

Sold to the Night Lord

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The banshee doesn't stop screaming—not even as she walks backward down the hallway and jumps through one of the corridor's glass windows. It takes me longer than I'd like to run after her, but all that's left are shards of broken glass on the floor—nothing more. I turn toward Drystan, completely enraged. He remains on his knees, blood dripping from his ears. As I pass him, I offer my hand, knowing full well I'm a bastard who doesn't deserve his friendship.

“Drystan.”

He snorts, slaps my hand away, and gets up on his own. He shoots me a look that could freeze hell—but not me.

“You’ve ruined everything,” he mutters. “I’m not staying to watch you build walls and wallow in your misery.”

“Oh, no? And where will you go, Drystan?”

“After her,” he replies, pointing at the shattered window. “She knows things, Cassian. I don’t understand how you haven’t realized it.”

“Don’t hide your real intentions.”

“Oh, don’t worry—I’m not.” He faces me, his face just a few inches below mine. “I’m going after her because I want answers and because I want her for myself. Unlike you, I know what I want.”

“Then go ahead,” I snap.

I see him hesitate, casting a nervous glance between the window and me. In the end, the war raging inside him is won by something greater than his loyalty to me. He disappears through the window, leaving me alone in a hallway where I swear I can still hear the echo of the

banshee’s scream, in a castle that’s beginning to grow cold.

I go to my room, where I release some of my fury. I scatter the papers on my desk, knock over the ink jar, and crack the solid wood of the desk with my hands. In the candle resting in the wall sconce appears a figure I know well—she’s been a loyal companion for some time.

“You’re an idiot!” Ank spits, forming two tiny fists with her hands, the fire of her hair flaring bright red. “You’ve let go of the only good thing

left in this castle!”

“Leave, Ank.”

“I promised your mother I’d watch over you, that I wouldn’t lose faith and wouldn’t let you be consumed by the darkness, with eating you piece by piece—but I’m starting to think you don’t care about being devoured!”

“I don’t need you lecturing me!” I shout louder.

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“You’re not even capable of realizing you’re suffering!” She stomps, sending tiny sparks of fire flying from the candle. “You’re like this

because of her, but your stubbornness won’t let you see it!”

A heavy silence stretches between us. I take my time returning my breath to a natural rhythm—it takes more effort than I’d like. When I finally manage, I approach the sconce where Ank rests, so close that my shirt is at risk of catching fire.

“Where is she, Ank? I know you can find her.”

“Not if there’s no fire nearby.”

“Have you seen her?”

She shakes her head, the flames of her hair returning to an orange hue.

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“Wherever she is, there’s no fire, no warmth,” she sighs. “Poor girl, she must be scared, lost... all because of you. You shouldn’t have underestimated her—Elara was beginning to fit in here. This could’ve been her place. Now she won’t return, and I fear that may have been your last chance for redemption.”

She keeps shaking her head, stepping back until she merges again with the candle’s flame and disappears. I reflect on her words for a long time, and then my mind races, trying to

figure out where she could have fled. A dangerous thought strikes me. *Ciro*. Could it be that she sought his protection? The mere thought makes my blood roar.

Alone, with no one who can stop me now, I leave the castle and set out toward his estate. With my speed, it won't take long to get there. I imagine all the things I'll do to him, the forms of torture I could use for planting seeds in the mind of my feeder. Does Elara really think he and I are different? Once he has her in his hands, he'll reveal his true face—just as monstrous as mine. The difference is that I've never hidden. mine; I've always shown my ugly, sharp sides, ready to hurt anyone naïve enough to come close.

I'm halfway there when a damp, cavernous smell flutters in the air. The rage I feel now is no good companion—it clouds my reason—so it's no surprise that I turn on my heels and redirect my attention toward the concentrated scent of the shifters. I dive into the forest, dodging branches, trees, and roots at full speed. The smell lingers in the air, and beneath the strong stench, there's another, softer one—fruity and wild. *My* heart skips a beat in my chest when I recognize it, and if I was anxious to find the shifters before, now I'm on the edge of madness.

I can feel how close I am—the scent is strong—so in complete silence, I climb to the top of a tree whose foliage is thick enough to hide me. The shifter I've identified as their leader is talking to Elara, who keeps backing away toward the edge of a cliff. If I can hear the sound of her fearful heart, so can they.

A breeze rises that won't hesitate to give away my position—it's time to attack. I move my hand with a quick gesture and, fueled by fury, my powers turn all the shifters into piles of flesh and blood on the ground. As expected, the leader remains standing. I descend, push my way through the massacre, and give a quick glance over Elara's body, searching for any wound.

I feel a strange relief upon confirming she's in one piece, and my enemy uses that second of distraction to try to catch my arm in his jaws. I'm fast and manage to alter his trajectory with a punch to the jaw. The shifter ends up on the ground—though not for long. We engage in a relentless fight, landing punches and twisting each other's joints at painful angles. I take my eyes off him for just a moment to make sure Elara is still there, and a deep sting of pain pierces my chest. I'm barely aware of what's really happening—only the grooves of his claws across my torso and I start bleeding uncontrollably.

“Who do you work for? Who are you loyal to?” I growl, thirsty for blood.

The blood runs down my chest, mixing with the blood soaking the ground.

“You have many enemies, Draven,” the shifter pants.

My opponent is exhausted—his flickering appearance betrays him, occasionally revealing the man behind the beast. I look at him with a fury nearly impossible to contain, and he must know just as well as I do that this will end with his death, one way or another.

“We’ll meet again, Elara Voss.”

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He contains his animal form just long enough to bow his head toward her and vanish into the forest. I watch him go—it seems easier than lacing what I’ve lost. I grit my teeth before turning to face Elara. I wish I could say I’m not surprised by what I see, but I am. Her hatred used to please me, now, I think I don’t like it very much. Still, my pride dominates.

“Elara,” I say, stepping toward her. “Come.”

A offer her my hand. I see the blood on my skin and easily recall hers staining my hands when the shifters tore her throat. My eyes wander for only a moment to the scars now lining her neck.

She refuses to answer me—her silence hits me.

“Running from me goes against the Treaties. Someone will have to suffer the consequences.” My voice sounds barely restrained. “Notto mention it’s useless. I’ll always find you.”

Her body tenses, and she throws me a defiant look.

“Your threats won’t work on me. I’d rather die than be under your roof again.”

I raise an eyebrow in her direction. For a moment, I allow myself to forget the seriousness of the situation, that this isn’t just another of our usual disputes where the goal is to push each other’s buttons.

“You didn’t seem to hate it so much when I was fucking you in my bed.”

A shiver runs through her body; however, the flames in her gaze speak not of cold, but of fury.

“And you didn’t seem at all upset about getting involved with a human, remember? We’re that emotional shit you despise so much.”

I lick my bottom lip.

“Is this jealousy, Elara?”

“This is pride, Cassian.” Her beautiful gray eyes pierce into mine. “Self-respect—the only kind I feel. I’m tired of living as what you all expect me to be, a submissive human who’s going to let herself be crushed by your words. No more. I’d rather be dead, because a life with you is the same as being dead.”

Her words hit me deeper than I want to show. I can’t help the memory of my father—who chose death rather than live without my mother, who didn’t fight for me—from rising up. Maybe it’s selfish, but I always wished my father had stayed by my side even after that. I wanted

someone to guide me, someone who wouldn’t leave me in the hands of the scavengers who waited their turn to steal a piece of me. In the end, I sank into that pit. They didn’t finish me because I soon learned to bend demons to my will. Only, mine are stronger than I thought.

