

Sold to the Night Lord

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Chapter 71

Cassian

I'm angry at myself. I feel like I'm betraying a **part** of who I am by giving in to my basest desires. I could almost swear I hear a little voice in my head mocking me, telling me it warned me this would happen. That **need** to buy her at the Red Auction wasn't of this world—the feeling of seeing myself reflected in her was my damnation.

Her mind has closed itself off to me again, but I don't need access to know she's happy. From one of the towers in my wing of the castle, I have a clear view of her balcony, and I can see her right now leaning against the stone railing, observing everything around her with eyes **full** of wonder **and** a smile that would turn any man foolish.

After hearing her brother's words, and the pain-tinged answers Elara gave him, I wanted to be the reason behind one of her small smiles

and that makes me an idiot.

I look away from her and retrace **my** steps back to my office. Inside, hundreds of letters from other Purebloods have piled up, arguing in favor of Aeron's experiments. My decision is made: no experiments. If they want to defy me, let them. Everyone knows there will be consequences. In the end, they'd come begging for my help to clean up the aberrations they created. Other letters report more uprisings. I sigh. I'm tired of being seen as if I were like my parents—focused on politics and the well-being of all. I'm not them. I don't care about any of this.

There's a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Narkissa's red hair **is an** explosion of color compared to the gloomy tones of the room.

"You summoned me?"

As if she didn't clearly hear my **voice** in her head a moment ago demanding her presence. **I don't** throw a sardonic remark, though I'm tempted. I merely nod, gesturing for her to enter. ©

"is something wrong?"

I place my fingers in front of my face as I soften my gaze—pure theater.

“No, I **was** just curious about something.” I fleetingly lift the corner of my mouth in a ghost of a smile. “What were you talking **about** with the Ruggiero boy?”

If our nature already gives us pale skin, I think hers just lost **all** color. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat and forces a tight smile.

“Nothing special, he was lost. I was just warning him it wasn’t wise to wander alone”

“And did you offer to be his guide?”

“What? No! Of course not!” She clenches her hands into fists that wrinkle her dress. “I have no interest in babysitting a mortal. I have enough on my plate managing your bloodmaids’ adaptation.”

I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes, studying her with suspicion

“Speaking of the adaptation of my bloodmaids, I’ve noticed you haven’t paid much attention to Elara.” I smile a little more. “You’re usually

more polite, Narkissa”

“**What** is this about?” she snaps

“I don’t know. Maybe I just want you to be honest in this conversation.” I click my tongue in irritation. “Tell me, what poisonous seeds were

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you planting in the Ruggiero boy’s head? Don’t lie to me—I know.”

She doesn’t answer. Instead, she rushes to my side and does everything she can to hold my hands. I let her and watch as she pathetically presses them to her chest, just where a heart used to beat—one now frozen in time. I hide my disgusted expression at the sight of her

reaction.

“I’m sorry, forgive me. I shouldn’t have spoken.”

“What did you say, Narkissa?”

She looks up at me, dropping to her knees, eyes wide with fear

“I just told him that his sister didn’t seem unhappy here.” She gasps like a fish out of water as she feels the pressure of my gift toying with the strings that make her who she is. “That maybe she was quite pleased with your presence. As if she... desired you.”

“You knew that wouldn’t sit well with the idiot brother. I know you too well, Narkissa.” I crouch down to her level and dig my fingers into her chin. “You’re very manipulative, but you forget I’m worse—and that if there’s even a sliver of malice in you, it’s because I taught you what it truly means to be evil.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Seems you forgot that, **just** like you seemed to think I’m a complete fool I know it was you who tampered with the letters, it didn’t take me two seconds to figure it out, though the poor bastard you fucked didn’t keep the secret long before I killed him. You had everything planned.

That’s why you organized the dinner. You thought I’d cause a scene, maybe hurt Elara, or that my rage would drive me to kill her.” My fingers dig deeper as fury burns through me at how she dared to underestimate me. “Now my question is: what should I do with you? Haven’t **been** generous all these **years**?”

I let go of her **as** if her skin had turned to filth and disgusted me.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” She clings to my legs.

I used to enjoy being begged.

From her, it sickens me. There was a time, I think, when I respected her. A diluted. Who would believe that?

“Get out”

She blinks rapidly.

“Get out?”

“Do you need me to explain the verb? I want you out of my sight

She doesn’t hesitate. She lifts her knees off the floor without caring if she steps on her dress. Her cheeks flush as she backs toward the door without turning her back to me. She bows her **head**.

“Thank **you**, thank you, thank you,” she repeats. “It won’t **happen** again. I won’t have anything to do with her again.”

“Don’t thank me. You’ll wish **you** were dead soon.”

With a tick of my hand, I open the door, the clear **order** that she **leave** and vanish from my sight. I release an exasperated breath when I'm finally alone. The papers on my desk no longer interest me, so I ignore them. Instead, I walk over to a small hidden safe and pull out a decanter filled with crimson liquid that will dull my senses enough to keep my rage from making me do something foolish.

Ia glass and lean against the wall to watch the view. The **sun** has begun to set, casting orange and pink tones over the gardens, creating a dreamlike image. **Once** the sun sets completely, it will look more like something out of a nightmare, with all its mazes and cruel flowers.

I don't know why the contrast makes me think of Elara and me. She, human, fragile, soft-**straight out** of a fairytale. Me, cold, immortal, out

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—her nightmare. Still, I can't deny the strong pull she has over me, one I'd like to blame on my destructive nature. Her taste stillingers on my tongue, which is why I take a long drink from the glass, hoping her sweetness fades from my mouth. If not, I fear I go back to her chamber right now, bury my head between her legs, and make her scream. I said there was something better than her blood—her screams. I didn't know the ones I'd crave most would be these caused by pleasure.

And her smiles—I want more. So many more.

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What a ridiculous thought.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement in the gardens and spot Elara holding her little sister's hand. Both have their faces tilted toward the sun, eyes closed, small smiles on their lips. I remain there, frozen, unable to tear my eyes away from the scene. And when Elara looks at her sister, unaware the girl is watching, I see love in its rawest form. My insides twist, and I don't know if it's from guilt or longing.

I place the glass back on the desk and leave the office, at first unaware of where I'm headed—until I find myself knocking on a door with my knuckles. I wait to be let in, using that time to regain my composure and put on my mask of indifference. The golden eyes of Elara's brother open wide when he sees me at his door,

*is something wrong?" he asks, hesitant.

I don't wait for him to invite me in. I don't need it—this room is as much mine as the rest, and I don't ask for permission with what belongs to me. He steps aside as if I carried the bubonic plague when he senses my intent

I walk away from him, moving toward the window while he clutches the door and refuses to move from it.

"I think the real question is, what's wrong with you?"

I make a massive effort to control the tone of my voice. It bothers me more than expected, having heard Elara's pained voice while she spoke to her brother. It's not that I'm nosy—it's just that my hearing is difficult to control, no matter how hard i **try** to **ignore** all the noise.

"What's supposed to be wrong with me?"

Larch an eyebrow at him arrogantly.

*Your name is Silas, right?" He nods. "Good, Silas. Let me be clear. You didn't make a great impression when you arrived, but there's something I don't tolerate—and **that's** people upsetting my bloodmaids, Did **you** know **their** mood affects the taste of their blood? No,

of course not. Why would a human know something important to a monster like me?"

I'm not being entirely honest, but he doesn't need to know that.

"I granted you a tremendous gift by allowing you to visit Elaray'm very aware you didn't have the chance to see her again once she entered the Red Auction—and even though this isn't customary, I allowed it. Don't push your luck, boy."

