.

Wait **a** second—my neck **is** completely bare.

I panic and consider turning back and begging Clarissa and Naida to undo the entire hairstyle and just let it fall down my back. Two vampires at the same table with my neck completely exposed feels like pure provocation. It's like I'm begging them to bite me.

Stop it, Elara, stop. You're stronger than this. Walk—one foot in front of the other—and cut the inter

"Making me wait so long at the table is quite rude of you, little wildcat of the castle."

nonsense

Cassian always seems to know when I need one of his damned comments in my head to make me keep walking, ready to throw a few insults at him. Only this time, when I enter the great hall, I don't give him one of those mocking, contemptuous smiles. I just play my

part as the submissive and pleasant lady, since there's someone else sitting at the table. Neither of them stands when they notice my arrival.

Gentlemen? Totally extinct species.

I take my seat at the opposite end of the table, and with just one glance I find Cassian's sapphire eyes staring at me with clear amusement. I don't make any gesture, as my attention quickly shifts to the man seated to his right. He has a fierce and warrior-like look, **very** different from Cassian's mysterious and elegant air.

His hair is straw blond, reminding me of my family's hair. Thinking about them sends a sharp pang through my chest.

"Eleazar, I present to you the most recent of my feeders, Elara Voss."

Cassian extends a hand in my direction. I force a smile.

"Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise."

That's it, not another word. Cassian doesn't look surprised at all. He snaps his fingers like so many other nights and immediately the human servants enter with trays in their hands. They place one in front of me and another in front of Eleazar. Cassian is only served a large goblet.

"I don't know if what I had prepared for you will be to your liking, although if it isn't, you can always have your feeder brought in. None of us has a problem with you feeding from her in front of us."

I don't miss the small glance Cassian throws my way, baring all his shiny teeth.

Eleazar lifts the lid of his plate, revealing a large steak almost raw. From here I can see how the blood oozes. I quickly search my memory, recalling the brief information I read in one of the books during my first days here.

## Sold to the Night Lord

C15

The Diluted, having human blood running through their **veins**, are able to consume certain foods aside from blood. Most seem to prefer just blood, but they **aren't** biologically restricted. That's not the **case** for the Pure, who suffer major intoxications if they consume any food they'd label as "human"; they are restricted to a completely liquid diet.

“Very considerate of you, Cassian.” I note a certain emphasis on the name. “This is perfect, no need to call anyone in.”

Satisfied, Cassian brings the goblet to his lips and takes a sip that **leaves** a small crimson stain on his mouth. The color of his eyes is faintly altered by an intense gleam.

“And to what do I owe this visit?” He folds his fingers in front of him. “You risked traveling during the day, knowing what that can do to you.”

“You know perfectly **well** why I’m here.” Eleazar’s voice sounds rigid; his whole posture is the same. He’s not comfortable here, clearly feels threatened. “You Pure ones keep overstepping with my kind, the Diluted. We’re tired of your propagations. Many have found themselves banned from the Red Auctions, and many others have seen attempts to ruin them there.”

“What makes you think I **have** anything to do with it?”

Eleazar’s fist slams against the table, making my cutlery jump. I quickly grab it and pretend to cut my food. Yep, my food is super interesting.

Don’t act like you don’t know anything. Everyone follows you. What you command, happens. It’s always been that way with the Draven family.”

“You forget that I never imposed myself as a leader. They do whatever they want. I haven’t asked to be respected.” He arches a brow. “Though they’re right to do so. Even so, I haven’t dictated that you be treated this way.”

“One word from you could change it.”

“What happens to the Diluted is not my problem.”

“We’re the same race, we come from Mother Lilith—how can you treat us this way?”

A laugh rumbles from Cassian’s chest.

“There may be a drop of the Mother in your blood, but we are not the same. You know that. You’ve always known that.” He places a hand over his heart. “Believe me, I have nothing against you. Well, I didn’t until you became a real nuisance. I’m tired of you always coming here asking for the same thing, of your little rebels’ attacks and that stupid trend you’re spreading... feeding on animal blood? You tarnish the species even more with your nonsense.”

“Some don’t feel comfortable doing that to humans...” Eleazar murmurs.

“Oh, of course, because you feel empathy toward them. Your human blood squirms in your veins every time you feed on one, doesn’t it?”

Silence falls. **It** seems Cassian has hit the mark. I clear my throat, unable to contain my curiosity any longer. Both of them turn their **gazes** toward

1. **me.**

“What is it that the Diluted are asking for?”

Eleazar’s eyes widen in surprise, revealing the gold of his irises that, unlike Cassian’s, are warm. He has scars scattered across his face without diminishing his attractiveness. His lips are full and tightly pressed, his cheekbones so high and sharp they seem sculpted from marble. He’s beautiful, rough, and rugged.

“We want him”—he points at Cassian—“and his ilk to sign a treaty granting us the rights we clearly **deserve.**”

“I already told you that doesn’t depend on me.” Cassian shrugs. “That my power frighten others? Yes, that’s true. But that doesn’t mean I’m a leader, much less that I want to play politics.”

“Your parents were politicians,” Eleazar snaps. “They brought peace.”

“First of all, don’t talk about my parents with your damn mouth.” Cassian’s voice **rises** with each word, radiating anger. “And second, I’m not them. I dedicate myself to enjoying life and the privileges it has given me. They were sufferers, looking out for the other species and for you. Clearly, they spoiled you too much, and now you won’t stop whining over a few dirty looks.”

He takes another sip from his goblet, as if the descent of blood down his throat might ease his rage. I shift uneasily in my seat, taking bite after bite of food, wishing I could flee. If there’s anything worse than an angry vampire, it’s two angry vampires eager to fight.

“It’s not **just** a few dirty looks,” Eleazar counters. “It’s constant contempt, massacres, food withheld.” His eyes narrow and one corner of his mouth lifts in an arrogant gesture. “But remember, we are many more and **we’re** gathering. More and more are daring to cross the Twisted Forest to find us. You’ll run out of Diluted to use like they’re nothing, and one day they’ll come to your doors demanding answers.”

“Oh yeah?” Cassian responds with **equal** arrogance. “And what will you do? Kill us? You don’t **have** the means.”

“It’s only a matter of time before **we** find a **way.**”

**12:19 PM**

My jaw practically hits the floor. Honestly, if I had to choose, I’d definitely board the Diluted’s ship, but I think threatening the one hosting you at his table is a bit

reckless. Nervous, I squirm in my seat, wanting to leave. Cassian must **sense** my racing heart and turns his face to me.

“Elara, are you done with your dinner?” He looks at my plate. “If **so**, you may return to your quarters.”

I don’t even hesitate. I drag my chair back and head for the door. I give a slight nod in farewell and the moment the grand hall doors close behind me, I bolt up the stairs. I hurry through the corridors until I reach my room. Once inside, I enjoy the silence—until it’s broken. Loud noises echo, growls like those of an animal, and things breaking. I flinch in place and slowly move away from the doors.

I don’t know how long the fight noises last. The next thing I know, I see a horse-drawn carriage speeding away from the balcony. The darkness **of** night doesn’t let me see much more.

