

Sold to the Night Lord

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 41

“So these are your private gardens?” My voice comes out more defiant than I intend. “Are you going to punish me for being here too?”

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“I should.” He says it so seriously that I brace myself for him to come closer and snap my neck so life drains from me private gardens.”

es, these **are** my

“Why don’t you let anyone come here?”

“Even someone like me needs a break sometimes.” Now he sounds much younger, and I see he’s not looking at me but at some lost point within all the vegetation. “Besides, this isn’t a place where a human should be.”

“Because of the strange flowers?”

“In part.” He tilts his head a little, looking at me again. “This garden belonged to Lilith—or so they say.”

“What?”

“God created Eden, that garden considered paradise, from which Lilith fled because she wouldn’t submit to a man. It’s said she wandered to the Red Sea, where many demons dwelled, some of whom she lay with, others simply corrupted her, giving rise to other creatures. I know you’ve read the book I left you, and that you already know some of this. We came from that corruption. Her blood tears created us. Lilith wandered the Earth as long as she could escape God’s wrath, and in that time, she planted her own garden—one where beauty, no matter how cruel, had a place. This is what’s left of it.”

We both look around us—him with something like nostalgia, and me, now fascinated knowing this place’s history. The statue at the garden’s entrance suddenly makes a lot more sense.

“And now where is Lilith?” He turns, surprise etched on his face, as if the idea that I might feel curiosity for her were nearly impossible. “You said she wandered the Earth as long as she could avoid God’s fury.”

“She’s cozy in hell now.”

“Was that... a joke?”

“Was it?” The twitch of his lips tells me he’s holding back a laugh. “I wasn’t joking, really. Lilith went to hell.”

My eyes go as wide as humanly possible.

“Hell?”

“There are two theories.” He slowly approaches the bench, studying it for a while, deciding whether or not to sit, until he does. I feel the brush of his clothing against my shoulder. “It’s not certain, but the first theory says Lilith was created from dust, as the first man was—that cursed Adam. Some say she was formed from filth and sediment. If that were true, that filth would have turned her into **a** demon, **and** it wouldn’t be strange for her to want to be among her own kind, and with someone who hates God as much as she does—Lucifer. **The second** option says she’s imprisoned there by a pact between two men who didn’t want a woman as powerful as them roaming **free**.”

“Have any of you ever met her?”

“Yes. The first ones did.”

“And... the

first ones are dead?”

That hateful, tilted, sensual smile appears slowly again on his tips.

“You could put all that curiosity of yours to good use.” I frown.

“You told me you were good at nothing, and I find it

strange that with all the

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curiosity, you haven’t shown consistent interest in anything.”

“I haven’t because it’s pointless to waste time on something when you know your days are numbered.” My voice is so cold it could slice my throat with ice shards. “And now it would be just as pointless, because it’s obvious you’ll finish me someday, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, it’s possible.” He lets out a deep sigh. “And to answer your other question—the first ones are dead. There have been two great massacres in our history, and in them, many Purebloods fell.”

“Until the other day, I thought Purebloods couldn’t die,” I murmur more to myself than for him to hear.

“Everything can die.” He leans back. “Though in our case, it’s not easy. We hide the things that can kill us very carefully. We taughtered the people who knew them, and now it’s a mystery again. One that, obviously, I won’t reveal to you no matter *how* much you ask.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“Are you sure?”

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Our eyes meet again and the jolt I feel is so strong it physically hurts. In a very real way. It burns my chest, and I feel everything around me start spinning faster. I clutch the stone beneath my fingers, pressing so hard the skin over my knuckles feels tight. It’s not enough—my body tilts in an unnatural way, and he notices instantly. The darkness clouding my vision doesn’t prevent me from seeing him stretch out his hand toward me, trying to grab me, then stopping halfway at the last second. As if he just remembered that the very idea of touching me repulses him—even if it didn’t seem that way earlier.

I try to stand to hide my weakness, and that’s when the burning in my body worsens. It feels like a flaming fist is grabbing my heart and squeezing it, trying to make it burst inside my chest. I gasp for air as my vision blacks out completely. I don’t want to seem even more pathetic than I already feel, but there’s little I can do to stop it. My knees buckle, the weight of my dress seems to have tripled, and I brace for the impact of dirt and grass on my knees—when arms suddenly wrap around me.

I can’t see anything. Everything is dark. The wind slaps my cheeks, and I know we’re moving very fast. We reach the castle interior with astonishing speed. I hear doors open, rushing footsteps, small exclamations of surprise. The feel of my back against something soft surprises me at first—my current lack of sight frightens me.

“What happened?” I recognize Drystan’s voice. “Did you bite her?”

“Why do you think that?” A thick silence stretches out so heavy I can picture their exchange of looks perfectly. “We were outside, and she started gasping like a little fish. I don’t know what happened to her.”

Soon the frantic, nervous voices of my handmaidens join **in**, their warm fingers checking my head and body for wounds or anything that might explain my state.

“This isn’t normal anymore, Cassian.” I hear them walking away, but I can still make out their voices. “We need to take her to the banshees- you know they have...”

My neck lolls to one side, nearly limp. I don’t hear what comes next. My sight begins **to** return slowly, but my hearing has vanished. Everyone’s mouths move, but I can’t hear them. My head throbs, like a second heart. Everything aches. I glance **at** my nightstand, where in the flicker of the candle I think I see Ank. I don’t know why, but I want to smile at the thought that she’s here to watch over **me**. **My eyes sting**, yet I don’t look away. My hearing returns suddenly, the shrill voices startling me.

Cassian’s face appears in my field of vision—his features tense.

“**Get everything ready—we leave as soon as the sun rises.**”

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Chapter 42

Cassian

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The sun is at its highest point, and although this doesn’t guarantee we’re free from enemies, at least we know the worst creatures won’t be lurking along the paths. Not until night falls and protecting the little human—who can barely stay upright on the horse—starts to become a nuisance. There’s a little voice in my head telling me to get off the horse and return to the comfort of the castle. What d dies? Then that voice is joined by my annoying right-hand man’s voice, inciting me to seek answers: “Don’t you think s human, my friend?”

I growl.

“If you need us to stop at any point, just let me know,” Drystan says.

ting

It hasn't been long since we set out. We were especially cautious in the area where we were attacked yesterday, and now we ride on open

roads, clutching our cloaks. Elara and Drystan share a new white mare, and I ride the black stallion who won't stop rubbing his muzzle

against the mare's side.

"Of course, no problem, Elara. We can also chew your food and feed it to you like a little chick," I say, rolling my eyes. I squeeze the stallion's

flanks and he surges forward several meters. "It's a two-day journey, so don't slow us down."

I don't bother looking at her reaction. I don't need to. I extend those invisible fingers of my power and try to caress her thoughts. Huh. Maybe

that ashen face is deceptive, because her mind is closed off to me. It's been days since she resisted.

We pass near a village, staying on the outskirts to avoid attracting the attention of any ruffians tempted to attack us upon seeing the fine condition of our horses. To their misfortune, of course. The farther we go, the rougher the paths become, and before the sun sets completely, we camp in a clearing hidden by trees.

When I dismount from the stallion, I can't help but feel relief in my legs. I welcome the short walk to a nearby stream to water the animals. By the time I return, Drystan has risked lighting a fire and holds a flask to his lips that, judging by the coppery smell, contains anything but

water.

"Want some?" he offers. "It'll do you good."

I shake my head.

"It's been sitting there for hours, that shit's not even fresh or warm anymore."

He shrugs and drinks again, his eyes shifting toward Elara, as if inviting me to try my luck with her. She's near the fire, breaking the bread into tiny pieces before putting them in her mouth with some cheese. She looks sickly and as unappetizing as possible. I wrinkle my nose.