Silas lets out a huff and looks at me with skeptical eyes.

"Are you sure it's the taste of her blood that matters to you?"

My ears catch the sound of his skin tightening over clenched fists, knuckles turning white.

"I won't deny your sister's beauty, however, don't insult me like that. I have plenty of others at my disposal—more willing and less fragile."

Strangely enough, I don't really want to belittle Elara, but it seems I have no other choice when it comes to her brother. The truth is, Ela slipped into the cracks of my thoughts and I'm not very interested in other bloodmaids. It's been a while since I demanded **blood** from another, **and it's** making me constantly thirsty. It's not like the

little wildcat has been particularly cooperative either. **She's** killing me with thirst, and the small sips she allows me aren't enough for someone insatiable.

"What do you want?"

I move toward him decisively.

"I want you, before you leave tomorrow, to fix whatever you've broken inside her." My eyes lock on his like daggers, like I could wound him

with a glance.

"I didn't allow you to come here just to fuck with me and that's exactly what you're doing, little mortal"

"Careful, Lord Draven, you might make it seem like the tumors are true."

I smirk, and in the blink of an eye, I grip his throat and slam him against the wall next to the door. I bring my face close enough that my **breath**

brushes against his skin. Some twisted part of me would enjoy knowing her taste still clings to my mouth.

"Careful, little Ruggiero, anyone might think this isn't brotherly concern, but something much more perverse. Maybe I'm not the only repugnant thing in **this** castle right now."

His nostrils flare **as** anger boils inside him.

I release my grip one finger at a time, satisfied to see the redness on his neck—and even **more so** when I see him gasp for air.

"I hope I made myself clear." I let the threat soak my voice.

"If not,

t know this: the distance to Sunnyside won't be enough to keep me from coming for you. I don't like my investments being damaged."

The word tastes bitter in my mouth. I ignore it and leave the room, making **sure** the door slams shut behind me. Without thinking, my feet guide me wherever they feel compelled to go. I head outside, wandering the gardens, careful not to cross paths directly with Elara and her sister. I search for a way to watch her without being seen.

"Do you t

like it here?" asks the little Ruggiero girl.

A silence stretches longer than expected. I'm surprised to realize I want to know the answer.

"**it's** a beautiful place, don't you think?" says Elara. "These gardens are magnificent, and my maids are really kind **people**, wonderful friends."

-I hold my breath, thinking she won't give a real answer

"Keep it secret, Abigail, but I think I'm starting to like this place."

"Wouldn't you go back to Sunnyside?"

"Of course I would," she replies immediately. "But that's not possible, little sister. So this place isn't bad, is it? I think I can manage to live

here.

"Of course you will. This is your **place**, **your** destiny"

I don't recognize the voice whispered through the air—and it seems I'm not the only one who hears it. Elara immediately straightens, and before she turns her head and catches me watching them, I disappear from her line of sight. She looks around in all directions, searching **for** the source of those words, I end up doing the same, searching with little success—until Drystan finds me hidden behind massive hedges.

"The air smells different," he says with a mocking tone. "Things are changing, Cassian."

I sigh and close my eyes, very

y aware that I can't hide much from my right hand and closest friend.

"Yes, they are changing—and I don't know if like it."

"I'd say you do. A lot.

I scoff low enough that Elara's human ears won't catch it, but loud enough for Drystan to get the message. He doesn't say anything else, **and** we both remain silent as we lift our faces toward the sun. I know Drystan enjoys this more than I do, which is why I gave him the **task** of watching over Elara during the day. I'm not used to enjoying the sun, and though my condition allows it, for some reason, I've forced myself

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to live a life of shadows, darkness, and night.

And now there's a point of light in this castle—someone who makes me want to admire the sun—and I don't know if that this

1. **me.**

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Llara

My feelings are confused and divided.

At this point, I don't think I can deny the obvious: **Cassian** exerts a strange pull over me, and as surprising as it may seem, it doesn't feel like I'm alone in this. I don't know **much** about passion, but the way he kisses me, the way he consumes me it doesn't seem like the actions of someone who feels nothing for me. Despite all that, the claws of hatred are still deeply lodged in my heart, and that confuses me. Is it possible to desire and hate the same person?

As if that weren't enough to drive me insane, there's also Silas's reaction. It hurts more than I want to admit. His look—that of someone betrayed—is burned into my retinas. I can't believe he isn't happy to see I'm managing to survive. I wonder if he'd rather see me broken, sad, unable to adapt to this life.

I hear the small sigh that escapes Abigail as she turns over in the sheets and faces me. She insisted on sleeping with me, and there's nothing I could ever deny my little sister.

The morning light is already pouring into the room, so I quietly lower my feet to the **floor** and tiptoe to the balcony, open its doors, and step out for some fresh air. The breeze is far too cold for the thin nightgown I'm wearing. My **skin** instantly breaks out in goosebumps.

I try not to let my thoughts drift back to the words whispered in my ear in the gardens, nor do I want to relive the moment in the library. There are moths in my stomach, eating away at my insides every time I think about what we did, how I melted in his hands like clay. Moths,

not butterflies—I'll never mistake them for butterflies.

We're probably both confused. Our hatred is such an intense feeling that it pushes us to do irrational things. Yes, that must be it.

force a fake smile onto my face, step back inside, and get ready for a new day. I choose a simple green dress and walk over to the bed to wake Abigail with tickles. A while later, we're walking hand in hand down to the dining hall, following the scent of buttered rolls and freshly brewed coffee. In the parlor, only my family is there—Evanora and, **as** always, Drystan, who seems unable to hide his amused smile when he's

near the **banshee**,

ont of me. **Maybe**

now I'm seeing his true self.

When I first arrived here, he was different, always very serious—at least in front

“Good morning, **dears**,” Crystan greets with a small nod.

I smile in response and help Abigail pull out her chair before taking my own seat at the table. I sit in silence for a few seconds, taking

everything in.

“is something wrong?” my mother asks, her smile unshakable.

“No, it's just...” “I think carefully—“It feels strange to see all of us sitting together, having breakfast like before.”

“I know. It was very kind of Cassian to prepare this for us. I'll be leaving much more at ease after seeing you and how he's treating you, **my**

daughter.

Immediately, my eyes **search** for my brother's. He avoids them. He looks away **and** focuses on his breakfast. I see his knuckles whiten as he grips his fork. I try to ignore the sting in my chest.

“**And** where is he?”

As I ask the question, I look at **Drystan**, since I know he's the only one likely to **have** an answer. No one seems fazed by it, except my brother, obviously. I hear the soft huff that escapes his lips, and it takes effort to remain composed and in my seat. I want to scream at him and maybe hurt him the way his words have hurt me. I grip the fork next to my plate tightly.

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“You know he doesn’t really like being active during the day—he’s probably resting,” Drystan replies. “That’s why I’m here. I be **showing you** around the gardens like no other. Cassian hopes to be present before your parents leave.”

The way he looks **at** me as he says that last part makes my stomach twist into a strange knot.

Why would Cassian want to be present for something like that? I thought he’d avoid it at all costs. I don’t take him for someone who enjoys goodbyes and all they entail—kisses, tears, hugs, parting words,

I clear my throat, trying to swallow the knot.

“Alright.” I nod, still a little confused. “So the plan is to walk through the gardens.” I turn to look at my parents. “You’ll love them. They’re beautiful. Abigail and I spent almost the whole day there yesterday, didn’t we, Abit

My sister nods with her mouth full of **toast** and jam.

Dad smiles and looks at Drystan, who’s seated at the head of the table in Cassian’s absence.

