

# Sold to the Night Lord

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 31

Cassian

That little girl has only been in the castle for two weeks and has already given me more headaches than all my other feeders combined.

For a millennial vampire, saying that her defiant

attitude tires me is saying a lot. Few things manage to stir any emotion in me, though this one is pure, absolute annoyance. Normally, I don't even glance twice at any of them. They're food, nothing more. And yet she seems determined to force my attention, always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong, making the most unexpected remarks, or showing compassion for those who clearly don't deserve it.

She's strange, irritating, and impertinent.

The best thing that could happen is for one of those fevers to carry her away and rid me of her. It's obvious I was a fool to buy her. Following that feeling pulling me toward her is turning out to be more expensive than the rubies I paid. Her blood isn't even that good.

The door to my chamber opens, allowing Drystan to enter. His face is expressionless, devoid of emotion as is typical for all of us. He folds his arms behind his back.

"She's fallen ill again."

A huff escapes my lips, irritated with myself for having chosen such a weak girl. She never seems to fully recover. Ever since that party, she's been falling into fevers constantly, with brief lapses of good health between long nights of cold cloths on her forehead.

"Let Lilith decide her fate," I say, voice heavy with exhaustion.

"You're not going to call the doctor?"

"He's been here twice already and doesn't know what's wrong with her."

I slap my palms on the desk with a dull thud. "Let's accept that there's something wrong with her. I'm not going to waste any more of my time on something that has no solution. If her fate is death, so be it." I smirk.

“It’s not like I hadn’t planned to drink her dry anyway.”

“And you’re just going to let such a costly investment go?”

He raises his eyebrows, letting me know he heard me call her that the other day down in the dungeons—when she

discovered one of the many horrific things I’m capable of.

Did Mavka really think I would overlook her disobedience? I made it very clear that Elara is my prey, no one else’s. Only I

have the right to take her life whenever I please.

“Lost wealth doesn’t matter as much as my good mood, and she ruins it every time she breathes. So yes, I’m willing to **lose** my investment.”

Drystan narrows his eyes, like he doesn’t quite believe me.

### **23.28 Sat, 2 Aug**

Yes, maybe it does irritate me how wrong I was about her. I thought what I felt at the Red Auction was **because her blood**

would be exquisite, a delicacy, something different. But it turned out to be nothing special—or maybe her fear altered **her** blood enough to make it tasteless. The anticipation and the way she looked at me had stirred my hunger deeply, overwhelmingly.

And then there’s the other thing... that feeling of familiarity. As if we were both hollow inside. Like her gray eyes—**empty**, pale. They reflect no emotion.

But none of that is worth all the trouble I’ve gone through.

“Maybe a change of scenery would do her good,” he suggests. “I’ve heard humans often respond well to that. A change of air to heal.”

“Nonsense.”

Hundreds of years of friendship and coexistence have given Drystan enough wisdom to know that nothing he says will make me change my mind. Continuing to speak is a waste of time and saliva, so he sighs in resignation and turns away. Before he can leave my room, I ask a question that’s been circling in my mind for days.

“Why are you so interested in Elara?”

He turns, just enough to look me in the eyes. He gives a slight shrug.

“I suppose for the same reason you bought her, no?” I could swear I see a mischievous glint in his midnight-*black* eyes. “Curiosity.”

“Curiosity about what?”

“I’m intrigued by her resistance. Did you know she hasn’t cried even once since you bought her?” He tilts his head slightly. “For someone who claims to fear us so much, she shows remarkable strength. I think her hatred for us is greater—and it’s what keeps her alive. Don’t you find that dazzling? I’ve seen men twice her size shit themselves with just one of your looks, and yet she’s capable of standing before you, trembling like a leaf, and talking back. I thought I’d turn to dust before witnessing something like that.”

“You can go kiss her ass if you like her so much.”

“You know I prefer kissing other parts of the ladies.”

He winks before leaving, and I must admit I’m surprised. Not that Drystan lacks a sense of humor—of course not, I’ve seen it before on occasion. It’s just unsettling that he chooses now to flaunt it while talking about that wild creature.

pread

Maybe I’m also a bit surprised by his boldness regarding her. I know intolerance toward humans isn’t that w among us. Most don’t discriminate between humans, vampires, or other species when it comes to choosing **whom to** lie with. I’m the one who remains wary of humans. I’d even rather be with diluted men or women than with one of them.

## Sold to the Night Lord

After our conversation, I try to distract myself. I check the correspondence but find only letters from useless **people!** couldn’t care less about—including that bastard Eleazar. He suggests a meeting between the three **main Pure** families and the rebellious Diluted ones. Bored with so much drivel, I decide to pour myself a drink while I think. I summon one of the feeders, and a blonde girl with a heart-shaped face appears, knowing perfectly what I expect of her. She **makes** the **cut** herself to pour her blood into my cup. I would never sink my fangs into her, no matter how seductively she bats her **lashes**, hoping I’ll do it.

The other night I was a fool—I almost broke one of my own rules. That’s not like me. I’ve never even considered **biting one** of them.

That beast seems determined to make me reconsider everything.

The feeder backs away without turning her back to me and disappears shortly after filling my cup. I bring it to my lips, savoring the thick liquid. It’s not remarkable—just like the blood of any other. Tasty, but not special. I relax as I **drink, and** my thoughts drift back to

Elara. Drystan's words surprised me. It's true—despite fearing me, she hasn't shed a single tear. Amazing, coming from someone so weak.

I blank my mind with the intention of jumping between the consciousness of the people in the castle. I look for her maidens, whose minds are wide open to me. The eldest, Clarissa, seems genuinely worried about the girl's health. Naida, on the other hand, has someone else on her mind—someone I know well. I hop from one to another, easing my boredom by violating their privacy.

Until I stumble upon a mind I had no intention of entering today.

“Cassian, Cassian, Cassian...”

She calls me like a siren's song.

That little girl says I disgust her and that she hates me, unaware that her mind never stops calling out for me.

“Cassian, Cassian, Cassian...”

Her cry becomes more demanding, and tired of hearing it, I get up from my chair with a screech as I drag it. I slam the cup down, spilling some of its contents. My guards are startled to see me walking down her hallway—it's not common for me to venture into the feeders' wing. I always try to keep my distance,

“Open the door,” I order one of them.

He obeys quickly. Inside, the fireplace warms the room. Everything is in order, only a few books stacked suggest she actually lives here. Otherwise, it remains as I remember it when it was empty.

he desk

On the bed that dominates most of the room lies Elara, the sheets pushed aside. She's wearing only her **nightgown**; her feverish body has soaked it with sweat. My nostrils flare when I notice her curves—I think I can almost see the color **of her** nipples. I quickly look away. No matter what she thinks, I wouldn't ogle her body in this state.

Not that I wouldn't, if the situation were different.

“For Lilith's sake, Cassian, what nonsense are you thinking?” I scold myself out **loud**.

Chapter 32

I **look at her** again, this time focusing only on her face. I'm sure if I **pushed** just a little harder **into her mind**

, I could see what she's dreaming. Because I believe what I heard is part of her dreams.

"Cassian, Cassian, Cassian..."

Damn it.

I clench my fists, unable to look away. Her neck is damp with sweat, and I feel the urge to run my nose along **it, inhaling** her scent again. It's sweet-like wild berries.

That scent...

The restraint makes me bite my lower lip with the edge of my fangs. I snort, disgusted with myself.

What is it about this damn girl, this human I bought filthy and with the hem of her dress torn? I storm out, furious at reacting this way. My guards flinch as I leave, and one even peeks inside.

Perhaps he thinks that feverish creature has died by my hand.

"My lord."

Narkissa, with her hands clasped before her lap, waits at the start of the castle wing that most are forbidden to cross.

"What do you want, Narkissa?"

"Just to see you."

"Not the time."

My words hurt her, and her face shows it.

"What's going on?"

Narkissa knows full well she shouldn't take such liberties with me. Just because I let her lips touch part of my body doesn't mean I'll let her into life.

my

"Nothing that concerns you," I reply, resuming my path to my quarters.

"It's that human again, isn't it?"