Blind rage shakes me, and though it’s not for her, I throw it in her face with my words.

“Fine,” I say. “Better dead than a fucking burden.”

Something like determination crosses her features. She looks over her shoulder, and before I can catch her, she disappears over the cliff’s edge. I run to the spot she occupied, lean over, and watch in horror as she plummets into the void. I don’t hesitate—I follow and crash into the cold water. Nearby, Elara fights against the force of the waves with her arms and legs—in vain. I swim toward her, wrap my arms around her, and carry us to the surface. Her mouth opens, gasping for air.

“Better dead, remember?” she says between gulps of air.

I look at her, irritated by her words—though I know I deserve them. At that moment, a huge wave crashes down on us and drags us back underwater. Something slams hard to my back, forcing me to let go of Elara. I try to reach her—I see blood dancing around me, and it

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instantly puts me on alert and tense. I search for her in the ocean’s dark waters, but she’s no longer there. I surface again and again, trying to spot something floating above, a head searching for air.

“Elara!”

I dive, searching for any sign of her in the sea. My search grows increasingly difficult with the waves and the darkness that signals nightfall’s

arrival.

Giving up is not something I do.

“She is not here, predestined one.”

The words are whispered in my ear through the water. I try to find their owner, quite sure it’s a mermaid. She’s not here—surely spoke from hundreds of kilometers away, unable to face my wrath.

With this new information, I swim to the nearest shore, defeated and exhausted. It’s not until past midnight that I head back to the castle- my desire for violence against Ciro has been forgotten. She wasn’t with him—she was in the forest, and now, who knows where. All I know is

that I’ll find her. I’m sure her whereabouts will reach me—many people know about her. The rumors have spread like weeds, and no one will hesitate to use her against me. I’m going after her with everything I’ve got.

When I enter the castle, the air is so cold it cuts the skin, and the silence so bitter I can taste it in my mouth. The climb up the stairs echoes everywhere, emphasizing her absence even more. How could one single person make this place feel alive? Not even the feeders dare to

wander—not now that the object of their curiosity is gone. I’ve barely entered my chambers and sat before the destroyed desk when there’s a

knock at my door. I don’t feel like speaking to anyone, but if they’ve come this far, it must be important. It better be if they don’t want to join the wreckage of this room.

“Come in.”

“Sir.”

One of the Diluted under my command, covered head to toe in armor, enters the office. He bows his head respectfully and straightens his

back as he looks at me.

“We went to search the Voss residence as you ordered...”

I raise my hand to stop him.

“I know what you’re going to say—know she’s not there.”

Now she’s lost somewhere, far from me, I think.

“Sir.”

“You may go.” I wave him off.

“Sir, what I came to report is that no one is there,”

“I already know that,” I reply.

“I mean, no member of the family is there. The neighbors say they’ve been missing for days.”

I raise my head abruptly, suddenly interested in what he’s saying.

“Are you sure?”

“Completely.”

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I place my hands in front of me.

“Very well. You may leave.”

He obeys and leaves me alone amidst the chaos I’ve caused in my room. I sink into my thoughts, aware that a disaster is brewing that I don’t know if I’ll be able to control. The disappearance of an entire family is no coincidence. I try to tear through the impenetrable walls of Elara’s mind, but every attempt leaves me exhausted. That can only mean she’s too far for me to use my power effectively....

“Come on, Elara...” I growl, gritting my teeth.

Her mind seems to open a little, as if she’s letting me taste it. As soon as I feel the small gap, it slams shut, hitting me in the face. Ank reappears in the same scone as before, sits on the candle, and looks at me with reproach.

“Now you’re going to know true agony, Cassian.”

I don’t think she’s wrong.

Comment

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Elara

I don't know how much time has passed when I regain consciousness.

"It was about time," says a soft voice.

It takes me quite a while to focus my sight. When I do, what I see leaves me completely stunned. A woman with pink hair and the palest skin I've ever seen is lying on the sand of what looks like a beach, near the water. She looks at me over her shoulder with emerald-colored eyes.

It's not just her beauty that leaves me speechless—a quick glance downward and I see she doesn't have legs but a tail made of scales that go from different shades of purple to pink.

"Are you... are you...?"

"A mermaid, yes," she replies as if she's more than fed up with the question. "All humans react the same way, it's a bit annoying. I don't go around going speechless just from seeing toes."

"Sorry." I try to sit up, brushing the sand with my fingers. "All this supernatural creature stuff is kind of new to me."

My words manage to soften her serious expression a bit, and a small mischievous smile draws itself on her lips. I observe her more closely, noticing her breasts are covered with seaweed, shells, and other oceanic objects. Her hands are also covered in some scales, and her fingers are long and end in dangerously sharp nails.

"Did you...?"

"Save you? Yes, I'd say so."

"Thank you," I say, my throat sore from the salt.

"Don't thank me." She waves her hand. "Now you're in debt to me. You owe me a favor."

"A favor?" I raise an eyebrow. "What could I possibly do for you? I'm just a human."

She shrugs while combing her hair with her fingers.

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"You don't have to do it now. I don't need anything." She looks at me, narrowing her eyes. "But someday, when I need something, I hope you remember I saved you from the fury of the sea and took you away from your captor."

“I still don’t understand what I could do for you.”

“You don’t have to understand it,” she smiles, “you just have to owe me a favor. I love favors.”

Her beauty, just like everything I’ve encountered in recent months, is deceiving. On the outside, she looks like a beautiful and almost adorable young woman, but I know that inside there’s a creature capable of killing me. She reminds me of that with that smile that, despite trying to be kind, is the smile of a predator who knows she’s got me cornered.

“Where are we?” I ask in an attempt to ignore the fear she causes me.

“On the other side, past the Twisted Forest.” When she sees I show no sign of recognition, she adds: “In the Southern Territories.”

It takes me a bit longer than I’d like to put the loose pieces together in my mind. I open my eyes wide in a mix of shock and panic. It’s

impossible to hide the slight trembling of my hands. I’m very far from home, from everything I consider familiar. The fist that holds my heart

tightens until it hurts—I can taste panic in my mouth.

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“Well, girl, I have to go.” The mermaid flicks her tail. “You know, sailors lead to death.”

She doesn’t seem to be joking.

Her tail, which was partially in the water, disappears completely as she moves into the sea. She never turns her back on me, as if I could ever

be a threat to her.

“I don’t know your name,” I say, raising my voice.

“That’s because I haven’t told you.” Her body has almost completely disappeared, only her head remains above the water. “My name is Galene.”

“My name is Elara.”

A sharp little laugh escapes her.

“I know, Elara Voss. The sea told me your name.”

Before I can ask what the hell that means, she disappears completely, leaving only a gentle splash in the water as she leaves.

It takes me a few minutes to process everything. I’m alone in a place I don’t know, and that could make me seem like a traitor. No one comes to the other side of the Twisted Forest—not only because it’s certain death at the hands of the kraugs, but because here there are only rebellious Diluted. Very few are stupid enough to lose the favor of the Pure. They’re brutal, possibly invincible—no one wants an enemy like

that.

The beach is empty, there doesn’t seem to be any trace of a living being, and that’s confirmed as I walk farther and farther along the vast shore. It’s the dead of night and I decide to take the risk of walking away, since here the sea breeze is not very friendly with my ragged and ruined dress. I place my hands on a rock formation and carefully pass through it, slowly entering what seems like a jungle.