“And besides whatever my daughter **is**

er is supposed to do for **your** master...” he says, “is there anything else occupying her time?”

“If you’re asking whether she’s been assigned duties, the answer is no. We already have staff for that, and truly, Elara wasn’t... purchased to

be a maid.”

I don’t miss how hard it is for him to say the word “purchased,” **as** if it were **mud** in his mouth. But we can’t ignore the truth—that’s exactly what happened.

“Elara’s time here is hers to do whatever she wants. Read, play, walk, eat... whatever she pleases.”

“Except leave,” Silas murmurs.

“Well, I believe those **are** the terms of the deal,” the vampire replies firmly. “Without him, you’d probably be hunted constantly—chaos would reign just **as** it did before the treaties signed by the Dravens.”

“Oh, how grateful we **are**,” my brother mutters sarcastically.

“Silas,” Mom scolds. “Please behave.”

Evanora, surprisingly seated beside Drystan, narrows her eyes **at** him. What surprises me more is that she hasn’t jumped at the opportunity to join in the attack against the vampires. Instead, she eats in silence but looks at me with soft eyes.

Drystan pushes his chair back and rises from the table, placing his palms on the surface.

“I’ll wait for you outside. Take all the time you need to finish breakfast.”

My mother tries to lighten the mood with trivial conversation topics, and Evanora joins into smooth over the tension.

I finish breakfast in silence and wait for the others before we head outside. To my surprise, Evanora doesn’t disappear and joins us for **the**

stroll.

“Can we goi

noin? Please, please, please. Abigail pleads, looking into Drystan’s pitch-**black** eyes. “My sister told me it’s forbidden.”

She points toward Lilith’s garden, where the statue of the **naked** woman guards much of the entrance. There’s something about Drystan’s expression that catches my attention—it’s rare to see him hesitate. I suppose my sister has something special that makes you want to grant her every wish.

The vampire crouches to her eye level

“If you want to get in, you have to promise not to touch any flower and to stay close to me?”

“Is it dangerous in there?” my father asks, concern marking his face.

“Not if you listen to me.” Drystan smiles. “If you ignore my warnings, perhaps one of the flowers will eat you alive.”

They might think he’s exaggerating or joking cruelly, but I’ve seen that garden at night—I’ve seen its flowers, both beautiful and monstrous and I wouldn’t put it past any of them to steal a life. At this point, nothing seems impossible to me.

To everyone’s surprise, Abigail smiles and slides her hand into Drystan’s. He opens his eyes, surprised, but recovers in a blink. He responds with another smile and begins walking toward the garden everyone is forbidden to see.

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A hand grabs my shoulder and pulls me aside from the rest. I'm about to scream when I see the hazel eyes of my brother.

"Can we **talk**?"

"That depends." I cross my arms beneath my chest. "Are you going to keep acting like a jerk, or will you behave like a decent brother?"

He bites his lip and rubs the back of his neck with a quilly look. He glanced over my head, though it's obvious our family isn't nearby.

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I was such an idiot to you," he sighs. "I've been completely irrational and childish. I couldn't understand how my sister, who always spoke with such visceral hatred toward these creatures, could be comfortable among them."

"You think I have a choice?" I snap. "This is what my life is going to be, Silas. I'll always be surrounded by vampires—if I'm lucky enough not to die first. At first, I resisted so much it was exhausting just to breathe."

"You can't let him think he's won."

"That's the thing. Silas." I grit my teeth. "He won the moment he bought me. Whether I like it or not, in everyone's eyes I'm his—to feed him, to serve him, to be broken if that's what he wants. No one will stop him, especially not him."

"Promise me your resignation has nothing to do with your heart."

I frown.

"Does what I say mean anything to you?" I say, annoyed. "You don't seem to listen at all. This has nothing to do with feelings, Silas. It's about survival"

He has no idea how much I've resisted, what I've been through these past weeks, what I've seen, what I've suffered.

It's so easy to talk and demand when you sleep in your own bed, with the people you love nearby, with the certainty they'll still be there in

the morning

Meanwhile, I sleep in a castle full of cold rooms, suffocating loneliness, and no guarantee that live to see **the** next day.

Besides, I'll never admit that a **flame** is starting to burn inside me—one that goes beyond hatred. He constantly accuses me, but has he wondered if this goes beyond me, if it affects more than just me? I don't think it's one-sided. Cassian's kisses and his attentions certainly

don't say so.

"I'm sorry, Elara," Sillas throws his arms around me, holding me tight. "I'm sorry for being a jerk. I just? can't accept that you're not with us anymore. I'm sorry you ever thought I didn't want you to **be** happy. Just, please, don't forget about us, I **don't**."

I feel my eyes fill with tears and blink them away.

"I'll get you out of here someday. I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," I whisper.

"I'll find a way to keep it."

We pull apart, and although everything seems resolved on the **surface**, I can't forget his words so easily. It'll take time to forgive him fully.

We rejoin the others, careful not to touch any of the flowers—you never know which one might kill you. Abigail's **laughter** lights up my soul every time Drystan makes a funny comment. I watch my parents' shoulders visibly relax when they see their daughter is happy and that the man accompanying us is not as monstrous as they may have thought. **No**, the worst monster of all is in his chambers, probably deciding how

hell make me pay for what happened between us, Because, of course, in his eyes, it'll be my fault.

More than once.

I catch Evanora watching Drystan. It's amazing how neither of them has noticed yet that they look at each other when the other isn't watching.

After walking through the hedge maze and every corner of the gardens—including the tree I used to enjoy reading under—we go back inside for some snacks. No one wants to say it out loud, but the moment to say goodbye is near. It's best they leave before night falls. The roads are never safe in the dark, unless you're traveling with a creature worse than the tumans who use the night to prey on travelers.

The banshee and the vampire disappear at some point, leaving me alone with my family. I gather my courage and take a deep breath

“Abigail, come here,” I call, taking her hand as she approaches, I bend down and cradle her against my chest. “Did you like this place!!

She nods her head

“Good, then remember I’m okay here. Don’t keep worrying about me. None of you should.”

I look at the others **as I speak**.

“I’m still alive, but I don’t want to be a ghost living with you in that house. I want you all to go on with your lives, please. I’ll try to make one here. Abigail, you need to play with other girls, fall, scrape your knees, learn to read, fall in love, get your heart broken—or break a few by accident. Silas, you too. Stop thinking about how to get me out of here and start truly living. I know we’ve all been frozen in time these past **years**, with my fate hanging over us. So now that you know I’m okay here, please—live.

Dad, Mom, I don’t want you to be sad. I know it’s a bit selfish to ask. I saw it in your eyes when you arrived—you’ve been mourning me **in** silence. Don’t keep doing that. Not for me.”

Mom struggles to hold back her tears, and I can see the shimmer in Dad’s eyes. Abigail has her face buried in my chest, her shoulders shaking with sobs. And then there’s Silas, who seems in pain just looking at me..

Don’t cry.

Don’t cry

Don’t **cry**.

I repeat it to myself, knowing I can’t let that be the last image they have of me. This is a real goodbye. We won’t see each other again, and I’m not naive enough to believe fate will decide to cross our paths once more..

They all come closer, surrounding us with their arms. **I think** they break around me—I’m the only one capable of keeping the tears at bay. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to hold back my emotions before they explode.

Someone clears their throat behind us.

with Cassian.

I blink several times to chase **away** the tears before turning and coming face-to-face wi

We haven't seen each other since what happened yesterday, and I'm almost sure we've been avoiding each other on purpos

He's wearing a loose black shirt that reveals the pale skin of his chest and leather pants that match his gloves.

He looks away

from me, as if it's painful to look **at** me.