Then, someone knocks at the door. And although I could think it’s Naida and Clarissa coming to check if I’m okay, something tells me it’s not them.

I open, feeling quite hesitant, trying to suppress the tremor in my hand before the door swings fully open and I find myself face to face with Cassian.

In front of me, tall and imposing, stands Cassian, looking slightly disheveled. The only signs of the argument—or whatever happened down there—are the light wrinkles in his shirt and a small bloodstain on his cheek. Other than that, he doesn’t look like he just fought another vampire.

“What’s going on?” I manage to control the stutter in my voice.

There’s a disturbing glint in his eyes.

“I just came to check that you went straight to your quarters.”

I blink several times, not believing it.

“You didn’t need to knock on my door for that—you knew I was inside.”

“You’re right.” The corners of his mouth lift into that arrogant smile I hate so much. “I could hear your heart.”

“Fantastic.” I grab the doorknob, intending to slam the door in his face. “Then you know I’m here. Good night.”

His boot steps forward, blocking me from closing the door, and his hand catches mine swiftly. I feel the cold of his skin against mine and something strange shakes me from

head to toe. I feel the overwhelming need to pull away, yet his fingers grip tightly, eliminating any chance of escape. He leans in slightly, and I **can't** believe what I see.

"Thank you." His lips brush the back of my hand in a light kiss. "You were incredibly composed down there, little wildcat."

"There's nothing to thank me for."

I finally yank my hand away.

"Believe me, I know how much effort it took for you not to lash out with that viper tongue of yours." His eyes drop briefly to my chest, where my small breasts peek out like little hills. "And your presence also managed to distract Eleazar. Who knows how much more nonsense he would've

said...."

"How wonderful," I **say** sarcastically. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to proceed to slam the door in your **face** so I can get some rest. Good night."

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 23

Once again, my attempts to throw him out are frustrated by his strength.

"How rude." His amused tone makes my blood boil. "You didn't even invite me in to talk."

"Ladies don't invite men to their chambers."

I lift my chin as he seems to ponder my words.

You're no lady." He steps back. "Anyway, I'm not interested in seeing your room."

"Didn't look that way a moment ago," I say with mockery, crossing my arms under my chest. "In fact, I hear.

His brow furrows in a scowl.

"Me? Entering ladies' rooms? I'm offended."

The way he says it makes me question whether he's joking or genuinely insulted.

"Yes, more specifically, Mavka's chambers."



you

C

entering ladies!

rooms.”

Now his face twists into an expression of utter disgust. His lips curl back, revealing his fangs, and his eyes flash gleam I’ve seen more times than I’d like.

with that

disturbing,

”

almost sadistic

Involuntarily, I take a step back, and he uses the opportunity to step forward, making me feel cornered.

“I would never go to her chambers, much less lie with her,” he spits. “I would never sleep with a human.”

“Forgive me if I doubt that.” I don’t know where this boldness is coming from. “I’m sure you love doing just that—lying with them and using all of us like whores.”

your feeders, defiling

“Is that what you think I do?” His hand moves to my throat, catching me there and caressing the base where my racing pulse throbs. “If that’s what you think, then tomorrow I’ll show you how I use you.”

“What?”

My voice comes out nearly strangled.

“Tomorrow night you’ll come with me outside the castle.” He pulls away as quickly as he came close. His eyes flick down to the dress. “Wear something more daring. Don’t forget, after all, you are my whore.”

He leaves without giving me a chance to reply, slamming the door so hard the sound echoes in my bones. I almost see dust fall from the doorframe.

All the comfort I got from the bell not ringing goes entirely to waste. Now I'm more sure than ever that Cassian will feed on me tomorrow night- possibly drain me dry. Dry enough to kill me.

All night long, I had been begging the sun not to rise, for this night to be eternal and not give way to the following day. It was in vain, because like every day, the first rays of the sun broke through, prompting the castle staff to begin their duties. The Diluted, as always, are in charge of the guards. All of this still feels strange to me, and I can't grasp many things, no matter how many books I read. Sometimes I wonder how I could have been so blind, so unwilling to see what surrounded me, so resigned to my fate that I never longed to learn more about this world we've been dragged into. I simply existed, and when I was old enough to understand things, I accepted them and waited for my end.

Suspended in a sort of limbo, I watch the flame of the candle resting on the solid wooden desk near the balcony. I suspect Clarissa and Naida open it when I'm not around, in order to air out the room, but then close it again out of fear that I might do something reckless.

"You seem a little lost."

I jump in my seat, bringing my hands to my chest as if that could ease the scare. Ank appears flickering among the flames of the candle, walking on tiptoe with her tiny feet and her hair floating in every direction.

"What are you doing here?" I approach her. I thought you lived in the library."

A high-pitched giggle escapes her.

"I live in the flames," she sings as she dances around the candle. "I go where there is fire, though it's true I prefer the library. And what about you? What are you doing here? You've spent more than a **week** going down there-it felt strange not seeing you."

"I'd rather not leave my room today."

"I could have sworn you weren't afraid of him."

12:19 PM

Confused, I furrow my brows and purse my lips. I shake my head from side to side.

"He terrifies me," I confess with resignation. "From the very beginning. **He's** evil, cruel, a narcissist and a depraved man."

"I must admit he **is** all of that."

"Not to mention his reputation," I continue. "No feeder survives long with him."

She sits on the edge of the candle, her legs dangling over the side, swinging back and forth. She's those enormous fiery eyes. **It's** fascinating to see how the flames live within them.

very endearing to look at, with her tiny figure and

W

"It's not that I want to defend him," she says timidly, "but I must **say** that they don't exactly try hard to survive either. Cassian provides comforts to all—you just need a bit of survival instinct."

"What does that mean?"

"If you know an animal is dangerous, don't provoke it, because it'll most likely bite or attack you. If you know Cassian is an irascible man, don't awaken his anger. And if you make sure to stay healthy, nothing should go wrong. What happens **is** that most of the young girls behave stupidly, fall for him, and try everything to gain his affection, not knowing that he truly feels disgusted by the human race. Really, if it weren't for necessity, he wouldn't be near a human being."

"I've heard that some vampires have started feeding on animal blood."

"That goes against their nature and the principles set by the Mother of them all—Lilith. An offense." She shakes her head. "No matter how much he hates you, he will never sever ties with his nature."

"You seem to know him well."

She gives a small shrug **as** the candle flame flickers. She stands again, and when I look closely, I see the shape of her body imprinted in the wax. I open my mouth in surprise.

"You could say I've been wandering around here long enough to get to know him." She smiles genuinely. "So then, what's going on today that has you more scared than usual?"

"Tonight I'm leaving the castle with him."

Frustrated, I let my forehead fall against the cover of one of the books on the desk. I bang it a couple of times, hoping to knock myself out or cause enough harm to avoid having to go tonight.

"Oh."

I lift my head abruptly.

"Oh?" I repeat.

“Well, maybe it would be better to **say**: oh-oh.”

