

Sold to the Night Lord

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 61

675%

Elara

I can't get that girl's image out of my mind. The unnatural way her neck was arched or her eyes, dull and lifeless, staring into nothing, I didn't even get the chance to close her eyelids. Just when I think Cassian can't possibly surprise me with more cruelty, he proves me wrong.

It makes me sick to know that I can have any kind of reaction toward him that isn't repulsion. I want to scream every time I remember how my body leaned into his, how it pressed against him, and how my lips parted, letting him taste more of me than he ever should have. And!

want to scream even louder when I think of how those memories have kept my mind in chaos.

I shouldn't be thinking about it—it's obvious he doesn't. Who am I kidding? The whole way here, every brush of his hand or his body against

mine made me tense up for reasons I should be ashamed of.

"It's been a while since we last saw each other," Walter says as he serves a dark liquid that smells delicious into two cups. "I heard you've

been sick."

"It's just been a strange few days," I say, trying to downplay it.

He gestures for me to sit, and I wrap my hands around the cup, enjoying its warmth. He mirrors me and gives me one of his cheerful smiles.

"I should warn you—you're the talk of all the Diluted." I frown, not understanding why. Walter leans over the table in a conspiratorial and

intimate gesture. "You must know how Cassian is. The Diluted never keep his attention for long. His relationships are purely... carnal."

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“You’ve caught his interest. They’re wondering what’s going on with you that Cassian is going to such lengths.”

“Aren’t vampires supposed to care for their feeders?” I reply.

Walter raises an incredulous eyebrow.

“Did that seriously come out of your mouth?” He takes a sip from his cup before continuing. “I think we both know Cassian’s reputation. That was a stupid comment, Elara. I just wanted to warn you that next time you show up in public with him, all eyes will be on you.”

“Exactly what I wanted,” I reply sarcastically.

“What are banshees like?”

“How do you know about that?”

Now he gives me a smile that, coming from him, feels like the most wicked thing he can draw on his face.

“Maybe I should’ve warned you that no gossip escapes me.”

“So you’re the gossip around here. I seem to remember you claimed to be the opposite.”

“What can I say? Sharing a bed with another gossip always keeps you well-informed.”

The hot drink goes down the wrong way and I start coughing like crazy. Walter rubs my back as if that would actually help. When I **think** I can breathe again, I look at him in shock. Honestly, since I’ve been here, no one holds back when it comes to talking about sex, and it still surprises me. My whole life, the topic was avoided. Not that I was saving my virtue for any special reason, but I suppose when everyone around you treats sex like something shameful, you don’t ask questions—and you certainly don’t consider exploring.

“I see... your village is one of those that’s turned prudish.”

Boat viltapes are libs mine!

“It wasn’t talked about much that topic. I confess.

*ex? Or sex with other men?

I hadn’t even realized Walter meant another man as his bed partner.

“Both, I’m afraid.”

“There’s only one thing I like about them,” he says, and I know who he’s referring to. “Their arrival gave humans the chance to return to old customs and cling to their prejudices. But you know what’s curious? The vampires never told them that sex was bad, or that loving someone of the same gender was immoral, or anything like that. It was humans who took advantage of the chaos to hurt those of us who had always been excluded.” He sighs. “But here, among them, I’ve never once felt like who I kiss or sleep with is a problem.”

“Only one person?” I tease, raising my eyebrows up and down.

“Well, Aeron is a good lover, I have to give him that.”

My mouth drops open, and I swear if I didn’t put my hand under my chin, my jaw would’ve hit the floor. I blink several times.

“Aeron?” I repeat the name. “Aeron the Pureblood vampire who bought you? Aeron De’ath?”

“Who did you think I meant?”

“I don’t know, maybe another feeder or a human who worked for Aeron.”

Immediately, I start comparing. I’m not the only one who seems to have had... contact with her vampire. Only, if I look at Walter, he doesn’t seem horrified by the idea—on the contrary, he seems very pleased with it. In my case, if you handed me a whip, I probably wouldn’t stop flogging myself for letting that kiss happen. I never should’ve let my lips touch his, and above all, I shouldn’t have enjoyed it.

“Darling, aside from Cassian, when one of them buys you, it’s usually not just because your blood is exquisite, but because your appearance

is too.”

He winks at me, and a shiver runs through my entire body. He must realize the distress the idea causes me.

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“Don’t worry, like I said, that’s not the case with Cassian. He’s not interested in humans or men.”

I can practically feel my cheeks heating every time Walter emphasizes how uninterested Cassian is in humans. Then what was it that happened between us? His words and actions don’t match someone who has no interest at all. My face betrays me, and before I can

process it, Walter is up from his seat, pulling me to stand with him. He drags me to a more secluded area, then places his hands on my shoulders and looks at me carefully.

“That guilty little face...” he muses. “What happened, Elara?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. That face looks familiar.”

“Familiar?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s the face we all make the first time we fall for a vampire.”

“I haven’t fallen for a vampire,” I protest almost angrily.

“You’re right,” he agrees. “In your case, it’s the vampire who’s fallen for you.” With an overly dramatic gesture, Walter hugs me. **“Darling, I’m**

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“How was it?” he asks, ignoring my complaint. “I’ve always been curious

“think you’ve seen enough at those parties.”

“I’ve never had the pleasure of talking to someone who’s received his attention.”

He raises and lowers his eyebrows comically, and though I want to stay mad, a small smile escapes me.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you.”

“Oh, come on! Just tell me a little...”

“Nothing happened, seriously.” His look tells me he doesn’t believe me, so I give in a bit. “He just kissed me.”

“Just?” I can feel his disappointment, but he recovers quickly. “Well, coming from him, that’s a big step. I don’t think it’ll be long before he tries something else.”

“What?”

“You don’t think someone like him is going to settle for a kiss, do you?” He smiles mischievously again. “Men like him are conquerors. He’ll burn everything down to have you. The question is, will you let him?”

“I’m not interested,” I state firmly.

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“Something tells me I don’t believe you.” He grins mockingly, managing to get on my nerves. “I know how much you hate him, but trust me, giving in to the pleasures of the flesh isn’t so bad.”

It’s not like I’m seriously considering that option. I refuse to, now that I’ve realized I’m the only idiot who overthought the whole thing. Seeing Narkissa leaving his room with that smug air didn’t make me jealous—no. It shattered my pride and made it burn, wounded. I almost allowed myself to feel a bit powerful when I heard him talk about me like I was a drug he was addicted to, something he couldn’t stay away from. His recent actions have quickly crushed that illusion of power.

Still, curiosity gets the better of me and I end up asking:

“What’s it like?” Walter frowns. “What’s it like to give in to that pleasure?”

Walter takes a moment to snap out of his confusion, and I can almost see the gears in his head turning until he realizes why I’m asking.

“I forgot that you...” That I don’t have experience. “Well, it’s something wonderful, Elara. You don’t have to be afraid. And that kind of... pastime becomes even more pleasurable with them. They may be cruel creatures, but I assure you that in the bedroom, they become very, very generous.” He makes another ridiculous gesture with his eyebrows. “I promise they won’t hurt you, if you ever...”

“It won’t happen.”

“You weren’t going to kiss one of them either, and look at you now.”

I feel attacked, but I can’t argue with Walter. He’s not wrong, and that’s what pisses me off the most. We’re so wrapped up in the conversation that neither of us notices the new arrival behind us. It doesn’t happen like with Cassian, whose presence I seem to sense from miles away— it’s like the air itself becomes electrified.

