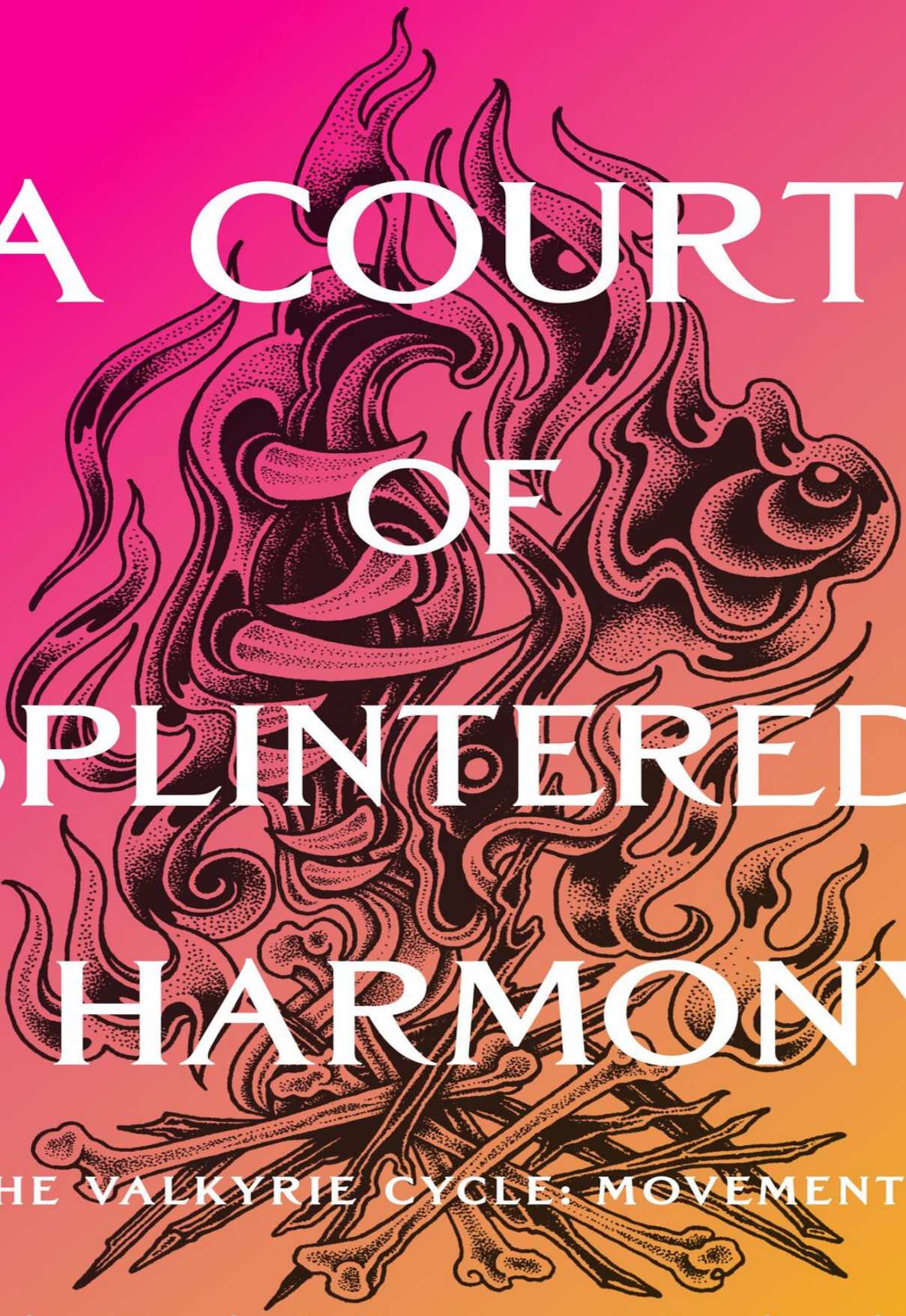
#1 BESTSELLING GLOBAL PHENOMENON



A COURT OF SPLINTERED HARMONY

THE VALKYRIE CYCLE: MOVEMENT I

SARAH J. MAAS

BLOOMSBURY

A COURT OF SPLINTERED HARMONY

THE VALKYRIE CYCLE: MOVEMENT I

SARAH J. MAAS

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
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For Josh, Taran, Sloane, Annie, and Scarlet—
I love you.

And for Maura Wogan—
thank you for getting this world back for me.

BOOKS BY SARAH J. MAAS

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Montesere
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Mortal Lands

Dear Reader,

When I began writing this installment in the ACOTAR series, it quickly became apparent that this was a story that could not be contained in one volume. Nor was it meant to be a trilogy, at least in the traditional sense of how a trilogy is structured and published. Rather, what poured out of my heart was a vast, sweeping story that didn't fit the parameters of what can be feasibly printed—a journey that *needed* to be told in a different way.

There are realities to publishing a physical book. Printers impose limits on a book's length due to the need for the pages to, you know, not fall out. But I did not want to have to cut vital parts of these characters' journeys simply to make sure the glue binding the book would hold or that it would fit easily on a bookstore shelf.

So I hatched a different vision of how I might put this project in your hands. A vision where I could tell the story the way it needed to be told, while also ensuring that you, the reader, were able to receive beautiful physical editions of its volumes.

This book—Movement I—is only the opening part of that larger story, told the way I want it, the way the characters demanded it be told. It is not a novel, not a "Book One." It is merely *part* of a much, much longer book.

Movements II and III will soon follow (bound together in one volume), with Movement IV as the eventual, concluding piece. My vision is that these four movements create *one* story together—to ultimately be read in one go, from Movement I to IV. The journeys of these characters, the pacing of the events in these pages, reflect that vision.

Beyond that, in the back of this book you will find three "bonus" scenes for this series that were previously published in separate special editions. I've always viewed these scenes as canon, and approached writing them from that mindset, incorporating their events into the full-length books. It has been my wish for years now that these scenes one day be accessible to every reader no matter where they live or what edition they buy, and the publication of this book has provided that opportunity at last. (I recommend reading the Azriel scene before you begin Movement I.)

I hope you enjoy this journey as much as I loved writing it.



PRELUDE

There was a room, little more than a cell, far beneath his father's mist-shrouded keep.

It was his room—his *pen*, his older half brothers liked to sneer—and only once a day was he allowed out into the chill damp to breathe in the song of the craggy, wind-battered mountains and feel, if he was lucky, a kiss of sunlight on his cheeks.

His mother was not allowed inside the pen. Visits with her were limited to once a week, when they would eat a small breakfast together in her own cramped chamber many levels above. One hour—that was all they had. He'd carry the trays up himself so her too-thin, overworked hands didn't have to ache any more than necessary.

Not that his hands were much better. Not after what his half brothers had done three years ago. He assumed it was three years ago—time was meaningless down here, marked only by how large his wings were getting, how they could now brush either side of the cell walls if he stretched them fully.

There were nights when he'd bolt awake screaming, certain his hands were still burning, skin melting—and find that thick, gnarled scars remained.

He'd been young enough when it happened that his wings had spanned barely half the space.

He only remembered flashes. The laughter as they slathered his small hands in oil. Then the piercing terror at the sight of the burning braziers, their sizzling coals audible even from across the room. The deep dread in his bones as he realized that there was nothing he could do to stop his half

brothers from shoving his oil-soaked hands into the flames. The heat of that fire reaching his straining fingers before they went in, then the instant shock of not feeling anything. That was the last glimmer—how he felt *nothing* for a moment.

And then pain so complete that everything went black.

He'd awoken to his mother's sobbing; he lay cradled in her lap with such pain in his hands, in his fingers, that the merest twitch had cast him into oblivion once more. That was how it was for a time: pulses of consciousness, a wave of agony, and then nothing.

Maybe the shadows kept him under, locked in their dark embrace. Maybe it was a kindness. But when he'd finally awoken for good, he found his hands changed. They were the same shape, but new flesh had crept over the burns. Where once his hands had been smooth, now the skin was shiny and rough and tight.

They'd thrown him back in the pen soon after that. And as before, his mother was not allowed to tend to him. To comfort him.

He knew why his mother was kept elsewhere most of the time. Why there was a small, discreet stairwell at the end of her hall that wound to the upper levels, where his father dwelled.

His half brothers made sure he knew.

Son of a whore—we'll fuck your mother one day, too.

Their own mother had personally locked him down here the first time he'd retaliated for the insult. The second time, they'd burned his hands beyond recognition.

So he was left with shadows for company, left to listen to the faint song of the wind that sometimes wandered into the depths of the mountain keep. He flexed his wings as often as he could, going through exercises he'd marked his father's warriors repeating in the courtyard.

He'd learned them all, noting the details during that one hour he was allowed out. How the warriors moved, how they handled their blades, how they stood, how they took off without a running start.

He had never flown. Not once.

His half brothers mocked him for that, too. But he practiced as best he could in the pen. His hands, once healed, had proved able to function as they had before the burns—albeit stiffly for the first few months, sometimes aching, but soon returning to their full range of use. So he trained. And trained.

He was an Illyrian; he could do nothing less.

His mother often reminded him of that, whispering so the other keen-eared chambermaids didn't hear, didn't report the words to their impetuous mistress.

You are an Illyrian, Azriel—the wind sings through your very blood. You cannot be caged. You cannot be broken. They lock you away because they fear you.

He sometimes forgot his name until he heard his mother say it. *Why?* he'd ask her, over and over. *Why do they fear me? Why do they hate me?*

She would kiss his brow once, twice. *Because you are different. They could all feel it, from the moment you were born. And one day, you will show them why that is a wondrous thing.*

When he'd been younger, the words had never made sense. But as the years passed, Azriel knew she was right.

The shadows in his pen—his *cell*—had become his friends. They had their own stories, their own accounts of events in the keep above.

The wind was his most trusted adviser, bringing him tales of the world beyond. Of wide-open fields where sunshine gilded wildflowers; of rushing rivers that cascaded down mountains; of a violet-eyed boy around his age toward whom the entire world seemed to gravitate, a winged boy—another Illyrian—clawing out an existence in the mud and snow far from here, and . . . her. A golden-haired girl, lovely and bright, encased in darkness akin to his own, trapped within a city beneath a mountain, dreaming of the open sky above.

But they were far from him, as unreachable as the moon.

So the shadows and wind kept him company. Shadows and wind and stone. Azriel came to understand the quiet, rumbling language of the rock, how it caught the voices and words of those who dwelled in the keep.

That was how he discovered that his half brothers had come of age. How he heard their plans for his mother. It had nothing to do with her and everything to do with him. But they would hurt her and get away with it, and then gloat to him.

The stone warned Azriel when they left their rooms in the dead of night.

His self-imposed training told him how to shatter his cell door.

The shadows guided him, keeping him unseen as he raced through the halls.

And the wind instructed him on how to minimize his half brothers' screams as he intercepted them before they touched her door, as he slammed his fists and his power and his teeth into them, as he unleashed himself, more beast than male.

Those keen-eared chambermaids heard; they instantly alerted the household.

It took three full-grown Illyrian warriors to pull Azriel off his eldest half brother. The other was already unconscious. And Azriel was still snarling, thrashing in their grip, when his father appeared, his wife beside him, and took in the scene—the door they stood in front of, and Azriel's mother, wide-eyed and shaking, her wings folded away painfully tight in utter submission.

Alcohol clings to your father, the shadows murmured, drawing Azriel from his daze. *And heavy sleep. Fear and anger envelop his wife. Your mother knows only terror—and desperation.*

The shadows didn't speak, exactly, but he'd learned to interpret the shards of images they showed him as words, sentences. Just as he'd learned to read and write during the precious hours with his mother, who hid books in her room, along with what scraps of paper and cinders she could find.

His father's spoiled, ice-hearted wife shrieked as she rushed to her own sons, then cooed their names, stroking their hateful faces. The one still conscious sniveled and whimpered.

Their broad-shouldered sire towered above Azriel, his wings so large they seemed to blot out all light. Wings as dark as his hair, currently pulled back from the harsh planes of his face. He surveyed his son with slightly clouded hazel eyes, while his Second in command gripped the boy by the back of the neck hard enough to bruise.

"Don't lame him, don't clip him, don't cut him," Azriel's mother begged, dropping to her knees, crawling toward his father. Her broken wings dragged on the ground.

His father ignored her, gaze fixed wholly on Azriel. "How did you get out?" His voice was harsh as granite. As unyielding.

Azriel sniffed back the blood clogging his nose. "The shadows and wind and stone told me how."

The warriors snickered, the breath of his sire's Second a warm push against his neck. His father kept staring, unmoved.

“Simpleton,” his father’s eldest son jeered at Azriel from the haven of his mother’s arms.

Embarrassment flooded through him. For a heartbeat, Azriel wished he could fade into the rock and darkness. Wished he could step back so the shadows could wrap around him and hide him, and he’d never have to see these people again—

So he did.

One moment, he was held in place by his father’s commander.

The next, a dark haze had settled over his vision. He could still see, but as if through a thin, black veil. A step, and he was out of the male’s grip. A glance at his own hands showed—

Nothing. They were gone. Only shadow remained.

The commander yelped, leaping back. “The bastard was right here.”

Azriel’s father scanned the space, something like fear blasting away the cobwebs of alcohol and sleep from his eyes. And in that moment, Azriel knew he was truly gone, hidden in a sliver of shadow so deep no one could find him.

“Where is he?” his father’s wife screamed.

Her shrillness shocked Azriel into movement. The shadowy veil shivered and fell away. Blaring light poured in, and he squinted against it. Whatever had happened, he had reappeared—or removed that cloak of shadows.

We are here, the shadows whispered in his ear. *We are always here*.

Hide me again, he whispered back. His mother had raised a hand to her heart. The shadows encircled him, the world dimming. His body vanished. He could still feel it, use it—but he knew no one could see him.

His father’s wife shrieked, “*Demon!*”

The word threw him into the light again, shadows slipping. Torchlight and the freezing hall pressed in.

“Shadowsinger,” a warrior down the hall breathed.

Azriel did not know what that meant, had not heard that word in the courtyard or on the wind. He peered at his scarred hands. A wisp of shadow wended around his fingers. *Why now?*

To seize this moment, the shadows answered.

He realized he’d been listening to them with a cocked head, as if having a conversation—realized it only because his father’s cruel face shifted from fear to calculation.

His father's wife apparently read the same shift in expression and hissed, cradling her son's head to her breast, "Don't you *dare*, Maxtus. Don't you *dare*."

Azriel's sire ignored her. His Second in command, now keeping a healthy distance from Azriel, countered, "Milord, having a shadowsinger in our forces is an asset—"

"The beast is an affront," his father's wife seethed, fear forgotten as she shot to her feet and tucked her eldest son behind her. At seventeen, the boy was too old to be hiding. But there he was, shock and horror blatant on his bloodied face. It melted into something close to victory as his mother spat at her husband, "If your by-blow stays, Maxtus, I'll put him down myself."

His father's craggy features again became as immovable as the mountains around them. The female trembled at that expression. And though Azriel hated her, he did not enjoy the sight and scent of her terror before that merciless countenance.

His father's voice was like gravel as he said to her, "For too long I've let you dictate what to do with the boy."

"You shamed me with his birth, when he was born of that *whore*," his wife snapped, unable to help herself, fear be damned. She flung a thin finger toward Azriel's mother, still kneeling on the floor. "And here is the monstrous result. That boy is a devil; look what he did to our sons—"

A backward swing of a broad hand, so fast that his father's wife hit the stone wall behind her before the sound of the blow had finished echoing. His father had barely moved. His face remained impassive as he growled, "I have had enough of your interference. Get out of my sight."

She clutched her cheek, righting herself. Her son didn't try to help steady her. Not one of the warriors reached out a hand to assist her. But she bowed her head, her light brown hair—a rarity amongst their people—tumbling over her shoulder. And she said with no true remorse, "Apologies, milord."

Then she rushed away, eldest son in tow, motioning to one of the warriors to lift her other son from where he lay unconscious on the floor. She turned back only once, venom in her gaze as it landed on Azriel. Then she was gone.

The lord once again assessed Azriel—slowly, coldly.

Down the hallway, water dripped against stone. A torch crackled. Far above, someone screamed. With pain or laughter, it was hard to tell.

Azriel's mother remained trembling at his father's feet. The looming male examined her. As if he had never seen her before.

But Azriel wouldn't have her kneeling—not for this male. Not for anyone. And no one, not even Azriel's father, stopped him from walking to his mother, helping her rise. His scarred knuckles were bloody and raw—arcs of dirt and blood lay beneath his nails.

His father ordered his mother, "Go into your room. The boy stays here."

Azriel lunged for his mother, but she only gave him a terrified, pleading glance before she vanished. Begging him to behave.

"Leave us," his father directed his warriors.

"Milord," his commander started, face pale as porridge. "I'm not certain leaving you alone—"

"Leave us," his father repeated, the green stone atop his hand flaring with a sickly light. In silence still heavily laced with fear, the soldiers departed. And then Azriel was alone, perhaps for the first time ever, with his father.

His sire stared at him. Azriel stared right back.

"How long have you heard them, boy?"

Azriel knew what the male meant, and kept his face blank as he answered, "A while." His voice was hoarse, but icy as the winter beyond the keep.

Interest honed itself into something deadly sharp in his sire's eyes. "And what do the shadows tell you now?"

Azriel considered his words carefully. Knew it for the test it was, though he could only guess at what the end result might be. The shadows yielded a solitary kernel of information: "They tell me that your wife is not going to her chamber. She has dropped your sons at the infirmary and is now walking alone to the guards' station. They tell me that the male who is leading the patrol tonight likes to lift her skirts when they are alone. They tell me that she thinks you do not know, but you do. And one day she will pay for it."

His father smiled, teeth flashing. "Anyone could figure that out. She's a harlot, through and through, but a good enough breeder to keep around for the time being. Tell me something no one else knows."

Azriel's entire life had boiled down to this moment, these next words. But the shadows offered nothing. Only silence. If this was a test, it was his to pass on his own.

His father was a brute, yes. But also clad in velvet finery at odds with what most warriors wore. The talons atop his wings were shining, as if polished, in contrast with the roughness of this place.

He was a vain male. And beneath the vanity lay fear—of being lesser, of being found wanting. The vanity was a shield. His sire's most valuable weapon and defense. And his greatest weakness.

So Azriel said, keenly aware of his mother's frantic terror leaking through the nearby door, "The shadows tell me that you have weapons in your arsenal that you have yet to wield, weapons that will take you to new heights of influence and prestige."

A blink—all the shock the male would show. But Azriel knew he had him, even before the male asked, "What sort of prestige?"

Azriel did not break his father's gaze. "While you now rule only this mountain and its range, you might command far more."

"How far? How much?"

The shadows whispered at last, and Azriel answered with the reply they supplied, "To the Steppes in the north, perhaps to Windhaven itself, if you use your arsenal wisely. Deploy it shrewdly."

Another blink. The boy had never seen a map, never heard of either place—and his father knew it.

Azriel lifted his chin, daring the male to doubt him.

His sire swept his gaze over him once more. To his scarred hands, bunched into fists. A grimace crossed his face. But it faded as he noted the wings Azriel managed to keep from dragging on the stones, as a true Illyrian warrior always did. His father gave him another smile, again full of teeth. "Look at the size of you. More my son than those whelps. And yet still a boy—a boy who sent his brothers sprawling." He chuckled. "An unknown weapon in my arsenal, indeed."

The words meant nothing. This male was nothing.

His sire looked to the cracked door. To where Azriel's mother was listening in pure panic. "Pack your things," he commanded. "You leave at dawn with the boy."

Azriel started. Had the shadows orchestrated this?

His father pivoted on his heel and strode for the stairwell. Azriel didn't fail to note that his father hadn't told him to pack *his* things. Azriel had nothing in his cell beyond two buckets, some hay, and a blanket. The threadbare clothes he wore were the only ones he owned.

His father said without turning back, “You will go to Lord Devlon’s camp, and there you will stay. He is one of the few with resources to properly train you—and one of the few I trust to do it right. In the meantime, you are banished from this keep and my territory until I see fit to summon you. Then you will report to me what you have learned, what you have seen. And if your shadows have spoken true this night . . .” His father paused, peering over his shoulder at Azriel at last. Only undiluted greed and cruelty filled his features. “Perhaps you will be able to prove to me just how valuable you are. And then we shall see which of my sons is given the honor to fight at my right hand as my true heir.”

With that, the male strutted away, content in his own dominion and lordship. Azriel had never hated a person more. Even his father’s wife. Even his half brothers.

Azriel stayed with his mother as she swiftly packed, one of the chambermaids bringing a rough-stitched sack for her to carry whatever she could.

And then they waited.

Those two remaining hours in the night were the longest of their lives, he thought. Waiting for the darkness to ebb, waiting for the silvery light to illumine the mists. Waiting for his father to change his mind and order him back to the pen. To keep his precious asset here.

Azriel and his mother clung tightly to each other as the minutes dripped by. She didn’t ask him about the shadows. She just held him, stroking his hair.

But then dawn broke, and the bulk of two warriors filled her door. Two—because they would both have to be carried.

Shame heated Azriel’s cheeks, worsened by the many who silently gathered to watch as they were hauled up into the sky, his mother shaking so hard he could hear her teeth clacking. Around them, the mist and wind howled. A beckoning and a warning.

And as the keep was swallowed by the mist, as his mother sobbed through her prayers of gratitude, Azriel bade the shadows and stone of the keep to await his return.

Not when his father called for him. He would never again be summoned on his father’s word. The male was a fool for thinking that dangling his title would keep Azriel in line.

He would sooner die than be named his father’s heir. But he would return—and so Azriel instructed the shadows to be ready.

For the day he’d come back to kill them all.

MOVEMENT I

SONATA

CHAPTER 1

Azriel

The howling, rain-lashed wind robbed every lingering ember of warmth from Azriel. The scales of his black armor did nothing against the lethal cold carried within those howls. Neither did his Siphons, their blue light unearthly through the downpour slicking every stone in the Monteserian mountain pass; nor his shadows, barely hanging on to his half-frozen wings amid the gusting veils of rain.

Five centuries of training kept him focused, though. Allowed him to silence the screaming in his head, the body that demanded he find heat—and find it *fast*.

He wasn't here to coddle himself. He had a task to complete.

Another hair-raising howl rent the night, so hollow and sharp that Az could have sworn even the rain shuddered.

He'd gone further than he should have. Rhys and Feyre's orders had been specific: *Observe, but do not engage*. Yet how could he not? How could he turn back when answers were so close—even if their enemies were, too?

A simple whisper had sent him here. A whisper overheard by his foulest of spies, stationed for months now in the mountains encircling Koschei the Deathless's rotting castle: *A long-slumbering object of power now awakens. It is rumored to lie atop Montesere's Rothorn Peak, waiting to be found.*

Your enemies will send their worst to attain it before you do. The hunt begins soon.

Nothing more than that. So Az had raced here, to these mountains, darting through the world between shadows and wind, flying with what Rhys and Cassian would consider reckless speed even when his power waned. *You'll snap your wings clean off your back if you dive into a gust like that*, he'd practically heard Cassian admonishing him. He'd ignored his friend's imagined advice, though. If he lost his wings, fine. He had other ways of moving through the world. And his wings had been enough of a nuisance through the centuries that he wouldn't be sorry to see them go. It wouldn't devastate him the way it would have for Cassian or Rhys.

But Az's wings had held against the fierce winds. Had seemed determined to forever cleave to his body, as surely as his shadows now clung to him while he surveyed the terrain.

He'd expected soldiers. Assassins. Slinking spies. Not the howls on the wind. Not the snarls, the baying, the canine keening.

Montesere had indeed sent its worst.

With the wind battering from all directions, it was impossible to distinguish how many windwolves stalked amongst those howls. And almost impossible to detect *where* they were. They were both flesh and air—able to shift between those states of being as easily as his half-wraith spies. But they were far, far deadlier than Nuala and Cerridwen.

Azriel squinted at the peak far overhead. He'd located the small cave on his flight in, moments before the rain and wind had sent him diving to the lee side of the nearest crag to keep from being smashed against the rocks.

He might be indifferent about his wings, but he certainly didn't have a death wish—though the Mother knew Rhys believed he did.

There—far above. A faint glimmer of fire, spilling onto the cliffside, then vanishing. Someone had entered the cave.

The howling continued.

Az's shadows whispered, swift and breathless, *They prowl around the cave mouth; they block every pass; they ride the storm winds. There is no path to the cave that does not involve contact with them*.

But he needed to get closer. Needed to see if whoever walked out of that cave possessed the object they'd sought.

Focusing his power, Az willed a shadow to slither toward the peak. It didn't move—just huddled in the shelter of his left wing. As if it didn't

want to go out into the rain, to approach those howls.

Go, he ordered. He shoved a bit more of his power, his will, into the shadow. A bit more, but not too much. Never too much. He'd made sure no one had ever seen the full, hideous scope of those shadows, and he wasn't about to start today. But a little more power behind them, a slight push—that, he could allow.

The shadow at last slunk away, a dark ribbon wending through the slick rocks. Az kept hidden, attention fixed on the cave mouth.

The shadow described everything as it drew near: *Rain, wind, stone. Water gushing between boulders; small rocks tumbling with it. Murmuring voices, barely audible.*

Az clenched his chattering teeth. *What are they saying?*

His tendril of shadow lurched closer, higher. *They say that there is nothing in the cave, despite what they learned from Koschei the Deathless. What was there is now gone. They will search elsewhere.*

What is it? he demanded. *What are they seeking? Who is inside?*

The shadow fell quiet for a beat. Then: *They wear cloaks and masks; there is no way to determine their identities.*

Given what hunted on the storm around him, Az guessed they were from Montesere, but—

The accents are varied; from different places. But all males, united in purpose.

Az blew out a breath through his nose, the air steaming in the rain. He was about to recall the shadow when it said, *Montesere. Vallahan. Rask.*

Az stilled. And then his shadow added, *Made.* Az's wings snapped in tight to his body. *The object is Made.*

He shook his head, water spraying with the motion. *The one they're seeking?*

It is unclear if they have already found a Made object and are pursuing another *tonight, or if what was meant to be in the cave is the only Made object they seek.*

I need to know, he pressed. *Do Vallahan, Montesere, or Rask already possess a Made object?*

If their enemies, hell-bent on invading the human lands to the south and amassing a unified army to do so, got their hands on a Made weapon, if Koschei was somehow involved in—

They have stopped speaking of the matter, the shadow supplied. *But they now speak of different objects: an ancient book of etched gold . . . and a six-sided box.*

They are treacherous, though, his shadow advised. *They have come at the behest of the Deathless One, and yet they also seek a way to control him. They know of the legends regarding a hexagonal onyx box that belongs to Koschei, more valuable now that he stirs, malcontent. The box contains his death, woven and bound within his sacred life-thread, and if they find it, they will get all they desire out of him. But they are fools, one of the males warns, all of them fools to even seek it, to risk betraying the Deathless One —*

A snap of invisible, dagger-sharp teeth, and his shadow went silent.

His shadow had been found. Which meant *he* was about to be found—

A howl blasted around him, off the rocks, through his bones. So close it would be a matter of seconds before the pack descended and tore him to shreds. The loss of one shadow wouldn't hurt him; no, part of him considered *that* a small blessing, but those phantom teeth and claws on the wind would rip his flesh apart with ease.

Az gathered his power in a swift, brutal surge. He could not win this fight. Not even with all his training, his strength. He might have tried—had he not now possessed information his family badly needed.

A lupine snarl sliced through the air to his right, the rain itself parting as his enemy lunged.

But Az was already gone, weaving through shadows, dripping water and shivering with more than cold, all the way back to Velaris.

CHAPTER 2

Feyre

I hated Storr. I didn't know how it was possible to hate a place I'd only just seen for the first time, but from the moment I'd winnowed onto this wave-blasted shard of granite in the middle of the Northern Sea, its freezing emptiness had sunk into my very bones.

No grass grew here. No seaweed clung to the oddly geometric boulders along the shore. No trees, no birds. Not even gulls sailing high above. Only salty spray carried on the biting wind. And the round stone building squatting in the center of the rock.

Storr provided only one use: neutral territory. Not for any of us in the seven courts, but between Prythian and the continent.

The stone building—more of an oversized chamber—was an ancient meeting spot, empty save for a circular table made of rock in its center and matching chairs, all so rarely used that orange lichen coated them like old blood splatters.

Lighting the oxidized braziers along the walls hadn't added much cheer. Nor had the large fire in the roaring hearth, the stone fashioned into a gaping sea serpent's mouth. A few of its carved fangs had cracked off and now lay in rubble on the mossy hearthstones. No one had ever bothered to

sweep them up. Or perhaps no one had set foot in this chamber since they'd fallen long ago.

But we weren't on Storr for a merry assembly, in any case—and lighting the fire was about as much effort as I was willing to put in to cheer up the room. There were to be nine of us negotiating today: Rhys and Mor and me, and three apiece from the two territories we'd worked so hard to get here, Vallahan and Montesere.

Rask hadn't deigned to reply to our invitations these past months. But we'd gladly taken a meeting with two out of three potential enemies.

They knew why we'd gathered them here. Mor had been in Vallahan often enough since the Hybern War that they'd be fools not to have some inkling of what we wanted. And what Vallahan knew, Montesere knew. Their network of spies rivaled anything Azriel could send their way.

It was Az's experience with those spies a few days ago that had prompted this meeting. The sliver of information he'd obtained that made us send out this latest round of invitations.

So here we all were: the King and Queen and Prince of Vallahan, and from Montesere, the grand vizier, the Duke of Bernion, and the Mistress of the Unseen—their version of a High Priestess. A mighty, royal group, and already the haughtiest of any I'd encountered.

So at least I didn't need to look pleasant.

Granted, on the outside, I appeared every bit the imperious High Lady of the Night Court: my night-black, shimmering gown cut to reveal swaths of pale skin, my favorite moon-phase crown atop my head, bloodred stain on my lips, and swoops of kohl around my eyes.

I had to give Rhys's tailor credit: she'd discreetly outfitted the slats over my chest with absorbent swatches of cloth. So when my tender, swollen breasts inevitably began to leak—which would be soon now, given the rising pressure in them—the milk would be sopped up before soaked spots appeared.

A month after Nyx's arrival, I'd been needed in the Court of Nightmares, and had donned one of my usual gowns. It somewhat lessened the *Get in line or there will be hell to pay* speech I was delivering when breast milk had begun darkening the front of my gown.

Only Keir's mocking smile had kept me from excusing myself. I had continued talking, daring him to mention the growing stain. I was absolutely *fine* with breast milk dribbling down my front—if he had a

problem with it, that was his to deal with. I let it become his discomfort, not mine.

But I did have problems of my own with meeting the demands of both a High Lady and a new mother. I didn't want my son anywhere near Keir or the Hewn City. Didn't want him with anyone beyond our loved ones in Velaris. But Nyx needed to eat every few hours. Sometimes every hour, depending on the day.

It was easier now that he was almost six months old and not feeding as frequently, and we were even going so far as to introduce him to mashed foods. On days like today, though, when Rhys and I had traveled far . . . it would have been a great deal easier to bring Nyx with us.

But I wasn't bringing him anywhere near these people, either. And I hated—*hated*, deep down in my bones—that the assortment of merciless faces gathered here even knew that my glorious, lovely son existed. Hated that if they wanted me to yield to their desires, all they had to do was get their hands on him.

They knew it. I knew it. And from the tremendous, dark power rippling off Rhys from the moment we'd left Velaris . . . my mate knew it, too. I knew Rhys would obliterate anyone who so much as breathed a hint of a threat, diplomacy be damned.

Thankfully, the present company knew that as well. And powerful as they might be, the beast that prowled beneath Rhys's beautiful exterior made them think twice.

Not that we hadn't taken precautions.

The terms for this meeting had been three delegates per group. We'd brought four.

Azriel—no more than a mere shadow—was barely detectible by the sealed stone doors behind me. Only those of us who knew the exact shade of his darkness would ever realize he was there.

But we weren't stupid enough to think the others hadn't taken precautions of their own. The inherent magic of Storr's neutrality oaths kept any sort of wards or magical traps from being laid, but just because I couldn't sense anyone else in the vicinity didn't mean they weren't present. The magic of this place had allowed Azriel in, after all.

"Well," the golden-haired Queen of Vallahan said, her blue eyes as frozen as the icy mountains of her territory. Nestled in her heavy cloak of furs, a braided circlet of gold across her pale brow and tattooed runes running

down her long, bony fingers, she cut an imposing figure. Though no weapons adorned her, there was something about her direct gaze, her stillness, that radiated *warrior*. Perhaps not one who'd fight on battlefields, but one who would kill to defend what was hers. That gaze now fixed wholly on me. "We have come to the ancient truce-lands of our kind to hear your groveling." She flicked one of those tattooed hands. "Proceed with your flattering speeches."

I bristled at the command, the swift assessment of me: that no matter what I had sacrificed, what victories I had achieved, to her I would always be a lowly human girl in fancy Fae clothes. But I kept my face composed, unbothered.

Let her underestimate me at her own risk.

I answered calmly, "Are you in need of refreshment? We've brought wine and ripe fruits." On cue, Rhys bade them appear on the stone table from the pocket realm where he'd stored them.

There were two layers to my words, the food and drink. On the one hand, I was establishing myself and Rhys as the hosts of this meeting. We were not to be commanded.

And on the other . . . the Prince of Vallahan gave himself away first.

He was young, golden-haired and blue-eyed like his mother, and hard-faced like his father. But where his mother's eyes were a frozen lake, his reminded me of the hottest part of a flame. And they simmered as they lit upon the spread of rare fruits from our fields and hothouses: glistening bunches of red grapes, oranges as round and vibrant as the setting sun, melon halves in alternating hues of sea-green and coral, lemon wedges whose scent brightened the miserable air around us.

Fruits that we knew Vallahan did not have, and could never grow in their frigid climate. Fruits they paid through the nose to import from more southern kingdoms as rare luxuries. And here they were, spread casually before the prince. Had he ever tasted an orange? I doubted that he'd ever even smelled one.

The Grand Vizier of Montesere motioned with a ring-encrusted hand to the glass pitchers alongside the fruits. "Is that watery swill what you pass off as wine these days?"

Rhys smiled coolly. His wings were hidden, but he wore the black crown of the High Lord of the Night Court above his usual dark regalia. "It's been a while since I tasted Monteserian wine." His voice was smooth as silk and

lethal as a newly honed blade. “And longer since you tasted ours. Maybe we’ve learned a few tricks in the past five centuries.”

The grand vizier scoffed. He appeared middle-aged, which for High Fae meant he was likely very old, and though a jeweled dagger hung at his belt, he had no calluses on his pasty hands, no warrior’s scars to mark him. A male who’d spent his life indoors, fighting with words and ink. But no less deadly than the warrior-duke to his left.

It was that male who now chuckled. Broad-chested, with a crooked nose that even with Fae healing abilities had clearly been broken several times over the centuries, the Duke of Bernion seemed like a fighter who’d been forced to dress respectably. He said wryly, “If this is a ploy to get us to open trade with you once again, you’ll be disappointed, Rhysand.”

Rhys winked at him. “Good thing we’re not here to talk about trade.”

Mother, he was slick. My toes curled in my black silk slippers. This male was *my* mate—mine in body and soul. Would the thought ever stop kindling such pride and desire?

I glanced at Mor, seated on my left. She wore a variation on her usual red gossamer gowns, with a gold-embroidered jacket lined with fox fur to keep the bitter cold at bay. A black circlet of twining serpents sat on her unbound golden hair—she was a queen in her own right.

It was true, I supposed. The distant ancestors that she and Rhys shared had been the first of the line after the fall of the Daglan. The Asteri, as they were called elsewhere.

But now wasn’t the time for such thoughts. Mor continued to stare pointedly at the Queen of Vallahan. *Focus*, Mor seemed to say, though the walls of my mind were firmly up and she had no daemati abilities. *You aren’t here to swap barbed compliments.*

I followed her lead. She was right, of course. There was a reason both Azriel and I had come to this meeting, when only Rhys and Mor would have been necessary. A reason urgent enough that I’d left our son at home, and now made myself appear every inch the imposing High Lady that I was, shoulders pushing back, chin lifting.

The duke appraised the group with a sharp-eyed yet cool indifference. “You are here to convince us that allying with you would be better than with these warmongers in the north.”

The Prince of Vallahan scowled. The young prince was a warrior, too—but before the Duke of Bernion, the prince was little more than an angry

boy. From the way the duke smirked, I knew he thought the same.

The King of Vallahan said to the duke, "I know you well enough, Valderic, not to take insult." His queen, however, was filled with the same ire as her son. The King of Vallahan, red-haired and bearded—unusual for one of the High Fae—continued with the calmness of a soldier who'd navigated battlefields his entire immortal existence, "And I know you well enough, Morrigan, to at least consider what your High Lord and Lady have to say."