I groan and bury my face again in the book cover,

“You’re not helping,” I grumble.

“Honestly, I only came up here because I was bored down there,” she says casually. “Good luck tonight.”

I barely have time to lift my gaze and see her melt back into the flame of the candle, vanishing from my room as if she had never been there. The only sign of her presence is the small indentation in the wax where she had been sitting. I stay still for a while, doing nothing, until I open a drawer where I find some scraps of paper, and immediately, an idea comes to mind. I wait until lunchtime, which is when Naida usually comes by to leave a tray on the little table near the fireplace.

“Naida, would it be possible to get some ink?” I ask before she leaves again.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 24

She glances at the desk, where the scraps of paper I found rest alongside an elegantly crafted quill. She nods with a smile and soon reappears with a small inkwell, just **as** refined as everything **else** in this castle. I set to work writing letters to my family, hoping Cassian will allow me to send them. I tell them about how everything is going here, my long walks in the garden, its beauty, the grandeur of the walls, and I make sure to reassure them by saying I’m fine. I don’t speak about my feelings or my thoughts regarding Cassian because I’m sure all my letters will be checked if they are sent. Doing this is how I spend part of my day, recounting my life and telling them about the things I’ve seen, including that little salamander named Ank. By the time I finish, I still have **a** couple of hours that I spend reading in an attempt to distract myself, and it’s when my doors open again and Naida and Clarissa enter that I know relaxation time **is** over.

“I must admit I never thought the master would want to take you to one of those parties,” Clarissa says while briskly rubbing my limbs.

“I guarantee I’m not excited about it.”

“It’s quite an honor.”

“What happens to them?”

She helps me stand, covers me before I get cold, and runs her hands to dry me. Naida appears, as always, carrying one of those beautiful dresses; this time it's white, so white it hurts the eyes.

Everything a lady shouldn't see happens there," she says. "The only one who's ever gone to one of those parties was Mavka and, according to her maids, the girl came back quite disturbed."

"Can't you tell me something more specific?"

Clarissa huffs, apparently annoyed by my ignorance and our constant chatter. She grabs my cheeks firmly.

"Carnal sin," she says. "That's what you're going to see."

Without saying anything more, the two begin to work in silence. The only sounds are the rustling of the fabric as it passes over my body, the tools they use to cover my face with powder and my lips with rouge. They apply some kohl, sharpening my gaze.

"Cassian wants you to wear this tonight," Naida says, taking from the jewelry box the beautiful necklace that now gives me my name among the

castle folk.

I make no objections, letting her fasten the clasp at the back of my neck, allowing the gemstones to rest on my chest. The loose white dress, barely cinched at the waist, **leaves** my neck and much of my shoulders bare. Once again, I'm surprised and relieved not to have to wear one of those monstrous corsets that barely allow a full breath.

Despite being terrified by what I might encounter or simply by having to spend so much time with my captor, a part of me feels a certain thrill at the possibility of going out, beyond the castle gardens. What I see tonight may not be pleasant, and yet it might help dispel this sense of isolation.

"Don't keep him waiting."

Clarissa takes me by the elbow and leads me to the door. Drystan waits on the other side and, without a word, begins to walk down the hall, knowing I follow closely behind. I lift the hem of the dress as we descend the stairs, catching a glimpse of the tips of my red heels. These, along with the jewelry I wear, are the only **trace** of color on me tonight. Everything else is pure white.

Cassian hasn't bothered to wait for me in the foyer, **as** a gentleman would, but already seems to be inside his carriage. The coachman offers his gloved hand to help me up, and I think I glimpse the edge of his fangs beneath the brim of his hat.

I settle inside, feeling completely intimidated by Cassian's presence, who, **as** expected, looks handsome **as** ever in his black suit jacket. I try not to make my scrutiny too obvious before turning my attention to the window.

"I hope you remember the rules I told you." He speaks with that captivating tone only he seems to possess and master to perfection. "Don't let anyone else sink their fangs into you."

"Don't you think you should tell your friends that? I couldn't stop them **even** if I wanted to. Remember, I'm just a stupid and mediocre human," I reply with a condescending tone.

One corner of his mouth lifts into something resembling a smile, though I honestly believe this soulless and perverse being doesn't truly know what smiling is. He only knows how to curve his lips in an intimidating way to reveal the edge of his fangs.

"I'm telling you, and that's enough."

Annoyed, I **turn** my face back toward the window. Seconds **pass**, and with each one, I feel more intoxicated by his scent, which fills the entire carriage interior. I wouldn't know how to describe it, even if I wanted to, but if the night had a distinct smell, it would undoubtedly be the one Cassian gives off. Night and moon. The mystery it holds for poets and artists. It's unique and impossible to decipher; you simply **feel**

embraced by the darkest night when you're near him.

"Will there only be Purebloods tonight?" I ask through clenched teeth, unable to contain my curiosity no matter how annoyed I am.

"No. Why would you think that?" He studies me for a few seconds, and at my lack of response, he continues speaking. "There will be Diluted, and also humans."

That last part truly surprises me, and he knows it as soon as he sees me turn my face in his direction, lips slightly parted in surprise and eyes wider than normal, abandoning the constant wariness I feel when I'm near him.

"I thought you hated the Diluted—and humans **even** more."

Or at least he seems to.

"Those are just lies they invent themselves to play the victim—and among themselves they know it. That's why some of them stop throwing tantrums and mingle with the higher ranks or even earn a place among them." He tilts his head, observing my expressions. "As for humans, several attend these parties hoping to seduce one of us—Diluted or Pure—it doesn't matter to them."

"I don't understand how anyone could want that."

vey

Curling his lips into a mocking smile, he leans over his seat, getting far too close to me. I *try* to press my body **as** much as I can into the velvet- backed seat while his blue eyes gleam mischievously. He raises his gloved hand in my direction but lets it drop before touching me, as if he suddenly remembered something. Maybe the apparent disgust I inspire in him, I tell myself.

“You can’t even imagine how unforgettable we can make **a** night, little wildcat,” he enunciates each word clearly. “Besides, some humans hope we’ll turn them and grant them immortality.”

“And would you?”

He looks at me with renewed interest.

<

“Tolerating the Diluted doesn’t mean I intend to create more like them.” He raises one of his dark eyebrows. “Why? Would

of us? Be immortal and beautiful, defy death and the passage of time...?”

“I’ve been prepared to die since the day I was born.”

you like *to* become one

He seems surprised; I, on the other hand, remain impassive. It’s one of the few things I can say with absolute certainty. I’m not afraid of death or whatever comes afterward, even if it’s nothingness itself.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 25

We stop abruptly, causing me to lose my **balance** on the **seat** slightly. Cassian remains silent and doesn’t seem inclined to break it. The coachman opens the carriage door and he steps out first, without even bothering to help me or accompany me. He walks several steps ahead, and I’m forced to quicken my pace on these torture devices called heels. Still, I stay a couple of steps behind until we reach a beautiful building with white walls climbed by vines. The doors open for us and the interior follows the same white pattern, with marble walls. My eyes dart in every direction, unsure where to look first. There are many bodies scattered throughout the room, in various levels of undress and debauchery. On some walls hang tapestries depicting scenes I don’t recognize but that definitely strike me as obscene. On others, there are only heavy red velvet curtains giving way to small

nooks where those who prefer to hide their actions from the lustful eyes of the room disappear.

