

# Sold to the Night Lord

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 51

She separates her hand from mine and, moving like water, leaves me and switches partners. I turn to face mine and have to stifle a **groan of** frustration when I find myself once again staring at that golden straw-like hair.

“Ladies are usually more pleased to have me in front of them.”

My hand presses his, devoid of warmth. It feels strange to be in contact with his skin. Cassian usually wears those leather gloves, as if **the** touch of a human were the most repulsive thing imaginable. Eleazar dares to interlace his long fingers with mine while he spins me around. He’s taking liberties, I’m sure he’s slightly ruining the harmony of the dance.

“I apologize again for bothering you,” he murmurs near my ear.

“Again? I don’t remember hearing an apology before.” I raise an eyebrow while staring into those golden eyes.

“Very clever.”

He crosses our joined hands over our heads, mimicking the other women. Eleazar stands out no matter what—he’s the only man in the camp. His scent invades my nostrils. He smells of apples and something that evokes warmth, though all his touch is cold.

“Why are you here?”

“So apart from being Cassian’s feeder, you’re also his little spy.”

I let out a choked huff.

“Can’t I just be curious, that’s all?”

“They say those are the worst kind of women, the curious little ones.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

He smiles, showing his fangs, and his chest vibrates very close to mine as he stifles a laugh.

“That’s because I have no intention of answering you, darling.” He leans toward me, so close his forehead brushes mine. “Whether you like it or not, you’re his, and everything you have—even your thoughts—belongs to him. My confessions would never be safe with you.”

Something twists inside me at his words...

“Elara.” I jump at the sound of my name and turn immediately, completely breaking the dance. “Stay away from him.”

Drystan’s obsidian eyes look at me with something close to betrayal. His fingers grab my arm, fast as a viper, and pull my body toward him. I open and close my mouth without anything to say as I witness the exchange of fierce looks between the two men before me. Drystan’s fangs glint. Neither says a word—they just glare at each other. I don’t know who breaks eye contact first; I only know that one moment I’m watching their silent duel, and the next I’m being dragged through the camp.

“What’s going on?” I ask, trying to resist.

“We’re leaving.” Drystan casts a quick glance/behind. “And there’s no room for discussion.”

“Why?”

“You’re not here **on** vacation, Elara. You **know** your **destiny**.”

**His words hit**

me and manage **what** I’ve **been trying to avoid—**  
**they affect me. I feel the sting in my eyes and blink rapidly before it turns into**

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tears. I **won’t gift any** of them my crying. I run to keep pace, but crash into his back when Evanora’s slender **figure** blocks our path. **Her outfit** has changed; now she’s dressed entirely in black and wears something strange covering her face from the nose down. It looks like a **mask**.

“I’m coming with you.”

“I know I’m hard to forget, but I’m afraid you’re staying here with your bland sisters.” Drystan tugs at me again. “Let’s go, Elara.”

“I have to go with you,” she repeats. “We’re not done with her. Either you  
me come along or she doesn’t leave here.”

“I don’t think you get to decide that,” Drystan counters.

“You know us—we never leave things unfinished.” There’s a hint of amusement in her voice. “Think your vampire ears can handle my scream?”

She stares him down and then examines her nails, nonchalant. Drystan lets out something like a snort, and as he we a white-scaled snake with red eyes slither from around Evanora’s neck. It rises into the air, staring at the vampire with

its mistress.

“What’s your choice, vampire?”

The animal’s forked tongue flicks in the air as it hisses, never taking its eyes off Drystan.

“Keep that thing away from me.”

“Deal.”

tions, I watch

defiance as

The snake coils back around Evanora’s neck. I can’t see her mouth, but I’m almost sure a superior smile crosses her lips. Drystan pulls my arm again, guiding us to the edge of the camp. The invisible barrier sends a strange sensation through my body as I cross it and leave everything

behind. I glance over my shoulder and spot Eleazar’s figure in the dict—something tells me this won’t be the last time our paths cross.

“What’s got you like this?” I ask once again as the stinging in my lungs grows from trying to keep up with Drystan’s pace.

“See for yourself.”

I look ahead and see a landscape completely destroyed: tree trunks cleanly severed, rocks split in half, animals lying dead or dying. I suppress the horrified cry rising in my throat and bring a

hand to

my lips. Evanora’s presence brushes my side.

“All for you, Elara,” she murmurs. “May Lilith protect you.”

We dodged the disaster that Cassian had undoubtedly caused. The air was stuck in my lungs, as if breathing too loudly could end up making me the target of his wrath. Drystan looked over his shoulder with a warning glare as we walked on tiptoe. The albino snake, now one of our new traveling companions, hissed and hid among Evanora’s hair. It seemed to know better than to show itself too much. Not when we had an unhinged vampire with us.

“What happened here?” I asked quietly.

“The right question would be: what didn’t happen?”

“Well?” Evanora chimed in, proving patience wasn’t **her** strong suit.

“A little encounter with some poor unfortunate creatures. Cassian lost control a bit. His powers tend to do that when **his thirst isn’t in check.**”

“He hasn’t fed these days?” I asked again.

**He** shook his head as he offered me a hand to help me over a fallen **log**. **I felt both fascinated and terrified by Cassian’s strength. As my vision adjusted,** I could make out his slender figure outlined by shadows. **On one side stood his black-coated steed, and on the other, Drystan’s**

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horse.

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With every step we took closer, a tingling spread to my fingertips, and when I finally met his stony, unreadable gaze, he tilted his head slightly. as if appreciating something.

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“What is she doing here?” He nodded at Evanora.

“She...”

“Elara is not recovered or out of danger,” Evanora interrupted. “She needs to stay longer with us. Since you refuse to grant her that, I’ll go with you.”

“Why do you care what happens to her?”

“Her recovery is important to our reputation. We don’t want our clients ending up dead and unable to spread the word about our skills.”

“You’re a banshee, not a witch.”

“I know enough to handle the rest of her care myself. Naja trusts me.”

Cassian continued his fine, persistent scrutiny. His eyes narrowed, giving him a feline look, while Evanora didn’t let his stare diminish her. She lifted her chin proudly until Cassian clicked his tongue and lost interest.

“Fine,” he said. “Elara, come. You’re riding with me. Drystan, take the screamer,”

“I’d rather die than ride with the mosquito,” muttered the banshee.

“Did you say something?”

Cassian and she locked eyes again before she bothered to plaster a fake smile on her lips.

“Nothing. I was just saying there are a lot of mosquitoes around here.”

She pretended to swat one away and walked past Drystan toward the horse, amusement dancing in his eyes. Something told me he loved being challenged.

I snapped out of my trance when Cassian’s gloved hand extended toward me and, to my surprise, I took it and let him help me onto the horse. I felt him everywhere when he settled behind me, every inch of his body pressing against mine.

He nudged the horse gently, and we reentered the Twisted Forest. I couldn’t help flinching every time I heard even the slightest sound. Each time, I could feel Cassian rolling his eyes. The night was pitch black, and that alone made my skin crawl.

“Seems like, Orpheus needs a drink,” Cassian commented after enough hours passed for him to stop feeling my backside.

Orpheus? So at least he’d bothered to name the animal.

“I hear water nearby. Wait here.”

Drystan nodded, and Cassian—without asking if I wanted to accompany him—veered off the path and led us among twisted trees with bare branches. We went so far that, looking back, I could only see naked trees, as if they meant to devour us. A shiver ran down my spine.