"I have thirteen humans. Which one are you referring to?" I say as if I truly didn't know which one she's worried about.

I'll never understand the female sex. They get jealous of those who are the least threat. That human co

her in beauty—she's a sack of rot. With each passing second, her body decays.

"The one with the rubies," she replies with contempt. "That human."

"What about her?"

"She's a nuisance."

"On that we agree."

ever outshine

¶

"And yet she's still here."

"Yes, she is." I feel her footsteps behind me and stop abruptly before she can follow me into my quarters. No one enters them besides Drystan. "Summon the doctor. Elara is ill again."

Her eyes widen so much they look about to pop from their sockets. I'm very aware my comment will infuriate her. I find great satisfaction in bothering those who cling to me like ticks. It's just another way of causing them pain.

"Since when do we take such trouble for a human? When they fall ill, they simply die."

"We?" I narrow my eyes. "Since when do we make decisions together, Narkissa?"

She shuts her mouth instantly.

"That's what I thought," I continue. "Thank you for calling the doctor. Have a pleasant day."

I enter my quarters, shutting the heavy double doors in her face. A smile I don't quite know how to describe creeps across my face, but it quickly vanishes when I faintly hear Drystan's laughter.

Our acute hearing has let him catch everything, and he seems to be laughing heartily.

"I knew you'd give in," he seems to whisper.

The little temperance I ever had vanishes in an instant, as does one of the decorative statues in the small salon before my

bedroom.

That frail human must die.

And yet Drystan, the maidens, even the little salamander that lives in the library—they all seem fond of her.

But not me.

I want her to wither, to cease to exist, *to* stop disturbing me.

To die.

Comment

## Sold to the Night Lord

Elara

The fever seems to be giving me a small break—or maybe it has finally decided to leave me for good. Even so, Cassian’s order was clear: no going out until he says otherwise, and truthfully, my latest discoveries, along with my drained **energy**, have completely killed any desire I had to fight him.

I stare at the mountain of letters on my desk. I haven’t stopped writing whenever I wasn’t feverish or exhausted. I have **the** faint hope that I’ll be allowed to send the

into my room, much more cheerful now the reassure my family and receive a few words back from them. Clarissa **bursts**

garment in her hands.

the fever has stayed away *for* two consecutive days. She’s holding **a** leather.

“Up you go, dear, you need to get ready. You’re going out.”

I blink, confused, not quite believing it.

“Out? Where to?” I rise from my seat beside the desk. “To stroll in the gardens?”

She smiles from ear to ear while shaking her head.

“No, dear, you’re going outside. Truly outside.”

My back straightens completely, and I feel a small pull in my stomach. Nerves and excitement. It's broad daylight, and that already makes me feel this will be a different kind of outing. I hope I get to see something other than **a** room full of

vampires indulging in carnal pleasures.

Clarissa shakes out a pair of black leather pants in front of my eyes, and before I've recovered from the initial surprise, she startles me again.

"Put these on."

"Pants?" I ask, incredulous.

"That's what the lord ordered."

I don't even think about complaining. I'm more than thrilled with this change of attire. I've never worn pants—my mother was very traditional in that sense and made little Abigail and me wear dresses and those instruments of torture called corsets. I was already thrilled not to have to wear them here, but now, in the presence of pants, I'm ecstatic. I undress without hesitation, completely shameless. I slide the material up my legs and pull the laces to tie it at my waist.

"I love them. They're perfect."

Clarissa nods in agreement. She brushes my hair from my face and ties it in a low ponytail.

"Do you know where we're going?"

"Not exactly, though most likely into the city."

I fall silent again while Clarissa finishes with me. I ask about Naida, who apparently is helping **pick** fabrics **for new dresses**.

**1/3**

Chapter **33**

**When Clarissa** tells me she's done, she barely has time to say goodbye. After being sick or locked **up for so long**, the idea of **going** out there—even if it's with him—excites me too much."

I head down to the entrance hall, which is empty. I pace back and forth, impatient, until I see him descending the **grand** staircase. He maintains a regal demeanor, barely acknowledging me. We haven't seen each other in days, **but our last**



exchange of words still burns inside me. He walks past me, and my chance to look at him doesn't last long, **as he throws** a heavy piece of fabric at my face.

"Put that on."

I'm about to tell him to go to hell. I hold back and examine what he just threw at me, discovering it's a cloak. I slide **it** over my body and tie it around my neck. When I finish, I see him watching me with suspicion. If he's waiting for a thank you, he's going to be waiting a long time.

A guard opens the door. I lift my gaze and spot two horses with sleek, shiny coats. I smile.

"We're riding?" I dare to ask.

"What else would I have two saddled horses at the door for, Elara?" he replies mockingly. "You think I'm in the mood for one of those typical Diluted snacks?"

I stay silent—probably for the best. He walks ahead toward what I assume is his horse. It has a black coat and bright black eyes. I step closer and, holding out my palm under its muzzle, let it bump and sniff me.

"Careful, he bites. Like his master."

Is that a joke? If it is, it's completely out of place, and I hope the wary look I shoot him makes it clear I find it anything but funny. Not coming from a vampire who can shatter minds and reduce people to dust.

I approach the other horse, which is the opposite of his—pure white. I do the same, letting it sniff me, and I can't help but laugh when it tickles my palm with its muzzle. I don't realize we've fallen into a long silence until I raise my face and find him looking at me with those piercing blue eyes. He notices too and breaks the connection immediately.

"Mount up," he *orders*.

I step closer, grabbing the saddle as best I can and try to get on. I'm too small for this big, burly horse. My leg barely reaches the stirrup to push myself up. Blushing, partly from the effort and partly from being watched, I manage to climb onto the horse, but then I slip along its side.

I already see myself face-planting into the ground and creating a humiliating scene. But it doesn't happen. I feel his hands on my waist, holding me firmly and placing me in the saddle. He hands me the reins.

"If you're always this kind, even the animals will laugh at you."

He circles his horse and mounts it with precise, graceful movements. I can't help but watch him longer than I should. I wonder if I should thank him for preventing me from cracking my head open—but then I remember his behavior **these** past days and tell myself it's the least he could do after being such a brute. He gives a small nudge to **the horse's flanks**, and it takes off. I mimic him, and when the white mare starts to gallop, I cling tightly to its body, afraid of

losing my balance.

## Chapter 33

**Both** animals seem to know exactly where they're going. They gallop nonstop, and before I know **it**, the **castle is** a distant – dot behind us. I stay hunched over for a while until I gather the courage to straighten up and let **the wind hit my** face. **The** hood of the cloak rises, covering part of my face, and from the way Cassian looks at me, I'm almost sure he **had** something

to do with it.

The mare rides up beside Cassian's horse—almost shoulder to shoulder... or rather head to shoulder, given **our height**

difference.

"Can I know where we're going?" I ask over the noise of the wind.

"I have a meeting."

"Then why no guards or carriage?"

"Why so many questions?" He looks down at me. "My carriage and guards draw *too* much attention." He pulls his own hood up over his head. "Do you know how to be a ghost, Elara?"

I'm about to reply that I've spent my whole life being one. Instead, I fix my eyes ahead and we continue down the path surrounded by thick vegetation. I look at the trees overhead, catching the sunlight in their crowns, and I scan them like something could jump out at any moment to attack us. I suppose the fact that Cassian wants to avoid attention unsettles

1. me.

After a while—probably over an hour—the city comes into view. My backside, if it had a mouth, would sigh in relief. I'm **not** used to riding, and I ache all over.

# Sold to the Night Lord

## Chapter 34

An exasperating chuckle escapes Cassian—it's pretty obvious he just got into my head again. I hate him. Isn't there a way to keep him out? This is a total mental violation.

"I don't need to get into your head to know you're sore." For a second, I think I see a lascivious glint in his eyes. "**You've** been bouncing in that saddle for ten minutes."

I press my lips together and stop moving, now fully aware that no gesture of mine escapes him. We're nearly at the city's edge when Cassian pulls the reins harder and steers his horse off the main path. We end up behind the underbrush. He dismounts in a swift movement, and I do the same. He ties the horses to a nearby tree trunk, and from the way he moves, I know this isn't his first time doing this.