“Am I interrupting?”

Walter places a hand over his heart in the most dramatic gesture, and I turn to face the voice’s owner. Ciro watches us both with curious eyes, never losing the kind smile on his lips. He’s wearing a green vest over a black shirt that suggests his limbs are slender but strong.

“I think I’ll go see if Aeron needs anything...”

With that, Walter slips away, leaving me alone with the vampire. If I looked back, my gaze would be screaming “traitor.” A movement from Ciro *forces*

me to focus on him again. Despite the youthful look of his smile, his eyes—that unbelievable pink hue—seem to hold wisdom.

“I’m glad to see you’re recovered.”

I let out a sound through my teeth that’s close to a snort.

“I see there’s no one here who doesn’t know what happened to me,” I mutter.

It annoys me, makes me feel vulnerable and exposed that everyone seems to know—or at least assume—what happened. I just hope the truth about my curse hasn’t reached anyone’s ears. And for some reason, I don’t think Cassian would want that revealed either..

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” He gives me a genuine smile. “I just wanted to express that I hope everything is alright.”

“It is,” I say with much more conviction than I actually feel.

“And him? Is he treating you well?”

“Why the interest?” I shoot back. “Last I checked, you were a vampire and I was a human—why should you care how I’m treated?”

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“Oh Elara... you have such a bad image of us,” he says, amused. “I hope Cassian isn’t helping reinforce that bad image, though I don’t have high hopes.” His hand, with no barrier between us, grabs mine and holds it in a gentlemanly way. “You’ve been to our parties. You’ve seen with your own eyes the humans who seek our attention—why would they, if we were so cruel?”

“Clearly, they’ve been deceived by your tricks.”

“Our tricks are pleasure and eternal life. I don’t think there are better things than that.” His eyes lock onto mine with intensity. “And if you let go of that hatred you have for us, you might begin to see things from another perspective.”

“I’m not going to see things from another perspective when you’ve stolen my future, my choices, my possibilities. How do you expect me to look at you differently when I was bought like cattle?” The words come coated in raw pain. “And your beauty won’t convince me otherwise.”

He stares at me for a few minutes and then bursts into laughter.

“I see Cassian told you about my gift.”

He composes himself and I watch him smooth his vest from some invisible wrinkle.

“He did,” I confirm.

He steps forward and his next move catches me off guard. He places his hand on my cheek and caresses it with his thumb—soft as velvet. Air gets stuck in my lungs and I don’t dare to move.

“Elara, if my gift had any effect on you, you’d be begging at my feet right now.” Again, his thumb strokes my cheekbone. “I’m sure Cassian feels the same about you. You resist his powers just as you resist mine. That makes you fascinating.”

“I couldn’t care less how you people find me.”

He tilts his head slightly, narrowing his eyes.

“Something tells me that’s a lie.” He moistens his lower lip, letting me see for just a second the reminder of what he truly is. “You can come with me, Elara. I’ll show you that we’re not so bad. You’ve just had a bit of bad luck until now.”

“I have no interest in going from one jailer to another.”

“What if I promise things will be different? Come to my villa one day, you’ll see with your own eyes how the people under my care live.”

“I don’t believe in promises.”

“You’ll believe in mine,” he promises. “And please, lose that frown—you’re gorgeous when you smile.”

“Someone should’ve taught you when to give up.”

I cross my arms over my chest and raise an eyebrow, defiant.

“Maybe others give up—I don’t.” He smiles now, smug. “Promise me you’ll think about it.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It means you’re insufferable.”

“I’ll take **it** as a yes, then.”

His persistence causes one corner of my mouth to lift involuntarily. **Ciro’s** eyes light up so much it hurts to look directly into those two pink

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Wises. A tickling sensation runs through my body and I know exactly where it comes from. I lift my gaze slowly, knowing what I’ll find, and still I can’t stop the effect it has on me.

The small smile disappears from my lips as I look past **Ciro’s** shoulder—toward the vampire now watching us with a sour expression. **Cirg** notices and looks over his shoulder. I take advantage of the distraction to step away. Being between two vampires with unresolved tension is the last thing I need right now

Heave the room, not finding **Walter** in the next. I must look pathetic—running and searching for a place to disappear. Something that, apparently, isn’t going to happen. **Cassian** hasn’t taken long to come looking for me. I feel his presence behind me without him saying a word. That scent of his soaks the air around me, making it impossible to breathe anything but him..

“We’re leaving.”

I spend only a few seconds gathering the strength to turn around and face him. His eyes sweep over my body as if he’s trying to find something different in me. I walk past him before things get more uncomfortable, heading for the exit. **Cassian’s** steps behind me are silent as a feline’s

Much to my dismay, I let him take my arm and guide us once again through the darkest, most deserted streets of the city. I close my eyes with anguish as we pass the same place as before. To my sorrow, the corpse is still there—only now the rats seem to have found it. I cover my mouth with my hand to hold back the nausea the image provokes.

He notices and quickens his pace so we can leave it behind. Tears rise to my eyes and my body relaxes once we leave the city and approach the thick bushes that hide **Cassian’s** horse.

The animal is happy to see us and makes it known with a neigh, seeking his master's touch. I don't have time to prepare before Cassian's strong, firm arms lift me and place me on the animal. He mounts behind me and, clicking his tongue, sets us into motion.

We ride for a few minutes before he breaks the silence.

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"What were you talking about so cheerfully with Ciro?"

I frown and try to turn around. When I manage to do so, I see he's looking at me with a regal expression.

"Why do you care?"

"Because you're my feeder."

I study his expression longer than any sensible person would dare, and I see something—something that shouldn't be there, or maybe something my subconscious wants to find.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

I hold his gaze the whole time.

"Could Ciro offer me more freedom than I have now?"

My words unsettle him—his face tightens as he holds my gaze. I hear the leather reins creak under his grip and know I've hit a nerve.

"Maybe," he admits. "Or maybe he just wants a rarity for his collection."

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By saying that, he's admitting he agrees with Ciro. To both of them, there's something odd about me that makes me, as he said, "a rarity." I fall silent and break eye contact, turning my gaze forward. Even though I'm not too familiar with the area, I instantly recognize we're taking a different path than before.

“I warned you about Ciro’s powers,” he adds. “He’s a master of seduction and will do whatever it takes to have you. He acts like a child, and now you’re the toy he wants. He’d sell you anything.”

“He offered me the chance to visit his villa and see for myself that I could be happy with him.”

“He’d show you a theater.”

“I could go unannounced.”

“That’s not going to happen,” he says firmly.

That closes the topic, and he keeps taking us down this unknown path. We climb a steep area that forces my body to tense to keep balance. My back ends up pressed against his chest, and it causes a pull low in my stomach. The air grows purer the further we go.

We stop after what feels like centuries on a promontory overlooking a vast expanse. Cassian dismounts and helps me down. He leaves me there and walks to the edge of the cliff to look out. At first, I don’t understand what he’s watching until I approach. Miles and miles of what was undoubtedly once a dreamlike landscape, now stripped of life. Dry, barren land, scattered with half-rotten fallen logs.

“What are we doing here?”

“Sometimes I like to clear my mind and look at beautiful things, Elara.”

I look again at everything before us, not understanding where the beauty is.

“You call this beautiful?” I ask, incredulous.