"I'll take first watch," I declare.

We sit in silence watching the flames. With every gulp I hear go down my friend's throat, my own thirst claws at me. And yet, I refuse to drink that rancid garbage. I want it straight from the source—especially now that I've tasted the fruity flavor of Elara. I've never admitted this out

loud.

"I need..." Elara's voice is raspy after staying silent all day. "I need to freshen up a bit."

She stands shakily, as if even that simple dress she's wearing is too heavy for her body. We both watch her walk away toward a more wooded area. I rise before Drystan gets the idea.

It doesn't take long before I'm only a few meters behind her. She glances over her shoulder at me with tired eyes.

"Can't I have a bit of privacy?"

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"I'm just going to keep watch." I keep my tone serious. "Lately, death seems to hover around you."

My comment draws a soft laugh from her. I pause briefly, surprised by the sound. Until now, I've only heard her laugh with irony.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"The fact that you say death seems to hover around me—like you're not a walking representation of it."

I stop, tilting my head slightly as I watch her move away. I turn around to give her privacy and lean my back against splashing of water on her face, the way she rubs her skin with it, and that little gasp of surprise at the cold. I try to fo tiny animals scurrying through the bushes, the treetops rustling with a gentle breeze, the sound of the river.

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her sounds: the

The scent of wild berries caresses my senses when Elara returns. She walks past me and heads back to the fire under my constant scrutiny. Soon, Drystan and Elara settle against the cold, hard ground, each clutching their own blankets, backs turned to me. I sit against a tree, cross my ankles, arms folded across my chest, alert to any sign of someone or something—approaching. I feel the exact moment when Elara falls asleep by the way her heartbeat and breathing become slow and steady.

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I let time pass. I don't wake Drystan to relieve me. I stay here, enjoying the night, this extension of myself, and also watching the small body

beneath the blankets rise and fall with each deep breath.

What a weak creature. So sickly. So fragile.

Did you know she hasn't cried even once since you bought her?

I don't know how long she'll last. I just know I want to see those tears fall, lick them, taste them on the tip of my tongue.

With those thoughts, the sun rises again, and we prepare for another long day on horseback. Drystan settles behind Elara and takes the reins.

I ride as far from them as I can on my own mount. I've gone a whole day without feeding, and the vein pulsing in her neck is torture.

"How old are you, Drystan?"

They've started talking animatedly, like they've been lifelong friends.

"I'm so old you'd be scared to know."

"And him?" She lowers her voice so much that a human wouldn't hear anything—but I'm not human. "Is he as old as you?"

"Older."

"How much older?"

"He's over a thousand."

Her voice blends with the breeze; still, I clearly hear how her breath catches in her throat and takes more than a second before it resumes.

"That many?"

I can't hold back the little smug laugh that builds in my chest.

"You see, little beast, your existence is ridiculous **in** comparison." I glance at her over my shoulder.

"For someone so ridiculous, you sure pay a lot of attention to her."

Drystan's clear laughter cuts through the air, but not the growing tension between her and me. Our eyes are like daggers plunging **into each** other's ribs. Neither of us is willing to look away first. One corner of her mouth lifts, defiant.

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"Is a third player allowed in the staring contest?"

"Shut up, Drystan."

"If you fall off your horse, I'm going to laugh so hard, friend."

"As if that could happen."

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Forest.

with their

I give in and look forward. A thick silence settles between us for a few kilometers. Before sunset, we'll reach the edge of th We'll spend the night beside the Blood Lake, the final barrier before entering the thicket, where the kraugs will be eager to tails and keep us captive until we decompose. That's why we'll wait until daylight to cross. *Once* we do, we'll be very close to the banshees

territory.

"Did you know a vampire can be freed if he drinks exquisite blood?"

"Freed?"

Their voices are the only thing I hear, and I must summon all my willpower not to turn and see her face when she realizes what he means. I already have a wicked smile tugging at my lips.

“Orgasm, Elara, an orgasm,” I answer.

An “oh” draws out from her lips. I hear her heartbeat—fast and erratic.

“Oh yes, Cassian knows that well. It happened the first time he tasted a nymph’s blood.”

“Silence.”

My eyes flick to her face. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes livelier than in recent days, and her heart’s rhythm remains rapid. I drag my gaze over *her* slowly, and she notices—it makes her blush even more.

“Don’t worry, Cassian. We were still young...”

“I said silence, Drystan.”

And he obeys. We ride in silence for *hours*, with pauses to water the horses and a brief one to feed the human. My throat feels dry. I swallow and try to console myself, telling myself that once I return, I’ll sate myself with my whole retinue of feeders. Some might perish in the

process.

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Chapter 43

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We stop at sunset near the lake, and like the day before, I handle the horses while Drystan prepares our camp. No fire. We’re close to the

Twisted Forest, and we don’t want to tempt fate.

“Maybe you want to bathe. Tomorrow we’ll reach

Elara nods. I see her stretching her legs, stiff from so many be

heads to the lake in search of the most secluded area.

I repeat what I did last night, following her a few meters behind

water. The waterfall drowns out all other sounds. With

Drystan walks off—for who knows what reason—and Elara

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I until she reaches a spot surrounded by protruding rock

3

a pool of

“Are you planning to stay there the

wrenched fists, she turns toward me.

asks seriously. “You’re a pervert.”

“Have you considered that maybe I’d also like to present myself clean and tidy to the banshees?” I arch a brow. “Besides, I need to make sure you don’t get yourself killed. I wouldn’t want to see so much blood go to waste.”

“Turn around,” she growls.

I do, but not without tossing one last jab.

“It’s not like I haven’t already seen your whole body at the Red Auction.”

I did. I saw every soft curve beneath that little red scrap of silk that did nothing to hide her nudity. The weight of her small breasts, the curve of her waist and hips, and the little hollow between her legs. I clear my throat to rid myself of the sensation.

She throws the simple dress at my head in response to my biting comment. I smile, pleased with her unpredictable reactions. I hear the sound of water as she dips her feet. I can imagine her wading in slowly—and then decide I don’t have to imagine anything when I can see it with my own eyes. I turn just enough to catch, from the corner of my eye, the moment the water conceals the curve of her backside and touches the tips of her hair.

Once she’s fully in the water, she lets out a tiny squeal.

I turn fully, watching as the day’s last rays hit her and the water, making it look like thick blood. They call it the Blood Lake not only because the kraugs’ massacres often tint the water red, but because the stones surrounding it are reddish and, in sunlight, create a whole spectacle. I will admit to myself that the sight before me is beautiful. I take a few steps toward the shore and begin to unbutton my shirt.

“Have you ever seen a naked man, Elara?”

One beat.

Two.

Three.

“No.”

Her response is music to my ears—though I don’t know why.

“Then **don’t** turn around if you don’t want that to change.”

The water kisses my feet as I walk toward her. Elara’s **breathing grows** ragged **as she** hears me **enter the lake**. **She keeps her eyes locked on the waterfall, but no** matter how **much it tries to muffle the sound of her nervous pulse, it can’t compete with my ears.**

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The water reaches my mid-abdomen. I scoop some in my cupped hand and run it over my arms, my neck, and my chest while my eyes remain fixed on her. She knows a predator is behind her so she begins to swim, farther toward the waterfall and away from me.

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I give her some privacy by turning ar

and wetting my hair with my fingers. I close my eyelids, absorbing the last rays of the sun. Even though the sun has never been forbidden to me for being Pure, I don’t enjoy it as much as I’d like. It’s as if my skin, after so many years of existence, threatens to turn to sandpaper as punishment for staying too long under the sun.