A chill runs all the way down my spine at the thought of what kind of animals—or worse, creatures—might be lurking in the vegetation.

I hold my breath when I hear something crack. I walk fast, more and more trapped among the vegetation. Another crack, and another—closer. My heart pounds like a drum in my chest. I look around searching for anything that could serve as a hiding place, missing the letter opener I left behind in the ocean. Just when I decide my best option is to climb one of the trees, a pair of large, strong arms wrap around my

neck.

I struggle, I thrash, I try to dig my nails into any place that might give me slight relief—the chance to escape. It’s useless. It doesn’t take much intelligence to know that whoever’s behind me is a strong man. I kick backward with my leg and manage to hit his calf. He lets out a growl, and his arms tighten even more. My vision blurs, darkens at the edges as white dots dance before me. I try to take in air—useless.

I collapse and feel my attacker put something over my head that turns everything black. He throws me over his shoulder, and my body sways from side to side with the movement of his steps. I want to hit him, complain, say something—but I’m dancing with unconsciousness, fighting not to fall again.

I don’t know how long it takes until they drop my body like a simple sack. I hear the sound of boots and then the light comes back in front of me. The brightness provided by the fire is too strong—I have to blink several times to adjust. When I do, once again, I’m left breathless. This

can't all be happening to me.

"Eleazar?"

He crouches to my level on the ground, his golden hair brushing his shoulders. His hands hang between his knees, full of scars that make him look even more terrifying than his size already does.

"Elara." His fingers stroke my cheek, and by the look in his eyes I'm almost sure he didn't know it was me hiding under that hood. "What are you doing here, little creature?"

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There's a hint of compassion in his voice.

"I don't know." I shrug. "Running away, I guess."

"From Cassian?" I nod. "I'm sorry my soldier hurt you."

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His hand lowers to my neck, which must be red—though that's the least of it. His golden eyes darken when he sees the claw marks on my skin. He sighs and straightens up again in front of me..

"I think we should talk somewhere better than this."

He offers me a hand, and I hesitate a little before sliding my palm into his. I feel the calluses from effort and the roughness of old scars as his hand wraps around mine, making me feel painfully small in comparison.

I look around and realize we're in a place most likely meant for prisoner interrogation. There's a chair in the middle of the room and what look like torture instruments. He pulls my hand, inviting me to walk with him.

"Eleazar?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not going to be your prisoner," I say with a confidence I didn't know I had. "I'm not here to trade one cage for another."

"I'm pretty sure you're not here by choice." He leans over to my ear. "Not when you know I'd be delighted to break something Cassian wants."

I pull my hand to free myself, but he holds it tighter.

“Relax, Elara. I won’t hurt you. You’re not my prisoner—you’re my guest.”

“Sorry if I don’t trust you.”

“You’re right not to.” He smiles, revealing his fangs. “Now, follow me. I think you need to change clothes. Then, when you’re no longer a distraction to the eyes, we’ll talk.”

I glance at my dress, torn more than halfway up my skirt. My bare thigh is exposed, and some marks that shouldn’t be visible are fully in the light. I blush and let him lead me wherever he wants. It’s not like I have any chance against him.

I thought I was going to find freedom-

I see now that I wasn’t.

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 94

Elara

I decide that keeping my eyes fixed on Eleazar’s back is better than looking at the rest of the individuals who stare at me as if I were a circus show. Even so, I notice the gazes and the slight nods toward Eleazar. They ooze respect through their pores, and I wonder if it goes beyond fear of retaliation. I’m curious to know what made Eleazar—and not someone else—their leader. Among the faces of the people, I spot vampires and, as I already expected, humans. From what I see, we’re in some kind of camp—a very large one, in fact.

There are tents spread out beyond what my sight can reach. The meat cooking over the fire makes my stomach growl; with all the trouble of escaping, I hadn’t had time to eat. I hope Eleazar didn’t hear the sound of my stomach among the murmurs that fill the air. I’m already feeling enough shame walking around here in a torn dress that barely hides my body.

We arrive at a tent made of skins, and I don’t need to see much to know it’s his. There are fur rugs on the floor and dozens of candles that light and warm the place. I catch sight of several maps spread out over a table, but I look away before Eleazar thinks I might be a spy. My eyes fall on a bed big enough for two people, even three, and seeing the rumpled sheets makes my cheeks burn. I turn around, avoiding looking back at it, and find Eleazar leaning against a large chest with a neatly folded dress beside him.

“I hope it’s your size.” He throws it to me without caring whether I can catch it or not. “As you can understand, until I really know your intentions, I won’t leave you alone.”

“Don’t I deserve some privacy?” I reply.

“Being a vampire doesn’t mean I’m not a gentleman, but I’m not an idiot either.” He raises an eyebrow. “You’ve escaped from Cassian—that says a lot about your skills.”

“Do you watch all your guests while they undress?”

“Only the ones invited to my bed, of course.”

I press the dress against my chest, as if it could serve as a barrier between us in case he decides to stop ‘being a gentleman’—though a real gentleman wouldn’t make that kind of comment in front of a lady. The color of my cheeks must be cherry red, and that amusement shows on his face. As if it took great effort, he turns around, giving me the view of his broad back.

“I give you my word I won’t look,” he says in a deep voice. “But if you try anything, I assure you I’ll respond with violence.”

I stare at him long enough to make sure he’s going to keep his word. With an exaggerated sigh, I turn around and begin to remove what’s left of my dress. The small slip I wear underneath is stained with dirt, so I get rid of it too and stand completely naked. I hurry to dress myself, surprised to find a delicate piece of cotton underwear. I slip my legs into it and then pull the dress over my head. It smells like a woman—I’m sure it belongs to one of his lovers. I try to fasten the row of buttons on my back, but there are too many, and I can’t reach the ones at the top.

I clear my throat.

“I need help.”

I glance over my shoulder and see Eleazar turn around and let his eyes wander down my bare back to the curve of my buttocks, which are hidden by the skirt of the dress. I clench my jaw—I refuse to feel shame. He brushes my back just for a moment, more than enough for the cold of his fingers to send a shiver down my spine. Little by little, the bodice of the dress adjusts to my body, and I exhale when his scent of tart apple and something that reminds me of summer fades away.

I face him, trying not to show how shaken I am. A woman, apparently human, enters with a tray in her hands.

“Leave it on the table, thank you.”

The woman nods and walks toward small round table that’s free of maps and wrinkled scrolls. I watch her movements and see that what

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covers her features is not fear but deep respect toward the man she is serving. Eleazar smiles at her and gives a small nod before she disappears outside the tent again.

“Have a seat, Elara, let’s talk.”

I’m a little reluctant to obey immediately. I look suspiciously at the table and its chairs as if they might bite me. Eleazar gives me a roguish smile, showing his teeth. He shakes his head as if I amuse him, and finally I sit, determined not to be the object of his laughter. On the tray are several slices of bread, cheese, grapes, and other fruits.

“Wine?”

Normally I’d refuse, but seeing there’s no pitcher of water nearby, I nod and bring my glass closer. The first sip explodes with a fruity flavor on my tongue, and my face must reflect my impression because Eleazar smiles with satisfaction.

“So... you say you’re running from Cassian. Should I be worried about possible retaliation against me?”

I set the glass aside and look at him. Now I’m the one raising an eyebrow and smiling sarcastically.