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“You don’t have to pretend to care. It’s dear you’ll never even let me consider the idea of being Cing’s face

“The ant shout him. He says, slightly annoyed. “I’m just curious. My time is unlimited I’m curious is now what someone does when thede isn’t

I turn his words over in my head, lost in memory, I **replay** that night in my mind. I can still feel the agonizing cold in my bones, the burning in my throat, and the thought that at **any** moment my lungs would burst. And then there’s that voice...

I take a deep breath **and**, without looking directly at him, I speak

* tried to end my life,” I confess,

Cassian shows no reaction to my confession—on the contrary, he remains impassive

“Do you still want to?”

The question is sharp and precise—so much that it drives like a blade into my chest. I thought I’d need more time to answer, but it comes more easily than I expected.

“No, I don’t think I do.”

I hear the movement as he turns toward me. Now we’re looking straight at each other.

“Why has that changed? This is the fate you feared so much.”

He’s right. And yet, hate has helped me stay sane here. It’s been oddly invigorating to confront him and always search for a way to challenge his limits, however small his concessions may be. In this past month, I’ve lived more than in the rest of my life—and though it’s sad, I suppose that’s as good a reason as any to keep holding on.

“Because I always felt empty,” I say. “I never allowed myself to enjoy anything because I knew what my destiny was. But maybe it wasn’t the end—maybe it was the beginning. Maybe I wasn’t meant to fit there—but to constantly challenge you, I don’t like you, Cassian. You’re cruel,

wicked, and cold. But at least your constant ways of provoking me make me feel alive.”

There. I’ve said it. Let it out. My words seem to have had the same impact as his questions. I swear I see him falter slightly on his feet, as if it were too much. Maybe neither of us expected me to admit something like this—at least I know I didn’t. I won’t thank him for buying me, but !

I can at least admit this truth: since he did, the fire in my veins has burned brighter.

He clears his throat, as if trying to rid himself of my words.

“You’re a contradiction,” he says. “You hate me and then say things like this.”

“You do too—you say you hate me and do contradictory things.”

My thoughts go in a very specific direction, and by his expression, I’d say he’s thinking the same. Words spoken out of violent need echo **in** my ears—they raise goosebumps on my arms and make my toes curl inside my shoes. His nostrils flare, as if something in my scent is betraying me. I watch in fascination as his Adam’s apple bobs while he swallows, and I think we’re both leaning closer, I feel the brush of **his** clothes against mine, and I know that if I move even a finger, I’ll touch the leather of his gloves.

His hand does what I don't dare. It glides up my arm, brushes my shoulder, and settles on the side of my neck. The silence is so deep I think I can hear my own heartbeat. I'm submerged in his eyes, and I don't think I'll ever resurface. The air between our lips hums with static—feet # pleasant tingle.

He closes his eyes, with a pained expression, and takes a step back—breaking the electric charge between us and putting distance. At least one of us had the strength to do it..

“I think we'd better head back.”

He turns around and I follow. I mount the horse without complaint and let him take us back to the castle. Now I'm more aware than ever of the points where our bodies touch—and it's driving me insane. Part of me wants to get off this horse and put as much space as possible between us. The other part, the annoying part, wants to keep playing this game and see how far I can push the man sitting behind me. He says I'm a contradiction—that's only because he hasn't looked at himself. He kisses me, and hours later, sleeps with someone else, only to then drag me through the city and behave like a jealous lover.

The journey feels longer than it really is. When we pass through the entrance gates, I let out a sigh of relief, and I don't wait for him to help me off the horse. Before he can react, my feet are already on the ground. I feel naked now that I no longer have his body behind mine or his cloak covering me.

I'm almost inside the castle and far enough that a normal human wouldn't hear me—but I know he will. I turn around.

“Just so it's clear—I may seem prudish to everyone in this castle, but there's one thing I know: when someone means nothing to you, you don't react the way you did.”

I open the castle door and let it swallow me. Good thing Cassian stayed behind—otherwise he'd see the small smile of superiority on my lips. I think *he's* a terrible liar. I may be a ridiculous human to him, but I'm sure he wanted to kiss me again. He, the mighty Cassian Draven, giving in to the charms of a fragile human. Who would've thought...

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Chapter 64

Cassian

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It's been a week since Evanora has been living with us in the castle. Wait-us? I shouldn't speak as if we're a team, considering I'm basically a prisoner. That aside, I'd say it's been one of the most fun weeks I've had since I got here. Evanora loves getting into trouble, and I'm so eager to live the little thrill of mischief that I get caught up in all of them.

"Are you aware that by doing this, you're only fueling the fire of your war?"

I pass her another garment from Drystan's wardrobe while she focuses on cutting out delicate shapes with the garden shears we stole. By delicate shapes, I mean forms that strongly resemble the male parts I've seen in medical books from the library. Maybe less detailed.

"Ruby Queen, I don't intend for this war to end."

"Don't call me that," I protest. "Besides, I can't take you seriously when you talk about war while cutting shirts with pruning shears."

She huffs, brushing aside a strand of white hair that falls over her eyes. She's not wearing her black mask, and I can see the mischievous smile that lights up her face the entire time. She's enjoying this. The albino snake coiled around her neck hisses as if amused by its mistress's mischief.

"Would you take me more seriously if I started cutting his underwear? The Ruby Queen and the White Banshee. Think about it, it sounds like a powerful duo."

"Yes, we have the superpower of cutting perfect male genitals."

"Thanks for appreciating it." She winks.

"Seriously though, why are we doing this? Wouldn't it be easier to just ignore him?"

"Like he ignores me? Do I need to remind you that yesterday I washed my hair with blood because of him? I still feel the stickiness..."

"Okay, I admit you're both fighting in this war..."

"And I refuse to lose."

That said, she gets up from the floor where she's surrounded by scraps of clothes and dusts her hands off on her skirt as if this had dirtied them. She twirls the shears in the air while eyeing the silk sheets on the bed and smiles again.

"I hope he and his lovers appreciate my taste in interior design."

I doubt Drystan's lovers are very happy with us. I can still hear the screams when they woke up with little hissing, crawling friends in bed. In my defense, Drystan should thank

me for talking Evanora out of putting one on his rear. If anyone asks, I'll deny having looked at that part of his body for more than two seconds.

I let her finish her masterpiece while I peek out through the crack in the door to check that we're not about to be caught mid-mischief. My eyes wander briefly toward the hallway I know leads to Cassian's wing. Since the day he took me to that lifeless place, we haven't seen each

other again. I haven't been summoned as a feeder, and that, strangely, unsettles me.

"Mission accomplished. Should I leave the shears on the bed for dramatic effect?"

"You want him *to* stab you with them?"

"You're right, better take them."

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She hooks her arm through mine and we slip out of the room, closing the door silently and painting innocent smiles on our faces. With the tip of her shoe, Evanora nudges the guard she put to sleep by blowing powder in his face. I don't know if I should ask for some—it looks useful.

"I think we're in real trouble this time," I comment.

Because there's a big difference between placing a few snakes in a bed and knocking out a guard. We'll probably get a proper scolding.

"Well, that's where you come in, my dear Ruby Queen." She gives me a look of fake innocence. "You just have to brush your lips against the vampire's and flutter your lashes seductively so he forgives us."

"Oh great, if that's your secret plan then I guess... we're getting punished."

"I think you're the one who'll get punished—and there'll be a bed involved."

I blush instantly and try to shut her up by bumping her shoulder with mine. Her laughter fills the hallways—it's beautiful, melodic, and

sparkly. We approach my chambers. Evanora walks off, waving her hand in a goodbye gesture.

"Will you have dinner in my room tonight?" she asks, walking backward.