Mor offered a slight smile to the king. She was the reason we'd even gotten this meeting—her hard work for months on end, the bonds she'd built in Vallahan. All for this moment.

The prince positively sparked with resentment, especially as his father nodded his respect to Mor. As if my friend had become a rival for his father's affections. It was a deadly combination: a skilled fighter with the temperament of a sullen teenager.

That's exactly what he is, Rhys said into my mind, the mating bond always keeping the line of communication open unless we willed it shut. *You're right to be on guard around him*.

I don't like him or his mother. I sent a mental sigh down the bond. *Even though Mor prepared us, some small part of me still hoped that we'd arrive here and find them to be nice, reasonable people*.

Rhys's star-kissed laugh danced through my mind. *Haven't your years with the Fae taught you anything?* Nice *and* reasonable *are words seldom used to describe us.*

I sent back a flicker of amusement before I announced to the group, "The fruit and drink are here for your enjoyment, regardless of—"

The last member of the group held up a hand.

Like the Grand Vizier of Montesere, the Mistress of the Unseen was pale, middle-aged, and reedy. Her long brown hair, in twin braids plaited with strands of gold, gleamed amongst the folds of her green velvet robe. For someone whose title suggested subtlety, her garb was anything but. In fact, it might have been of finer make than even that of the duke and the grand vizier.

I inclined my head slightly. Enough for respect, but not deference. "Yes?"

The Mistress of the Unseen folded her hands in her lap, graceful as two nesting doves, her narrow face serene. But her chestnut-colored eyes were

shrewd and humorless as she said, “I would have the Unseen Gods bless us before we begin. As is customary in my lands.”

I fought to keep from tensing. It wasn’t the words, but rather the tone that took me back to another place and time, when another female adorned in the trappings of spiritual finery had spoken of gods and blessings with similar entitlement.

Ianthe was long dead, torn to shreds by the Weaver. I’d seen to that. And I relished her death still. But the damage she’d done—to me, to Rhys and Lucien—remained.

In the years since her death, I’d learned that Ianthe was nothing more than a false priestess, her title and elevated station merely bought and not Cauldron-blessed. That betrayal of faith and truth went deep. Once, in long-past millennia, the Cauldron itself had appointed twelve High Priestesses to its holy governing council, in turn guided by the High Priestess of all Prythian. Each of the twelve on the Sacred Council had been marked on their brow with a sigil of a full moon flanked by two crescent moons. A symbol only the Cauldron could bestow on the dozen Mother-chosen females. But on the High Priestess of Prythian herself, that tattoo had been spread across her collarbones.

In the thousands of years since there had last been a Sacred Council, it had become customary for all priestesses to bear tattoos on their brows, bestowed in an annual ceremony. But Ianthe’s tattoos had not been bestowed during the ritual, and had not been in accordance with the holy symbolism of the priestesses’ marks. They’d been a flight of fancy on Ianthe’s part, an elaborate component of what was ultimately a costume. Rhys had told me that she’d bragged to him about them once—that she felt they were better than the true priestesses’ tattoos by virtue of being specifically chosen.

No one had bothered to explain that to me, though. I had been so naïve then, so new to this Fae world, that I had not recognized the tattoos as a marker of what a fraud and liar Ianthe was.

I knew now, though. And this Mistress of the Unseen was no better than her former Prythian counterpart.

“A blessing would be appreciated,” Rhysand said graciously to the Mistress. “We are happy to honor all gods here.”

The Prince of Vallahan rolled his eyes, either at my mate’s diplomacy or the Mistress’s request, but he followed his mother’s lead as she bowed her

head.

The Mistress of the Unseen stood, emerald robes shimmering in the firelight, and lifted her hands. The heavy sleeves of her robe fell back to reveal forearms tattooed with arcs and lines, akin to the slashings of a feral animal. Pain seemed to limn each one.

The Mistress closed her eyes, revealing more tattoos on the lids, which suddenly glowed pale blue. Unlike the slashings on her arms, these lines swirled to become another set of eyes. And as they flared, more lines leaked from them, spilling onto her cheeks and up to her forehead. A growing, living thing.

It was otherworldly. Unsettling. Especially as those tattooed eyes surveyed the room with their own sort of sentience.

Ancient spell work, Rhys said into my mind. *Mostly a fancy show.*

Hush, I sent back, bowing my head. *I'm trying to be respectful*.

Is that what that pinched expression on your face is? *I would never have guessed.*

Beneath the table, I dug my foot into the side of his leg. Rhys playfully squeezed my knee back.

The Mistress's words hissed across the chamber. "All hail the Unseen, whose whispers guide us toward a pure world of harmony." Those tattooed eyes darted back and forth, as if the Mistress—or whatever being peered out of those eyes—was measuring our reactions for any hint of disrespect. "All who bow before you are the Chosen, blessed children. Only those who honor you shall be granted true, everlasting life beyond the icy grip of death. To worship you is to spread love, to worship you is a privilege we thank you for daily."

Blessed. Children. I'd heard those words before.

It had been a long while since I'd thought of the Children of the Blessed, the misguided humans who'd worshipped the Fae, going so far as to try to cross the wall to serve Fae masters. Those who had managed had never been seen again in the human world.

What had become of them now that the wall was gone? Had the war between Hybern and Prythian awakened them to the true dangers? Or had they run northward as soon as they could, right into the arms of Fae who'd use and then discard them? I'd encountered one who'd done exactly that during the Hybern War—a young woman who'd somehow wound up in our enemy's war camp. Az and I had freed her, and Mor had made sure she was

safe with Viviane and the Winter Court army. I never saw her again. I'd prayed she'd found her way, but I had my doubts.

And as for the other Children of the Blessed in the human realm, with the wall now gone . . . If they reached Night Court lands, we'd have helped them. But they'd be lucky to even clear the northern border of the Spring Court. And these days, no one was watching out for anyone in the Spring Court, let alone foolish young humans.

I willed myself to turn back to the Mistress. To meet those tattooed eyes.

They were already staring at me, blazing near-white. A chill skittered down my spine.

Whatever studied me wasn't the warm, strong force I'd felt before in Prythian. The force that had saved me, my son, and Nesta's power. This force, this being, was something wholly different from the Mother. And it didn't feel kind.

A shadow shifted behind me, but I didn't dare try to see if Az was there. I knew he wouldn't be visible anyway.

"I beg you," the Mistress intoned, "bless this meeting, bless your true adherents, and turn the hearts of the nonbelievers to your cause. In your name, we shall do the good work to ready this world so it may one day be purified for your Great Revealing. I beg you again, bless us all."

The Mistress lowered her hands, the tattoos around her eyes shrinking and fading. And as she opened her eyes, her gaze was already fixed on mine again. "Given the gravity of our talks today," she said, her mouth thinning, "some divine assistance seemed necessary."

The grand vizier grunted, but the Duke of Bernion remained notably impassive.

The Mistress didn't drop her stare from mine, her face stern as she suddenly asked, "Have you dedicated your child to the service of your Mother yet?"

It took every ounce of self-control to keep from snarling at her mere mention of Nyx. I didn't need to look at my mate to know he fought the same battle. Instead, I asked as blandly as I could, "What business is it of yours?"

"The Unseen whispered to me of his unbound soul."

It would take me half a thought to send a lash of flame to wrap around her neck. To squeeze until something popped.

But the Duke of Bernion laid a warning hand on the arm of the Mistress's chair and said, "While I know you speak with the kindest intentions, Mistress, we should leave our companions to decide what is best for their son."

The Mistress didn't take her eyes off me. I'd never hated anyone more.

Rhys answered smoothly, not a glimmer of the lethal rage I knew was smoldering right beneath the surface, "His Naming Day approaches. No more unbound soul after that." His teeth flashed in a smile that was pure predator.

Our son's Naming Day would be a modest ceremony to officially add Nyx's name to the court's lineage, then a party for which I'd handed off the planning to Elain, though the Mistress didn't need to know any of that. Most babes had their Naming Day on the eighth day after birth, but . . . well, things had played out differently for us. We'd settled on the Autumn Equinox, six months after Nyx was born, if only to give us time to settle things enough for a party. And feel like having one.

The Queen of Vallahan cut in imperiously, "And I suppose our invitations to your son's Naming Day were lost?" She gestured at Mor, and though I did not appreciate her one bit, I couldn't help but admire how the rune tattoos on her fingers were etched with razor-sharp precision. "Or were you going to hand-deliver them?"

"The ceremony is limited to family," Rhys answered, unruffled. "Nothing fancy."

I kept my face blank. Rhys had wanted *shooting stars, cascading garlands, at least three choirs* in his initial vision of the celebration. We'd settled on something more reasonable: lunchtime tea and cakes. The Autumn Equinox wasn't one of our largest celebrations at the Night Court, but its feasting and harvest decorations would certainly add some pleasant vibrancy to our own merriment.

"Wasn't there some old story," the Queen of Vallahan mused, fingers now drumming on the stone table, "about the dangers of not inviting everyone you know, even those you don't like, to life's great celebrations?"

I glanced at Mor, searching for a hint as to what story the queen was referencing. Mor's brown eyes darkened. "Are you planning on sending a curse Nyx's way?"

A rumble of deep, unbreakable power reverberated down my mating bond. Rhys was one breath away from violence.

The queen smiled, all teeth—well aware of the monster she had provoked, and finding it highly amusing. “Of course not. I am simply offering advice.” A nod toward the Mistress, now watching us with naked distaste. “As was she.”

“We appreciate it,” I bit out.

“Enough with babes and curses,” the Prince of Vallahan said, crossing his muscled arms, fur coat shifting with the movement. “Let us get down to the business we came here to discuss.” His father shot him a weary, reproachful look, but his mother lifted her chin in approval.

I refrained from telling Mor mind to mind that we should drastically increase her salary for dealing with these people. And maybe give her a nice, long vacation.

“Very well,” Rhys agreed, interlacing his fingers and setting them on the table as if he had not been poised to turn the Queen of Vallahan into bloody mist a heartbeat ago. “If you already know what we wish to discuss, then it shall come as no surprise when I ask what, exactly, are your intentions regarding the human lands to the south.”

My mate was a beautiful balance of charm and power—and implied threat. He could handle them easily. So while he did what he was best at, it was time for me to embark upon my own mission.

Az had likely already completed his shadows’ sweep of the room. Half a thought had my own magic unspooling, invisible threads that wended around the table, lightly brushing over the occupants.

Both Az and I had come to seek a Made object, using our very different powers to detect whether one of our enemies possessed such a thing—and were dumb enough to bring it here.

Az hadn’t been able to confirm it a few days ago, when he’d braved Montesere’s highest peak on information from one of his spies: a Made object was being hunted by Montesere, Rask, and Vallahan, but did our enemies *already* have possession of a Made object? Did they seek a second, or were they still searching for their first? Aside from the Trove, which required that its bearer be Made, most other Made objects could be wielded by anyone with magic. A category that certainly included our enemies.

I was one of the few people in any territory who might be able to detect if they already had one. A Made object, either on them or recently used by one of them, would have left a lingering aura of power. A scent, like the odor of

smoke from a bonfire. Or so Nesta and Amren had claimed when Az presented his findings.

Nesta would have perceived such an object in a heartbeat, but her mere existence was already unsettling enough for these people. Bringing her would have been an unwanted distraction—and possibly interpreted as a threat. Elain, of course, was too inexperienced. So even though my Made powers were different from theirs, it was worth a shot. Worth it for Az and his shadows to see if something felt amiss. They were not Made, but they could sense such things.

Focusing now on my task, I vaguely heard the Grand Vizier of Montesere ask Rhys, "And why do you think we have any interest in the human lands?"

I let Rhys answer the preening male. "Because you refuse to sign the new treaty we've drafted. And you refuse to give any explanation as to why."

My magic coiled up the legs of their chairs, over their laps, their arms. I detected nothing.

"What reason do we need to decline," challenged the Queen of Vallahan, her husky voice like claws on stone, "other than refusing to have our fates dictated by a territory that endured no consequences from the war five centuries ago, yet thinks they know what is best for us?"

Nothing lingered about the king, the prince. My power traced over the queen's tattooed fingers, cutting along the lines of the runes. Nothing.

The Duke of Bernion said carefully, "I would agree with the Queen of Vallahan." He surveyed Rhys, Mor, and me with unflinching frankness. I forced myself to feign intense focus. As if I weren't wrapping my magic around them one by one. "Prythian only yielded a sliver of lands to humans, and that came from one court only." The Spring Court, the idle part of my mind supplied. I kept at my task. "Meanwhile, the continent was split in half. Some Fae lost their homelands entirely, their territories erased from existence, their people now scattered to the winds. And those of us who remained have had to share, our borders shrinking to the point of insult. Not to mention the massive swath of unattached Fae lands in the middle of the continent. They were intended for those without homelands to return to, but that never came to pass. They're now a chaotic patchwork of feuding lordlings and war-bands, leaderless and rotting away. Our campaign would reclaim those lands, too. Unify the Fae in them once more, with the incentive of stability, wealth, and a stake in the retaken human lands."

The words were enough to make me pause, just for a moment, to listen fully.

"The new treaty addresses that," Rhys answered.

"Your new treaty," the vizier countered, "allows for humans to decide whether to *sell* us back the land. Land that was ours long before humans crawled out of the mud into existence. And now we must *buy* it from them?"

My fingers curled into fists, heat sparking at my nails.

The Mistress reminded the vizier beatifically, "All of the Unseen's creations are worthy." She added with a slight twist of her lips, "Even if it is difficult to see that worth."

Heat singed my palms, but I kept my tone even as I asked, "And none of you believe that humans are entitled to lands of their own after millennia of slavery and torment?"

Stay focused on your hunt, Rhys instructed, but I ignored him.

"I believe," the duke parried, "that the humans have vast stretches of empty, unoccupied land. Land we once tended and farmed, now left fallow and decaying. If they don't use it, why shouldn't we?"

The Prince of Vallahan slapped a broad hand on the stone table. "The humans have had long enough, especially by their lifespans, to recover from any *torment*."

Fire simmered in my throat, but I shoved it down. It had been drawn by the flame in the prince's eyes, whatever ember of magic he possessed. I could control the various elements of my gifts, but occasionally they answered to something around me. Meeting a foe with power to match.

Like called to like.

But Rhys was right. I needed to focus. I had not come here to bandy words with a spoiled princeling.

Banking that answering fire, I resumed my work. Crept my magic over them again. Nothing on the Queen of Vallahan, nothing on her king. Nothing on the vizier or the Duke of Bernion. I moved on to the Mistress.

"The prince speaks truth," the Mistress agreed with a simpering smile, so like Ianthe's it turned my stomach. "My disciples report that the humans have little memory or knowledge of the War—or their ancestors' lives before it. They truly don't know any better."

I made myself concentrate. Swept my power's invisible hands over her green velvet robes, her slashing tattoos, the threads of pure gold in her

braids.

"And how," Mor asked, breaking through my focus, "do your disciples know this?"

The Mistress's tattoos flickered like distant lightning. My magic recoiled. "There are no borders for the Unseen."

I suppressed the shudder that went through my magic as *something* within her aura slithered in answer. In pleasure.

But it wasn't Made. Whatever had purred in delight at her praise, it wasn't what I sought.

"I will remind you, Mistress," Rhys said, power churning around him, as if either his temper was getting the better of him or he was trying to cover for any slip of my own power that the Mistress might detect, "that wall or no wall, the old line of demarcation still exists and is still honored. Fae are not allowed into human lands." No matter that we knew this rule had been broken by several people in recent months. We wouldn't be mentioning that.

"There are humans, lost and ignorant, who need our teaching," the Mistress said, and for a heartbeat, I wondered if she might be worse than Ianthe. "They need our guidance."

I was grateful to withdraw my magic and move on from her hateful essence. I paused my work for a moment, settling fully back into my body as Mor said, "These are debates we have had before." She turned to the King of Vallahan, then to the Duke of Bernion, perhaps the only voices of reason. Neither appeared remotely moved. So I stopped bothering to keep a neutral expression on my own face. At my side, I could feel Rhys doing the same, his power a dark song in my blood.

Mor went on to the king and duke, "I have been visiting your courts for almost two years now and have yet to receive an answer. I bring my High Lord and Lady today to ask you directly: Do you plan to march on human lands and expand your borders?"

Rhys and I stared them all down, Night Triumphant and the Stars Eternal.

"What business," the Queen of Vallahan sneered, "is it of yours?"

"The business," I shot back, "of people who wish to leave this world better than how we found it." The last request of the Suriel—my final promise to it.

"Better by whose definition?" The Queen of Vallahan scoffed. "Better for *us* would be more lands, our old borders rightfully returned. Better for the

humans, too, who do not speak to the land and to whom the land will never respond. We can coax the fields into fertility—and distribute the benefit from the harvests."

My crown weighed heavily, digging into my scalp, my skull. I kept my chin high, though, as I said, "The Fae have all the power. The humans have none. The least we can do is let them live in peace. Separate from us."

"And again I ask," the queen demanded, utterly unfazed, "what business is it of yours?"

I might have responded had Rhys not gone preternaturally still. What had he figured out? The bond between our minds lay silent.

The Queen of Vallahan continued with that vicious sneer, "I shall say it again: You rule one territory. One territory on an island. Prythian's size is but a drop compared to the vastness of the continent. And yet you believe that you may dictate to *us* what the fate of the world, the relations between Fae and human, immortal and mortal, shall be?"

I spread my hands on the table, tattoos dark as night against my pale skin. "I was born human. I know a thing or two about human and Fae relations."

I used the opportunity to again sweep my power over her spoiled son. Still nothing.

The Queen of Vallahan waved a hand, rings glinting above her tattoos. "There are others with similar knowledge. You call for this meeting with us, the rulers of entire kingdoms, when you lead a fraction of a territory. Are you authorized to speak on behalf of all Prythian? If you are so hell-bent on humans being entitled to our ancestral land, where is the delegation of mortals to plead their case? Or have you appointed yourself speaker for the humans of Prythian, too?"

I forced myself to tell Rhys calmly, *I'm done. None of them have a Made object on them, or any trace of recently using one. I checked them all twice.*

Az just said the same.

We could both be wrong, though, I admitted. *We should have brought Nesta.*

I wouldn't trust her to control herself, my mate said tightly.

I bristled, but now wasn't the time to delve into the lack of trust between my mate and my sister.

I trust you and Az, though—that between you two, you learned what we need to know.

Yes. None of them have been near a Made object recently.

Ever the silky courtier, Mor said, “The new treaty was agreed upon by many of the High Lords of Prythian.”

“Many,” the grand vizier noted, dripping with condescension, “but not all. I do not recall hearing from Autumn or Spring that they approve.”

“You have come a very long way,” Rhys said, night gathering at his broad shoulders like phantom wings, “for people who do not wish to even entertain the idea of treating with us.”

The Mistress of the Unseen inclined her head with that mock piety, gilded braids glinting. “We came to offer the honor of telling you face-to-face to stick to your lands. Leave the business of the continent to those who live there. If you wish to continue granting humans autonomy over that piece of land in Prythian, that is your right. But you do not dictate what we do across the sea.” Her eyes narrowed to burning slits, utterly unfazed by the dark power radiating from my mate. “Though you may believe you have the right—and might—to do so.”

I stilled, bracing for the blow. Rhys asked with unnerving serenity, “What does that mean?”

The Queen of Vallahan hissed, “You preach peace, yet you amass weapons of war.”

The King of Vallahan restrained his wife with a touch to her fur-bundled arm and said, a shade more tactfully, “It has come to our attention that the Night Court possesses several objects of ancient and terrible power. That the Dread Trove now lies in your hands, along with . . . other items.”

It shouldn’t have been a shock. The human queens, Briallyn especially, had known about the Trove. She could have told anyone. And Koschei, that malevolent force lurking in the continent’s heart, knew, too. I wouldn’t have put it past him to sow the information about, hoping to seed discord.

“We have no plans to wield the Trove,” Rhys said firmly.

He didn’t say, of course, that we *had* used it. Nesta had. And had risked all of us by—I shut my thoughts down and brought my attention back to the conversation at hand.

“That may be true, but you still *possess* the Trove,” the Duke of Bernion said. “You, with all your power, Rhysand, are still gathering more. We heard the Cauldron was also in play during that squabble between you and Hybern.”

“*Squabble*,” Mor spat, but Rhys motioned her down with a wave of his hand.

My mate crossed one leg over the other, casual despite the brewing tempest of power still gathering around him. “And what should I do with such objects when they cross my path?” He examined his neatly trimmed nails, the portrait of idle arrogance, even as death beckoned in his violet-blue eyes. “Shall I hand them over to you?”

“We would never expect such a thing,” the grand vizier sputtered, puffing up like a disgruntled owl, “but you will not fault us for bolstering our forces by trying to add to our own considerable arsenals.”

I tamped down every bit of surprise that sparked through me. They’d as good as confirmed what Az had reported. It was beyond anything we’d hoped to achieve in this meeting. And—*trying,* the vizier had said. They were *still* looking for this Made object, whatever it was.

At least now we didn’t have to pretend not to know.

And yet the stars in Rhys’s eyes went out. “What do you plan to add?” The wine goblets on the table rattled, though his magic had struck no blow.

The Queen of Vallahan smoothed a tattooed hand down her furs. “Prythian has its toys,” she preened. “We shall have our own.” She lifted her blue eyes to Rhys, lips curving upward. “If you wish to arm yourselves with the Dread Trove, to meddle with the Cauldron, then don’t play surprised when we, too, retrieve our lost birthrights.” Another sneer toward me. “You aren’t stupid enough to think that if we found one, we’d bring an object of power here, are you?”

She’d known what I was doing while they talked.

Again, my crown seemed to press harder into my head. Again, I forced myself to keep my chin aloft, shoulders back.

I felt nothing down the mating bond. Rhys’s face was as blank and empty as I’d ever seen it when he said, “You seek a Made weapon of your own, then.” It would have to be a Made weapon that did not require a Made bearer to wield it, but there were plenty of those. The items of the Dread Trove were the only ones I knew of that had so severe a restriction. “And if we disarm the Trove?” Rhys continued. “Will it discourage you from seeking a Made object to wield against us?”

“It is not possible to *disarm* these weapons,” said the Mistress of the Unseen, clicking her tongue. “If you claim to have destroyed them, we shall know it for the lie it is. Such Made things cannot be Unmade. Though we hear that your sister”—she grimaced at me—“Unmade a human queen recently.”

Nesta hadn't just Unmade Briallyn—she'd obliterated her from existence.

I didn't waste my breath denying it. Instead, I demanded, "And our word counts for nothing with you? If we write into the treaty that we shall not use the Trove, if we swear it on all we hold holy, you will still not believe us?"

The Queen of Vallahan smiled with soft wickedness. "No."

My mate's brewing power, the impenetrable darkness around him—they stalled, then faded. And in their wake, Rhys said with raw honesty, "We have no intention of going to war with either of your territories. Our possession of the Trove, of any Made objects, is entirely coincidental. There are no circumstances that would induce us to use them. It would be folly for you to pursue your own."

I nodded my solemn agreement, Mor following suit.

"Tell me this, then," the Duke of Bernion asked, exposing his roughened palms, "if we marched south to reclaim our ancient homelands from the humans, if you could not stop us with your armies, would you use the Trove to prevent it?"

Don't answer that, I cautioned Rhys.

Rhys's silence was answer enough for our enemies.

The duke smiled grimly, placing his hands palms down once more. "So it seems there are circumstances under which you *would* feel compelled to use the Trove. In which case, it's only right that we, too, possess such power."

"We came here in the name of peace—" I tried.

The Mistress broke in. "People who seek peace do not arm themselves for war."

"Besides," the grand vizier added, right on her heels, "not all of Prythian agrees with you. The Autumn Court is *very* amenable to the idea of reclaiming our rightful lands. They might well send their forces to aid in our holy march."

Beron, that bastard, had made it clear enough. Even having Eris's covert support might not be enough to sway his father back to reason.

"I see your rising fury," the Duke of Bernion said to me. "And—not desiring war myself—I would urge you to remember that Prythian is small enough as it is. Without the support of every single court, you are made even smaller. Consider the odds against you if you bring conflict to the continent. Consider the losses for your people."

"We are first and foremost considering the innocent human lives endangered by your impending invasion," Rhys said with enough bite that I

looked at him. His power remained harnessed, yet his face showed his disgust and unbridled rage.

"Our goal would be a bloodless conquest," the duke asserted quickly, as if noticing—and wisely fearing—that slip on Rhys's usual steely self-control. "Let the humans see the Fae forces gathered against them and lay down their weapons. They might not be as wise or learned as we are, but they are not stupid enough to start a war they can never win."

My blood simmered. The snobbery of the High Fae was as alive and well today as it had been five hundred years ago.

Yet Rhys said with terrifying quiet, "And what part does Koschei the Deathless play in these plans of yours?"

There it was. The suspicion, the worry we'd had for some time now. Confirmed by the death-lord's manipulation of Briallyn, and all the little steps he'd been taking subtly, indirectly, to move us around some game board we were only just figuring out. And confirmed again only days ago, when Azriel's shadow heard the males in the mountain cave speaking of Koschei and the onyx box that rumor claimed possessed his death. A thread, the shadow had claimed. His death had been woven into a life-thread—whatever that meant. We'd never heard of such a thing.

"Who's that?" the Queen of Vallahan asked my mate, too sweetly to be casual. Her husband's face was impassive. The prince, however, was glancing between his parents. It was clear that they did, indeed, know who Koschei was.

"I'd think you'd know the name of the creature pulling your strings," Rhys said mildly.

The King of Vallahan bristled, that impassive expression vanishing. "No such thing occurs within *my* borders—"

"We know of Koschei," the Duke of Bernion said darkly.

The Mistress of the Unseen sighed heavenward, pure dramatics. "He is but a petty sorcerer playing at being a death-god. We have no use for him."

I gave her a flat look. "You don't sound even halfway convincing."

She opened her mouth, but before she could snap a response, the duke cut in, "Our spies have long been aware of his presence. They prowl the mountains around his lake, ever watchful. If he so much as breathes in Montesere's direction, we hear of it."

"And are these reports," Rhys asked, his impeccable calm settling around him, "to keep your forces prepared against him? Or to better understand an

ally?"

"Koschei is no ally to Montesere," the duke insisted. The vizier and the Mistress were noticeably stone-faced, as were the Vallahan royals.

Rhys surveyed them one by one, but said to none of them in particular, "I hope, for all your sakes, that what you say is true."

"Is that a threat?" the Prince of Vallahan demanded. "Can we not ally with whomever we please? Or will you shove your nose into that business as well?"

Rhys studied his nails again. "It is simple advice. Whatever Koschei might have promised you, whatever the prize, it will not be the blessing you think it is." He flicked his eyes up to the King of Vallahan, to the Duke of Bernion. "Whatever he has said, I would advise against believing him."

"We have no contact with Koschei the Deathless," the Mistress seethed. "To engage with him would provoke any number of enemies against us—not only you. We are not so foolish. You're inventing things."

"The world has gone mad enough these days," Rhys said coolly, even as every part of me wanted to scream *liar* in her face. "I don't have a need to invent anything." He went on before anyone could respond, "But the advice was meant in kindness."

No one responded to that bit of truth. Not even the duke.

There were several territories on the continent who might be willing to fight against the alliance of Rask, Montesere, and Vallahan. We had tried since the war with Hybern to contact them, to no avail. They wanted nothing to do with us, our treaty, or any conflict. It was no small relief that they wanted no contact with Rask, Montesere, or Vallahan, either—Mor had discovered that our enemies had also been trying to woo them, with as little success as we'd had.

Mor asked into the sudden quiet, as if it were some conclusion, "So you're still set on this invasion, then?"

Their silence served as confirmation. Something low in my gut twisted.

Mor slammed a hand on the table. "A force of Fae marched for the humans' sake during the War. *We* marched for them." She pointed to the King of Vallahan, her brown gaze lit with dismay. "*Your father* marched for them. You're really going to spit on his memory, his sacrifice, and the sacrifice of your people, by destroying the cause he fought for?"

Something like shame and sorrow kindled in the King of Vallahan's deep-set eyes.

But his wife shrugged, again stroking her fur cloak. “The world has changed. What was once a lofty ideal of two lands, two peoples, has become a nightmare. You will find that many of those who once believed in your cause have lived out the reality for five centuries now—and found that some things were, in fact, better before the War. We are not so proud as to refuse to admit that we might have been wrong then. Just as you, with your new treaty, are wrong now.”

With that, the Queen of Vallahan stood, her son with her, merciless as the frozen land she ruled.

The grand vizier and the Mistress rose, too. The King of Vallahan and the Duke of Bernion followed after a beat, albeit reluctantly.

“We’re done here, I take it,” Rhys said softly, remaining seated.

The duke inclined his head. “We came out of respect for you. I came out of affection for her”—a nod toward Mor, glowering at all of them. “She made a valiant effort to convince us.”

This couldn’t be happening. Another war, another invasion, humans enslaved—

“Perhaps you have anticipated this for some time,” the Mistress crooned. “And that is why you gathered the Trove.” She gave me one of those hideous, beatific smiles. “In your deepest heart, you knew we would not be swayed. And I warn you now: To use that Trove is to damn your eternal soul. The Unseen shall punish you and yours for it.”

I bared my teeth. “I don’t answer to the Unseen.”

“Perhaps that is part of the problem,” the Mistress chided. “There are no gods left, no true Mother to guide Prythian. She has found your souls wanting and abandoned you. You are a godless, forsaken land—”

“That is beside the point,” the Duke of Bernion cut her off, earning a glare. But he lifted a hand, and the stone doors of the chamber groaned open, the icy sea air bursting in like a pack of wolves. “We came here to be very clear: There shall be no new treaty. And we reserve the right to arm ourselves, as you have done.” Though his words were firm, a sort of defeated weariness lingered about him.

The Prince of Vallahan shoved past the duke’s seat and toward the door, all swagger. “There are other weapons out there in the world, lost and forgotten.” He smirked over his shoulder. “But not for long. They stir, both Made and those imbued with ordinary, wicked magic. Awoken, perhaps, by this death-lord you speak of.”

His father gave him a sharp, reproving frown.

My blood chilled. Had Koschei's unholy presence truly woken the Made objects in the world? What Az's spy had heard indicated that he'd helped our enemies in their quest for this Made item, hinted at the location of the weapon—in exchange for what? Why?

My heavy breasts gave a throb, reminding me of what—who—awaited me at home. I got to my feet, the motion setting my milk leaking. I squared my shoulders as I swore, "We will continue to seek a path toward peace for all the peoples of this world."

The Queen and Prince of Vallahan snorted. But their king nodded sadly at me, at Mor, before vanishing into nothing.

The Mistress of the Unseen inclined her head to me. "May the Unseen and your neglectful Mother have mercy on your son's soul." Before I could wrap a whip of flame around her neck and squeeze, she, too, vanished, the vizier with her, sniffing his distaste. Only the Duke of Bernion remained, the icy wind from the open doors rustling his hair.

For a moment, the crashing of the sea beyond roared through the chamber.

The duke's craggy features filled with something akin to pain. "I have no desire for an invasion, or a war." He considered his broad, scarred hands, as if he could already see the blood on them. "But I will follow my king into battle if he goes."

Rhys's face was hard as the stone table between us. "Did your king even send you here today, Valderic?"

"No." His throat bobbed. "He refused to come himself, and refused to send me as his emissary. I lied to the vizier and the Mistress to get them to come—they think it was royally sanctioned."

Voice cracking with dread and anguish, Mor demanded, "Why bother, then?"

The duke regarded her plainly, openly. "I hoped you might sway them—and that they in turn might sway my king. I lost his ear long ago—they believed my lie that I've mended things with him. There will be hell to pay for it when I return home." He didn't seem to relish the thought. "But your worries about who Montesere might ally with are well founded. More than that, I cannot say. Not without damning myself and my entire family to traitorhood."

Rhys said nothing. The wind howled outside.

“You are a good male, Rhysand,” the duke continued, shaking his head slowly. “Be a smart one, too. Do not needlessly waste your people’s lives. This invasion will happen, and we will win it, no matter what you do. If you bring the Trove onto the battlefield, you will risk war coming to your doorstep as well. So do not engage. Do not provoke Koschei the Deathless, who whispers in so many ears and through so many dark dreams. Remain in Prythian, in your Night Court. Be happy. Raise your son.”

My throat closed up.

Rhys stared at the untouched wine as he asked hoarsely, “When does the invasion begin?”

The duke shook his head. “I could not tell you that, even if I knew. But considering that you bear the Trove, I’d guess that the others will wait to march until they feel they have a weapon to counter yours.”

I offered him a grim smile of thanks. He might not desire to be a traitor, but he’d given us this gift: a solid indication that none of the three territories had a Made object in their possession yet. Rhys closed his eyes—just for a beat. I reached for his hand. His fingers were as icy as the sea outside.

“Do not let the matters of the continent concern you,” the duke said to us. “I shall do my best to make it fair enough for the humans.”

Unlike the others, he walked slowly through the doors, staring for a moment at the sea before vanishing as his companions had done.

The wind howled, the braziers and fireplace guttering in the chill. Mor sank back into her seat, putting her head in her hands.

“You can come out now, Az,” Rhys said, voice heavy with exhaustion. An invisible weight was pressing on his shoulders already—I knew, because I bore it, too.

Az didn’t appear.

Rhys lifted his gaze toward the open doors, to the rocky earth of Storr, the violent sea beyond. “Azriel.”

Nothing.

Mor lowered her hands to her lap. “He’s not here.”

Rhys’s eyes blazed. “And where, exactly,” he asked, every word clipped, “did he go?”

Mor nodded to the now-empty chairs. To where the royals from Vallahan had been sitting. “Take a wild guess.”

CHAPTER 3

Azriel

Winter always arrived early in Vallahan. Though the Night Court was still basking in the glory of autumn, already veils of snow drifted through the hulking, barren mountains in which the fabled golden fortress of Thrudheim had been built.

The snow was a blessing and a curse. A blessing, for it made Azriel's enemies' visibility poor and provided him ample cover to observe as he pleased. A curse, for it also made *his* visibility poor—and hid any creeping foes.

But Azriel knew how to stay hidden, shadows or no. And this was certainly an improvement on the rain-lashed mountains of Montesere. Even if now, tucked into a crag high on one of the sister mountains that cradled Thrudheim, the wind was again shrill in his numb ears—but at least no teeth snapped within it. And at least nobody looked his way from the landing below.

The stronghold of the Vallahan royal family had been established in the crook where the two mountains came together—and on the slopes below, a village sprawled toward the now-frozen river and slumbering fields in the valley. With the mountains near-impassible, the keep dominated the high

ground, commanding a view over the lands below for miles and miles. A good spot for a fortress if one was defending against terrestrial armies.

Against people like him . . . it made them easy prey. And easier still to observe unseen.

As in the river house and the House of Wind, the wards around Thrudheim prevented anyone from winnowing directly inside. Which kept Az out of the building proper, but also allowed him to watch the three royals marching from the formal landing site—a circular stone area framed with carved arches depicting rearing rams, reserved solely for the royal household—across the drawbridge that spanned the frozen moat, toward the golden gates of the fortress itself.

Golden was a generous way to describe the building—the name stemmed only from the pale stone that had been hauled in from thousands of miles away, and the occasional, now-peeling scraps of gold leaf on the carved facade.

Vallahan had seen better years. Centuries. Those fields in the distance hadn't yielded a bountiful crop in ages, the soil long since leached of its richness, despite their shamans' best efforts to regenerate its fertile magic. And though the Autumn Equinox was only days away, no festive decorations to honor the bounties of the harvest had gone up. As if they'd had nothing to reap—no gods left to thank.

But that wasn't Azriel's focus, not as he peered through the snow toward the three royals bundled in their furs, the guards along the moat bridge saluting with their spears.

Their enemies were hunting for a Made weapon of their own. So he'd come to figure out which one was tackling it. Rask was too far, too vast, too well guarded for him to slip in on a whim like this, and Montesere's spy network always had him treading carefully in their territory, but Vallahan . . . It was easy enough to listen in on them for a few moments. And he'd be a fool to pass up the opportunity, especially now, when the task would be fresh on their minds. So he'd come, appearing mere seconds after the royals, who were still fuming over the conversation on Storr.

Granting his shadows only enough power as was required, Azriel bid them to whisper what they heard from the darkness beneath the bridge.

"That was a complete waste of time," the Queen of Vallahan was ranting to her king, breath clouding the frosty air. "We should never have gone."

The king said calmly, “We owed it to Morrigan to sit down with them. I’d promised her as much.”

The young Prince of Vallahan spat on the ice-crusted stones, narrowly missing the leather boot of one of the saluting guards. The guard didn’t flinch—and the prince didn’t offer an apology. Preening asshole. “You favor Morrigan too much. She worked her charm on you.”