I’m almost done and feel benevolent enough to get out of the water and leave her alone, but she screams behind me and my head whips in her direction. I see her submerged up to her chin, struggling to stay afloat. I swim toward her and arrive so quickly that circumstances I would have startled her. My hands take her by the waist, I lift her enough for her head to be out of the w my lips, I show my fangs.

en, baring

I hiss at the creature beneath the water. An undine. I can see her small twisted horns tangled in her thick blue hair, matching her eyes. The creature shows me her row of sharp teeth. Elara's hand rests on my chest seeking support.

The undine sinks her nails into Elara's ankle and pulls again, ready to drag her to the bottom of the lake. I snort like a wild animal, feel the veins in my neck about to burst. The ground trembles along with me and the undine finally understands she's facing a predator far superior to her. She retracts her fangs, removes her hand from Elara's leg, and slowly retreats. She's a creature of stunning yet deceptive beauty. Like most of us: a pretty wrapping that contains deadly poison.

I don't take my eyes off the water until my sharp vision guarantees the undine has gone and has no intention of returning. I feel Elara's trembling fingers against my skin. I focus my attention on her face, paler than usual and a quick glance confirms that her breasts are pressed against me. I feel her nipples.

I pull away from her before she can feel what is awakening near her thigh. We are connected at almost every point, and she's so frightened that she doesn't even feel shame or gift me with her blushing cheeks. I get out of the water, back to her, feeling her eyes pinned on me. I don't wait to dry off before dressing, I let the fabric of the shirt cling to my chest and my hair drip down my neck.

"What was that?" she asks.

"An undine." I glance briefly at the water, where she's still hugging her body with her arms. I turn so she can come out. "A water nymph. They're usually more friendly, but I suppose being in a place so close to violence has made them irritable,"

Hearing her come out of the water with the drops sliding down her skin makes me tense immediately.

"Was that the same nymph Drystan spoke about?"

The question catches me off guard. I didn't expect what piqued her curiosity to be whether the infamous nymph who made me come in my pants with her blood was similar to the lake undine.

"You were almost eaten and you ask something so stupid." I shake my head, holding back a laugh that she wouldn't like at all. "Anyone would think you're jealous, little beast."

"I'd rather dig into your love life or whatever it is you have, than think about how I was almost dragged to the bottom of the lake to possibly be eaten alive."

The sound of her clothes sliding back over her skin distracts me for a second. **The** sensation of **her** breasts against **me**

, the softness of her thigh tangled with mine, the memory of her hand over my heart that doesn't beat, all persist in the memory of my cells. Hunger makes me think of my teeth dancing over the silkiness of her skin and sinking into that tender part of her thigh...

I blink and relegate that thought to a remote part of my mind.

"Well, I wouldn't want to leave you curious about my love life or whatever it is I have." I glance at her when I think I've been gentlemanly. enough for today and the next ten days. I catch her slipping the remaining sleeve

of her dress on. "She was a forest nymph, a dryad."

"And what was she like?"

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"Black hair that covered her breasts." I savor every word. "Gray eyes like mist. Pronounced and dangerous curves. Pale skin kissed by

death..."

"What you're describing..."

I cut her off before she continues.

"Don't go comparing yourself to a dryad, Elara. You're a human."

I spit the last word with disdain. Her features contort into an expression of disgust and anger. I'm not willing to endure what she's about to spew from that pink mouth, so I turn and go back to Drystan. As soon as he sees me appear, he raises his e

"What happened?" He rummages through his bag. "I felt the ground tremble."

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omments

surprised.

"A little accident."

Neither of us adds anything more. I lie on the ground, feel the small stones pressing against my back, and use my arm as a pillow, placing it behind my head. When Elara joins us again, I don't bother to look at her. Soon the night swallows everything.

Drystan insists on keeping watch from a tree branch. The mound of blankets where Elara hides doesn't seem enough to warm her, I can hear the chattering of her teeth. I clench my jaw, insisting on focusing on anything else. I see the splash of stars in the sky, the only thing capable of casting some light on this night, even if I don't need them to see through the absolute darkness. I hear the hoot of an owl and the sound of the blankets as Elara moves under them. From the rhythm of her breathing, she must be asleep or about to fall asleep.

I listen to her without looking directly. If I had, I would have realized in time how close her body is to mine. She's seeking anything that gives

her warmth.

I know Drystan has an eye on us, so I open my power and my senses toward him.

"She must be freezing, Cassian."

So? It's not *like* my body gives off heat. We're pretty close to dead, remember?

From here I see him shrug.

I let out a growl so low only he can hear it, but there are more important things to focus on, like the human glued to my side. I turn my face in her direction, her head well below mine and her brow furrowed as if occupied with something in her mind. If she were awake, she'd die of embarrassment to see how she seeks me in the middle of the darkness. Her fingers emerge from under the blankets, hook onto my clothes and pull until she's completely pressed against me.

I burst into flames. Her body is a damn bonfire compared to mine, cold, frozen, and unchanging over time. She lets out a small sigh of relief.

"Fuck," I growl through clenched teeth.

Her head rests against my chest and for a moment I don't breathe. I fear that doing so will carry her scent into my nostrils and I won't be able

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Chapter 44

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As soon as the sky turns twilight, I leave my spot next to her, who mutters something in her sleep, I walk to the lake, where I splash cold water on my face, and by the time I return, Drystan has already come down from the tree and made enough noise to wake her. In no time we're back on horseback. We have to cross the Twisted Forest, which shouldn't take us all day. Hopefully, if the kraugs don't delay us, we'll be at the camp before sunset. In the worst case scenario, we could be trapped in the Twisted Forest at night—or dead. Neither option appeals to

1. me.

“Why can't I go with Drystan?”

“I'm flattered that you miss riding with me on horseback,” Drystan says, dramatically placing a hand on his chest while m

mare.

“You didn't seem so bothered last night,” I mutter.

She turns her head to look at me, but I already have my gaze fixed forward.

“Elara, it's better you go with him. The Twisted Forest is dangerous and, though it wounds my ego, Cassian can keep you safer than I can. He's stronger, and even the monstrous creatures there recognize it.”

“Is the name Draven that powerful?” she asks.

“It is.”

They talk as if I weren't present and, truthfully, it doesn't bother me. If I keep my mouth shut, her scent won't flood into me.

We ride just a bit until we're at the edge of the Twisted Forest. It's named for the shape of its trees, twisted into monstrous forms with canopies so intertwined they create a dome through which only faint rays of sun pass. Many creatures, aside from the kraugs, use the trees to hide and stalk their prey, others camouflage themselves in the darkness the forest

provides. The horses haven't gone ten meters before they have to step over the remains of some poor fools who decided to tempt fate and venture inside.

My thighs tense against Elara's, who seems to shrink and press her body into mine. She manages to make her backside rub against the front of my pants and, if it weren't for needing my senses alert to detect any threat, I might try to provoke her.

The light grows dimmer. I grip the stallion's reins tightly and none of us dares say a word. In this torturous silence the first hour passes. When something cracks behind us, Elara jumps on the saddle and ends up pressing closer to me. The force with which I clench my jaw could break

my teeth.

After three hours I'm sure the end of the Twisted Forest must be near and Elara seems to have relaxed. Her body is probably exhausted. I'm about to make a mocking comment when I hear the sound of something slithering.

Drystan and I lock eyes. I nod.

"Run," I say.

I spur the stallion to run and the speed makes me lean forward, dragging Elara with me. My body cages her in. I glance over my shoulder just in time to see the semi-humanoid body of the Kraug sliding down a tree trunk. It's like a snake, but ends with the fierce stinger of a **scorpion**. The foul mucus it secretes travels through the air. I hear Elara stifle a gag

"We're almost there," I inform

The kraug seems to understand that the chance to get a bite is slipping through its fingers. Fingers, **by** the way, **that** are webbed **and and** in long, sharp claws. I can almost see small drops of venom falling from them.