Cassian has stopped requiring me as a feeder in every sense of the word. I no longer dine with him—now it’s alone or, occasionally, with Evanora. I’m about to tell her yes, that I’ll see her tonight, when my door opens and Clarissa appears, lips pursed.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. Tonight, both of you are required to come down to the hall.”

“To the hall?” I ask.

“Tonight, you’ll all dine together.”

“Who’s ‘all’?” asks the banshee.

“I don’t know,” Clarissa replies curtly. “I just know you must be in the great hall by eight and look presentable.” She looks past my shoulder at Evanora. “Young lady, there are two handmaidens already waiting in your chambers.”

With that, she shoos Evanora away and pulls me into the room. Inside, Naida has already begun laying out beautiful dresses on my bed, but

when I look at her, I notice she doesn’t have that usual sparkle in her eyes as she admires the clothing. Now that I think about it, both of them seem quite serious—almost angry, I’d say. I don’t dare ask while Clarissa undoes the knots on my back and undresses me. I’m becoming less modest by the day, and though I know my body isn’t sensual or even pretty, I no longer cover myself with my arms.

I step into the tub and scrub myself until the pleasant scent soaks into my skin. When I’m done, Clarissa places a robe over my shoulders and tells me to sit at the vanity. She smooths and styles my hair, opting for a high bun that leaves my neck fully exposed. I open my mouth to protest, but her pursed lips stop me.

“What’s going on?” I decide to ask.

“What makes you think something’s going on?” Clarissa replies without even glancing away from my hair.

“You’re both acting strange. Did I do something wrong?”

Clarissa locks eyes with me through the mirror’s reflection, sighs, and sets the brush on the vanity. She cups my cheek in a purely maternal gesture. I smile, relieved.

“You haven’t done anything, dear.”

“Then who?”

She shoots a quick glance at Naida who, though pretending to be busy, I know is listening intently.

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“Evanora causes too much trouble, Elara. We don’t think it’s wise for you to be so close to her.”

My jaw drops. I don’t understand.

“Why?” I blink in disbelief. “Evanora’s helped me a lot these days—I’m almost fully recovered. If it weren’t for her and Naja, I’d still be sick.”

“We know. But recovery doesn’t include joining her in her mischief. You’re drawing too much attention.”

“We’re just having fun.”

“Do you think Cassian will be pleased with that?”

I exhale sharply and turn on the stool to face them both.

“You need to start accepting that I’m not going to do things just to keep Cassian happy. This week has been more fun than my entire eighteen years of life. Why can’t I enjoy a bit more?”

Clarissa steps forward and cups my cheeks, forcing me to meet her gaze.

“Evanora will leave. And you’ll stay here to face the consequences of your actions. We just want what’s best for you. We don’t want you to suffer. We don’t want you to die by his hand.”

“I understand.” I place my hand over hers in a warm gesture. “Please understand me too. I’m not doing anything truly wrong—I’m just enjoying myself. And if I’m going to be punished for that, I prefer it to staying terrified and submissive in my room like he expects of all of us. I didn’t come here to be what he wants. I’ve always made that clear.”

“We like you very much, Elara. We don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“It won’t,” I assure them.

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I manage to wrap both in a soft hug, though I still see something in faida's face that worries me. She doesn't smile, doesn't speak, doesn't seem like herself i shift uncomfortably in my seat while Clarissa finishes her work and hands me off to Naida, who has already chosen a lovely dress. She helps me into the delicate lace underwear nothing like what can be found in Ravag, at least not without a fortune. The dress is lavender, and its fabric flows so freely it feels like I'm wearing clouds.

She's placing a necklace on my neck when I grab her wrist to get her attention.

"Are you okay, Naida?" I try to read her eyes. "If you need to talk about anything..."

She gives me a forced smile I don't believe for a second.

"Don't worry, I'm just tired."

I know I won't get anything else from her, so I stop insisting and let them finish dressing me. They leave with a final reminder to mind my manners in front of Cassian. I roll my eyes as soon as I'm alone.

It's not long before I hear soft knocks, and Evanora's braided head peeks in.

"Well, don't you look stunning," she says, stepping in.

"You too."

Her hair is full of wavy strands and intricate braids. The black and gold dress she's wearing creates a striking contrast with her pale skin and albino hair. Her snake rests on her arm like a bracelet and hisses happily at the sight of me.

"I really don't want to go to this dinner," she mutters.

"You'll get used to it."

"I don't want to get used to it," she snaps. "Besides, you're almost better—I doubt I'll stay much longer."

Besides our many antics, this week I've also gone back to drinking Naja's brew. The first time made me vomit that awful black liquid again, though *in* smaller amounts. The second time, I only felt nauseous—nothing came out. A relief, honestly.

"As strange as it sounds, I think I'll miss you."

"Well, you can always come with me." She winks.

I don't answer. Before discomfort settles, she opens the door and steps out first. I follow, close it behind me, and walk the halls with her. As always, the guards open the doors to the great hall for us. Inside, a soft melody plays, just gentle enough not to interfere with conversation.

I'm surprised to see some of the faces at the table, like Narkissa, seated to Cassian's left. Drystan sits on his right, as is his place. It's him who gestures for me to take the seat beside him.

"Here's my favorite human and her shrieking pet." He smiles, flashing all his teeth—including the sharp ones.

"Says the expert in pets," Evanora says loud enough for Drystan to hear.

I sit down, and that's when I notice Drystar is wearing one of the shirts we ruined this afternoon. He wears it proudly, exposing much of **his** chest. My eyes drift involuntarily toward Cassian, who watches us with a raised eyebrow, as if waiting for an explanation. Beside him, Narkissa shoots me a venomous look and a crooked smile as she sips from her glass.

"Do I want to know why my right hand is wearing a shirt with a hole shaped like nothing less than a...?" He leaves the rest hanging **in the** air

1/3

as he pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Don't you think it's the latest trend?" Evanora quips.

"Without a doubt, little witch. Thanks for making me look even cooler."

"Maybe organizing this dinner wasn't such a good idea. Clearly, they have no manners. They're girls," Narkissa says haughtily.

I narrow my eyes until they're just slits and speak with utmost calm.

"What's the reason for this dinner, if I may ask?"

Staff enters with our covered plates and goblets filled with thick, crimson liquid—for them. As if the blood they were drinking before wasn't already first quality. I wonder who the feeders were that filled them. I glance at Drystan, curious. I've never seen his feeders—does he have any? Or does Cassian take care of him as his second?

"The dinner is because Narkissa thought it would be a good idea for us to get to know our guest better," Cassian replies.

An unpleasant weight presses on my chest when I hear him say her name and watch how she looks at him with infatuated eyes and silly fluttering lashes. Her sharp, red-painted nails rest on Cassian's forearm as she strokes it seductively. He does nothing to stop her.

"I don't know what you want to know about me—I thought my reputation preceded me," Evanora says while cutting her steak into small pieces.

"I'm curious why you became a witch."

"Well, I'm curious how a random Diluted ended up regularly riding that one over there." She points at Cassian with her fork. "But unlike you, I don't ask indiscreet questions."

I gape at the banshee, who wears a triumphant, pearly smile. Across the table, Drystan tries to stifle his laughter, pretending he choked.

I dare to look at Narkissa's face, red with rage. Cassian, however, looks completely unbothered.

"Oh, and one more thing—I'm not a witch."

Half-witch, I think.

With that, Evanora ends the conversation and puts a bite in her mouth. Drystan clears his throat.