The bearded king shot his son a reprimanding look—an aging warrior plagued by a son who was not a worthy successor. “I have known Morrigan longer than you have been alive. She had my respect well before she came here. Her behavior in these halls only deepened my sentiments.”

His queen slid him a glare. “She’s as foolish and softhearted as her High Lady.”

Her tone grated talons down Azriel’s temper, enough that he checked the backs of his half-frozen hands to make sure his Siphons weren’t flickering with blue light. Thankfully, they remained slumbering—a weapon he kept under far tighter control than Cassian, whose Siphons often acted as a mirror to his own volatile emotions.

The keep gates groaned open, the carved rams built into each door parting their butting heads to let the royals through. Once they crossed Thrudheim’s threshold and wards, they’d be beyond his shadows’ power to hear.

“Morrigan makes no difference where our plans are concerned,” the prince declared, sniffing. “I’m sick of speaking of her.”

Az leaned closer, ignoring the numbing blast of snow in his face.

The King of Vallahan didn’t reply as he continued toward the gates and the snow-dusted courtyard beyond. The queen fell back a step and turned to her son, her wheat-colored hair buffeted in the wind as she advised, “You leave on the morrow to seek what we need. Rest tonight, my love.”

The prince only nodded, grim and determined.

Azriel tensed, a plan already taking form. If the prince was winnowing tomorrow to wherever he was going, he’d have to walk back out of the fortress, and might provide another few snippets of information before vanishing. And if the prince was traveling on foot, then Az could get high enough in the sky to track him undetected, and—

The Prince of Vallahan whined to his mother, “Going to that hellhole on Rothorn was a dead end—and now our enemies are aware we’re hunting for a Made weapon. Time races against us. Against me.” Az tensed. He’d been

right to pick here over Montesere. The Prince of Vallahan had been there on the mountain. Hunting alongside people from Montesere and Rask. "And why did we need to go to that farce of a gathering today? We *know* they have the Trove; we didn't need them to confirm it."

"It was not my choice to do so," the queen said stiffly. "But your father—your *king*—wanted to hear it from their lips."

Azriel gritted his teeth. Well, they'd walked into that one. They hadn't so much as tried to deny they possessed the Trove. But Vallahan didn't know what else they possessed.

Not that it made a lick of difference. They had confirmation that their enemies were going after a Made weapon of their own. Though he supposed if they knew the true total of how many the Night Court possessed, they might indeed launch a war upon them.

Truth-Teller hung heavy as a lodestone at his side—one of those secret Made weapons, though he'd only recently learned this about the blade that he'd wielded for centuries. He'd carried it, slept with it beneath his pillow, sliced with its wicked edge all these years without having the faintest inkling that it was Made. He'd never seen any hint of power from it save for what his hand wrung from their enemies. An unholy blade for a tarnished soul. He supposed he and Truth-Teller deserved each other, and yet he hadn't drawn it in weeks. Not since—

"My father has grown too cautious in his old age," the prince grumbled, steps from Thrudheim's gates now. The king was already far ahead, as if eager to be rid of his family.

The royals of Vallahan had been matched in an arranged marriage, Az remembered from the history Mor had compiled. The queen had been a powerful warlord's daughter, and Vallahan, facing unrest thanks to those failing fields in the valleys, had needed her father's forces to shore up the military. It seemed little love had blossomed between them in the centuries since—or since the arrival of their son nine decades ago.

The young prince had yet to mate or marry, which left a door open for an advantageous, rock-solid alliance. It was doubtful they'd allow anyone from the Night Court to wed into their family—not that Az thought anyone would agree to marry the prick. There were other courts, but it was far more likely that a territory like Montesere or Rask was already vying to seal that union.

Which made it all the more necessary for Azriel to observe who entered and departed Thrudheim, if any emissaries from those territories arrived.

"I want you to find it," the queen ordered her son. "To bring this boon back to your father, to Vallahan. It should be in our hands, no one else's."

He marked that tidbit. Vallahan, Montesere, and Rask might be allied, but could that unity be broken apart by the race to attain whatever this Made weapon was? They'd clearly trusted each other enough to join forces recently, but how strong was that faith? It seemed as if the prince intended to strike out on his own—did Montesere and Rask know Vallahan was going rogue?

Perhaps that was the best route to stopping this invasion: destroying the triple alliance by turning them on each other. He'd have to get spies and agents deep into all three courts, Rask being the most difficult, but if he could undermine them, use the hunt for this Made weapon to get them at each other's throats, reveal the prince's unauthorized, secret hunt outside of their alliance . . . it might work. And was precisely the sort of unsavory, dishonorable scheming that he'd always excelled at—a cunning gift. Or curse.

Azriel glanced to the Vallahan queen and prince, but Thrudheim's gates were already shut, the rams butting heads once more, sealing the royal family within.

His shadows caught it, then. The muttering of the guard.

"Pampered little brat," one of them grunted. The one who'd nearly been spat on.

None of the guards contradicted him. No one cried foul at the dishonor.

Interesting. A prince who did not command the hearts of his soldiers. Another string to pull. Collapse the triple alliance, undermine the ruling order of each territory, thus ensuring the Fae in the free lands below had no incentive to join them—

Later. He'd already lingered too long here.

With his shadows swirling around him like a living cloak, Az vanished, leaving only a hot puff of his breath behind.



"It went well, then," Cassian drawled from where he'd thrown himself on the couch before the fire in Rhys's formal study.

“Supremely well,” Feyre said, easing onto the couch beside him, Nyx in her arms at her bared breast. “They’re even coming for Solstice now.”

Azriel snorted, unable to help it, even as he kept to the armchair by the window, content in the deep shadows of the velvet curtains framing it. They’d all been here when he’d returned, and Rhys had barely given him more than a nod—though he’d definitely eyed the snow still melting on the scales of his armor.

Azriel’s shadows, of course, had reported who was present prior to his entrance, but he’d blocked out their murmuring before they could also report on who else was nearby. That was a distraction he didn’t want or need right now.

Not with so much information in his head, so many plans taking form. His skin tingled with the need to move, to start doing what he did best.

“Another war on the horizon,” Cassian said, crossing his legs at the ankles, the mud splattered on his boots still drying. It smelled of autumnal woods near the sea, Az’s shadows whispered. “What else is new?”

“I don’t know how you can find this the least bit amusing,” Mor scolded, tossing her sheet of golden hair over her shoulder. “This is nothing like Hybern. And will be nothing like the Sundering War, either. It will be worse.”

Az’s cascading plans halted at how somber she sounded.

He couldn’t remember who had started calling the war five centuries ago *the Sundering War*, but it had stuck. Hopefully, this next conflict wouldn’t require nearly so dramatic a name. Hopefully, it wouldn’t materialize at all—though Az knew that was a fool’s dream. As most of his dreams turned out to be.

Azriel didn’t miss the predatory gleam in Cassian’s eyes as he said casually, “We’ll deal with it.”

His pulse is quickening; fear runs rampant beneath—

Az ignored his shadows again. He didn’t need to know every single detail of Cassian’s emotional state—not when his brother wore it on his face.

Go be somewhere else, he willed his shadows. *I’ll have work for you soon enough.*

He could have sworn they slunk away, tails between their proverbial legs, and curled up in a pocket of darkness by the shut doors. He ignored them.

“And how do you propose we deal with it, Cassian?” Amren asked from the armchair across from Azriel. “With what army? At what cost?”

Rhys must have filled the others in while Az had been in Vallahan.

Feyre cradled Nyx closer. The only sign of her dread before she said, "They're all afraid of us. They pretended they weren't, but they are."

Az nodded. His shadows had confirmed as much during the meeting. He himself knew the tang of that fear all too well—had grown up with it stinging his senses just before someone called him *monster*, *demon*, *abomination*. He could sense it in others with almost a preternatural ability, shadows or no.

"They're afraid of the Trove," Amren corrected, drumming her long red nails on the arm of the chair. "And as long as we retain possession, as long as we have someone here who can wield it, they will limit this invasion to their shores—and leave us alone here in Prythian."

Az didn't want to, but he looked. So did the rest of them.

A lone figure stood by the far window, gazing at the front lawn and the turquoise river beyond. Toward the very spot where a stranger had landed four weeks ago.

Azriel clenched his teeth, avoiding the urge to touch Truth-Teller's hilt.

He'd been in this house, poring over Mor's latest report from Vallahan, when his shadows hissed in his ear: *She's here in the grass and mist; she has come. She smells of another world; the bloodline is* back—

He'd stalked onto the lawn, silent as death, and seen her: a red-haired female who smelled both Fae and human, in strange clothes and garishly pink shoes, coated in blood that didn't smell like her own—a female's blood that was not human or Fae or any manner of creature from this world.

The stranger's name was Bryce Quinlan.

She had winnowed onto the lawn—and yet she hadn't. *She fell from the stars. Fell from the rock, fell from the sea—*

His shadows had been babbling, trying to put into language what they were puzzling out with the female's every gasping, shuddering breath.

Then Truth-Teller had begun thrumming. Singing. And right as he'd crept to the kneeling female and angled the blade against her golden throat . . . he'd spied the great black sword.

Truth-Teller had leaped in his hand, and only his determined grip on the knife had kept it from falling out of his grasp. And then his iron will had him following a protocol beaten into his very blood. Putting a potential enemy in a blindfold, keeping her unaware of where she was going or who

was around her. Flying in several different directions to further disorient and unnerve her.

Not that Bryce had needed any more unnerving. She'd been shaking in his arms. Sobbing, though she hadn't shed any tears. She was soaked in that other person's blood, as if she'd bathed in it.

But there was no hatred, no sense of a vicious warrior's triumph about her. Only fear and despair and pain and terror and a deep, shattering grief.

In those initial moments, he'd been so stupidly pitying that he'd brought her to the town house, not to the nearest holding cell or to the Hewn City. No, that had come later.

It ranked amongst the most reckless and idiotic decisions he'd ever made. No one had said so, but Azriel knew it—and would never forget it, either. He'd brought an outsider from another world into the heart of his home city, surrounded by families and children.

So much had happened after that. So much, and so quickly.

Judging by the silence in the room now, the others were remembering it, too. The Mother knew they were all still processing what had occurred, and what they'd learned.

Az had just done what had usually served him well: buried it down deep and moved on. Even if he still wouldn't draw Truth-Teller. Hated even attaching it to his body. Maybe he'd get lucky and a sharp wind would one day rip off not only his wings, but the cursed blade, too. Spare him from actually working up the nerve to chuck it in the nearest trash bin, where it deserved to be.

Nesta continued staring out the window as she said to none of them in particular, "Am I even allowed near the Trove these days?"

Azriel might have regretted bringing Bryce Quinlan to the town house, but at least he'd retained a healthy wariness of her. Nesta, on the other hand . . . Nesta had ultimately, naïvely trusted the female. And had thus nearly destroyed them all.

Cassian's face remained hard as steel.

"Vallahan and Montesere don't know that you're banned from wielding the Trove," Amren reminded her.

For a heartbeat, Az wished his shadows had remained close enough to read the nuances of Amren's harsh tone. But even if they had been, he might not have dared ask them to. Not with Amren.

"And if Vallahan and Montesere ever learned what happened with Bryce Quinlan, they'd march on us immediately," Mor said, brown eyes almost golden as she surveyed the crackling fire. "You gave the Mask to Bryce to *take to another world*, Nesta. She might have convinced you she needed it to win her own war, but it may very well spark a new one here if others find out."

"She gave it back," Nesta argued, still not turning from the window.

"Yes," Rhys said icily, "and now our enemies have every right to take the Trove by force to 'protect' *this* world from our good intentions."

Though Nesta's earth-shattering power had been diminished—yielded so the babe in this room might live—enough remained for her to command the Trove. To make her a threat. To allow her to Make things as she willed.

Was it a relief for Nesta to lose some of that monstrous power, as it would be for him? She hadn't let on, even before Bryce Quinlan had landed on the front lawn.

Tension snapped taut through the room. Az felt, more than saw, his shadows ripple, aching to sweep between his friends like a phantom wind and report back on every twitch, to paint for him a portrait of what they were all feeling. *Stand down*, he ordered them.

His shadows slumped back to the floor by the doors. He gave them a withering glare.

"That's not the point," Cassian started, and Az didn't miss the pain in his brother's eyes. Even Cassian was angry at Nesta and what she had chosen to do—and even more pained by this new distance between them all. That Rhys was even in the same room as Nesta was a solid step forward after these three weeks, but it didn't mean any of them forgave her.

Azriel certainly didn't.

Bryce Quinlan had lied to them and—a pang twisted through him—had stolen Truth-Teller before fleeing back to her world. She'd reached for Azriel's dagger, and the blade had flown to her. Just as it had tried to do that first moment on the lawn.

It wasn't only that Bryce had stolen Truth-Teller. Truth-Teller had *abandoned* him. Bryce had called it, and like a faithful dog, the blade had raced to her hand.

As if five centuries with him meant nothing. As if *he* meant nothing. He hadn't drawn the blade since. Could barely stand to look at it whenever he

tethered it to his side, this dagger that found him so lacking it fled his hand at the first chance.

And despite all that, Nesta had still given Bryce the Mask to use against her world's enemies. With Bryce's human parents, Ember and Randall, as collateral.

Nesta had handed over one of the most powerful weapons in their world to a veritable stranger. And when Rhys—when all of them—had demanded to know why, Nesta had simply said that it was *the right thing to do*.

Without consulting a single person, Nesta had risked the fate of their world.

"The point," Cassian plowed ahead, the only one not looking toward his mate, "is that these assholes on the continent are going to make their move soon—and they want some special power of their own before they do. So what's *our* move if that happens?"

"We don't let it happen. We keep them from obtaining anything," Feyre said, hooking a finger in Nyx's mouth to unlatch him from one breast before pivoting him to the other. Eyes closed, the dark-haired babe barely noticed or cared, so long as his feeding and his mother's warm closeness wasn't interrupted. "We find out what they're seeking and then we beat them to it."

Az's High Lady glanced at him, conveying all he needed to know: he'd be the one sent to uncover what their enemies were hunting. Exactly as he'd planned.

No one likes hearing I told you so, *Az*, his High Lady said into his mind, a wry smile on her pretty face.

I wasn't going to say anything, he replied, trying to keep his own expression neutral. Feyre had always been able to make him smile—he sometimes wondered if she knew how rare that was. How much it meant to him.

"That's a tall order," Amren cautioned Feyre. "There are any number of Made objects loose in the world, either known or forgotten. It'd be a waste of our efforts to try to find all of them before our enemies do. And there are some that should stay forgotten."

"We might not have that luxury," Feyre said. "The Made objects are stirring, whether we want them to or not. And Koschei's rising power is the likely cause."

Amren frowned deeply. If there was anyone who could confirm this, it would be her. She said at last, "Koschei is a death-lord. If Made objects are stirring in response to his restlessness, then I would be *very* concerned about what manner of power those objects contain. Like calls to like."

The words hung like a dark cloud. Az suppressed a shiver of dread at the thought.

But Cassian said, polishing his ruby Siphon with the back of his jacket sleeve, "Then it's all the more vital that we find what our enemies are hunting before they do."

"This could be a lure to distract us," Rhys said, dragging a hand through his raven-dark hair. "A bluff, even."

"It's not," Azriel said at last. He usually preferred to watch from the shadows and only contribute when absolutely necessary. He had always felt more comfortable that way. People revealed more about themselves when left to speak as they pleased—when they forgot he was present. He stiffened against the discomfort of having all eyes on him. "The Prince of Vallahan departs tomorrow to once again hunt for something. I heard him whining to his mother about being in that group on Rothorn Mountain a few days ago."

"What is he looking for, though?" Amren challenged. "Did you hear specifics?"

"No," Azriel admitted, folding his wings in tight. He didn't mind being questioned—not even by Amren, who could unsettle the steeliest warrior—but stepping up, speaking up . . . Five centuries later, he still found that it went against his nature. He pushed through. "But it was in the context of discussing the Trove, and looking for their own Made object."

"You're not going after the prince," Rhys said with cool authority. Feyre raised a surprised brow at the order, in complete opposition to what she'd tacitly implied to Az a moment ago. Seated on the couch across from Feyre, still in his finery and with his black crown, Rhys was every bit the High Lord of the Night Court the world feared.

Feyre, Az had already noted, had ditched her crown on a side table—as if still not entirely used to it. Or maybe she wanted to forget it, with her son bundled in her arms.

"Like hell I'm not," Az said. "We need to know what the prince is looking for, especially if Vallahan thinks it can stand against the Trove."

Rhys shook his head. “The Prince of Vallahan, preening and rash as he seems, knows us well enough to anticipate that you or one of your wraiths will follow him.” He added before Az could protest, “It is also possible that Rask and Montesere are racing to find this object, too. The Prince of Vallahan might not even be the first one to get to it. You can’t be in three places at once. And I’ll remind you that Montesere has spies of its own to track *you*. The Monteserian windwolves are no joke.”

Az couldn’t help the answering flutter in his Siphon, readying its power against an enemy mercifully hundreds of miles away. But he shoved the memory of a few days ago away, the howls on Rothorn’s summit that still chilled his blood, as he said, “Then I’ll send Cerridwen and Nuala to whatever territories I’m not in.” His half-wraith spies were perfectly capable at such things.

“That’s a possibility,” Rhys said, crossing his legs. The firelight bounced off the fine dark leather of his boots. “But the fact remains that if any of the three territories finds what they’re all searching for, we will still not be able to stand against their united force—plus any of the unaffiliated Fae that join them—when they push into the human lands. Even if they *don’t* find this object, we won’t be able to stand against them. Is it worth it, then, to spread ourselves thin in pursuing it?”

Feyre’s face now seemed set in contemplation of her mate’s reasoning. *She’s leaning toward agreeing with him now*, his shadows whispered, having inched closer without his noticing.

Amren asked Mor, “And the bastards from Rask truly didn’t deign to come today? Not a single emissary?”

Mor nodded gravely.

They’d anticipated that Rask likely wouldn’t show—Az had argued that this meant it wasn’t worth going at all. But both Feyre and Rhys had insisted. *We owe it to all the lives that will be lost in this war to try for a peaceful solution*, Feyre had said.

It had shamed some part of Az to realize he hadn’t so much as thought of that.

But that was why Feyre had been destined to be High Lady—why she and Rhys were best left to make the decisions. Azriel merely bloodied himself and others to make sure their vision of peace was attainable. He’d keep doing so until the bitter end. Even if there was nothing left of his soul long before then.

Not that there was much left of it anyway. Maybe there'd never been much of it to begin with. Perhaps that was why the shadows had found him. They'd sensed some gaping void, some innate *lack*, and come to roost in him. It wouldn't have surprised him to learn he'd been born without a soul at all.

Mor added grimly, "Let's not forget that Koschei, Made items awakening or no, is also pulling the strings of all these territories. I've never been able to get proof of it while at their courts, but I can *feel* it." With that remarkable truth-sensing gift of hers, she could pick up on much that went unspoken.

Fraught silence settled over the room once more, interrupted only by Nyx's soft gulping as he drank, little wings twitching with pleasure.

Feyre said at last, "Koschei wishes all of us distracted, fighting and killing each other. Prythian, Montesere, Rask, Vallahan, and any other territories that might join in. He'll use our distraction to break the spell containing him with little interference."

"We were distracted plenty before now," Cassian countered, rubbing his jaw. "Why not do this during the Hybern War? That would have been the time."

"Perhaps that's what he needed," Amren mused. "Time. The war with Hybern would have been ideal, but if he didn't have what he required yet, he'd have been unable to act. Whatever he was waiting for, he's now moved the pieces into place, and will try to distract us with this new conflict." She examined her red nails. "To make matters worse, it sounds as if the territories are well aware of his influence—if not outright allying with him. They'll never admit it, though. Too many other realms and kingdoms would balk at allowing a death-lord to break free."

"The Mistress of the Unseen implied the same," Mor agreed.

"So we prove to the rest of the world that these three territories are working with him," Feyre said. "Maybe we don't even need to rally a force against these armies. Maybe we just provide clear proof of their working with Koschei to other powerful territories, and we'll find ourselves with enough allies that they'll back down from any invasion. Maybe the unaffiliated Fae from the open territory in the middle of the continent would even rally against them—that would make it virtually impossible for their armies to get to the border with the Mortal Lands unless they go through the Helbronn Mountains."

“We can and should do that,” Amren said. “But Koschei is still trying to free himself from his lake. And that must not be allowed to happen under any circumstances.”

Az lifted his brows, unable to help himself.

“He’s likely been driven mad by millennia of containment,” Amren clarified. She would know. She’d spent thousands of years in the Prison. Had somehow survived it.

She still dreams of that darkness, his shadows began to whisper. He shoved them back toward the outer edges of the room with a silent, mental snarl. They knew better than to get that close to Amren.

Amren went on, “A sane death-lord is threat enough. But one lost to madness? We cannot begin to imagine the horrors, the suffering that would be unleashed upon the world. Especially if he gets his hands on a Made item, which I imagine he intends to do once one of these territories is in possession of it. He will swoop in to claim it through manipulation and treachery. And when Koschei gets it in his claws, there shall be no going back.”

Az resisted the urge to tap his foot, to pace toward the door and fly away, get started on this hunt when it seemed every second was precious.

“It sounds as if they’re tied together, then,” Cassian said. “Stop the territories—and therefore Koschei—from getting this Made item, expose their alliance with Koschei to the world, and thus create a coalition of territories willing to stand with us, the might of which will convince Rask, Montesere, and Vallahan to drop this invasion.”

Silence followed—one of contemplation, of agreement.

“So we start by getting eyes and ears in these three territories,” Feyre said, nodding to Az, again with that *You were right* gleam in her eyes. “We need to figure out what Made item they want, who specifically is going after it, and try to find any definitive proof of them working with Koschei.”

“Vallahan seems primed to slip up,” Mor said. “They’re the roughest of the three territories—still a few centuries behind the others in many ways. We should plant Nuala and Cerridwen in Rask and Montesere, but I think we’ll find the most potential for weakness in Vallahan.”

Az could only stare at her. Radiant. Glowing with power and surety. She had always been that way—and he’d loved her for it from the very first time he’d had the honor of witnessing Mor in her element.

A fool's love. A boy's love. Five centuries of waiting in the shadows, yearning. Five centuries of his own inability to see what was in front of him. He'd never again let himself be that stupid.

"The Duke of Bernion didn't seem unquestioningly loyal to his king," Feyre said, drawing Az back to the conversation at hand. "He commands a sizeable chunk of Montesere's army. Perhaps he could be enticed to reveal more of their plans and Koschei's involvement."

"Valderic's sister is to marry the king's son," Mor explained. "He stands to gain far more from staying true to the royal family than joining our side."

Az hadn't known that. These were shreds of information that he should have gathered, that he should be presenting, not Mor. But Mor had been the one chosen to infiltrate these territories, not by stealth but by charm—something he'd never possessed. Not like Mor or Rhys or even Cassian, in his own way.

Azriel knew he'd never had that gift. He was a monster—merely a creature. Best left skulking in shadows. Most suited to collecting information through subterfuge or pain.

The shadows had taught him about that. How to extract truth with agony. Where to slice and twist so that enemies spilled their guts, sometimes literally. He'd named his blade Truth-Teller for what it had carved from their foes. He should have called the knife Butcher's Blade instead.

Az pushed the thought aside as he caught Feyre peering at the child in her arms, stroking his cap of black hair with one tattooed hand. Tracing her fingers over the tips of the wings beginning to bud claws at their apex. Whatever thoughts filled her mind, she kept them to herself.

Out of respect for that privacy, Az again ordered his pack of shadows to keep back.

The shadows couldn't read minds, but they could read scents, expressions, even the most minute. And from that, they formed a picture to report to him. He understood them all too well, even when he didn't want to.

It was why he only gave them the barest sliver of his power, never anything more. They caused enough misery in his life.

Nesta said, still not turning from the window, "Are we sure that other territories would stand with us, even if we had proof of these three working with Koschei?" They were frank, stark words. Spoken like the Valkyrie

she'd become. "We need to be certain. Need to know who we should even be delivering this information to. Who is worth the risk."

No one replied. Not even Rhys.

There had only been a few instances in their shared history when Azriel had seen his High Lord at a loss for words, for ideas. As powerful as Rhys was, it was his razor-sharp mind that was his greatest asset. His ability to think two steps ahead of friend and foe.

Az had prided himself on making it possible—on giving his brother the information to stay those two steps ahead. And for so long, Az had amassed that information by any means necessary. No matter the cost.

Until he'd seen Feyre's grimace that day in the cell beneath the Court of Nightmares, with the Autumn Court soldiers tied to the chairs before them. The flicker of pain, of memory—of her own torture at Amarantha's hand.

He was no better than Amarantha. How many had he tortured without thinking of who they were, who loved them? He'd lost count.

"We have a short window to find these allies," Amren advised Rhys darkly, her eyes softening as they lingered on his crown, as if she knew its weight. "A short window to chart our course of action while our enemies hunt for this Made item."

"Short, yes," Feyre agreed, "but even if Montesere, Rask, and Vallahan dispatch their armies for the human lands today, they'll need to stop well before the open Fae lands' southernmost border to camp for the winter, until the spring thaws out the passes of the Helbronn Mountains. Even Koschei cannot change the seasons. We have some time."

"This time will come and go quicker than you think," Amren warned. Feyre straightened. But Amren had moved on, her silver eyes pinning Azriel to the spot. His shadows rustled by the door in answer, snakes coiling to strike. Even the twin Siphons atop his hands seemed to waken, priming for a fight. A thought, and they dimmed again. Another power he loathed, used only when necessary. Amren didn't so much as blink. "Don't you dare set foot in Vallahan, boy."

He had a healthy respect for Amren, but he wouldn't be cowed by her. "We need to track the prince before he finds that Made item—"

"I'm going back," Mor declared.

Azriel whipped his head toward her. That beautiful face that had haunted him for so many years, that face he'd built so many dreams around for his future, their future—

“After Nyx’s Naming Day, I’ll be the one returning to Vallahan,” she said to him, almost pleadingly. “To do what needs to be done.”

“Absolutely not,” Cassian blurted, voicing the shock and fear Azriel couldn’t master enough to form into a retort. “They know what we’re about now.”

“Then I can stop attempting subtlety,” Mor said, waving a hand. “I’ll have the rest of the fall and all winter to observe them and find proof that they’re working with Koschei.”

Azriel glanced between his High Lady and High Lord. “You can’t be seriously considering this.”

Feyre’s and Rhys’s expressions remained hard—unmoved. Az might have objected, but he understood. He’d seen the respect the King of Vallahan showed Mor. That Montesere, too, showed her. If there was someone here who might stand a chance of being heard . . . it was Mor.

But to send her back now, when their enemies had confirmed that this court possessed the Trove—

“They won’t dare hold me hostage,” Mor said gently to Az, as if reading his mind. Or just his face. He schooled it back into neutrality. Once he would have crawled to hear her speak to him with such tenderness. Such concern. “Made item or no, they’re still too afraid we’ll use the Trove on them, even if it’d give them all the justification they’d need to obliterate us.” She offered Az a grim smile. “Trust me—I’ll get what we need.”

He did trust her. She’d learned the hard way how to navigate an adder’s nest. Had spent years in that hellhole called the Court of Nightmares. She bore the scars to prove it. He’d loved her for it—for surviving, thriving, despite what she’d been born into.

A similar hell to the one he’d been born into. Had also survived.

He’d thought that had destined them for each other, two people born in darkness so different from what Rhys had later offered, two people born to fathers who loathed their very existence and mothers with little to no ability to protect them—or, in the case of Mor’s mother, no desire to protect her daughter at all. Two people who possessed unique powers to glean information, *truth*, whether they wanted to or not.

It hadn’t meant shit. In the end, through no fault of Mor’s own, it hadn’t meant a damn thing.

But for Mor to go back across the sea alone, with the stakes even higher—

“I trust you,” Feyre said pointedly to Mor. “We all do.”

Shame flooded Azriel. He was no whelp to be managed, whose feelings needed to be reined in and worked around.

But Mor gave their High Lady an appreciative wink. And he understood: Mor wasn’t venturing once more into enemy territory to bandy with a bunch of war-bent conquerors only for the sake of the humans. It was also for the sake of the child in this room, half-drunk on his mother’s milk, utterly safe and contented. For if another war came, one or both of his parents would fight in it.

And if one of his parents didn’t come back, the other wouldn’t survive, either. Thanks to that stupid, lovesick bond they’d made, the promise between their souls: if Rhys or Feyre died, the other would go, too.

In the months since that horrible fact had been revealed, Amren had sought a way to undo it, to no avail. Helion had put the scholars at his one thousand libraries on the hunt, too, also to no avail.

Azriel rarely thought Rhys or Feyre were fools, but to be that reckless, to be that in love—

He’d never known such a feeling. Once, he’d longed for it with his entire being, but now . . . now he wasn’t sure if he ever wanted it.

“What do we do with the Trove in the meantime?” Nesta asked, breaking the quiet with a question no one really wanted to ask. She turned toward the group at last.

It wasn’t the same face that Az had seen emerging from the Blood Rite this past spring. This one was hollower—bleaker. As if, in recent weeks, she’d stumbled back toward who she’d been a year ago, a female who saw little joy to be found. Whose blue-gray eyes lacked their usual intensity.

Az couldn’t find it in himself to feel bad for her. Or even for Cassian, who looked at her with such pain and anger. Nesta had made her choices. She could live with the consequences.

“The Trove remains in its current hiding place with me,” Rhys said firmly, and Feyre nodded. “Our enemies and Koschei could very well be hoping that we’ll panic and move the Trove. They are likely watching our every move out of the expectation that we do so, in order to catch us in the process.”

Az glanced toward his shadows by the door. They’d reported nothing—nor had any of his flesh-and-blood spies, but that didn’t mean their enemies didn’t have their own methods of surveillance. He certainly knew

Montesere had a similarly unearthly arsenal of watchers to deploy around the world.

Amren said firmly to Rhys and Feyre, "You should go to Fomoria."

Even Az jerked in surprise. The large territory in the northeast of the continent had ignored all overtures at contact since even before the Hybern War. From both them and their enemies, thankfully.

Feyre shook her head. "Without proof of the three territories working with Koschei, I doubt they'd even grant us an audience. Plus, we've already tried to contact them—thrice now."

"Try again," Amren said simply. "They're the only territory that might make Rask think twice, not to mention Montesere and Vallahan. If Rask backs down, the other two will as well."

"Short of showing up on their doorstep and banging on the gates," Feyre said a shade testily, "there's no way they answer our letters or invitations to meet."

"So show up on their doorstep," Amren pushed. "Bang on the gates until they open."

Feyre crossed her arms. "That would be too aggressive, even for us. It might annoy them enough that they run right to Rask."

"From what I've heard," Mor chimed in, "they're not as vindictive as that, but they *can* be quick to anger."

"Then do what you're good at," Amren ordered Rhys. "Charm them; trick them."

Feyre said sharply, "You told us moments ago that we don't have time, but that would take a great deal of time. With no guarantee of success." Amren opened her mouth to reply, but before she could make a sound, Feyre kept speaking. "We're better off finding allies within Prythian than dashing across the world to woo people who have shown us every time we've attempted contact that they don't want to be bothered."

"You will need far more than Prythian to thwart our enemies' armies," Amren replied, eyes flashing. "You will need allies on the continent. And Fomoria is your best bet. You should go—leave right after Nyx's Naming Day, if you can."

Feyre was having none of it. "We don't even know the full scope of their forces and power—we could waste all that precious time for *nothing*."

Amren bristled, and Az braced himself. "I'm not inventing the urgency of this—"

Feyre cut her off, and Az winced as she said, “What we *do* know is what our allies in Prythian can offer. Tarquin and the Summer Court are a good start. Getting him to ally with us again would send a strong message to the other courts here, as well as to our enemies.”

“Tarquin should be the backup, not the first option,” Amren said. “This threat is graver than you can imagine—drastic steps must be taken.”

The tension in the room once again became almost palpable. Even Rhys shifted a bit uncomfortably. Feyre’s blue-gray eyes narrowed. “I can imagine quite a bit regarding how grave it is, thank you.”

“I don’t think you can,” Amren retorted. “Or else you’d be at Fomoria’s door, begging on your knees for help.”

Feyre shot back, “What did you advise all of them”—a nod to the others—“to do when Amarantha first appeared on these shores?”

“What are you getting at?” Amren demanded, voice dangerously low.

Only Feyre and Rhys, Az knew, could go head-to-head with Amren and walk away alive. But this conversation was edging into dangerous territory.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Feyre said tersely. “What was your advice regarding Amarantha when she came to Prythian? And how did it work out for all of you?”

Az’s shadows whispered, *Rhys is desperately trying to speak to his mate mind to mind, to call her off—*

Amren’s already pale face blanched with fury.

Feyre went on, “You should have done then what we are going to do now. Found a way to immediately unite Prythian against her—to convince them of the threat she posed, and not wasted your *time* with charming and tricking allies, as you said. You knew she was evil, yet you wanted to play games in the shadows instead.”

Even Nesta was gaping at her sister now, at the unkind words flowing from her mouth.

Feyre seemed beyond caring. “So we’ll unite Prythian as best we can first. It will only strengthen our case with Fomoria when—*if*—we decide to beg at their doorstep.”

That one word—*if*—made it clear enough who would be making the call about approaching Fomoria.

Amren tried again, shockingly willing to let Feyre’s accusations drop, “You could do both at the same time. You would be stretched thin, yes, but to do what must be done—”

“I know what must be done,” Feyre interrupted. Az’s shadows stirred again—and again, he banished them.

“You don’t,” Amren returned with equal venom. “The fact that you are arguing with me about this—”

“I’m aware that being told *no* is foreign to you,” Feyre said. Cassian sucked in a breath. None of them, even Nesta, had ever spoken to Amren like this. “But this isn’t your decision.”

Amren opened her mouth, then shut it, again to Az’s shock. But silvery light still glowed in her eyes as she said, “Whatever my High Lady wishes.”

Feyre’s nose crinkled, as if she’d snap something back, but Rhys cleared his throat. Feyre, thankfully, said nothing more.

Nesta broke the miserable tension, clearing her throat, too, as she asked, “Regardless of all that . . .” It was a clumsy attempt to gloss over the ugly argument, but at least Nesta was willing to step into the line of fire as she said to Feyre and Rhys, “You’re hiding the Trove. But what do you all plan to do about the other Made weapons in our hands?”

There were five of them now. The Made blades. Three, Nesta had Made herself. A sword whose power felt colder than ice; a dagger as temperamental as fire, once more in Eris’s possession; and the third . . . Ataraxia. The great sword that could kill the unkillable. So much power, and yet Nesta had barely explored what she’d created. Az’s shadows had always seemed to be half in awe, listless and yearning, around the blade. He’d ignored their longing.

And then there were the other two.

Gwydion—the Starsword, as Bryce Quinlan had called it. Even now, Az had trouble reconciling the fact that the black sword Bryce had brought with her—and then gifted to Nesta, of all people—had been *Gwydion*, newly returned to this world after fifteen thousand years in Bryce’s own. Gwydion, the legendary magic blade of Fionn, the last High King of Prythian. And later Theia, his traitorous queen.

And the last: Truth-Teller, sister to Gwydion. Made of the same dark metal, from the same fallen meteorite. Iridium, Bryce claimed. Small wonder that Truth-Teller had leaped to join Gwydion, after fifteen thousand years apart. But that hadn’t lessened the betrayal when it left him.

Az couldn’t help peering downward, to where Truth-Teller’s dark hilt seemed to devour the light of the room.

Even after the blade had been returned to him, when Bryce had, miraculously, brought it back after she stole it, the sting of that betrayal hadn't faded. Amren and Rhys had deemed it wise for Az to keep the blade, though he hardly wanted it at his side. Long centuries had it been content to stay with him, they said. So it would continue to do so. With Gwydion returned to this world, who knew what the dagger might do, especially unsupervised? It could not be hidden with the others; could not be left to its own devices. It would hang at Azriel's hip, as it had always done, under his close watch.

He had no interest in even touching the knife. And so he hadn't. Not more than he had to when fastening it to his body. Az willed himself to forget its weight.

"Most of the blades," Feyre said, still stroking Nyx's head, even as embers of anger toward Amren simmered in her eyes, "are weapons our enemies don't know about, even Koschei. So we keep it that way for as long as possible. They'll stay in Rhys's possession for the moment. We don't use them."

He didn't miss the long look Amren gave Rhys. Or how Rhys pointedly didn't turn the petite female's way. It had nothing to do, Az knew, with her argument with Feyre.

Az had mulled over their conversation from last year many times. The debate regarding those swords and what Rhys might do with them. Who—what—Rhys might become with them, if Amren was to be believed. High King of all Prythian. Rhys had rejected the idea outright.