We reached a small pool where the moon cast its reflection. Cassian dismounted, then grabbed me by the waist and **helped me down**. My legs trembled for a moment, sore from hours of riding and lack of habit. The horse approached the pool and began **to drink while I felt Cassian’s** eyes on me.

“**Elara.**” My name sounded like a caress from his mouth. “You stink.”

I flinched **at** his tactlessness. My cheeks burned.

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“**Oh** God, **Cassian**,” I snapped. “You’re so rude, insensitive, animalistic!”

**He** grabbed the wrist of the hand I was using to cover my face, overwhelmed with shame.

“You reek of another vampire.” His nostrils flared. “You smell like Eleazar.”

“I was there,” I replied instantly.

“What did he want from you? Why

“I don’t know.”

Was

he there?”

The pressure of his fingers on my skin grew stronger. The moonlight made his black hair glint blue, matching his eyes, which stared at me with glacial cold.

“You’re lying,” he nearly spat. “Open your mind to me, Elara. Do it now.”

I frowned, confused. How could I open my mind? Had I ever closed it? I thought he could wander through my thoughts freely at all times.

“I don’t know how,” I replied.

“There’s something different about you.” His eyes scanned every inch of my face. “You’re not the same Elara who entered the camp. You smell stronger, your blood is singing to me, Elara. I’m going insane. Your scent has lingered in the air for days, tempting me to break the truce

with the banshees.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Lilith, I can’t resist,” he murmured to himself. “I’ve tried.”

“What are you talking about, Cassian?”

His eyes turned feral as he grabbed my other wrist, pinning both above my head and cornering me against one of the bare trees. I felt the bark scrape my skin, but that sensation was completely overshadowed by the nerves triggered when I felt his nose grazing my neck. My body reacted to his touch in a thousand ways I couldn’t describe; repulsion wasn’t one of them.

“Cassian, get away from me.”

I tried to push him off, in vain. His chest was solid and unmoving, like a boulder. I felt the hardness of his muscle beneath his thin shirt. In contrast, *he* pressed himself tighter against me, touching me in so many places that my blood boiled and rushed to my cheeks.

“Just a sip, Elara. I’m thirsty.”

“Not my problem.” Again I tried to push him away. “You’re the one who refused to feed like Drystan did. Don’t expect to use me now—not in the state you’re in.”

“And how am I?” he whispered into my ear.

“Famished. You’re acting like an animal,” I said, trying to sound as calm **as** possible.

Something hard pressed against my belly. Cassian’s hand stayed firm on my wrists as he buried the other in my hair and **pulled just** enough

**to** make me look at him.

“My reputation precedes me—they say I’m the most insatiable of all. So **why**

do you **keep resisting**, Elara? Yield.” **His tongue licked the curve of my neck** like he was preparing me for **what** was coming “I promise you’ll **enjoy it as much as I will.**”

The way his lips brushed my skin **made it all stand on edge. Completely disconnected from my will, I moved against him, seeking his**

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closeness. I closed my eyes, surrendering to his touch, to the way his scent wrapped around me, numbing my senses like a drug. I unclenched my fists slowly and let my body soften against his.

“Please... don’t do it,” I whispered with the last remnants of my reason.

“You’re asking me to go against my nature.”

I took advantage of a brief moment of weakness on his part to free one of my hands. I immediately brought it to the base of my neck to cover myself, as if that would stop him.

A smug smile crept across his lips, slow and chilling.

“I could sink my teeth into other parts of you, Elara. Your neck’s not the only place I’d enjoy biting.”

I swear I felt my breath catch abruptly at his words. His eyes—those two oceans trapped in his irises—caught mine and stole every possibility of breath. My heart betrayed me as Cassian’s hand traveled under my dress, which I now regretted

1. me. They

imple.

His gaze never left mine, expecting resistance that never came. Why aren’t you moving, Elara? Don’t let yourself fall for his deceptive beauty.

“Cassian...”

“Yes?”

The cool tips of his fingers traced a path on my skin that burned like fire. My back arched against the tree as my leg became completely exposed to him. With pure seductive elegance, Cassian knelt on one knee and placed my leg over his shoulder.

“Please...”

He grazed my thigh with the sharp tip of one fang, never looking away. My chest rose and fell faster and faster.

“Please what?” His breath tickled my skin. “I’m not a merciful being, Elara, but I’ll listen. Please what?”

The night’s silence settled between us, leaving only the erratic sound of my breathing and the soft noises of the horse beside the pool.

I wanted to say something, but my vocal cords were frozen, my senses dull. I was too intoxicated by the possibility before me. Cassian waited as long as his self-control allowed, and when his mouth approached my flesh and I didn’t stop him, he sank his fangs in.

The stab of pain was sharp and yet fleeting. As soon as a choked whimper of pain left my lips, it was replaced by other sounds I’m not proud of. A tingling spread through my limbs, filling every cell. It numbed me, draining the strength that had kept me upright. Cassian’s hand was quick, holding me against the tree before I collapsed into a position that would leave even less to the imagination. God, it felt so good I couldn’t even think about what parts of me the dress was exposing. I was incapable of feeling shame.

“You taste like something forbidden to me,” Cassian murmured against the bleeding skin of my thigh before sucking again.

That triggered new sensations that drove me into a kind of madness, where uncontrolled sounds spilled from my throat. A knot in my stomach begged to be undone. My nails dug into the bark behind me. If I closed my eyes, I could see bursts of color behind my lids, like the birth of a new galaxy.

“You’re so noisy, little beast.”

I had *no* time to respond *or* open my eyes before tasting something metallic—my own blood coating my tongue. Cassian’s body was everywhere, and it took me a while to process that he was kissing me. He, of all men, was kissing me.

His lips moved with a delicacy I didn’t think him capable of. His tongue found mine with grace and fluidity, like a true conqueror. I couldn’t let this continue. He couldn’t take more from me. This was my first kiss, and I never thought it would be stolen by one of these creatures.

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## Chapter 52

**Finally regaining** my senses, I bit down on his lower lip and felt the explosion of his blood in my mouth. Now it wasn’t **just** mine **flavoring my tongue**. He didn’t pull away immediately, which only proved again that Cassian was a sadist who enjoyed the darkest things.

I pushed him, and this time I got him off me.

“You bit me,” he said, wiping the traces of our blood with the back of his hand.

I tried to reclaim my pride and lifted my chin defiantly.

“Now we’re even,” I said through gritted teeth. “If you bite me, then I bite you.”

I didn’t wait for another sarcastic remark. I lifted my skirts just enough to see the tips of my shoes and started walking back. I’d only dodged a

few roots when his voice called from behind.

“I enjoyed it.” Without needing to look, I knew he wore one of those wicked smiles.

“When we return to the castle, give y guards. They’ll take care of sending them.”

“What?” I tried not to reveal my surprise.

to the

“The letters to your parents.” Over my shoulder, I saw him grab the stallion’s reins. He began walking and quickly passed me. “Thanks for the fun, and you’re welcome for being gentle.”

I thought I saw a fleeting wink before he turned and vanished into the underbrush, forcing me to run after him. As I did, I couldn’t stop a strange feeling from settling in my gut—a mix of guilt, fear, and excitement. I worried that I hadn’t resisted Cassian enough. I worried that a part of me didn’t hate him enough to stop him next time. I worried about the satisfaction I felt in the way his teeth tore into my skin.

When we returned to the others, I saw in their eyes the certainty that they knew what had happened. No one said a word as we resumed our journey—only now, I rode with Drystan.