“You can do whatever you want, as long **as** you respect our rule,” Cassian says before walking

ay *fr*

e and disappearing into the crowd.

I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do here, so I stick close to one of the marble columns surrounding the hall, crossing my arms to cover as much of my body as possible. I observe my surroundings, noting the diversity of clothing styles people wear. It’s not hard to distinguish vampires and their feeders. Most are young girls, though there are also a few older men. Their outfits are nowhere near as comfortable **as** mine. I see girls wearing enormous skirts that nearly swallow them, with corsets squeezing them and lifting their breasts until they look ready to burst. Not to mention the appearance of the fabrics—undoubtedly of incalculable value—and even heavier still.

“**Is** it that obvious?”

“Is it your first time?”

I spin around and find a young man with brown skin, caramel eyes, and wavy hair. He has and suspicious.

smile

on his

lips; however, I remain guarded

“You’ve got your nose wrinkled like you’re disgusted, and unless your face is always the color

“Well then yes, it’s my first time,” I mutter.

of

death, I’d

you’ve

gone

pale.”



and some

We remain in silence, close to each other, our eyes fixed straight ahead. Soft music plays from a small orchestra tucked in a corner, women dance to its rhythm with disheveled hair and carefree smiles on their faces. Others have a paleness and beauty that clearly mark them as vampires, but it's obvious many of them are making a strong effort to attract attention. The blush on their cheeks makes it clear there's a heart inside their chests pumping blood.

"Now that Cassian has arrived, things are going to start getting worse," the boy comments.

I'm about to ask him what exactly that means. There's no need, because as if speaking the words out loud were a starting signal, the people around us begin to search for him **as** if he were a beacon of light. I see him seated with his legs slightly apart, in a relaxed pose that still exudes power. He receives attention from both men and women, which makes me blush, and for a brief moment, I look away.

That moment is enough for me to see people sprawled on the floor, completely naked, doing things they most definitely shouldn't be doing in a place like this and that I shouldn't be witnessing. A woman opens her mouth in a sound of clear pleasure while her lover takes her from behind. Another brings her breast to his mouth. Everywhere I look bodies are writhing and pleasuring each other.

I shift uncomfortably, not knowing where to flee. My gaze returns to Cassian and finds him with a red-haired woman nestled between his legs. His eyes lock with mine and the gentle up-and-down movement of the woman's head makes it perfectly clear what's happening. I feel the blush heating my cheeks; however, I force myself not to look away from his. I can almost perceive that sinister glint in his eyes as he watches me, and I know he's daring me. His leather-gloved fingers stroke the woman's head, sliding through her reddish waves. He urges her to continue, biting his lip until a droplet of blood emerges.

I feel overheated and completely out of place.

"Look, that over there is Aeron De'ath."

"De'ath?"

"You know him?" the boy frowns. "He's my master."

"Aren't the Death one of the first bloodlines?"

"They are, just like the Draven," **he** points at me accusingly. "So don't even try to act surprised. You've also been bought by one of the important ones. In fact, I'd dare say the most important."

“Why?”

A brown curl falls over his forehead as he glances **over** his shoulder, and when he thinks no one is watching us, **as** if that had ever happened since we got here, he leans in conspiratorially.

“I don’t know how much you know about all this,” he whispers. “Cassian’s parents were the ones who arranged the Treaties with humans. They **were** very well-known politicians among their kind and ours. Before them, our situation **was** much worse—chaos reigned and blood flowed. Vampires and other species carried out true massacres against humans, and it wasn’t until they decided to reach some kind of peace that things calmed down a bit. He glances around again. “After that, it was the vampires who kept the other species **in** check.”

1/2

13

ww

12:20 PM

I manage a sound resembling a nod as I look back at Cassian, whose Adam’s apple rises and falls as he swallows. One of his hands grips the armrest of his seat, and the other buries itself deeper into the woman’s hair at the exact moment she

es absolute,

ecstasy.

When the woman rises again, wiping the corner of her mouth with a finger to clean the saliva, I’m left stunned. It’s Narkissa. I knew that shade of hair was familiar, and yet I hadn’t imagined it could be her. I didn’t think she was into public acts like these. I scold myself instantly, reminding myself that she’s a vampire. They don’t think or feel like we do. It’s not as if this kind of spectacle would shame either of them.

“I find it surprising that people like them could produce someone like Cassian,” I say, trying to seem. “He doesn’t seem the least bit interested in **peace**.”

“He’s not interested in **peace** or politics,” he leans beside me against the marble column. “That who handles all that.”

“Does he treat you well?”

“He doesn’t have much time, **so** he doesn’t bother us, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“And how many **are** there besides you?”

“Two more.”

**focus**

the

Can and

not what I’ve just

more my master’s thing—he’s the one

Cassian has twelve feeders. Even though both he and Aeron come from important lineages, it’s clear Cassian does whatever he wants and takes whatever he pleases. Despite his disgust for us, having us in his arsenal sends a clear message: he’s far more powerful than the rest and can do as he wishes. No one seems to question him either, likely because they’re too afraid. The memory of Mavka’s torn screams rattles my mind again, and not having seen her in days, chills my blood. Who knows what horrors he put her through?

“Would you like to dance?”

I look at the hand he offers me with a mix of horror and curiosity. I alternate between his hazel eyes, which look at me with He has **a** small mole beneath his left eye that gives him a mischievous touch.

“I don’t think I should,” I shake my head. “Besides, I don’t know how to dance.”

“Did he forbid it?”

We both know who he means.

“No.”

↳

hint of amusement.

## Sold to the Night Lord

“Then let’s dance.” He pulls me with enough strength to make me stumble over my own feet. “By the way, my name is Walter.”

His smile is almost contagious, and, helplessly, I end up returning it with a small, timid one. I let him guide us to the center of the hall where the other guests dance without concern; some are naked, others still wearing bits of clothing. And others... what they're doing couldn't be called dancing-

maybe dancing on each other's skin is a very modest way to describe it.

"My name is Elara."

He places his hand gently on the small of my back while the other intertwines with my fingers, stiff from the cold. We take a few hesitant steps until I get used to the rhythm. He's patient the entire time, saying nothing when my foot moves the wrong way and ends up stepping on his. He merely smiles, shakes his head, and guides our movements again.

"And how does he treat you?" he asks after the first song.

I take my time to answer. Yes, his treatment could use some serious improvement, and his constant disdain doesn't help my self-esteem-like every time he sniffs me and twists his face-but it's true that I've never seen my physical safety in danger despite all the warnings I got at the beginning. He hasn't tried to throw himself at my neck either, and for him, maybe I should count that as a positive behavior point.

Am I insane? A positive behavior point? Let him burn in hell, he's a brute, and I shouldn't be praising the bare minimum any gentleman should offer-like not assaulting a lady and respecting her.