It lunges at us with its mouth open on its half human face, showing **that row** of rotten, **sharp** teeth that have **torn and devoured not** just

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humans, but other species too.

"It's going to catch us," Elara says while looking back.

I take her chin, to make her look forward.

“You’re riding the best mount with me behind you, it’s not going to catch us.”

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We both

As if the words sank into the horse, it speeds up, widening the distance between us. The creature doesn’t even glance at Drystan, too focused on us, its prey. I can already see the light at the end of this thicket and hold my breath until we reappear at the end of this nightma turn our faces toward the creature that hisses angrily, possessed by rage. The sun would devour its flesh if it dared to come out

“What a horrible thing.”

“And you thought I was the most horrible,” I joke.

She throws me one of her deadly glares. It’s obvious we all breathe easier after leaving the forest behind. Only Drystan and I know the kraug will be waiting for our return—perhaps better prepared. After a while we spot the beginning of the banshee camp. Elara tries to rise in the saddle to get a better look. She stretches her neck and struggles to keep her balance.

“Sit down, for fuck’s sake.”

“You’re exasperating,” she replies. “I prefer Drystan, no doubt.”

He winks at her.

She’s the exasperating one, not realizing that with every movement she manages to make some part of our bodies touch. I don’t know what bothers me more. Elara and her heat, my body for its reactions, or my mind that constantly reminds me of my hatred for her kind, how

different we are, and the disgust her existence causes me.

We haven’t even entered the camp when we’re greeted by a small committee of women, among them an old woman with gray hair full of

braids, trinkets, and animal feathers. Beside her is a girl with hair white as snow. We dismount our respective horses.

“Lord Cassian Draven,” the old woman says with a rough, deep voice from age. “The winds told us you would come, but we didn’t want to

believe you'd be so bold."

"Just Cassian Draven," I correct. "And I suppose yes, I'm quite bold."

"You are not welcome," spits the white-haired girl.

My eyes focus on her. Despite what the marks on her face may say to the rest, she is beautiful in a tragic way. Around her lips are grotesque scars. I can imagine why and the reason for her mistrust toward me and what I represent.

"We know we are not welcome," Drystan intervenes. "We wouldn't be here if it weren't our last option."

The old woman squints until her eyes are mere slits.

"Explain."

"It's her." Drystan gestures to Elara. She, to my surprise, keeps her shoulders upright and chin high. "Something strange is happening **to her**.

The old woman cautiously approaches until she's close enough for her aged eyes to recognize Elara as human.

"She's a human." She waves her hand in the air as if to dismiss the matter. "I don't know what could be **so important that you'd come**

here for

a human."

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"We know you have a witch among you." I accompany my words with a superior smile. "The best doctors don't know what's wrong with her, so we have no choice but to turn to magic and its methods."

"We don't have a witch," the younger one replies.

The rest of the women remain silent, attentive to the exchange. They all have long black hair, creamy white skin, and wear simple gray dresses. Insipid. I wouldn't expect anything else from those who court death.

"Don't lie, girl, I can smell her old blood, corrupted by the Mother, from here."

No one knows the exact moment when witches appeared, only that it happened after the vampires. They were born daughter upon hearing the tragic story of Lilith, they promised to give part of their soul to her, to worship her and do everything in her Lilith gave them gifts and immortality, marking them as her daughters. The fury of their former creator cursed them with difficult reproducing, and since then, the birth of witches has been rare and increasingly scarce.

"Only she may enter," the old woman points.

"No way. She is my feeder."

"Then only one of you will enter."

Drystan and I look at each other, aware of who it will be.

"Him." The young woman points to Drystan. "He will accompany the human."

"No way," I protest.

"You heard Evanora," says the old woman. "If you don't like it, you can turn around and take your problems with you."

and

return,

I grind my teeth, knowing there's nothing I can do to change things. Or at least, nothing that doesn't involve violence. I could break their bones and destroy their minds, but I know witches—and none would be willing to help us if we came to them with violence.

I have no choice but to nod. They set off as soon as they see me yield. The young Evanora grabs Elara by the elbow and pulls her away from me. Drystan follows immediately, throwing me a significant look. I watch them walk toward the camp and with just a few steps I feel the barrier surrounding it repel me. What the barrier doesn't keep out is the scent carried on the breeze. Wild berries and there, deeper, the smell

of a Diluted one I know well.

They don't want two vampires near Elara because they already have one in their damned camp.

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 45

Elara

The banshee camp is farther than I expected.

Flanked by Drystan on one side and the snow-haired girl on the other, I feel the urge to turn and look behind me. Cassian is just a dot in the distance and, despite that, I feel his eyes on me, setting me on fire from within.

His scent, the one I find hard to classify and can only call nocturnal, surrounds me. I feel it on every inch of me. When I think of n can't help but think of his. Smooth, perfect, and cold as ice, in contact with mine in the lake. Despite being shocked by the e the undine, the memory of his hard chest against mine makes my cheeks burn.

I notice the curious gaze of the girl beside me. I try to focus on what lies ahead.

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We reach the camp, and Cassian is no longer even a dot in the distance—I can't see him. There are small huts and cabins made of wood with straw and canvas roofs. Some seem sturdier, built from stone and clay, but they are much fewer. Beside each door hang charms that tinkle with unsettling sounds every time the wind stirs them.

There are only women, and all of them look at Drystan and me with serious, expressionless faces. They don't seem particularly happy to receive visitors. I can see scars on some of their mouths or deeper ones crossing cheekbones, collarbones, eyes...

These women must have been through hell.

"Naja won't receive you until tomorrow," the young woman finally breaks the silence. "So I suggest you sit by the fire while we decide what to do with you. We don't usually get visitors."

"Who is Naja?" I ask.

"The witch you came to see."

“Why can’t she see us now?” Drystan interrupts.

The young woman grimaces in clear displeasure before turning to him and shooting a look full of hatred.

“Do you think everyone is at the disposal of powerful vampires? Not everything works with your little finger snaps.”

“No?” he feigns surprise, placing a hand on his chest. “They usually say I’m very persuasive and that my charms are exceptional.”

The growl she directs at him isn’t enough to stop Drystan’s stream of words. It’s evident that the serious demeanor he insists on maintaining is just a mask hiding something else—possibly a mischievous personality that loves to provoke. He amuses me; sometimes I forget what he is

thanks to that attitude.

“We’ll sit,” I say, approaching Drystan and nodding toward the fire. “And wait.”

I emphasize the last word, looking him in the eye. He raises his eyebrows so high they nearly touch his hairline. He seems surprised by this burst of confidence—even I am surprised.

He nods, following me to the fire. We drop onto a tree log and quickly many of the women who had been sitting nearby get up and disappear. We are, clearly, outcasts here.

We remain alone, in silence, as I bring my hands near the flames, desperately seeking warmth. These past days have been torment; my teeth still ache from so much chattering.

“I thought no one could hate you more than I do,” I comment, not looking away from the fire. “What did you do to these women?”

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“We? Nothing,” he replies completely calmly. “I can’t say the same for others. They probably did atrocious things to them.”

“What kinds of things?”

“They sew our mouths shut,” says the girl from before, making me jump at the fire.

She sits across from us on a rickety chair and stretches her legs toward the flames. Her skin and hair seem like pure fire thanks to the light, but my eyes can’t look away from the grotesque scars around her mouth. They’re irregular, raised, and have taken on a whitish hue with

time.

“Why?”

“Banshees predict death, and part of us can’t help but react when we’re near a vampire, since they carry death with them. Also we use our scream as a way to defend ourselves, rendering our opponents useless. If they take our scream, they leave us without

we’re vulnerable.”

“Just out of curiosity...” Drystan leaves the phrase hanging in the air. “What did you say your name was?”