“You know there’s very little you can do to avoid his retaliation. He’ll seize the slightest opportunity.”

“If I’m exposing myself to that, I’d like to know why you ran away.”

“Is it that strange?” I reply. “Anyone in my place would be eager to escape at the slightest chance.”

“Very few dare. There are always things to lose.” He leans back in his seat, resting his hands on the armrests—it’s the posture of a king. “You have family. Why would you risk that, Elara?”

I avoid his questioning gaze.

“Unless you’re very sure he won’t go after them, and that brings me to my next question: why would Cassian show such consideration?”

I shrug.

“I don’t know. I just have that intuition.”

"I consider you smarter than someone who lets herself be guided by intuition." His golden eyes roam my face, trying to read me. "Alright, I can only assume Cassian doesn't just want you as a physical possession—he wants your feelings. Is that it?"

"He's never going to have that," I answer sharply.

"I'm not asking if he can have them."

"You're wrong anyway—he doesn't want my feelings. I'm just a human to him."

"Just a human, huh?" He curves his lips in a crooked smile. "A very slippery one, I see, dodging all my questions." He sighs, pushing some food toward me. "Fine, here's what we'll do. I'll let you stay here as long as you need, but you'll always be watched—either by me or one of my trusted men."

"Are you sure?"

He leans forward again, bringing his face dangerously close to mine. I can see myself reflected in the liquid gold of his eyes, and I lose myself in the reflection long enough not to notice his mouth approaching my ear.

"If you try anything, I'll show you forms of torture your mind couldn't even begin to conjure." His breath tickles my ear. "Don't make me be cruel."

"You're the one choosing cruelty." I retort.

I pull back, pressing my back against the chair as much as I can.

"Only if you endanger the fruits of my labor and the people who trust me."

"You're already putting them in danger by letting me stay, remember?"

"Do you want me to change my mind?" I stay silent. "You have no alternative, and I trust that you're sensible—maybe you'll make the right choice for once."

"What do you mean?"

"I wouldn't be putting my people at risk in vain if you were one of mine."

A laugh escapes me—not amused, more like hysterical.

"You're trying to manipulate me into trading one cage for another."

"No one here is caged. Everyone is free to leave whenever they want. I give them what they don't have with the Pure: freedom and trust. You'll see it for yourself."

“I don’t think I’ll be staying that long.”

“Maybe you’ll end up liking this place or its people,” he reasons.

“You’re not doing a great job of making that happen.”

He stands from his chair, planting his palms on the table and looming over me. I hold my breath as his size seems to swallow me.

“I’m not trying to make you like me, Elara. Believe me—when I try, you won’t want to leave this place. Leaving me will feel painful.”

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 95

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I clench my teeth hard. I don’t overlook his word choice. “When,” not “if” It sounds like a promise. At last, he steps away from me enough for my muscles to relax a little. He doesn’t return to his seat, but walks toward the tent entrance—not without giving me one last look that clearly expresses the promise of consequences if I dare to do anything that puts his people in danger.

“I suggest you rest—you look tired.” He pulls back the tent flap, letting in the cold night air. “You can use my bed.”

“I’m not going to sleep in your bed,” I say quickly.

“Relax, I won’t join you.” He winks at me. “I’d suggest you choose your battles wisely. Anyway, if that’s what you want, the floor might be comfortable. The insects deserve to appreciate pretty things once in a while too.”

Without adding anything else, he leaves and lets me alone in the tent. For a few moments I wait for his return, but after a good while it’s clear he has no intention of coming back—at least not soon. I take a few grapes and savor them as they burst on my tongue. I’m hungrier than I thought.

When I finish satisfying my hunger, I step away from the table, trying to make as little noise as possible. I’m even careful not to let my skirts drag on the floor. Holding my breath—almost expecting someone to scold me like a child touching something they shouldn’t—I approach the table where, without a doubt, strategic decisions are made.

When I look at it, it’s really like I see nothing. I haven’t been trained to understand wars and strategies. Spread over the table is a map of Drystia, with small pieces scattered here

and there. I spot the camp where we are and see that around it there are several pieces surrounding it. I glance over my shoulder several times, expecting to be reprimanded. If they caught me, I think they wouldn't hesitate to label me a spy- although Eleazar is well aware of the things he's leaving in plain sight by allowing me to stay here, so possibly this map doesn't reveal anything truly important to them.

I look at the bed and let out a small gasp of surprise when I see clean sheets perfectly arranged. A blanket, thick and heavy-looking, possibly polar bear fur, rests on top. I brush my fingers over the softness of the material as I wonder when the messy bed from before turned into this.

I sit down carefully. I promise myself I'll just rest for a moment. I rest my cheek against the blanket to feel its magnificent texture against my face. I keep my gaze fixed on the entrance of the tent, refusing to close my eyes in case those few seconds are used by someone else to harm me. I try again and again to fight the heaviness that gradually closes my eyelids. Everything around me turns blurry, and little by little, the edges of my vision darken until there's nothing left.

Even in my dreams, I'm not at peace.

"Is everyone good or bad? Is there only black and white? What about shades? What about, gray?"

Don't go, don't drift away.

You will break.

It cannot be contained.

You are in danger.

Sing to death.

Sing to life."

The words don't let me have a calm dream. They come whispered by a woman whose vocal cords seem to be plucked like guitar strings.

Little by little, the words stop coming in waves and are replaced by the caress of fingers in my mind. Between the world of dreams and looming consciousness, I am not strong enough to repel Cassian's attempts to break into my head.

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"Come back," he whispers into my thoughts. "Without you, there will be no mercy, Elara."

As if I cared about him being merciful, as if he hadn't dug his claws into me, and I hadn't allowed myself the stupidity of caressing his most monstrous parts.

I don't know if it's my mind conjuring nonsense or if what I'm seeing is real. Cassian is sitting in front of his desk, and around him, chaos takes shape. The curtains are torn, papers scattered, black ink spilled across the rugs. There are shattered furniture pieces and glass fragments sprinkled everywhere. I focus on looking at him, at his hand holding a silver goblet that dangles precariously, staining the floor with blood. His appearance is disheveled, his black hair messy and his shirt wrinkled—very unlike him. He's slouched in his seat, head down, eyes lost staring at who knows what.

As if he can sense me in the room, he lifts his face. It's a dream. It's impossible for him to see me. The blue of his eyes is dull, almost gray, like mine

I hold my breath, surprised.

"I was wrong about you."

I raise my eyebrows upon hearing the whisper of his words, and his eyes widen in surprise too, as if he really is seeing me in front of him.

I panic when he bolts up from his chair, making it fall with a loud crash. He takes a step in my direction, my heart races, and then everything vanishes—except for one thing, one last whisper.

"You are my redemption."

I wake up from my strange dream with a deep exhale. My heart threatens to burst from my chest, and I need a moment to breathe and calm down. My peace doesn't last long. A movement makes me turn my head toward Eleazar, who is leaning against one of the posts of the tent. He watches me with curiosity, without hiding it.

"A nightmare?" he asks.

I place my hands over my chest. I feel naked under the intensity of his gaze and by the fact that he's been watching me sleep.

"Has no one ever told you that watching someone sleep is in bad taste?"

He shrugs.

"I suppose few dare to point out my mistakes or lack of manners."

"That only leads to arrogant leaders," I reply.

He smiles and crosses his arms over his chest, with no apparent intention of leaving.