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Evanora gave me a knowing look, as if she could sense all the shame inside me and pitied me for it.

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Night closed in on us, and as we delved deeper into the Twisted Forest, the air grew heavier and heavier, like syrup. At one point, Drystan tried to joke with me, nudging my shoulder, and when I turned to look at him, I saw a radiant smile on his lips.

“That frown will cause your mortal skin to wrinkle ahead of time.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t think I’ll live to be  
that.”

an old lady anywa

I mutter. “No

der survives to see another full moon, and I’ve already outlasted

Drystan leans his torso over mine and brings his mouth  
my ear.

“You’re so naive, Elara.” His voice drops just enough to be  
ine to the human ear. “If he wanted you dead, you  
De already.

Don’t you see you’ve caught his interest?”

“And that’s supposed to be a good thing?”

His laughter shakes us both.

“It’s the worst thing that could’ve happened to you,” he confesses. “We’re vampires. We  
have all the time in the world. Our obsessions **aren’t**

as fleeting as a human’s. I’m afraid, darling, Cassian is going to keep you close for a long  
time.”

“I don’t get it.”

“No one dares stand up to him like you do. Your fierceness fascinates him.”

“I

“You’re not talking about yourself, are you?” I joke

“Oh, I go crazy watching how you drive him crazy.”

He gets me to laugh lightly, and strangely, I feel something unexpected: gratitude. During this past month, Drystan has only been kind. I look ahead, where Cassian’s horse leads the way. Evanora is riding behind him with her hands on the saddle, refusing to touch one of them. I spot her turning her neck toward us, and although I can only see her eyes, the feeling in them is intense enough to make it clear that there are

others like me whose lives seem marked by vampires.

“Maybe you’ll find someone to drive you crazy too, Drystar.”

I know he heard me, but he chooses to ignore it, because we all prefer talking about others than about ourselves. The sky gradually shifts

from dark shades to grayish ones as we approach sunrise.

“Isn’t everything too quiet?” I dare to ask.

“Cassian made sure it would be. You can rest easy, Elara. None of those creatures will cross our path today.”

And, indeed, we crossed the rest of the Twisted Forest without incident. I quickly recognized the area they chose to rest—or better said, for me **to** rest. I don’t forget that my traveling companions aren’t mortal and don’t share the same basic needs. Evanora looks for me, **sits** beside me, and quickly pulls several things out of a small bag. She takes the water canteen from my hands and I watch as she pours **into it a**

combination of liquids in different colors that, frankly, don’t look drinkable.

“Drink.”

“What is it?”

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“**What**

**you** need **until** you’re fully healed.”

“I paid quite a generous amount so you could finish the job in one go.”

**In** front of us, leaning against a trunk with his legs crossed at the ankles, Cassian watches us with an unfriendly face.

“Sorry to be the one to tell you, but there are things that can’t bend to your will—and magic is

of them.”

“Don’t make me try. I can be very creative.”

“Do you ever shut up?” she snaps.

“Only when my mouth is busy with other things.”

open.

wish it had

His icy gaze seeks mine, and from the way he looks at me, I expect to feel his voice inside my head any moment, but there’s only silence, so without thinking further, I obey Evanora and drink from my canteen. At first, I feel nothing different stay that way. At least fifteen minutes pass before I feel my stomach turn and, with trembling legs, I manage to move away from the others and empty my stomach into the bushes. What comes out of me is black as soot, with a viscous appearance that makes me wrinkle my nose in pure disgust.

Just as I’m about to wipe the tears caused by the retching, I feel Evanora’s hand rubbing my back gently.

“It’s okay, it’ll pass soon.”

I want to believe her.

“How many times will I have to drink that?”

“Today is enough. We’ll wait a few days before the next dose.”

I don’t know if that’s supposed to comfort me.

With a forehead covered in cold sweat, I manage to walk back to the group. I lean against a tree and exhaustion overtakes me, making me sleep the rest of the time we remain there. We resume our journey when the sun has passed its peak and begins to slowly set. We travel by night, in silence, with nothing but the sound of our breathing. We make one more stop before finally reaching the castle, and during all this time, Cassian and I consciously ignore each other.

When I see the castle rise before me, I look at it as if it were the first time. A few days away are enough to renew my sense of awe. This place is like everything around it: dark and terrifyingly beautiful. Upon entering, Narkissa is on the grand staircase, showing me her most serious

face.

“Drystan, take care of them.”

Cassian leaves us after saying this and heads toward Narkissa. He whispers something in her ear that makes her smile and then throw me a

look full of malice.

“Follow me, little witch.”

“Call me that again, leech, and I’ll blow your miserable eardrums out.”

Drystan laughs before heading toward the stairs too, but pauses briefly to make sure Evanora is following him. **The banshee gives me a** look before reluctantly following, and once alone, I have **no** choice but to head to my **own** chambers. My entire **wing is silent and empty, as if** Cassian had sentenced me to solitude. I touch the doorknob, open **the door**, and **find the** room completely dark.

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I grope my way to the curtains and pull them back to let in light. I immediately shut the door—I don’t want anyone to see me when my **mind** is this confused. I have a strange idea, I run to my nightstand where I find an unlit candle and a few matches. I light one and bring the flame to the wick. I watch the flame hopefully, wishing to see a tiny fiery body curled in it.

Ank doesn’t appear, and that makes me feel deeply alone here. Even though Naida and Clarissa soon come to check on me, I don’t feel

comfortable telling them what happened. I don’t know if they’ll judge me. I know I do.

Did I like that kiss? Did I give in too quickly? Should I have resisted more? Does that kiss mean anything?

“You have to tell us everything you saw,” my handmaidens ask.

I tell them about our encounter with one of the kraugs from the Twisted Forest, what the banshee camp looked like

with Naja, and my dance with Eleazar.

“You danced with him?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Cassian won’t like that,” Clarissa mutters.

“He won’t find out,” I say. “And if he does, I don’t care. He doesn’t get to decide who I can or can’t dance with.”

“You do realize he’s your enemy?”

“You do realize Cassian is my enemy too?” I reply.

ance of the

The conversation ends there. They offer to help me change and wash up, but I ask to be alone. The real reason is I don’t want them to see the bite mark—and more specifically, where it is. They insist on preparing the bath, and once everything is to their liking, they leave me alone.

I peel off the dirty dress and look at my naked body in the full-length mirror in the corner of the bathroom. It doesn’t take long to spot the mark that’s already turned purplish on the inside of my thigh.

I touch the two punctures with my fingertips and feel my body shrink from the wave of memories. Memories I wish weren’t so vividly etched in my mind. I turn away from my reflection and step fully into the hot water, which quickly becomes murky.

I return to those memories, grazing my lips as I recall that blood-tasting kiss that, despite it all, was incredibly soft.

I tell myself this is just because it’s the first time I’ve experienced any kind of intimacy with a man. It would’ve been the same with anyone else. It has nothing to do with Cassian.

I wash and get out of the bath after a good while. I slip on the nightgown and am focused on detangling the knots in my hair when there’s a knock at the door. My heart skips a beat at the thought it might be him. Instead, a head with braided white hair appears.

“Mind if I sleep with you?” I blink, confused. “I don’t trust them.”

Evanora looks at me with a face so soft it's almost childlike. I **can't**

say **no** to her words, so I gesture for her **to come in**.

"It's **not** like my presence would stop them from entering, but if **it** makes you feel better, **you** can stay."

"I hope your blood is tastier than mine and gives me a **slight** advantage."