The girl continues to give him that same wary, annoyed look. I assume she’s not going to answer when the name slips from her lips:

“Evanora.”

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“Well then.” I hear him inhale beside me. “Just for the record, I’m not in favor of what they did to you, Evanóra. Not to you or any of your sisters. As I understand, that practice has been banned. The Dravens outlawed it.”

“Not everyone follows the rules, do they?” Evanora lifts a brow in defiance. “You vampires know very little about respecting rules.”

I bite my lower lip, feeling the tension settle over me, threatening to crush me into the ground. Out of the corner of my eye, I see windows and doors of the cabins shutting. These women are terrified.

“I only came to say that Elara can spend the night with me,” she says, sliding her eyes to me. “If that’s okay with you. As for you—whatever your name is—you’re free to return to your master.”

“I’m not leaving without Elara, and I’m not stupid enough to go and risk not being allowed back.”

Evanora gets up from her chair, which creaks under her weight, and walks firmly toward us. She crouches a bit to be eye level and then places her index and middle finger on Drystan’s forehead. I feel him tense beside me, but he does nothing else. We both listen closely as incomprehensible words are murmured from Evanora’s lips, and when she finishes, a mark glows on his forehead. My mouth opens in surprise, and she must see the questions burning in me.

“This mark allows only you to enter the camp while she is with us.” She extends a hand to help me to my feet. “Don’t wander around if it’s not to be with her. We have eyes everywhere, and we don’t like snoopers.”

Without adding anything more, she pulls me away from the fire. I glance at Drystan over my shoulder, and he inclines his head before disappearing. There’s no trace of that mysterious mark. We walk through the camp without encountering many others until we stop before a

small, modest cabin. Evanora opens the door for me and waits until I enter to close it behind me.

“You can use that cot there. The fire is lit, and they’ll bring some dinner shortly.”

I follow her gaze and approach the cot near the fire with short, hesitant steps. My fingers immediately stretch toward the fireplace, seeking warmth again. I look around. As I imagined, the cabin holds no luxuries. It’s furnished with an old table and two rickety chairs. From the ceiling hang the same charms as outside the doors: colorful feathers, bones, stones... At the back, there’s what seems to be a tiny kitchen and, near the fire, two small cots with sheets so thin I understand why they’re so close to the chimney. Evanora sits beside a large trunk at the foot of the other cot, crosses her arms, and looks toward the flames.

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 46

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But I can’t stop looking at her. She’s small and graceful, the bluish-gray dress she wears looks like it could swallow her at any moment, and yet she manages to present herself as someone to be respected. Her features are a mix of softness and hardness. The arch of her upper lip is soft and pinkish, while her cheekbones are sharp as glass. Her eyes are the clearest blue I’ve ever seen.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re very transparent?” she says, interrupting my scrutiny. “I can see all the curiosity in your face.”

“Would anyone really be surprised that I have questions?”

“You humans really do live in ignorance. At least now.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighs, brushing a rebellious lock from her cheek.

“You probably already know the Dravens were in charge of the Treaties with humans. Back then, all creatures roamed freely and gave in to their most primal urges. Hunger, sex, among others. Humans were being wiped out at an alarming rate, and no matter how much you wanted to, you couldn’t ignore our existence.” She nibbles on her lower lip. “I suppose now you feel safe enough to forget, to live in ignorance. You think vampires are the worst thing that inhabits Drystia, but I have my doubts.”

“Are you dangerous?”

My question draws a lopsided smile from her lips, revealing teeth white as pearls.

“For you, of course.”

As she speaks, a log cracks in the fireplace, making me flinch slightly. I try to calm myself by pulling at a loose thread from my cloak.

“What is it like?” I ask again. She frowns, clearly not understanding what I mean. I clear my throat and reformulate, “Being a banshee. I’ve

read a few things...”

Until now, I hadn’t noticed she’s holding a small-bristled silver-handled comb. She must see the surprise on my face because she grips it tighter, as if it were her most precious possession. Without breaking eye contact,

she begins to comb her hair.

“We are messengers of death. Women cursed long ago whose curse is passed down from generation to generation.”

“Are you immortal?”

“We can die, but our lifespan is many times that of a human’s. Our leader, for example, has lived several centuries.”

“And you all have magic?”

“Magic isn’t our gift. We were blessed with the scream.”

“But you...”

The sound of a knock cuts off the rest of my sentence. Her eyes dart toward the door, and she doesn't waste a second getting up, **smoothing** her dress, and running to open it.

"That must be dinner."

She pulls the door open, its hinges groaning loudly. The cold creeps inside, making my skin prickle. I pull my cloak **tighter around me**, craning my neck to try and see over her shoulder.

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"What are you doing here?"

"I'm a guest, aren't I?"

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That voice sounds familiar, I don't have time to dive into my memories to match the face to it. Slipping past Evanora's still figure at the door, a tall, broad-shouldered man with golden hair enters the cabin.

Eleazar.

"You're a guest in the camp, not in my cabin," Evanora replies, holding the door open.

"I felt Cassian Draven nearby. I couldn't not come."

Both their eyes land on me. My body wants to shrink under their gaze, but I don't. I keep my back straight, stiff as a brooms.ck. I don't let myself hunch or look down. Their eyes examine me, as if expecting to find Cassian hiding behind my shoulders.

"He's not here," Evanora informs.

"You stink of him," he spits.

I feel insulted.

"I'm his feeder," I lift my chin. "Of course I smell like him, but as you can see, he's not here, so get out."

“You’re telling me to get out?” he says, amused.

“Yes, I am. Problem?” I raise a brow. “I think Evanora made it quite clear you’re not welcome in her cabin, so leave. None of us like your presence.”

He narrows his eyes, glaring. I don’t back down. I keep my head high, my eyes locked on his just like his on mine. I sense the exact moment his fists clench, his nostrils flare, barely containing his rage—then he turns and storms out the way he came. Evanora, who’s been watching silently, wastes no time shutting the door behind him. She turns to me, a new gleam in her eye.

“That was a pleasant surprise,” she says. “Though he’ll come back for you. Vampires don’t take kindly to wounded pride.”

“Believe me,
I’m aware.”

She lets out a brief giggle. Soon there’s another knock at the door, and this time it really is our food. We take it in silence, exchanging small glances at each other. When the candles go out, I receive the clear order to go to sleep, and so I do—or at least I try, because I feel like an intruder in this place. No matter how much I want to, I can’t fall asleep.

“Well well... someone can’t sleep.”

His voice sounds like a soft purr in my head.

“I’m not a cat, I don’t purr.”

Shit.

“You’ve kept that little head of yours closed to me for a good while, anything interesting that made you shut me out?”

No.

“Liar... I smelled Eleazar, anything to share?”

Absolutely not.

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“Fine then, I’ll leave you to your sleeping hours.”

I wish I could sleep, I think, not intending for him to hear.

“I can help with that, if you let me.”

How?

“I can make you sleep and dream pleasant things if that’s what you want.”

I fall silent, thinking nothing at all, and I fall asleep.

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I dream of places I’ve never visited nor seen anywhere. Cliffs overlooking seas of greenish waters, underwater caves where I see animals and creatures I’ve never imagined. I travel to mountain ranges, lakes, meadows, deserts. Beautiful places where flowers tickle me as I pass, masses of hot water where the liquid boils, snow-covered beds. I go on a full journey while dreaming, and when I open my eyes again and realize I’m still in the cabin, I feel a small pang of disappointment in my chest.

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Sold to the Night Lord

A

Chapter 47

I’ve never left Ravag, never seen beyond the small alleys of my village and now Cassian’s castle. I’ve never allowed myself to dream of traveling, and I think the fact that Cassian has shown me everything I’m missing out on beyond this is an act of cruelty.

“You’re awake, perfect. Here’s a basin with
water.”