“Am I an arrogant leader?”

I scoff; the answer is too obvious. I give him a quick look from head to toe and notice that he has changed clothes. The candles inside are still lit, and nothing outside seems to indicate that dawn has arrived. I suppose that as soon as the sun threatens to rise, Eleazar will disappear to wherever he goes during the day.

“How long have I been asleep?” I ask, avoiding answering his question.

“Approximately an entire day.” His tone is amused, light. “I almost suspected you were dead.”

“I was tired,” I admit.

“Too tired to take a little tour of this place?”

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“Are you going to show me the camp?”

“Only if you want to.”

I know I’ll receive wary glances and that my cheeks will be in a constant state of boiling; however, I think anything is better than staying here waiting for boredom to overcome me and for sleep to come again. I don’t know if I want to see Cassian again—his eyes or his melancholic expression. I don’t want to hear words I don’t understand or confessions that want to break me.

With a nod, I accept, and his smile tells me it’s the answer he wanted. He leaves me alone for a few minutes, which I use to try to look human again. I detangle my hair with my fingers and see a jug of water that I don’t hesitate to use to freshen up my face. There’s a mirror where I check my appearance one last time and, taking a deep breath, I join Eleazar outside the tent. The guard stationed at the entrance watches me with an unfriendly face, and I immediately look away from him.

“Has he been there the whole time?” I whisper once we’ve walked far enough.

“Ask what you really want to know.”

I look at him from beneath my lashes. He walks beside me, my shoulder far below his, and his broad build makes me feel tiny next to him.

“How do you defend this place if the Diluted and you can’t be in the sun?”

“Are you sure you’re not a little slippery spy?” he jokes, raising an eyebrow in my direction, and takes his time giving me an answer. “We have humans too.”

“Do you really think humans could handle an attack from the Pure or any other being?”

A strange, dark expression briefly crosses his features, giving him a fiercer look.

“We have our methods. You’re safe here—that’s all you need to know.”

It’s not all I want to know, though I suppose I should be satisfied for now.

Sold to the Night Lord

I follow his steps as he leads me through the vast camp. He shows me the forge where a man works the weapons, his face red and his expression not inviting anyone to get too close. The kitchens are farther along, next to a large tent with wooden tables and benches for people to eat. The smell of soup and meat already dances in the air. Outdoors, there are men and women helping to skin animals; they’ll use the hides to sew clothing and coats. Children play with a can full of stones, which they don’t hesitate to hit and use as a ball. Some of them freeze when they see me; they recognize me as an outsider. But their wary looks change when their eyes land on my companion.

“Ele!” one of them shouts.

He runs toward us with a smile missing a few teeth. Eleazar makes a small sound of protest before crouching down and ruffling the child’s

brown hair.

“How many times have I told you my name is Eleazar?” he complains.

“I like Ele better.” The kid shrugs and looks at me. “Who’s she?”

“A guest, so don’t be rude.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

Eleazar laughs, clearly amused by the child’s words.

“I don’t have girlfriends, little one.”

“I’m not so little anymore,” he growls. “I reach your belly now.”

“Because that’s definitely being tall. Go on, your friends are waiting.”

The child looks back at his friends, who have stopped playing, very attentive to us. He smiles at Eleazar again—maybe I want to start calling him Ele too—and runs back to join them. They quickly go back to their game. We resume the tour and pass by a group of men sharpening knives and women sewing pant hems. Their gazes fix on us, very cautious. We pass them and head toward what looks like a small tent, but

something else catches my attention. A black door that seems to lead into a room that descends into the earth. He follows the direction of my eyes and says nothing, though he doesn't make any move to take me there either or satisfy my curiosity.

“What's that?”

“I don't think it's something you'd want to see.”

He doesn't understand that saying that is exactly what triggers my desire to know what's hidden there. I place my hand on his forearm to keep him by my side before he continues walking and takes us away from the place.

“What's in there?”

He shifts his attention to the place I'm referring to. I can see the internal battle he's fighting—between telling me what I want or insisting and dragging me away. With his deep and resigned sigh, I know I've won this battle.

“It's where we store the blood. It stays fresh longer there.” He runs a hand over his face. “Exposing ourselves too long to human food can weaken our defenses, so we have to alternate between human food and animal blood.”

“Only animal blood?” I find that hard to believe.

He twists his mouth, and with that, I know it doesn't stop there.

“Some of us still show intolerance to the change,” he confesses. “It's just a matter of time before they yield.”

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“What do you do then to feed those who don't accept the change?”

“Some of the humans here volunteer. Other times, we go to villages known to be sympathetic to our cause. They let us draw a bit of blood in exchange for payment.”

“Don't you have feeders?”

“All the Diluted who are here got rid of them when they joined the cause—including me—though when I'm with the Pure, I have to maintain certain appearances.”

“Got rid of them?”

“I think I used the wrong word.” He draws a smile that almost seems embarrassed. “I meant to say we freed the humans. Some live here because they have nowhere else to go, and others returned to their families. I can introduce you to some if you want proof I’m telling the

truth.”

I search his eyes for any trace of a lie; instead, I find nothing but gold—too warm for my cold skin. There’s nothing that shows he’s lying, and part of me wants to believe he’s telling the truth—not to feel comfortable around him or think he’s a decent man, but because it means there were others who got a happy ending, something worthy.

“I believe you.”

His posture seems to relax at my words. He takes my hand, and the calluses on his palm brush against my knuckles. I part my lips, surprised.

“Not all of us are monsters,” he says. “I was human, Elara, and part of me always will be. I want what’s best for them—and for those like me. You could be happy here, if you wanted.”

His thumb strokes my fingers in a soft, constant caress. The thought flutters through my mind that maybe he’s a little right. A part of him is human. Maybe that’s what makes the difference and makes him less brutal than the others. However, mistrust has my heart firmly gripped—I find it impossible to trust his good intentions. I sigh and pull my hand away from his, feeling cold again. Now it’s me walking ahead, though! don’t really know this place well. A quick visit hasn’t made me an expert in navigating here.

As I pass two young boys holding different weapons in their hands, I stop. I haven’t seen many weapons in my life beyond a dagger. This is very different. Curved and sharp blades, whips ending in spikes that promise pain, long swords with a tip as fine as a needle...

“Would you like to try?” Eleazar whispers in my ear.

I take a step forward, startled. I turn around to face him.

“Are you serious?”

He nods.

“Prove you’re not a threat, and I’ll personally teach you to handle a weapon.”

“ ... ”

He raises his hand to stop my words.

“Don’t say anything. I’d rather you thank me with good choices in the future.”

He turns around, very sure I’ll follow him and I do. I’d rather go with him than stay here, standing in the middle of people who look at me

like I’m a fish walking on two legs. I keep replaying his words in my head—needlessly—because I’m pretty sure what he wants.

He wants me to choose him.

What Eleazar doesn’t know is that when I jumped off that cliff,

I chose myself.

Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 97

Two days have passed—two days in which Eleazar has taken it upon himself to show me every corner of this place, except what lies behind that black door. People still look at me strangely, although some women have smiled at me. That doesn’t exactly make me feel at home immediately, but at least it helps a little with my growing discomfort.

In addition to exploring the camp with Eleazar, I’ve shared my dinners with him, and during the day, when sleep comes for me, he disappears into his side of the tent. The night we returned after he offered to teach me how to handle a weapon, I discovered that he had a tent annex installed to his own, connected by a hallway where a curtain separates us. Now I have a small space to myself, and I haven’t had to sleep in his bed again. I don’t know what material they’re made of, but the tents don’t let a single trace of sunlight in. When the day breaks, Eleazar makes sure his side becomes an impenetrable wall.