I **look** at her, **unsure** if she's joking **or** not—she must **notice**, because **she bursts into laughter**. **She's no longer wearing that strange mask**

**that once** covered her **face**, and I can see the markings **around** her **lips again**.

**1/3**

**was joking, Elara.**" **She closes** the door and sits on the bed. "I'd never stand idly by while they hurt **a** woman."

"Good to know."

The lack of enthusiasm in my voice gives me away. Evanora crosses her legs on the bed and watches me with a cat-like expression.

"What exactly happened when you went to the pool?" she asks. Y

eemed off

ever since."

"You don't know me well enough to tell, do you?" I say defensively.

"You're right, but I'm not stupid. And remember I told you all your questions show on your face?" She raises an eyebrow. "Well, now you've got guilt and regret scribbled all over it. Look, I'm not great at being someone's confidante, but if you need to confess your sins—I'm here?"

The last part she says with a mischievous smile. I study her

carefully while my fingers continue the task of untann

yet hair.

"I hate them, Evanora. I hate those damned things," I say with a sigh. "They've stolen my whole damn life."

“I get it. I hate them too.”

“And I think I hate myself now too.” Evanora stays silent, waiting for me to explain. “He kissed me when we went to the pool, and I did nothing. I’m afraid I even enjoyed it—absolutely everything that happened there.”

“Everything that happened there?”

“He bit me.”

“I don’t know where to begin.” She gets up and grabs my hand, pulling me with her. “Elara, a vampire’s bite can feel good—if he wants it to. So don’t feel bad for enjoying it. That’s probably exactly what he was aiming for.”

“I don’t know...”

“Maybe what you should worry about is that—him wanting you to enjoy it.”

“Why?”

She looks at me like I’ve grown a second head. Her grip tightens slightly before she lets out a small noise from her throat.

“You know his reputation, Elara. We all do,” she says. “Cassian is a horrible creature. Do you really think he cares if his midnight snack has a good time while he drains her dry? The answer is no.”

“Then why...?”

“He likes you,” she says, horrified. Then repeats it. “He likes you.”

This time I’m the one who looks at her like she’s grown a horn out of her forehead, and after a moment I burst into laughter.

“You’re insane. Cassian hates humans as much if not more—than we hate vampires.”

“I hope you’re right, Elara. Because if not, I fear you’ll fall to him—like everything else he desires. Of all the possible fates for you, I think being

wanted by him is the worst.”

“You’re worrying over nothing.”

“I hope so. You know he’s insatiable, and when he’s done **with** you, **Elara...** he’ll leave **nothing** behind. **Not even your poor heart.**”

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## Chapter 55

Cassian

I wake up drenched in cold sweat, the memories of my nightmare drilling into my mind. It had been years since I last dreamed of the origin of my blackened heart, but I suppose recent events have forced my mind to summon memories from the past. Beneath my skin, I can still feel the roar of my blood at the contact of that human's mouth on mine.

I get out of bed, slip on a shirt I don't bother to button, and pull on a pair of pants. I don't need to ask myself where my feet are taking me as soon as one steps outside my room. I walk with purpose to the castle's main library—nothing like that small, dusty one on the lower floors that the fire salamander has claimed as its home. I push open the heavy doors, still damp with sweat down my back.

I take a step forward, savoring the rare sensation of not being the most imposing thing in the room. The shelves filled with books, their spines flecked with color, stretch farther than the eye can see. The ceilings are incredibly high—so high, enormous ladders and—required to reach the books that rest up there. However, it's not this room's beauty that I came looking for. I keep walkin

two massive portraits of the people who gave me life.

ge are

nd before

It doesn't matter how many times I stand here; every time I look at them, I realize my mind has already started forgetting the details of their faces—like the color of my mother's eyes, the exact shade of blue in my father's irises, or how remarkably black was the waterfall of curls of the woman who bore me. But these portraits can't give me back details already lost across the years they've been dead. I can no longer recall how my mother's voice sounded when she called my name, nor the tone of her laughter when my father complimented her and her cheeks flushed. I clench my fists until the skin on my knuckles stretches taut. The hatred waters me again, refusing to let me forget anything.

“Love made you weak,” I say, knowing no one hears me. “That won’t happen to me. I won’t let anyone turn me into a fool.”

Among my kind, they sometimes whisper the story of my parents as if it were a tragic play penned by some dramatist. The problem is that it’s not some fiction born from a scholar’s mind, but the real story of two people who loved each other so much—had so much love to give—that they were unable to live without the other.

Before my thoughts drag me into that dark pit I sometimes struggle to escape, I turn my back on them. As if doing so could dull the pain. Still, I don’t leave. I sit on one of the armchairs not far from a liquor cabinet. It’s almost as if someone on the staff knows I escape here more often than I’d like to admit, to remind myself that I must be as harmful as ice held too long in the hand.

I pour two fingers of alcohol mixed with blood and let it burn my throat. I close my eyes, trying to empty my mind, but footsteps stop me. I know who it is—no one else would dare come here. Or perhaps that fierce human would find the guts to do so, though *I* hope she’s too busy tormenting herself over what happened earlier.

“Can’t sleep either?”

I take a sip before responding.

“Let me guess, is a woman the reason for your insomnia?”

“Just as she is for yours, my friend.”

I click my tongue and wave my hand dismissively. I cross one leg over the other, getting comfortable. Drystan, hands behind his back—a pose I’ve seen more times than I can count—steps further into the room and takes the seat across from mine.

“Want to tell me what happened earlier? You’ve seemed unsettled since then.”

“It’s all in your imagination.”

He arches an eyebrow at me and holds my gaze for a long moment, as if waiting for my resolve to break. He sighs, pats **his thighs**

**, and stands**, ready to leave me alone. I don’t know why I give in now, when I’d almost managed to be alone again. Maybe **it’s just** that—**I don’t want to be** alone while guilt and remorse gnaw at my thoughts.

1/3

13:27 Mon, 4 Aug A

“I kissed her.”

“You kissed her?” he repeats, incredulous.

“I guess it was something in the moment.”

“Something in the moment...”

I lift my eyes, tired.

“Do you not know how to do anything besides repeat what I say?”

He shakes his head like he needs to snap out of a trance. He sits again in front of me and clasps his fingers under his chin.

“Even though I’m at a loss for words, I can’t say I’m entirely surprised.” He clears his throat. “It’s as if Elara was made for what you need—I’ve never seen you more alive. And I understand your reasons for hating her. I know what she is, what But maybe it’s time you stop clinging so tightly to your hatred. It might be *good* for you.”

ian. She’s

ents to you.

“She’s not good for me.” I finish my drink and slam the glass on the table. “On the contrary, my hatred doesn’t hurt me. I have to put an end to her as soon as possible. I’ve let this go on too long.”

“And why do you think that is?”

Our eyes lock, defiant.

“You don’t want to hurt her, Cassian. You know she’s innocent. She’s not what others were.”

“Humans aren’t different from one another. They’re selfish creatures.”

“So are we.”

“Whose side are you on, mine or hers?” I snap.

“I’m always on your side.” He stands and places a hand on my shoulder. “That’s why I’m telling you this, friend. You need to let go of the past and face the present.”

“I face the present every day.”

“You think you do.”

I let out a breath through clenched teeth. I shrug off his hand from my shoulder, He laughs—a sound that makes every nerve in my body prickle with the urge to fight.

“And what about you? Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you look at the banshee.”

“I find her interesting.”

“Interesting, as in spread across your bed, you mean.”