No words are needed—when he steps out from the brush, I follow, making sure my hood covers my face well, though I doubt anyone in the city would recognize me. Even if they did, it wouldn't matter. I'm no one to these people.

We enter one of the poorest neighborhoods. We blend into the walls, walking down the darkest and loneliest alleys. It's hard for me to keep up—he moves too quickly and silently, something I can't replicate. His footsteps float. I, on the other hand, feel like an elephant trying to tiptoe.

cloak's fabric, but it does little to help. Our ?

As we wander through the slums, the stench of urine, feces, and garbage is suffocating. I try to cover my mouth with the of the corner of my eye, I spot a nearly naked child. We share a very brief look before a man appears and pulls him away. I to believe it's his father. I hope it is. From that moment, I feel my heart shrink in my chest and I move forward in a daze.

We stop in front of a building that looks in better condition than everything we've passed. True to form, Cassian goes in first and doesn't even bother to hold the door for me. Inside, it's quite dark, and we have to climb three floors until we

reach a door with a snake-shaped handle. He knocks three times exactly, and then a familiar face opens the door: Walter.

He can't hide the bit of delight he feels at seeing

me again.

Cassian steps past him, removing his cloak and gloves as he scans the room.

“Aeron and Ciro are waiting where they always do, sir.”

He walks off without saying a word—the thud of a door at the end of the hallway is the only sign he entered one of the

wide grin spreads across Walter’s face.

rooms. We’re left in silence for a few seconds, and slowly, ”

“I’m so glad to see you again and to know you’re okay. I was really worried when you left like that.”

My hand instinctively travels to my wrist, where the wound is already healing. I’ll carry a reminder of that night He notices the gesture, and for just a second, the brightness in his eyes dims.

“Yes, I’m better. It was just a small accident.”

“I’m glad that’s all it was.” He points to a small chair—not exactly glamorous compared to the luxuries I’ve had these past weeks. “Please, take a seat. I don’t think they’ll take long; they never do.”

“Who’s Ciro?” I ask, remembering the name he mentioned earlier.

**2329** Sa, ZAug

I know Aeron De’Ath is his lord and comes from one of the three original bloodlines.

“Ciro Amery.”

I open my mouth in an “O” shape and then nod to show I know who he means. Well, only in theory. Honestly, **I don’t** remember seeing him at the party. Maybe I did, but didn’t recognize him.

“And what do they do?”

“They discuss things.” He waves his hand dismissively. “Or rather, Cassian discusses and the others listen.”

“Do they fear him?”

“Everyone does—or at least they should.”

“What do you know about him?” I lower my voice so much I think he didn’t hear me. Though I’m sure they did, with **that** devilish hearing of theirs.

ho lives with him and feeds him.” Seeing my blank “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” he replies. “After all, you’re the one

know almost the same as you. He has a lot of power—so much that even expression, he sighs and continues. “I guess those of noble lineage fear him. He has gifts no one else has. His temper makes him wildly unpredictable, and most of the time people are afraid to anger him, afraid he’ll destroy everything. Generally, he’s not violent, but when he chooses to be, it’s absolute terror. What happened the other night wasn’t the first time—I’ve seen him do the same to almost an entire room.”

“Does he go around killing humans?”

He arches one brow, as if saying of course—haven’t I heard the rumors about feeders who don’t survive?

“If it’s any comfort, he doesn’t do it for pleasure. Or so I think. He just gets rid of the ones who irritate him—especially if they’re human. He truly hates us.” He shrugs. “Doesn’t surprise me much. I think he hates everyone. Sometimes I even find it strange that he lets anyone touch him at all.”

“Man or woman?” I repeat. “Cassian...?”

“Most enjoy the company of both men and women.” He winks. “Why settle for one gender when you can have both?”

I feel myself blush immediately, remembering how many men—many of them Diluted—lingered near him.

“Do you have a problem with that?” he asks.

“Not at all,” I say hurriedly, waving my hands in front of me. “I just didn’t imagine it.” The start of an awkward moment looms, so I prepare another question to keep the conversation going. “And what do they discuss?”

“No idea. I don’t like to gossip.”

I narrow my eyes into two thin slits, letting him know with just a look that I don’t believe him at all. I stand, trying **to** make as little noise as possible, which is easier with these boots than with the heels I’m usually forced to wear. I walk **to the end** of the room, not quite close to the door. I can tell it’s good quality—it barely lets sound through. *I*

*only* catch isolated words.

**23:29 Sat, 2 Aug**

Race.

Diluted.

Extinction.

Create.

Words that don't mean much to me without context, though I guess the extinction they're referring to is that of the **Diluted** -or something like that. I'm already turning to go back to Walter when the door swings open. Cassian catches me **mid-** escape. He says nothing, but the way he looks at me makes it clear he doesn't like nosy people getting into his business. Behind him appears Aeron, with his shining silver hair down to his shoulders and that mischievous green gaze. **Right** behind him is who I assume is **Ciro**. Even without knowing him, his beauty instantly marks him as a vampire. There's **no** doubt when you look at him. His skin is as pale as the others, his hair a tousled chestnut, and his eyes a color that makes me blink—an extremely light pink.

I know vampires born as such stop aging once their body deems itself fully mature. Still, **Ciro** looks the youngest of the three. He has a youthful air; even his clothes are messier than the others'. He wears a bottle-green vest, his shirt untucked from his pants, and one hand stuffed in a pocket.

Our eyes meet, and I feel myself blush instantly. In response, his lips curve into a kind smile, and for a moment, I think I stop breathing. I would never admit it out loud, but **Ciro** is incredibly handsome—in a very different way than Cassian.

“You must be Elara.”

23:29 Sat, 2 Aug 0

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 35

A muscle in Cassian's jaw twitches as **Ciro** steps forward, takes my hand, and kisses my skin. His lips are cold, and **yet I** feel something electric.

“Pleasure to meet you.” He glances sideways at Cassian

“She's not how *you* described her. She's a beautiful feeder—were you afraid I'd steal her from you?”

Cassian lets out a sound halfway between amusement and mockery.

“Beautiful, if you like the bland type.” His eyes stab into mine. “Impertinent and boring.”

“That didn’t really answer my question.”

“I’ve said more than enough.”

“Don’t forget you owe me a feeder,” *Ciro* says lightly. “You killed one of mine.”

“I wouldn’t have if she hadn’t been a nuisance.”

I watch the exchange utterly stunned, shifting my gaze between them.

“You know your effect on women.” *Ciro* tilts his head as if studying him. “You can’t kill them all just for wanting a bit of your attention.”

Even though *Ciro* is smiling, I sense something dark swirling between the two.

“Sorry I’m not like you, getting lost in anyone’s skirts.”

“You think you’re special just because you don’t sleep with humans?”

“Men are always better—much more grateful,” *Aeron* comments, and I can’t tell if he’s trying to steer the conversation elsewhere or just being sarcastic.

“*Aeron*, you know our dear *Cassian* doesn’t lie with human men either.”

annoys and disgusts him. To be honest, almost *Cassian*’s nostrils flare, making it very clear that this conversation everything annoys and disgusts him. Seeing him in a good mood seems impossible. Without warning, he grabs my arm roughly and pulls me back toward the door.

“I think that’s enough for today,” he says without looking at *Ciro* or *Aeron*. “Everything we needed to discuss has already been said.”

He opens the door without waiting for his companions to say goodbye or call him an idiot—which I would. *Out*

of the *corner* of my eye, I catch *Walter* watching us with slight astonishment but still maintaining his submissive posture next **to** *Aeron*. When the *door* closes, it trembles. We hurry down the stairs and once outside, with a sharp tug, he pulls the cloak over my head and drags me through the dark alleys, retracing our steps, back to the horses.

I stumble slightly not that he cares—and when we finally exit the slums and reach the overgrowth **that surrounds the** city, I sigh in relief. At least he’ll stop dragging me around the streets like a rag doll. I stroke the **mare’s side as I mount, this**

time without *Cassian*’s help.