"The carriage is outside," he announces.

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My family clears their throats and discreetly wipes **away** their tears while Cassian turns **and** assumes we'll follow Leling to my sister's hand, and Silas reaches blindly for mine. We descend the stairs slowly, Cassian staying behind us.

"Will you write to us?" Dad asks.

"As often as I can," I reply, not knowing if it's even true.

"Take care of yourself Mom hugs me again. "And don't do anything that might put you

I catch the double meaning.

on't make him angry.

might put you in danger"

Dad and Mom are the first to get into the carriage, taking Abigail with them, who looks at me with tear filled eyes.

Splinters are lodging into my heart with every goodbye.

Lastly, Silas wraps me in a tight, engulfing hug

my head. "I didn't want to spend these days being a jerk to you, and I ruined everything Forgive me

"Forgive me," he whispers over the **top** of my -and don't forget my promise.

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Before I can respond, he's already let go and disappears into the carriage, which looks nothing like the rickety old cart they arrived in that

first **day**.

I cast a brief glance at the vampire and lower my head slightly, hoping he'll understand the small gesture.

His eyes narrow a bit as he keeps his lips pressed in a tight line and nods back.

I hear the knock on the carriage roof giving the order to depart, and I remain standing there, watching my family leave me once again—this time, it promises to be forever.

Part of me wants to keep seeing their faces as they vanish, but deep down, I'm thankful they have the courage not to look back. That would only make it more painful.

I stay like that until the carriage is just a tiny dot in the distance.

Exhausted, I collapse onto the stairs and hug my knees to my chest.

A long time passes before I feel his presence prickling **at** my back.

"I'm never going to see them again," I **say**, knowing he's listening.

I flinch slightly when he appears beside me and sits down, stretching and crossing his long legs in front **of him**.

"Believe it or not, I know exactly how **you** feel"

"You miss your mother, don't you?" I face him, allowing myself the comfort of talking to him. "In the end, not even your nature makes **you** immune to the rawest, most painful feelings."

He gives a sad smile, and I lose my breath for a dangerously long time.

The light hits him in such a stunning way it's almost blasphemous to describe **it as** beautiful—but it is.

His **hair** is so black it has blue undertones, and his lips are full **and** masculine.

He **was** designed specifically to attract prey.

“Unfortunately, I know a lot about **pain**, Elara.”

“Have you **always** been **like** this?”

I can’t stop my tongue, which longs to ask the most invasive and undoubtedly inappropriate questions.

Cassian looks at me so seriously I’m sure he didn’t like my question.

The silence that follows raises goosebumps on my skin, anticipating the worst.

“No, not always,” he answers without looking away from me. “Before, **you** might have even found me amusing”

“What did they do to you?”

Without realizing it, my hand is resting on his forearm, as if I could extract the words I want to hear through touch.

He notices the gesture—his eyes drop to my hand, and they seem to warm my skin.

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His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows.

“Why do you want to know?”

“You know why I hate you—your kind took away my freedom, stole my will to live from the moment I was aware of myself”

I grip him tighter,

“I’d like to know why you hate us. Why you hate me.”

“It’s not a pretty story.”

“I don’t expect it to be.”

He looks away from me and leans back, resting his arms behind him. I think he won’t answer, **as** the silence settles between us like a third

presence,

I hear him take a deep breath.

“My kind is rarely monogamous. Vampires have so much time and beauty at our disposal that we see it as ridiculous to spend eternity with just one person. Unlike humans—whose supposed God doesn’t love you enough to **spare** you from time, disease, and hardship—you tend to cling to one person. You find beauty in growing old together.

My parents admired that about you. They thought it was something... beautiful.

They also wanted to spend eternity together—and believe me, that’s a long, long time.”

“Are you saying vampires never consider loving one person for their whole life?”

“It’s not something that appeals to us. Normally, the **Pure** ones bond for a while—long enough to have children and raise them until they can fend for themselves.

At least before, when we could still reproduce.”

He sighs again.

“What I wanted to tell you is that my parents loved

d each other—so deeply that even our own race didn’t understand it.

They said they learned how to love by watching humans, and that’s why they did everything in their power to **ensure** your safety.

My parents loved you—damn it.”

of his gloves creaks **as** he clenches his fists.

The leather of his

My mouth goes dry, and despite everything, I can’t look away or force myself to leave without hearing the rest of his story, no matter how much pain **and** hatred it holds.

“Humans conspired. They figured out how to kill the Pure ones—and that’s what they did. They managed to wipe out many of them especially went after the women. They didn’t want us reproducing.”

A strangled laugh leaves his throat.

“**Idiots**

. They didn’t know that the Diluted ones would continue to exist—and would become an even worse threat.

Anyway, **one** night my parents organized a small dinner with the humans they trusted

wed, 0 Aug

Some of them even owed my mother their children's lives."

His sapphire eyes pierce my skin when he looks at me again,

"My mother had the gift of healing. She cured several humans who were beyond hope and look how they repaid her

They killed her in cold blood. Impaled her before my eyes.

And then they did the same to my father—blinded by pain and love, he didn't **resist**.

He seemed to prefer following her rather than staying and fighting with me."

"You shouldn't say that."

"They forced me to swallow my parents' blood while their **bodies** cooled at my feet.

A muscle twitches in his jaw.

"They stained my

y soul in a thousand ways,

Elara.

They whipped me, tore open my wounds, poured salt in them.

When they saw I was starting to heal, they reopened them—again and again.

They raped me.

They made me live in my own filth."

His fangs glint into view, and I swear they look even sharper **than** before.

"Eventually they grew bored of me—enough to relax their guard—and that's when I killed them all.

I didn't leave a single one alive, and it was so much fun to see their horrified faces...

No one expected it—my gifts had remained hidden until then."

If I moved closer, maybe I could

d **see** the carnage

in his **eyes**.

“Do you

think that’s a good enough reason for me to hate you, Elara?”

I try to wet my mouth with saliva, but my body refuses to cooperate.

My hand is still resting on his forearm when I **slowly** lower it to touch the leather covering his.

It might be my imagination—or something my body secretly craves—but I think I feel his hand gently squeeze mine.

“I’m sorry,” I **say**, “I know I’m the last person you want to hear that from—but I am. No one deserves that.”

His body leans toward mine, and while one hand holds mine, the other rises to cup my **cheek**

.

I shudder at the feel of the cold leather against my skin.

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t say **the** same about you. I can’t regret what I did.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t regret that you’re here.”

His thumb traces along my cheekbone.

“Remember when you told me that being here, constantly challenging me, made you feel alive?

Well, I’ve never felt more mortal—more alive—than I do now, here, with you.

I don’t know if i like it.

It feels like I have too much to lose by feeling this way.”

“There’s also a lot to gain.”

My voice comes out somewhere between a whisper and a breath.

His lips are so close they're distracting—I feel like they're calling me.

“**What** exactly?”

His eyes search mine.

“Me. **You** gain me.”

On the steps of the castle, in full view of anyone who might pass by, Cassian claims my mouth.

: Hear the deep growl rumble from his chest just before both hands grab my cheeks and draw me into his **kiss**.

It's not gentle—it's dominant.

s my bottom lip, claims my mouth and his place inside it

He licks r

I moan and

nd wrap my arms around his neck.

My chest presses into his, and that makes him growl **again** against my lips.

He gives a little bite, and I taste something metallic on the tip of my tongue.

I let out a soft gasp when his hands grip my thighs, **forcing** me to wrap my legs around his hips.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking you to my bedroom,” he growls into my mouth. “I’m going to disrespect you in a thousand ways inside it, Elara.”