He glares at me, and now it’s my turn to laugh, knowing I hit the mark. I exhale sharply and stand up. We’re face to face, only a few centimeters of height difference between us.

“Doesn’t feel so good when others meddle in your business, huh?”

He clenches his fists and teeth—I can hear them grinding. I flash a tight-lipped smile and walk **out of the**

library. **Twisted as it is, I feel a little** better now. I suppose it’s in my nature to feel relieved when I know someone else is just as **broken—or worse—than me.**

**2/3**

13:27 Mon, 4 Aug **A**

I return to my quarters, determined that none of the recent events will affect me more than I’ve already allowed.

59%

(+20)

No matter what my friend and right hand says, Elara has been a distraction—one that has lasted too long—and it’s time I leave her behind, in the care of someone else. Someone I trust. Someone experienced.

I summon her, and it doesn’t take long for her to appear in my room, a cascade of red curls trailing behind her.

“You summoned me, sir?”

I sit in the chair and gesture for her to come closer. I close my eyes, trying to drive Elara’s gray eyes from my thoughts. It doe work, so I dive into dark memories that sour my soul.

seem to

Blood, screams, a young man watching rivers of blood soak the floor until it stains his toes, the agonizing cries of a man whose heart has been shattered, the rancid scent of abandonment.

Yes, I let it all flood in, reminding me why Elara can't be anything more than a feeder whose time is running out.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 56

Elara

When I wake up in the morning, Evanora is already gone.

In her place, my maidens fill the room, moving dresses from side to side and pulling me out of bed to get me dressed. I am definitely back to

routine.

I eat breakfast in my room and then, returning to my old habits, I head to the gardens—only this time I do so knowing what hides in the places I'm forbidden to visit.

Lilith's garden.

A garden where flowers are not just flowers and where beauty can be cruel and wicked.

Before leaving, I handed my letters to one of the guards stationed at my door without giving too much thought to how cold his fingers were or how his fangs peeked out like a threat.

To my surprise, I'm not the only one who has decided to spend the day outside. Many of Cassian's blood maidens are here, and I can hear the murmurs they hide behind their fans.

It doesn't take me long to understand why they're here.

Beneath the tree with violet flowers resembling wisteria, Evanora sits again. She wears that kind of mask that covers her mouth and part of her nose. Her gaze is fixed straight ahead, lost.

walk toward her, trying not to startle her.

"May I?"

She lifts her eyes to me, and now that I'm close, I can see how her fingers gently stroke the small head of her snake.

"Please," she replies.

She makes room for me beside her, and I quickly take the spot. I can feel the eyes of the others on us.

"Nice pet," I comment.

"She's useful and doesn't make noise, which I appreciate."

"Useful in what way?"

"Intimidating enough to make people think twice before approaching me, like all the ones staring at us now."

I look around and see she's right.

"And she also helps me communicate with Naja."

My eyes widen, surprised. For some reason, I lower my voice, as if this conversation shouldn't be overheard.

"How do you communicate with her?"

"I'm sure you noticed her appearance. Among her gifts is the ability to communicate through any reptile or possess their consciousness."

Aug

She strokes the snake again.

"When she needs to speak to me, she simply takes over her, and somehow, I understand her."

"Not all of you can do that?"

"No, that's not something typical of a banshee."

"Does that mean you're not an ordinary banshee?"

She turns to face me.

"You ask a lot of questions," she sighs. "But no, I guess I'm not a regular banshee. I can do some basic spells. Magic seems to like me."

“Are you half witch?”

“You could say that.” She shrugs. “I couldn’t resist being more than one thing.”

4470)

I have many questions, but I decide I’ve asked enough. I don’t want to overwhelm her. Though, could she blame me? Every day I’m surprised by everything around me. I’ve been so blind...

Even though the silence between us isn’t uncomfortable, the constant stares from the other women walking through the gardens are.

I suppose they sense Evanora is different. She isn’t like us.

Evanora grabs my wrist suddenly, startling me.

“That mosquito again.”

“Mosquito?” I ask, confused.

“Let’s go. I’m sure you know something we can do for fun.”

She pulls my hand forcefully as she stands, intending for me to do the same.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye and spot Drystan approaching us.

As always, he walks with a calm and confident stride.

His black eyes catch mine, and a sly smile begins to form on his lips.

“Why do you hate him so much?”

Evanora frowns as if I’m the one acting strangely.

“Do I need a specific reason to hate that thing?” she insists, tugging my wrist. “Elara.”

I give in, though it seems too late. Drystan is almost upon us, and he surely heard everything we said and is quite pleased to know he gets under Evanora’s skin.

Since they met, they’ve acted like cat and mouse.

The banshee starts walking quickly, dragging me along.

I try my best not to slow her down, but I fear her supernatural nature means running doesn’t affect her the same way.

14:42 Tue, 5 Aug

We're not far enough not to hear the vampire's voice.

"Good morning to you too, grumpy!"

"Go to hell, leech!"

"Only if you come with me, darling!"

Not laughing takes all my willpower. I'm sure a certain someone wouldn't find it as amusing as I do.

We dodge a few women walking with parasols. In their eyes, I see a flicker of recognition as they meet mine.

Possibly no one here doesn't know the supposed Ruby Queen. The title is ridiculous.

We step back into the castle, and I feel the temperature change immediately.

I bend over, placing my hands on my knees and trying to catch my breath.

Evanora gives me no respite; she grabs me by the elbow and pulls me.

"Anywhere that's just yours?"

I'm forced to think fast, and the image of my peaceful little spot by the window comes to mind. I walk ahead and lead her toward the side of the main staircase, to the small door that opens to a spiral staircase.

"Please tell me your spot isn't the dungeons."

"Oh, I've been there too. Not pleasant. This place is much better."

I tread carefully on the steps, feeling Evanora's hand on my back.

We descend in silence, and when we finally reach the library, I wait eagerly for her reaction.

In just one month, I've made this place my favorite spot in the castle.

Evanora scans the dusty shelves and, as if the little nook had my name written on it, heads straight to the windowsill.

As she passes, the candle flames flicker in their sconces.

The last book I read is still where I left it—on the small chipped table.

Beside it, the candelabra with a candle that seems never to burn out.

“So you’re an avid reader.”

“Well, not really. But when everything is new and no one’s willing to explain anything, books become the best option.”

She runs her finger across the cover, collecting some of the dust that’s settled over the days.

She wipes her hands on her skirt and then, with graceful movements, removes the mask covering part of her face, revealing once again how striking and raw her beauty is.

“You really didn’t know anything?”

“Truly.”

**3/4**

14:42 Tue, 5 Aug >

“Why?”

I wet my lips, thinking of my answer, and sit on the windowsill as usual. She, instead, sits on the table, swinging her legs.

“I was content knowing that when I came of age, one of them would buy me,” I begin. “I never allowed myself to think beyond that or enjoy what surrounded me, for better or worse. I’m an empty shell. Sometimes I think I don’t know what pain or happiness feel like, because I’ve walked through life ignoring everything.

The closest I’ve felt to sadness was the moment I left my family to come here.”

“From what I see, you’ve killed yourself before they could.

You never let yourself live, never enjoyed what life could offer, because you were too focused on what would happen *next*, right?”

I nod.

“And now?”

“Now what?” I reply.

“Are you living, or still resigned?”

I fall silent, turning her question over and over, arriving at some surprising conclusions.

“It’s strange.” I lift my gaze to hers. “I think since I’ve been here, I’ve done more than when I was in Ravag.