His horse bolts forward, forcing the mare to match its pace. I struggle against the wind to keep my hood **firmly over my** head. The air cuts my cheeks and my eyes begin to water. We move fast, much faster than before, giving **the animals** no rest as they keep running, kicking up dirt behind us.

We enter the area thick with vegetation, now even darker. The trees lean over the path, suffocating, and despite **our speed**, I feel the unease growing inside me. And as if that earlier sensation had been a premonition, a scream cuts **through the** rhythmic sound of hooves on the dirt. I barely have time *to* react before I'm thrown *to* the ground. The mare whinnies, frightened and pained by a wound on her back that makes her fall. I manage to dodge just in time to avoid being crushed by her weight. I try to get up and see Cassian fighting alone against more than a dozen men. He snaps necks or moves his hand and reduces them to nothing. I'm horrified and yet relieved that they don't seem to pose a real threat to him.

I drop to the ground beside the fallen animal, who has a gash in her belly. My hands quickly become stained with her blood, and I'm so focused on the mare that I don't notice the threat behind my back.

They grab me by the hair and drag me to my knees until I'm forced to stand. I feel the blade of a knife against my throat, pressing against my jugular.

"You're making a mistake," I say, my voice trembling. "I'm not important."

A rough laugh escapes him.

"That's not for you to decide."

Cassian's gaze turns toward us, and I see his eyes widen when he sees me in the arms of one of them. He takes a step forward and stops when I feel the hot trickle sliding down my neck.

"Release my companion," says my captor.

Cassian is holding one of them, his neck bent at an unnatural angle. He's dead. Cassian obeys and lets the lifeless body drop to the ground. He brushes the dust off his cloak without taking his eyes off us.

"What do you want?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

I can feel his smile behind my neck.

"You're an idiot if you think I care enough about her for you to use her as leverage."



“You don’t get it.”

I feel teeth sink into my neck, and my eyes fly open in horror. I let out an agonized scream. His bite is meant **to hurt—not to** feed. I didn’t even think they were vampires. Are they? Their skin isn’t as pale—though I can’t see them well either. Most **of** them move at inhuman angles. I try to reach behind me to grab my captor and pull him off, but it’s useless. His teeth clamp harder onto my neck, and I’m terrified he’ll tear it open.

Amid this chaos, one of the fallen rises and silently walks behind Cassian. I want to scream at him **to turn around, but the** pain freezes my vocal cords. The only sound that escapes me could be a scream of pain—**or warning**.

He doesn’t see it coming. I see the blade of a white wooden dagger pierce his chest. More men **come out from**

the free and grab him by the arms. My attacker takes the chance to drag me away from there. I reach for **my neck** as he drags me across the ground, tearing my clothes and pulling out locks of my hair. My scalp and knees burn. With **every** second we move farther from the path. I don’t know where he’s taking me.

My fingers cling to anything they can find on the ground. I come across a rock and use it to strike the hand holding me. He grunts when he sees his bruised knuckles, and my body collapses to the ground. I don’t even have time to recover—he’s already on top of me, strangling me.

“Fucking bitch.”

I can’t speak, scream, or breathe.

His grip is strong, and I swear I’m about to pass out. Then I see his skin begin to wither, turning the color of death. **His eyes** -which I hadn’t seen until now—are amber, but as the seconds pass, they lose their life and turn white. Something strange escapes from him and enters my mouth. His hands lose strength and finally release my neck. His body falls completely on top of mine, crushing me against the cold earth. It takes me several attempts to push him off. When I manage it, I spend just a few seconds looking at my attacker. His skin is ashen, and from where I am, I can see he looks like he’s about to crumble like a dry leaf.

I don’t stop to think about what just happened—I don’t know. One second I thought I was going to die, and the next...

wasn’t.

I turn away from the corpse and run until I reach the scene of the massacre again. Cassian is on one knee, clutching his chest. Everyone around him no longer looks human. As much

as I wish I didn't see it, I see eyes outside their sockets, severed arms, piles of formless flesh, and among them—the monster who did this.

“Are you okay?” I ask, reaching him.

“Yes.”

His voice is dry. He tries to stand, but his legs give out before he can and he falls back to his knees. He closes his eyes, as if holding his breath. When he opens them again, his gaze lights up and focuses on my neck. I cover it immediately.

“Is it bad?” I try to divert his attention.

“No.” He lets out a ragged laugh. “Those bastards thought that stupid dagger could kill me. They’re idiots. As if they didn’t know that Purebloods can’t be killed.”

“Never?”

“Not in any way they know.” He looks past my shoulder. “And the other?”

“I think dead.”

He freezes, looking at me as if waiting for me to laugh and tell him I’m lying—or that he’s right behind me, ready **to finish** tearing my throat. When a few seconds pass in silence and he realizes I’m not joking, his lips curl wickedly **and then he** bursts out laughing, leaving me completely stunned.

“You think?”

LUL7

I nod, still confused. I half expect to find him behind me.

He shakes his head, disbelieving, and on the third attempt, collapses.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 36

Cassian Draven has collapsed at my feet. I’m not even surprised—after killing several dozen men by himself. There are so many dismembered, unrecognizable bodies here that one could form a small platoon. I look **at** him, waiting for him to open his eyes and say it was a joke. He doesn’t. I nudge his body with the tip of my boot. No reaction.

Something in my head tells me what I need to do, but my reason begs me not to. This is my moment to run -I could disappear into the forest and try to escape.

Don't be an idiot, Elara. He'll find you. You're bleeding, and he's a vampire.

Besides, where would I go?

I'm far from home, and on foot the journey would be much harder. I have no resources, and my family would probably be killed if I returned to them. So I sigh in defeat and look for a dagger. I find one that's fallen from one of the enemies' hands. It's clean-its owner didn't have time to stain it with blood. I grip the hilt, bring the blade to my palm, and hesitate. I hesitate for several minutes before slicing my palm and holding it above his mouth. The first drop falls without any reaction. Two, three, four drops fall until they slip between his lips-and his eyes open. They've turned an almost unreal shade of blue.

He grabs my wrist, brings my hand to his mouth, and I feel his lips against my palm. He kisses the skin as he sucks my blood. A low growl escapes him, triggering an unexpected reaction in me. A little tug in my

stomach.

"Stop," I say, pulling my hand. "That's enough."

He doesn't listen. Instead of stopping, he grips my hand tighter and brings his body closer. I lose my balance and, before I realize how it happens, he's on top of me, my palm pressed to his mouth. He sucks hard-I feel my blood rushing out, his tongue licking my skin.

I give up hope that he'll stop. The sensation flooding my body is like-floating on a cloud, a tug in my belly and tingles throughout my limbs. I suppose it's not that bad after all.

With that thought, I let him continue drinking-and grow frustrated when he stops. He pulls away from me as if I carried the plague.

"This can't be."

I blink.

"You're supposed to say thank you," I snap.

"You taste... different."

"Well, I'm sorry." I stagger to my feet. "You're a damn ingrate."

1/4

15:03 Sun, 3 Aug

He snorts in response.

When I reach the mare, I see her breathing has stopped. I feel a deep sadness—she was a majestic animal. Things shouldn't have ended this way.

“Take her out, maybe a change of air will do her good.” I hear Cassian mutter behind me.

“What did you say?”

I turn to face him. He's already mounted on his horse, showing no signs of exhaustion or weakness.

“I said get on. That's what I said.”

He offers his hand, again covered in a cold leather glove. Begrudgingly, I let him help me up and end up nestled between the reins and his chest. That mysterious scent—like night—completely surrounds me. I glance up at his face once, and see his lips pressed into a tight line, stained with the crimson of my blood. He urges the horse forward, and we gallop back toward the castle.

I never thought I'd say this, but I want to go back.

Out here, I don't feel safe.

We ride fast, leaving behind a slaughter—and a withered corpse I can't explain.

We enter the castle, stirring up a commotion in our wake. Drystan descends the grand staircase and notices the wound on his friend's chest, which has stopped bleeding. He allows himself just a few seconds to assess my condition with a quick scan. Aside from my disheveled hair and the tears in my shirt, I'm unharmed. Well, if we don't count the cut on my palm and the wound on my neck.