“Everyone’s watching us, Cassian.”

“Little beast—pray to your God they don’t hear you screaming my name.”

I **pull** back to look at him, and his eyes gleam with such wickedness I know he’s carving into **my** flesh the promise of the most surable

pain.

I close my eyes as his lips travel down my neck—and yes, I

should

pray.

because I'm about to lose myself in the arms of a monster who just gave me a piece of his darkness.

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 76

Elara

With me in his arms, he climbs the steps and moves us through the maze of hallways that lead to his wing of the castle.

I keep my eyes closed the entire time, lost in the feeling of his breath against my skin, but I know there are eyes watching us

Our troublesome passion will be on everyone's lips in less than an hour, and I know I should stop this before we cross the final line.

The problem is that there's something inside me that refuses to stop.

It wants to live, it wants to savor the experience.

Cassian grips me tighter so that my legs stay firmly wrapped around his hips

I feel the heat rising to my cheeks when I become fully aware that there are soft, sensitive parts of my body now pressing against his stomach.

He manages to open the door to his room blindly and, slamming my back against it, shuts it behind us.

We stare at each other, face to face now, and the predatory spirit I see in his eyes steals the breath from my lungs

He brings one hand to his mouth and, with his teeth, pulls off his gloves—one after the other.

I don't know why, but it feels incredibly erotic..

He sinks his fingers into my hair without fully closing the distance between our mouths, just watching me as if trying to decipher **me**

I lick my lips, expectant, my heart galloping in my chest.

“Kiss me.”

He narrows his eyes, resting his forehead against mine.

I can feel his breath trembling, and I need no more proof that his mind is as stormy as mine.

He probably knows too that we’re about to cross a line that will change everything.

I’m betraying myself, and so is he

Now that I know his story, I can understand his hatred.

A hatred so raw and **powerful** it seems unable to fight against lust.

“**Kissing** you again would be my **undoing**.”

His fingers dig deeper.

“You’re **so** cruel for **asking** this of me... do you want to drive me mad?”

“You shouldn’t have let me taste what it’s like to be kissed.”

His torso presses closer, trapping me completely between the door and his body.

Between my legs, I feel the hardness hidden beneath his **pants**, and rather than scare me, it makes me greedy.

1/4

10:13 Wed 6 Aug

“Do you think you’d be just as aroused if it were someone else kissing you?”

His breath is closer, brushing against my lips as he speaks.

“Elara..

I don’t respond—I’m too busy feeling everything his body is awakening in mine.

The almost animalistic growl that rises in his throat gives me chills, and the next thing I know, his lips are on mine—wild, demanding, and

desperate

I bury my fingers in his hair, soft like leathers.

A moan escapes my mouth, and it has **a** visible effect on him.

His hands travel down from my hair to my y neck—one wraps around it while the other keeps moving until it reaches my hips, his fingers gripping tightly enough to leave marks the next **day**

The way the door rattles each time his body slams into mine, trying to eliminate even the tiniest distance between us, sends waves of sensations through my body that only awaken a hunger I've never known.

My teeth nibble his lower lip hard enough to taste metal on my tongue.

Cassian takes it as **a** provocation and responds by pulling me away from the door and carrying me across the room to throw me onto his bed.

He stands at the edge of it, watching me as my eyes focus only on him.

It doesn't matter how curious I am to see what **his** room looks like, if it matches what imagined.

All that matters is him—**and** that steely gaze that has turned so dark I'd swear his eyes were never blue, but black.

“Take off your clothes,” he commands.

His demand catches me off guard, and my shy, inexperienced self peeks into the room for the first time in a while.

I force myself to be clever with my tongue—and not in the way the vampire would like right now.

“Why don't you do it? Afraid you won't be able to untie the knots in the dress?”

One corner of his mouth h lifts in a smirk halfway between amusement and arrogance.

He grabs my ankle, yanks off my shoe, and pulls me toward him until my legs are on either side of his body.

“My little wild thing...

He leans over me slowly and hooks a **finger** into the front of my dress.

“It's not **that** I can't untie the knots.

It's that I don't have the patience. Not when it comes to you."

The fabric of my dress tears as Cassian rips it open.

The rip appears little by little—first revealing the cleavage between my breasts, then slowly continuing downward in a thin line that exposes my navel.

10:13 Wed, 6 Aug

My chest rises with a breath of surprise, and for a few seconds, a deep silence settles between us

Cassian raises an eyebrow, daring me to say something clever again.

Instead, I dig my heels into the backs of his thighs and force him to lower himself completely onto me.

I grab the collar of his shirt until his lips crash against mine once more,

He licks my lips, asking for permission, and when I give it, our tongues battle, abandoning tentative caresses.

The hardness pressing against my thigh makes the wetness between my legs intensify.

"Hell must be rubbing its hands, waiting for the day I fall—if I even have a soul," he murmurs as his teeth scrape along my chin and his lips

caress me.

"How bad can it be to taste heaven before I fall, Elara?"

The words die in my mouth when his hand pushes aside the torn fabric of my dress and exposes my breasts to his touch,

He rubs my nipple with his thumb until it hardens.

I close my eyes, arching my back to stay close to him, biting my lip at the unfamiliar pleasure coursing through me.

While his thumb draws slow circles over my abused nipple, his mouth covers the other, giving it equal attention with his tongue.

I feel like I'm dying.

There are tickles in my stomach that feel like standing at the edge of a high place **and**

looking down.

It's fucking vertigo.

Despite the threatening sharpness of his teeth against my skin, he doesn't break it.

He's extremely careful while driving me insane beneath him.

My hips lift, brushing against his hardness again, eaming me agrowl muffled against my skin.

His hand leaves my nipple, and with both hands, he tears the rest of my dress apart, leaving me completely naked for him.

If my cheeks weren't burning before, they are now.

The icebergs that are his eyes melt as his gaze travels slowly down my

I shrink back slightly when his breath touches my skin.

yentire body.

hes my sex, he looks up at me.

He moves lower and lower, **as** slowly as a predator stalking its prey, and just as he reaches

"Do you hate me, Elara?"

He knows the **answer** and still asks.

"With every cell in my body."

My trembling hands rest on his shoulders.

"And you? **Do** you hate me?"

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I know the answer

"Of course

"Then what are we doing?"

“Hating you doesn’t erase the fact that I want to ruin you—mark you until you want to be mine.

My soul hates you, but my body worships you.

Let me show you.”

I know what he wants to show me before he even does it.

His tongue licks my folds slowly, opening me to him.

A shiver tiptoes down my spine, making me gasp.

This is the sweetest torture.

“Cassian...”

“Did you say something?”

I prowl, lifting my hips toward him again—I don’t want him to stop.

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Comment

Chapter 77

The sight of his mouth on me and his eyes focused on my reactions is maddening

“Touch your breasts,” he commands.

When I don’t obey immediately, he pulls away from the apex of my thighs.

I instinctively bring my hands to my breasts and begin massaging them with closed eyes, as if that could shield me from dying of embarrassment.

“The nipples,” he says. “Pinch them.”

I don’t dare disobey.

I do as told, while his tongue delves deeper into me, opening me wide.

His licks are slow at first, avoiding my clit and dragging me into desperation.

Then he cups my

ass in his hands, lifts my body for better access, and slowly circles my clit.

The combination of his tongue and my hands on my nipples ignites a flame in my lower belly that only grows.

Without warning, one of his fingers slides inside me, and I hear the sound of my wetness with each stroke.

The pressure is there—not painful

He sucks harder on my swollen clit while moving his finger, doing everything he can to hit the spot that will make me unravel

He adds another, increasing the pressure.