I’ve sought information about what surrounds me, walked under the sun, ridden horses, attended dances, met people, danced...” I sigh. “That doesn’t mean I’m thankful to Cassian. I could never thank him for buying me like I’m an object.

In fact, it makes me angry to feel alive now and not when I actually had some control over myself.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 57

I wasted my time lamenting, thinking about how to end it all before I came of age.”

“You know what?” She squeezes my hand.

75%

(+20)

“Take advantage of what you’re feeling, even if it’s thanks to him. Live. Don’t give in. Don’t resign yourself to your role. Use the interest **he** has in you to live, Elara.”

“Weren’t you the one saying his interest was the worst thing that could happen to me?”

“It probably is. But if you’re getting something out of it, maybe it’s not so bad.”

“You two are chatty today!”

We both jump, hands on our chests as if to calm our hearts.

Ank appears, stretching her arms as if she just woke up.

Do salamanders sleep? Maybe I should look that up...

Ank stares directly at Evanora, and Evanora does the same.

They watch each other without blinking.

“You’re a...” Evanora begins.

“You must be the White Banshee.”

I look intently at Evanora after hearing that name, hoping maybe she’ll give me an explanation, though I suppose it’s her hair that earned her the nickname.

Ank scurries across the chipped table and gives a little hop to get my attention.

I move closer and offer her my finger so she can climb up. The warmth of her body against my skin is pleasant, not quite painful.

“You know me?” asks the banshee.

“Of course,” Ank says, proud of herself. “I’m old enough to have heard of you. The banshee beloved by magic who renounced the Old Gods to worship Lilith.”

Evanora’s expression darkens immediately. I look at both of them, frowning.

Once again, things are slipping past me.

The look they give each other becomes even more tense, if that’s possible.

I begin to suspect there are some old grudges between them.

“Will someone explain what’s going on?”

“Nothing, the banshee simply replies.

“What does that mean, ‘Old Gods?’” I keep digging.

75%0

Evanora sighs and retreats further onto the table, crossing her legs and directing her gaze to anywhere but me.

It’s clear I won’t get answers from her, so I lift Ank to my face until she’s at eye level.

I give her my best smile, one I hope reaches my eyes.

“Would you be so kind as to explain it to me, Ankhiale?”

“I can’t say no when you use my full name.”

She clasps her hands under her chin and gives us a flutter of her lashes before sitting on my finger as if it were a chair, and then she begins to speak again.

“The Old Gods, as their name suggests, are the gods who existed before what you now know.

Before that egocentric man who thinks he’s the only one.”

“And why haven’t I heard of them?”

“Because you forgot them—the moment they retreated to rest and you fell into the clutches of the false God and that demoness.”

Ank’s tone is angry.

“But they haven’t forgotten us. They’re still here, and one day they’ll make you pay for forgetting them.”

“Demoness?”

“She means Lilith,” Evanora clarifies.

She makes a sound of resignation before continuing to speak.

“Surely you’ve heard of white magic witches and dark magic witches.”

I nod.

“Well, a white witch practices magic by offering to the Old Gods, while a dark witch does so in the name of Lilith.”

“You’re forgetting the most important part,” Ank grumbles.

“What part? That nearly all fairies are followers of them?”

“No, not that—though she’s right,” says the salamander, looking only at me. “What Evanora hasn’t told you is that a dark witch has no soul. She gives it to Lilith, who feeds on them. The Old Gods would never ask for something like that. Our soul is our pass to the lands to come. Without **it**, there’s nothing after.”

I bring a hand to my temple, feeling like the information is a slap across my face. Too much to take in at once.

“If you think I’m so horrible for not having a soul, what are you doing under the roof of one of Lilith’s sons?”

**Ank** jumps slightly on my finger, and the salamander actually seems affected by her words. Her hair, always wreathed in flames, seems to dim a little, and her gaze drops to the floor.

“I made a promise to a daughter of Lilith, and I intend to keep it.”

“I take it that daughter you’re speaking of must’ve died in one of the great massacres of the Pure.”

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My hands act on their own, stroking the tiny head of Ank as if i could somehow offer comfort. Ank lifts her eyes, which until now had always been two warm, burning Bames, but now are bluish and dim.

“That’s right.”

“Humans can be cruelly clever sometimes,” Evanora comments, and I feel her body move closer to us, as if she too wants to offer some comfort. “Someday, they’ll get what they set out to achieve.”

“Believe me, I’m the one who hates herself the most for doing this, but I have to ask—what exactly did the humans set out to do?”

“A Pure can only be born from the union of a Pure man and a Pure woman.”

Evanora makes a gesture with her hands to add one plus one.

“Throughout history, there have been two great massacres where humans hunted the Pure women and killed them, making sure no more

Pures could be born.”

“That doesn’t solve the problem with the Diluted,” I comment.

“No, the Diluted increase in number very quickly,” she concedes.

“Though they hope to make them disappear little by little once their original source has vanished. The problem is, those who knew how to kill a Pure were murdered by none other than the owner of this castle.”

“Cassian,” I say.

“The very same.”

After that, the three of us fall silent, and none of us seems willing to break it. I chew on the information, trying to digest it. Too much to

absorb all at once.

There was a time when humans stood up to these creatures, reduced their numbers. Humans figured out how to destroy them. It’s incredible. It also explains Cassian’s deep hatred for us.

Ank stands on her tiny legs, balancing like my finger were a tightrope and she a top-tier acrobat.

“I saw you dancing with Eleazar.”

She puts her hands on her hips, clearly switching the topic entirely.

“How did you see me?” I reply, confused.

“I already told you—I can go anywhere there’s a flame. I was in the bonfire.”

“Oh.”

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” she snaps in a scolding tone. “I want all the juicy details—don’t leave anything out.”

“There are no juicy details.”

I shrug. Evanora hops off the table and stands beside me. She bumps my shoulder with hers, making my body shift and causing Ank to lose

her balance.

“Come on, don’t be shy, tell her what you told me.”

I shoot Evanora a look that could freeze hell.

3/4

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## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 58

Traitorous banshee, I think, glaring at her. Ank, for her part, opens her eyes wide and wears a face that betrays just how desperate she is for gossip and entertainment.

“So you’ll tell her and not your dear friend Ank?” she blurts, offended.

“Since when are we friends?” I ask with an amused smile on my lips.

“Since I share my library with you!”

The tiny salamander clenches her fists, causing her body to flare with more heat.

“Fine! Fine!” I exclaim in defeat. “Cassian kissed me.”

Ank stares at me without saying a word, scanning every inch of my face, and I don’t know if I should say more, or if my confession has hit her so hard she’s speechless.

When I think I’ve lost the little fireball, she surprises me with a shriek so high-pitched I wrinkle my nose.

“I knew it! I knew Cassian would eventually fall for a human!”

I glance sideways at Evanora, who looks just as surprised as I am, her eyebrows raised as she tries to hide the tremble in her lips.

“You know what?” I raise my voice.

“You’re both completely insane. Cassian has not fallen for a human,” I say, looking at Ank.

“Nor does he desire me or anything of the sort,” I add, now looking at the banshee.

“You’re just putting silly ideas in my head.”

“If you want to lie to yourself like that...” Evanora sings softly.

I grit my teeth and then gently lift Ank and place her into Evanora’s hands.

The Banshee lets out a small surprised sound from her throat, and Ank looks at me with puppy-dog eyes as if she can’t believe I’ve

abandoned her to the hands of a banshee she clearly doesn’t like. Well, since they both love gossip so much, they might as well find common

ground.