The others nodded. Nesta turned back to the window, resuming her silence. A Valkyrie at her vigil.

Never mind that Az's shadows had told him that Nesta had stopped going to the Valkyries' morning practice weeks ago. He himself had stopped teaching her after she'd handed the Mask to Bryce. He hadn't wanted to see her after that. The other priestesses and Emerie, who had been training with Nesta, had nothing to do with Nesta's choices, but he'd stopped teaching them, too.

No one had asked him why he'd stopped going. Not even Cassian.

"Rest for tonight—all of you. Let your tempers and anxieties settle," Amren declared. Then she addressed Az, who immediately stiffened, unable to help it, no better than the fearful whelp he'd once been. "Send your wraiths to Montesere and Rask, though. Get them in place." She nodded to

Mor, Azriel forgotten like morning dew under the sun. “You can wait a day or two after the naming celebration. Don’t seem too eager to rush over to Vallahan.” Mor nodded back, but Amren was already looking to Rhys—pointedly *not* at Feyre, who was doing a good job not looking at Amren, either. “Enjoy your son’s Naming Day. After that . . .” She loosed a long, heavy sigh that had Az bracing himself. When she spoke again, the hot anger in her silver eyes had cooled. “After that,” Amren said, “we will proceed as planned.” *As the High Lady plans*, she didn’t need to add.

The defeat and pity in her voice were terrifying. Az had never once heard Amren speak like that, even when they’d fought against Hybern.

And then there was the even more terrifying fact that none of them tried to call her on it.

CHAPTER 4

Cassian

"Nesta."

The others remained in the study, but Cassian had watched Nesta see herself out with hardly a word. And like the lovesick asshole he was, he'd followed her.

She paused, already halfway to the house's grand entry. He allowed himself the seconds spent closing the distance to observe her in a way he hadn't dared earlier.

Her Illyrian leathers hung looser than they had a month ago. Her eyes seemed colder.

That was no surprise. Her eyes had been cold since the day Bryce Quinlan had returned to her own world. He knew why. He'd put that coldness there.

"What is it?" she demanded by way of greeting.

"You're not staying for lunch?"

She lifted a brow as if to say, *That's really why you came running after me?* But she answered, "I'm not hungry. And I don't want to see round two of Feyre and Amren going at each other."

"All right." The words died in his throat. He had no idea how he could stand here, aching to touch her, to bury his face in her neck and breathe in

her scent, while also wanting to just . . . roar at her.

What the fuck were you thinking? How could you be so reckless? How could you have given that stranger *the Mask and not talked to any of us about it first? Do you know what could have happened?*

He wished he could trust her again, but he couldn't. Not yet. That had gone unsaid, when they'd been discussing the locations of the Trove and the weapons. They'd stay in Rhys's possession until Nesta could prove herself trustworthy.

The thought alone made Cassian queasy. As did the question of whether she'd ever be able to accomplish it.

Nesta lifted both brows now. "Anything else?"

He swallowed hard and said plainly, "I don't know what to do with you."

Her mouth thinned. It had been the wrong thing to say. "You don't *do* anything with me. You are my mate, not my keeper. Though Rhys seems to think otherwise."

He clenched his jaw so hard it hurt, the red Siphons tethered to the backs of his hands glinting. "That's not what I meant. Do whatever the fuck you want—burn everything to ashes if that's what pleases you—"

"Keep talking to me like that and I will."

He dragged both hands through his hair. "This thing," he said, motioning between them to indicate the bond, the fraying threads along it these days, "wasn't only my doing, you know. You're not some victim we're all ganging up on—"

Silver fire gleamed in her eyes. As it always did, the sight of that power stirred something deep in his soul, beckoning to him. His Siphons blazed in answer. "You're right. I am *not* a victim," she seethed. "And I do not see any of you as *ganging up* on me. I see you as a bunch of *idiots* who are holding a grudge at a time when such things are pointless."

He blinked.

She gave him a simpering grin that set his temper surging to answer her own. "Don't tire yourself too much trying to come up with a witty answer," she said, pure venom, and turned on her heel.

He lifted a hand to reach for her but stopped himself. What was the point? They couldn't have it all out in this hallway, with the others probably listening with ears pressed to the door. And he had to sort out his thoughts first. Figure out what the fuck he wanted and needed to say. They were

mates—they owed it to each other to at least *try* to talk it out. Even if they wound up killing each other in the process.

So Cassian let her go. Let her keep walking down the hall, and out the front door.

Nesta didn't look back at him. Not once.

Nesta

Panting, Nesta gazed out at the gray sea, the waves thrashing against the towering pale cliffs on which she stood. There was nothing on the horizon save storm-tossed ocean. But there, due north, several miles off the coast, beyond her sight . . . there lay the Prison.

The icy wind ripped her hair free from its braid, and even in her warmest Illyrian leathers, a numbness settled through her body that belied the sweat running down her face and neck. She'd winnowed all the way out to the coast today—the farthest she'd gone yet.

But to make the last jump, from these cliffs to the misty, barren rock that was the Prison . . . she hesitated. Nesta flexed her fingers at her sides, willing some warmth into them.

She'd never had a desire to winnow before, but she'd spent days traversing the caves and tunnels under the Prison with Azriel and Bryce Quinlan, and something had shifted. Bryce had winnowed clumsily—she was clearly just learning. But it was the sight of Bryce, mastering this skill imperfectly but doggedly, that had awoken in Nesta a curiosity. A yearning. Watching Bryce had ignited a spark that couldn't be extinguished. What had been merely one more oddity of the Fae world became a goal, a new mountain she strove to summit. If Bryce could do it, Nesta knew she could, too.

But she'd told no one about the winnowing. It wasn't anyone's business.

Her nose tickled, and Nesta wiped away the itch with the back of a hand. The smell of copper filled the air—a nosebleed.

She wasn't expected back at the house until dinner. Cassian certainly wouldn't be seeking her out after that conversation in the hall. She'd gained the upper hand, and yet it had killed something in her to walk away and not have him call after her again. It shouldn't have been a surprise, not after all these weeks, but there was a hollowness in her chest that she couldn't ease.

So she'd opted for space instead. Open air.

Besides, she needed to *do* something after Amren had spoken so gently. Which was perhaps one of the more terrifying things she'd ever heard from the female's mouth. Even worse than Amren's ugly fight with Feyre moments before. Amren's tone at the end had made Nesta wonder whether the petite female knew something they didn't. Like finding the Made object, winning allies either in Prythian or across the sea, might be an impossible task after all.

So Nesta had come here. Alone.

She'd started trying to winnow two weeks ago. It hadn't been easy, had sapped her so fast it stunned her, but she'd kept at it, in those quiet afternoon hours when everyone else was occupied and had happily forgotten she existed.

Nesta stared down at the stormy sea, blinking away the sting of salty spray.

If Koschei's recent stirring had caused other Made or wicked magical items to awaken, possibly ones affiliated with Death itself . . . the Prison should be the first place they looked. It had held the Harp, after all, with no detection for millennia. What else was in there?

Nesta knew she could have asked any of the Night Court to transport her to the Prison, but then they'd have questions, and she couldn't bear the thought of asking for their help if there was a chance she'd emerge empty-handed. She had to try, though. She owed that much to Feyre.

Feyre alone had defended her choice to hand over the Mask to Bryce. Even Cassian hadn't done so. But Feyre didn't look at her with disappointment or rage or fear. Only understanding.

I would have done the same, her sister had said.

And that had gotten the others to back down. Not enough to be nice to her these past weeks, but at least Rhys hadn't killed her. And he wouldn't, not after Ember and Randall's brief stay and the motherly talking-to Ember had given Rhys on the subject.

Ember's pretty, mortal face flashed before her, and Nesta's chest tightened. She'd never see the human woman again. But her words—*you'll find your way*—lingered. Every day, they lingered. Along with what her daughter, Bryce, had said: *I think that eight-pointed star was tattooed on you for a reason*. Her last words to Nesta before vanishing back into her own world.

Nesta wiped her bloody nose again, staring at the back of her hand as it came away red and wet. That eight-pointed star tattoo was long gone. Though she could have sworn she sometimes felt *something* tingling down her spine.

. . . for a reason.

For a reason.

A reason.

Nesta closed her eyes, lowering her bloody hand. She pictured the Prison: the mossy, rocky island, the behemoth mountain rising in its center like the spine of some great beast breaking from the ocean depths.

Would the wards on the bone gates even allow her in?

There was only one way to find out. Nesta dove deep into her power, into a core of silver fire that churned like a maelstrom. It was nothing like it had been before, but it was still potent. It still made her balk to behold.

She willed it to her, let it build. Shards of rock shuddered away from her booted feet. The silver flame heated in her body, her mind. Heated, and burned.

The Prison. To its doorstep. *To what we need*.

Her body ached. *No more*, it seemed to beg. *No more*. The nosebleed had been its first signal of alarm. But her body would recover. She hoped.

Her hair began to drift upward. She drew a few more silvery embers to fuel the jump across the endless miles of stormy sea. If she misjudged the distance, if her power drained to the dregs . . . there was nowhere to stop. Not even a shard of rock to cling to.

More—a bit more—

To the base of the Prison, she ordered her magic. That was the closest anyone could get by magical means. The mountain's wards wouldn't allow winnowing past that point.

The next splatter of sea spray from the gargantuan waves below dissolved into mist before it could hit her.

Winnowing hadn't been that hard to figure out. The difficult part had been calculating and summoning the precise amount of power to take her exactly where she willed. With this unknown leap, she was totally in the dark about the exact distance save for the map she'd studied that morning while waiting for Feyre, Rhys, and Mor to return from Storr.

A reason.

Nesta's fingers bit into her palms. And with a final gasp of air, she winnowed. Darkness, wind, pressure all around her, spinning through the in-between, and then—

Icy, towering waves slammed into her body, so frigid they knocked the breath from her. Her boots became a weight pulling her down, down, down.

Instinct had her limbs flailing, kicking and pushing toward the surface. It was so dark, so cold. She was in the Cauldron again—

She'd winnowed right into the middle of the thrashing sea. Her body locked up, the surface so far, too far, and no matter what she did, she'd never reach it—

No. She wouldn't let panic drag her down, as surely as the ocean was trying to. She closed her eyes, just for a beat. A pause, enough to settle her mind. Assess her surroundings. Mind-Stilling—without the breathing, of course.

Up and down aligned properly. The surface was that way—she could make it. Stay calm, stay steady, and she could make it.

Nesta focused on her legs. Her arms. On the breath she'd barely managed to hold in her chest as she pulled and kicked her way upward.

The air above the water was worse. Spray stung her cheeks, the wind howled so loud her gasp was instantly swallowed, and a wave came cascading onto her head, shoving her back under.

She pushed and thrashed her way up once more, breaking the surface again, desperate for air. Nothing but wild waves and wind and blinding spray surrounded her, no sign of land, no sign of help.

Another wave rose, this one bigger, slamming her back into the silence below. Hitting her so hard that any stillness, any calm, was knocked from her. Along with any remaining breath.

Air. She needed air.

The effort to reach the surface this time sent every muscle in her body burning. And that silver fire in her . . . it was doused. She'd depleted it. There was nothing left.

No air. No magic. No strength. She'd never be able to survive out here long enough for it to slowly replenish. She was going to *drown*.

The next wave struck in a stunning blow to the top of her head, sending her flipping into the silent depths. The impact echoed through her very bones.

She twisted, trying to find her way up again, to find that calm in her mind, but the force pulling her down was so strong, and up was increasingly so, so far away—

There was something below her. Shining. Not the Mask. Not the Harp or the Crown. But of a similar ilk, somehow.

It was one, and yet—not. Two pieces, together forming a whole. Twins, joined in spirit, hardened into something razor-sharp and unified.

It was there, glimmering on the ocean floor, and then it was gone, as if it had been spirited away by dark hands. It seemed to cry out, to summon her to it.

Her lungs were burning. The surface was too far. She had to take a breath, had to open her mouth.

Find me.

Was it her imagination in her last moments? Or was whatever she had seen truly calling out? She couldn't tell.

Find me. Find me. Find me.

She couldn't stand it, the pressure in her chest. The urge to take a breath, even if it would kill her. Couldn't stop herself—

Nesta opened her mouth, and water flooded in. A force like a boulder barreled into her side. And then she was surrounded by light and warmth and air and air and air.

"What"—a male voice panted nearby—"were you"—another pant —"*thinking*?"

Nesta gasped down another breath, and nothing had ever tasted so precious and beautiful. Her eyes stung with tears or salt water, she didn't know, didn't care. She lifted her head—she was on a *carpet*, in a *room*— and found Rhysand gaping at her. Dripping water. All his finery soaked. Utterly shocked. His eyes were as wide as she'd ever seen them.

The High Lord's expression didn't improve when Nesta vomited seawater all over the woven carpet between them.

CHAPTER 5

Azriel

"Are you going away for a month or a year?" Cassian demanded from where he'd perched himself on the edge of Mor's lavish bed. Azriel, standing at the window overlooking the grand front drive of the river house, didn't laugh. Standing in here, in her space, so full of her scent . . . His heart lay heavy in his chest.

"Vallahan and Montesere," Mor simpered behind the armful of dresses she hauled from her armoire over to the bed, "have *very* different climates, and *very* different clothing requirements for meals and functions." She dumped the latest pile of clothes onto the bed and surveyed the mountain she'd created.

"Aren't you just going to wear variations on that red getup?" Cassian asked, dangling a pale blue gown from his fingertips. "This one seems unnecessary."

Az couldn't help his slight smile. "Agreed," he muttered.

"I like to have options," Mor said, snatching the dress from Cassian's hands. "Don't crinkle it."

"You've already bunched it into a heap," Cassian shot back.

"Well, don't make it worse."

It had always been like this between them. Squabbling like siblings, endlessly teasing each other. It had once provided a steady, comforting background noise for Az—one that even his shadows seemed to enjoy—but so many things had changed lately. Perhaps too many.

Az found himself saying, "I thought you were only going to Vallahan. I'm about to send Nuala to Rask. And Cerridwen to Montesere."

"I intend to be only in Vallahan," Mor said, refolding her dress with expert care, "but if a situation arises and I need to go into Montesere, I want to be prepared. And I don't want to lose time by coming back here for an entirely new wardrobe."

Fair enough. But for Mor to take all this on her shoulders, even with her considerable power and talents—

"How many fur cloaks do you *need*?" Cassian demanded, drawing Azriel's attention back to where his friend now held up an ermine stole like a dead snake.

Mor clicked her tongue. "You can leave, Cassian, if you're going to question every item that goes into my trunk."

"*Trunks*," Cassian corrected, nodding to the five massive leather boxes sitting open near the door. "Even Rhys doesn't travel with this much."

"Oh, he does," Mor trilled, primly folding the mountain of clothing. "He hides it all in one of those little pocket realms so you two can't make fun of him."

Cassian snorted, but Az gazed out the window. He was in no mood to talk about Rhys—to laugh about him. Not with Mor packing for this trip. She shouldn't have been going. She'd done more than her fair share of diplomatic work already.

Az should be the one leaving. With one word, Rhys could have made it possible.

He'd already debated venturing to Vallahan himself, but ignoring orders wasn't something he was entirely ready to do. Even if it grated on him to not know what was happening, like talons running down his spine.

"I'll be fine, Az," Mor said, and he realized she was watching him. Reading him perfectly whether he wanted her to or not. She'd always been able to do that.

Az cleared his throat. "I could go with you. Stay hidden."

His shadows, idling by the doorway, stirred in response. *Yes*, the pack of them seemed to say, *let us do our work*.

"If you were discovered, any goodwill I've created would vanish," Mor said firmly, setting another folded dress onto her growing pile. "Stay here, Az. Help everyone come up with an alternate strategy in case I fail." A snarky glance at Cassian. "They're going to need all the help they can get."

Az didn't smile. Not even as Cassian flipped her off and asked, "Remind me why I'm going to miss you again?"

Mor began stacking her folded clothes into the first of the trunks. She moved with sinuous grace—with a warrior's surety, yes, but with an ethereal sort of beauty and elegance that still made Az pause to admire her.

He hadn't been what she wanted. He never had been. It was her choice, her heart—he knew that, and he accepted it. But he had spent so long waiting for the day when she would confirm that all those centuries together, all the things they'd been through, hadn't been for nothing. He'd tended that secret fire for five hundred years.

Now it was ash in his scarred hands.

Even his shadows knew better than to provide a read on what Mor was feeling right now. They'd already done enough when it came to her.

Mor began bickering with Cassian again, so Az broke in, "Cass, we'll be late for the meeting with Devlon." He wouldn't normally have given a shit about that, would have been glad to keep Devlon waiting for hours, but he had to get out of here.

Cassian groaned with distaste. "Right."

Mor frowned. "You're heading to Windhaven now?"

The same dismay had swept through him when Rhys had given them the order. To stand down from acting against their enemies and go to *Windhaven* instead . . . it chafed against every instinct.

"Quick meeting," Cassian assured her, jumping to his feet. "Expanding the patrol routes. Stupid, but necessary. Az is providing the eye candy, of course."

Az's shadows whispered, *He's glad for the excuse to do something—to avoid thinking of his mate.*

He blocked them out as Mor smirked at him. "Did you give Cassian the real time for the meeting or the fake time?"

"Don't start that again, please," Cassian grumbled, tossing the stole into the trunk. "I thought we hadn't done that in a century or two."

It had been an experiment once, after Azriel and Rhys had grown sick of Cassian and Mor always showing up late. Az had started telling them a

different time for meetings and events—one that was thirty minutes earlier.

And for one blissful month, neither Mor nor Cassian noticed that all the clocks in their rooms and residences had *also* been moved ahead. And neither of them had been late for anything.

Azriel learned that Cassian had become aware of his subtle nudging when his brother had left the pieces of a two-hundred-year-old grandfather clock under the covers of his bed. Mor had merely thrown her mantel clock at Azriel's head at the next meeting. After showing up twenty minutes early.

"All the clocks are set to their normal times," Azriel assured them, striding into the hall. Better to get this absurd visit over with. His shadows flowed to him, gathering at his shoulders as a phantom cape. "But the winds heading out there are nasty today—we should give ourselves a cushion."

Neither of them blinked at his statement. They were used to him knowing about the weather not because of a report but because he'd awoken to information from his shadows. *Roaring blasts off the eastern peaks*, his shadows had murmured this morning, *slicing dangerously through the valleys.*

Maybe he'd get lucky and those winds would be so swift they'd rip his shadows from him for good.

"Be careful," Mor advised. Cassian waved her off, but Azriel didn't bother to reply as he stalked for the stairs, the Siphons on his hands radiating a glacial blue.

Be careful.

It was hard to be careful when so much of his heart had stopped caring at all.

Feyre

"Remind me why this Naming Day celebration was a good idea?" I asked Elain as I stepped into the dining room, half of which had been converted into gift storage.

My sister, standing in front of the ever-growing pile of presents at the far end of the room, shook her head. "Because it's a part of Fae culture, and you are now, too."

I grimaced at the veritable mountain before me. "These gifts feel an awful lot like . . . tribute." They'd come in from nearly every corner of

Prythian. The one closest to me—a night-black rocking horse carved to resemble Helion's prized flying stallion, Meallan—was perhaps the most subdued of them all. Magic pulsed around the pile, likely from delightfully enchanted toys. I'd still had Amren check each one as they had arrived.

And after all that talk on Storr about cursed Naming Day gifts, I planned to have Amren check them again before the party. The Mistress of the Unseen and the Queen of Vallahan had clearly wanted to spoil my joy, add some fear to what should have been a treasured, peaceful moment. They'd succeeded.

But considering my argument with Amren earlier, I'd ask Rhys to inspect the gifts instead. I had little interest in speaking to the female, and was certain she had little interest in speaking with me, let alone helping me with anything, even for Nyx's sake. The way she'd spoken to me, the way she'd decided there was *one* way to go about this—*her* way—had irritated me. It had nothing to do with me being High Lady. I hadn't been thinking of the title or my crown beside me when I'd gone toe to toe with her.

And yes, perhaps I had leveled a low blow with that question about what advice Amren had given when Amarantha had appeared on these shores decades ago, but Amren did make mistakes. Not often, but she had made them before. I trusted, respected her wisdom, but for her to grow angry when it wouldn't be blindly followed . . . it had put my temper on edge. And it remained that way, even though I tried to release it from my body with a few long breaths as I surveyed the presents.

At least there were some gifts here that didn't need to be checked by Amren or Rhys—perhaps already my favorite of the bunch: the array of painted cards. All from children in the painting classes I still carved out six hours a week to teach. All of them saying in some form or another: *Congratulations! Welcome, Nyx!*

The children loved the days when Nyx came with me to class. Loved to show him their paintings, talking to him as if he could understand every nuance and brushstroke.

Seeing those proud faces—no longer the shy, frightened children they'd been in the aftermath of the war—made an extra task I perhaps should have let go utterly worth it. And beholding these cards now, created under the guidance of my business partner and friend, Ressina, lit a star-bright, unextinguishable kernel of joy in my chest. I already knew I would treasure those cards more than any expensive, magical gift we received.

"You *are* High Lord and Lady of the Night Court," Elain said, turning from the presents that she'd been arranging into some semblance of order. "It's only natural that other courts and influential people would want to send these, to remain in your good favor."

I rocked the toy horse with one finger. "I don't like that my son's Naming Day celebration is being treated more for political gain than actual enjoyment of his existence."

Elain nodded her agreement, but glanced behind me. "Where is he, by the way?"

"Napping," I said, grinning. "He guzzled so much milk down during the meeting earlier that he might sleep for the next year."

Elain smiled faintly. "Meeting?"

Meeting—and an ugly argument with Amren. But I waved a hand. "Just about the ordeal on Storr today."

"Right."

I winced as I realized my error. "I should have invited you, too. I'm sorry. I assumed you were busy with the party planning—" She'd seemed so happy to plan Nyx's Naming Day celebration. I hadn't thought to ask if she wanted to join us for the debrief, certainly not about such a miserable subject. But I was glad Elain hadn't been there to witness my fight with Amren.

Elain quickly shook her head, though her features had tightened. "You have enough on your plate already to bother remembering which sister to invite to your meetings."

The truth was, I hadn't invited Nesta—she'd just become part of the unit, and I routinely gave her the same information that I passed to Mor or Cassian. Even if recent events had strained some of that ease of communication and welcome between us all.

But Elain . . . I buried my guilt down deep. "I can give you an update if you want," I offered. "It's grim, though. We think Rask, Montesere, and Vallahan are seeking a Made item of their own—likely at Koschei's urging or manipulation. We need to find it first. Mor is going back to Vallahan after the party to see what she can find out, but . . ." I sighed. "Who knows?"

Elain angled her head. "Do you want me to try to . . . See it?"

"No," I said, sighing again. "Thank you, but no—Nesta tried scrying before the meeting but couldn't discover anything. I thought, because she's Made, that whatever spells are hiding the object might not apply to her,

since it seems no spells can even *hold* Nesta, but it was no use." I didn't add the obvious: that if Nesta couldn't find this thing, Elain, Seer or no, likely couldn't, either. Nesta's power had always been stronger.

"All right," Elain said quietly, and turned to the pile of gifts. "It's going to take you a month to open these, by the way."

I let her drop the subject and followed her lead. "Writing all the thank-you notes will take longer."

"Maybe there's some magical charm that could write them for you."

"If someone has invented that, I'll kiss them right on the mouth."

Elain laughed. A rare sound these days, I realized. When had I last heard her laugh—or seen her brown eyes really light up like that? I couldn't remember. Another pang of guilt pealed through me.

Once the Naming Day was over and done with, maybe I'd pull Elain aside for a heart-to-heart. Last year, she'd mentioned the trauma she had endured at the Cauldron's hands—and how much it hurt her that our focus had been solely on what her trauma did to *us*, rather than what it had done to her in the first place. I'd never followed up.

I was a terrible sister.

But now wasn't the time for that talk. So I asked, "Everything is ready for the party?"

"Yes," Elain said, tucking a strand of hair behind an arched ear. "The Velaris High Priestess has her acolytes preparing the city temple based on the specifications I gave them—I know they'll want to have their own Equinox ceremony before, so the trickiest thing has been balancing their ritual requirements with the decorations we're bringing in. But it should be all sorted out, and everything here should be in order for the luncheon afterward."

"Thank you," I said. "Not only for planning this, but for taking it off my plate, and Rhys's. He loves to throw a good party, but I think this would have stretched him too thin."

Elain laid a hand on her heart. "It's my honor. And my pleasure to do it for Nyx."

"He loves his Aunt Elain." Though Nyx had a nursemaid—Ana—who tended to him during the hours when Rhys and I couldn't, Elain often gladly took over her duties, walking Nyx around the grounds, reading him books, and doing the one task I truly had no stomach for: changing his soiled muslin diapers.

Elain's doe-brown eyes softened. "And his Aunt Elain loves him." For a second, I could have sworn I detected a note of longing. Of pain.

But I had another meeting to rush to, with the Minister of the Palace of Thread and Jewels to discuss much-needed repairs on the south colonnade. They were about three hundred years overdue. And while my sister's well-being was important . . . I was High Lady of this court. My people were dependent on me.

So I said, "Thank you again. I'll see you at dinner?"

"I might be late," Elain said. "The burlap for the garden just came in and I'd like to get some on as many of the topiaries and beds as I can before winter gets too close."

Something tight eased in my chest. Good. Elain would be kept busy, at least, with that. She'd have something else to do beyond sorting through all these presents.

With a nod of farewell, I winnowed to the front lawn, stepped beyond the wards, and winnowed again to the heart of the city proper.



It had indeed turned out to be one of those days when I couldn't seem to find a moment to breathe. As I crawled into bed beside Rhys, my mate propping our son in a sitting position with some pillows, Nyx's little wings flapped—or rather, one did, as his body and mind were still figuring out how to get both to move together at once—when he saw me. He broke into a gummy smile that I couldn't help mirroring. "Hi, my love," I said, tickling his warm belly. "What are you doing in here this late?"

Rhys, a stack of paperwork balanced on his lap, said without looking up, "He didn't want to go to sleep."

I hummed and stroked a hand over Nyx's softer-than-soft hair. "He didn't want to, or you didn't want to be the bad guy?"

Rhys flipped a piece of paper over to read the back. "The rest of the world thinks I'm a monster. I don't need my son thinking it, too."

I clicked my tongue. "You couldn't resist that face, could you?"

Rhys sighed. "No. Between the face and the wings, I have no defenses."

Nyx beamed up at Rhys, as if he understood perfectly what his father was saying and the effect that little dimpled face had on the most powerful male in the world.

“Come on, you,” I said, grunting as I heaved Nyx into my arms. “Let’s get you settled.”

Nyx babbled happily in my ear, and I caught Rhys staring at us as I walked back around the bed, aiming for the nursery door. “What?”

Stars glimmered in his eyes. “I don’t have enough words to convey how much I love you,” he said hoarsely. He nodded toward our son. “How much I love him.”

“You *gladly* change his messiest blowouts,” I said. “Just by that alone, I know how much you love him—and me.”

“I never thought I’d be a father.” He rose to his feet, walking to me and Nyx. He stroked a knuckle down Nyx’s rosy cheek, and Nyx reached up with a fat finger to squeeze one of Rhys’s. Rhys’s smile was soft enough that my chest ached. “Never thought I’d be someone’s mate.”

“I know.” I scanned his beautiful face, the old shadow that passed over it. “But there’s no better father anywhere in this court—this land.” Probably this entire world. “And no better mate, either.”

“Motherhood has made you too nice,” Rhys said, flicking my nose affectionately. “Where’s the Feyre who threw a shoe at my head?”

“Where’s the Rhys who fucked me against a wall so hard the pictures fell off?”

Rhys burst out laughing, the sound like music. “Such a mouth, for such a fine lady. And in front of our innocent son.”

I cuddled Nyx, who was happily cooing between us. “Trust me,” I said, hauling Nyx toward his room, “with Cassian for an uncle, he’s going to grow up hearing *far* worse.”

Rhys followed me into the nursery, the space bedecked in variations of cream and sand, the ceiling I’d painted during my pregnancy to resemble the night sky. Rhys had enchanted it so that the stars twinkled and rotated with the seasons. The black wood cradle was just inside the door—so we could hear every little sound Nyx made—and I took a seat in the overstuffed dark blue armchair beside it, freeing a strap of my nightgown as I did.

Nyx knew the routine, and happily found my breast, nestling against me, a tiny fist clenching at my upper chest. My breasts tingled with the rush of the milk letting down, a tangible release I felt through my body, and then Nyx was sucking away, his limbs going almost impossibly softer as he relaxed.

“That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Rhys said from the shadows of the doorway. “It was the first time I saw it, and it still is, even all these months later.”

“The first time you saw it, you were still such a crying mess that I’m not sure you registered what was happening.”

“Forgive me if I’d just been through an ordeal, Feyre darling.”

“Worse than dying?”

“Don’t even joke about that.” I stuck out my tongue in his direction. He laughed, low and soft. “My High Lady.”

I smiled, petting Nyx’s head. His eyes fluttered closed, his long, dark lashes splaying over his rosy cheeks. “We made a very beautiful baby,” I said.

“We did.” Rhys’s voice was strained, and a glance up at him showed tears in his eyes. Not from sorrow, I knew, but from the same joy I felt, so great it could crack my heart wide open. No matter the long nights and exhausting days—it was all worth it.

I’d created a family. My friends had been my family before, and still were. But this boy in my arms . . . I was his mother, and Rhys was his father, and we were, forever and always, a family.

Nyx’s mouth popped off my breast, his head lolling back, utterly asleep. As steadily as I could, I rose to my feet and walked to the cradle. Madja had advised us to only keep the little mattress in there—no bedding, no pillows, no toys—to avoid the risk of suffocation. If I had my way, Nyx might very well be sleeping on a bare mattress until he was a grown male.

I caressed Nyx’s warm, velvety-soft cheek. “I love you,” I whispered, and stepped back from the cradle.

Rhys leaned down to brush a kiss on Nyx’s head. “I love you more,” he whispered as well.

I scowled at my mate, and Rhys kissed me, too, before he straightened. In silence, we walked back into our suite, Rhys softly shutting the door, his wings tucked in tight so they didn’t so much as rustle.

“Don’t bother buttoning up that nightgown,” Rhys growled softly behind me when the door was shut. “I plan on licking those breasts for a good—”

Rhys drew up short when he turned to me. I’d already climbed into bed, nestled amongst layers of pillows and blankets, and was leafing through his giant pile of paperwork. “You’re *working*?”

I lifted a piece of parchment from the middle of the stack. “I want to make sure we approve these spending proposals for the repairs on the southern colonnade at the Palace of Thread and Jewels before tomorrow morning.” The sooner they could start working on it, the better.

“Nyx is asleep.” Rhys walked to the dressing room, but paused in the doorway. He slyly assessed me over his shoulder. “Shouldn’t you be getting naked?”

I made a show of surveying my cozy long-sleeved nightgown. “Why?” I asked innocently, even as my toes curled under the blankets.

He faced me fully, unbuttoning the top of his black jacket. “We usually spend our nights doing something other than paperwork.” Another button came free. “What was it, now?”

I returned to the proposal, though I didn’t process any of the lines before me. “Sleeping for as long as our son will let us?”

“That doesn’t sound quite right.” His voice had lowered to a gravelly purr.

“Getting into vicious fights with Amren?”

His eyes glittered. “I’m amazed you’re still alive.”

I flicked my stare over the top of the papers. He’d shed the jacket and was slowly removing the dark shirt beneath. Golden, tattooed skin gleamed in the faelight, and my core tightened, aching.

But I wasn’t ready to give in, not quite yet. “You’re not going to scold me for the Amren fight?”

“It’s between you two—and I agree with you. I just didn’t have the balls to say it.” A wink, as if he knew exactly where my eyes would go after that.

But I refused to look below his waist as I huffed, “I’d think the grandmotherly nightgown would convey all the interest I have right now, Rhys.”

His long fingers unhooked the first button on his trousers. He’d already taken off his boots upon entering our suite, so there was little resistance as he let the pants drop to the floor.

I gaped. “You weren’t wearing underwear?” Never mind that my mate was already hard, his proud, thick cock setting my mouth watering.

“You looked so stunning this morning that I forgot.” He stalked toward me, wings flaring slightly. He pulled the blankets off me one by one. “You distract me, Feyre darling.”

“Did you deliberately go without them so you’d shock me?”

He grinned, pure predator closing in on his prey. “Are you shocked? Or . . . delightfully surprised?”

He pulled the last of the sheets off me, revealing my bare legs. And the scent of arousal I didn’t bother hiding. Rhys let out a low rumble deep in his throat. “The grandmotherly nightgown doesn’t seem to be having its intended effect.”

I loved this, lived for this—the chase between us. I set aside the spending proposal. Slowly got to my feet. Held his gaze the entire time I pulled the laces on the front of the nightgown free. Let it tumble to my feet.

Naked lust flooded Rhys’s expression as he took in my bare body, the breasts full and swollen. “*Now* look who’s not wearing any underwear,” he teased.

My nipples ached—and not from the milk already building up behind them. Rhys took a step toward me. Just one. And then dropped to his tattooed knees.

Only for me would he do this: kneel on those mountain-tattooed knees, the promise to kneel to no one and nothing but his crown. But for his mate, his High Lady—

I let Rhys hook one of my legs over his shoulder, right under a wing, as his hands came around to support me, fingers kneading into my bottom with luxurious pressure. “I love you,” he murmured as he lowered his head to my bared sex. “You have no idea how much.”

At the first decadent sweep of his tongue up my core, I managed to pant, “Oh, I think I know.”

I felt his smile before he licked again, slow and taunting. “You’re so wet I could fuck you this instant.”

I bit my lip to keep in my moan. The baby was in the other room, and we did have to keep our voices down to avoid waking him—

Another savoring lick. “But I think I’ll taste you for a little while, Feyre darling.”

In one smooth movement, he hoisted me right onto the bed, positioning me at the edge of the mattress.

And then he buried his face in me. My skin flared with heat, too tight on my breasts, my bones. I clapped a hand over my mouth to muffle my groan. He knew what he was doing—a few licks and I was utterly bent to his will.

He sucked at the apex of my sex, rolling the bundle of nerves over his tongue right as he slid a finger into me. My hips rose off the bed, and he

pinned me with his other hand, holding me still for his ministrations.

"All this time," he mused, slipping another finger into me, pumping in a maddeningly slow rhythm. "All this time and I still can't get enough of you."

"Rhys." His name was a plea.

"I love you beyond reason." He maintained that slow, taunting pace with his fingers, licking me once. "Even when you bite my head off, I love you more than I can express."

"I think you love it when I bite your head off," I managed to get out. "And I'll bite your head off right now if you don't get inside me."

A dark, sensual chuckle vibrated against my most sensitive flesh. His fingers withdrew, slowly, teasingly. He lifted his head, revealing lips shining with my wetness. Only heat blazed in his remarkable eyes. "If milady wishes it so . . ." He rose to his feet and climbed atop me. The weight of him, his wings blocking out the light, his sheer presence threatened to send me tumbling over the edge before he was even in me.

I reached between us, hand wrapping around his cock and squeezing hard. Rhys hissed, but nipped at the delicate arch of my ear as I drew him closer. "Put me inside you," he breathed into my ear, a hand rising to gently —so gently—massage one of my breasts.

I did as I was told. And at the first nudge of him, I parted my knees wider, hands slipping around to grab his perfect, firm backside to practically haul him to me.

But he resisted, laughing darkly as he peered down at my face. "Say it."

I dug my fingernails into his ass. "Say *what*?" I panted.

"That I'm yours."

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help my smile. "You're mine, Rhys."

He rewarded me by sliding in an inch. "And?"

I inhaled sharply through my nose. If I didn't get him inside me, if he didn't start moving—"And I'm yours."

Another inch, stretching me already. "Damn right." Another inch. Another, and another—as if he couldn't help himself. I certainly couldn't help the moan that finally escaped me when he at last seated himself fully. But he still didn't move. He just propped himself up on his elbows, staring down at me for a moment before he said, "I won't let anything change that."

He started to withdraw, preparing to make that first thrust, but I halted him with a hand on his chest. "What does that mean?"

He took my hand and kissed each finger. “It means that with all that’s happening in the world, this beautiful, precious life we’ve built . . .” He did withdraw then, nearly to the tip, but held my gaze before he said, “I won’t let anything jeopardize it. No matter what, Feyre darling.”

I might have asked more, but he slammed in. And at that first, powerful movement of his body into mine, I let pleasure sweep me away.

CHAPTER 6

Azriel

Three in the morning had come and gone.

Azriel knew he should be asleep. Knew he should be in his own bedroom. Or up at the House of Wind. Probably halfway across the territory, gathering information for his High Lord and Lady.

