



Chapter 3

I look in every direction searching for the source of the voice, but only the trees and the lonely path answer me.

The words crash into me with weight, and my shoulders shake as I break into tears.

I've been so selfish, such a terrible daughter and sister...

I almost condemned my siblings to my fate and my family to disgrace.

I cover my eyes with my hands, trying to hold back the tears, but they come out with force, unwilling to stop.

I don't know how long I'll stay sitting there before Silas appears.

"Elara!" My brother's steps grow louder and louder. "Elara! What happened?"

The warmth of his arms surrounds me, and instinctively, my hands try to cling to him, seeking comfort.

I bury my face in his chest, soaking his shirt with my hair and wet clothes.

He murmurs something I can't make out while rocking us both gently.

"There, there, Elara... It's okay now."

I feel his fingers tangle in my hair as he strokes it.

His embrace is exactly what I needed—and I didn't know it until this moment.

Small clouds of breath form in the air with each of my ragged breaths.

His hands massage my feet and ankles, trying to get my circulation back to normal and drive out the sickly color.

Sold to the Night Lord



"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

I shake my head, and he doesn't push.

That's what I like about him, the bond we have, the mutual agreement not to push each other when the questions are too painful to answer.

We spend a long while on the shores of the lake—me clinging to him, trying to absorb some warmth, and him checking to make sure the circulation in my limbs returns to normal.

"I hope you know you're going to cause quite a stir when we get home."

One of his arms goes around my back, the other slides under my knees, and he lifts me from the ground.

"Mom and Dad are going to lose their minds when they see you like this."

I nod. My parents will definitely make a fuss when they see me like this.

It's obvious I'm already in trouble for not coming home before dark, and showing up like this isn't going to make things better.

Silas doesn't speak again; he carries me silently along the path until we reach the empty village streets.

The cold still lingers deep in my bones and I don't know what else to do to warm up.

I sigh in relief when I see our house in the distance, casting an orange light through the windows.

When we reach the door, Silas kicks it open, and the avalanche of my family's concern begins.

"What happened?" my father asks, rising from his chair beside the fire.

Sold to the Night Lord



"Elara!" My mother's cry cuts through the air. "My girl! What happened? You're soaked!"

"Bring as many blankets as you can," Silas orders as he carries me toward the fire.

I don't even get to feel the relief of being near the fireplace.

I pass out on the way to it, and the last thing I'm aware of is my head falling backward with a sharp jolt.

As expected, I spent my birthday and the following days in bed with pneumonia that made the air coming out of my chest sound like a horse's neighs. Four days later, my appearance hasn't improved much, and I hope this will serve as an excuse so no one buys me tonight.

My thick black hair has been neatly gathered at the nape of my neck with small floral pins. My skin has a lifeless tone, and two small purple grooves rest under my eyes.

"My little girl..." says Mom through tears as she pinches my cheeks to give them some color. "I'm not ready for this moment. None of us are."

My chest tightens with each word, I blink several times to chase away the urge to cry. My tears will only make this harder.

"Don't worry, Mom. Maybe I'll be lucky and no one will find me appetizing enough tonight."

My mother's eyes look at me without humor, red and flooded with tears.

"Whether they buy you or not, this is the last night you'll spend under our roof." Her hands rest on my shoulders, and she pulls me into her arms. She gently strokes my back.

"Stay healthy—not for them, but for yourself, Elara. Write to us, let us know somehow that you're still alive."

"I'll try," I reply without conviction.

Sold to the Night Lord



Most of us already know the fate that awaits once we're bought.

Each vampire is supposed to have a certain number of "feeders" according to their rank. No more, no less, as long as they remain healthy and capable of fulfilling their duty.

They're not allowed to hurt us, overstep, or hasten our deaths. But those are just words, laws written by their ancestors and ours to guarantee peace.

In practice, many of them overdrink, leave us dry, discard us, and quickly find a replacement, with the cooperation, of course, of corrupt Red Auctions.

Mom leaves me alone for a few moments, which I use to try to burn into my memory every detail of what has been my bedroom for eighteen years—my place of rest and confessions.

I'm wearing the prettiest and newest dress I have in my closet.

One that squeezes my chest so tightly it's hard to breathe.

It's made of green velvet with golden thread embroidery, the neckline is square and reveals the curves of my breasts. I get up from the little stool in front of the vanity and grab the shawl.

I give myself one last look in the mirror and involuntarily pass my fingers along the curve of my neck, as if I already knew I'd never see it intact again. I wrap the shawl over my shoulders, hold it tightly, and leave the room.

I descend the stairs, listening to every creak of the wood, and see all the faces of my family waiting at the bottom.

"You look beautiful," says Silas, his eyes shining.

"Elara always looks beautiful."

Dad takes my hand as I step down the last stair and pulls me

Sold to the Night Lord



into his chest, hugging me so tightly my bones protest.

Still, I say nothing.

I stay there for several breaths, knowing this will be the last time I'll be in my father's arms.

It's painfully hard to pull away.

"Elara?" a child's voice calls.

My little sister looks up at me from a few heads below. Her huge honey-colored eyes gaze at me, frightened, and I smile to reassure her. I hug her, cradling her face against my chest and stroking her copper curls.

I'm going to miss so much...

I won't be there to soothe her scraped knees the next time she falls playing, there will be no more candlelit stories, and I won't be around when she starts smiling because of some boy.

Our parents watch the scene with true anguish, and Silas joins our embrace, wrapping his arms around us both and shielding us from the world with the breadth of his body.

I inhale the scent of home while holding back tears.

The sound of a bell breaks the silence.

The Red Auction is open to receive us.



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