“I’ll leave *you* two to become besties.”

“Oh, come on!” Evanora says aloud. “You’re already abandoning me? Where are you going? Don’t tell me you’re off to smooch with the

mosquito!”

I shoot her a deadly glare before quickly climbing the spiral staircase.

Once I’m back in the castle’s grand entrance hall, with the palatial staircase before me, I start climbing, muttering curses for the two gossiping lunatics I’ve ended up with as companions in this lonely castle.

I don’t realize that my feet have carried me elsewhere until it’s already too late.

I think that kiss is taking a toll on me—my head won’t let it go, and now it’s making my feet move on their own, like there’s an unbreakable bond between him and me. I blink in disbelief, telling myself I’m stupid. I plan to turn around and return to my wing, where no one **will** bother me.

1/3

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Then I remember that he’s probably already aware I’m here. My scent must be lingering in the air. I suppose it would be even more embarrassing for him to know I came here snooping for nothing—maybe I should come up with an excuse.

To thank him for letting me send the letters to my parents, for example.

To be honest, it was something I thought I’d lost for good.

Cassian isn’t sentimental. I don’t expect him to understand the gaping wound of being far from my family.

With renewed determination, I walk down the corridor, repeating to myself that I’ll just knock on his door to say thank you.

It’s not because I feel the need to see if his face shows any sign that he’s also been thinking about what happened.

Of course not—just to thank him for the letters.

75

%0

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I haven't even made it halfway down the corridor that leads directly to his door when it opens and Narkissa appears, her red hair tousled. She hasn't seen me yet, but when she does, a smile full of malice spreads across her lips.

She's wearing a black silk robe that shows off her curves quite clearly, and as she walks toward me, I can see her skin is smeared with traces of blood.

The smile on her lips and the flush on her cheeks make me feel sick.

"If I were you, I wouldn't go in now," she says as she reaches me.

"I'm afraid a prudish little human like you might get scared seeing what a man looks like after some good sex."

She winks.

"Don't worry, no matter how prudish I am, I won't be scared of something so mediocre," I lie—because I've never seen anything like that or been anywhere near it.

I don't wait for her to reply or get into a verbal war.

I walk with determination to the doors, feeling her gaze on me the whole way.

At some point, she disappears and leaves me alone before the jaws of the wolf—or rather, the vampire.

I knock my knuckles on the door.

Cassian takes his time before he finally appears, his suit pants hanging loose at his hips and his black shirt half on.

When his eyes meet mine, they show nothing.

And that, if the bite marks and scratch wounds weren't enough, is proof enough that I'm the only one who gave a damn about that miserable

kiss.

I curse him for stealing that kiss—my first kiss./

"What are you doing here, Elara?" His voice is cold. "You know you're not allowed to be here."

"..." I almost forget my excuse.

"I just wanted to thank you for letting me send the letters."

He leans his shoulder against the doorframe while his **ring**-covered hand strokes his chin.

1843 Tue, 5 Aug

outline at the way here to kad me that shes\*Y

My eyes want to drop to the foot, but I don't let m

To the being grateful fan't Hansence\*

You could show me your gratitude in more interesting ways\*

I feel my cheeks start to burn.

Like disappearing from my sight, for example," he adds.

I take a step back, ready to leave with what's left of my dignity and not look at him again.

I'm already turning when his hand grabs a bit of my dress and forces me to stop.

"Though since you're here, you might as well wait a moment and come with me to the city."

I stay silent.

"I have a meeting, and I like to have my favorite little snack nearby."

He doesn't wait for me to accept the offer—he's already made it clear he sees me as one of his possessions, so I doubt saying no will make a

difference.

He reappears a couple of minutes later with his shirt buttoned and smoothed out, and his pants properly adjusted.

He closes the door and walks ahead of me. When he sees I don't follow right away, he stops and glances back.

"Did I offend you? Oh come on, Elara, don't get all sensitive now. Where's the beast of the castle? Don't you have some sharp comment for

me?"

I give him a look as empty as the color of my eyes and walk right past him.

I don't know if the beast he speaks of ever existed, but that damn kiss has thrown her off, and I have to find a way to bring her back.

He can keep my first kiss-

I'll keep the satisfaction of knowing that, for a moment, he gave in to a human.

3/3

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 59

Cassian

Everything in Elara's posture reeks of anger, and I find great satisfaction in imagining what might have caused it. Her taste lingered on my tongue for hours, and the reminder of my weakness was so unbearable that I quickly had to find something to rid myself of her sweetness. Narkissa is helpful, loyal, and, above all, compliant. She doesn't ask to stay longer in my bed because she knows the answer, just as she doesn't ask for displays of affection I won't give. That's why she's always the easiest option.

What isn't easy is ignoring what my hungry nature demands now that I've had a small taste.

We arrive at the stables, where Orpheus has already been saddled on my orders. The stallion seems pleased to see us, although perhaps I shouldn't extend that assumption to myself. The animal seeks Elara's hand, and she, unable to resist, ends up stroking his snout.

"I'm not dressed to ride," she comments over her shoulder.

"Don't worry, you'll ride with me."

Her body tenses immediately, and I'm glad to know I provoke that reaction in her. I want her to suffer from my presence as much as I suffer from hers. I check that everything is properly fastened on the horse and briefly survey Elara's clothing. She's wearing a silk dress that slips over her body, molding to her hips and hugging her breasts. Definitely not clothing for riding, nor for being near someone thirsty.

Before she can voice her refusal, I scoop her into my arms and, ignoring her cries, set her atop the horse, then mount right behind her, my thighs trapping hers.

"I want my own horse," she demands.

“

Too bad I never do what pleases you most, little wild thing.”

I leave the stables with the reins loose in my hand. Outside, a human waits holding my cloak. I take it without paying him much attention and wrap it around both of us, almost making Elara disappear.

“What are you doing?”

“Would you like to be attacked again?” I ask in return.

That seems to silence her. She doesn’t relax against me; on the contrary, she keeps her back straight and tries to maintain the greatest distance possible between our bodies, which causes her head to protrude more than desirable through the cloak’s collar. If I don’t want surprises during *the* ride, I have no choice but to do something she won’t like. I wrap my arm around her waist and force her to press against me, feeling her shoulder blades through the fabric of my shirt.

We cross the gates that welcome us to the castle grounds, and a while later we’re far enough that they are just a small point in the distance. The city is still far by horseback, and I can’t help but think the journey would be faster if I used my speed, though I fear she’s not ready for an experience like that.

“Have you sent any letters yet?” I ask, and without needing to look, I know I’ve surprised her once again.

“As if your guards haven’t told you...”

“Believe it or not, I’m not constantly keeping tabs on you,” I reply, the words like ash in my mouth. “I’m too busy avoiding people who **think** I’m a politician.”

“What were people like before?”

“Freer. You had practically lost faith in religion. You lived wildly, being who you wanted to be. But then we came, and that small portion **of the**

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population whes still clung to archivale minds convinced you that catvation tay in restraint, in judging the different, cosering your skin.

forbidding love that wasn’t like theirs. You changed for the wrense. \*

“How did your parents manage to bring peace between humans and vampires, then?”

In my mind, memories begin to flash by, each one stabbing between my ribs, nearly stealing my breath

“I suppose they needed each other. There’s no better path to understanding than when both sides can benefit.”

“Did everyone accept it just like that?”

I stifled a small laugh.