"If you keep thinking so much about me, my ego won't fit in this hall."

I jump at the sound of his voice in my head, and immediately my eyes search for him. I can't find him. What I do find is Walter's worried gaze.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing, I'm just easily distracted," I excuse myself. "He treats me well, at least better than I expected. Many times I question my very existence; I barely seem to exist for him."

"That's good, isn't it?"

He twirls me around, then holds me by the waist to prevent me from losing balance and making a fool of myself.

"That's wonderful," I agree.

We smile at each other amidst all this chaos.

“What’s wonderful?” I could recognize that tone of voice even in the midst of absolute chaos. Velvety, seductive, and with just the right edge of roughness. “I suppose you were talking about me.”

I immediately step away from Walter,

who seems to pale just as I did when I first arrived. I’m surprised by his reaction—I thought he’d be used to Cassian’s presence, as he doesn’t seem new to these kinds of events. Cassian’s gloved hand extends toward me and I look at it the way one would look at a rabid dog about to bite.

## Chapter 26

“**Come** with me.” The authoritative tone leaves no room for objection. “Walter, your master is **looking for you!**”

Walter runs off before Cassian even finishes the sentence, leaving me completely alone staring at the gloved hand in front of me. Cassian’s eyes stare at me insistently, so I end up sliding my hand over the cold, hard material and **let** him **lead** me? wherever he wants to take me. My heartbeat grows more frantic as my mind imagines the possibilities.

Unfortunately, I’m not wrong in expecting the worst.

Cassian pulls us both behind one of those heavy velvet curtains, where darkness reigns and the sounds from outside are muffled. I think I stop breathing. His hand leaves mine only to grip my neck as he presses us both against the cold **surface** of the marble.

“It’s time I put something in my mouth, dear.”

“No.” I try to squirm in vain; the weight of his body is immovable. “No, please.”

His eyes become curious as his finger caresses the skin above my pulse.

“Why do you think I brought you here? I hope you didn’t think it was so you could enjoy yourself dancing with mediocre humans,” he hisses. “You’re here to do what so many blood rubies have cost me. Now,

lift your head and let me taste you.”

My fingers, in a desperate attempt to push him away, clutch the shirt under his suit and try to distance his chest from **mine**. I shut my eyes tightly, determined to hold back the tears of terror welling in them so he won’t see them.

At my refusal, he ends up burying his hand in my hair and pulling it, leaving my neck completely exposed. He brings his face close, I feel his nose sniffing my skin and then the edge of his fangs grazing it. My entire body trembles with fear, shrinking smaller with each second. I try to think of something pleasant, anything that could make me be somewhere else.

I

Suddenly the warmth of his breath against my skin disappears, as do his hands from my hair. I hear the sound leather makes when he removes it from his hand, and then I see the shine of that claw-shaped ring.

With his other hand, cold to the touch, he takes my wrist and before I can react, he cuts me. My wrist hangs over his mouth, into which a thin stream of blood begins to drip. Even in the shadows, I think I see how his eyes gleam in an unnatural way. While he feeds, I feel my legs shaking and threatening to give out beneath me. I don't know how much time passes until I manage to say something.

"Cassian." My voice is barely a whisper. "Cassian," I repeat. "I... I'm going to faint."

feel my legs getting weaker, like hundreds of an at. "I... I'm going to faint."

crawling all over my body. My vision blurs a bit, but I can **see**

Cassian's tongue licking my wrist, and then his hands slide under my dress to tear a part of the lining. He ties it around my wrist and tightens it so much it hurts.

"It would've been easier if you had let me bite you."

I still feel dizzy, almost as if my body no longer belongs to me. I bring my hand to my neck with some difficulty and **touch** my intact skin.

"I heard you don't bite us." I sound weak, "Never."

I hear him click his tongue and the sound of leather as he slides it back onto his fingers. Then **he**

**grabs me tightly by the**

23:27 Sat, 2 Aug ▼ D

Chapter 26

elbow and pulls me out of the shadows. I feel his body very close to mine as he leans toward **me slightly**

“Maybe things will change.”

He pulls me even harder and we move among all these vampires with quick steps, not bumping into any of them **thanks to** his excellent reflexes. Despite the knot on my wrist, I feel fragile, as if I could collapse at any moment. I even see **little dots** in my vision. An attractive man with silver hair down to his shoulders and green eyes blocks our path. I immediately remember he’s the one Walter pointed out earlier—Aeron De’ath.

“Leaving already?” he asks with a lopsided smile and a mischievous glint in his eyes. “It’s not like you to leave **the party so**

stay longer among us.” soon. Give me a few seconds and I’m sure I could find a man or woman to entice you

He winks.

“Aeron, I’ve lived a long time—no one surprises me anymore, much less entices me to anything.”

## Sold to the Night Lord

He begins to laugh as if it were the funniest thing he’s heard in years—maybe centuries. His laugh is beautiful, soft, and melodic. My head spins again and I’m certain that if I take another step, I’ll fall flat on the floor.

“Is this the famous addition to your feeders?” he turns his attention to me and gives my body a quick once-over. “I think you should treat her a little better and take better care of her—she looks like she’s bleeding out.”

His nostrils flare, probably picking up the scent of my blood. I look around and, though not all, many others have noticed too. I lower my gaze to my hand and realize the bleeding hasn’t stopped, and now it’s soaking through completely. The piece of fabric, originally white, is now a deep scarlet.

Cassian’s piercing eyes focus on me; he gives a quick glance at what I’ve just noticed myself and, with a rough yank, **grabs** my wrist to examine it.

“Why aren’t you healing?” he snaps. “My saliva should have sealed the wound and accelerated the healing.”

I try to speak, but the words don’t make it past my throat. He looks around, and by the way his face tightens and his jaw becomes sharper, he’s clearly not happy. The rest of the guests seem to notice too, because we don’t even have to push them aside—they part to give us space. We move quickly, causing me to stumble several times and earning an angry glare from him. Just when I’m thinking I’m not going to survive this night, a girl

throws herself at him. She wraps her hands around his neck and the blush on her cheeks makes me think maybe she's had too much wine.

"Lord Cassian..." Her lips get dangerously close to his face. "You're so handsome and dashing..."

"Move."

He nearly pushes her to the floor. She doesn't give up though, as we've only taken a few steps before she gets in our way again, bothering an already furious Cassian. Her level of drunkenness prevents her from realizing the danger she's in.

"Please, sir, consider me," she pouts ridiculously. "I want to be beautiful forever like all of them." She points to a group of vampires watching us with their goblets overflowing with thick liquid. "Bite me, I offer myself willingly."

She throws herself to the floor, begging and creating a rather embarrassing situation, even for me. She ends up clinging to his legs, pleading for him to turn her.

"She's not even pretty."

It takes me a moment longer than it should to realize she's talking about me.

"Turn me instead. Please, sir..."

The way Cassian's chest expands with a deep breath is more than enough warning to know he's reached his limit. That sinister look I've managed to glimpse many times before appears again. His hand grips my elbow tighter, and then what happens leaves me speechless and increases my trembling.