“You like it,” he says, **his** mouth still on me.

“I can feel you strangling my **fingers**, Elara.”

The heat spreading through my veins is searing, and the hunger is almost sickening

I want more—I want to come undone and then have him show me how he’ll ruin me.

As if he can hear my thoughts, he speeds up,

and so does my breathing

My toes curl as the wave of climax comes crashing down.

His name climbs my throat and

d comes out in a moan as I tug at his **hair**.

He doesn’t stop—he keeps licking and torturing me with his fingers until my breathing returns to normal and my body collapses against the

mattress.

Only then does he **pull** away, and I see the shine of my orgasm on his lips.

He licks them, never taking his eyes off me and does the same with the rest on his fingers, tasting it like it’s his favorite meal.

“As sweet as your blood.”

He looms between my legs, brushing his nose against the skin of my thighs.

I watch his nostrils flare, and his eyes close as he breathes in the scent of my arousal that now fills the room.

When he opens them again, what i see is indescribable,

I’ve never seen such raw hunger.

“Do you want to keep going?” he asks.

“Would you let me go if I said no?”

I try to close my trembling legs, but he blocks me with his body, my sex left at eye level.

“I understand why you’d think that, given my actions—but your virginity is one thing I would never take without your consent.

If I’ve given you pleasure with my tongue, it’s because I told you what I intended to do at no point did I feel you didn’t want it.

Am I wrong?”

I slowly shake my head, knowing it would be hypocritical to pretend this happened against my will

“**Good.**

Then, what do you **want** now, Elara?”

The word is already on my lips, and even though I try to hold it back, it comes out

“Everything.”

“It’ll hurt.”

“if it hurts, it means I’m alive, doesn’t it?”

His fingers move to the buttons of his black shirt and begin unfastening them with precision,

Just watching his hands gives me a twist in my stomach, thinking of what they just did to me.

When he reaches the last button, he lets the shirt slide off his shoulders and fall to the floor.

I lose my breath at the sight of his hard, defined torso.

The impulse is stronger than me, and I end up on my knees, moving closer to him to brush my fingertips over his skin.

my fingers trace the lines of his chest, never looking away from his eyes, drinking in every reaction,

He holds his breath as my

I gently caress the muscles of his stomach until I stop at the waistband of his pants.

I can’t hide the slight tremble in my fingers.

“He doesn’t bite,” he whispers against my ear and kisses the sensitive skin behind it.

His hand joins mine, **and** I watch as he loosens his pants so I can continue to indulge my curiosity.

My fingers linger on his abdomen, feeling it rise and fall with each breath, and then I help pull his pants down.

Cassian finishes the job and stands completely naked before me.

He cradles my cheek, lifts my face toward his, and brushes his lips against mine tentatively while my hand lowers and explores further

I touch something warm and hard.

I hesitate over what I should do, until I slowly wrap my hand around the shaft of his erection.

His gaze ignites as my hand moves along his length—careful and unflinching

Air escapes

through his teeth in a hiss as my hand works its small magic on him,

I relax my wrist and move with just the right pressure, up and down his taut skin.

Something moistens my palms, and it’s during that brief moment of hesitation that he takes advantage—pushing me back onto the bed and laying over me completely.

He digs his fingers into my cheeks

“So it seems you’re not as innocent as you pretend to be,” he purrs.

“Do those filthy books on your nightstand have anything to do with it, Elara?”

I turn my face away to avoid looking at him as a new wave of shame washes over me.

Apparently, he doesn’t know the meaning of privacy and feels entitled to rummage through my things.

“What have those books taught you, little beast?”

His erection presses against my stomach.

“Nothing I want to show you,” I reply.

“Oh, I assure you the day will come when you do.”

Supporting his weight on his forearms, he leans down until his tongue can lick the spot where my pulse throbs.

“It’s a promise.”

His knee nudges between my thighs, and he positions himself between my legs.

The weight of reality crashes over me, tensing my body, and he notices.

He runs a

sa soft caress along **my** face, brushes a strand of hair behind my ear, and takes the opportunity to touch me there so slowly that, under different circumstances, I might fall asleep beneath his touch.

His shatt rubs against my entrance, sliding over it several times, as if giving me the chance to flee

One of my hands rests on his shoulder while the other tangles in his hair to bring his face closer to mine.

“Don’t add this to the list of things you hate me for, please,” he says before kissing me.

His kiss is gentle, slow, and **sensual**.

He tries to calm me with the movement of his lips and the taste of his tongue, even as I feel him beginning to slide inside me.

I dig my nails into his shoulder at the sensation of being filled.

He pauses and meets my gaze.

My hand relaxes and slides from his shoulder down his back, where I feel the raised, rough scars scattered across IC

I don’t know why touching them lurts, why knowing they’re real unsettles me beyond words—or why I want to cry for a younger Cassian) never knew.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and I hesitate before nodding

“This is going to hurt.”

And yes, it hurts.

My flesh strains to accommodate his size, and I feel a sharp pain.

I bite his shoulder as he pulls back and thrusts **again**.

I can feel the effort my body makes to adjust to him.

It’s a sensation of being completely filled, mixed with a burning pain and, deep beneath it, a slight tingle of pleasure.

He lowers his face until he can lick my cheek, where a tear had slid without me knowing.

He does the same on the other side, indulging his twisted side with the taste of pain.

“There’s not a single part of you I don’t want to **taste**.

He thrusts, and / feel it like a brand searing into every nerve ending. if my nails or teeth hurt him, he says nothing.

Chapter 78

He lets me stay like that as long as I need before start to relax and sync with the rhythm of his body.

“This is so wrong...” I murmur, my lips brushing his shoulder and kissing his collarbone

..but it feels so good, Clara. You’re my favorite sin,”

And he is mine, without a doubt,

His fingers slide down to where our bodies are joined, and he starts tracing circles on my clit, distracting me from the pain

His thrusts grow stronger, making my breath hitch and my legs wrap around his hips

I surprise myself when I dig my heels into his buttocks, pulling him deeper into me.

It hurts—but I want to feel all of him.

My movement drives him mad, and his thrusts become deeper.

Acry escapes my throat,

His thumb keeps circling my clit, increasing the pressure as he feels my heart racing toward release.

Cassian bures

es his face in the curve of my neck, inhaling my scent while I fall apart beneath him.

His name spills from my lips in moans, my **vision** blacks out, and I see nothing but bursts of color as fire licks through my veins.

I feel a tiny pinch at my neck and then **Cassian’s** lips sucking my blood, linking my orgasm to a forbidden pleasure I refuse to admit.

“Cassian...

He wraps his arms around me and sits on the bed with me on his lap, moving me slowly.

He grips my hips, guiding me to draw circles with my body on his shaft.

The penetration grows so deep it hurts to feel so full, and with a chaotic rhythm, his name escapes me over and over until he reaches his own climax

His body falls forward,
covering mine without crushing me, while a hot liquid slides down my thighs.

-With lips stained in my blood, hair tousled by my fingers, and eyes clouded with pleasure, **Cassian** looks at me—and smiles.

It's a beautiful smile that completely unravels my heart.

Speaking of my heart, it stops when I feel his series between my thighs again.

"Cassian... **what** did you do?"

I bring my hands to my breasts to hide them from him.

"God, I'm not stupid—I know how women get pregnant.

He grabs my wrists, moves my hands away from my chest, and pins them above my **head**

1/4

"You're not going to get pregnant."

"How can you be so sure?"

The edge of his nose brushes down my throat and into the valley between my breasts.

I can practically hear him purr as he delights in my scent and the softness of my skin.

"Because I take a tonic, Elara. That's why I'm sure."