Evanora sets it on the small table. “When you’re done,

60 see Naja.”

I freshen up quickly, the cold water clears my head. Next to the basin I also see a simple blue dress. I put it on and leave behindy dirty

clothes.

Luckily, my head is free of voices for now. I follow Evanora out of the cabin, lifting the hem of my dress so it doesn't get sta

the filth of

the streets. I look around me attentively. There are some little girls helping others with the laundry and, once again, no sign the opposite sex. I suppose it's admirable how these women do everything themselves without depending on men. I feel proud, and part of me envies

them. At least they seem to control their lives and destinies—unlike me.

We reach a much larger hut than the others I've seen on the way. There's a curtain made of seashells and animal bones. I grow uneasy when Evanora pulls it aside for me and gestures for me to enter with a nod. Inside is dark, lit only by a few red candles whose wax looks like blood spilling down. There are small animal skulls here and there, and the smell of herbs that my nose can't identify overwhelms me. It feels like a

hard slap to the face. The air inside is warm and heavy—nothing like the one I was breathing just moments ago.

Evanora walks ahead confidently; she knows where we're going.

Bent over a bowl is a woman with violet and white hair, braided into hundreds of tiny braids that together form larger ones. Her skin is sun-

kissed, and though I remember Cassian mentioning something about old blood, the woman before me doesn't look it at all. When she lifts

her gaze to look at us, I can see her skin is still taut, only touched by a few expression lines.

"You must be the young lady who needs my attention," she says with a smile that unsettles me.

We get closer, close enough that I can see the pin she holds in her hand and her pricked fingers dripping blood onto the bowl, where small bones, like phalanges, rest soaking in it. She pushes the bowl aside when she sees my eyes widen in fear."

"Elara, right?" She circles the table. "Come closer."

I glance at Evanora, who nods subtly. I take only a couple of steps forward before Naja's hands stretch out to meet mine. Her fingers wrap around mine, and her blood-stained thumbs dirty my pale skin as she caresses me.

Behind us, we hear a voice raised, asking for entry.

“That annoying vampire again,” Evanora grumbles.

“Go to him, dear. I’ll handle this.”

Evanora nods obediently before stepping away. She’s already fading into the darkness of the hut again when I turn, almost begging her not to leave me here. As much as this woman smiles, she unsettles me.

“I **don’t**

usually offer my help to anyone,” she says. “I’m an old woman who wants to spend her years in peace.”

“**You** don’t look like an old woman,” I whisper.

“**Looks** and reality are two different things.” She studies me with eyes that, **up** close, resemble a viper’s—amber **with a slit pupil**. **To be** honest, I was a bit curious what you might have that would make Cassian come begging for **help—**
and for a feeder no less. Your reputation

has reached this far.”

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“And?” I ask. “Is there anything special about me?”

She tilts her head slightly, looking thoughtful and somewhat intrigued. Her tongue slips out to lick her lips, and I take a step back **when I see** it’s bifid. I guess my comparisons weren’t so far off.

“Do you want me to tell you you’re special?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Am I?”

“No.” She exhales through her nose. “I don’t feel anything

in

you, *so* tell me why you’re here.”

My shoulders sink at her words, and in an attempt to hide it, I begin to speak with confidence. I describe everything that's happened recently -my problems healing, the fever, the experience in the garden when I lost some of my senses and then recovered th

She bursts into laughter when I finish telling her how Cassian's doctor couldn't find a solution or explanation.

"Of course he couldn't." She holds her belly, as if laughing too hard had hurt her. "What's happening to you is magical, not scientific."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me check something."

She's as quick as the animal she shares traits with. Her hand grabs mine, and before I can protest, I feel a small prick on my finger. She brings

the bleeding finger to her mouth and licks the drop of blood. My skin tingles when I feel the roughness of her tongue.

A few seconds pass with Naja's eyes closed, though I notice the faint flutter beneath her lids.

"A curse," she says. "You've been cursed."

"What? Why me?"

"I don't know, to both questions."

"Can it be cured?"

"Not today,

" she hisses. "Tomorrow is the full moon, and magic is stronger with it. We'll do it tomorrow."

"*And* in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, get out of my sight."

She shoos me away with her hand, making it very clear I'm no longer welcome. It's almost like my feet move on their own, because I walk with no will of my own. I reappear outside effortlessly, where a grumpy Evanora seems to be cursing out a very amused Drystan. Both turn to me the moment they see me.

“Already cured?” Drystan raises his eyebrows nearly to his hairline. He grabs me by the elbow. “Great, perfect. We’re leaving. Thanks for everything, grumpy one.”

Evanora spits out a word I don’t understand, and Drystan pulls me along. I plant my feet on the ground firmly and **stop him**. He looks **at me** strangely, as if I’d suddenly grown another head.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m **not** cured,” I inform. “Not until tomorrow night.”

“**What do you** mean?”

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“She says I’m cursed, and she can’t break the curse until the full moon tomorrow.”

“Cursed?” he repeats.

Evanora’s presence at my back surprises me—she’s approached very quickly. She sniffs me, making my cheeks flush red. On the other hand, Drystan looks uneasy, shifting his weight from foot to foot. It feels unlike him; he usually exudes calm.

“I don’t smell any curse,” Evanora keeps sniffing. “It must be a strong one if it hides itself this well.”

“What are you now, a dog?” the vampire replies.

“Maybe you should shut up, leech.”

Instead of snapping back or annoying her with one of his remarks, Drystan stays quiet and looks toward some distant trying to see what caught his attention, but I see nothing.

“Is something wrong?” I ask, stepping closer to him almost conspiratorially.

follow his gaze,

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Comment

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 48

He glances quickly at Evanora and pulls me away from her. We hide behind a hut. He sighs and runs a hand through his hair.

“Cassian hasn’t been feeding, he’s irritable,” he confesses. “I’m worried he’ll do something stupid out of his bad mood.”

“You talk like he’s a child.”

“He’s not, but he’s not used to being denied anything.” He sighs again. “He doesn’t like being told what to do or being forbid fan, and here we are, with him stuck outside because he’s not allowed in while you, his feeder, are here with the leader of the Diluted ones bunking up your scent.”

“I don’t see why he should care.”

The corners of his eyes wrinkle as he smiles genuinely.

“Poor naive girl.”

“So,” I ignore his comment, “should we leave now that we’re here and close to solving the problem?” I lower my voice. “I know I’m not important to him, my life is nothing compared to his, but since he went to the trouble of bringing me, wouldn’t it be foolish to leave now?”

He purses his lips, thoughtful.

“We’ll wait,” he finally says. “I’ll do what I can to keep Cassian calm.”

He turns around and leaves without bothering to say goodbye to Evanora, though I don’t think she cares in the slightest. I return to her, and she’s waiting with a frown. We say nothing more; I just follow her through the camp while receiving wary glances from the other women.

I offer to help with anything, but Evanora refuses, telling me it’s best I stay out of the way.

When night falls, I make an excuse about fetching water to clear my head after spending the whole day locked up in the cabin. I’m grateful, but it’s suffocating. Now that I know everything that’s out there and that I’ll never get to see, being trapped inside feels like more of a torture than before. Even being in the fresh air now feels like a gift.

“Still around?” Eleazar’s voice startles me.

I drop the bucket I was holding, which doesn’t hit the ground thanks to Eleazar. My mouth hangs open. He’s very fast–inhumanly fast.

“Why? Does it bother you?” I reply, picking up the bucket and resuming my walk to the cabin. “Doesn’t surprise me anymore; it seems no one of your kind likes me.”

tsay it jokingly, but he doesn’t take it that way. He steps in front of me, forcing me to stop. I lift my head to look at him properly.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to act like a jerk.” He nibbles his lower lip, revealing his fangs. “I’m not like him. Last night I was a fool–and apparently today as well.”