I don't know if it's the movement of his hand or something else I can't see, but in a matter of seconds, the girl's body collapses to the floor, as if she had lost all structure, as if her skeleton had been ripped out. A mass of skin and organs that couldn't be contained now covers the ground. Bile rises up my throat, I bring my hand to my mouth, trying to avert my gaze from that pile of flesh that just moments ago was a beautiful girl.

## Chapter 27

I'm about to vomit when Cassian pulls me again, dragging us out faster than I thought possible **to the outside**. The

carriage is waiting, he pushes me in roughly and I'm not even seated when it starts moving. He runs **his** hands **through** his hair frantically and I can't bring myself to look at him for more than two seconds.

He's a monster, a complete monster.



“Let me see your wrist.”

He tries to reach for me; however, for once I’m faster and manage to press myself against the seat before he can **grab my** wrist.

“Don’t touch me.”

My voice is tinged with panic and, realizing this, he does something unexpected. He laughs—heartily—and it shouldn’t seem like such a beautiful sound.

“I hope from now on you show a bit less defiance.”

His gaze locks on mine.

“I’ve been far more benevolent than you think, so next time I demand your blood, you’ll give it to me without objections. And now let me see why you’re not healing.”

I’m reluctant to obey, so, as has been the case all night, he ends up yanking my arm without any delicacy. He inspects **the** improvised bandage and rips it off, examining my wound that won’t stop bleeding. The gash across my wrist looks quite

bad.

“There’s not a single sign that your tissues are trying to heal and regenerate.”

He mutters mostly to himself. Once again, he catches me off guard when he licks my wound, taking with him the traces of blood with his tongue. A shiver runs from head to toe and I tell myself it’s from the cold and fear. I turn my gaze to the outside, where the path rushes by quickly. We don’t take long to leave the cobblestone streets behind and reenter the thick vegetation. I don’t even notice when he lets go of my hand again—I’m too exhausted,

When we arrive, I’m the first to step down with the help of the coachman and I’ve barely taken two steps forward when his

voice stops me cold.

“Let your maids tend to the cut. Someone will come check on you tomorrow.”

I lift my gaze over my shoulder to look at him.

“And don’t leave your room until I say otherwise. I’m more than furious with you. You didn’t heal, and the rest

My blood boils in my veins and I don’t know if that will make the bleeding continue and soak everything. Maybe I **should** calm down. Though it’s not easy when this brute blames

me for having exposed him, Maybe none of this **would've** happened if he had left me alone and hadn't drunk my blood. I was fine, dancing with Walter, and then he... he **ruined** everything.

"It's not my fault your tongue lost its magic touch."

I wait a few seconds during which there's **no** reply, so I leave with hurried steps, unable **to** believe **that came out of my**

2/3

mouth. When I reach my chambers and close the door, I stumble a bit. For a moment, I feel **proud of myself**. For once it seems I've left the fearsome monster that prowls this place speechless.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 28

Elara

My maidens didn't take long to appear once they learned of my arrival, eager to obtain any information I might want to give them. Instead, they found a version of me that was frightened and with trembling fingers.

I didn't tell them anything substantial, and when they saw the wound on my wrist, they didn't want to know anything either. They tended to me as best as they could, tucked me into bed, and left me to rest.

I've slept through the rest of the night and most of the day and only woke up because, just as the last ray of sunlight disappeared, a man with graying hair and angular features burst into my room. He is currently injecting something into my arm, I believe I heard him say it was a vitamin serum. Narkissa, whom I can't bring myself to look in the face, is right **by** to report it to Cassian, who, by the way, hasn't even bothered to see how gesture on his part, but what did I expect? It's clear he doesn't feel even

his side, checking everything he does—probably s

I am. Since this is his fault, it would've been a *nic* the slightest bit responsible.

"I honestly don't understand why our saliva isn't working on her," the doctor-*vampire*, to no one's surprise—comments. "Do you suffer from any blood-related illness? Hemophilia, perhaps?"

I shake my head firmly.

“No, nothing like that.”

“There was no record of any disease in her Libris,” adds Narkissa with a harsh tone. “She should coagulate just like a healthy human would. The problem is Cassian went overboard with the cut, thinking his saliva would heal her, and it didn’t.”

Yes, I’m very aware of that. Last night I lost a more than considerable amount of blood, and the doctor had to suture the wound. It’s very likely I’ll be left with a rather ugly scar.

“Tell your lord to refrain from doing things like this for the time being.” He closes his briefcase and stands up, smoothing the lapels of his coat. “I’ll return in a few days when she’s better and will take a sample of her blood. The answer is undoubtedly there.”

“Perfect, doctor.”

Narkissa escorts him out of the room, and only a few minutes later she reappears in my chambers with an unfriendly expression. The fireplace, for the first time since I arrived, is lit and warming the room. She kneels before it, her back to me, and a long time passes before she speaks.

“Because of you, the others now think Cassian is weakened, that his powers have diminished.”

I try to sit up in bed as best I can, since being comfortably laid down while accusations are hurled at me doesn’t seem

ideal.

“Because of me?” I reply, confused. Maybe he should be less brutish. I told him not to do it, he didn’t listen, so now he **can** face the consequences of his actions. Besides, I think you’re all exaggerating a bit.”

“The healing ability of our saliva is the most basic of our traits; the fact that it’s failing is ridiculous.” She turns, **half her face**

bathed in firelight, the other in shadow. “And especially for someone like Cassian, his power is **so great it surpasses** all of

**us.**”

“He killed that girl with a simple flick of his hand, isn’t that proof enough that his powers are intact?”

A low snort escapes her lips.

“Maybe, but maybe not.” She turns completely and throws me a scornful, reproachful look. “Don’t shame my lord **again**, or I’ll be the one to make you pay for it.”

My eyes widen in surprise, unable to believe what I’m hearing. In the end, the blame always falls on the one **with** the **least**

power. It seems very hard to accept that all this is simply a foolishness they’re blowing out of proportion, and **that**, if I may say so, could’ve been avoided if a certain person were less of an animal and more respectful. I study her face as I **stay** silent and see more than anger in her eyes—I see pain. Like pieces of a puzzle fitting together in my mind, everything becomes clear.

“I see what this is all about,” I say quietly. “You’re in love with him.”

“Of course not!”

From here, I can see her fists clenched. Her jaw tightens as she grinds her teeth.

“Oh yes, you are.” For some reason, I find myself smiling with a hint of compassion. “Look at how you react, of course you’re in love with him. You’re attacking me to avoid seeing what he’s done,” I proceed cautiously. “Narkissa, he doesn’t need you to defend him or threaten me. He’s more than capable on his own. What’s really happening is that you’re angry

with me for other reasons, and I assure you, you don’t have to be.”

“Don’t speak nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense. It’s the truth. And if I may say, I don’t think he deserves you. If he respected you, he wouldn’t have paraded you around last night as if you were just another in his string of conquests.”

“What do you know about us?” She slams her hand on the fireplace, and I think I see the stone crack. “Besides, a prude like you has no idea how sex works.”