“No, of course not. There was resistance on both sides. Humans called those willing to negotiate mad, and vampires accused my parents of being traitors for allowing a human to believe they had the right to set limits.”

“So your parents had to go through a lot. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but it almost sounds like your family was... good.”

Her mood, fiery and eager to contradict whatever I say, shifts quickly. I can feel it, and although I won’t say it, part of me recognizes that feeling in the heart when you’re far from your family. Maybe I’m so selfish that I want her to know perfectly how that feels. Or worse, I’m jealous because her family is alive and mine is not. I’m the only Draven walking Drystia, and if I die, the surname dies with me.

I know she wants to keep asking, and a small part of me is grateful she doesn’t. There are things I’d rather leave behind. The rest of the journey passes in silence, and once we reach the city, I hide Orpheus as I have so many times before. I make sure the cloak is in place, then adjust my leather gloves. Elara looks surprised when I offer her my hand, and I’m almost sure she’ll reject it when she slides her delicate palm over the glove. The leather cannot prevent me from feeling the roar of her blood beneath her skin.

She walks beside me without complaint, and I guide us through the darkest corners of the city. We pass through filthy alleys where small

puddles of excrement gather and where rats find paradise. We only come across vermin or the poor fallen into disgrace. I try to shield Elara’s body with mine, always leading her along the safest path. The last thing I need now is for us to be ambushed by someone.

## Sold to the Night Lord

### Chapter 60

We're almost to where I expect to meet the other Purebloods when a lump obstructs our path. The first sign that it's not just a pile of trash **is** Elara's horrified scream. Upon closer inspection, I see it's not trash—it's a young girl. A very dead girl.

"Don't look."

I try to block her view with my arm. Her small hands claw into my forearm and push it away. I snort as I let her soak in the horror before us. **A** quick scan of the body confirms what I already suspected: this isn't the first or the last corpse I'll find like this. This girl didn't die of **natural**

causes.

"Let's go."

I tug her away from the scene.

"No." She stops cold. "We can't just leave her there."

"We can, and we will."

"Do you have no scruples at all?"

I arch a brow, not sure if she can see me.

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"No, you don't have to—I can imagine the answer," she snaps. "I don't care what you do. I won't leave her body here like garbage."

glance at the body, which, from the looks of it, has probably been lying here for a day. Clearly, she hasn't looked very closely.

"Technically it's a decomposing body. We could say—"

"Don't finish that sentence."

"—It's trash."

I don't know how long it's been since the last time I was slapped. Probably decades. And here I am, being slapped by a small, weak, and

clearly insane human. Despite the time that may have passed, the sensation of a slap is always the same. My skin burns where her hand

struck hard, and it seems the blow made me bite my own fang.

“You slapped me,” I state the obvious.

warned you not to finish that sentence.”

I take a step forward, quickly catch Elara’s neck, and apply just enough pressure to make the muscles in her throat tense under my touch. I can feel her heartbeat beneath my hand, and her gaze, though I know she’s afraid, doesn’t show weakness.

“Maybe I haven’t warned you enough about what I can do to you, Elara.” I savor her name. “I suggest you start walking unless you want to join the corpse on the ground.”

**And** possibly this wouldn’t have as much to do with my actions. That girl was killed by one of my own, and they’re likely not far, waiting **for** their next victim. I notice the exact moment she yields because she pulls her body away from mine. She gives the corpse one last glance **and** starts walking.

I pass her easily, and within minutes we’re inside the building where they’re already waiting for me. I leave her with Walter, Aeron’s favorite feeder. I can feel her gaze on the back of my neck, and before I disappear completely into the grand entrance hall and **enter**

## **the improvised**

14:43 Tue, 5 Aug

meeting room, I give her one last look. Her eyes are filled with hate. Just as they should be. That’s what exists between us. Raw, visceral hate.

I don’t have to close the door myself—someone else does. I look at the faces around the table. Among them are Aeron and Ciro, representing their surnames and two of the original families. The rest are familiar but hold less power. They’re second-class Purebloods, offshoots of our

families.

I take my seat at the head of the table while the rest fix their eyes on me in silence. Only Aeron dares to break it.

“There have been more uprisings,” he informs. “Labor is scarce, more and more are risking crossing the Twisted Forest looking for the Diluted.”

\*There are still humans desperate enough to work for us,” adds another.

“And let’s not forget this isn’t the first time labor has been scarce. The Diluted multiply quickly—it’s only a matter of time before things return

to normal.”

“But we don’t, Cassian,” Ciro snaps. “We are doomed to extinction.”

“Speaking of that...” I drum my fingers on the table, knowing my silence and gestures unsettle those present. “You must stop your attempts to create a Pureblood.”

“You’re asking us to accept our fate,” Ciro grumbles again.

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“It’s incredible that I’m the one saying this, but you cannot continue doing what you’re doing. It’s monstrous.”

images of the creations brought into this world flood my mind, along with the memory of how I had to kill each of those small, deformed, disease-ridden bodies myself. After the second great massacre, which reduced the number of Pureblood women to zero, we’ve found no way for more of us to be born. Meanwhile, the Diluted reproduces far too easily, putting us at a clear disadvantage. Experiments have been conducted with other species with DNA similar to ours. It’s been tried with human women, who in the best case gave birth to another damn Diluted, and in the worst, died. We are doomed.

“I’m almost certain these last experiments will succeed,” Aeron says.

“I said no,” I declare. “In fact, I want you to destroy every trace. I’m tired of being the one who cleans up the signs of the monsters you bring to life.”

Ciro rises, dragging his chair loudly and leaving the room with a slam. I suppose he’s deeply invested in all this. A part of him still hopes we’ll become what we once were: a united front, impenetrable. The truth is, our weaknesses are more obvious by the day, and I know they expect me to be the strong, unshakable wall that saves them. The truth is, I won’t waste what’s left of my existence searching for solutions that don’t exist or fighting battles that will never be won. I’m not a savior. I was born to be what I am—a selfish being.

“You ask too much,” another protested.

“You can’t be serious, Cassian,” Aeron tries to reason. “Don’t you see that without those experiments there’s no hope left?”

“I don’t know who told you you were allowed to have hope,” I reply. “Just try not to die and stop creating abominations.”

I know the last word hurts him. Many carried his DNA, and he had to watch me massacre them without any mercy. Who knows what they could have become had I let them live? Needless to say, I never offered my genetics for anything like that. I won’t donate my seed

for such a thing. I don't even care if we go extinct as a species. There comes a point when existence becomes too monotonous, boring—it's almost **like** being dead already.

The discussion continues for a while, and when I finally put an end to it, I know no one is pleased with my decree. I don't **know** if **any of** them will dare defy me and continue with it, but they know my wrath would likely be worse. We move on to discuss strategies and **mechanisms for**

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resolving disputes with the Diluted. Apparently, they've attempted to burn down some Red Auctions—unsuccessfully, for now.

When the meeting ends, I'm the first to rise and leave. I expect to see Elara with that frail human, Walter. Instead, I find her grinning from **ear** to ear at Ciro, and I don't know why, but that stirs something abrasive inside me. I try *to* shake it off, for it's childish and pointless.

As if my presence were something Elara couldn't easily ignore, her gaze rises to meet mine, and whatever she sees in my eyes makes her leave. Ciro glances back and approaches me. He wears a foolish grin I don't like. He passes by without stopping but does speak, sure **I'll** hear him.

"You still owe me a feeder," he says. "And Elara is the first one I'd steal if I had the chance, so maybe *you* should take better care of her."