



Chapter 1

No one should be planning their suicide before reaching adulthood.

I have.

Tonight will be the longest night of the year and will also mark my birthday. I had never feared the arrival of a day the way I fear this one. Since I can remember, I've been warned about my terrible fate—the one that awaits all firstborns in this new society.

"Elara!" My mother's voice pulls me from my daydreams. "Dinner is ready!"

I look at my reflection one last time before rising from the vanity and descending the rickety stairs to the living room where my family awaits. The stairway is lit by a half-consumed candle resting in a wall sconce. Since their arrival, progress has stopped. We've been condemned to live their way. Damned nostalgics with an aversion to technology. Everything I know about the "advanced world" is what I've been able to read in old books or seen in photographs that are already beginning to fade and crack. We've spent over a century going backward in time, adapting to their way of life: we travel by carriage, wear pompous and uncomfortable clothes, and communicate by letter. I was born when computers, cell phones, and gasoline-powered cars were already just a memory in the minds of the oldest people.

I step on the last stair, which creaks under my weight, and find my entire family gathered around the table. My mother serves soup with a ladle, filling the bowls with a smile, because being able to offer us this meal tonight is not something common. We are not a wealthy family, not even

Sold to the Night Lord



middle class.

"Sweetheart, sit down, it's getting cold."

I take my place next to my seven-year-old sister, Abigail, a little girl with copper-toned curls and honey-colored eyes. She smiles at me with her gap-toothed grin.

"Don't be nervous, maybe they won't choose you."

My father's voice is sweet, just like he is. Sometimes I think he's like that with me because I've been marked since birth. Being the firstborn had branded me and condemned me to a miserable fate. A fate where I'm seen as a mere source of food for those cold, sadistic, soulless beings.

"I'm not nervous," I lie. "I've spent eighteen years preparing for this."

I know the smile doesn't reach my eyes, though I try to convey as much calm as possible. This isn't easy for them—how could it be for any parents? In a few hours, it will be my eighteenth birthday, and in just a few days, there will be a full moon, which means entering the Red Auction. If you're lucky, maybe no one will buy you, but clinging to that hope is foolish. We're products, we're just blood. They'll end up buying us, whether you're attractive, bony, or sickly. Sooner or later, someone will be willing to feed on you.

"To be exact, it's been seventeen years and three hundred and sixty-four days," says my brother, trying to lighten the mood. "Don't ask me to be more precise with hours, minutes, and seconds because on that I might fail you."

I roll my eyes; this is typical of him—resorting to silly humor when situations overwhelm him. Silvano—whom we all call Silas—is my younger brother by ten months, yet he insists on acting older than me. He has a broad, stocky body, straw-golden hair, and honey-colored eyes like Abigail. Mine are gray, empty, without color. Everything about me seems

Sold to the Night Lord



to lack brightness, from my eyes to the dark shade of my hair.

I grab the spoon and take a bit of soup. My mother's gaze is on me, waiting for me to say something or react in some way. I smile at her, and she seems to relax in her seat. Her hair is the same color as my brother's, slightly graying and tied in a low bun at the nape of her neck. And although her gaze is the sweetest I've ever seen, it's also the saddest.

"It's delicious, Mom."

I force myself to keep eating, even though my stomach is closed from nerves. I'm a terrible daughter and sister for what I plan to do tonight. Surely they won't be proud to have raised such a selfish daughter, willing to end her life out of fear of living it to the last breath with those insatiable, sinful creatures.

"So you say you and Lea are going for a walk near the lake..." says my father. "You know you shouldn't come back late, it's getting dark. No matter what they promise, they're dangerous."

"I know, Dad, don't worry, we'll be fine."

He strokes his several-day-old beard with his fingers while examining me. Does he know my true intentions? Do I wear them all over my face? Finally, he turns his attention back to the bowl.

"Can I come?" asks Abigail. "Please, please..."

"No," we all answer at once.

Abigail pouts and goes back to her soup. The atmosphere is more tense than expected; it shouldn't be like this, but the threat is in the air, and no one is willing to ignore it. In four days, I'll leave this house, most likely for the rest of my life.

I don't leave a single drop in the bowl before standing. I look at my whole family, imprinting them on my memory. I wish

Sold to the Night Lord



I could tell Silas that I hope he forgives me someday for what my death will cost him, for the way it will condemn him. I wish I could explain that I've lived with fear for many years, and I can't bear it any longer. That death feels like a walk in the park compared to the fate life has in store for me.

I do none of that. I just smile at them one last time, run to my room, and there I grab a fur-lined cloak that Lea gave me years ago and which I've kept carefully, as it's one of the few valuable things I own. After a few minutes, I slip out the door under everyone's gaze. The cold air kisses my cheeks, and although the first snowfall hasn't yet come, I fear it won't be long. I walk the path to Lea's house, located a couple of streets from mine. The last workers walk the streets, eager to take refuge in the warmth of their homes, some women finish gathering the laundry they hung out this morning, and shopkeepers are closing up their businesses.

Lea is right at the entrance of the little path to her house, waiting for me, all bundled up in her cloak, her nose red from the cold. She smiles, and even if she doesn't mean to, it's a sad smile. Her orange hair frames her face.

"Elara!" She runs a few steps toward me. "I thought you weren't coming!"

"Sorry, I got a little delayed." I link my arm with hers, and we start walking through the dirty village streets. "How's the family?"

"Same as always. Mom's still waiting for Sophie's letters every week, but it's been two weeks since the last one."

"The roads are bad, mail hasn't been arriving often lately," I try to reassure her.

Sophie is Lea's older sister. A year ago, she entered the Red Auction and was bought. Not everyone is lucky enough to have owners who allow them to stay in contact with their

Sold to the Night Lord



families. Most are torn away from them completely, considered dead to the world. Sophie is lucky—she was bought by one who doesn't care about anything other than having a midnight snack.

The lack of mail might just be a coincidence or, in the worst-case scenario...

"Mom's going to fall ill if this keeps up, and Dad's been working too much. I think they're starting to fear the worst, and I... I don't know how to feel."

"I'm sure she's just delayed a little, don't lose hope." I stroke her hand with mine, giving her little pats. "How are your latest readings?"

I try to distract her by talking about those huge books that talk about the world before. Lea is a curious girl, ever since she learned to read she's loved scouring the little market stalls for books that tell how life used to be. I love that about her—I like sitting by the lake shore and listening to her ramble for hours about how people our age used to relate, about fashion, so changing, fleeting, and much more comfortable than today's.



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