I feel the area tingling as I think about his lips against my skin,

sucking, the edge of his teeth brushing my palm. A knot forms in my stomach, tightening when Cassian drops his cloak to the floor and Drystan begins helping him remove the blood-soaked shirt clinging to his body. My breath catches when I see the thick, raised marks where there must have once been ugly welts. The scars crisscross over one another, leaving no trace of healthy skin. Somehow, he seems to feel my eyes traveling over every inch of his skin. He looks over his shoulder and instead of covering up or turning away, he stands taller, as if showing that the scars don't bother or shame him—though by their appearance, they probably still hurt.

“What the hell happened to you?”

Drystan follows Cassian up the stairs like a loyal pup. Cassian doesn't seem intent on stopping; he plans to leave me alone in the foyer. I refuse to stay behind like some idiot. I follow, several steps behind, but not far enough that I can't still hear them.

"We were attacked on the way back."

"Diluted ones?"

"Yes, but I smelled something else too."

My presence hasn't gone unnoticed by either of them, and Cassian makes that clear when he turns to look directly at me. A smug smile forms on his lips as he waves a dismissive hand.

"This is my side of the castle. You can't follow us." His eyes gleam with arrogance. "Stay there, little wildcat. Unless you're following me because you want a personal tour of my chambers."

I clench my fists, my nails digging into my palms and worsening the pain from the cut. I think carefully about what I want to say, and though I try to sound calm, when I see him walking away again, I yell:

"I saved your life today! You could show a little gratitude. If it weren't for me, you'd still be lying there on the ground!"

"You think too highly of yourself."

He doesn't even need to raise his voice. His is strong and echoes against the hallway walls, reaching my ears clearly. His arrogance makes my blood boil. I stomp my foot, furious.

"Let me send letters to my parents!"

He doesn't answer. Instead, Drystan turns his face and seems to apologize with a slight bow. Not for himself,

but for his idiot friend. I stand there watching as their silhouettes grow smaller and disappear around the

corner.

My rational side tells me to go back to my room, take a hot bath, and relax in the comfort of my bed. But do I

ever do the rational thing? Of course not. The one quality that seems more like a fatal flaw is my curiosity- and now, a new one: the urge to do the exact opposite of what Cassian tells me. One day, it will get me killed. Maybe today.

I wait a little longer, then tiptoe forward. I haven't taken two steps when I decide to remove my shoes and walk barefoot. As I move through the corridor, it feels like I'm breaking the surface of water-that same

strange sensation I had when I jumped into the lake. Like Cassian's wing of the castle is protected by a

barrier I just crossed.

At the end of the hallway, I turn right. I see only one pair of double doors. No confusion-his chambers are

there.

Carefully, I approach until I'm just a few meters away. Their voices are faint, so I inch closer. Surely they'll notice I'm here soon; I can't hide my scent or my heartbeat. I'm not afraid of death-I've always been ready for it. What I won't accept is being cast aside from this so easily. I'm the one they tried to kidnap.

"There were many, but I sensed something different. Something familiar, but I can't quite place it. What I am sure of is that most were Diluted." Cassian's tone reveals nothing. "They tried to take her. Thought she was special to me."

❧❧❧

**Aug**

"Maybe the rumors about how much you paid for her are spreading."

Mentally, I tell my heart to calm down, to stop beating so fast. The silence on the other side of the door makes me fear the worst. I'm sure I've been discovered. Then Cassian speaks again.

"I've tasted her. Her blood has changed."

"Maybe it's the sickness."

**38%**

“I don’t know.” I hear the scrape of a chair. “Usually I can tell when a human’s blood is sick. I didn’t feel that at all. Maybe it’s connected to the feeling I had at the Red Auction.”

“What feeling?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

I strain to hear the sound of paper tearing and pages turning.

“You’re thinking of going?”

“Should I?”

“Maybe it’s good to appear among your own kind so they don’t get the wrong idea. News of the attack will spread fast, and it wouldn’t help if they thought you were afraid or affected. A public appearance would be

ideal.”

4/4

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 37

38%

He exhales, and from the way he does it, I suppose he agrees with his friend. I decide not to press my luck any further and slip away from the door. I retrace my steps and return to my chambers. Clarissa and Nalda are inside at the low table where they usually play cards. They smile until they see the state of my clothes and the bird’s nest that is my hair.

“What happened?”

“We were attacked on the way back to the castle.”

Both stand so quickly the cards scatter everywhere. Clarissa starts checking my body for injuries I might not have noticed.

“I’m fine, really.”

They don’t believe me and keep inspecting for a while. I let out a heavy sigh when they finally give me space to breathe.

“You must’ve been so scared...”

I nod.

“There’s hot water ready. Best we get that mess out of your hair,” says Clarissa, lifting one of the tangled

locks.

“Don’t worry, I’ll do it. You two can continue your card game. I’d like to bathe alone.”

They hesitate, but something in my smile must convince them it’s not a totally insane idea. I walk to the

bathroom, remove my shirt, and as I pull down my riding pants and underwear, I see blood. I immediately

look down at my legs—between my thighs is a reddish stain. Not a wound. My bleeding must have just

started. I step into the tub, submerging one foot, then the other, until the hot water covers me up to my

chest.

A moan of pure relief escapes me as the warmth begins to loosen the tension in my legs. The water quickly turns murky from the dirt stuck to my skin and hair. I sink into it completely, massaging my scalp and opening my eyes underwater. For a moment, I feel the same as I did in the lake the night I tried to end my life. I almost hear that voice again.

I break the water’s surface, gasping/like a fish, and instinctively glance around, as if I might see that woman again. I don’t. I lean back and begin rubbing oils into my skin as the maids usually do. I trace the cut on my palm with my fingers—not pain, just a soft tingle.

I growl softly, frustrated with myself for feeling that sensation, for not being able to stop thinking about that moment. It takes a while before I leave the bath, and the water is already growing cold. I wrap myself in a robe and head toward the wardrobe. I haven’t even opened a door when my maids are already on me.

“We have to get you ready. Cassian sent Drystan to tell us you’ll be accompanying him again tonight.”

“He’s insane.” I frown. “We just got back, we were attacked, and he’s thinking about parties?”

“We don’t ask questions, we obey.” Clarissa taps my nose. “And so should you.”

One starts drying me while the other rummages through dresses.



“I think my bleeding has started.”

“Don’t worry.”

And I don’t. Bleeding is normal for women. I just hope it doesn’t make me a juicier snack. I wrinkle my nose at the thought.

I let them do as they please. Instead of the white dress from the other night, they choose a dark red velvet one, the color of blood. Much to my dismay, they insist on a corset with stiff bones that dig into me every time I breathe. They say it accentuates my figure. And it does—my breasts are practically an invitation. I never thought that part of me was especially generous, but now I wish it were even less so.

They’re always attentive to the details, and before long, I’m on my way to the carriage where Cassian waits. The ride is silent. We don’t speak, we don’t argue—which I consider a small victory. Neither of us brings up what happened earlier. We stop at the same place as before—I recognize the façades and entrance doors. This must be their party palace.

Cassian walks ahead several paces, not bothering to wait for me. I watch him silently from a distance. His pants cling to his long, strong legs, and his chest is covered by a black shirt with the top buttons undone. He doesn’t need a coat—few things in this world are colder than he is. Meanwhile, I’m burdened not only with a cumbersome dress but also a white cloak lined with wool.

I catch up just as he reaches the doors. He glances sideways at me.

“You know the rules. Do whatever you want, but your blood is mine.”

He disappears into the crowd, but his presence is unmistakable. I watch him longer than I should—and I wish I hadn’t looked away, because the rest of the attendees are not dressed like him. I see vampires sitting on small thrones with naked women squirming in their laps, blood dripping from their throats. The rest of the room is no less obscene—bodies tangled together on the marble floor, moving to various rhythms. I have to look away.

No matter how loud the music is, it can’t drown the sounds. The moans bounce off the marble, creating a cacophony that makes my skin crawl. My eyes desperately seek a familiar face, but Walter doesn’t seem to be here—or hasn’t arrived yet.