But here he was, in the kitchens of the river house, the embers in the hearth slumbering. Even his shadows had scattered, as if ready to sleep as well.

Here he was, braced on the counter, nuzzling a warm, silken throat.

Gods, she tasted good. Sweet. Pure. And he was a monster for being here, for tasting her. But he'd accepted his role as the monster that prowled in the night. Long before she'd come along.

The legs wrapped around his middle tightened, pulling him closer against her, and his cock ached, straining against the hard leather of his pants as it brushed up against the core he knew was molten.

He wanted it. Wanted her. More than he'd ever wanted anyone. Without the shadows around him, he was bare—still clothed and yet laid bare before her.

He tipped her head back further, licking up the column of her throat, tasting that delicious skin.

Elain Archeron moaned, and fuck if the sound didn't kill him.

He shouldn't be here. For a million reasons.

Rhys had ordered him nearly a year ago to stay away from Elain. And he'd tried. He really had. Until last month, when he'd made the mistake of staying overnight here, just once, and had smelled bread baking in the early hour before dawn, and had ventured into the kitchens.

He'd pretended he hadn't known who'd be up this early. But his cock had already been hard by the time he'd seen her kneading dough, half-covered in flour. And when she'd lifted her large brown eyes—a doe's eyes—and her mouth had formed that little, perfect O . . . There had been no words between them. His shadows had fled, the room brightening. The entire world brightening, as it always did in her presence.

It didn't matter that he'd barely spoken to Elain since Winter Solstice, when he'd attempted to give her a necklace only for her to return it to him. After the shit he'd been through in the caves with Nesta and Bryce, after Truth-Teller had been taken from him and Nesta's idiocy had threatened everything, after what he'd learned during the Hybern War—nothing fucking mattered.

So after Nesta had given Bryce the Mask, he'd walked up to Elain. Taken her beautiful face in his hands, waited for her whispered *yes*, and then kissed her. Deep and thorough, the way he'd wanted for so long now.

He'd instantly wondered if he could die from it—that kiss, the touch of her tongue. The way she writhed against him, the softness of her breasts. He'd decided to taste her mouth as he pleased, and when he was done with that, he'd taste her sex, and he'd been halfway through formulating his list of all the things he wanted to do with her when soft steps had scudded beyond the kitchen.

He'd vanished into shadow, leaving her breathless, with barely a moment to right herself before one of the kitchen staff stumbled in, bleary-eyed.

Never again, he'd promised himself. She was another male's mate.

And yet he'd gone back a week later. Again, in that hour before dawn. He hadn't touched her—not the way he wanted to—not yet. It had been just a few moments of stolen kisses before the morning shift arrived.

Then the next week. The next. Swift, almost brutal encounters that he never let venture beneath their clothes, though he did grasp handfuls of her breasts through her gown, did kiss the tops swelling over the neckline.

Yet that driving need couldn't blind him to the tinge of the mating bond within her scent. A marking in the blood, not welcomed by Elain, but a marking nonetheless. He loathed it. Forced himself to ignore it that first time, and every time since then.

And here they were once more. Only now it was past three in the morning, and dawn was a long, long way off. He'd stayed the night at the river house, intending to wake at the usual hour—but he'd smelled bread. Deep in his dreams, he'd smelled bread baking, and he'd woken to it. Had followed it, a hound to a scent, down here. To where the smell of bread mingled with the jasmine and honey scent that was Elain herself. She'd been waiting. Baking . . . and waiting. For him.

Elain's hand slid down his front, angling toward his cock, but he halted her with a light grip on her wrist. "Not yet," he mumbled against her neck, then lifted his head to gaze at her face. So beautiful. So trusting and open and everything good in the world. So good that his shadows were still nowhere to be seen. They'd fled the moment he'd stepped into the kitchen.

He couldn't get enough of it, of her. His salvation. That's what she was. He might be a monster, might be a worthless, soulless demon, but here, in his arms—here was his salvation. His lone chance at joy. From the flush in her cheeks, the feverish gleam in her eyes, he knew she felt the same.

And that was enough to embolden him to voice what he'd never said to anyone before. He wanted her to know him. "When I was a boy . . ." His throat closed up, but he battled past it. "I lived in hell. Every single moment, of every single day. And . . ." He fought to find the right words to explain—not just what had happened then, but why it mattered that he tell her *now*.

Elain laid a gentle hand on his cheek, thumb brushing over his feverish skin. "We—could find a bedroom," she said, shyly.

All thoughts of talking about the past vanished as he swallowed his groan. He knew exactly where the nearest bedroom was. How many steps it would take to get them there. But to cross that final line—"I need you sure," he said, kissing her throat again and again, where that necklace should have been. They'd talk later about his life in his sire's dungeon. Or perhaps never. "I need you certain."

"I am," Elain said, running her hands down his spine, avoiding his wings. She'd never touched them, and he honestly didn't know what he'd do when she did. Spill in his pants, most likely. "I am," she repeated, fingers digging

into his lower back, pulling him against her again. He gave her a hint of what she wanted, pushing his hardness against her, a promise of what was to come. Elain writhed, and the heat of her seared him even through their clothes.

"Elain," he ground out, but merely saying her name threatened to undo him.

When she reached for his cock again, he didn't stop her. Timidly, tenderly, she brushed her fingers down the front of his leather pants. Mother spare him.

Az gritted his teeth, panting through his nose. "Elain," he growled.

She flattened her palm against him with a possession that shocked him, nearly took him to his knees. His eyes rolled back in his head.

He needed her naked, needed to taste every inch of her, to lose himself in the pure bliss of her body—

"This ends now."

It took him a heartbeat to understand. To process the icy command rippling through the room. To understand that Elain had also heard the voice.

Rhys's voice.

Elain gasped, yanking away, leaping apart from him.

Azriel braced his hands on the counter, willing his brain to reorder the world. No more sex, or the promise of it. Rhys was here. His High Lord was here, and had seen them, and Elain was—

Shaking. She was shaking, gaping at the High Lord looming in the doorway, wings folded and face stormy.

Rhys only glowered at Azriel. As if Elain was no more than a whisper of spring against the dark winter of his rage. Without Az's shadows nearby, he hadn't had any warning—certainly not from Rhys, who could sneak up with feline stealth if he wished.

Darkness blotted out the stars in Rhys's eyes as he said, "This is the last time. You want to fuck each other, go do it somewhere other than my house." Rhys finally slid his attention to Elain. "Or have the decency to formally end things with your mate first."

Elain trembled. Az's rage roared to the surface, ready to bloody, to protect—but he'd left his Siphons next to his bed, and without them to filter his power, he wouldn't have control over it—

But Elain shook her head, a startled deer, and bolted from the kitchen. Here, and gone. That whisper of spring vanished into the night.

Azriel's shadows poured back in, wrapping around him, attempting to soothe him, hide him.

But there was no hiding from Rhys. Az stared at his High Lord. And his High Lord stared back.

"Did I or did I not tell you last winter that you were to back off?" Rhys's words were terrifyingly calm—flat.

Az said nothing, digging down deep, bracing himself for the storm.

"Did I or did I not tell you," Rhys repeated, still as a panther ready to strike, "that if you needed to fuck somebody, then go find your pleasure in the city? Not here." He pointed to the now-empty doorway through which Elain had fled. "Not with her."

Cold like nothing Az had known surged through him, numbed him as he said to his High Lord, "You can't tell me who to be with."

Rhys's voice remained terrifyingly calm. "Her mate is our *ally.* You know this. She knows it. And yet you two are here, getting covered in each other's scents. I had planned to send you down to the human lands tomorrow, but now . . . I'll go myself. Lucien would take one sniff of you and know immediately what you've been doing behind his back. Behind mine as well."

The very stones of the kitchen shuddered. Az had rarely seen him this angry—certainly not directed at him.

"I know how to take care of the scents," Az dared say. With a flick of his hand, his shadows swirled around him, the kitchen, the hallway, all the way to Elain—*running upstairs to her rooms*, his shadows reported. They curled around him, and the scents were gone. Or rather, veiled. Tucked between one shadow and the next. As he had been doing each and every time they'd met like this. As he had learned to do as spymaster so their enemies never caught one whiff that he was in their midst.

Rhys's jaw tightened. "As much as I admire that little trick of yours, it is beside the point." Before Az could say more, Rhys angled his head to one side, all predator. "Is it worth it to you? To jeopardize the few allies we have for this?"

Ice cracked through Az's heart. "We already had this conversation at Solstice."

"Apparently, it did not stick." No light whatsoever shone in Rhys's eyes. "And apparently, you didn't understand the consequences I promised."

Azriel bit out a laugh, harsh and lifeless. "Consequences? Like what? You'll banish me to the House of Wind like you did Nesta last year?"

He was an idiot for taunting his High Lord like this, for challenging a predator already on the edge of spilling blood. But Az was a predator, too—and could match Rhys's monster with his own any day.

Rhys considered him like he'd never seen him before, that murderous intent melting into something incredulous. Disgusted. Some small part of Azriel curdled in shame. That expression wasn't from his High Lord, but his brother.

Rhys said softly, "Alliance with Lucien aside, I spent months in agony, you know. After realizing Feyre was my mate. Months of *agony*, knowing that she was my mate and she was sharing someone else's bed."

"It was Feyre's choice then, just as it is Elain's choice now," Azriel snarled.

"That is true on all accounts," Rhys said with that awful quiet. "But it doesn't erase the fact that as Feyre's mate, it destroyed a part of me to know she was with someone else. Feyre didn't know what we were—she had no idea she was even making that choice. But Elain does. And perhaps she doesn't understand the agony it will cause Lucien, but I do. *You* do."

Azriel scoffed. "Lucien has no right to agonize over her. It is her life, her body. She can do as she pleases, with whomever she pleases."

"I have no argument with that—and I fully support that autonomy for anyone. But I would not wish the pain that I felt during those months on my greatest enemy, and certainly not on a valued ally like Lucien. And I will not allow myself to be complicit in deceiving him, especially when it is undertaken in my home. So either tell Lucien about it and destroy what we've built with him, or fuck Elain somewhere else. But not here. Never here."

Azriel let drop all pretense of being civilized, of being a decent male. He wasn't those things. Had never been those things, though the Mother knew he'd tried. "Lucien isn't entitled to any explanation from Elain. She didn't choose him—doesn't want to be mated to him. It's a fluke of nature."

It had to be.

"Why are you doing this?" Rhys asked hoarsely, bleakly. "Do you still think you're entitled to her?"

Azriel had told him on Solstice—three sisters, for three brothers.

But the third sister had been given to another. A worthy male, if he was being honest, but not one who played any part in their lives. It made no sense. If it wasn't a fluke of nature, then it had to be some sort of divine joke. Perhaps the Mother was condemning Az for all the blood he'd spilled, the pain he'd unleashed.

Well, the Mother could condemn him all she liked. He'd pursue what he wanted, mate or no.

When it became clear that Azriel wouldn't respond, Rhysand slowly shook his head. "I'm not going to punish you."

Az loosed a breath. He and Cassian and Rhys had beaten the shit out of each other over the centuries, of course, but never had Rhys actually *punished* his brothers. Like they were his subjects.

The anger melted fully from Rhys's face. But that undiluted disgust remained. Az had never seen Rhys look at him like that. He never wanted to experience it again.

And Rhys knew it. But his High Lord said, disappointment and exhaustion dripping from his words, "Do what you want, Azriel. The world's already burning." Rhys slid his hands into his pockets before he turned on his heel to walk away. "I have too many other fires to put out to bother dealing with your mess, too."

"Fuck you," Azriel breathed.

Rhys paused. "I used to be proud to call you brother." The words tore something low and deep in Az's chest.

Rhys vanished into a wisp of night.

And even as Azriel's shadows pressed close, murmuring in his ear like the lover whose honey-sweet scent still lingered in his nose, he'd never felt more alone.

CHAPTER 7

Azriel

The sun had barely crested above the horizon when Az summoned Nuala and Cerridwen to the river house. He hadn't slept in the long hours since Rhys had found him and Elain. But he hadn't dared venture to that bedroom down the hall, to where he knew Elain was probably awake as well. The Mother knew how he'd find the words to speak to her—even be in the same room as her—after last night. His shadows, of course, would be of no use where she was concerned. They currently lounged at his feet, as if dozing.

Worse than Elain . . . the Mother knew how he'd deal with Rhys. He didn't feel like seeing his brother for a damn long while.

But he still had duties to perform. Obligations to this court and the people he loved.

Seated on the couch before the unlit fire, tethering his Siphons to his scarred hands once more, he found himself staring into the depths of the ocean-blue stone atop his right hand. Its cabochon-cut surface, smooth and flawless, seemed to mock the scarred mess of his skin. And gazing at the stone now, one of the seven he wore, he could almost see himself, still bruised and battered and half-alive after the Blood Rite, reaching into the ancient brazier of flames—a nod to the Cauldron—from which all initiated

warriors attempted to draw stones. Only those Illyrians who possessed powerful magic would ever be able to summon a Siphon from the flames.

As it was every year, it had been carried by seven warriors from its sacred resting place in the Illyrian Steppes all the way to Windhaven, the closest war-camp to Ramiel, for the occasion. Illyrians from across the territory had come to witness who emerged alive from the Blood Rite, and who didn't; who had made it to the foot of the mountain itself, and who had the strength left to begin its climb. And who might have miraculously, impossibly, scaled its summit. The answer to that last one was usually no one. But Az, Rhys, and Cassian had done it. Together. Against all odds, they'd done it. And now only this final step of the Rite remained.

He'd known that attempting to draw a stone from the inferno forever burning in that holy brazier required reaching into the flames with his bare hands. He had prepared himself, talked himself through it over and over. Watched countless newly minted warriors reach into those flames seeking to pull out a stone, skin unscathed thanks to its sacred magic. Once a powerful novice had completed the Blood Rite, whatever magic flowed through Illyria allowed the male—now a true warrior—to grab their Siphon at last.

And yet Azriel had hesitated. It didn't matter what he told himself, how much his mind screamed at his body to *move*, to put his hand into the flames. For a moment, he was still in that keep, still listening to his half brothers laughing as he screamed, as his flesh melted—

Rhys had known. Somehow, in that way Rhys had always been able to read him, despite their physical and mental exhaustion threatening to send them all into unconsciousness, Rhys knew. Az's brother had said into his mind, *We're here*.

Rhys was at one side, Cassian at his other. His brothers, his *true* brothers, were with him. So Az had at last reached into the flames.

One stone was usually enough to control any power in an Illyrian's veins, sloppy and dangerous otherwise. Illyrian lore didn't say anything about why the Mother had built the Illyrians that way. Maybe it had just been a curse. That wouldn't have surprised him at all.

Az had closed his hand around the first stone, that flame licking harmlessly up his bloodied forearm, and known it wasn't enough.

Someone had gasped—in horror, in disgust—when he'd reached in to draw a second.

More his magic had ordered. So he drew a third.

The dismayed crowd of Illyrians had started stirring. *Demon*, someone had whispered. The word he'd heard his entire life. Nothing had improved since arriving at Windhaven a decade ago. Their fear of him had only grown as he'd gone deeper into his shadowsinger training, surpassing even what Devlon—who had trained the last one centuries ago—could teach him as he'd learned to spy, to kill, to carve up.

A fourth stone, then a fifth. A sixth.

By the time he drew the seventh from the flames, the females had left, clutching their children to them as they fled Windhaven. Only the males, hard-faced, seething, remained. But there was nothing they could do. Nothing anyone could do. Illyrians, pieces of shit that they were, were so blindly faithful to their traditions that they could not deny him this. Everything else, yes, but this—never.

That the stones were all the same hue of blue, a cobalt bordering on turquoise, made no difference. But it was odd—and remained something he'd never puzzled out, even now.

He turned his hand this way and that, watching the faint light catch within the stone, setting it aglow like the Sidra under the sun. Whatever shock the Illyrians had felt when Az drew his seven stones was nothing compared to their outrage when Cassian, a bastard-born brute, had drawn seven red stones a moment later. Each of the stones so vibrant it was as if Cassian had drawn out the very heart of the flame itself. Cassian had been grinning with each stone, daring the other males to try to stop him.

Az had glared at them all, already planning how he'd use the Siphons now weighing down his pockets to destroy each and every one of them. By the time Cassian was done, Az had decided he'd start with his sire and half brothers.

He followed through on that decision not a decade later.

Az lowered his hand into his lap, shutting out the memory. Not from disgust—quite the opposite. Which he supposed made him as much of a piece of shit as the Illyrians he'd unleashed vengeance upon so many centuries ago.

It required a mere thought before Nuala and Cerridwen were standing before him. The half-wraith twin sisters were both yawning, both clad in their usual black-on-black silk blouses and pants, similar to the style Amren

preferred. Az's shadows stirred, swirling like small eddies in welcome, and then settled back at his feet.

"Late night?" he asked the twins by way of greeting. He never had to bother with pleasantries with them—never had to suffer through small talk.

Cerridwen, the more impertinent and wilder of the two, stretched her night-dark arms over her head, tendrils of shadow pouring off her. The twins occupied a strange space *between*—between full form and mist, between living and . . . whatever it was that wraiths did. When he'd found them centuries ago, they were making a living running messages for a petty crime lord in one of the backwater towns beyond the Illyrian Steppes. Training them had been almost disturbingly easy. Even now, they barely spoke of their life before he'd taken them under his wing. Literally, he supposed.

He knew better than to ask—the Mother knew he never wanted to talk about his own past. Certainly not when someone pried.

"It seems like *you* had a late night," Cerridwen observed, earning a sharp look from Nuala.

There was no hiding anything from them. Especially since they'd taken to spending time with Elain, helping her bake. He'd found it charming at first, but now . . . it gave them too much access, too much information about his own business. They certainly knew what was happening—the twins were too clever not to have noticed and understood Elain's reaction any time he'd come up in conversation amongst them.

"If you heard about it," Azriel reprimanded, "then I don't need to explain what happened." Cerridwen's amusement faded.

One of his shadows stirred, then went still again.

Nuala, shier but more merciless, simply said, "We already have our things packed for Montesere and Rask." From the shadows behind her, a dark pack appeared, weapons glinting from the top. She shouldered it, then tossed a matching one to her sister.

They weren't his assassins—he usually reserved that sort of killing for his own hands, to stain his own soul. Or used one of the select living nightmares serving under him. But as his most trusted and politically savvy spies, they did occasionally have to get themselves out of scrapes. Or get an answer out of an enemy quickly.

"Good," he said, studying the wall of windows, the city now blooming into its full morning chaos. "Stay hidden at all costs. Report back daily if

you can. Any whiff of a Made item, I want to know about it immediately. Any hint of Koschei or a black, hexagonal box, don't wait to tell me. He might be hiding the secret to his immortality there."

The twins nodded and vanished, leaving only a wisp of night behind them.

With no one for company but his thoughts and the shadows slumbering at his feet, Az closed his eyes. Somehow, sleep found him at last.

He doubted that true contentment would find him as easily. And wondered if he'd ever really care enough to wonder why.

Nesta

The music splashed and flowed around Nesta like a cascading river, filling the music hall to the brim with glorious noise.

In recent weeks, bathing in that sound had been a relief and a joy, one of the rare times she'd felt either since Bryce Quinlan had arrived. But after yesterday, that feeling of being completely submerged in something . . .

She had nearly *drowned* yesterday. Had come within a heartbeat of it.

Only Rhys knew, and then the two of them had sat at the family dinner table last night and pretended like nothing had happened. Without Cassian there to mark her every breath, no one had noticed her half-lost in thought, running over every mistake she'd made and every word said between her and Rhys in his study.

You can winnow? the High Lord had asked, seeming torn between gaping and fuming.

I'm trying to, she'd corrected. The two of them had been sopping wet, both breathing heavily. *How'd you know where I was?*

I heard you screaming find me, find me, find me*—or was that for someone else?* Rhys had wiped the water from his eyes.

So much had swarmed her that she'd needed a moment to answer. *I didn't realize I was sending any thoughts out. I—It didn't even occur to me to do that.*

You planned to just drop to the bottom of the ocean and wait for us to realize you'd drowned?

I panicked, she'd snapped. *I didn't expect to wind up—there.*

Why the hell were you trying to get to the Prison?

She'd shaken her head. She didn't want to answer.

Rhys's eyes had dimmed with lethal warning. *No more secrets, Nesta.*

It's not a secret, she'd retorted, finally mustering enough strength into her legs to stand. Water sluiced down her pants, into her boots, squelching with each of the two steps she took back from him. *I just . . .* She'd made herself hold his gaze. Meet the dominance in it with her own. *Plenty of awful things wind up there. I thought perhaps this Made object might also be hidden there. I knew it wasn't likely, but I figured it couldn't hurt to look. Especially if Made things seem to be waking up.*

There was more she wanted to know, but that wasn't Rhys's business.

Rhys angled his head to one side, water dripping off his night-black hair. *Why.* It was a command, not a question.

She held his stare again. She didn't answer to him. Not now, not ever. Rhys's lips curled back from his teeth in a silent snarl.

Her knees trembled with the effort of keeping upright, her neck straining not to bow her head. To take her mind off the instinct to obey, to submit, she'd said, *Why* wouldn't *I want to help this court, the world?*

Rhys's snarl had faded—wary curiosity warming his face instead. He'd snapped his fingers and the water on them vanished. And had said before stalking out, *Next time you want to go to the Prison to poke around, ask me. And if you want winnowing lessons . . .* He shook his head, hand on the doorknob. *For fuck's sake, ask me for that, too*.

Then he'd been gone, and she'd spent today practicing. Like hell would she take winnowing lessons from him.

She didn't know where Cassian was tonight. He'd gone to Windhaven with Azriel yesterday, and while the latter had returned for dinner last night, Cassian had not. He'd opted to stay in the wilds, sleeping at Rhys's mother's old house.

It wasn't unusual these days.

Nesta examined her left hand. The mating band glimmering in the muted light of the music hall. In her right hand, she cupped a small silvery ball. The Symphonia.

She'd been coming here often to let the enchanted ball absorb the music—with the orchestra's permission, of course—so she could listen to it whenever she pleased, but tonight she'd barely heard a single note. Had only heard her own circling, dismal thoughts.

She wished she could talk to Cassian about it. About everything. Cauldron damn her, she truly did. But where to begin? He was still furious about the Mask. How would he react to news of her winnowing, of wanting to go to the Prison, of this other, enormous thing that writhed within her?

They hadn't slept together for weeks. Since Ember and Randall had arrived. Cassian sometimes slept in the bed beside her, but he hadn't reached for her. Had barely spoken with her. That conversation in the hall yesterday, as miserably fraught and ugly as it had been, was the most they'd communicated in days.

Was it possible for mates to . . . un-mate? For that bond to fracture deeply enough that there was no repairing it?

It's one matter to hide things from Rhys, was all Cassian had said when she'd confronted him about his distance, his simmering anger. *It's another matter entirely to hide things from* me.

But Nesta hadn't been granted the chance to even consider hiding her plans from Cassian—or sharing them, for that matter. One moment, she'd been reading in the library at the House of Wind, and the next, Bryce had been there, begging for the Mask, offering her parents not only as collateral but as refugees from the Asteri's wrath.

Nesta had read the desperation in Bryce's amber eyes and had known what she had to do. She didn't have the time to debate her choice—but she also hadn't needed to.

It hadn't mattered that Bryce had later won against the Asteri. That she'd then returned what she'd stolen and what she'd been given—and then some. That her parents had returned to their own world, here and gone like morning dew. It hadn't mattered to anyone that Nesta had found something in Ember she hadn't realized she'd wanted so badly.

You'll find your way.

Nesta had tried to explain everything—*everything*—to Cassian afterward. He hadn't wanted to hear it.

We were finally getting things on the right track, he'd said before walking away. *I don't know why you had to* . . . He'd trailed off, and she hadn't had the nerve to ask him to finish that sentence.

Ruin it. That was what he'd nearly said. She'd ruined it—the tentative peace and affection with Rhys and the others. All the good she'd done by saving Nyx and Feyre, and Rhys in the process, had been erased. Even

Elain still regarded her with caution—had seemed shocked and disappointed when she'd heard about the Mask.

So Nesta had no one to even ask to join her at the music hall, not really. Feyre, maybe, but she knew how stretched thin her sister was, and coming here with her would have been a burden, wouldn't it?

Nesta had taken a seat in the highest section of the theater, wanting to remain mostly unnoticed and unbothered, but tonight, it didn't seem to be an issue. The hall was half full, and most of the patrons sat in the downstairs sections. A middle-of-the-week performance was rarely packed to the rafters, but she liked it this way. It felt as if the music was hers and hers alone.

She could afford a better seat—in fact, there was a gilded box several levels below that technically belonged to her. She'd been donating nearly all of her court paycheck to this orchestra and a few others in Velaris. What else was she going to do with the money? She had everything she needed, and though Rhys and Feyre allotted a healthy amount of their own fortune toward the arts in this city, Nesta had seen firsthand how many repairs were constantly needed, and how little these musicians made.

Their music had brought her such joy and tranquility and peace—how could she not offer them something in return?

Her donations had been anonymous, but it seemed someone had found out. She'd received a letter informing her that the box was to be given to her in thanks for her generosity.

Generosity. She'd laughed when she saw that word. She'd thought giving the Mask to Bryce Quinlan was generous, too.

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat. Focused on the music. Once, it had made her want to dance, to cut through the world with motion and speed. Now it just filled the endless quiet in her head.

She peered at the Symphonia again. She'd saved a world, and lost part of hers in doing so. She didn't regret that choice; she never would. But if she had known what the fallout would be for giving Bryce Quinlan the Mask, would she still have done it?

Yes, a small voice whispered. She would have. To turn her back on an entire world in need, even one not her own? She couldn't have lived with herself.

The symphony finished. She hadn't registered its final, crashing notes. And barely noticed the applause ringing through the cavernous space as she

rose, the Symphonia tucked in her cloak pocket.

She made her way out through one of the back exits, and only when she was in the crisp, misty night air, only when she was certain the narrow alley around her was empty, did she pull out the Symphonia from her cloak.

She didn't need to check to know that the orb had captured the entirety of the symphony, filtering out any crowd noises, leaving only the pure music. It had never captured an errant cough or rustle of clothes or the murmur of a patron.

Except once.

A thought to the Symphonia summoned the sound to the surface. A tap from her finger had it playing into the frosty, empty night.

"*I love you,*" Cassian's voice whispered.

They'd been at the music hall together that night. Sitting in that box, where she hadn't sat in a month. He'd leaned over during the brief pause between movements and whispered it into her ear.

She'd only realized what had happened when she'd gone to listen to the symphony the next day and his words suddenly sounded into the room.

I love you. More than life itself.

The Symphonia had never captured a single spoken word before. But it was as if it somehow knew that those words, in Cassian's voice, made the most beautiful music she'd ever heard.

So now, with all she'd done like an impenetrable wall between them . . . Nesta played the words again.

I love you. More than life itself.

In the empty alley, the chill seeping into her bones, she clung to those words. The treasure she'd broken in order to do the right thing.

She allowed herself another moment to feel it, that burn in her throat, her soul. Then she locked it away and buried it deep. Lifted her face to the river of stars glinting overhead.

And walked alone into the bitter night.

✦

Cassian didn't come back to the House of Wind that night—again.

And like the fool she was, Nesta had waited up for most of it. Listening for any creaking floorboards or that familiar stomping strut down the hall.

Sleep had been elusive once she'd given up hoping her mate would return, and she'd tossed and twisted in the sheets until she'd been tangled

up in them. Only a driving need for tea had dragged her from her room—and a driving need for some sort of company had sent her across the city to the river house.

Feyre and Elain weren't in the dining room as she shouldered open the doors, breathing in the sweet-smoky scent of her tea, along with all her favorite breakfast treats.

Azriel, however, was seated at one end of the long table, wreathed in shadows despite the brilliant autumn morning outside. He didn't look up, though he'd certainly already known she was about to walk in.

"Morning," she said, mostly to taunt him, since he seemed content to ignore her.

Azriel's hazel eyes flicked up. "Morning," he said, barely more than a grunt.

The plate piled high with breakfast foods before him was untouched. Only his teacup was empty, drained to the dregs.

"Food not up to snuff?" Nesta asked coolly as she took a seat at the opposite end of the table.

Az blinked down at his plate. As if surprised to find that there was, indeed, food in front of him. But he said nothing. His shadows draped off his shoulders, like they, too, couldn't be bothered.

"Where is everyone?" she asked, serving herself soft scrambled eggs, hard cheese, peppery arugula salad, and toast.

"Cassian's off to see Eris. But surely you knew that already." His eyes flicked to hers again.

Score one for the shadowsinger.

Az went on, "Amren went to the Day Court to search through Helion's libraries for any hint about Made objects that might have woken up—or might awaken soon, if a death-god is stirring."

Nesta frowned. She could have joined the female for that—would have loved an excuse to browse through the High Lord of Day's vast and stunning collection. Or what remained of it after Amarantha and her cronies had looted many of his one thousand libraries. It would have required enough focus that she could have avoided thinking about her mate. Wondering.

"And Feyre and Rhys are preparing to go see Jurian and Vassa, to ask about Koschei," Az said, tapping a scarred finger on the table beside his teacup.

Nesta met Azriel's cool stare and added, "And to see Lucien."

The shadowsinger's mouth tightened. His shadows writhed.

Score one for the Valkyrie.

Nesta had seen and inferred enough to guess how Azriel felt about Lucien Vanserra. Why he might feel that way. She'd never said a word to anyone about it—not him, not Elain. With Feyre, she'd exchanged a few knowing glances, but nothing more.

Azriel's eyes sharpened, the blue Siphon atop his hand flaring in emphasis. But his tone remained flat as he asked, "What are *you* doing today?"

Nesta made a point to eat a few bites of her eggs and salad before answering. At least someone else in this court was in as foul a mood as she was—small comfort, but she'd take it. She said at last, "Well, today I'm running errands in Velaris—half for me, half for Amren. But tomorrow Clotho needs me to pick up a present for Nyx, so I'm going to the library. And while I'm there, I'll track down Gwyn. I need her to do something for me."

No matter that she hadn't seen or spoken to her friend in weeks. Az didn't need to know that. It wasn't his business, and considering the cold shoulder he'd given her since Bryce Quinlan's departure, she didn't care to tell him.

Azriel eyed her, his shadows likely feeding him whatever supplemental information they gleaned. Did they tell him how she'd barely talked to Gwyn since the Blood Rite? That she missed her friend so much it physically hurt—even though she knew it was imperative to give her space? Gwyn had been relieved to see Nesta when she emerged from the Blood Rite, of course, but that didn't temper her fury that Nesta had decided the path for her, against the priestess's wishes.

Did those shadows whisper that every day without her friend had eaten away at her? She had Feyre and Elain and sometimes Amren, but they didn't hold a candle to the friendships she'd forged with Emerie and Gwyn—especially Gwyn. The sisterhood.

"What do you need Gwyn to do?" he asked at last, a shade warily. As if his shadows had told him that she might have some sort of nefarious scheme in mind.

Nesta said sweetly, even as red-hot fire kindled in her belly at the implied accusation, "I want her to record everything that happened with Bryce Quinlan in the caves."

His surprised inhale was every bit as satisfying as she'd hoped. So was the sight of his shadows scattering from his shoulders to cluster on the floor around the table. "Are you authorized to do that?" He was deadly serious.

"Yes," she lied. His wings twitched, his shadows leaping to his shoulders again. But he didn't call her on it. She added drily, "Want to join?"

"No." He twisted his teacup around once, twice. The Siphon atop his hand flickered.

Still not entirely done poking the dragon, if only to release some of her own misery, she asked with a saccharine smile, "Weren't you supposed to be the one going to the human lands?"

He twisted the teacup again but didn't take the bait—or even seem to realize they were still playing the game. "I've been pulled off that duty."

She stilled—both at the words and the fact that he'd even told her. She dropped all obnoxiousness as she asked, "Why?"

Az didn't answer. His shadows seethed around him like an angry swarm of wasps. Something to do with Rhys, no doubt.

She'd been on the receiving end of Rhys's anger and contempt enough that she softened a bit and said, "Then today you should help me remember everything that happened with Bryce, so that I can relay it to Gwyn accurately when I see her tomorrow."

His eyes lifted to hers, shadows settling, as if his curiosity had soothed them. "Why are you even bothering to record it?"

"Because I want to lay out all the pieces." She sipped from her tea. "And I think . . ." She took another sip, sorting through how to explain it. "I think there should be a record of what happened. For history, and for us to reference. It's knowledge that was once lost, and should not be lost again."

That eight-pointed star was tattooed on you for a reason.

She blocked out the memory and went on, jerking her chin at him, "You were the one who found Bryce on the lawn. The narrative should probably start there."

Az tapped a scarred finger on the table as he thought. She'd seen him playing chess with the same intensity. At last, he asked, perhaps a little reluctantly, "Not sixteen thousand years ago?"

"I don't know," she admitted, grateful for this relatively normal conversation, despite its unnerving subject. "Is it better to start with us and how *we* learned the truth of what happened, or start in chronological order,

with what we now know about Theia and Fionn and the Daglan and all that?"

All that. As if two words could ever encompass what had happened at the dawn of this world.

She'd already explained to Rhys and Feyre the true history that she, Azriel, and Bryce Quinlan had learned in the tunnels beneath the Prison, but she couldn't stop turning over the details again and again like one of Amren's puzzle pieces.

She should have had Cassian at her side to help her. Should have had her mate there to parse every bit of information. She'd even gone so far as to pretend like a fool to talk to Cassian about it, to figure out how she'd explain it all, that she could practically recite it by heart.

Sixteen thousand years ago, this world had been ruled by cruel, petty masters: the Daglan. Near-impossible to defeat, they'd reigned over Fae and humans alike for untold millennia before that. Until a coalition of Fae led by Fionn, a legendary warrior still worshipped by the likes of Cassian and Rhys, had at last destroyed them, with the Trove and a host of other magical weapons.

The Mother knew how badly she wanted to pick Cassian's brain about what those weapons might be—how a force of Fae, outnumbered and outpowered, might take on near-gods and win. She suspected the bastard had been talking to Rhys about it. Likely to Az, too.

It was history even Amren didn't know, as she had been in the Prison already by that point. Some vague information had survived, but not at the level of detail they now knew. In the wake of overthrowing the Daglan, the Fae had risen as the dominant power in this world, enslaving the humans as the Fae themselves had once been enslaved.

It left a bad taste in Nesta's mouth, no matter how many times she ran through this history in her head. Another thing on her list of issues to discuss with Cassian: How could she reconcile being newly Fae, being a part of this people, knowing what they'd once done to her ancestors? What many of them still wished to do. How did *he* feel about it? How did it sit with him to know that his beloved ancient heroes took their freedom and then used it to enslave others? Fionn, great warrior and savior of the Fae: enslaver of humankind.

She didn't know how to think in the gray like that. Cassian had always been better at that sort of thing—might have been able to explain how

Fionn could at once be good *and* have done terrible things.

For a thousand years, humans aside, a tentative peace held. The Fae formed kingdoms and territories, and in Prythian, a High King ruled, a High Queen with him: Theia. The first and last High Queen of Prythian.

Not counting Amarantha, who'd declared herself High Queen during her reign. That monster had never been a true queen of anything.

But Theia had ruled this land. And in those tunnels beneath the Prison, Nesta and Azriel had learned the secret history of the forgotten court that Theia had established solely for her personal use and retreat. What might now be considered an *eighth* court: the Prison.

The Prison, which had once been fertile and teeming with life. The Prison, which had once been ruled by a High Lady with starlight in her veins.

But in the end, that starlight might as well have been poison, fueling and justifying a ruthless ambition for power. Theia had betrayed her husband, Fionn, taking for herself his great sword: Gwydion.

Maybe it was good Nesta hadn't discussed it with Cassian. Surely he would have made some jab about Theia taking whatever magical items she wished and Nesta using the Trove as she pleased, gifting the Mask to Bryce. She ground her teeth merely imagining what that argument would be like.

He'd probably have pointedly mentioned that even Gwydion hadn't been enough to save Theia from a betrayal herself, and that she got what was coming to her: When she'd led her people, including her two daughters, into another world, she'd never returned to this one. Theia's youngest daughter, however—Silene—had managed to get back to this world, separated from her sister and mother in the process and forced to leave them behind. Then Silene had taken it upon herself to leave a record of this history, carved into rock and magic in the catacombs beneath the Prison. To be forgotten until Nesta, Az, and Bryce Quinlan had found it.

Of course, had she been working through it with Cassian, that would have been the point where Nesta started yelling about whether he actually considered her as monstrous as Theia—if he truly believed that her lending Bryce Quinlan the Mask was on the same level as Theia's betrayal of her husband, her world, and her people.

Nesta already knew she didn't want to hear her mate's answer.