Sometimes I find myself unsettled by the thought that only a few meters separate us. I’m not able to feel comfortable among vampires, even

though not long ago I was willing to offer my body without looking back to one of them.

It hasn’t been long since I woke up. My hair is still tangled like a bird’s nest. I’m savoring some leftover fruit from last night on my tray when a

girl not much older than me appears in my small quarters, holding clothes in her arms.

“Eleazar sent me to bring you this, miss.”

“Please, call me Elara.”

A small smile tugs at her lips and she nods, placing the clothes on my bed.

“Is there anything you need or anything I can do for you?”

“Don’t worry, I have two perfectly capable hands.”

She blushes a little and gestures to leave. She must remember something because she turns back and looks at me again. She has beautiful

green eyes.

“Eleazar is waiting for you at the training grounds. If you’d like, I can take you there once you’re dressed.”

“That would be nice.”

The girl nods and steps out so I can change. I go to the bed where she left the clothes and examine them with curiosity. It’s a pair of brown leather pants—sturdy and warm. Alongside them is a loose shirt and a sort of jerkin. To my surprise, when I try everything on, it fits me rather well. In the full-length mirror, I look at myself. With clumsy fingers, I try to tie my hair into a decent updo. After about twenty minutes, I reappear next to the green-eyed girl with my hair in a bun, my new training outfit, and leather boots that reach up to my knees.

It’s very likely I could find my way to the training area by myself—I paid real attention during my walks with Eleazar—but I prefer to walk this place with someone other than him. Eleazar intimidates people too much; some even pretend to tolerate me. Now I can see their real faces. Most avoid looking at me too long, others frown, and very few offer a smile. The usual sounds of physical exertion become louder as we approach—I hear panting, metal clashing against metal, and grunts of effort.

In the middle of all the people sparring with raised weapons stands Eleazar, arms crossed over his chest and brows furrowed, supervising everyone. We approach slowly, and I can hear him giving instructions here and there. The girl stops and lets me walk forward alone. I turn to

her.

“You didn’t tell me your name.”

She waves her hand in the air.

“It’s not important.”

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I'm about to contradict her, to tell her we're all important but it's too late. She's already turned around and is running through the camp, lifting the hem of her skirt. With nothing else to do, I approach Eleazar, who senses my presence immediately. His gaze lands on me; those molten gold eyes seem to pierce through me. He scans my body, leaving no inch outside his scrutiny. The others must have noticed, because the sound of clashing metal has considerably died down.

I clear my throat.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks, as if he hadn't just looked over every inch of my body. His voice is deeper than I'm used to hearing.

"I suppose so."

I shrug.

"I'm glad to hear that. You need to be well-rested for this."

Lagree. He gives me one last glance before starting to walk, trusting I'll follow. We go to a more open area where different weapons rest on a table.

"Have you ever held one in your hands?" he asks, pointing at them.

I shake my head.

"Then we'll start with a wooden one. Today we'll look at your stance and teach you some basic movements."

I don't know why, but the idea of holding a weapon in my hands excites me. He hands me a short wooden sword, which I wrap my hands around. I avoid looking at the others, though I can feel their eyes on me. Eleazar places his hands on my waist and turns me to face a distant point.

"Keep your feet shoulder-width apart," he says near my ear. One of his hands moves to my elbow and raises the arm holding the sword. "You have to grip it firmly, but not overly tight. Your knuckles are white from tension—and this is just a wooden sword. Relax."

I look at my hand and see he's right. I'm gripping the hilt too hard, so much that my knuckles hurt. I try to loosen them and ease my grip a bit. When he's satisfied with how I'm holding the sword, he moves on to correcting my shoulders and torso. When my posture is decent, he stands beside me and draws his own sword from the belt at his waist. Its blade shines so brightly I'm sure it would cut through me effortlessly, like hot

butter. The hilt has embedded gemstones and what appear to be tentacles coiled around it as if trying to strangle it. I get lost for a moment in the beauty of the design.

He adopts the same stance as mine, only his head stands well above mine. He performs the movements with precision and elegance, waiting a few seconds for me to imitate him. At first, I'm too clumsy, and he has to correct me more than once. By the time I manage a halfway decent strike, my shoulders are sore and burning from the effort.

"You're small," he says.

I make a face.

"Wow, thanks. I thought you hadn't noticed just by how I have to tilt my head to look up at you."

My comment makes him laugh.

"You're small and thin. That could give you a slight advantage against a bigger and heavier opponent," he huffs. "Let's not kid ourselves— your chances of winning are low. But with proper training and enough time, we could improve your odds. You could be slippery and fast."

"Comforting." I push a strand of hair from my face, exhaling. "Anyway, do you really think I'll be here that long?"

"You're here, aren't you? The time you stay depends on you. I won't be the one to throw you out."

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 98

The problem is I don't know where to go. The only thing I know is that I don't want to fall into the hands of another one of them. I want to find

my own path. Realistically, that's nowhere close to happening—Cassian is looking for me, and going to my family is not an option. I'm sure Rava is the first place he's watching. The banshee camp is completely out of the question; something about them gives me chills. So maybe

should be clever and use my time here to gain all the skills I can, and then escape.

“I think that’s enough for today.” Eleazar sheaths his weapon. “Let me walk you back to the tent. I’m sure you want a bath”

I can feel the sweat soaking my neck and running between my breasts. Honestly, a bath sounds perfect right now—for both hygiene and my sore muscles. I walk to the table and set down the wooden sword, then join Eleazar with a small smile. He walks confidently, greeting his men, who don’t hesitate to throw me looks that range from wary to lewd. The torch flames that light the entire camp don’t help with my sweat—the fire is suffocating. The scars on my neck start to itch, and I bring my hands there and begin to rub, very aware that I’m reddening

my skin. He doesn’t seem at all affected by the heat or physical effort—I suppose he’s used to it.

“Do you miss it?” I ask, and when he doesn’t know what I mean, I add, “The sun.”

For a moment he seems surprised by my question, but quickly masks it with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I suppose I’d be lying if I said I didn’t,” he sighs. “I know that to you I’m no different from the Pure—I understand that. But I’d ask you not to forget that many of us are just their victims. Before this, many of us had lives. Others were born like this, with no chance to be anything else.”

I bite my lower lip, unsure if it would be too much to keep asking. Still, something about him makes me feel like my curiosity won’t bother

him.

“You were turned...” I choose my words carefully. “How old were you then?”

“Twenty-six.”

“And now?”

“Three hundred and forty-two.”

I try to stifle a sound of astonishment—in vain. Eleazar bursts out laughing at my reaction. We stop when we reach the entrance of my tent, and I still feel like there are many things I want to ask. Something of that must show on my face.

“What do you say we meet after your bath and eat with the others?”

“You mean... with everyone?”

“It’ll be good for them to see you among them. It’ll help them relax in your presence.”

I'm not entirely convinced, but I nod. That pleases him. He gives me another one of his smiles, and with a small hand gesture, he says goodbye, letting me enter and clean up.

inside, behind a folding screen, there's a clawfoot bathtub already steaming. I suppose that even though Eleazar doesn't live in a gothic and glamorous castle like Cassian, he's not lacking the power to give orders. I don't even know when he asked for the bath to be prepared.