I feel lost and disoriented. I try to escape, edging through the crowd until I press myself against one of the red tapestries that serve as curtains. Slowly, afraid to find someone already using the small space behind.

**15:03**

**Sun, 3 Aug**

me, I lift the tapestry. Inside is total darkness, but it seems empty, so I crawl in.

Once the tapestry falls completely behind me, the darkness becomes absolute, but eventually my eyes adjust. It's a small cubicle with a chair. I collapse onto it, ignoring the thoughts in my head about what inappropriate things may have happened here.

The moans drill into my ears.

38%

29

I slouch into the armchair, feeling the corset boning digging into my skin. I think about trivial things until I get lost in my own thoughts. I go over and over the most recent events, as if I weren't capable of moving forward. At some point, someone stumbles in accidentally and immediately apologizes, laughing—no doubt under the effects of wine. Or perhaps blood has the same effect on them.

Nothing else happens, and I suppose that's what leads me to fall asleep. When I realize what's happened, I

sit up with a jolt, wondering how long I've been lying here asleep and whether anyone came in. My hands fly

to my neck by pure instinct, but it doesn't seem to have been touched by anyone's fangs, much less pierced.

When I step out, the light makes me squint and even brings tears to my eyes. I look around, visibly disoriented from the sleep. The hall doesn't look any emptier than before—maybe even fuller—so the party

must be in full swing. I consider going back to the darkness of my refuge. I'm already turning when a voice

interrupts my escape.

"Hello, darling."

The voice isn't entirely unfamiliar, but it's definitely not Cassian's. I turn heavily.

It's Ciro Amery, wearing a blood-red shirt, open, exposing the paleness of his chest that looks as if it were

carved from stone. My eyes travel down that path of skin, and a little voice in my head tells me it's

inappropriate to look at a man like that, especially a vampire, so I lift my gaze again. His pink eyes look at me with amusement, and his chestnut hair is tousled, a few curls falling over his forehead.

“You look tired.”

I’m completely speechless. I stare at his face like a fool, unable to stop. The amusement in his eyes grows.

“This is... this isn’t my idea of an i-ideal party.”

The words come out with difficulty. What’s wrong with me? With Cassian, this doesn’t happen. With him, I

often become a sharp-tongued girl who doesn’t hesitate to blurt out whatever comes to mind, even if it

might cost me my life. Ciro Amery wouldn’t hurt me, he can’t touch me... right?

“Yes, you’re right.” He dangles a glass from one hand. “The orgy was definitely too much.”

His words draw my eyes briefly to the center of the room, where something my eyes shouldn’t see is happening. Sweaty bodies, entangled, moaning. Immediately my cheeks burn.

“**It’s** obscene,” I declare.

“It’s natural,” he counters.

Something in my face must change because suddenly Ciro bursts into laughter. That makes me feel even more uncomfortable and annoyed. I’m more than ready to turn and walk as far away from him—and the rest—as possible. His fingers dig into my elbow before I have the chance to do just that.

“Sorry,” he apologizes. “It’s just that I’m still surprised by how humans react to sex. You’ve regressed so much... You used to be far more liberal. I’m glad to know there are still people who resist that and come to us to enjoy their sexuality.”

My gaze grows wary and venom pools on the tip of my tongue.

“I suppose it’s your fault that humans have regressed so much,” I spit.

“It’s the fault of the religion you insist on clinging to.” His index finger lifts my chin, searching for my eyes. “God doesn’t protect you—he imprisons you.”

“You eradicated everything to do with religion.”

“We can storm churches and defile them, destroy crucifixes, burn bibles, and break baptismal fonts, but in

many minds faith still persists. They keep reciting prayers at night, clinging to those invisible shackles.” He begins circling me, evaluating. “Why is it a sin to enjoy your body? Why is it a sin for a man to love another?

Doesn’t God say to love thy neighbor? What does it matter if I do it by shaking his hand, clapping his back like good Christian men, or if I do it by kissing him until we both lose consciousness?”

Even if I try to argue or find a counterpoint, my mouth opens and closes without a single word coming out. The longer I stand in front of him, the more foolish I feel. And, as if that weren’t enough, I have to suppress a

yawn.

“I want to believe it’s the party that bores you, not my company.” He tilts his head, eyeing me with a playful smirk. “Still, I can’t let you feel bored.”

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 38

The cold touch of his fingers when he takes my hand knocks the breath out of me. He pulls me from **the** comfort of my hidden corner and leads me to the center of the hall, where people immediately stop whatever was keeping their bodies occupied. They look at him as if he were the sun itself. The moaning fades away, finally allowing the music played by the artists to take center stage. One smile from Ciro is enough for everyone to start dancing, completely forgetting what they were doing before. Naked and half- naked bodies pair off around us.

“Will you dance with me?” He gives a pompous bow and brings the back of my hand to his lips, planting a kiss there without breaking eye contact.

The word is fighting its way out of my mouth, almost as if against my will. I’m about to vomit a “yes” at his feet when the fragrance of night itself surrounds me.

“No,” Cassian answers for me.

Even knowing he’s there, the cold hardness in his voice still startles me. Ciro narrows his eyes at him, and for the first time, there seems to be no trace of amusement in them.

“Why not?”

Even I ask myself that question. I turn to get a better look and see red marks on Cassian's neck and his shirt even more open than before—there may even be scratches on his chest.

“Because she's going to dance with me.”

I must still be dreaming—this has to be some bizarre dream. It's the only explanation for what just came out of his mouth. He avoids being near me at all costs, and now he wants a dance? I'm definitely dreaming.

“You don't dance with humans,” *Ciro* replies. “And even less with a feeder—you find it unworthy and

disgusting.”

“I do and undo as I please.”

If *Ciro* says anything else, I don't hear it. Cassian drags me away with him. Unlike *Ciro*, he doesn't ask me to dance or kiss the back of my hand. He simply commands, and I must obey if I want to survive another night. Maybe I should do the opposite—disobey him and embrace death.

His hand settles at the small of my back, pulling me closer until our chests brush. I feel his gaze lower slowly over my face and linger one second too long on the curve of my breasts. Heat rushes to my cheeks—it's probably visible. His other hand grips mine, and wherever our fingers and palms touch, I feel that same tingling I despise.

No matter how hard I try to look elsewhere, his eyes seem intent on keeping me captive—I can't escape his

I gaze. I feel like I'm sinking into the cold, deep waters hidden in those icy wells.

38%

“*Ciro's* gift is his beauty,” he says. “One look at his body, and you'll feel the urge to fulfill his every wish. What do you humans say? Ah yes, looks aren't everything. Well, *Ciro Amery's* beauty is like a carnivorous plant that lures insects into its jaws.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

His grip tightens around my body as we start to spin again and again, drawing more and more attention from the guests. For someone marked by death, he moves through the floor with vitality. His movements are precise and elegant.

“Didn't you feel an attraction to him from the start?”

I'm ready to deny it, but he doesn't let me.

“I heard your heart speed up. Don’t try to lie to me—those things don’t work with me. I live attuned to your heartbeat.” He seems to realize he’s said something he didn’t mean to and keeps talking. “What I mean is, it’s very easy to fall under Ciro’s spell. Often it’s almost involuntary—his beauty is both gift and curse. Just like Aeron is too intelligent for his own good. His supernatural intelligence will drive him mad someday.”

“And why do you care?”

The thumb of the hand he holds mine with traces slowly down my palm, gliding over every small crease.

“care if you look like you want to be bitten by an Amery.”

“I didn’t look like anything,” I snap, annoyed. “Stop making things up and stop trying to control me.”

“Controlling you is exactly what I intend to do.”

A wolfish smile forms on his lips, raising the hairs on my neck. I try, in vain, to break free and leave him standing in the middle of the floor—it would humiliate him. It’s useless—he’s far stronger than me. His eyes briefly flick to something over my head, and just as I’m about to turn to see what caught his attention, he surprises me by dipping me backward in his arms. He’s no longer looking at anyone—only at me. His eyes drop to mine, trace my cheeks, linger on my lips, and finally reach the curve of my neck. He licks his bottom lip, and far from scaring me, it makes something flutter in places it never has before.