“Yeah, truth is, you’re a lot like him.”

I try to sidestep him, but he moves so his shoulder blocks my way again.

“Sorry to hear that.” He wrinkles his nose slightly. “And I probably deserve it, though I hate being compared to him.”

“Well, I don’t care.” I shrug and walk around him this time successfully. “Good night.”

I’ve only walked a few meters when he speaks again from behind.

“Can I ask why you’re here?”

I stare a moment too long at the hair brushing his shoulders and debate whether or not to answer. In the end, I decide to keep walking and say nothing. I’m tired of irritable vampires with mood problems. I’m not a punching bag for everyone’s issues.

I enter the cabin and set the water on the table. Evanora is by the fire, smoothing her hair with that silver brush she seems to cherish. I try not to make noise. I slide between the sheets and close my eyes, trying to sleep. I hear her mimic me, lying down on the other cot. Silence reigns, broken only by the sounds outside: howling wolves, hooting owls, the breeze rustling everything.

“Can’t sleep tonight either?”

His voice again, absent all day and present at night.

I sigh.

No.

“But you’re talking to me in your head–you’re not sleeping.”

Leave me alone.

“Come on, give this vampire a bit of fun. I’m bored out here waiting, and trust me, you don’t want me bored.”

And why wouldn’t I want that? I ask mentally, driven by curiosity.

“Because if I get bored enough, I might find a way to get in and reach you and I must warn you: I’m thirsty.”

I’m sure you can sink your teeth into something. A squirrel, maybe. Or better yet, maybe you’ll find a village where some woman will offer you her neck.

I hear his laugh inside my head, so sensual it makes my stomach clench and my skin break out in goosebumps. Suddenly I wish I were there to see what his face looks like when he laughs like that.

“Very funny.”

A long pause. For a moment, I think I’ve managed to cut off our mental link.

“I hope *you* still have that same sense of humor when I bite you.”

Hadn’t we already talked about how you don’t bite us? That you hate us, that we disgust you...? Forgotten that? Maybe someone’s suffering memory loss from old age?

“Has leaving the castle turned you into a chatterbox? Because from what I remember, you used to be quite shy.”

He’s right. Maybe I do feel some freedom to speak now that I know he can’t see me, touch me, or do anything to me. Though I may be tempting fate—it’s only a matter of time before we meet again.

“Good night, Elara.”

Those words echo *in* my ears longer than I’d like. I fall asleep and dream again of places I’ll never visit.

I spend *most* of the day wandering around the camp with careful steps. I suppose Eleazar is not a threat during the day since sunlight would kill him, but I feel strange walking around here. The banshees throw wary looks at me; I can almost see written on their faces that they blame me for bringing the vampires with me, although the truth is quite the opposite. I had no say in any of this.

The hours feel endless, especially in this loneliness. Drystan has not reappeared, and the absence of Cassian’s voice in my head makes me

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think something is happening outside. Maybe Cassian has lost control and Drystan is trying to calm him down? Is it possible that when I leave this camp, I'll receive news that an entire village has been massacred? I wouldn't rule it out.

Resigned, I return to the cabin and try to do anything to distract myself. I hope Evanora doesn't mind that I cleaned. The truth is my hands can't stay still, I suppose nerves about tonight are taking their toll. So when the sky finally darkens and Evanora honors me with her presence at last, I feel my chest deflate a little.

"I brought this." She points to a bucket of water. "I let the moon reflect on it for a while before bringing it. It will be good for the ritual if you bathe with it first."

She leaves the bucket by the fire and I watch her turn, her small braids swaying. She gives me a bit of privacy, although by now I've grown used to being seen naked—Clarissa and Naida see me all the time. I take off the simple dress I'm wearing and begin to wash myself as best I can with a cloth. There's not much I can do for my hair. Evanora comes up behind me once I'm dressed again and skillfully

braids my hair into a crown.

"Thank you," I murmur when she finishes.

"Let's go. Naja is waiting for us."

braiding

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 49

If I already felt eyes on me before, they intensify during our walk to Naja's large hut. I try not to pay attention and focus on the camp's atmosphere. There's a festive smell in the air: more bonfires than before, more decorations on the doors, strange makeup on faces. Darkness greets me when Evanora pushes aside the curtain of bones and beads at Naja's hut. Before entering, out of the corner of my eye, I see Eleazar's golden hair.

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I take a step forward, entering the hut, where no sound seems to penetrate and the smell of incense is nearly suffocating. I walk blindly,

trying to follow the trail of Evanora's silver head until we're back in the same place as the day before, though with some extra space has been cleared to make room for a drawing in

the center, traced with white chalk. Where the lines intersect, there are stones. Most surprising of all is that part of the ceiling seems to have disappeared to let moonlight shine directly onto the surface.

“Great, you’re here,” Naja sings as soon as she sees us. “We better get started right away. Elara, step into the center.”

Her hand is already halfway to grabbing my wrist. I move quickly, stepping out of her reach and looking at her with a frown.

“First explain to me what exactly you’re going to do to me.”

Her tongue slips between her teeth as she emits a small hiss.

candles or

drawing”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she says, interpreting my words as a sign of distrust. “We’ll recite the proper words and break the curse. There’s

nothing to worry about.”

The truth is, I have a lot to worry about—but I don’t know that yet.

I obey and stand in the center of the drawing, the moon bathing my entire body in that whitish light. My skin looks even paler, almost sickly.

In fact, I think it’s the exact skin tone of someone on the brink of death.

“You don’t need to worry, the moon reveals our true form,” Naja explains. “The curse upon you is strong and, over time, deadly. Your body is fighting it, and your health is declining. That’s why you’re pale.”

“Am I going to die?” I ask, serious.

“Not if we can help it.”

I glance at Evanora, who remains silent beside Naja, hands clasped in front of her lap. I do my best to keep my nerves at bay, though it doesn’t help when all the candles suddenly light up and a soft breeze brushes my skin. The stones on the ground seem to shift, seeking their

proper alignment, orienting toward an exact point.

I freeze when I see the dagger Naja is holding, which she draws across her arm, opening a wound that begins to bleed. I recoil, shocked. Then

Evanora imitates her. Blood drips quickly from both of their hands, staining the floor.

“Close your eyes, Elara.”

It’s difficult, but I obey and close my eyes. I clench my fists at my sides and wait in silence.

The voices of the two women reach my ears, chanting in a strange language. They sound mesmerizing, and the sound of their voices gradually lulls me. A pleasant sensation spreads through my entire body; the blood in my veins flows calmly, gliding like a serene river. My mind slips into a trance, their voices muffled. Then, that peaceful sensation shatters like a thousand pieces of glass. The blood in my veins, once a calm river, now feels like a sea of vipers zigzagging violently and frenetically inside me.

The ground beneath my feet disappears, and the sensation forces me to open my eyes to understand what’s happening. Everything around me is a blinding white explosion of light, and I can’t see anything, but one thing is certain—my feet are no longer touching the ground.

Blood roars in my veins, pounds in my ears, and a pressure builds in my head until it’s unbearable. Then my entire body is wracked by

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unbearable pain. I can’t believe the scream tearing from my throat is mine—but it is. A brutal, raw scream like that of a wild animal.

“Hold on, Elara! You have to fight it!”

What am I supposed to fight? What should I do? The pain grows worse with every second. I feel a fireball in my stomach that slowly rises through my esophagus and burns me completely. My back twists at unnatural angles and I think I hear the sound of my bones snapping one by one.

“No one is allowed to kill you but me, Elara, so fight.”