He slips his hands beneath me and lifts me effortlessly.

"I won't get you pregnant, and I've never gotten anyone pregnant. It's completely effective."

"Yes, oh."

I think I feel a soft kiss on my temple.

"And I'm not done with you, just so **you** know.

This is only

only the beginning of your ruin."

He gives that cocky smile **again** as he lays me on the large pillows of his bed.

He steps **away** from me and disappears through an ornate side door.
I use the time to glance around.

The furniture is made of black wood with silver accents.

The bed has four tall posts from which hang sheer burgundy curtains.

There are no family portraits—actually, nothing decorates the cream-colored walls

Sconces and chandeliers are scattered throughout the room, and the melted red wax makes it look like they're weeping blood.

Beyond the bed, there's a small archway that leads into a study, where a tall bookshelf stands filled with books.

I want to keep looking, but Cassian returns holding a damp cloth in his hands.

He touches my knee with gentle pressure.

"What are you doing?" Lask, my voice higher than normal.

"Cleaning you," he replies in a bored tone.

"Open your legs.

I hesitate.

Elara

"I've had my tongue **inside** you, Elara—I've seen more than enough. Open/

"Does your tongue have to be so filthy?"

"Only filthy tongues give good orgasms"

"You're so full of yourself."

"Your body doesn't seem to think so. Now, please—open your legs"

Tobey only because it's useless to resist—he's right.

He's seen and touched parts of me that still make me blush just thinking about it.

My legs are still trembling slightly when I spread them wide and let him run the warm, damp cloth over me.

Thiss

"Sorry, he murmurs.

It stings

He continues in complete silence, carefully wiping away any trace of his release, along with the blood that p

With him.

Oh my

God.

I should feel terrible—but instead, I feel more **at** peace than ever, as if I were resting on clouds.

t proves I lost my virginity

He leaves the now pink–stained cloth on the floor and, to my surprise, slides beside me and makes me rest my head on his chest.

He strokes my back in a steady rhythm.

My eyelids begin to grow heavy.

“What’s going to happen after this?”

The question slips from my lips, and I regret it instantly, because part of me doesn’t want to know the answer.

It would rather stay in ignorance.

“I don’t know.”

“Will you ignore me tomorrow—or hate me again like always?” I whisper.

“I’ve never ignored you—not even when I should have.”

He lifts my chin with his index finger.

“And I don’t just hate you I want you. I want

You beyond my principles.”

“But...”

“But don’t expect **a** love story.

People like me don’t get happy endings.

“Don’t worry—I’m not going to fall in love with you.”

The comers of his eyes soften—though not too much.

My breathing grows heavier, bulled *by* the movement of his hand on my back.

“The problem isn’t you.”

When I wake early the next morning, whatever I thought I heard last night feels like a dream, and the spot beside me is empty and cold

Θ

Chapter 79

Elara

Back in my room, I tell myself again and again that not seeing him is for the best.

I don't think I could've handled waking up and finding him there, looking at me with eyes clouded by regret, admitting that this had been a mistake.

It's already enough that the voice in my head reminds me every time forget that this is wrong

The thing is, my heart doesn't feel that way.

It's euphoric, drunk on emotions.

Thead to the bathroom, and when I undress, my **eyes** can't help but glance at themselves in the mirror.

There are marks scattered across my body.

Small bruises on my hips, pink marks along the arch of my breasts, and a bite **mark** that's almost faded on my neck..

Apparently, Cassian's healing saliva is finally working on me.

I look more closely at the bite, running my fingers over the purple bruise and the two punctures that are already starting to close.

A shiver runs down my spine when the brush of my fingers awakens memories from last night—the caresses, the kisses, the touch of our naked bodies, the stares too intense to breathe properly, the sweat covering us, the painful pleasure...

"You didn't like it," I tell myself in the mirror. "It won't happen again. You won't think about it."

"What is it you didn't like?"

I turn around, startled, trying to cover my nakedness with my arms in vain.

The small figure **of** Ank bounces on a little cabinet in the bathroom where a candlestick rests.

The tiny salamander sits on the marble, swinging her legs like a little girl waiting for my answer.

I walk to the bathtub filled with water and quickly submerge myself.

"Nothing you need to know," I answer

"Oh, come on—do you really think I don't know?"

My eyes widen as I stare at her.

She **didn't**...

"I didn't watch, if that's what you're wondering," she adds. "But any supernatural creature would recognize his scent on you—and not in superficial way. It's inside you."

I groan and cover my face with my hands to hide the blush on my cheeks.

I don't want to hear that his scent is **inside** me—it sounds so... Lascivious. When I uncover my eyes again, it seems like the colors around me are more vivid.

In books, I'd read that women felt different after lying with a man.

I thought it was an exaggeration, a fantasy, but the truth is, I think the world has exploded in color around me.

"307

"Aren't you going to tell me the details?"

Ank props a hand under her chin, and I swear I can see her lashes fluttering dreamily.

"I think technically, you've known Cassian since he was very young—don't you think it's strange to ask about something involving him **and a bed?**"

"I'm nosy. Nothing stops me."

Her features twist into an almost devilish expression.

This salamander is thirsty for information—**or** mo

"Did you like it?"

more accurately, for gossip.

"Oh God..." I sink into the water until it covers my cheeks.

"I'd dare say she liked it a lot," says another voice behind me.

I turn and find Evanora leaning against the arch separating my bedroom from the bathing area.

Her arms are crossed over her chest, and a smug smile is plastered on her lips.

"Can't a girl have any privacy?" I protest.

The banshee laughs and walks over to the bathtub, pinching my cheek.

"If you cared so much about privacy, maybe you should've been a little quieter last night.

I have a mental image far too detailed of everything you probably did."

"God, just kill me already..." I mutter.

For two who supposedly don't get along, Ank and Evanora seem to be teaming up to kill me with embarrassment.

They laugh in unison, and the banshee splashes water in my direction to make me look at them.

I puff my cheeks like a little girl and frown at them.

"It's natural. You don't have to be ashamed," she says now without any hint of mockery.

were just teasing in case **you** dropped us a crumb of info."
She bats her lashes.

"So, is it true"

"What is?"

10:14 Wed, 6 Aug.

I begin wiping my skin with a cloth—even though it doesn't look dirty, it's covered in dried sweat.

"The rumors about the vampire's thills in bed," Ank teplies as if it's the ntost obvinius thing in the world,

I bite the inside of my cheek, and memories flood back his hands gripping me tightly as his body slid over mine, the tide of emotions on his

face, the hiss between his teeth with every thrust, the moans that left my throat with his name burned into them

My cheeks begin to heat again.

I was...

"Fine"

"Just fine?" Ankadds.

"What do you want me to say?" I grumble. "I have nothing to compare it to."

"The girl came through the front door," the banshee says, standing behind me and helping wash my hair.

"It's not like he or his friend are my favorites, but I'll admit—his kind is good in bed,"

"Evanoral" I exclaim.

"What? It's the truth..."

"And you know that because...?"

"Because I've lived long enough to have tried most races." She winks at me.

"Aren't you supposed to **hate** vampires?"

"That wasn't always the case"

She adds nothing more as her fingers detangle my hair and massage my scalp

I let out a small whimper of pleasure as her hands work their magic.

Ank watches us in silence, swinging her tiny legs.

Evanora rinses my hair when she finishes lathering it.

"Well, I'll leave you to enjoy your bath in peace."

She pulls a small vial from her sleeve.

"actually came to give you the last dose."

"The last?"

"After this, **you** should be completely healed, Once I confirm it, I'll leave here with my pockets full.

Naja will be very pleased."