The melody fades, giving way to the next song. Cassian, with elegance and feigned chivalry, helps me upright again. I glance behind me, where Ciro watches us with shadowed eyes.

“You smell like blood,” he says casually. “In a different way than usual.”

My thoughts immediately jump to my monthly bleeding.

“...”

Once again, I fall silent. I’m sick of myself. What’s wrong with me? Am I an idiot? I plant my feet firmly on the ground, lift my chin to banish any trace of shame, and respond with complete naturalness:

19

38%

“I’m menstruating.”

His gaze lights up, his eyes gaining a depth I've only seen in his wildest moments.

"I see," is all he says. He lets out a small sigh. "It's time to return. Think you've had enough vampire attention for one night? Or do you still want that dance with Ciro?"

I feel the urge to say yes, just to annoy him, but I know that no matter how many spins Ciro gives me, my head will be elsewhere. I nod and let him lead me away from the dance we were clearly disrupting. Ciro makes a move to approach, but he must see something on Cassian's face that stops him in his tracks and sends him turning back.

"You made a wise choice," Cassian says almost into my ear. "I still need to punish you for wandering through my wing of the castle."

The blood in my veins turns to frost, my circulation halts completely, and I feel numb. His laugh tickles my ear. He pulls my arm, making me stumble.

"What are you going to do to me?" I croak.

"What would you like me to do?"

"Leave me alone."

"That's impossible, little wildcat. I've discovered I very much enjoy disturbing your existence."

"Why?"

His hands leave me as he opens the carriage door and practically throws me inside. Our eyes meet once more—we seem incapable of looking away. Perhaps I do have a tendency to drown in stormy waters. The sound of the door slamming signals the driver to set off. With the jolts, it takes me more than one try to sit properly. It may be my imagination, but I think I hear him whisper inside my head:

"Because you disturb me. You want to shatter my most solid principles."

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 39

4624

The silence is so thick it feels like it has taken on a corporeal form and has settled between us like a third person. We're no longer just two people—or one person and a vampire—inside the carriage. Now silence is a presence, stretching its claws toward my throat, squeezing until each breath is harder than the last. My fingers keep twisting in my

lap, knotting together over and over again. I keep going over his words in my head—that I disturb him? I’m not the one restricting his freedom or constantly threatening to end his life. I don’t see how I could possibly disturb him. And then there’s the issue of punishing me... Was he serious? Or just trying to scare me? I want to think it’s just a bluff, but by this point, I can’t recall a single time one of his

threats hasn’t come true.

All I have to do is close my eyes to see the bleeding, mangled mass that poor girl became, or to hear the coldness in his voice when he ordered the head of the guard who wasn’t watching the cells to be cut off.

Cassian never makes a threat unless he intends to keep it.

I knew I shouldn’t have wandered through his wing of the castle, I know he hates our scent, and I left it all along the hallway, right up to his door... I hate those brief moments of bravery that hit me from time to time.

What am I saying? They’re not bravery—more like complete stupidity.

When we stop in front of the stairway leading to the castle’s main doors, I feel panic rather than relief. Who

knows what horrors await me once we’re inside. The words they told me at the Red Auction echo louder

than ever in the back of my mind. No one usually survives until the next full moon, and I’m getting dangerously close to that deadline. Maybe today is the day when my disobedience leads me to that feared

and yet long-awaited end.

When I step out of the carriage, still gripped by silence, I lift my gaze toward the castle and try to summon

courage, because I was always ready for something like this to happen.

!

What does it matter if death comes by my own hand or by someone else’s? I’ve always been resigned to die

once I reached adulthood. I’ve only postponed the end by a few weeks. And even so, though I try to convince myself of this, when the sound of the wind rustles the treetops in the garden, a signal reaches my legs—one that tells me to run. To where? I don’t know. Just to run.



That's what I intend to do when I grab the heavy, deep red skirts of my dress, which will serve as a damn

beacon of light. Behind me, I hear the sound of dirt crunching beneath Cassian's feet as he lands. I don't

even look back when I start running—I don't need to. I know he's watching me with narrowed eyes, thinking

how stupid I am.

I know it's foolish, but I keep running. I race through the most familiar parts of the gardens, etched into my memory after weeks of pacing them nonstop.

"Elara, the more you run from me, the more fun you make the hunt."

His voice echoes inside my head, soft as velvet and just as seductive, sending a shiver through every inch of

Sun, Aug

38%

my skin. My hands clutch my skirts tighter, I struggle not to trip over my shoes, and then I see that invisible line I shouldn't cross. There, in front of me, stands the statue of Lilith, and the chiseled smile on her **face** seems to invite me to cross, to enter the gardens that have been forbidden to me until now.

"Maybe I should warn you that the most interesting hunts tend to excite me... And when that happens, I

overdo it when I drink... It's possible I won't leave a single drop inside you."

I could swear I feel his lips whispering those exact words near my ear, and a sharp turn confirms they're just in my head. Cassian is only in my mind. For now. I'd better not waste time and just keep running. I cross every red line and enter those gardens that seemed beautiful from a safe distance during the day, but now feel dark and eerie. The statues, in this gloom, have lost their beauty. They look like monsters waiting to pounce. I pass a set of statues and small benches lit by moonlight. A small arch of lilac flowers leads to a path of thick hedges. I stop, weighing whether it's a good idea to keep going, to go even deeper. But I only need to hear what must be Cassian's increasingly close footsteps to launch myself down the hedge path faintly lit by moonlight.

I can only hear my own breathing as I run. I hate this damn dress and feel tempted to rip it off, but I know that without it, the chances of catching hypothermia increase

dramatically. I glance over my shoulder and see only lonely hedges. I turn left, then right twice, going deeper and deeper into what is undoubtedly a labyrinth.

“I never said what the punishment was, but I see your imagination has already done the job...”

His voice only makes my pulse quicken, it feels so close I can’t help but glance back repeatedly, finding nothing. I need to get out of here, to see what’s on the other side of this maze. With luck, maybe it leads to the forest and I can escape—although thinking about it, in the darkness of night and the thickness of the forest, dangers also lurk. Now more than ever, I should be aware of that. The stories I was told as a child are

no longer just stories—they’ve become real. The big bad wolf exists, the sirens that lure sailors to the rocks,

the witches who curse.

If I somehow manage to make it through all these gardens and miraculously reach the forest, my fate wouldn’t be any better than what awaits me here. I should stop exhausting myself unnecessarily, running in

this heavy dress, draining my last reserves. The best thing would be to stop now—so why can’t I?

I’ve never been a fighter or brave, so why am I insisting on acting like one now?

Death’s cold fingers brush the back of my neck, and when I turn around, Cassian’s deep, dark eyes are

staring at me with unsettling intensity. The air I’d been holding in my lungs escapes in a shaky gasp and my

heartbeat becomes erratic.

“I caught you.”

His eyes remain narrowed, reflecting the satisfaction he feels at any challenge—even one named Elara Voss. A small, stupid human who thought she could run. His lips curl slowly into a crooked smile.

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“Running from me is stupid, Elara.”

The words are stuck at the back of my throat. I don't protest when he drags my body to one of **the** solid hedges forming the labyrinth. It's much sturdier than I expected. The coolness of his fingers still lingers on my neck, drawing small circles that do nothing to calm me—in fact, they only heighten my unease. The hardness of his chest threatens to crush mine. Every part of my body is in contact with his, forming a perfect cage.

"Tell me, what did that little head of yours think would happen tonight?"

His dark scent seems to intensify, wrapping completely around me and clouding my senses. If I already had trouble getting words past my throat, his scent certainly doesn't help.

"Did

I you think I was going to kill you?"

One of his free fingers trails up to my chin and lifts my face until my eyes meet his. I dig my nails into my palms, trying to break out of this stupor—and I think I succeed, because the words—or rather, a word—slip from my tongue.

"Yes."

"You suppose correctly."

"Then?" My voice comes out rough.

The finger on my chin travels down my neck to my collarbone, where it lingers, deliberately caressing my skin. Hundreds, thousands of sparks seem to ignite beneath my skin in response. I feel electrified. This isn't what I should be feeling. My skin shouldn't be prickling from horror at the cold of his fingertips or the closeness of his body—it's doing it for reasons I can't understand.