"How was the horseback ride the other day, Elara?"

"It wasn't a ride," Cassian says sharply.

"I don't recall you having breasts and being called Elara," I snap, turning to Drystan with a smile. "It could've been much nicer if the company hadn't been so bad, but it was fine."

"So I'm bad company..." Cassian swirls his goblet, light glinting off his rings. "That's not how I remember it."

"What do you remember, then?"

"Are you sure you want me to say it?"

I grip my utensils tightly until my knuckles turn white and lift my chin in a defiant gesture.

“Absolutely.”

14:44

Tue, 5 Aug

“Very well,” he says calmly. “If I remember correctly

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I’m spared from hearing his version when the great hall’s double doors burst open and a pale-skinned servant—clearly a Diluted—rushes in, slightly out of breath.

“Sir, there’s a carriage at the castle gates.”

“Tell them to turn around.”

“They say they were invited.”

“I didn’t invite anyone.” He falls silent for a tense, suffocating second. “Did they say who they are?”

The servant’s eyes fall on me, and I could almost swear he feels sorry before returning his gaze to his master.

“They’re the Ruggieros, sir.”

My head explodes. Surely I misheard.

“What else?” Cassian demands.

“They say they were invited by letter.”

I rise so fast my chair crashes backward with a loud noise. My hands tremble, but I manage to grab my dress and lift it just enough to free my feet—and run. I do exactly that until Cassian appears in front of me, closing both doors with his hands and blocking my path.

He knows I stand no chance against him. The ground seems to open beneath me, threatening to swallow me whole. There’s no joy at the thought of seeing my family—only panic. Panic for what Cassian will do to them. I didn’t invite them—I never would. I’d never think this was a good place to bring them. A bitter lump swells in my throat, threatening to choke me.

“I didn’t invite them,” I say in a voice so soft anyone else might think they didn’t hear. But I know he did. If anyone can hear me—it’s him. “I

didn’t.”

His eyes, stone-cold and hard, study me for a moment before he directs his attention to a point over my shoulder.

“Let them in,” he instructs the servant. “We’ll receive them shortly.” I hear him inhale. “Drystan, deal with the supervisor responsible for Elara’s letters. Clearly, he hasn’t done his job properly. Kill him. And as for the rest of you—leave us. Now.”

Everyone obeys, even Evanora. As she passes me, her fingers brush against mine and I feel a small electric current pass between us. Narkissa

gives me a smug smile and look. Something tells me she’s enjoying this immensely. The doors close again with a sharp sound that marks the

moment we’re completely alone.

“When?” he asks. “When did I give you the wrong idea that you could do something like this? At what point did I give you the impression that I’m someone magnanimous, Elara?”

I low-

“It v

Sold to the Night Lord

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Then who, little beact?” its tates a step toward me. “Are you implying the invitation sent itselfy

I shake my head frantically.

“Someone must have done it.”

“Who cares enough about you to do something like that?” His body is too close to mine—close enough that grabbing my cheeks and digging his fingers into them takes no effort. “Look at me.”

“I don’t know, I don’t know who did this,”

He studies me—I know he is. I know he’s reveling in the moisture that fills my eyes, though I refuse to let it fall. I will never give him my tears.

“Let’s say I believe you.” His voice is velvet. “What would you do for them?”

“Anything,” I say without thinking.

“Anything?” He doesn’t need a second confirmation. “Then let me into your mind.”

“I don’t know how to do that.” His grip on my cheeks doesn’t ease and it hurts. “I can’t give you that if I don’t know how.”

His jaw tightens, and I can see a muscle twitch.

“You’ll give up the stupid idea of visiting Ciro’s villa.”

“Is that what you want?”

“For now.”

“I won’t visit Ciro’s villa.”

He releases my face and I don’t get a chance to add anything before he turns around and walks out of the hall toward the main entrance. I run after him, not caring if I stain or tear the hem of my dress. We step out onto the landing that leads to the main stairs. I rub my arms with my hands, hoping to warm myself despite the cold air of early February.

Or maybe it’s just the fear that’s seeped into my bones.

The servant was being generous calling that carriage—it’s more like a battered cart pulled by an old horse. My father and brother are the first I see, seated in the front holding the reins, and then my eyes go to the back, where my mother and Abigail sit covered by a blanket. Despite that, they have radiant smiles on their faces. I don’t wait for them to stop completely before rushing down the steps to meet them. I throw myself into my mother’s arms as soon as I can and inhale the scent of home, which I hadn’t realized had its own fragrance.

“Mama...”

I feel her hand patting my back as she snuffles. We pull away from each other, her eyes teary, mine overwhelmed with emotion.

“My precious girl... you look radiant.”

I suppress a sad laugh. Abigail claims my attention with a hug, and I return it instantly. I hug her small body tightly and play with her copper curls. It feels like she's grown while I've been away—or maybe it's my imagination and everything's just the same.

"You look like a princess, Elara."

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"Notisendar you're the preve

Her honey colored pyes shine with sweltement 1 pinch her cheek, earning a gap toothed gri

Attend he's taking care of you property"

recognize sitas' voice and turn to him, throwing myself into his strong arms, which don't hesitate to hold me tight. He spins me in the air, and I no longer feel cold—only the warmth of being reunited with my family. His raspy laugh echines in my ear, and I don't know how long passes before I feel the ground under my feet again and his hand ruffles my hair like I'm still a little girl.

"You look good," he notes.

"I'm fine."

"I'm glad, because if not..."

A throat clears, cutting the conversation. We turn toward the terrifying Cassian, who watches all of us with those analytical, cold eyes that miss nothing. My father, whom I haven't even spoken to yet, squeezes my hand and then, as head of the family, steps forward to shake Cassian's hand.

"Thank you for inviting us. That was very kind of you. I know this isn't very conventional, but my wife and I are truly grateful."

Cassian's hands are gloved in leather as he shakes my father's hand, as if touching his skin would be unthinkable. I notice tension **in** his posture—more than usual—and I assume he's making a great effort not to voice one of his typical remarks about the human race.

"If you'll come in, the castle servants will show you to your rooms and dinner will be sent up. You must be hungry."

My father says something in response, but it's what my brother whispers in my ear that grabs my full attention.

"Will it be human food or are they serving us dripping raw meat?"

I'm about to warn him that Cassian can hear everything when he proves it himself.

"I believe your sister has no complaints about the food I provide her."

Silas presses his lips together, and everything about him oozes the same hatred I feel for Cassian—though, is that really true? Cassian heads back inside to give us some privacy. My father hugs me and kisses my cheeks, tells me how much he misses me and how empty the house feels without me. I don't know why, but my mind can't fully believe my absence is felt anywhere. After all, can someone who is empty really fill anything with their presence?

The air coming from our mouths turns into little clouds of vapor, and that becomes the main reason we end up going inside. Honestly, if I could, I'd send them back to Ravag. I'm terrified that they're here, and no amount of warmth in my heart from seeing them can outweigh the cold in my bones from the fear of what might happen in a place filled with threats.

"Please follow me," one of the servants says.

My mother's fingers intertwine with mine.

"Come with us. You have so much to tell."

I pat her hand.

"You should rest. It's been a long journey. We'll talk then."