“But I do know how respect works.”

Her face, of exquisite beauty, is grotesquely transformed by rage. I see in her the intent to lunge at me and hurt me; however, something seems to make her change her mind. She retracts her fangs, which had begun to show, and with a sharp turn, disappears from my room. I bring my hand to my chest and let out a deep sigh.

“Little beast, don’t meddle in my bedroom affairs, although I’m glad to know a prude like you noticed my performance last night.”

I growl inside my head, hoping she hears that too. Sometimes I forget about the sharp hearing these creatures have. With them, there's not much one would call privacy. I roll over on the plush mattress, rest my hands under my chin **and focus** on falling asleep again; that's all I feel like doing. Any movement feels like climbing a steep mountain—it leaves **me** exhausted and breathless.

I toss and turn on the mattress, unable to sleep. I try everything: counting sheep, squeezing **my eyes shut, focusing on**

**my**

R

**23:28 Sat, 2 Aug**

breathing until it calms. Anything to help me sleep. I end up letting out a furious growl when I see it's a lost cause. I sit up again on the bed and right in front of me stands a nearly naked woman, her breasts covered only by **the length** of her bi sỏ The scream of surprise gets stuck in my throat.

For a moment, I think it's Narkissa, but I quickly discard the thought. The shadows don't let me see her face clearly. **The** orange glow of the flames outlines her figure, and I could swear she's watching me with the curious gaze of a **feline**, slightly tilting her head, examining, evaluating the helpless human in front of her, ready to torment me.

“Who are you?”

My question comes out in a squeaky tone. I try to cover myself as much as possible with the bed sheets. I don't need **to see** her clearly to know she's not human—I can't say exactly what she is, only that her presence chills me to the bone.

“Have you accepted your fate yet, stupid girl?”

My fingers grip the sheets tightly when I recognize her voice. The same voice I heard at the lake, the one that made me furious and fight for my life. The answer to her question, I suppose, is yes. I accepted what life had always had in store **for** me, and here I am, in a castle, away from my family, being the sustenance of a centuries-old vampire who can barely stand me—and I can't stand him either. Instead of saying that, I ask another question.

“Why did you save me?”

The crackling of the flames masks the annoying click of her tongue. She paces back and forth by the fireplace, showing no shame about her nudity or concern that someone might walk in and see her like that. When she lifts her gaze again, her eyes look like bottomless pits ready to suck out my soul.

“You are my gift.”

“Your gift? What does that mean?”

I push the sheets aside, more than willing to stand and walk toward her, in case seeing her face clearly might help me decipher her words. Before I can set one foot down, she stops me by raising her hand. She brings the other to her lips, then presses a finger to them, urging me to stay silent. I’m just about to snap back at her in fury when I wake up.

I look around, hearing my heartbeat thundering in my ears. My body is soaked in sweat, my nightgown clinging to my back and strands of sweaty hair at my temples.

“Easy, Elara, I’m *here*.”

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 29

Clarissa’s kind face, wrinkled with worry, appears in my line of sight. Immediately I feel the relief of a cold compress **on my** forehead. She whispers soothing words while I feel like I’m burning from the inside out. What I saw could’ve been **a dream** or simply the hallucinations of a feverish person.

“You’ve probably been incubating something for days, and that’s why all this happened,” she says thoughtfully as she replaces the compress and with another damp cloth wipes the sweat from my neck. “I shouldn’t have taken you *to* that party.”

I hear the doors opening and don’t even have the strength to lift my face. Seeing what I’m trying to do, Clarissa helps me recline against the pillows. Naida has just entered my room accompanied by Drystan. The girl’s cheeks seem slightly flushed, though given my condition, I prefer to think that’s just a hallucination. There’s no way Naida could like someone like him, right? I mean, he’s a vampire, he’d only see her as a food source. It’d be like the mouse falling for the cat. A suicide.

“How is she?”

“The fever’s the same,” Clarissa replies. “The doctor should see her again.”

“I’ll mention it to Cassian, although I don’t think...” The other half of the sentence hangs in the air.

Everyone except me seems to know what Drystan meant, but I haven’t the faintest idea. Cassian what?

“It’s not fair, he’s supposed to take care of them, he can’t let-”

“He’s angry, and when he’s like that, he doesn’t exactly do what’s fair.” She crosses her arms. “I’ll see what I can do.”

If anything else happens, I have no idea. I lose consciousness again, plunging once more into a heavy darkness—this time without half-naked women or talks about accepting my fate. Just a suffocating, crushing darkness.

Luckily, Cassian did call the doctor again, and with the help of some herbs and advice, my fever gradually went down. Three days later, I’m in perfect condition and more than ready to wander the castle as much as possible. That said, there’s still no sign of an explanation for what happened with my wrist wound. Just last night, the doctor took some blood samples and, frankly, I doubt he’ll find anything. It’s normal for humans not to heal magically, so I think the problem lies elsewhere, though of course, no one dares say it out loud, lest the fragile ego of the lord shatter into a thousand little pieces.

If that happened, I’d love to stomp on them to make sure there’s no way to put that massive ego back together.

Much to

I head down to the library and sit in my usual spot where I continue studying the different supernatural creatures. To my dismay, Ank doesn’t make an appearance. I stare at the candle’s flame, hoping he’ll show up at any moment **with his** flaming hair and tiny figure. He doesn’t, and the pang of disappointment in my chest confirms how alone I feel here. I have no interest in meeting the other feeders—I feel I don’t fit in with them or that they expect something from me, though I couldn’t say what.

I leave the library the same way I entered, except this time I don’t head straight to my chambers. I decide to explore a little. I walk to the opposite side of the staircase, where there’s a small door similar to the one that leads to the library. Without much hope, I try opening it and, to my surprise, it opens without trouble. A strong smell of dampness and stale air **hits my** nostrils. In front of me is a daunting descent of stone steps. I can barely see the first few, and the wall torch seems **to** have

gone unlit for a long time. I look around for something to use as a light, but there’s **not a single**

candle **in sight**. **Great** where are they when you need them?

I decide to leave the door wide open so it can provide some light for my descent. Some cobwebs fall from **the** ceiling **and** stick **to** my hair as I pass. I try to shake them off, but after a while, I give up. I descend cautiously, **feeling the cold** stone walls with my hands. I’m about to give up when I step onto the last stair and turn right.

Cells.

That's what's hidden down here.

I think I've had enough of the adventurous spirit for today and should turn back... until I see a figure sitting upright **at the** back of one of the cells. I walk forward, fortunately finding no one else imprisoned, just that person. Maybe Cassian **isn't** so cruel after all and doesn't imprison everyone.

Or maybe he just kills them and saves himself the trouble, says the voice in my head—which, at this point, I **don't** know **if** it's mine or his, digging relentlessly into my thoughts.

"Hello?"

My voice bounces off the walls, and the figure doesn't even flinch to show they've heard me. I'm sure they did—it's impossible they didn't unless they have hearing problems.

"Are you okay?"