She straightened, and found Az watching her carefully, his shadows likely whispering that she'd lost herself once again to thoughts of the past

and of her mate. And she said, perhaps because Az was one of the few people with whom she could be honest, “Does it keep you awake, thinking of that time in the caves with Bryce? I can’t stop thinking about it.”

He considered, all traces of his earlier foul mood gone. “Because you feel guilty about handing over the Mask?”

“No.” It was as close as she’d come to talking about this with anyone. “Just a sense that maybe there’s more to learn.”

His Siphons blazed, but his face remained impassive. “Like what?”

She shrugged, pouring herself more tea. “We still know so little about how to wield the Trove. About the Prison—what it used to be. There are countless chambers and tunnels, many forgotten or hidden. You’ve all been going there for five centuries, yet you never knew or even sensed what was contained within. What if there’s more hidden inside?”

Azriel studied her. “Have you sensed something?”

“I don’t know.” How to even explain what she’d seen and felt beneath the sea, when she was drowning? It might have all been a hallucination on the edge of death. “It’s just this . . . feeling I can’t shake.”

“You want Gwyn to record all this so that you can chase a feeling.”

She shrugged, ignoring his disbelieving tone, if only because she did indeed sound out of her wits. “Maybe in the telling of it, I’ll piece it together.” In the way she so badly wanted to, needed to, with her mate. “But at the very least, there should be documentation of it for future generations. In case . . .” She didn’t want to finish the words, to put them out into the world.

But Azriel asked, almost daring her, “In case what?”

Nesta clenched her jaw. “In case we don’t make it through this coming conflict with the continent. In case future generations might need it.”

Az scanned her face, his shadows swirling. Nesta withstood the scrutiny. Let him see whatever he wished. She had little to hide.

But Az said, “I’m sure you’ll be able to cover it all on your own when you tell Gwyn.” He rose, silent despite his considerable size, and headed for the patio doors. His shadows trailed him like a long, shifting cloak.

And maybe she was foolish, maybe she was too softhearted, but she asked, “Are you all right?” If he’d been pulled off one of his usual information-gathering duties, something had to have happened with Rhys. Something that had given Az that icy edge in his eyes, that lack of appetite and interest in engaging in any sort of conversation.

Az paused at the glass doors, shadows swirling with the sudden stop, but he didn't turn. He quietly asked, "Do you think Rhys will ever forgive you? For handing over the Mask to Bryce Quinlan?"

She knew he wasn't asking about her, or even the Mask. But Az was her friend—sort of. He had been, up until the moment she'd handed the Mask to Bryce. At the very least, she could offer him honesty. So Nesta said, "No. I don't. Maybe he'll be able to speak civilly to me again one day, but I don't think he'll ever truly forgive me. I don't think he's capable of it."

Az had known the male for over five centuries. He should have known the answer already. Or maybe he did, and just needed to hear it from someone other than himself.

She waited for Az to respond, but he didn't say another word before he stalked onto the front lawn, a storm of brooding black against the light, punctured only by the blue gleam of his Siphons on those scarred hands, and gently shut the doors behind him.

CHAPTER 8

Cassian

Cassian hated to admit it: The Autumn Court was beautiful. Beyond beautiful. Like straying into a dream. Reds and golds and oranges all around, trees like temple pillars rising toward a crushingly blue sky, each step cushioned by velvet moss, every breath crisp and tasting of pine.

He might have enjoyed it, might have even laid himself in the glade and basked in the buttery warmth of the sun streaming through the oaks and pines, had he not stood before one of his least favorite people in Prythian.

Eris was in more finery than usual, which was saying something. Silver rings encircled his long fingers, and his usually unbound hair had been braided back in an ornate warrior's plait. Not one thread lay out of place on his silver jacket, the embroidery so delicate it glistened like the babbling brook running through the clearing in which they stood.

"You're late," Eris said by way of greeting. "I've been waiting for fifteen minutes."

Cassian shifted his weight, checking his temper. "The winds coming down from Illyria weren't in my favor." A severe understatement. They'd been brutal. He was only fifteen minutes late because he'd pushed himself to near exhaustion.

But he wasn't about to show Eris his trembling arms and legs, the stomach muscles that ached from the effort of supporting his back while he flew. Or the wings that were so tired he could barely keep them from slumping on the mossy, leaf-strewn floor.

Only pure pride held his wings upright. Even if it required almost all his concentration to do so. But Cassian still managed to say, "Do you have somewhere more important to be?"

"Yes. At my father's hall. Helping him prepare for our most honored and holy celebration of the year."

"Right—Autumn Equinox," Cassian said, letting himself sound as glib and brainless as he knew Eris believed him to be. "We're not invited to the party?"

"I hear you're having a party of your own that day," Eris countered coolly. "Are *we* not invited to that? A Naming Day for a High Lord's child is usually an event that we all attend."

Cassian snickered—he knew a high-born asshole like Eris would resent it from a common nobody. "You're our enemy, remember? Why should we invite you?" He winked, nodding to the empty wilderness around them. "Feeling lonely in the woods these days, Eris?"

Eris toyed with a delicately embossed silver button on his jacket. "Here I was, thinking you saw me as a good male." His eyes lifted to Cassian. "I thought the High Lady herself was coming to meet with me today."

"Change of plans." Cassian had no idea why. Feyre and Rhys had decided to go see Lucien and Jurian—a job that had initially been set aside for Az. But apparently, Az was pulled from the duty, and not only Rhys had filled in for him, but Feyre, too. Leaving Cassian to meet with this unbearable piece of garbage.

Eris asked, bored and annoyed, "What is it you came here to tell me?"

"Shit is happening on the continent," Cassian said, not wasting more breath than necessary on this prick. "Armies are mobilizing to march south. Koschei's all tangled up in it somehow, too, and we need solid proof of that to convince everyone else to pressure the territories to back down. Does your father know anything about it?"

"If he does, he has not confided in me."

Cassian had been in Illyria yesterday when Feyre had sent him the order to come down here—apparently for nothing, if Eris had no more to say than that. Cassian had debated returning to Velaris last night, and flying out this

morning, but what was the point? The only reason he would have returned to Velaris was to see Nesta, and these days . . .

He couldn't even think of what to say to his mate these days. So he'd extended his stay in Windhaven. Rhys's mother's house felt bigger than it ever had in years past, and he'd flown down here at dawn, glad for the complex brutality of the headwinds to occupy his thoughts.

Until he'd stopped flying—and now every muscle screamed to collapse and never move again.

Eris frowned. "My father stands to gain more from a victory for the continent in this conflict than in joining you, Koschei or no. I don't need him to tell me that. He's established a clear enough pattern by now that you should be able to predict how he'll side."

"And I don't suppose *you* could bother to lift a finger to try to persuade him otherwise." Cassian crossed his arms, muscles shrieking in protest. "Maybe have him try to convince the continental territories not to march southward. And that allying with Koschei is a dangerous plan."

"As if that's even *remotely* possible."

Cassian bristled. "Fine. I don't know why we bothered to ask you anyway. Mor's headed back to Vallahan one last time to see if she can sway them." Among other things, but Eris didn't need to know about the Made item hanging in the balance.

A muscle ticked in Eris's cheek. "She won't be successful."

Cassian might have agreed, but the sneering smugness . . . He bit out, "If Mor sets her mind to do something, she does it."

"So do they."

Cassian flashed a grin that was all teeth. "When are you making your move to oust dear old papa?"

"What's it to you?"

"Prythian united looks a hell of a lot more formidable against the continent than a bunch of scattered courts. If you're going to murder your father in cold blood, now would be the most beneficial time for the rest of us."

Eris didn't take the bait, and instead examined his neatly trimmed nails, the rings adorning his fingers. "I assume Spring is too busy peeing on trees and bushes to bother helping unify Prythian?"

"Something like that," Cassian said.

Eris's amber eyes flicked up, pure fire. "And you mean to tell me Thesan has agreed to stand with you? Dawn is much more skittish about these conflicts than even we are."

"Thesan isn't opposed to the idea," Cassian lied. They hadn't yet broached the subject with the High Lord of Dawn. But they'd need him—and his legion of Peregryns. Thesan had willingly joined the conflict against Hybern, but that had been a threat that imperiled them all with immediate consequences. This one was different. Thesan would need to be approached delicately about it. "But he's rightly concerned about Koschei's involvement. Hence the need for tangible proof of that alliance. It would persuade him to our side."

Eris smiled, like he scented Cassian's lies as accurately as one of his famed smokehounds. "I'll spare making you give me the *Together we rise, apart we fall* speech and tell you the truth," the male drawled. "Even if every legion of Prythian's courts came together to face the threat of Koschei, there is not one reality in which we could take on the combined might of Rask, Vallahan, Montesere, and any of the unaffiliated Fae who join them. Death-lord pulling their strings or no."

"Which is why we need to prove to other territories that Koschei is involved—and get them to pressure Rask, Vallahan, and Montesere to back down."

"Perhaps," Eris said mildly. "But is there a possibility that the very territories you're counting on to stop the invasion might do the opposite? That, when given the opportunity, they might risk the threat Koschei poses and join the march southward to seize human land before it's all claimed? Many of them are arrogant enough to think they could handle Koschei themselves—after the old lands are returned."

Cassian shook his head, disgust curdling in his gut. "It's certainly a possibility." Hadn't Az heard as much a few days ago in Montesere's mountains? That their enemies sought the box that contained Koschei's death in order to control him? Fools, all of them, for double-dealing with a death-god. Cassian sighed. "But for us to stand aside and let it happen—"

"Would be the wise thing to do. I know wisdom is a foreign concept to you." Eris held his gaze with a force that hinted at the High Lord he might one day become, if Cassian didn't kill him first. "You're fools for letting Morrigan go back into Vallahan when you're so close to war. And fools for

involving yourselves in a conflict that has nothing to do with you or your lands."

"We've heard that before," Cassian said with a dismissive arrogance calculated to drive Eris up the wall. "But these situations usually shake out in our favor."

"It won't this time. Not with Koschei involved."

Cassian snorted. "Thanks for your support."

"I'm not telling you this out of cruelty," Eris said sharply. "I'm telling you this so you don't all wind up dead. Or worse."

"I'd think you'd be pleased," Cassian taunted.

He could have sworn hurt flickered in Eris's eyes. "You must be truly stupid if, after everything, you actually believe that."

Cassian schooled his face into neutrality. Eris had just come awfully close to admitting he actually liked them. Cared about their well-being.

To avoid having to really think about whether Eris considered them all to be *friends*, Cassian turned and spread his wings. Why the fuck had Feyre sent him to do this? Maybe it was busywork, like the type he assigned to the grunts in his armies to keep them too tired to grumble.

A strong, unyielding hand wrapped around his forearm. Cassian blinked at it, one of his own hands already palming the knife at his side.

Eris's eyes simmered with flame. "Rhysand is clever, I'll give him that. But he's revealed himself in recent years to be too kindhearted. Dangerously so. This is a conflict that won't be resolved by civilized discussions on Storr."

How did Eris know about that meeting? Cassian shook off Eris's grip. "Touch me again and I'll cut your hand off."

Eris didn't back down, though he let go, rings flashing again in the dappled sunlight. "The Autumn Equinox is a time of balance: light and dark held in perfect unity for one day."

"What's your fucking point?"

"Perhaps think on it—all of you. You cannot have too much of one and not enough of the other. Dark is needed to appreciate the light, and light is needed to appreciate the dark. The scales tipped too far toward one side after the war five hundred years ago. Now they are seeking to rebalance, and perhaps Koschei is the instrument of that. It might not be a bad thing."

Cassian's wings flared. "Tell that to the humans about to lose their lives and homes."

"Tell that to the Fae who lost theirs five hundred years ago."

Cassian's lip curled. "I didn't come to debate the ethics of this invasion. And if you have nothing of value to tell me, then we're done here. Enjoy your perfectly balanced holiday of bullshit."

Eris snarled. "I'd mind the insults you levy toward the Mother and her sacred days. Especially after what she's granted you, of all people."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

Eris shrugged, his fine jacket shimmering. "The Mother granted you a gift when she gave you your mate. Not only your court, but *you*. If *I* were you, I'd be on my knees every day thanking the Mother for it."

Before Bryce Quinlan's arrival, Cassian *had* been on his knees every day, not just thanking the Mother for Nesta, but showing his mate exactly how much he appreciated her.

But Cassian didn't miss the sharpness in Eris's eyes. And couldn't resist as he goaded, relishing Eris's misery, "Jealous?"

"I offered for her," Eris said bluntly, sliding his hands into his pockets. The Made dagger at his side shifted—its ordinary hilt glinting in the sun.

Had the lordling drawn it yet? Learned the secrets of its powers—whatever Nesta had imbued in it? Did he even dare wear it in his father's presence, for fear of the questions it would raise? They'd given it back to him months ago, after that whole business with Briallyn. But surely Eris wouldn't be stupid enough to wear a Made dagger in front of Beron. Or anyone at the Autumn Court. Perhaps that was why he'd agreed to come today—simply to have the chance to wear the blade and gloat over it. Cassian wouldn't have put it past the male.

Eris shrugged again. "When Nesta gets tired of you, mate or no, my offer still stands."

White-hot rage boiled up through Cassian, setting his Siphons crackling with power. "That's not going to happen."

Eris smirked. "Then where is she? I haven't seen her at one of our little chats in a while. I wonder why."

Cassian didn't bother answering. It didn't matter what Eris said or did or became. They'd never be friends—not in any true sense. The lordling could go to hell.

Eris went on, squinting at the blue sky above the vibrant forest canopy, "A word of warning: if you provoke the continent into war, if you bring that

conflict to Prythian's doorstep . . ." His stare lowered to Cassian's, full of fire and steel. "Then even your mate's power won't be enough to save you."

With that, the bastard winnowed, leaving only swirling red and gold leaves behind.

Azriel

Intruder. Visitor. Stranger.

Azriel had been in the town house, reading the daily reports from Nuala and Cerridwen—nothing of note in Rask or Montesere so far—when his shadows had begun roiling around him, shouting.

Intruder. Visitor. Stranger.

He was out the front door and launching skyward before he could think it through.

The day was bright, the city humming and peaceful, not a tinge of discontent in the air—

Stranger. River. Fear.

A pivot of his wings had him angling down, the wind shrieking in his ears as he soared for the Sidra. The turquoise water was clear, undisturbed; the boats meandered along, the bridges full of pedestrians all unbothered. He swooped low enough to scan the water, so crystalline he could see the river bottom thirty feet below with perfect clarity.

Even after he'd finally learned to fly as a child, it had taken decades for it to become instinct. To read winds and clouds and light, to trust his own body to do what it had been created to do.

Fear. Shadows. Hiding—

An image formed in his mind, courtesy of his shadows. Something, someone concealed in the dimness beside one of the docked merchant vessels, crouched between the wall of the quay and the hull itself. Clinging to the stones with long, clawed fingers.

Az's shadows locked in, showing him the distinctive carved prow with its rearing fish-tailed horse, and he searched the riverside for it—there. His Siphons glowed as he rallied his power, readying for attack.

Mor was in the city—somewhere. And Nesta was up at the House of Wind. Everyone else was gone, but between the three of them, if his

shadows could notify them somehow, perhaps they could face whatever this creature was. Before it posed a threat to Nyx. And the people of this city.

Curious sailors and merchants peered up at him as he shot past. A brisk wind off the river had him tilting, wings straining to keep steady. The ship he sought rose before him, a wood-and-canvas behemoth, and his senses narrowed toward where the hull met the river, the shade inches beyond it—

There; there, his own shadows urged. *Fear. Alive and not. Dead and not.*

He reached a hand over a shoulder for his Illyrian blade. Drew it in a silent slide. He didn't bother to reach for Truth-Teller. The blade could turn to rust in its sheath for all he cared.

He banked in a whisper-quiet flap, assessing the boat, the river, before veiling himself in shadows. Nothing better than a wisp of darkness, a stain on the light. He slipped into the gloom along the quay. A skill that had been beaten and brutalized into him by Devlon from almost the very first day he'd arrived at Windhaven.

And when he'd surpassed Devlon's knowledge of how to train shadowsingers, the other tutors who had been brought in had made Az long for the days when the petty Illyrian lord had overseen his education.

Hidden, Az examined the gap between the stone wall and the hull.

A white face stared up at him.

It was all that training that now kept Az utterly still, preventing him from doing what every instinct screamed: recoil, run, get airborne. And in his stillness, he remained a mere shadow. Nothing at all.

The over-large, fishlike eyes on that white face moved past him, scouring the sky, the ship. As if knowing Az approached but not that he was already there, inches away.

It was vaguely male and vaguely Fae-like, this creature. White as bleached bones, gangly, with webbed, claw-tipped fingers. Its lips, full to the point of seeming like they'd burst, opened and closed. A fish on dry land.

Its claws dug into the barnacle-crusted hull, keeping it half in the water, half out, and the part of its body that was still in the river—

A fish on dry land indeed. A scaled tail thrashed where legs should have been, as ghastly white as the rest of the creature. Like it had crawled from some lightless hole at the bottom of the sea. Perhaps it had, Az mused as the creature skulked in the shade, squinting at the sky, the ship, the quay.

Alive and not. Dead and not.

He couldn't make sense of his shadows as they sought to puzzle out what the creature was. It looked around, tail thrashing beneath the water to keep it afloat. His shadows had been right about the fear. The thing in front of him was rippling with it. And yet . . . he did not have the sense that it was lost.

It came here; it was sent, his shadows confirmed. Which meant it was time for questions.

Half a thought had Azriel's Siphons sending out a bolt of blue light. His power clamped like a manacle around one of the creature's wrists, binding it to the hull.

The creature flailed, tail whacking the ship, the quay, the water so hard that someone was bound to notice—

"Calm yourself," Azriel ordered, stepping from the shadows at last.

The creature clawed at the blue manacle on its wrist, so hard it drew blood. Its tail, too, was bleeding in spots where its scales had been knocked off.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Az said, though not at all gently. And not at all truthfully, he supposed. He wouldn't hurt this thing—*yet*. Honor was a luxury he didn't often indulge in.

The creature thrashed again, its too-thin body slamming into the side of the ship just once, then going limp. Slowly, it turned its face toward him. Its saucerlike eyes blinked.

"Tell me what you're doing here," Azriel commanded.

The thing's puffy mouth opened, shut. Fear still pervaded its scent. But it said in a hoarse voice, as if it bubbled up from far, far below its throat, "I come bearing a message to the High Lord and Lady of the Night Court."

Az kept his face neutral.

Truth, his shadows confirmed.

Wiping any trace of curiosity or surprise from his tone, Az said, "You picked an odd spot to deliver it."

Again, that strange voice spoke. "Too many people; too much noise; too much *everything*." And so it had scuttled into the shade here to hide.

"Who sent you?" Once, he might have already taken this thing to the nearest dungeon and started his usual type of questioning. But now . . . he owed it to Feyre, after seeing her flinch while he interrogated their enemies, to try another way. At least once.

The creature opened and closed its mouth again, like it was struggling to breathe. “Hybern.”

It took a considerable amount of self-control to avoid reeling back in shock. To avoid lifting the sword still in his hand and slicing down, ending this creature’s miserable life with one stroke. Az made himself instead say impassively, “What business does Hybern have sending a message to the Night Court?”

The thing gurgled, spittle bubbling at the corners of its rounded lips. “They wish . . . to meet.”

“That’s not happening.” Az didn’t have the authority to decide that, but he could damn well guess that was what Rhys and Feyre would say.

The thing flapped its tail once, twice. Tried and failed to free itself from the manacle again. It stilled after a moment. “Hybern . . . wishes . . .”—each word was a push of air—“to form . . . an alliance.”

“An *alliance*—”

But before he could finish, before he could master his own astonishment, the creature shuddered and went limp. With a final sigh, eyes closing almost in relief, its white skin frothed and bubbled. Melted away into the water. And where there had been a creature half dangling from a blue manacle moments before, now only sea-foam remained.

Alive and not. Dead and not, his shadows had whispered. Like this thing had existed between the two states, and now, its purpose fulfilled, it had entirely ceased to exist.

His shadows swept over the foam, the water. *Gone*, they reported. *Returned from whence it came*. *Salt to salt, water to water.*

Some sort of magical construct, then. Az rubbed the back of his neck. It was complicated magic, to make something that could think and endure on its own . . . but ultimately served only one reason for being, and would vanish when it was fulfilled. Soulless, yet driven by need.

Az stared at the sea-foam until the bubbles thinned and spread, until the Sidra was turquoise and unblemished once more. Until only his stunned reflection stared back at him.

CHAPTER 9

Feyre

I'd forgotten how bitter autumn could feel in the human lands. Like death loomed all around, waiting with frozen hands to snatch away any kernel of warmth and life.

Only a few years ago, I'd dreaded this chill in the air. Had felt nothing but terror at waking to that first frost sparkling on the dried grasses beyond our cottage. There had been nothing I could do to stop that lethal, oncoming winter.

Lucien seemed to be doing his best to keep his companions from feeling that growing cold: a preternaturally large fire crackled in every hearth of the small manor house—without wood—and each room was toasty to the point of suffocating.

But Vassa, perched by a window in dire need of a cleaning, gazing out at the setting sun, didn't seem to mind the heat. Not surprising, given that she was currently in her firebird form, barely more than a flame given shape herself.

Jurian had rolled up his sleeves, though, and now stood at the large desk by the far wall of the study, poring over the map that Rhys and I had spread across the surface for us all to survey.

The harsh lines of Jurian's face remained set in a scowl. "I would have thought you, at least, Rhysand, would remember how little the other side cared for diplomacy during the last war."

"We had to try," Rhys said from where he leaned against the desk.

"You've been trying for nearly two years," Jurian said. He stabbed a scarred finger on the map, right where the wall had cut through the continent. "It's done nothing."

Standing on the other side of the desk, I jerked my chin at him. "I didn't see you at the negotiating table."

Jurian snorted. "Because I knew it'd be pointless."

"They also wouldn't have deigned to meet with him," Lucien said across from me, frowning at the map, golden eye clicking.

Jurian scowled again, but said nothing.

Az was supposed to have conducted this check-in, but Rhys had told me yesterday afternoon that given all that was happening, we were to go in his stead. There was something else to it—I could sense it—but Rhys didn't elaborate. When he was ready, he'd tell me.

And frankly, I was glad for the excuse to get out of Velaris, though my mate had informed me only after we'd winnowed here that Amren was at the Day Court. Apparently trying to avoid me, too. Fine.

A flash of light drew our attention to the window where Vassa had perched, revealing a sun now below the horizon line, and a flame growing and stretching into—

"Honestly," Vassa said, human form appearing, clad in a mix of suede and leather clothes that had seen better years, "I wouldn't have agreed to meet with Jurian, either—certainly not with that haircut of his."

Jurian rolled his eyes at her teasing, but once again stayed silent.

Vassa nodded to me, then to Rhysand, a twinkle in her cobalt eyes. "Not being able to speak while these two idiots talk about important things is agony."

Lucien threw her an exasperated look. "You had to wait all of three minutes from their arrival to when the sun set."

Vassa brushed aside the comment, coming to stare at the map. I noted where her eyes fell first: the massive, sprawling lake in the center of the open Fae lands on the continent.

"Koschei is indeed pulling the territories' strings," Vassa said, recalling the update we'd given them upon our arrival. She fingered a frayed corner

of the map. “I can confirm beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is true. He’s long done that to amuse himself.”

“We need proof, though,” Rhys said. “Real, tangible proof.”

“Like what?” Vassa asked. “My word isn’t enough?”

“I wish that it were,” Rhys said gently, straightening from his casual pose. “But for the Fae territories to be convinced, we need someone who doesn’t stand to benefit from his downfall, someone not enslaved to him.”

“Is this any different from what he’s done before, though?” Vassa asked.

Rhys pointed to each of the three territories, then the vast stretch of open Fae territory below, in turn. “Yes. He’s pushing them into this invasion. That goes beyond mere amusement. And we need to know why.”

“I don’t think the territories required much encouragement from Koschei to do that,” Vassa argued, utterly unafraid of the High Lord in all his glory before her. Her jaw tightened, though, as she looked back at the lake. “But if Made objects, particularly evil ones, are stirring, *wanting* to be found . . .” She nodded distantly. “Yes. That would certainly imply that Koschei is making a move to escape from his lake—at long last. He wants an arsenal.”

“It could be that our enemies are well aware of his intention to liberate himself,” Rhys said. “And the threat it would likely pose to them, even if they uphold their side of whatever this bargain is. They’re seeking the box that contains his life-thread so they can use it to control him, should he prove . . . unwieldy.”

“Then find it first,” Jurian advised.

Now Vassa rolled her eyes. “It is impossible to find. Koschei hid it himself—and I’ve never heard him utter so much as a hint as to its whereabouts.”

“What *is* a life-thread?” I asked. “Did you ever hear Koschei mention it when you were at his lake?”

Vassa shook her head. “No. Never. But life-thread or not, if your enemies seek the box, they go on a fool’s errand. It cannot be found. And when Koschei discovers their treachery, he will make them pay for it, lake or no lake.”

Even Amren, for all her talk of urgency, hadn’t suggested hunting for the box as a solution. She must have understood it to be as impossible as Vassa had just declared. Not that I was going to ask Amren anytime soon.

“It all ties together somehow,” I said. “Koschei pushing for this invasion and wanting to be free of his lake. Why he’s doing it now, when he would

have had the perfect opportunity during the Hybern War while we were all distracted. And what does he stand to gain from this particular invasion? We need to find out before it bites us in the ass."

Not missing a beat, Rhys clarified, "But first, we need to obtain proof that Koschei is manipulating Rask, Montesere, and Vallahan so that the other territories pressure them to back down. And we need to stop Koschei from escaping his lake and attaining whatever Made items are now stirring."

"Stop him—not destroy him?" Vassa asked.

"Ideally destroy, but I'll take just stopping him for now, if that death-box of his truly can never be found." I put a hand on her arm. "Are you any closer to uncovering a way to break your own curse?" I knew it was a sensitive subject, but I had to ask.

Lucien winced. Even Jurian glanced warily to Vassa. But the queen—former queen, I supposed—lifted her chin. "We've had an endless stream of shamans and soothsayers coming to the house. None of them can make heads or tails of my curse."

At her resigned sorrow, I really should have let it drop, but I found myself asking, "Your fellow queens sold you out to Koschei, but why was he interested in you in the first place? Why bother with any of the females he has trapped there?"

"Beyond being a narcissistic monster?" Jurian quipped. Lucien grunted with agreement.

Vassa's eyes slid to the far east of the map. For a moment, I thought she might ignore my question, but then she said, "My distant ancestor was the Fae female who trapped Koschei in the first place. All the females now trapped in his lake are descended from her. All human, all with that mere trace of Fae ancestry. In his delusion, he believes some key to his freedom lies with us. Our ancient bloodline. And . . ." Her voice sharpened with anger. "He also takes sick pleasure in trapping the descendants of the female who cursed him. As if it gets back at her in some way."

"That's despicable," I breathed.

"*He's* despicable," Vassa said. "He's nothing but a creature of hate and greed and rot."

"Have you returned to Helion to have him try again to break your curse," Rhys asked.

Vassa ran a hand through her shoulder-length red hair. “I did. Or rather, I begged him to come and take one more stab at it. He swaggered down here a few months ago, took one look at me, and said it was a lost cause.”

It was an effort not to inspect Lucien’s face for any sign of discomfort. Had he been present for this encounter?

He still doesn’t know, Rhys said into my mind. *That Helion is his true father. Let’s keep it that way.*

Why? I shot back down the bond.

Because it’s valuable information that should be wielded at the right time.

You’re such a schemer, I accused him.

Always.

“Vassa has to be mindful about who to approach regarding her curse,” Lucien explained, golden eye whirring as it scanned over the map. “The moment Koschei learns she’s trying to break the enchantment, he’ll summon her back.”

“You have a bargain, though,” I said to Vassa. “You’re allowed to be out in the world for some time before returning to the lake.”

Vassa’s blue eyes darkened to stormy seas. “Yes, but I also agreed not to try to break the curse.”

“So if Koschei learns she’s broken her promise, he’ll break his,” Lucien finished gravely.

I knew firsthand how powerful Fae bargains could be. Knew that if broken, the binding magic could exact a terrible price.

Rhys cleared his throat. “Tell me something, Vassa: When Koschei let you leave . . . did he say why? It couldn’t have been out of the kindness of his heart. So why agree to it at all?”

Vassa traced an idle finger along the river that flowed from the western coast to Koschei’s lake. “Your father, Feyre”—her words thickened with what I could have sworn was grief—“was very good at bargaining.”

My heart twisted a bit. Like it did every time I visited the lone stone marker on that grassy hill outside Velaris.

“But what is the benefit to Koschei?” Rhys pushed. “Why allow you out, when it was clear that you would help us, the very people he would later send Briallyn after?” My mate angled his head as he turned to Lucien. “Did anyone in your party give him something in return?”

“Koschei received nothing,” Lucien said darkly. “He seemed to find it amusing.”

I studied the vague depiction of Koschei’s vast lake; not the one near Briallyn’s palace, where Cassian and Azriel had encountered an apparition of the male. But rather the true place where the death-lord resided. Only a tiny marker indicated where his castle lay. No other details—though they would need to be filled in. Along with many other things. As if thinking the same thing, Rhys said to Lucien, “I wasn’t aware you got close enough to him that day to be able to tell such things.”

“I didn’t,” Lucien conceded. “I saw him only briefly, and from a distance, but I could hear his laughter echo over the lake.” He nodded at me. “Your father was the only one of us brave enough to get close. Koschei’s very presence seemed to drain all joy, all courage, all hope.” His throat bobbed, “But your father was so desperate to help you and your sisters that he overcame his fear of the death-lord. He loved you that much.”

There was pain in his words—perhaps for the fact that he’d never had a father who cared about him the same way. Even if it had taken my father until the very end to try.

But Rhys said to Vassa, “You’ve been near Koschei often, though.”

Vassa shook her head. “Koschei kept back—used magic to amplify his voice across the lake. I believe he liked to remain out of sight so that we’d imagine the worst. So that we’d picture our darkest nightmares. Merely his voice could drive some of the other girls into trembling, sobbing fits. He’d sometimes send whispers on the wind through the trees just to torment them.”

Rhys’s mouth pressed into a tight line. “Could I look into your mind? To see for myself?”

Vassa went completely rigid. Lucien and Jurian both eyed her carefully—protectively.

“No,” Vassa said, paling so much that her freckles stood out like splattered mud. “I—I’m sorry, but I . . .” Her hands shook.

This warrior had charged into battle for us, stood toe to toe with my mate and never backed down, but this request was clearly beyond her comfort.

“I’ve had one too many faerie creatures . . . touching me with their magic,” Vassa explained. Her fear shoved itself up my nose.

Jurian laid a scarred hand on her shoulder. He turned damning eyes on Rhys. “She’ll tell you what she knows, but no more—nothing more

invasive on your part."

I faced Lucien in time to see his throat work while he, too, scented Vassa's lingering terror. Lucien said, "She doesn't even have to do that if she doesn't wish to."

I tucked away my interest at that protectiveness and instead said gently, "If you do, though, you could just tell one of us—you could talk to Mor, even." I offered her a smile. "People tend to like her best."

"I take offense at that," Rhys said, and I could tell the humor was for Vassa's sake.

To help further lighten the atmosphere, I pointed to my mate. "You're too slick. Az is too scary. And Cassian would likely wind up getting us into a *second* conflict at a time when we can barely handle one."

"That wouldn't surprise me at all," Lucien replied—perhaps an attempt at humor for Vassa's sake as well.

But Rhys said to Lucien, amusement banking slightly, "If Vassa can't tell us anything new about Koschei, that leaves you, I suppose."

Lucien shifted. "Aren't I already your human emissary—"

"We need proof of Koschei working with our enemies. Beron has made it known that he's more than open to Koschei's influence. Koschei likely knows we're working against him, so if he makes his move within Prythian, it will be soon. I want you in the Autumn Court, waiting for that moment. And I want you to use this"—Rhys reached into his pocket—"to capture your memories of it for the world to see." The Veritas orb landed on the table with a soft thud.

I couldn't conceal my shock. Neither, it seemed, could Vassa or Jurian.

"He could be *killed* if Beron finds out, Rhys," I protested.

Rhys waved a hand. "Not if he's in the Autumn Court under the right circumstances."

"Like *what*?" I demanded.

Rhys again leaned against the desk as he said to Lucien, "You still technically work as Tamlin's Second in command. Tamlin has a record of allying with enemies at great cost to Prythian's safety. It won't seem strange to anyone if suddenly Tamlin sends his Second to the Autumn Court, seeking a way into this unholy alliance with Koschei."

It was my turn to shake my head. "Tamlin will kill him if he finds out—"

"*Tamlin* is too busy running about on all fours chasing after rabbits and squirrels to notice what's happening beyond his borders. Or what his

official Second in command does on his behalf. And the people of the Spring Court are too busy trying to scrape a living out of the land to care one way or another who rules them or what they do."

"You're insane," Vassa said unsteadily. Lucien appeared inclined to agree. "Who, exactly, are you trying to fool here?"

Rhys stabbed a finger to the inset of Prythian on the left of the map. "Tamlin has the only court that lost land after the Sundering War. It makes sense that he, as its High Lord, would leap at the chance to reclaim his ancestral borders. At least, it would make sense to someone like Beron, who would then divulge all the details—the proof—we need."

Lucien gazed at the Veritas orb on the table, face grim. Thinking it over.

My mate's plan wasn't a bad one, but something like guilt pricked my conscience. "I thought you were trying to . . . help Tamlin."

"If I had years, yes." Rhys's hand moved from the map to grasp mine, squeezing gently. It was all the reassurance I needed that he knew what lay within my heart. "But things are accelerating faster than I anticipated. If Tamlin needs to wallow in his bitterness and despair, then let him. It provides the perfect cover for his Second in command stepping in for more important duties."

Lucien gaped at Rhys like he had ten heads.

I said to my mate, my attention again snagging on that inset of Prythian on the map, "That amounts to treason for Lucien. And if our involvement is found out, any trust we have with the other courts is gone." No matter that the same could be said about Eris. Yet if Eris were caught . . . I wouldn't necessarily miss him.

Rhys said into my mind, *Eris can't manage it—he's not ready, and stands to lose too much within the court. Cassian said the meeting earlier today wasn't productive.*

Rhys jerked his chin toward Lucien. "This is all with your consent, of course."

"You want me to pretend to be doing Tamlin's bidding," Lucien said, low and disbelieving. "To walk into my father's house and lie to his face—lie to a High Lord on behalf of another High Lord? Who would believe me?"

Rhys didn't smile. "Everyone knows how loyal you stayed to Tamlin during the decades with Amarantha." I hated the sound of her name on my mate's lips. "Your father witnessed it during those last months Under the

Mountain. And Eris, I know, has not been reporting on how badly Tamlin has been faring lately."

I didn't want to know the particular details about that. Not really. Half of me was glad to let Tamlin suffer. The other half . . .

Lucien slowly shook his head. "How did you get Eris in your pocket?"

I snorted. "If you ever see Nesta dance, you'll understand."

Lucien's brows rose high. I added, "That's a tale for another time, and if you go to the Forest House, you *cannot* mention it—don't even attempt to talk to Eris about it."

"Believe me, I have no intention of talking to Eris at all."

Vassa cut in, leveling a cool stare at us, "So you want Lucien to play spy at the Autumn Court—and betray his own High Lord in the process."

"Doesn't seem too much of a stretch for you," Jurian said with a grin to Lucien.

Lucien glared at him, even as his mouth tilted upward.

"I know it's a great deal to ask," Rhys said. "But we need any scrap of proof we can find. We need allies—here and beyond Prythian. A united Prythian is important, yes, but we need other territories willing to stand with us. And for that, first and foremost, we need proof."

Lucien's eyes again fell upon the map. I didn't fail to notice the way Jurian and Vassa seemed to angle themselves closer to him—as if they'd form a defensive wall against Rhys and me, if need be.

"Let me think about it," Lucien said, each word heavy, almost exhausted. "I'm inclined to say yes, Mother damn me, but let me think about it."

Vassa eyed him but said nothing.

"Of course," Rhys agreed, "but do it fast. The territories are beginning to move—we have until spring at the latest."

"Spring?" Vassa asked.

Jurian answered for my mate. "Magical armies they might be, but they're still somewhat bound by the limitations of nature. They'll travel as far south as they can into the open Fae territories, camp for the winter, and move at the first thaw of spring when the passes open. The terrain between there and the nearest human border is treacherous even in the mildest of weather."

I nodded and said to Jurian and Vassa, "If you can make contact with the humans on the continent, with whatever sway you have . . . warn them as best you can. Advise them against raising an army."

"So they can be slaughtered?" Vassa shot back.