She looks hesitant, and in everyone's eyes is a question they don't dare ask: Why aren't you as happy as we expected? They don't **know this**

. visit isn't normal. It never should've happened—and that frightens me. Finally, my father talks some sense into my mother and they **walk**

away, climbing the exile up and disappearing into the many w

I head to my chambers, wondering if I should seek out Cassian to talk about all that I don't need to think Inng he's already found me. He's

tearing against the wall across from my door, knee bent, arms crossed. The black shirt clings to his body, outlining every muscle and making him look like the threat he is. With his strength, he could crush my bones without effort. Then again, he wouldn't need to touch me

remember the pile of flesh and organs he reduced that poor girl to at the ball. What did he do? Just flick his hand in the air. That's all that

separates me from becoming a heap of blood and tissue at his feet.

“What are you doing here?”

“What a way to speak to someone who just did you a favor.”

“I don’t consider it a favor,” I reply.

True—it’s a gift.”

I close the last few steps to my door, lean back against it, and face him.

“Two days,” he adds.

“What?”

“Two days is the time I gift you with your family, Elara.”

“Will there be consequences?”

“A gift comes without consequences—usually.”

“Why? Why are you giving me time with my family?”

I feel a lump forming in my throat—emotions I don’t want to let out, not in front of him. He uncrosses his arms, sighs with a hint of resignation, and takes a few steps toward me, closing the distance. I feel a third presence in the hallway: an electric tension filling the space

between our bodies.

“Because the rest of your time will be mine.”

I look into his features and find doubts that mirror my own. We’re falling apart—and that cannot happen. As if he sees the same thing I do, he turns and disappears down the hallway, running from feelings disguised as hatred—but that are looking less and less like hate. Or maybe it’s a furious passion, one no one will win—and that, without a doubt, will hurt us both.

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Comment

Sold to the Night Lord

I still can't believe my family is here. It doesn't matter that I spent most of the night talking with them, catching up on everything that's happened this past month. I still can't believe any of it. Not even now, as Abigail runs around the garden trying to catch butterflies. Flook at

her and think that, in the span of a blink, she'll vanish.

"Don't get too close over there."

"Why not?"

"It's forbidden."

"Why would he forbid such a pretty place?"

I glance over to where her eyes are pointing. She's right—from the outside, you can already glimpse how beautiful it is, how much it hides. I don't dare comment on what my eyes saw in there for fear it'll only make her more curious to the point of doing something reckless. I sigh.

"Because he's selfish and wants all the beauty for himself. That's why he also bought your sister."

Evanora joins us and ruffles my sister's curls with her hand. Last night, once she was sure there was no danger, she burst into my room and, of course, insisted on coming with me. It's worth mentioning that she was absolutely charming with everyone and quickly won over my

younger sister.

"Makes sense," Abigail adds as she tilts her head and studies me. "My sister is very pretty. You are too, even if you cover yourself."

Evanora's eyes widen in surprise at the comment, then quickly soften. I know she's smiling because of the way the corners of her eyes

wrinkle.

"Will you let me see you fully one day?"

"Oh, how bold," the banshee teases. "She wants to see me fully—did you hear that, Elara?"

"Can I join in too and watch?"

We all turn at once toward Drystan, who has his hair tied back in a soft bun and his arms behind his back, as usual. My sister shrinks slightly at my side, instinctively aware of what stands before her.

“In your wildest dreams, leech.”

“Permit me to ask: am I a mosquito or a leech? I’m terribly confused.”

“You’re both as disgusting as a leech and as annoying as a mosquito.”

Abigail lets out a small giggle, even if it’s not exactly a joke. Evanora hates him with such passion...

“Fine qualities, no doubt. Though you forgot the most important: my impressive intellect, my undeniable wit, and of course, my rather striking looks.”

“You’d only be attractive if I looked at you with empty sockets.”

“May Lilith forbid you ever lose those pretty blue eyes, little witch.”

Abigail tugs *on* the sleeve of my shawl to get my attention. I look at her and understand she wants to whisper something in my ear. I crouch to

her level

“They like each other,” she whispers.

“Undoubtedly. When do you think they’ll realize it?”

We quietly slip away from the two of them, who don’t even notice we’ve disappeared mid argument. We walk back toward the castle, radiant smiles on our lips. No matter how far we go, we can still hear Evanora’s insults and Drystan’s laughter an absolute spectacle, no doubt.

We climb to the upper floor of the castle and I head to my parents’ temporary chambers. I knock twice under the watchful eyes of the guards, and my mother opens the door herself. She pulls me inside, and I see my father sitting in a chair by the balcony.

“How was the walk, Abigail?” Dad asks.

“It went well. I don’t know why you didn’t want to come with us,” I reply.

He doesn’t truly answer—he just gives me a gentle smile, the kind that’s so typical of him, then turns his gaze back to the window overlooking the balcony.

“Now that you’re back, you can keep telling us everything that’s happened since you left.”

Mom places her hands on my shoulders and gently pushes me to sit on the bed. Abigail runs to my father's lap, where he lets her sit while distractedly gazing outside and stroking her thick curls.

She used the key word: "lived." Because it seems like before all this, I didn't live—I merely existed.

"What do you want to know?"

"What's he like?" She sits beside me and grabs my arm. "It wasn't until you left that we even heard his name. Since then, it's all anyone talks about in the streets of Ravag."

"Why?"

"Because people thought he was almost a legend—a myth, something forgotten."

"Cassian, a myth? Something forgotten?" I repeat, completely incredulous. "He's very real. He's no fantasy, and he's my... I belong to him, Mom. I'm his—to break, to torture, to kill."

"Don't say that," she scolds. "Don't tempt fate."

"Fate turned against me the day he bought me."

"But he let us see you. He can't be that cruel, right?" She frowns. "Or will you pay for this later?"

That catches my father's attention, and he looks ready to get up and confront Cassian right then and there. I try to ease my mother's worry with a small smile and a gentle pat on her hand.

"Don't worry, Mom. Nothing will happen to me."

I try to change the subject to something more pleasant. I tell them about my handmaidens and how kind they've been, how Clarissa

sometimes takes on a motherly role with me, or how Naida is a friend with the best taste in dresses. I go on with details that aren't exactly substantial until I notice someone's missing from the room.

"Where's Silas?"

"He said he went to explore a bit."

13:44 Tue, 5 Aug

“Explore: Alone?” I get up immediately, lifting my skirts. “You shouldn’t have let him wander off on his own. There are forbidden areas in this Lastle.”

“I thought he was looking for you...”

“I’ll be right back.”

I pull the door open and rush down the hallway without looking back. I check near my room in case he actually came looking for me. No luck. I go downstairs again and wander through several sitting rooms and the kitchens. I return to the main hall, debating whether I should check the wing Cassian has claimed as his own—completely off-limits. I’ve nearly made the decision when I notice the small door beneath the grand staircase is open. I know exactly where it leads—it’s my favorite place here.

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Sold to the Night Lord

I decide the head Helyn in the library, glue rege in vel rey’s juridine ferns Dejaban citit, i fuererol the stars and #lance su dare i wwv the billain. Everything’s winery week for the vesting on one of the lungs. It never consitter turning back, but something draws me toward the with formed by the Beck dates, sat chart walking that keep t running my fingers along the edges of the shelves or the dusty covers

Timer aberrbed by the golden teered titles that i don’t notice someone else it there until my fingers touch his. The contact is immediate and it feels like an explosion, a supernovs.

My traitorous heart races without my permission, and my eyes seek the owner of those long, cold fingers, already knowing who they to. They’ve held me by the waist more times than I care to admit.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my voice tight.

“Just because you’ve chosen this place as your favorite doesn’t mean it stops being mine, Cassian replies in a neutral tone. “I wanted to check on its condition.”