I take another hesitant step, getting closer to the cell. There's only a small barred window letting in faint rays of sunlight. Not enough to light this place, but enough to keep me from cracking my head while walking. I keep moving cautiously, like a lion tamer approaching the beast. I hear a sound behind me that makes me turn, heart racing, feeling like I'm about to vomit it onto my feet. Once I'm sure I'm probably hallucinating, I take one more step toward the cell.

Right now, I'd love not to be so curious and do what would be sensible: go back up the stairs, close the door, and return to my room, where a warm fire awaits me. The problem is I'm low on sensibility, and it seems much better to be here, in the dark, freezing, and approaching I-don't-know-what. It could be something worse than Cassian... or maybe it's just a defenseless person, a victim of his cruelty. I lean toward the latter.

My eyes adjust to the dark, and by the time I reach the bars, I clearly see that it's a woman. A part of me instantly feels empathy.

"Hey, are you okay?" I touch one of the bars. "Why are you here? Do you have food?"

I scan the floor, looking for a tray or something with water. My heart tightens at the thought that they might **be keeping** her down here, dying of hunger and thirst/I strain my eyes as much as I can, since she doesn't seem **willing** peak. **The**

faint light lets me glimpse the hem of a delicate, silky dress in a deep golden tone. Yellow like **sunrays or straw**. **It feels** slightly familiar. I examine all I can, since her face remains hidden in the shadows.

"Do you have a name?"



I receive no response, though it's *not* necessary, because the figure slumps to one side, revealing her face **from** the shadows. I recognize Mavka instantly. Her golden eyes stare blankly ahead, and she doesn't even **attempt to sit up again**. She lies there on her side, staring at the wall, and I only know she's not dead because I can see her **eyelashes moving**

12 Aug

slightly. I grip the bars and crouch as low as I can to be at her level.

"What happened to you?" I'm beginning to panic. "Oh, holy heavens, I'm going to get help!"

I run, trying not to fall, and rush up the stairs, clutching the folds of my dress. I'm thankful I'm not wearing **monstrous** shoes this time. I'm so stunned by what I've just seen and so focused on finding help that, when I glance back **one last** focused on finding help that, when I glance back **one last** hard chest that smells like the dead of night.

time at the stairway behind me, I can't avoid crashing into

"What were you doing down there?"

go, as if my touch were abrasive against his skin. His hands grip my shoulders for only a brief moment before he lets go. Beside him, watching us with raised brows and a horrified expression, stands Drystan. He wears a lovely red suit **and his** hair is loose and straight down to his shoulders.

"Mavka... I..."

Both pairs of eyes are fixed on me.

"You what?" Cassian insists without a hint of kindness.

AD

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 30

"Mavka is down there." I point with my finger. "She's not well, something's wrong"

"I know."

He crosses his arms as if what I'm telling him bores him immensely, and I seem like a hopeless idiot. Drystan steps forward and tries to take me by the arm to drag me back to my room, where no doubt, they think I'll stop asking stupid questions.

"Get off!" I slap his hand away and see the subtle flash of anger in his eyes, but it quickly fades and he resumes his usual elegant and composed demeanor. "What's wrong with her? What did you do to her?"

Cassian doesn't seem at all worried about my accusations. He shrugs, and I don't know what infuriates me more—his perfectly arrogant face looking at me with boredom, the way he treats me like a fool, or both things mixed into a cocktail I'm forced to swallow every day I'm here.

"Answer me."

A mocking laugh slips from his lips.

"I didn't know the roles had been reversed." He steps closer to me, pressing his chest against mine, forcing me to tilt my face up to look him in the eyes. "I was under the impression that I gave the orders, and you obediently did what I told you. Clearly, we need to work on that a bit more. I don't think you're afraid of me enough."

His hand, bare and with nothing preventing direct contact with my skin, caresses the curve of my bare neck down to my collarbone in a threatening way. I've heard others say that a man's touch can make you burst into flames on the inside. His is not like that. It's cold and makes you shiver from the inside out, like the icy edge of a knife against your skin.

"Come with me."

"No!"

I have no time to resist, to anchor my feet to the ground or grab hold of the first thing my fingers find, as he grabs my elbow and drags me back into that suffocating darkness. We go down the stairs quickly; I stumble several times, and if it weren't for his grip, I would have tumbled down and broken a bone. He moves effortlessly in the dark until we reach the cell. The door gives way with barely any effort; he pushes us both inside and throws me to the ground beside Mavka. She

remains in the same position as before, her golden eyes fixed on nothing.

"This is what happens to those who disobey."

His lips almost graze my ear as he speaks, making me tremble from head to toe.

"What's wrong with her?" I ask in a shaky voice.

“She’s empty.” He paces the cell. “Her mind is blank. She’s broken.”

“Broken?”

I look into his eyes, which shine with satisfaction at seeing he’s getting what he wants: to scare me, to make me fear **him** so much that I’ll never oppose him again.

“I can alter things, to put it in a way you’ll understand.” I feel a surge of anger. “Where once there was a **beautiful, slender**

body, now there’s a pile of organs and tissue; where once there was a sturdy, immovable mountain, I leave a **small pile** of sand; and where there was a complex mind, a hollow shell.”

The confession sinks in slowly. I alternate my horrified gaze between him and Mavka, who now seems to be nothing more than a memory of herself. I don’t know her well, but every time she entered the grand hall, she exuded power. Her appearance was always impeccable, and her appearance was always impeccable, and her eye

yes shone—not like this. No, this is not her.

“Do you feel compassion, my dear beast?” He taps his chin with one of his long, pale fingers. “You surprise me.”

“You’re horrible. Why did you do this to her?”

“Because no one touches my investments.”

As if it were routine, he pulls me up, forcing me to stand. He leads us out of there with a loud slam that shuts the cell door again. We climb the stairs back up, and the worried face of Drystan greets us as soon as we reach the top step. Cassian lets

an old, dirty rag. go of me and I end up in his arms, discarded like

“Take her to her room and make sure she doesn’t leave.” He looks straight at me. “If I remember correctly, I told *you* to stay there.” He turns to Drystan again. “Then have whoever was supposed to be down there watching executed—precisely to prevent curious and impertinent people from going in.”

“Cassian...”

A single look is enough to silence his right hand immediately and make him abandon whatever he was about to say. He nods obediently and begins to take me back to my room. His hand on the small of my back is much gentler than Cassian’s rough grip.

“Oh, and have the head placed in the guards’ break room,” he adds nonchalantly. “So they don’t forget the consequences of their negligence.”

Drystan nods again and continues walking. He doesn’t say a word, and I don’t expect him to. He returns me to my quarters and I hear the key turn in the door, locking me in. No one comes for the rest of the day—not even my maidens to keep me company—as if Cassian is determined to make me feel alone and miserable, and, unfortunately, he’s succeeding. Even those unpleasant dinners were a form of distraction; I used to enjoy shooting him glares full of anger and throwing biting remarks. Now there’s a fear lodged in my heart that I think would prevent me from even doing that, and that bothers me.

That night, the fever returns, and I fall ill again.

五