I didn't flinch. And to his credit, before I could form my own reply, Jurian explained calmly to the female, "So it does not give the Fae any sort of justification to march on them. The Fae territories can twist everything to their advantage—even the humans' raising of a defensive army."

Vassa's eyes heated with blue flame. "So what do we tell them to do? Sit and wait to be killed?"

"I wish I knew." I pointed to the lower half of the map, where the wall had once stood. "They could flee farther south, perhaps, but the Fae will find them there, too, eventually."

Rhys added to Jurian and Vassa, "You two are perhaps the most qualified to figure out a path for the humans. You occupy a space between the Fae and human worlds. We will, of course, offer any resources you need."

"The humans won't take them," Vassa declared. "Not from Fae."

But it was Jurian who countered darkly, "They will when their children are poised to be enslaved or killed."

Vassa curled her lip in disgust. At the situation or at what she'd have to do, I didn't know. She rolled up our map without further word and shoved it into Rhys's arms.

There wasn't much left to say after that, and Lucien showed us to the front door. He'd put up wards around the house, not that they'd be effective against Rhys or me. We could have winnowed right out of that study if we'd wanted to. It seemed polite, however, to use the front door.

On the threshold, the chill night ahead looming like a wave, I turned to Lucien. "Are you really up for it?"

He'd left the Veritas orb on the table—he hadn't touched it, but also hadn't given it back.

Lucien's russet eye was weary. Resigned. "Do I have a choice?"

"Yes," I said. A few steps into the night, barely more than a shadow, Rhys paused to watch us. "You've helped us so much already. What we're asking of you is . . . beyond dangerous."

A shallow, noncommittal nod. "And yet," Lucien murmured, "it won't really change anything, will it?"

I knew exactly what he meant. With Elain.

"You never know," I offered.

He gave a small, sad smile at my half-assed attempt at positivity, golden eye whirring. And it was so horrible to even consider how he might be feeling that I blurted, "Come to Nyx's Naming Day party on the Autumn

Equinox. It's not really a party, just a ceremony and then a luncheon with a few of us, and we're not even really celebrating the Equinox, but . . . you should come."

Rhys's surprise sparked down the mating bond, but he kept silent.

Lucien considered us both warily. "You'll allow me near your son?"

We hadn't until now—we hadn't allowed almost anyone, especially Fae males, around Nyx. Reason told me I was being utterly irrational, but every Fae instinct roared at me to keep him tucked away for as long as possible. Bringing him to my art classes was as much as I was willing to do. And I'd learned enough about motherhood so far to listen to my instincts.

"I mean, I might not let you *hold* Nyx," I admitted, "but yes. You should come. You can stay the night at our house."

Rhys's shock only increased. But I wasn't about to let him talk me out of it, which I could feel his eagerness to do.

Lucien was risking *everything* for us, and to just take and take from him and not offer anything in return, not to show him any sort of gratitude or welcome . . . it didn't sit right. And there was really only one thing that Lucien desired: a chance to see Elain. Nothing more.

That, at least, I could offer him.

So I said, "The ceremony begins at ten at the city temple. But come over to the river house any time before that to get settled in."

CHAPTER 10

Nesta

"You really think Tarquin won't ally with us in this conflict?" Standing in the river house foyer, Nesta frowned at her sister, then at Rhys. Feyre was clad in a sea-green gossamer gown much like the ones Mor favored—likely in anticipation of the Summer Court heat. Rhys, however, was in his usual head-to-toe black. "He backed us against Hybern."

Feyre fiddled with the gold-and-pearl headband atop her unbound hair. She'd been teary-eyed when she'd come downstairs moments ago, having just said goodbye to Nyx in the nursery before his morning nap.

"It's worth confirming—and formalizing," Feyre said, mouth twisting to one side. An understatement. That they were squeezing this visit in so close to the party, leaving right when all the decorations were going up—vases overflowing with autumnal blooms on every surface; sparkling silver streamers hanging from the walls and archways—told Nesta how urgent securing Tarquin's alliance was to their efforts.

Nesta couldn't help but see how *young* her sister was, despite being a mother, High Lady, and savior of these lands. Young and beautiful and bearing so much on her slim shoulders.

"Is Amren going to be there?" Nesta dared ask. With Varian as her lover, Amren spent ample time at the Summer Court, and might have more sway

than even Feyre.

"No," Feyre said, chin lifting. "She's returning from the Day Court in an hour, and will help Ana watch Nyx."

Nesta, of course, would supply whatever additional help they needed. Even if the thought of *Aunt Amren* made her shudder. But the babe loved the female. And Nesta had never seen Amren smile so much as she did when she was around him.

Nesta didn't fail to note that Rhys had somehow drifted off to study one of Feyre's paintings across the foyer. Coward. Throwing a glare his way, Nesta said to Feyre, "Maybe if you explained to Amren more of your reasoning behind uniting Prythian before chasing down Fomoria's help—"

Feyre waved a hand, irritated. "Even if I begged Amren to come help me navigate the Summer Court, she wouldn't."

"I'm shocked you're even letting her help with Nyx."

Feyre glanced up the stairs, as if she could see all the way to the nursery and the babe within. "Our argument has nothing to do with Nyx and his care. She's his aunt—I'm not going to deny her access to him because she and I are at odds."

"Well, you *could* try saying sorry," Nesta said simply.

"Sorry for what? Disagreeing with her?"

"I butt heads with Amren plenty." The Mother knew they'd spent a fair chunk of last year not speaking. "I don't think that was the thing that upset her."

"Then what was?" Feyre tapped a slipper-clad foot. "We need Prythian united. For additional arms, yes, but also to project strength to any potential allies on the continent who might be afraid to defy the unholy trifecta brewing over there. And *that* would ultimately help Amren's plan of wooing Fomoria, wouldn't it?"

Nesta knew Rhys was listening to every word, but choosing to stay out of it. His wings were drawn in tight to his back, though. What side did he fall on?

Feyre sighed, more to herself than to Nesta. "We need Summer ready to stand with us. Winter and Dawn, too, but Tarquin seems to have the most influence with the others. What he does, they'll follow. Amren insisted that time was precious—so this should, hopefully, be a quick but effective visit. Tarquin already knows why we're coming."

Nesta motioned to her sister's gown. "And you're pandering to him with the Summer Court–colored attire?" Feyre usually had no problem wearing magnificent black and some High Lady jewelry to match.

Feyre gave her a rueful look, all traces of anger fading. "I thought it couldn't hurt to remind Tarquin that we're fond of his court." She fingered the material of her skirts, then winked at Nesta. "And I really wanted an excuse to wear this color."

It was a lovely color—precisely the sort of shade that would appeal to her sister's artistic soul.

Rhys sauntered over, deeming it safe to return at last. Feyre slipped her tattooed fingers into his before asking, "Are you doing the winnowing or should I?"

Rhys sketched a bow, kissing Feyre's hand. "By all means, winnow us, my lady." He inclined his head to Nesta in distant greeting—and farewell. Better than ignoring her, Nesta supposed.

Feyre rolled her eyes at Rhys's iciness, but threw Nesta a parting, hopeful smile, and then they were gone.

✦

Seated in a pew at the back of the small temple beneath the House of Wind an hour later, nothing but music and candlelight around her, Nesta at last found a shred of peace. That might have been due to the triad of voices weaving through the space, none more lovely and clear than Gwyn's.

Though it wasn't the usual sunset or sunrise hour for the priestesses' daily prayers, Nesta had been directed to the temple when she asked after Gwyn. What now unfolded before Nesta seemed to be a dress rehearsal for the Autumn Equinox ceremony tomorrow. White and black candles—to signify the Equinox's balance of night and day—and a set of silver scales adorned the altar, the dishes of the latter laden with samplings of the four elements. Feathers, stones, cinders, tiny vials of water: each scale was meticulously and carefully filled with its offerings so it hung in absolute harmony with its twin.

Gwyn stood between two other priestesses Nesta was only vaguely acquainted with, neither of them Valkyries, their eyes closed in reverent joy as they wove their song together. If Gwyn had noticed Nesta sitting here, she hadn't let on. Hadn't looked to the back of the chamber, where Nesta sat amongst a few others who'd come to savor the music.

Frankly, Gwyn could have carried the entirety of the song herself, that mezzo-soprano voice so rich and resonant that it seemed to effortlessly burst from her throat. But the other two—an alto and soprano—added sweet and interesting details.

But Gwyn . . . Gwyn shone. Despite the dimness of the mountain, Nesta's friend seemed to radiate light. Color. Her humble pale robes were the same as everyone else's, no jewelry adorned her—she didn't even wear the Invoking Stone atop her brow as the others did—and yet the candlelight seemed to bend toward Gwyn. Reflect off her. Or maybe that was her remarkable copper hair. Or her eyes. Whenever her friend opened those eyes, the entire room was treated to the sight of a teal so vibrant it reminded Nesta of the Sidra.

Her friend was beyond beautiful. But it was what was inside, Nesta knew, that made her glow. That made Gwyn seem to be painted in full color while everyone else was rendered in charcoal sketches. At no time was it more apparent than when Gwyn was singing.

Nesta's chest tightened. How long had it been since she'd heard this voice? Since she'd last seen Gwyn? She'd felt the ache of missing her many times before now, but being here . . . it was worse. All she wanted to do was go up to her friend and start to talk and laugh and tease the way they had for months. And the fact that she couldn't freely do so, that she hesitated, cracked something vital inside her.

Nesta hadn't been to a Valkyrie training session in weeks. Not since Bryce had arrived. Whether Cassian and Azriel still instructed the priestesses, she didn't know—Cassian woke early every morning, regardless of training—but Gwyn hadn't been to training since the Blood Rite.

As far as Nesta knew, her friend hadn't left the library since the Blood Rite. Not even to attend Nesta's mating ceremony. Nesta knew Gwyn had been hurt that Nesta had knocked her out during the Blood Rite, that Emerie had carried her to the top of Ramiel and Gwyn hadn't had the chance to continue to fight beside them. But she was surprised that her friend had stopped coming to training entirely.

Give her time, Emerie counseled. Nesta heeded her advice, taking comfort in Emerie's presence at training, her steady friendship.

Yet right before Bryce Quinlan had crashed into their world, Emerie had written to explain that with the oncoming winter, her shop was busier than

ever, so she was taking a break from training for a few months to ensure all the orders were filled before Samhain. Winter came early to the Illyrian Mountains—she wanted to make sure her people were equipped. Even if most of them were ungrateful assholes.

So that last morning of training, hours before Bryce had appeared, Nesta had entered the ring and found she was alone. Well, not alone. The other priestesses—Valkyries—were there. But Emerie and Gwyn were not. And though Cassian and Azriel had been almost disgustingly nice that morning, she hadn't been able to shake the heaviness from her limbs, her heart.

Robes rustled to Nesta's left, and she turned to find Clotho taking a seat beside her. The High Priestess of the library, her face hidden behind the heavy shadows of her pale hood, touched Nesta's shoulder with a gnarled hand in welcome. Nesta inclined her head in return, knowing that there was no use speaking until the song was finished.

So it came as a surprise when a piece of parchment appeared in Nesta's lap, its ink still drying. Clotho's enchanted pen hovered in the air above her knees—though she kept it low enough that no one onstage or in the other pews might glimpse it.

Nesta skimmed the note, written on a letterhead beneath a symbol of two crescent moons flanking a full moon. It said in flowing script: *It is appropriate that you should arrive just now. Their song is one to call lost sisters home.*

Nesta whispered so only Clotho could hear, "Did you plan it that way?"

She had the distinct impression that Clotho was smiling beneath the hood. The pen danced over the paper, writing, *I wish I were that skilled. But no—this is a song we sing each Autumn Equinox. It is a prayer for wholeness, for the return of things and people lost to us, so balance might be restored.*

Nesta nodded as the song ended. Gwyn and the other two singers huddled together, talking. Two more priestesses—one of them the golden-haired Ananke—strode onto the dais to join the conversation.

"So this is an important holiday to you?" Nesta asked softly.

All holidays are important, Clotho wrote back, *especially the Fading Cycle, the progression from the Autumn Equinox to Samhain to Winter Solstice*. Then she added, *But in this court, yes—after tomorrow, night claims the majority. Light begins to yield—to die; then the light fully dies on*

Samhain, traversing the worlds of the dead before being reborn in this world after the longest night of Winter Solstice.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Nesta muttered.

A huff of amusement from beneath the hood.

"I love Solstice," Nesta admitted, "and I can see how the longer nights make the Autumn Equinox important for the Night Court. But Samhain? Last year it was so . . . somber." She'd barely paid attention to it.

It is indeed a somber holiday for some. The veils between life and death, between all worlds, are thinnest on Samhain. But some see that as a blessing; to commune with long-lost loved ones. Some see it as a cause to welcome them home; to celebrate the eternal bonds across worlds. You should come to our ceremony for it—the songs are different. Older, strange. Unsettling, even.

"Are you saying that *I* can relate to such things?" Nesta teased.

Clotho patted her knee with a mangled hand. *Of course not*.

On the dais, Gwyn and the other two began singing again, this time starting with a round initiated by the alto in the group. Gwyn followed, then the soprano, each making their way through the tune before joining together in one voice.

This time, Nesta noted how the alto's voice grew quieter, then silent altogether.

Seeming to understand her unvoiced question, Clotho wrote, *She represents the lost sister. By the end, the other two will have sung her back to them.*

Such a wealth of knowledge and tradition, all hidden here beneath ancient stone. "Will I hear this at the temple tomorrow for the Equinox?"

No. Most other temples do not remember this song, or see a need for it.

"But you do?"

Clotho stared straight ahead, though her pen moved on the paper. *There will always be sisters lost to us—ones we pray each day will find a way home to our sides. Not only in the physical, mortal sense, but an emotional and spiritual one, too. Other temples perhaps do not understand the importance and need for such prayers in the way we do down here. This year, when it seems we need it most, I've bade them*—a nod to the priestesses on the dais—*to put a little magic into their melody. A little wish for the Mother to listen. And tomorrow I will throw a little magic of my own into their song, silent as my voice might now be.*

Nesta's chest tightened. These females had built a community of love and support so they might all heal from the horrors they'd endured, her friend up on that dais amongst them. What did Gwyn feel, singing a song to call home lost sisters, when her twin had been so violently ripped from her? She wished she could ask her friend. Offer whatever comfort Gwyn might need.

Nesta observed, "You should be leading the ceremony tomorrow for Nyx's Naming Day."

Clotho shook her head. *The High Lady extended me the honor, but I explained to her that I am needed here. In case a sister does come back after hearing the Song of Returning tomorrow.*

When had Clotho last left this mountain? When had she last felt the wind and sun upon her face?

Clotho wrote before Nesta could dare ask, *I summoned you here so that you might deliver this to the High Lord and Lady. I might not be able to do them the honor of presiding over their son's Naming Day, but I can offer this instead.*

Clotho fished in her pockets and pulled out a braided, silvery piece of fabric. It was delicate as frost, and even in the faint light, it glistened.

Nesta blinked, unable to hide her awe. "What is it?"

As you and your mate were bound by thread during your mating ceremony, so, too, is the child bound to his parents—and to the Mother. This is my gift to them: the thread to use tomorrow.

Nesta gingerly took the ribbon from Clotho. It was light as air—so light that if she hadn't been examining it, she might not even have known she held anything. "It's stunning. Is this what you use down here for your own rites?"

No. It is a gift to the High Lord and Lady's son. One like it has never been made, and perhaps never will be again.

"Did—did *you* make it?" Nesta stammered, loudly enough that Gwyn finally looked her way. Her friend's brows rose high at seeing her, though she didn't miss a single note of the song. Yet Nesta didn't fail to notice the slight lines of strain that suddenly bracketed Gwyn's mouth.

Clotho wrote, *It is the least I can offer in return for the home that the High Lord granted me long ago.*

Nesta peered at the glittering string. Though no great magic pulsed from it, it seemed . . . alive. Aware, somehow. "They will be very moved," she managed to say, thinking of Clotho creating this exquisite thing. Either with

magic or her agonizingly broken hands, she'd put in the effort out of gratitude and love.

Clotho patted Nesta's knee again, and in silence, they listened to the song echo through the room. The alto's voice returned for the last, loudest, most joyful chorus. A Song of Returning. Of lost sisters coming home at last.

At least one sister would be returning to see Nesta tomorrow. Emerie would arrive in Velaris for Nyx's ceremony, she reminded herself with no small amount of joy.

Clotho was already up and moving toward the dais, and Nesta rose, thinking through the words she'd prepared for Gwyn. A balance between diplomacy and groveling.

But a female voice called behind her, "Nesta! We haven't seen you in weeks."

Nesta found Roslin and Deirdre standing with crossed arms. Both of them still wore pieces of their white ribbons woven through their braids.

Gods, where had she left her own? In her closet levels and levels above, she remembered. After that night Rhys had nearly killed her for handing over the Mask, she'd been so disgusted with everything that she'd torn the ribbon off the wrist where she'd taken to wearing it and thrown it into that closet. She hadn't so much as peeked at it in the weeks since.

What would Emerie say when she saw that Nesta wasn't wearing it? She still wore the charm bracelet from that happy night they'd woven them upstairs, but Emerie would surely notice the lack of the white ribbon. Her friend didn't know the full extent of what had happened with the Mask—Nesta hadn't found a moment to explain it to her. Hadn't even *seen* her since then. Would Emerie be as furious with her as the others in the Night Court were? Her stomach twisted with the thought.

Nesta turned to greet the two priestesses. "I'm sorry I haven't made it to training lately. You're both still going, right?"

"Every morning, though our instructors also haven't bothered coming for several weeks now," Deirdre said, clearly affronted. Nesta didn't blame her. Cassian had really abandoned training? It was surely because of her. And she supposed Azriel was still pissed off enough about the whole Bryce thing that he didn't want to see her, either. But to abandon the *rest* of the priestesses and Valkyries was unforgivable.

Roslin sighed, unaware of Nesta's brewing temper. "Cassian, I can live without. No offense," she added to Nesta, who pulled herself out of her

anger long enough to chuckle. “But Azriel . . .” Roslin sighed again, fluttering her eyelashes.

Nesta couldn’t stop her snort.

“Wait,” Deirdre said, frowning deeply. “If you’re here now, you could have come to training this morning, couldn’t you?”

“I’ve been preparing for Nyx’s Naming Day,” Nesta lied.

The truth was, after what occurred with Bryce and the Mask . . . she hadn’t wanted to go to training. Hadn’t wanted to be near Cassian’s or Azriel’s anger and resentment, hadn’t wanted to face the priestesses, her fellow Valkyries, and know that she had, in fact, chosen the lives of strangers in another world over theirs. That she hadn’t for one moment considered their well-being or that of anyone else before handing over the Mask.

So she hadn’t gone for a few days. And then a few days turned into a week. And a week into . . . well, weeks. But apparently, her mate and his brother hadn’t attended, either. Which irritated her to no end. Even if she had little right to feel that way.

“I’ll come back soon,” Nesta lied again.

“That’s what *she* keeps saying,” Roslin said, tossing her red braid over a shoulder as she nodded toward someone behind Nesta. “Come, Deirdre, I want to ask Ananke about the schedule for tomorrow.”

The two priestesses headed for Ananke, leaving Nesta to turn as Gwyn strode down the aisle. She always forgot, somehow, that her friend was taller than her. Only by an inch or two, but enough to be a surprise, even now. Gwyn moved with a fluid grace, probably thanks to her nymph grandmother, and came to a stop before Nesta on near-silent feet.

Nesta braced herself, unsure what to do with her hands, her face, her posture. It was like meeting a stranger.

Gwyn offered a grim smile that suggested she felt the same. “I didn’t know you were coming today.”

Every part of Nesta loathed the tension, the caution. But she said as casually as possible, “I had to pick up something for Nyx’s Naming Day.” She held up the shimmering bit of ribbon Clotho had made.

Gwyn’s eyes widened, the distance momentarily shattered by her awe. “That is . . . remarkable,” she breathed, shaking her head. “Sangravah—the town, I mean, not the temple compound—had fine weavers, and they

sometimes came to sell their wares to us or even give us classes on how to work a loom, but I never saw anything like that."

Nesta said wryly, "Our bracelets certainly don't look like that." She lifted her wrist slightly, the navy blue and crimson and silver threads Emerie had woven with a small silver charm vibrant in the candlelit space.

Gwyn glanced at her own wrist, at the bracelet still there, despite everything. A small mercy that Gwyn hadn't taken it off—a shred of hope. Something to build on. Nesta couldn't help but notice that Gwyn wasn't wearing her white ribbon either, though.

Gwyn smiled a shade crookedly. "Nyx's ribbon makes our bracelets look sad."

"Clotho made it for him," Nesta said, relieved that Gwyn was willing to play along, to try to be normal. "I don't think any of ours stood a chance."

Gwyn's throat bobbed as she surveyed Clotho's work, still awed. "Make sure the High Lord and Lady know how precious it is."

Nesta nodded, heart racing. "I also came here because I wanted to ask you for a favor. To help me work on something."

All amusement faded from Gwyn's eyes. "You came here to ask me to do work for you."

The other words went unspoken: *We haven't spoken in months and you're suddenly here to ask me for a* favor*?*

Nesta swallowed against the dryness in her mouth. It was so much harder, even now, to opt for calm explanations over a barbed retort. But for Gwyn, it would always be worth it. "I need someone to write down my account of events that occurred recently. Discreetly."

Curiosity mingled now with the sarcastic disbelief in Gwyn's fine features.

So Nesta went on, fumbling for the words, "It . . . it was big enough, important enough, that I think there should be an official record of it left for future generations. I was hoping that the best would assist me in the task." She meant it sincerely, but Gwyn was having none of it. Her expression remained unchanged. So distant, so far from the joy that Nesta had just witnessed radiating from her friend while she sang.

It pained Nesta to behold. Something had happened, *more* than Nesta overriding her wishes on Ramiel's slopes. But she couldn't ask her friend about it. It was clear that wouldn't be received well.

Gwyn only stared, waiting for an explanation.

"I . . ." Nesta clenched and unclenched her fingers at her sides. "I wasn't ready to come back here, to even talk to you about doing this until . . ." She hadn't been ready until she'd been drowning in the sea, and realized that if she died, this history would die with her. Even Azriel didn't know the entirety of it. "I wasn't ready." She offered a tentative smile that she prayed her friend would echo. "But I am now."

Yet still no smile graced Gwyn's lips. "I'm needed for the Equinox preparations, I'm afraid. Perhaps after, if Merrill can spare me."

Nesta understood precisely what her friend meant: *No.*

The silence that spread between them was so awful that Nesta blurted, "You're invited, you know. To Nyx's Naming Day. Emerie's coming. She—we'd love to see you."

Gwyn slid her hands into the pockets of her robe, probably to fiddle with the Invoking Stone she always kept in there, rather than on her brow like the others. "Again, I'm needed here." The same excuse Clotho had offered.

"You can't hide down here forever," Nesta said quietly.

Gwyn stilled. Nesta immediately regretted the words—though not necessarily the sentiment. "I wasn't aware I was hiding."

"I meant . . . you should live your life," Nesta attempted to clarify.

"That's what everyone else here does," Gwyn said. "They live out their lives in the library. Why can't I?"

It really wasn't the time or place for this conversation, but Nesta couldn't stop the words from tumbling out. "Because you went out there, and you triumphed, and . . . what was it all for, if you're just going to stay down here in the darkness?"

"I'm content down here *in the darkness*," Gwyn said with unusual sharpness. "My work fulfills me, despite what you might think."

Nesta opened her mouth, but someone spoke from behind her.

"If that work is so fulfilling, Gwyneth," Merrill sneered, "why aren't you doing it right now?"

Nesta grimaced as she twisted to find the white-haired beauty seemingly floating toward them on a phantom wind. "Merrill."

Merrill sniffed through her pert nose and pointed with a slim hand toward the open temple doors. "I've been waiting an hour for you to proofread the latest chapter, Gwyneth. Do I need to wait another?"

Nesta's fingers clenched again.

But Gwyn's face remained impassive. "No, Merrill." All traces of anger, of fight, faded into resignation. Gwyn added halfheartedly to Nesta, "I'll see you later."

Nesta knew it wouldn't be anytime soon. But she couldn't stand it—couldn't stand Gwyn backing down, couldn't stand the cold distance, the resignation to Merrill's cruelty.

Nesta called out to Gwyn's back, "Come to Nyx's Naming Day tomorrow. Please."

Merrill laughed, nasty and sharp. "I'd die of shock if she did."

Nesta turned to the female slowly, gathering her fury. "There's no need to reveal yourself for the complete asshole you are, Merrill. Everyone here is already aware."

Two nearby priestesses—Lorelei and Ananke—spun toward them, gasping. But Nesta held Merrill's lilac-blue stare.

Merrill tutted. "Such language, in a holy place."

Nesta gave her a gesture that was sure to defile this place further. But before Merrill could respond, Nesta saw Gwyn striding away from them, already at the doors. As if she had not heard or cared about Merrill's barb.

So Nesta let Merrill see the lingering silver fire in her eyes as she promised, softly but viciously, "If I find out you had anything to do with her staying down here, you'll answer to me."

"Anything to do with what?" Merrill spat. "With Gwyneth being a coward? She does that all on her own, no assistance from me required."

Gwyn seemed to pause on the threshold, like she'd whirl back around and give Merrill a piece of her mind, but she just kept walking. Until she was gone.

Nesta calmed her simmering rage. Or tried to.

Merrill, damn her, was right in a way: This wasn't the place for foul language. For confrontation. The priestesses had seen enough violence. Some of them might train to defend themselves each day, but seeing Nesta and Merrill go at it . . . She didn't want to bring that darkness here. The Mother knew enough of it had once dwelled within this mountain, down below the library.

So Nesta pivoted on her heel and left, blocking out Merrill's taunting laugh as it trailed behind her.

She clutched Clotho's ribbon instead, the material almost metallic against her hand. And she could have sworn she felt a pulse of approval run through

it. Like the High Priestess herself appreciated her restraint. Her balance.

Perhaps Nesta could thank the Autumn Equinox for that. She sure as hell couldn't thank herself.

CHAPTER 11

Azriel

Hybern wanted a meeting with them—an alliance, if that strange creature was to be believed. It was likely a trap.

Azriel had decided, while staring at the sea-foam remains drifting on the Sidra's surface, that he wouldn't tell Rhys or Feyre until after Nyx's Naming Day tomorrow. The day after, probably, so they had time to properly enjoy the occasion.

Hybern—the orchestrator of so much of their suffering and loss. It was almost laughable.

But Az tucked the thought away. Cassian had requested that he accompany him to Windhaven, and though Rhys might have yanked him off duty in the human lands, perhaps rightly so, Az could at least help his other brother, unpleasant as this task might be.

Windhaven had barely changed in the five hundred years that Azriel had known it.

There was absolutely nothing special about it—not its location, not its simple wooden buildings, not its miserable people. When he'd first arrived all those centuries ago, his mother shaking and weeping with relief and terror, it had been little more than a settlement whose main purpose was to

train Illyrian whelps into bloodthirsty warriors and to offer a place to spend the night while out on their extensive patrols of Night Court territory.

Since then, tents had been replaced by buildings, but even now, it retained something of a backwater feel. It was always muddy, for one. Even in the depths of the bitter winter, somehow it always *felt* muddy.

And small. Though Windhaven had definitely expanded as its population settled permanently, built families, and grew, there was nothing resembling a good life here. The birchins were as close to community gathering places as it got. There were no restaurants. Not even a tavern.

The only approximation of real ale was the ceremonial mead they imbibed on various holidays, which was almost undrinkable.

Azriel was so in need of something to blunt the edge off the morning's encounter that he was half-tempted to seek out one of the females who fed the various warriors to beg them for a cup. A bucket. But all the females were occupied making their Autumn Equinox feasts for tomorrow—if one could even call spreads of unseasoned stews and hard bread feasts.

No sign of Cassian, but he'd expected that. *He's arguing with Devlon*, his shadows whispered. *He doesn't need you yet for backup, but he will soon*.

In the meantime, Az walked along what served as the main street of the village—*street* here being closer to a muddy path—and toward the one shop that might have something somewhat edible. Or drinkable.

His shadows held fast to his feet and shoulders. He didn't miss the fact that all the children of the village had suddenly been called inside by their mothers. That had always been the case here.

Monster. Demon. Even five centuries later, they still feared Az in a primal way that set his teeth on edge. He knew that was why Cassian had requested his presence here—to use that fear to their advantage in manipulating these backward assholes into doing what Rhys needed. If they didn't recognize him on sight, then spying Truth-Teller at his side or the array of blue Siphons told them precisely who stalked through their midst.

The bell above Emerie's door jangled merrily, perhaps the only joyful sound between here and Velaris. The female herself stood behind the counter, scribbling in a ledger. She glanced up with a frank, swift assessment, eyes darting once to his shadows at his shoulders. "I thought the Naming Day was tomorrow—on the Equinox."

Az gave her a half shrug that sent his shadows scattering. "It is. I'm here to help Cassian. I just couldn't stand being out there for much longer."

“It’s a cold day.” Emerie returned to her accounts. That wasn’t what he’d meant, but Az didn’t correct her. “There’s rabbit stew in the back,” she said without looking up. “Help yourself.”

“I’m good, thank you.” Maybe asking for a glass of mead or a bottle of Rhys’s wine—she’d acquired a collection thanks to Nesta—would be strange. It was only eleven in the morning, after all.

“Then make yourself comfortable wherever.” The Valkyrie’s dark hair gleamed in the light streaming through the glass window. The glass itself was a luxury—a novelty here, even.

Az did as he was told, shadows settling around his boots as he claimed a chair by a display of heavy, dark wool capes. Plain, simple garments. No patterns, no color. The way people here liked things.

“Business is . . . good?” he asked into the silence. He was usually fine with silence—preferred it. But he’d trained Emerie, had become friendly with her. And after all the hardship she’d endured at the hands of the Illyrians, he could offer her basic kind words.

Emerie grunted. She’d never been shy around him—certainly never nervous, not like others in Windhaven. “Busy enough that I’m almost considering giving my hateful uncle this shop just to get a good night’s rest without wondering if I’ve done the accounts wrong.”

Azriel snorted. But he angled his head as her words sank in, his wings shifting. “Has he been giving you any trouble?”

“No. Rumor has it he went mad with grief after his son was killed during the Rite. Crumpled into a ball and won’t get out of bed for anything except a piss and a meal.”

Az nodded, unsure what to say. He’d seen via Rhys a compilation of the events of the most recent Blood Rite, all told through the eyes of Nesta, Gwyn, and Emerie. The trials they had endured had been beyond even the normal depravity of the Rite.

Az took in the female at the counter. Technically, she was the first female Illyrian to have ever won the Blood Rite. The first Illyrian female to ever even compete in it. And considering that only six males had ever won the entire thing before—reaching the monolith at Ramiel’s peak—that was saying something.

But then Emerie had returned here and resumed her work as if she’d never left. Guessing that she might have untapped magic, Rhys had offered her the chance to draw a Siphon from the sacred flames, just like any other

Illyrian who'd completed the Rite, but she'd refused, and hadn't mentioned it since. Az had seen her at training before he'd stopped going after Bryce Quinlan's arrival, but it seemed that now Emerie had slipped right back into the life she'd had before the Rite.

Perhaps it was a form of self-preservation. To show this village she wasn't anything special, anything worth fretting about. No, it wasn't a big deal at all that she'd won the Blood Rite. She wasn't going to talk about it, and certainly wasn't going to start pulling females away from their so-called traditional duties to join her in Valkyriehood.

Because she, like Az, knew the alternative. She would have been run out of Windhaven—if she were lucky enough to leave alive at all. And to lose this shop after she'd fought so hard for it would have been devastating.

He didn't blame her for it, but he loathed that this was the choice she'd been left to make. Rhys was wasting his time with these assholes. If someone like Emerie couldn't get them to change their ways, get them to see the value each and every female innately possessed beyond childbearing, if Emerie had returned here after winning the damned Blood Rite and *still* had to make herself smaller to survive . . . then they'd never change.

"Is this all right?" she asked suddenly, and Az realized he'd been staring at a display of candles for long minutes. She went on, "I thought I'd try it on today to make sure it still fits before tomorrow."

He glanced over, shadows peering, too, to see her motion to her simple dark blue dress, cut elegantly to her slender frame.

"I don't own anything fancy like the rest of you, but this one at least doesn't have any stains—"

"It's perfect," he said, giving her a slight smile.

She smiled back, a bit self-consciously. "I know how the rest of you lot dress."

Nervous, his shadows informed him. *Excited, but nervous.* He asked, pushing aside his fury at their people, "When was the last time you were in Velaris? Not for training, but out in the city itself."

"Nesta and Cassian's mating ceremony." She winced. "So . . . a while. And I haven't been to training in nearly a month."

"Work has kept you away?"

"Sure," she said, and he knew from that tone not to push it. It was odd enough that Emerie was willing to leave Illyrian territory—most females

here never left the borders of Illyria.

She was holding her wings up now, though even from here, Az could see the asymmetry of their heights. It had evened out during those months training with the Valkyries, as her core and back muscles grew stronger, but with so much time since then without exercises, it had gotten worse again.

It was a good thing her father was dead. Azriel would have killed him himself if he wasn't. The male had been a piece of shit. All these people here, in all of Illyria, were pieces of shit.

He got to his feet, shadows trailing, unable to sit a moment longer with the thought forming in his head. "I should check on Cassian," he lied, then added, "I'll be back tomorrow morning to pick you up."

She lifted a hand in farewell, focused on her ledger. She clearly didn't think twice about having a shadowsinger in her shop, and he took a small amount of comfort from it.

He'd nearly made it to the door when she said, "Azriel—your sheath. The strap's fraying."

His hand went to Truth-Teller, since the only other weapon he wore was his Illyrian blade, whose sheath was built into the back of his armor. Indeed, the ancient leather near the buckle had thinned. When had that happened?

"I can order a replacement," Emerie offered, returning to her ledger. "It wouldn't arrive until Samhain, though. The vendor I use is skilled, but slow."

Az didn't touch the sheath, or the dark-hilted blade within. More than five centuries ago, he'd returned from the Blood Rite to this very village bearing this knife. That day of triumph, when he and his brothers had so stupidly thought they'd proved their worth to the Illyrian assholes who'd tormented them for years, had turned into one of confusion. Shame. But first they'd won, touching the monolith atop Ramiel before sunrise on the final day of the Rite.

When they'd emerged into Windhaven, Az had found the knife, with its strange black hilt and matching blade, in his hand. It hadn't seemed Made, hadn't even pulsed with magic, but it was different. He could feel it. The other Illyrians could, too, demanding to know what it was, where he got it, when weapons were banned from the Rite.

He shouldn't have been surprised by their loathing and fear when he explained that it had appeared in his hand when he touched the monolith, as if Ramiel itself had gifted it to him. And then, later, when it had become

clear that both he and Cassian would require Siphons to handle their power, when Az had reached into the vat of sacred flames to draw out his Siphon, and instead had been appointed by the Mother to draw *seven* blue stones . . . Az blocked out the memory of the Illyrians' pure hatred for him—he'd already thought of it too much in recent days.

He'd borne several sheaths through the centuries. This one, black leather so worn it had paled in spots, had lasted the longest.

"It's fine," he found himself saying. Like hell would he give the knife a new sheath, like a reward for its treachery. "Thank you, though."

Emerie didn't respond, and he swiftly exited.

The bitter wind slapped his face as he stepped onto the muddy track. To his left lay the heart of the village, where Cassian was explaining the new patrol routes to Devlon for the tenth time, as the warriors yesterday seemed to have forgotten what *east* and *west* meant. And to his right was a pine forest. Empty. Frigid as hell, but no one would be out amongst the trees.

The average Illyrian warrior avoided being under the canopy, as it inhibited flight, but they valued the groves of pines, birches, and aspens in Illyria for firewood and housing. It was as close to true farming as the Illyrians came, beyond the few plots and fields they tended for personal gardens: planting groves to replace ones they'd depleted, carefully selecting where and when to harvest the trees so they didn't run out.

Even their small Autumn Equinox celebrations centered more on the trees than the bounties of the field. At Equinox sunrise, one great, old tree would be felled, its wood distributed to each family's hearth for a sacred burning; at sunset, a sapling would be planted nearby, each family now spilling a ladle of water onto it to help it grow—and for luck.

Rhys had always said it was the Illyrians' way of depicting the balance of life that the Equinox demanded they honor, but Az couldn't help but note that of course their rituals involved the needless killing of a living thing.

But no matter the holiday tradition, the year-round forestry of the Illyrians at least left Azriel with plenty of quiet, empty places to roam. Even his shadows now gleefully scattered through the trees like hunting dogs bounding off into the wild. A sweet-fresh scent wrapped around him as he navigated the bone-dry carpet of pine needles, scraggly twigs snapping underneath his boots.