“And

His proximity is too much—I try to pull away, pressing my back against the bookshelf. I almost want to beg the wood to swallow me whole.

“I’ll **send** someone to clean and maintain it better.”

“Good.”

“Good,” he echoes.

We stare at each other in silence. I’d love to be him—to know what he sees when he looks at me. The wood creaks as he leans on it, some of his weight falling forward. He watches me from his towering position, waiting for me to shrink away like everyone else.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

We both look toward the noise and find a sore-looking Ank hobbling on her tiny legs, rubbing her backside. It doesn’t take a genius to figure she fell—probably from eavesdropping where she shouldn’t have been.

“Ankhiale.” Ank straightens up the moment she hears her full name from Cassian’s lips. “Out. And don’t even think about spying again—I’ll know.”

Immediately, the tiny salamander begins to run, turning into a flickering flame darting across the floor tiles. For a moment, I worry about her—at least until I remember I should be worrying about myself. I’m alone with him again. Whenever we’re alone, things happen that make me lose control of my thoughts.

“You know Ank?”

I keep my chin raised to look at him. He’s leaning over me, caging me in with his body. Nervously, I fiddle with the shelf’s edge behind me and try to count the small notches in the wood.

“I know everyone who lives in this castle, Elara.”

“Then I assume you’re a complete control freak.”

“I won’t deny it. I like control.” He exhales a small breath before continuing. “Ankhiale has lived in this library since I was considered a teenager.”

1/3

14:44 Tue, 8 Aug

He steps away from me, leans against the opposite shelf, and crosses his long legs at the ankles. I take the opportunity to breathe normally

again.

“I don’t know what surprises me more that you were ever considered a teenager or that Ankhiale has been here that long”

Cassian raises two fingers in the air.

“First–Ank isn’t imprisoned here. She’s always been free to leave whenever she wanted. And second–did you think I was born like this?” He gestures to himself. “If only. No, I had to go through the mess of out-of-control hormones and the feeling that the world was against me.”

“Vampires go through adolescence too?”

A crooked smile curves his lips and his eyes narrow mischievously before he answers.

“We suffer it far worse than humans and indulge it far quicker. Maybe because we come from something corrupt. It might make us surrender to our desires in a more carnal way.”

“What else makes you like humans?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “I’ve never been one. Maybe you should ask Eleazar.”

I catch a slight tic in his jaw, and though I have a sharp reply on the tip of my tongue, I decide not to ruin this moment with arguments. I want

to extract as much information as I can–I have to take advantage of Cassian being open to my questions.

“So, if Ank isn’t a prisoner here, why doesn’t she leave? Doesn’t she have family? Friends? Somewhere to go?”

“I suppose she does. But she’s loyal. She made a promise.”

“To whom?”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows.

“To my mother,” he confesses.

His body tenses, while mine relaxes. Something inside me already knew the answer. Seeing how hard it is for him to talk about this makes me think maybe there’s still some light in the monster trapped within these walls.

“What was the promise?” I ask in a half-whisper, almost sure he won’t respond.

The air seems to hold its breath, just like me, aware that whatever the vampire says next will be important. My fingers have stopped counting the wood’s notches and now rest limply at my sides.

“To keep a spark in my heart.”

I can’t see myself, but I’m completely sure the look on my face is one of utter confusion.

“What does that mean?”

“Who knows.” He shrugs. “Only those two know—or rather, only Ank knows now. Maybe it’s something metaphorical, or perhaps more literal than I thought. In any case, I don’t feel any warmth in here.” -He touches his chest. “Only cold and silence. Lots of silence.”

I nibble my lower lip, absorbing his confession while tasting a bitter flavor at the back of my mouth.

“I’m sorry about your mother.”

Cassian’s eyes, which had been fixed on the floor until a second ago, shoot up and look at me in surprise. I freeze, letting him see that my

Chapter 68.

words are completely sincere. He may hate me: he may claim to know nothing of humanity but he must feel the pain of loss, right? How could I not feel at least a minimum amount of respect for that emotion?

What Cassian does next is the most unexpected: he bursts into laughter. He laughs wholeheartedly, and I don’t know why that sound splinters me from the inside. It’s the happiest and saddest thing I’ve ever heard.

“It’s ironic,” he finally says. “During all the time she’s been dead, no one has offered me condolences—not even my own kind. And you—a human, one of those responsible for taking her from me—have pity for my loss.”

“I didn’t take her from you. I would never do something like that.”

“You’re one of them; of course you would,” he replies bitterly. “Don’t you do the same to us? You hate us all. You consider us monsters.”

“Have you given me reason—of all of them—to think otherwise?”

“You’d already decided what I was to you long before you bought me.”

“Stop reminding me you bought me!”

“But I did!”

My chest heaves as I breathe unevenly, and when I meet his gaze I see his chest do the same. It throws me off balance once more, seeing him so affected by our exchange. This isn’t like him—just moments ago he boasted about his love of control. Now he seems unable to control himself, unable to control anything. Absolutely nothing.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he growls.

“Like how?”

“Like I’m the only one dying for the other.”

I part my lips, ready to ask what he means, but his mouth is already on mine—devouring, consuming, conquering. I gasp in surprise, but the sound dies under his lips. My body reacts, betraying me, responding to the kiss with hunger. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer, feeling his hardness pressed into me. I can’t help but curve my lips into his, silky yet hungry, when I hear a throaty moan rumble from his chest. The sensation radiates through my body, centering on one very particular place.

Sold to the Night Lord

My feet leave the ground when his hands lift me by the thighs and set me seated on the edge of a shelf. His body fits between my legs, which shamelessly keep open for him.

“We shouldn’t,” I murmur against his mouth. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“No, we definitely shouldn’t be doing this.” His lips part to brush the column of my throat. “We should be doing worse things.”

He nips me, but it doesn’t hurt—only a tingling that puffs up my nipples and arouses me. His fangs and velvet lips trace my throat down to my collarbone. I feel him inhale my scent for a moment before traveling downward—his teeth part the fabric of my dress and lower it, revealing the curves of my breasts. His tongue sketches one of them, and I exhale a soft moan.

“Your skin tastes so good...”

One hand grabs the shelf firmly; the other buries itself in his hair. My body writhes against his as his tongue, daring and merciless, circles my nipple with soft bites that make me tremble to my toes.

“Please, Cassian, please...”

“Do you know how many times I’ve imagined you begging me?” he murmurs, nuzzling between my breasts. “Fuck, so many... Do you want me to give you relief, Elara? Ask me, and I’ll show you why being with me will ruin you for anyone else.”

I’m nodding before fully realizing it—and I don’t know how to feel about it. I hold the shelf with both hands, thinking I might collapse at any moment, unaware that what’s about to come is what really makes me feel faint.

Cassian's cold fingers stroke my calves beneath the dress with an unexpected effect. His touch ignites me. His hands travel up behind my knees to my thighs, applying gentle pressure. He kneels and lifts my legs to rest on his shoulders without effort. My most sensitive part lies exposed before him.

"I knew the lace would suit you perfectly."

His words whisper against my lingerie, making me feel them resonate at the epicenter of my legs. I shift my hips, seeking to feel him again. He smiles; I sense his lips curve against my skin.

"What do you want, Elara? What does the Ruby Queen demand?"

His fingers dig into my thighs, keeping them parted to give him a perfect view of what he needs most in this moment. My nails dig into wood as his breath moves closer to my sex. My need intensifies when his tongue brushes the fold of my groin and nears the fabric of my underwear.