"You could at least pretend you're sad to leave," I grumble.

She shrugs, and even though I don't know her well, something tells me **she** is a little sad to go.

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Of course, she'll never admit it.

Ever.

She waves goodbye and disappears from the bathroom.

I remain in silence for a while after hearing the door to my chambers close.

I stretch one leg and rest it on the **edge** of the tubs, rubbing fruity-scented oils into my skin.

"So... are you going to ask me what you want to know already?" Ank says.

lock up:

and bite my lower lip

It's true there are many things I want to ask, and I knew there was no one better to answer them than her...

or at least, that's what I thought until yesterday.

I think Cassian could've answered too—I just prefer not to talk about this with him.

“Do vampires have souls?”

I've always called them soulless—but is **that** really true?

“They do have souls.” She nods. “They hope to reunite with the Mother someday—where **souls** go to rest.

“And what about the Ancient Gods? I mean, I don't get it.

God isn't real, but Lilith ist isn't that contradictory?”

“We never said He wasn't real—only that He isn't the only god, as everyone believes

Before Him were the Ancient Gods, and without them, that charlatan never would've existed.”

“So vampires don't come from the Ancient Gods?”

“Not directly”

Now Ank lies stretched out on the cabinet, legs crossed, propped on her elbows.

“They come from something much more corrupted—like other creatures.

Fairies, for example—some came from the Ancient Gods, others from demonic corruption.”

“And who are these Ancient Gods?”

“You're thirsty for knowledge, little one,” she laughs.

“The exact number of Ancient Gods is unknown—there were many, and many of their names have been forgotten.

Gaxar was the goddess of earth, animals, nature, and life itself.

Arion was the god of night, shadows, air, and death.

Kloto was the god of water.

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Gora, the goddess of fire and wat

There are many more some have been renamed because their
ise their original names were
re lost to time. That's the case with the middle god

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is Gora the goddess you serve?"

"I revere them all. My prayers always go to them. But my origin comes from
Gors."

"Will you reunite with them once you die?"

"When the day comes, if my soul is worthy, I'll pass into the Far Lands and
meet them there,

"And if your soul isn't worthy?"

"Then I'll go to what humans call Isell."

"What will happen to Evanora?"

I haven't forgotten the conversation we had in the library—and her admission
that she gave up her soul to become some kind of half **dark**
witch

"She won't go to either place. It'll be **as** if she never existed.
The void will consume her."

A chill runs through me and I'm sure it's not because the **water's** cold.
Evanora chose that fate to become **a** half-witch. But why?
Why give up something so important for that?

*Is it the same for humans!"

Anklets out a little laugh—almost diabolical.

"yes, it's the same," she admits.

"Imagine their surprise when their souls arrive and there's no single god—when
all their beliefs crumble"

"How do you know all this?"

"The ones beyond told me."

gasp, and she sighs.

"I think that's enough for today. I'll leave you to finish your bath in peace."

She starts hopping toward the candle flame.

“Oh, and by the way he has a soul

I’ve kept **that** heart warm, waiting for you, Elara.”

“For me?”

“I knew someone like **you** would come one day

And she vanishes, becoming one with the flame

I stay a while longer in the water, staring at the fire in case Ank decides to reappear and play a prank to scare me to death.

When I realize that won’t happen, I climb out of the now lukewarm bath.

I wrap myself in a silk robe and walk to my chambers, leaving small drops of water in my wake.

The curtains are drawn, keeping daylight from spilling directly inside, so the warm glow of a candle beside the vanity is what lights up my features.

I sit and look at everything spread out in front of me.

I grab the brush and decide to start with what feels familiar.

I run it gently through my hair, **undoing** small knots and letting it fall like a cascade over my shoulder.

I close my eyes for a few seconds, enjoying such a mundane act

The slight scent of night—blooming jasmine and damp earth snakes under my nose—and before I can open my eyes, I feel warm lips kissing my shoulder.

“You didn’t think a simple bath could wash my scent off you, did you?”

he **says** against my skin.

I grip the brush tighter, open my eyes slowly, and look at our reflection in the mirror.

His eyes are looking at the same thing as mine and they shine brighter than ever.

His chin rests on my shoulder, and a wicked smile is etched on his

smile is

on his Gps

He slowly lowers one hand along the curve of my neck and continues, shifting the delicate fabric of my robe to leave my shoulder bare.

“You want the whole castle to smell

YOU

“What image?” he asks, amused.

“No humans—that image.”

ell me on you? Doesn't that go **against your** image?”

“Oh, that “I hear him inhale sharply.

“I guess it's a little late to think about that now, don't you think?

Now it's no humans... except the beast who haunts my castle.

Maybe I shouldn't push certain buttons—but my mouth, the one that never knows when to shut up, acts on its own.

“Are you, Lord Draven, speaking of exclusivity?”

I cast a challenging glance toward our reflection.

He arches a brow and curves his lips in an arrogant smile.

He **pulls** away slightly, and I feel it like the loss of a limb—of something vital.

“Do you think you alone could **satisfy** me?” he challenges.

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It's not just my thirst that's insatiable.

All of me is. Every dainned part.”

It my chin and hold his gaze through the mirror.

i don't think it,” say

“I know it.”

His laugh is low, but deep enough to make my insides twist with desire and my toes curl.

I wring my hands on my lap, abandoning the brush and the task I had been doing

Some damp strands cling to my

my cheeks—tignore

e them and tum on the stool of my vanity to face the vampire.

He straightens up, which places my face at the level of his abdomen, and I have to lean back, pressing against the wood of the furniture to look up at his face.

“We'll see about that, Elara.”

He lowers his hand to my face and runs his thumb over my bottom lip, freeing it from my teeth.

He presses just enough for my lips to part and make room for his finger to invade my mouth.

There's something incredibly powerful about how it's the smallest gestures involving **me** that darken his gaze like this
Not even when I've seen him furious have his eyes looked like they do now.

My tongue hesitantly grazes his thumb at first, and soon after, I swirl it and give a small suck.

A hoarse moan rumbles in his throat, and I know we're both having the same sinful thoughts

He pulls his finger from my mouth before I can keep torturing him with unspoken promises.

My eyes open in surprise when I see the shape of his hardness in his pants.

"Oh, God..."

The words come out almost like a whimper, and I wonder when my soul became so stained by sin.

I don't recognize myself.

"If what you **want** is to pray, I have a good reason for you to get on your knees."

He grabs the back of my neck and forces my body to lean even more against the vanity.

"But not now—you need to get ready. We have to attend a masquerade ball, and the journey is long"

His words are purely informative; he doesn't expect me to say anything about it.

He captures my lips between his and kisses them like he'll never get enough of me.

I moan against his mouth.

The **heat** that swirls in my stomach every time his hands or mouth touch me is too much.

I hear the clatter of jars and objects on the vanity as his body presses harder against mine.

That's not enough for him—he lifts me from the stool and sits me on the vanity, placing his hips between my legs.

My tongue licks his, and the kiss grows more violent

He slides his hand up my calf, pushing my robe aside until it's practically useless.

At this point, it's not doing much to hide my nakedness.

Some strands of my hair fall over my chest, hiding my nipples, and the robe hangs loosely over my hips.

"Elara... Elara... You're going to be my niin."

"Cassian..."

He scatters kisses along the column of thy throat,

It's hard to stay composed when my hands and lips only want to pull him closer and closer.

Cassian is poison—he's killing me, and yet I can't get enough.

A sudden coldness **covers** my neck, and when I manage to keep my eyes open long enough, I glance down at him.

The ruby necklace rests against my throat, the jewels dangling over my chest.