"I've decided to postpone it a little longer." I watch as he moistens his lower lip with his tongue. "Your desire to resist me makes you the most entertaining of my feeders... and I do enjoy being entertained."

I have to remind myself to breathe, because while those words left his mouth, it's as if I forgot how. Or maybe I was too focused on watching his tongue wet his lips and the edge of one of his fangs peek out like a silent threat. I blink—more than once—shouting at myself mentally to remember how to be myself. Surely he's influencing me in some way.

"We're not entertainment," I say. "I'm not entertainment."

"Oh no?" His head tilts slightly, reminding me of a feline. "Then what are you, Elara? What do you want to be? What should I consider you?"

With every passing second, his gaze grows more feral, the blue of his eyes turning into the deepest of

oceans where no light reaches. His savage side is surfacing, and when his body presses even closer against mine, I realize something's happening. Cassian never gets this close to me.

3/4

“...”

“You...” His voice sounds restrained. “You are a fucking problem.”

4/4

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 40

I don't notice his hand has moved so quickly to my skirts until it lifts them and reaches my bare thigh. He, raises it, fitting himself better between my legs, pressing his hips against the softest parts of my body. I feel like I might faint at any moment. My legs tremble, my vision blurs, and I feel my blood pulsing in my lips. Those cold fingers now drawing slow circles on my thigh don't make me shiver with cold—instead, they send waves of pure fire through my body. I tell myself this is wrong. I try to lift my hands and push him

away, but they're pinned against his chest. There's no space between us.

“Your blood is like a siren's song to me, Elara.”

He's said my name before, and only now do I realize how good it sounds in his mouth, with that velvet voice. I want to say something, but everything I can think of feels stupid... or maybe I just don't want to break this moment and betray myself.

The nearness of his mouth to mine is dangerous—I can feel the warmth of his breath brushing my lips, and I bite them when his hand slides higher up my thigh. If he moved just a couple more centimeters, his hand

would be pressed against the very center of me. Just the thought makes me flush every possible shade of red. His eyes focus on my lower lip caught between my teeth, and what he sees makes him swallow. There's

something almost erotic in the way his throat moves up and down.

“You disgust me,” he says, mere centimeters from my mouth. “And I disgust myself.”

The distance between us couldn't even fit a needle. The impact of his scent drives my senses wild-

everything begins and ends with him. He surrounds me completely, not just because he literally has one

hand on my nape and the other under my skirts, but because his presence seems to seep into every inch of my skin. He brushes his lips fleetingly against the corner of my mouth. His body moves, and his lips follow, touching mine in a way so subtle it almost seems like a mirage-but it's not. It's not, because I feel a tingling exactly where he touched me, and the darkened look on his face tells me it was real. He pulls away from me

with a growl, wild.

Wherever his skin had touched mine, cold spreads once more. His hands are now rubbing over his face, and

I hear him stifle more than one growl. I'm too stunned to act normal right now. No words come out-only

instinct tells me to get as far away as possible. I've taken only two steps when his words stop me cold.

"I hope my touch is punishment enough, knowing how much you hate us," he says coldly, cutting. "It certainly was for me."

The truth is, I was far from feeling that way, though I know it's the right thing to feel. I let him touch me and nearly kiss me-a creature like him. What does that say about me? Am I that disturbed? Leaving my family, my home, my beliefs... it's affecting me to the point where now let a vampire touch me while I bite my lips to suppress moans. It's pathetic how a single brush of his fingers could awaken such a strange reaction.

I keep walking, though not for long, knowing I'm lost among these hedges. I have **no** idea how to get out. The thought of retracing my steps is not an option-I wouldn't be able to look Cassian in the eye right now.

So no matter how lost I am, I'll have to find my own way out-or freeze to death. I hug myself, missing the cloak I lost earlier tonight. I don't know how much time passes as I turn one way and then the other, without much hope. I should feel relief knowing my actions won't bring about my death-for now-but what just happened has tainted that feeling.

I feel dirty, wrong, immoral.

Invaded by those sensations, I manage to get out of the labyrinth, only to my disappointment it is not the end of these gardens-they're far more extensive than I

thought. This area is less dark, bathed in the silvery light of the moon. There is a small stone bench, and around it grows vegetation I have never seen before. It looks nothing like what grew in Ravag. The lilac flowers I saw at the beginning of the maze now cover everything here. I step closer to admire them; from their center, like a cascading fountain, fall tiny droplets that shine as if they were diamonds. My fingers, driven by curiosity, stroke them, expecting them to be wet. They are solid and dry. For a moment I consider the possibility that they are actual diamonds. I shake my head—it's impossible. They're flowers; jewels can't grow from them.

Others, in a dark crimson shade, catch my attention. I approach them expectantly, raising a hand to my mouth to stifle the gasp that wants to escape. The flower remains closed in a bud, but it pulses, as if it were a heart. I glance around and find more oddities. Flowers with small bells that truly chime when the breeze touches them; others, silver ones whose petals seem sharp and ready to wound anyone who dares to touch them; and lastly, roses, blacker than the deepest night, along which drip beads I could mistake for dew, but

whose reddish tone leaves no doubt.

There is a cruel beauty in this garden.

I sit on the bench, determined to catch my breath before attempting to find a way back to the castle that doesn't involve crossing the maze again—though the gardens themselves seem just as confusing. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimmering light and turn toward it. At first I think it's a firefly, though I doubt one would come out in the dead of winter to freeze—it would probably have more survival instinct than I seem to have. Like everything else here, it too holds an inexplicable beauty and rarity. It shines like a star in the sky, flitting around me so brightly that tears sting my eyes from the effort of keeping them open.

Another light joins it. Then another. Soon I'm surrounded by tiny stars. I raise my hand and extend a finger toward one of the tiny shining lights. When I touch it, it feels soft and warm, and I think I hear a tiny laugh. I lift my face, searching for someone else nearby who could have made that sound. No one is there—only me.

I repeat the gesture, touching another of the points of light with my finger, and get the same response.

I open my mouth, unable to contain my wonder.

“What are you?” I ask, not truly expecting an answer.

As I suspected, none comes. Instead, the lights begin spinning faster around me. Their glow warms my skin chilled by the night, and I feel my heart soften inside my chest. This sensation is so pleasant...

“You don’t speak?” I ask again, like a fool.

“Sometimes they do.” The masculine voice I didn’t want to hear again tonight answers from behind me. “You just have to listen to them in your heart.”

I don’t respond. I try to ignore him, though that doesn’t make him go away or leave me in peace. His footsteps sound firm behind me. The lights that had moments ago swirled around me with their glow and warmth now flutter around him, shining even brighter. Illuminated like this, his features are so... They don’t seem so cruel. They seem softer. Still, I remind myself that his beauty is as cruel as the rest of this garden.

“What are they?” I ask, just to satisfy my curiosity.

“They’re fairies.” One lands on the tip of his finger. “Very particular ones. They tend to appear where there are tormented souls.”

I jerk upright on the bench.

“Tormented souls?”

“That’s what I said, yes.” Now more than one perches on his fingers as he looks at me with one brow arched. “Why? Are you scared at the thought your soul might be tormented?”

“My soul is not tormented,” I reply immediately. “I don’t know what makes you think that. In fact, look at yourself you’re the one they’re all drawn to. Maybe it’s for you they’re here. These are your gardens after

all.”

“Maybe you’re right.” A rough laugh escapes him and crashes into my nerves, which are now frayed and raw.

“Though that doesn’t quite match what you usually think of us, does it? What do you call us in that little head of yours? Ah yes... soulless monsters...”

I eye him with suspicion, narrowing my gaze. All the wildness from earlier seems to have left him, though he doesn’t exactly look harmless now either. But that animal look is no longer in his eyes. I wonder if my blood

has stopped calling to him, as he says, or if his momentary madness simply vanished when he regained

awareness of the situation. He can’t hate me the way he says and then press me against hedges in the dark.

And I can't hate creatures like him and still allow my skin to react the way it does when he touches me. It's

utterly contradictory.

AD

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