"Ask me. I will gladly take care of you."

"Make me feel good, Cassian. Make me feel alive."

"Order received."

His tongue parts my lace, and the first stroke between my folds makes the world crumble beneath my feet. My stomach twists with a strange

sensation.

The second sweep of his tongue parts me further to access my clit, a sensation so intense that my mouth cries out his name in moans. I open my eyes to look at him—he's kneeling with my legs on his shoulders, his head moving to the rhythm of his licks. He plunges into the **secret** opening between my folds with the promise that he'll explore deeper one day, and then slowly drops to my other opening.

Once his intention is clear, his tongue retraces the path to my clit, teasing it with small suction pulls that send streams of pleasure through my entire being. My breath accelerates and halts when I feel fullness wash over me.

1/2

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His gaze meets mine, expecting me to recoil from his finger inside—but I only stare back with lust-filled eyes as he pushes deeper.

“You’re so tight, fuck.” I feel the curl of his finger inside me, drawing a moan from me.
“You like it, don’t you?”

I nibble my lower lip, holding back fresh gasps and watching him with hooded eyes full of desire.

If the scene was already erotic, seeing his lips cover my clit while his finger pumps inside and his eyes probe me makes everything too much.

I feel the adrenaline of being on the edge of a cliff and the impending fall.

My back arches, pressing into the shelf—it hurts less than the ache between my legs, demanding urgent relief.

“Cassian, I... I....”

“You’re more alive than ever.” He breaks contact, and I see my wetness on his lips.
“Come, darling.”

I think that damned word is what hurls me over the cliff. Or maybe it’s the mix of his curled finger inside me and his teeth sinking into my groin that launches me into a spiral of desire.

I dig my heels into his back as his name slides from my lips. He sucks firmly, slowly; as I fall from the orgasm wave, he retracts his fangs from my flesh and licks the wound.

“Elara?”

Shit.

Of all the possible moments, it had to be now. I freeze, legs trembling on his shoulders, unable to breathe so my position isn’t revealed to my brother.

“Elara, you there?”

His steps retreat, and I hear them echoing away—relief washes over me. I close my eyes, afraid to move.

A blood-stained smile appears on Cassian’s face. Slowly, silently, he lowers one of my legs from his shoulder, then the other. He rises and settles between my legs. His finger remains inside me, then he slowly withdraws it and places it into my mouth before I can make a sound, leaving me suddenly empty again.

He forces me to taste my own desire while we both hear my brother's footsteps retreating. Only then does Cassian withdraw his finger from my mouth and wipe my lower lip with his thumb.

"This has been our undoing, Elara." He smears my blood with his mouth. "I'm going to fucking devour you whole, make no mistake."

He seals his threat with his tongue invading my mouth—and in the next second, he's gone, leaving me in an empty, silent library, wondering if it was real or a hallucination. My skin burns—I wish it were from sickness, not desire. I try to steady my breath and the trembling in my legs, smooth my hair, adjust the décolletage, and wipe the blood from my face.

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AD

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 70

Hook around, expecting sneaky Ank to reappear—but she doesn't. I climb the spiral stairs in haste and retrace my steps to my rooms. I still can't believe what has happened, that I let Cassian do these things to me—and worse, that I enjoyed them so much.

Find Silas pacing down a corridor that isn't mine, and without thinking I grab a scrap of his shirt to pull him to face me.

"What are you doing here?"

"Exploring."

"Stop that," I scold. "Cassian won't like it."

"Ah, so you care about what the vampire likes or dislikes..."

I narrow my eyes, fixing him with my gaze. He may be taller and stronger than me, but I'm the older sister. I'm the one who distanced him from a miserable fate, so he should speak to me with respect.

"Are you insinuating something?"

"Is it possible that someone who's lived here for over a month doesn't know what the servants whisper—and I, in just a day,

know more than you?” His tone turns sneering. “Elara, why does everyone say you’re in love with him?”

“What?”

I take a step back, as if struck by a slap. I nearly feel it—but what hurts more is his stare. He looks at me like I betrayed him, like I’m not the same sister who slept beside him growing up or the one who pulled his hair when he told me I couldn’t do something because I was a girl.

“Are you having something with him, Elara?” He steps toward me. “My sister wouldn’t fall in love with one of them—not after what he’s done to you, what he’s forced you into.”

This can’t be real. Not now. I wonder when his hard line will curve into a teasing smile and he’ll tell me it’s all a joke. Of all days, today? When

I’m emotionally shredded and my thoughts a mess?

“Who said that?”

“What does it matter?” he replies. “Is it true?”

He yanks me roughly, twisting my wrist.

“No, no! Of course it’s not true!” I struggle against him. “You’re hurting me, Silas. What the hell is wrong with you? Let go.”

“You’re not Elara. Not the Elara I know.”

“Stop with the nonsense,” I snarl through clenched teeth. “Let go of me, Silas. I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with you today, but you’re not here to judge me—you’re here to see me, maybe for the last time. Cassian’s generosity isn’t on my side. I don’t know what the castle thinks or what lies they’ve fed you—but I’m not special. You won’t ever see me again, and you’ll regret this moment, Silas. Do yourself a favor -let go. Now. I never expected gratitude for my sacrifices—but at least I expected you to be happy I’m alive, that I’m managing to survive each day.” My eyes sting. “If I have to be with him to stay alive, would you mind? Would you prefer I be dead?”

He loosens his grip and I slip free.

“I didn’t say that.”

“*You* didn’t need to. Your eyes said much more than your mouth.” I jab a finger into his chest. “You’ve judged me—just like they’ve judged **me**

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from the start, from that night at the Red Auction. But what you said... it's worse. You're my brother. My family. I don't care about them—but care about you.”

He pales at my words. Tries to grab my arm again but fails. I put distance between us, backing away several steps.

“Elara, your eyes...”

I'm already turning away, unable to listen further.

“I wish you'd never bothered to come—for this,” I whisper.

I don't hear him running after me, and that comforts me. I have no strength left to face this, to look into the stranger's eyes.

“What have they done to you, Elara?!” he exclaims behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, confused by his question. His face is still pale—and I almost want to hug him, but I can't. I'm the one trapped here forever. I'm the one who's given up freedom and family. He still has everything.

Turning the corner, I enter my hallway and head to my room. I slam the door shut so hard it comes off one hinge. My hand flies to my chest- surprised I did that myself. I must be angrier than I thought—and the door must be older than it looked.

I sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for the guards to send someone to fix what I broke. In the silence, I feel something brushing my mind- like reverent fingertips, as a pianist does on keys. It's not a new sensation; I've felt it when Cassian entered my head—but now he seems unable to do it no matter how much he tempts me with gentle caresses.

I imagine a double-door set in gold. Black arcane symbols form letters I don't understand. A polished handle gleams, awaiting my touch. I picture myself reaching for it, wrapping my hand around it—and pulling it open...

The sensation inside my head stops.

“He's an idiot. Don't listen to him.”

Cassian's voice echoes in my mind, and I imagine him here with me, whispering those words into my ear while his fingers caress my neck.

“He'll never be able to understand your sacrifices.”

You don't understand them either, I think.

"I reward them."

And then, I hear *the* click of the lock on my balcony, the double doors swing open immediately, and fresh air rushes in. Clean, crisp air.

I run toward it, forgetting I had been carrying on a conversation inside my head, and for the first time, I step out onto the balcony of my room

and discover that I have the most beautiful view in the entire castle.

AD

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