Without thinking much more, I rid myself of my clothes and plunge into the water, letting out a moan as the hot water kisses my limbs. I rest my head on the edge of the tub, relaxing for a moment before moving on to lather my body with the small piece of lavender-scented soap. The scent fills the air and, mixed with the hot water, makes me feel too comfortable—almost drowsy.

The sudden sensation of suffocation is what jolts me awake. Something or rather someone—wraps around my neck with iron strength. I kick beneath the water, and my hands shoot to the arm of my attacker, trying to pry him off. He grips tighter and cuts off my air.

Chapter

won't let some which where's tricks dominate another vample." man growts into my ear. "Maybe you bewitched that Vitalle idiot, 5oor

win't let you do the same to our leader."

The edges of my vision start to blacken as the air in my lungs runs out. I try with all my strength to get rid of him, breaking my nails against the leather on his arm. My hands fail me, Falling limp at my sides. Shame over thy nakedness has no place when life is slipping through my Ringers. I feel something wet running down my cheek and it takes me a moment to realize they're my tears.

"He'll thank me," my attacker says, lost in his own thoughts. "Right now, he can't see the danger you pose."

Everything around me seems to be happening in slow motion—or maybe I'm the one moving clumsily. I look around hoping to find something i can use against him. The soap bar and brush mock me. There's nothing to save me, and screaming is impossible. I open my mouth, seeking oxygen.

"What?"

His grip loosens slightly, but not enough. He's still strong. My limbs are stiff, and I can't move my hands. The world spins around me.

"Fucking whore!"

A grayish cloud floats in front of me and, as if it has a life of its own, enters my mouth. His grip around my neck finally loosens enough. I pull away, kneel in the tub, and gasp for air desperately. My head throbs like it's being pounded with a hammer and the corners of my eyes are still wet with unshed tears. I bring my hands to my neck to soothe the pressure and dare *to* look over my shoulder. There's nothing. No one. I grip the edge of the tub, struggling to lean over far enough to see beyond it.

When I do, a rough scream gets caught in my throat.

A middle-aged man with curly hair is lying on his back on the floor of my tent, his eyes wide open like his mouth, frozen in an agonizing expression. That isn't the worst part. What truly makes my skin crawl is the ashen tone of his skin.

This feels familiar, and the knowledge that I'm responsible hits me like a hammer. I cover my mouth with my hands to stifle my horrified

scream.

What have I done?

I retreat to the center of the tub, pull my knees to my chest, and bury my face between them. My heart races erratically, my fingers tremble, and my throat burns. I'm afraid of the consequences of my actions. I know it was self-defense, but he was one of theirs, and I am no one to them. They'll kill me. Knowing that running has served for nothing, just carrying me from one death to another, crushes me completely.

I have to run again, and I don't know if I'm strong enough right now. Though I suppose it doesn't matter—I must. I'm thinking of getting out of the water, which has long turned cold, when I hear footsteps approaching.

"Elara?"

I look up and clearly see Eleazar's shadow behind the screen. My heart threatens to leap from my throat and land at his feet. I shrink into myself. I know there's no escaping this.

"Elara, I'm coming in," he warns.

I wrap my arms around my chest, hugging myself as if I could protect myself from the fury Eleazar will feel when he learns I killed one of his own. I'm sure that if he had any doubts about me, they'll be fully confirmed now. I want to cry, mostly from rage—rage that my life has to end at the hands of a vampire anyway, rage that I couldn't live even one second of my life without their weight on my head.

His figure enters my field of vision. Noticing I'm naked, he averts his gaze from my body and focuses on the corpse on the floor. His eyes widen with surprise for just a second before he disappears and returns with a silk robe in his hands. He holds it out to me, and

I'm so numb I don't care that he sees my naked body as I rise from the water and wrap it around me. I lift one foot out of the tub, and Eleazar is instantly at my side when he sees me lose balance.

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Sold to the Night Lord

Chapter 99

Without meaning to, his boot hits the body on the ground, and to our astonishment, the spot of impact begins to disintegrate like ash blown by the wind, I can't hold back a horrified gasp.

"I suppose that solves my problem of how to hide the body," he says.

I turn to him, incredulous.

"Aren't you going to ask?"

"Do you want me to ask?" he replies, his grip firm on my arm. "Did he attack you?"

I lower my gaze, recalling the sensation of suffocation, the certain feeling that life was leaving me.

"Yes."

"Then you did well to kill him."

I can't hide my astonishment as I look at him, wide-eyed.

"He was one of yours, Eleazar."

"Being one of mine doesn't mean I'll defend a coward who attacks a woman while she bathes." He grabs my chin between his fingers and forces me to lift my face, exposing my neck. "I assume he tried to strangle you from behind. Not very noble. Did he say anything?"

I grit my teeth tightly, blind fury flooding my veins as I recall how he called me a "whore" while I was naked and helpless, dying beneath his

arm

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“He said he wouldn’t let me enchant you, that he wouldn’t let you be a fool like Cassian and that you’d thank him later for me being dead.” I stare him down defiantly. “Is that true?”

“What, that I’m enchanted? Or that I’d thank him for your death?” His fingers, still holding my chin, soften their grip and stroke my skin gently. “I’m not enchanted, creature. I’m very interested. And that makes me want you alive.”

“I hope you won’t be too disappointed when you find out I’m not as interesting as you think.”

“I don’t think so.” His eyes shift to the corpse on the floor beside us. “That seems pretty interesting to me.”

He crouches beside the corpse and, with a light touch, it begins to disintegrate again—only this time the process doesn’t stop and it gradually disappears, leaving behind only a pile of clothes. I’m completely horrified to see that now there’s nothing left. Maybe he wanted to kill me and I should be glad he’s dead. Still, he must have had family, people who will mourn him, someone who would have wanted a body to say goodbye to. Now, there is nothing.

I turn away, unable to bear the sight of his absence.

“Get dressed. We’ll act normal for now.”

“Someone will miss him.”

“Of course. I just won’t give any explanations now.” His eyes drop for a second to the curve of my neck. “We’ll go on with what we planned: we’ll eat, and I’ll walk you back.” He places a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll increase security and find out if anyone else is involved, I promise you, Elara.”

He removes his hand from my shoulder and interprets my silence as permission to leave me alone. I avoid looking at the pile of clothes on

the floor and search for mine. Fortunately, they’ve given me more than just dresses, so I put on a pair of pants and a loose shirt that swallows my figure without revealing my curves.

When I step out of the tent, it feels as if the crime is tattooed on my skin, and I don’t know if Eleazar will be able to keep me alive or maybe he should be more worried about his own. I’m no longer sure I’m not a threat.

It’s been almost a week since the incident, and now people avoid looking at me at all costs. I don’t know if it’s fear or if they’ve just decided I’m a pariah. It doesn’t bother me; I’m used to spending a lot of time alone.

“Focus, Elara.”

Just then Eleazar delivers a strike that knocks the sword from my hands. I grunt from the tremor of the blade that travels up my arms. For the past few days, he’s let me use a real weapon—he said it was time to get used to the true weight of a sword. I’m still clumsy, far from decent. I crouch, pick up my weapon, and return to a defensive stance, waiting for the next attack. I glance behind him just for a moment to see a woman holding a whip tipped with spikes. It’s not the first time I’ve seen her training with it.

“Do you like it?” Eleazar asks. “The whip.”