Cassian’s voice in my head makes me see a small, burning orange flame amid all the blinding white light. I close my eyes, raging myself rising above that flame, so small in comparison to my body. I draw closer to it, feel its heat burning through me. I clench my teeth, hear them grinding with the effort of holding in the pain. The mental image in my head tries to fade, but I don’t let it. I have the flame reach out and trap it between my hands. Then I extinguish it.

front of me-1

The pain slowly disappears, its claws releasing me and retreating completely. I collapse onto the cold floor. I begin to see lours and shapes again, finally leaving the blinding light behind. I get on all fours, feeling something churning in my stomach. I barely have time to compose myself before opening my mouth and vomiting a black, viscous liquid-the most disgusting thing that has ever come out of me.

Tears stream down my face with each new retch. The blackish liquid stains my dress and covers much of the floor. Long minutes pass in this slow, painful death until it finally stops. My stomach settles, and I can breathe normally again.

“Elara?”

Evanora’s hand firmly grips my elbow, helping me back to my feet. My hands are sticky from the disgusting liquid that coats everything. I

wrinkle my nose.

“You did well,” she encourages.

Did I? Did I actually do anything?

I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart. I look around and realize the stones have been shattered, and the drawing is barely visible under all that black liquid.

“Was that always inside me?”

“Since you were cursed, yes,” Naja explains. “It’s probably been feeding on you, growing bigger. That’s why you were weak.”

“So, does that mean this curse is something recent? I wasn’t born cursed?”

“If you had been born cursed, you would’ve died shortly after birth. That“-she points to the black liquid-“is too much for an adult body, unbearable for a newborn. So no, Elara, you weren’t born cursed.”

I suppose a curse isn’t the reason I was born marked by death, nor for my indifference toward life, feeling, or joy. It seems that was something always broken in me-no one was to blame for it.

Evanora’s hand releases me, and my legs buckle like fragile twigs ready to snap. She returns to my side.

“Accompany our guest outside. Perhaps the festive atmosphere will restore her strength.”

“Is everything over now?” I ask curiously.

“It would be best to keep you with us for a while. Curses often have a life of their own, intelligence, and they know how to deceive us.” She fixes her slit-pupiled eyes on mine. “It could have tricked us, making us believe it’s completely gone.”

“You mean I have to stay here longer?” I shake my head. “Impossible. He won’t allow it.”

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 50

OU

“He?” Naja bursts into laughter. “He can’t reach you here.” She takes a step closer, grabs my chin, and digs her nails into my skin. “If you don’t want to go back to him, we could give you a home. You don’t have to return.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re delusional if you think he can’t enter here.”

Naja doubles over with laughter, holding her belly as her whole body shakes.

“That’s what you want to believe, girl.” Her forked tongue flicks between her lips. “Could it be... you can’t resist being near fiercest hearts seem to yield before eternal, unchanging beauty.”

“That’s not it. You don’t understand. Cassian is capable of burning to the ground the very land you stand on.”

“I know full well the gifts of our dear Cassian.” She raises an eyebrow. “Tell me—do you know mine?”

Even the

I remain silent, and once Naja realizes I have no reply, she waves her hand toward the exit, dismissing us. I lean some of my weight on Evanora as we walk back outside. Every time I leave Naja’s hut, it feels like I’m shifting dimensions—the air becomes lighter, and I can breathe more easily.

Outside, as Naja said, a festive spirit reigns. All the women are gathered, with floral crowns on their heads and pristine white dresses billowing with each gentle night breeze. Harsh voices, others silky and beguiling, some nearly childlike, intertwine in a chant that makes my body vibrate.

“I’ll get you something to drink. You must have a dry throat.”

I say nothing as I watch her head toward a long wooden table, but the truth is, the thought of swallowing any liquid right now makes my whole body shudder.

She doesn’t take long to return and hands me a cup of greenish liquid that smells like herbs. I take a small sip while we both watch a girl of no more than five years old dancing by the fire with the others.

“How do you reproduce if there are no men in the camp?”

“Have men gone extinct outside?” She looks at me amused.

“Not that I know of.”

“Well, there’s your answer. We simply go out when we feel our numbers are dwindling or we need reinforcements.”

“And boys never get born?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Why?”

“The cry belongs to the females. Our race is intelligent—it doesn’t produce males who can’t carry the gift.”

I decide to stop asking questions for now, though it’s not easy. Every day brings a new revelation, and I still can’t believe all this is real and

that I never bothered to learn more. I thought only those despicable vampires roamed among us, but it turns out there’s much more: fairies, shapeshifters, witches, banshees—who knows what else hides out there that I never cared to discover?

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I feel the new presence before he even speaks, because, strange as it may seem, Eleazar is like a giant ball of fire that warms my back the moment he approaches from behind. Contradictory, knowing he’s a vampire.

“Ladies.”

Evanora rolls her eyes and starts walking away, muttering a barely audible “leech” under her breath. My back goes completely straight when I’m left alone with him. If he notices, he says nothing. He merely takes Evanora’s place beside me, lifting a glass to his lips. I don’t know if it holds the same greenish liquid in my cup or something else I’d rather not identify.

“You’re still upset with me,” he says.

“I’m not upset.” I take another small sip.

“Yes, you are.”

“To be upset, you have to care about the other person, even a little.” I face him. “And I don’t know you, nor do I care.

His lips curl in a sly, lopsided smile as he sips without taking his eyes off me. My body wants to shudder under the scrutiny of his molten-gold gaze, but I refuse to do exactly what he and his kind expect of me—as a human—to shrink, to fear, to whisper. So I stand taller and fix my gaze

forward.

“Now I understand why he likes you so much. Your attitude explains why he wanted you for himself.”

I whip around, glaring at him with seething rage.

“I’m not his.”

“You are his feeder.”

“You can say whatever you want, but none of us belong to you. I know I don’t—not while my heart still beats with the disgust I feel for your

kind.”

“There was a time when I was human, you know. I might understand you better than you think.”

“If you had been human, you’d hate what you are now. You wouldn’t be able to stand being alive,” I spit.

“So, should I end my life for being something I had no control over?” he counters. “I was a young man, like you, who was turned into what you see now. It wasn’t my fault. It was theirs.”

“*And yet now, you do the same to others.*”

“How can *you* be so sure?” he replies. “Like you said, you don’t know me. All you know is that I was at Cassian’s castle and that I want change, for my kind and for everyone. I haven’t forgotten the humans. I haven’t forgotten what I was.”

“Those are pretty words that vanish into the air, don’t you think?”

I leave him standing there before he can keep showering me with sweet words that are far from the truth. I’m quite sure his interests don’t include humans; he only wants to win me over/because of my closeness to Cassian. Someone should probably tell him just how terrible my

relationship is with my captor.

I walk among the women, not really knowing where I’m headed, until a girl of about ten, with hair the color of flames, takes my hand and flashes me an innocent smile before pulling me along. I stumble over my own feet and take a good while to catch up with her rhythm. The dance is frantic but beautiful, awakening a strange feeling in me. I mimic the gestures of the others, who circle the fire as they dance and raise their arms to the sky.

The suspicious looks still linger *on* many faces, though not as many as at the beginning. The little girl links her arm with mine and spins us

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around, giving me a small push toward my next dance partner. I link arms with a young woman with black hair full of braids and colorful feathers. A smile forms on her lips and she gives me a slight nod that I take as a greeting.

I change partners again and this time I run into a familiar face. Evanora doesn’t smile; she simply links her arm with mine and follows the steps as if she’s sick of repeating them over and over.

“What did you talk about with the leech?” she asks near my ear.

“Nothing special,” I reply. “Do you know why he’s here?”

“He came looking for answers.”

“Answers to what questions?”

She lifts the palm of her hand, presses it to mine, and we look each other in the eye as we spin in a perfect circle. Her Evanora is the very image of calm.

“Just as we won’t speak of your reasons for being here, I won’t reveal his either. That’s not who we are.”

nothing;