I blink, turning my attention back to him.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I don’t mean aesthetically. Do you think it’s a weapon that would suit you better? It’s not all about the sword, though it’s always good to know how to handle one.”

“Do you think could handle it?”

He shrugs.

“I think you can do anything you set your mind to.” He lowers his sword and looks at me intently. “I’m imagining you with it and I think it would be perfect.”

I lower my weapon too, exhausted. He steps aside and goes to the table, grabbing a few cloths. He hands me one, and I use it to wipe the sweat running down my temple and neck. The training area is fairly empty, and I think that has a lot to do with us. My interactions with the rest have noticeably decreased. I think Eleazar has ordered them to stay away from me. He doesn’t trust his own enough or isn’t foolish enough to think I can’t repeat what I did. The idea that I don’t know how to control myself keeps me up at night. What if I do the same to an innocent? More importantly—what is this? What’s happening to me? I want answers and I don’t know where to find them.

Add to my worries the dreams with Cassian and my little mental conversations with him, and no wonder I look so sleep-deprived. When I dream of him, I can feel his rage in my own body, and during the day I feel his fingers in my head, trying to break through. I’m growing weaker, and I fear that one day he’ll fully enter my mind and come back for me. I don’t want to admit it, but he hurt me. More than I thought anyone ever could. It’s not something physical, it’s not a visible wound, and sadly, those are the ones that hurt the most.

“I was wondering if you’d like to come with me in a few days.”

“Go where?”

“We need to go to the Far Lands for a few things for the camp and also to sell some pelts,” Eleazar explains. “Maybe it’d be good for you to explore a bit.”

“I’ve never been.”

“Then I think this is a good opportunity to visit.”

“When would we leave?”

“In two nights.”

“I think about it.”

Sold to the Night Lord

He nods, ending our moment of rest. He raises his weapon again, positions himself offensively, and I do the same. I can’t help but picture myself holding a whip like that girl’s or wonder what the Far Lands might be like. I’ve only heard rumors. They say people there are exotic, that color bathes every surface, and that people are free in every way one can imagine. Passion rules them, and I don’t know if it’s a *good* idea to go somewhere like that—especially not with someone who looks at me with liquid desire in his eyes.

The next two nights I spend training, testing my physical endurance. During the day, my attempts to sleep are constantly disturbed by Greems that feel too real, in which Cassian is in front of me. Sometimes he brushes my hand with his fingers, and other times his lips graze my temple. Not even in dreams am I immune to the magnetism his body exerts over mine.

The Far Lands live up to their name. It will take us several days by boat to reach the coast and, once there, I don’t know what our destination will be. From the moment I set foot on the wooden deck, I feel an urgent impulse to cling to the railing and watch how the ship cuts through the sea. I don’t take my eyes off the water for even a moment, and sometimes I think I can distinguish shapes beneath the surface. Shapes that are watching me.

“If you’re not careful, you might fall.”

The sour apple joins the salty scent of the sea. I glance sideways at the vampire, who seems more interested in me than in his surroundings. I rest an elbow on the wooden surface, cradle my chin, and throw him a curious look.

“That would be a shame.”

“Do you think I want you dead?” He mirrors my curious look. “You’re far more valuable breathing.”

“Are you planning to use me as a bargaining chip with Cassian?”

Laughter bursts from his chest, filling the air with its sweet sound. I try to hide my surprise—it always impacts me to see how Eleazar doesn’t try to hide his amusement and seems happy most of the time. Despite his intimidating appearance, his robust body, and feline gaze, he isn’t cruel when he speaks and doesn’t seem like a tormented soul.

“I have no intention of taking you back to him,” he says slowly. “Though if it’s your wish to return, I won’t be the one to stop you. I already told you, you’re a guest, not my prisoner.”

I remain silent as I deliberate in my mind whether I should reveal some of my thoughts, let him know how lost I am.

“I really don’t know what I’m going to do, I don’t know where to go.” Sadness filters into my voice. “I can’t go back home and I have nothing else. I don’t want to go back to him either—I feel pathetic remembering I was just entertainment and that I almost ended up in a cage just because I looked pretty.”

“Do you really believe that, or is it just anger?” I show him a confused expression. “Haven’t you thought that maybe... you like him?”

“Cassian exerts a twisted power over all of us, he’s magnetic.”

“I’m afraid we were made to have that effect on humans.”

“Is that how you ended up becoming a vampire?”

He curves his lips into a sad smile and lifts his hand to brush my cheek. He moves a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“You should rest. Tomorrow night we’ll resume training.”

He steps away from me and walks across the deck until he disappears into one of the cabins below. I look at the sky, see how twilight’s gray stains the heavens, and with a sigh I finally pull away from the railing and imitate Eleazar. I go down the steps into the interior of the ship, where darkness is total. Luckily, there’s a small sconce on the wall. I grab the candle from it and use the flame to guide me through the

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Elbam head to my chen cabin. The bird is small, with comple sheets and a pillow. Other than that, there's a trunk full of things that are supposedly mine but don't really consider them on, a chair where i sit to take off my boots, a jug of water, and a mirror on the wall that has fallen due to the way of the waves and is now covered in tiny cracks.

I leave my clothes on I don't trust that someone won't barge into my room at any moment, I felt unsafe since the bathtub incident and. to be honest, i haven't felt truly like myself since then. The memories torment me, the certainty that it's not the first time I've done something **like** that, because now I'm sure it was me. The events of the forest had been pushed to the back of my memory and now they've resurfaced,

I wonder who the real threat is--them, or me?

I lie on the bed on my back, eyes fixed on the ceiling. There are no windows, the ship is designed so that the entrance of light is nearly impossible. Only a few humans walk the deck, maintaining the ship's course. I hear some voices speaking softly and focus on ignoring them. Sleep takes a while, but it comes.

I'm sitting at the edge of the bed. At first I think it's just any bed until I see the sheets and raise my eyes to observe the rest of the room. It's Cassian's, and if I wasn't entirely sure, I feel his warm breath behind my ear. The scent of wet earth and night-blooming jasmine envelops me, unlike his hands, which rest on either side of my thighs. His presence behind me is like a tingling sensation.

"Why do you come to me every night?" His voice drips with agony. "Don't give bread to someone dying of thirst, Elara."

I don't know where I find the courage to turn and face him. His face looks thinner, but no less attractive. There are shadows under his eyes and his lips have lost some of that poppy red color. He's not feeding--I know it without him telling me, his appearance gives it away. It's been almost two weeks since our paths separated. That's quite a long time dying of thirst. I don't feel pity, I feel immense satisfaction.

"I assure you, it's not your bed I want to visit at night," I reply.

"Oh, no?" He raises one of his symmetrical eyebrows. "Is there someone visiting yours, Elara?"

"That's none of your business."

"So there is someone..."

"I know what you're trying." I move away from him. "I won't let you find me."

He gets on his knees on the bed, his shirt unbuttoned, exposing the skin of his chest. Like the other times, his clothes are wrinkled, as if he

slept in them.

“I will find you,” he promises through clenched teeth. “And when I do, Elara, you’ll scream.”

His hand rises fast enough that I can’t dodge his caress. He grabs my neck and forces me to lean toward him. We’re face to face, his eyes consuming mine and holding them so tightly I’m unable to look away. The blue in his irises darkens and the air is trapped in my lungs. Even though he grips me tightly, it’s not so strong that I can’t pull back if I want to.

I should want to.

AD

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