He'd walked this path so many times that he couldn't help but wonder if its slender track was *only* because of him. Even after finding Cassian and

Rhys, he'd needed the space, the time alone. He knew every rock, though the trees had changed quite a bit, and the streams had changed course more than a couple times over the centuries. But the smells, the air . . . they were familiar.

Familiar, but not beloved. This place—these people—would never be beloved by him.

Some days, most days, he loathed the warrior tattoos on him. Rhys and Cassian wore them proudly, but from the moment Azriel had them inked after the Blood Rite, he'd wanted them gone. Cass and Rhys had seen them as a mark of victory, of their triumph over all the shit they'd been put through for being different, for being *better* than the rest of these assholes—but for Az, they somehow felt like a brand.

He'd tried in battles and brawls to have his skin shredded apart. Had even deliberately taken a lance to the shoulder once, hoping it would destroy the tattoos. But they were inked with magic—that same strange magic that granted the most powerful Illyrians the ability to wield the Siphons, that kept the eternal fire burning atop that brazier year-round. That cut off their powers during the Blood Rite. So every time his skin was ripped apart, the tattoos healed along with the flesh.

He could have found some enchantress or mage to undo the magic, maybe even consulted that swaggering peacock Helion, but explaining to Rhys and Cass why he wanted them gone felt impossible. They'd be wounded by it, he knew.

Not that Rhys had given a shit about wounding him in the kitchens with Elain.

Az rolled his shoulders as the light between the trees brightened and the forest ended.

It might have gone on forever had the cliff not stopped it. The vantage from its edge revealed mountains, valleys, and hills crusted in miles and miles of conifers, interrupted only by gray stones and the occasional splatter of green meadow.

And far off, breaking like a shark's fin on the horizon . . . Ramiel. Already, its barren gray sides were covered in snow. Even from so far away, the mountain seemed to stare back.

He'd beaten that mountain. Just as he'd beaten all the miserable warrior-assholes in Illyria.

He dragged a scarred hand through his hair, the silken strands catching on some of the rougher patches. As he lowered it back to his side, sunlight touched on his Siphon. He frowned down at the stone. It flickered with blue fire.

If there was any way to get rid of his seven Siphons, to toss them right back into the fire in that sacred vat, he would have trashed them along with his tattoos. Along with his shadows. His wings. And along with any trace of this place and these people lingering on his body and in his blood.

Sometimes he thought the hate might suffocate him. Being here, amongst these warriors, seeing what had been done to Emerie and so many other females . . . he could hardly stand it.

But war was coming—again. And whether he liked it or not, whether he hated these people or not, they'd need the Illyrians to fight. He'd need to work with them. Lead them, albeit under Cassian's command.

He supposed the only good thing about heading into battle with them was watching so many of them die. Fewer spiteful, backward males to return here to produce more offspring exactly like them.

Azriel had never told Rhys or Cassian that awful thought. That during the Hybern War, he'd sometimes been *glad* to see the Illyrians piled dead around him, shredded to bits or screaming in pain. He'd disliked the reduction of fighters in their forces, of course, but he'd felt nothing when they lay dead or dying. Only a sort of contentment. Satisfaction.

He was a monster. He held Ramiel's ancient stare, knowing the mountain believed this of him, too.

But wasn't dying on the battlefield what these people wanted? Their greatest honor was to fall in combat. To die when they were old and happy and surrounded by loved ones was an affront. What sort of people wished for that? Lived like that?

He'd never understood it. Not even as a warrior in training.

Certainly not after that training was done, when he'd seen firsthand how violent, how ruthless these people could be. The first shadowsinger in a generation had to be strictly instructed, they said. Rhys's father had insisted on it. Devlon had seen it out.

It was a different sort of training from what he'd done most days with Rhys and Cassian. They'd received similar training in time—how to carve a person apart without killing them, how to inflict pain in such precise

movements that enemies broke with little effort—but for him, the education had begun far, far earlier. Younger.

"Enemies" had been provided by Devlon on a weekly basis to learn on. Over and over. He and his shadows had pulled people apart—learning to read them, to block out their shrieks and pleas.

He'd been good at it. Too good at it. Sometimes even Devlon had needed to leave before it was done.

It didn't matter that sometimes the screams of those people bound to tables or chairs or hanging from rafters had reminded Az of his own when his hands had been melted by his half brothers. He'd decided already: he'd do whatever was necessary to keep his mother and himself from returning to that fortress.

And he'd learn everything he could so that when he *did* return, he'd make them all pay for every second of suffering.

You did make them pay, Ramiel seemed to whisper from across the horizon. *And you don't regret it, do you?*

He didn't feel the biting breeze on his face. No, he didn't regret it. He'd do it again if he could.

Monster. Demon.

Yes, he told the mountain. *Yes, I am. You and your people made me this way. You gifted me the knife at my side the day I became a warrior—you* wanted *me to be this way.*

Distant clouds drifted by, veiling Ramiel from view. As if the mountain couldn't bear to behold him for another moment.

It could go commiserate with Rhys, then.

Az turned his back on the holy mountain, striding once more into the trees. He never knew why he bothered to make the walk to this vantage point. Why he'd done it so many times throughout the centuries. It had always ended the same: turning his back on Ramiel in disgust and loathing.

He couldn't help but feel that the mountain had turned its back on him, too.

Mor or Feyre would probably have suggested that he kept coming here because of the inherent mystery of the mountain: Who had put the monolith atop it? What lay beneath it? No one had ever been inside.

But if Az was being honest, he had a feeling the mountain was empty. Hollow.

That was why he was drawn to it. Because Ramiel was just like him: hateful and empty and cold.

Feyre

"It's remarkable how much more you've rebuilt since we last visited," I observed to Tarquin as we stood on the grand veranda off his formal dining room. His pale castle rose behind us; the turquoise bay glistened ahead. Adriata hummed with life on its far shore. Connected by a causeway to the mainland, the High Lord of Summer's castle sat on its own mountainous isle in the heart of the bay, its lower hills encrusted with the estates of the nobility.

Tarquin, resplendent in cobalt robes trimmed with gold, his moon-white hair shorn close to his brown-skinned head, smiled gently. "Another year and I believe we'll have the city fully returned to its former splendor."

Before Amarantha, then Hybern, had wrecked and plundered much of it.

In the harbor, ships of various sizes came and went, white sails dazzling against the crushing blue. "That large ship by the harbor exit—with the double sails," Tarquin said, directing my eyes westward. "A young shipwright managed to build that. It's a self-sailing ship. It only requires a crew of *two*. A ship that big, able to be crewed by magic itself. We thought the art lost thanks to Amarantha. She burned all of them early on—butchered the shipwrights who knew how to craft them, too. No doubt to keep any of us from sailing off." A sad, bitter sigh. "But this young male traveled to the Day Court, worked with Helion's librarians, and uncovered some of the earliest methods our ancestors used to create them. Amarantha burned a good portion of those books, but this male and the librarians found what precious little had survived in Helion's libraries."

The ship soared over the waves, swift and steady, between the two mountains flanking the harbor mouth. "He had scribes make copies of the plans and the spell work they could piece together," Tarquin continued. "Then he brought it all back here, and has been working on it for more than a year now, filling in the gaps of knowledge with his own experimentation and guesswork. You're seeing him and his crew heading out on their third trial run." His smile became strained. "They have another two being built as we speak. I hope they get the chance to sail them."

I understood him completely.

Behind us, Rhys stood inside the dining room, conversing in that charming way of his with Varian's sister, Cresseida. There was no sign of the male himself. I ignored the tinge of relief at the thought of not having to face my friend's lover, who'd certainly heard of our ugly argument already. An opulent lunch of fresh shellfish and the first catch of the day had already been prepared, along with sparkling pale wine from the northernmost reaches of the Summer Court.

This was a careful dance, one whose steps Rhys and I had discussed at length. Tarquin seemed well aware of that as he murmured, "Can we stop pretending that this is just a friendly visit?"

I couldn't stop my half smile. "It *is* meant to be friendly, you know."

The handsome High Lord chuckled. "I'm sure that's your intention, but only the gravest of matters would take you away from home, and certainly take you away the day before your son's Naming Day ceremony. How is Nyx?"

He was right. Another hour and my breasts would be achingly full with milk. I'd brought bottles for any hand-expressing I had to do, but if we didn't get home until late, I wouldn't get to kiss that sweet-smelling, soft little head before he went to sleep. I wouldn't get to hold him against my body, let him drink himself into a contented stupor, and—

I shoved away the unbearable ache. The strange blend of terror and sorrow and absolute pain. I forced myself to look at my old friend and truly smile, saying, "He's fine, thank you. And thank you for the gift." Tarquin nodded, eyes shining. I squared my shoulders, pushing aside thoughts of my son. "It's because of our friendship and our gratitude for your presence in our lives, Tarquin, that we wanted to talk to you."

Some of the brightness dimmed from his eyes. And there—I beheld the burden curving his broad shoulders. The disappointment tightening his mouth.

My heart sank. "You won't stand with us?"

Tarquin's throat bobbed. "When you look at me like that, Feyre Cursebreaker, you make it an impossible decision indeed."

"What changed? You were our ally against Hybern."

Tarquin gazed across the glittering bay, to the ships and the city beyond. "Yes, but Hybern wanted to take our lands. Hybern attacked this city." The sweet, salty breeze ruffled the folds of his regal robes, but he remained

perfectly still as he said, “The dangers on the continent do not and will not affect us.” His eyes slid to mine, full of regret—and fear. “You are asking me to send my soldiers to their deaths for a war we cannot win, for land we have no ties to. You ask me to devastate their families on the principle of doing what you deem right.”

I couldn’t stop myself from straightening to my full height. And couldn’t stop the sharpness in my tone as I demanded, “And you don’t deem it *right* that we should help the humans protect their lands and ability to self-govern?”

Pity washed through his eyes. “I think the humans of the continent are a people we know little about; who are well aware of what is marching their way, and yet have not asked for aid.”

“What does that mean?”

Tarquin again contemplated his lovely, vibrant city. “The humans have certainly heard of the war we waged here against Hybern two years ago. To defend the humans in this land, to stop Hybern’s spread beyond it. The humans on the continent know Prythian to be sympathetic, and willing to die for their sake. Yet no emissaries have come to ask for our assistance against this invasion. Why?”

That is a very good question, Rhys said into my mind.

How are you listening to me and *talking to Cresseida at the same time?*

I’m the most talented, delightful, charming High Lord to ever exist, remember?

I gave him a filthy gesture across the bridge between our minds. Night-kissed laughter floated my way.

I tried again with Tarquin, my mate’s teasing bolstering my spirits. “Believe me, I have every reason not to go to war, not to face this, to sit in Prythian with my son and hide from the world, comfortable in my luxuries. But how could I face Nyx when he’s older and say, *We’d done enough already and it was someone else’s turn*?”

From the corner of my eye, I caught Cresseida turning from Rhys to stalk our way, her coral-pink dress flowing behind her. She cut in before Tarquin could answer, “If this conflict is as dire as you suspect, then I will be glad to avoid it and live long enough to have my future children ask me those difficult questions.” Tempests capable of shattering rock lay in her eyes.

Tarquin didn’t contradict her. Didn’t nod, but didn’t argue, either.

I shook my head, unable to help my disgust, but Rhys said calmly, utterly unruffled as he trailed after Cresseida, "In order to attain allies of our own beyond Prythian—allies that might make Rask, Montesere, and Vallahan back down—we need a united Prythian first. A Prythian that, at least to our enemies and would-be allies, appears united in one goal, and ready to march together."

"And if we unite," Tarquin said, leaning back against the stone railing of the balcony with a casualness that belied his words, "only for these enemies to call our bluff and march south anyway, will we follow through and lead our people to the slaughterhouse to save some far-off land, to rescue humans who loathe us?" The wind buffeted his blue robes into a living wave around him. "This would be a very different war from the conflict with Hybern, my friend. And very different from the war five centuries ago."

I knew that phrase—*my friend*—would go right to Rhys's heart.

My mate said nothing. His face revealed nothing, either.

Tarquin continued, the sunlight bouncing off his white hair in a near-halo, "During that war, at least, the humans on the continent were used to our kind. They could tolerate us, even saw some of us as allies and family. Now they've had more than five hundred years to forget about us. To hate us. Their willingness to accept and trust our help might be hard to come by."

Rhys slid his hands into his pockets. "I suspect that when the hordes of Rask, Vallahan, and Montesere are laying siege to their walled cities, they'll happily accept any help they can get."

Tarquin said nothing.

I couldn't quite believe it. That my brave, honorable, *good* friend—for that was what Tarquin had always been—was speaking these words.

Had Amren known? Was it why she had pushed for Fomoria instead of this? Angry as I might be with her, I didn't think she would have withheld that information. Had Varian known and kept it from her—had he avoided being here today so he could deny it? Amren being Amren, she'd have sensed something amiss, but she wouldn't have had proof of their intentions.

"What do we owe these strangers?" Cresseida demanded of my mate, utterly unfazed by the dark, foreboding figure he cut. "The humans of Prythian, those who dwelled in our shadow and suffered for it, they are our neighbors, and we owed it to them to fight for their safety and freedom

against Hybern. But the humans on the continent are across an ocean. And even if we did go, the entirety of Prythian's armies couldn't take on all three territories' forces. And who is to say these so-called allies you seek beyond our borders would even join us in that battle? Would we still march into war even without them, just to prove our honor?" The princess gave Rhys, then me a disdainful glance. "We would die in order to feel morally superior."

I glared right back at her. Might have flashed my teeth a bit.

Silence fell, taut and resentful.

They aren't wrong, Rhys said mind to mind. *I can understand their reasoning, even if I don't agree with it.* I didn't answer.

I had to try again—we had until tonight, and perhaps if I got Tarquin alone, out of Cresseida's earshot, he might listen to reason, might act with courage and mercy—

"Milady Feyre," Tarquin said, and I knew he'd guessed my intentions. His tone gentled, again laced with that terrible pity. "If this was a cause we could win, a cause where we had all the information at hand, yes—I would fight to the death alongside you. But we have only assumptions and hopes to rely on. I cannot march my people into certain death on rumor. Can you, my friends?"

That phrase again. And for a moment, admiring Tarquin's open, beautiful face . . . I wasn't sure if I really could live with it. With any of what I'd come here to ask him to do. To lead his people to a distant land to face a death-lord whose threat we had not yet fully confirmed, to fight a war we'd surely lose—though at least we'd lose with moral righteousness on our side. Could I face my son when he was older, if I even lived through this war, and explain that we'd marched our friends to a sure death just to feel good about ourselves? Was it any worse than explaining why we hadn't gone at all?

Tarquin's eyes softened, and he offered his arm to escort me into the dining room. Like he knew this part of the discussion was over and done with.

I took his arm out of politeness, the muscle beneath his sleeve as unyielding as the sea all around us. "There is too much that we don't know, Feyre, to risk jumping into a war that all my generals tell me we cannot hope to win," Tarquin said with that pitying gentleness. A numbness settled over me, heavy and unending. I barely heard him as he concluded, "And as

much as I admire your principles, I’m not sure we will ever agree on this matter.”

CHAPTER 12

Nesta

The sunset stained the sea to Nesta's left into blood-splattered gold. Panting, nose already bleeding, she knelt on the edge of the cliff, the northern horizon an impossibly distant line. Beyond it lay the Prison.

Between the Prison and here lay death.

She sucked in a breath, trying to rise, winded and sore from the winnowing that had taken her north from Velaris. Her knees, her thighs, did not cooperate.

Go, her blood whispered. *Make the jump.*

Why? she whispered back. *Why?*

But there was no reply. Even her blood seemed to go silent, leaving her shivering in a cold sweat on that cliff edge.

Alone.

She looked to her right, to the purpling eastern sky. To the first star of evening. To the darkness, the night growing beyond it.

Wedged between night to one side and the remnants of day to the other, Nesta found herself unable to move in any direction at all.

It was fitting, Nesta thought bitterly. She'd been stuck for weeks now, trying to figure out how to reach that place she'd been before, where she'd felt like she had a home and a mate and a family that she loved. It was all

she wanted—those things, those people. To love them, be loved by them, to keep them safe and happy.

That golden horizon to her left shimmered with the last rays of the sun.

It was the only thing she was certain about, that love. She knew it, because these weeks without Cassian, with him treating her as little more than a stranger, had been the hardest of her life. This time without Gwyn and Emerie and training with the Valkyries had eaten away at her, until she was nothing but weary, aching bones.

The old Nesta might have balked at such feelings, might have sneered and said she was weak, pathetic, needy. But those bonds had helped her survive Ramiel. Helped her survive Briallyn and the Crown. Those bonds had saved Feyre and Nyx. She would never not be proud of that. And she was grateful, so grateful, to have people who loved her. People worth protecting, worth dying for.

On trembling legs, head spinning, Nesta managed to get to her feet. Maybe whatever called for her over the northern horizon was a siren song, luring her away from what mattered, who mattered. *Come*, it beckoned, but to where? To what end? More shadows and loneliness and secrets?

It would consume her, if she let it.

So Nesta ignored that northern horizon, stained with a dazzling blend of encroaching night and lingering day. She turned from that horizon line, back toward the people she loved.

The green, shimmering hills of the Night Court lowlands spread ahead to the south. And beyond *that* . . . Velaris. Home.

She glanced over a shoulder, just once, right as the final rays of the sun slipped under the sea. Could have sworn a shimmer of green flashed as they did so, like some sort of final farewell.

Then she let herself look eastward one last time—to that evening star now emerging. Glinting, as if in welcome or goodbye. She was almost tempted to lift a hand in greeting or parting in response.

But she resisted, and with blood in her nose, its tang in her mouth, Nesta winnowed home. Gwyn might not be ready to speak to her, but Cassian . . . Cassian was her mate. He *had* to be coming back tonight, if Nyx's celebration was tomorrow. And since they were all due to go to the temple together in the morning, it was likely he'd at least have to stop by the House of Wind to pick up his clothes.

She couldn't stand it another moment, being separated from him, their anger keeping them apart.

The House of Wind was quiet; their bedroom even quieter as she donned her nightclothes. She slipped between the sheets, keenly aware of the crisp comforter and fluffed pillow on the other side of the bed. For long moments, she lay there, the silence pressing on her skin, hollowing out her head.

At last she said into the stillness, "Everything is a mess."

She didn't know why she was talking to the House about her personal problems, but she whispered, "I can't figure out a way to fix it."

In answer, a pile of splinters landed in her lap, littering the white duvet in wood and cinders.

Nesta sighed deeply. "Is this your opinion on the current state of my relationship with my mate?" The House, of course, didn't answer. Nesta peered down at the pile. "What is this, exactly? Or *was* this?"

The splinters stirred on a phantom wind and rose off the blankets, forming a shape in the air beyond the bed. "If you show me Cassian's stupid face—" she started, but halted as she beheld what the House had crafted. A wooden pillar—a hewn tree trunk. One that looked very familiar, especially as it began to buckle and indent at one particular spot halfway up its length.

"Is that . . . the punching block we used for training last year?" Nesta asked. She'd attacked it until the entire thing collapsed into splinters—and embers steaming with silver flames. The House must have squirreled away the shards when cleaning up after her.

The House repeated itself, building the punching block, then showing it shattering under invisible blows, then disintegrating into the pile again.

Nesta closed her eyes after the second viewing. "Take it away. I get it." But when she opened her eyes again, the House hadn't removed the splinters. It had instead placed the massive pile back in her lap.

"*Take it away*," she hissed. "I don't want to see it." The House obeyed this time.

It was perfect, really. The House couldn't have chosen a better symbol of where she and Cassian stood. The training, the determination, the love that had grown between them—all shattering not due to some outside force, but because of *her*. Her choices. Her powers. Her stubbornness.

So yes, it was upon her to rebuild a seemingly impossible whole out of so many shards. But that would require her mate to show up.

Long into the night, she waited for Cassian, curled up in their bed with a Sellyn Drake novel and a cup of warm chocolate. The House got that request correct, at least. But her mate didn't come. She stayed up as long as she could, eyes burning with fatigue. Yet in the end Nesta fell asleep alone, her hand on Cassian's pillow, reaching for the empty side of the bed.

Feyre

I walked alone down the untamed stretch of beach to the north of Adriata. I'd winnowed here half an hour ago, needing space and air and tranquility.

I waded shin-deep in the surf, the light skirts of my green dress bunched in one hand, the sun beating on my left side as it began to make its downward turn. There was nothing but the sigh of the surf, the soft, damp sea breeze playing in my hair.

There was no path forward. We had talked and eaten and talked some more, all to no avail. I even got Tarquin alone for a good half hour when Rhys asked Cresseida to show him one of those self-sailing ships, but the conversation with Tarquin went nowhere. And when Rhys returned, face carefully neutral, I shook my head. Nothing had changed.

I didn't even have it in me to be angry. Their reasons for avoiding the conflict were sound. Tarquin's people had suffered enough losses. Not just against Hybern, but during the fifty years under Amarantha before that.

Worse was what Tarquin had revealed during our private conversation: Kallias, High Lord of the Winter Court, was in agreement with him. And from what Princess Cresseida had implied upon her return with Rhys, Thesan of the Dawn Court felt the same.

If Tarquin would not formally ally with us in this conflict, then there was no chance Winter or Dawn would, either.

A wave slammed into my legs and I paused, steadying myself as it pulled back, ripping away the sand from beneath my feet. The water was so clear here—so warm. Silvery fish darted in the shallows, long fins trailing like ribbons. I could see them as clearly as if I were gazing through a window.

"If you're thinking of taking off that dress and swimming naked," Rhys drawled from behind me, "the answer is yes. Please do."

I snorted, glancing over a shoulder. My mate was barefoot, black trousers rolled to his knees and matching shirt rolled to his elbows, unbuttoned

enough at the top to reveal the beginnings of his Illyrian tattoos.

Another wave crashed around me, spraying my dress.

Rhys offered me a half smile. “That’s an awfully sad expression for someone so beautiful.”

I turned back to the beach, and silently began walking once more. My mate fell into step beside me, and for a while we said nothing.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said hoarsely at last. “Three courts, four if you add the Autumn Court, which is likely—*five* if you include the Spring Court—that won’t help us. For all we know, Helion won’t agree, either. We’ll never get anywhere if we can’t show strength in Prythian, can’t present a unified front to the world. Even Miryam and Drakon wouldn’t join us.”

“The numbers aren’t on our side,” Rhys agreed.

I kicked at the surf as I looked over at him, hoping to find that familiar smirk, that grin that told me he had a plan and it would all be fine in the end. But Rhys’s face was grave—sad. I swallowed the building lump in my throat. “Are *we* being fools? I don’t mean about not listening to Amren’s advice to go to Fomoria first. Are we fools for involving ourselves in this conflict at all?”

“There is one solution,” Rhys said very, very quietly. Too quietly. His violet-blue eyes were so bright, so pained. “We rebuild the wall.”

I whirled on him. “What?”

He couldn’t be serious. But that sadness remained etched on his beautiful face. “It was the only thing stopping them before. We rebuild the wall, even stronger this time, and then no one crosses one way or the other.”

Despite the sun, the warm breeze, the gentle water, my very blood chilled.

“How?” I breathed. But I already knew. “With the Trove. And the Cauldron. With me—and Nesta.”

“It took the power of nearly every Fae leader in the Treaty to build that initial wall five centuries ago. We would need much more power behind it than yours and Nesta’s, but yes . . . that’s essentially how we’d do it.”

I had to sit down. Had to walk over to the high-tide line and sink into the sand, forcing myself to loose a too-tight breath. The sun singed my cheeks, my temples. Burned along my hair, the scalp beneath.

I said bleakly, “I thought we agreed that a world divided wasn’t one that could thrive.”

Rhys sat beside me, forearms braced on his knees, tattoos stark in the evening light. The muscles along his forearms shifted as he opened and closed his hands, as if grabbing for some answer he couldn't reach. "It's possible, Feyre darling, that a world with no wall is too dangerous to exist. We Fae are too long-lived, too bored in our immortality. We make rules, then bend them, then break them. What is honor when one lives for a thousand years, longer? Time eats all that away. It eats away at the value of honor and kindness and *life*. Even if you and I got every territory on the continent to sign the treaty, in ten years they might renege on it anyway."

"So that's the answer? Decide that humans and Fae can never coexist, and keep our two worlds forever separated?" My voice broke, eyes stinging. "What of Miryam and Drakon's people? Fae and humans living together, thriving together for five hundred years."

"Cretea is a small island," Rhys said, "with only one ruler. The continent has many kingdoms, Fae and human, all with their own views and agendas. Peace rarely lasts."

I blinked away the burning in my eyes—made myself consider.

Rhys stroked a knuckle down my too-warm cheek. Soothing coolness trailed in the wake of his touch. Like the first night-fresh breeze after a scorching day. I leaned into him, even as I gazed out at the water. "If we build a wall," I mused, "if we cut their armies off before they can reach the human lands, then they might very well be so furious that they direct those armies right to us." I turned to my mate, brows high in question—and worry.

"I know." And there it was: the cost.

I pressed my lips together as they trembled. "So either we fight and die for a lost cause, letting the humans become enslaved again in the process, or rebuild the wall, stop the invasion before it can happen . . . and wait for our enemies to come wreak vengeance upon the Night Court." I couldn't bear to do either.

"Or we do nothing," Rhys suggested. "We step back. Look the other way."

I knew he hated that option as much as I did. My words shook as I asked plainly, "How can I tell our son to grow into someone who defends those who need it most when I won't do the same? How can I ever look him in the eye knowing that I doomed thousands—millions—of human children,

babies, to such a fate?" I wiped away the tear that had slipped down my face. "I can't, Rhys. I can't."

He reached forward, catching the next tear that fell. "I know." He kissed me softly on the mouth.

I slid my arms around him, needing his closeness, his warmth, his strength. And when he held me to him, I didn't stop the tears from falling.

I was a fool for thinking a few alliances might solve this. But alone on this beach, at the edge of Prythian . . . here, I could fall apart. With my mate, I could fall apart and know I was still loved, still supported.

When the tears had stopped, when my breathing had evened out, I pulled back. Rhys's eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"We need to have our contingency plan in place," I said, words shaking slightly, but steadier than they'd been minutes ago. I swallowed hard, taking his hand in mine. "The moment the wall goes up, we must have our defenses ready. We'll use the Trove again to put an impenetrable wall of our own up around *us*." But I paused before continuing as another thought hit me, horrible and unavoidable.

Rhys nodded, sensing the direction of my thoughts. "That's the question, isn't it? Does that second wall include just the Night Court? Or all of Prythian?"

"Can we survive cut off from other courts?"

"We can and we have. Culturally and spiritually, though? I don't know."

"But our enemies might march on Prythian anyway. Sack the other courts as retribution. Try to draw us out by butchering everyone else."

Another nod. He knew all of this.

"But if we block off Prythian from the world . . . will the other courts deem us their enemies? March on us?" I let go of his hand to rub my face. "How do we ever get them to understand why we did it? To accept it?"

Rhys shook his head, raven-black hair gleaming with reds and golds in the setting sun. "That's a debate for another day. We'd need to think of a way to extract the Cauldron from Miryam and Drakon, in any case."

"You think they won't give it to us? It's not technically *theirs*." And if they tried to keep it as their own possession—

"It's not ours, either," Rhys reminded me. "I think they likely will yield it to us, but achieving that peacefully and with minimal questions will be difficult." After how today had gone with Tarquin, I couldn't assume anything would be easy. Even with friends.

My stomach twisted. And I dared say, finally, after all these months, "So many of these problems would disappear if you were High King, Rhys—"

He whipped his head to me, outright fury on his face, along with pure terror. Not one star shone in his eyes. "That is out of the question."

"Why?" I demanded, matching his fury with my own. "Amren says time is short and to make the most of it. Well, then we'll spend these next months figuring out a way to bring back the throne, to put you on it, and make them all feel good about it. We don't bother with alliances—here or in Fomoria. We manipulate the hell out of the Prythian courts until they are *gladly* handing over that crown, *making* one for you, and we are a united force that other territories seek out for our alliance—"

"It will *ruin* our lives," he snarled.

I stilled.

He bared his teeth, chest heaving, even as his words were lethally soft. "You think it's bad having to run the Night Court, to deal with everything we have on our plates? To barely have time for each other, for Nyx? To bear the burden of so many lives depending on us? Imagine that plus six more courts. We wouldn't be able to stay ensconced in the Night Court—we'd need to be out in front of the entire territory. And if you think we have plenty of enemies now, imagine when we're ruling. They won't come running for our alliance." He let out a bitter laugh. "Look at any of those kingdoms across the ocean and you'll see that only a few rulers manage to hold their thrones into old age." He slowly shook his head, disgust crinkling his perfect features. "I won't do it. Not even for this."

"But if we had everyone supporting you, if it somehow felt *fated*—"

His power thundered like a night storm, setting the sand on the dunes behind us shuddering and slithering downward. "I. Am. Not. Doing. It."

I reeled back. Rarely had we spoken to each other like this. We fought, but not like this. Not with this viciousness.

It made me all the madder, somehow. Made me hate this impossible conflict even more.

I shoved to my feet, sand spraying off my gown. "Fine." I stared down at him without an ounce of kindness. "If you're refusing to do that, *fine.*" He glowered up at me. I glowered right back as I declared, "I still want to try to find a way, one last way, to get the continent to back down. Ideally, it's through a united Prythian, and whatever allies that might bring about. We—*I*—need to at least exhaust that route before I'll consider any other option,

wall or no. We failed here, but perhaps there's still hope yet at Winter or Dawn."

"Fine," he echoed. "I'm not holding my breath." I hated it, that bitter hopelessness in his tone, the fact that deep down, I, too, knew my hopes were futile. "And when everyone proves what cowardly pieces of shit they are and refuses to ally with us, when we've run out of options and time, then we'll rebuild the wall for the human lands. Then a wall around Prythian. And if the other courts march on us, we'll also build a wall around the Night Court."

The sun alit upon the horizon line, then began to sink beneath it. Rhys made no move to stand.

No stars shone in his power. None of the vibrant array of night-kissed hues. Just black, as dark as the bottom of a depthless pit.

"Walls within walls," I said, backing toward the surf. A wave crashed around my feet, colder than it had felt minutes ago. Rhys cast his stare toward the horizon—unwilling or unable to look at me. "I'm not sure I want our son to grow up in such a small, sad world."

His eyes shifted to mine. Dark as pitch. "At least in that small, sad world, our son will have the chance to grow up."

There was nothing more to say. I didn't bother so much as nodding farewell before I winnowed to Tarquin's palace to bid him goodbye.

Azriel

Seated on the roof of the town house, Az watched the first stars of night blink awake. A crisp autumn breeze ruffled his hair, scented with crackling fires and an array of spices—nutmeg, cinnamon, cardamom—from the many homes still busy baking for tomorrow's festivities.

He didn't dare return to the river house until tomorrow morning, and not just because of Elain. It had been hard enough to see Cassian this afternoon at Windhaven and not tell him about Hybern's messenger. He didn't know how he'd be able to look at the others without revealing it, either.

An alliance with their most hated enemy. He'd have to tell them—and soon. But not tonight. Not tomorrow.

They could wait. Hybern could wait.

His family deserved a celebration full of joy. A lifetime of it. Even if he didn’t.

CHAPTER 13

Cassian

"I hate getting dressed up," Cassian complained to Nesta the next morning as he ran his hands through his damp hair. He'd just made it back from yet another visit to Windhaven in time to bathe off Lord Devlon's nastiness and slip into what he hoped was a decent enough jacket and pants. Black on black, and certainly not as fancy as Rhys's embroidered pieces, but . . . he smirked in the full-length mirror of their bedroom in the House of Wind. He did clean up nicely. He'd even given the tips of his wings a quick polish.

Nesta strode by, clad in a dove-gray silk robe, her hair already styled into an elegant bun atop her head that set the long lines of her neck on stunning display. "We're not getting dressed up," she said without looking at him, aiming for the bathing room. "*You* just happened to wash up before this ceremony and change out of your leathers for once."

Each word was clipped. She'd barely spoken since he'd walked in. A new, hotter sort of anger shimmered around her. Something had happened since he'd last seen her. *He'd* done something to piss her off, he was willing to bet.

Cassian tracked her movement in the full-length mirror as far as he could follow, then turned to watch as she positioned herself in front of the mirror

above the sink, making quick work of sweeping a line of kohl along her eyelash line. Then applying a glorious red to her lips.

But she still didn't so much as look at him as she finished and walked back to the armoire in the bedroom proper. He might as well have been a painting on the wall. He'd gotten used to the tension between them lately, but she seemed especially riled. On edge.

He'd spent the night at Windhaven again yesterday. And—he did the mental math. Until a few minutes ago, he hadn't seen her for three days, not since that conversation in the hallway downstairs. It ripped him apart to realize it, set the primal, mated male within him roaring.

Only the Mother knew what had happened to make Nesta even more agitated. He certainly didn't.

It was concerning enough that he asked as casually as he could, "What's up, Nes?"

His mate flung open the armoire doors and surveyed the array of gowns. "Nothing."

"Liar."

She didn't respond as she untied her silk robe and let it fall to the ground.

His mouth dried out at her naked body on full display. The lines of her back, the curve of her ass, the hint of those lush breasts he could barely glimpse at this angle. The tattoo of the eight-pointed star that had graced her spine for so many months was gone, leaving only glowing flesh that his fingers practically ached to stroke. His cock tightened, and he shifted his stance.

Gods, she was beautiful. And Eris, the bastard, was right: some days, he honestly couldn't figure out why the Mother had deemed him deserving of such a mate. Not merely her physical beauty, but the spirit inside . . .

Even if that spirit had made some dumb fucking choices lately.

The thought doused any building desire, replacing it with a heaviness in his chest that had grown too familiar. So Cassian returned to his own reflection while she donned her gown. If she didn't want to talk, fine. They could co-exist in miserable silence.

Only when skirts rustled did he turn to find her approaching in a twilight-gray silk gown a shade darker than her robe, cut low enough to put her breasts on display to devastating effect. Maybe they should go to the temple more often, if this was what passed for pious attire these days.

He clenched his jaw. Perhaps the desire wasn't *entirely* doused. Before, he would have had no problem walking right up to her, sliding his arms around her waist, and exploring that bare, creamy expanse of neck and breasts. Nuzzling into that velvety skin, tasting every inch of it. Now he hesitated.

He lifted his eyes to hers and found something simmering there—there, and gone in a blink.

He crossed his arms. "So we're not talking about *anything* now?"

She crossed her arms as well. "What's there to talk about?"

"Something's happened in the past few days—I can see it written all over you."

"Nothing happened. Not that you've bothered to be around much anyway." She yanked open a drawer on her vanity hard enough that the jewelry within rattled. Jewelry Rhys had heaped upon her for saving his mate and child. She selected a necklace made of a single flexible line of small square-cut diamonds, delicate and glittering and made to draw the eye to that long, lickable neck.

Fitting it to her throat, she lifted her arms to latch it—and couldn't get it to catch.

He certainly wasn't going to help her. Her nostrils flared, sensing that.

"I do have a position within this court that requires my time, you know," he said tightly.

"Day *and* night, apparently." She breezed over to him, smooth as a panther, and got right up in his face before she said with saccharine sweetness, "Move, *General*."

Cassian gave her an exaggerated bow, wings folding elegantly as he made space before the mirror. She half turned, puzzling out the clasp, those pale fingers fumbling. Her eyes narrowed into slits of annoyance as she tried again.

"Talk to me," he pleaded. "Why are you even more pissed off at me today?"

She rotated the necklace to figure out the clasp from the front. "There's more I should be mad about? You mean, beyond the fact that you shut me out completely these weeks so you could sulk? Or how when you do speak to me, you pretend everything is fine—until it isn't and you shut me out again? Or how you won't even touch me for sheer disgust?" She pointed to the bed. "It's been *weeks*. You haven't reached for me once."

“You want me to touch you?” His voice had dropped an octave, even as a corner of his mouth kicked up.

She snorted. “Not at the moment, no.” She gave up on the necklace and made to tear it off, but Cassian moved faster.

“Allow me,” he drawled, grabbing the necklace and laying it gently along her throat and chest. His fingers grazed the warm skin at her nape.

His cock tightened again at that touch. At the way she went utterly still, sucking in a small breath. He leaned in slightly, unable to help his deep inhale of her scent. “Do you miss this? Is *this* what you’ve been waiting up for these past few days?” As he’d wished to moments ago, he trailed his fingers down the column of her spine, light as a feather.

Arousal washed over her scent. But the witch said, “No.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, making quick work of fastening the clasp. His fingers lingered at the base of her neck, withdrawing only as he leaned down to brush his nose over the same spot. Gods, she smelled incredible. “What about this?” His words were a hot push against her skin. “Have you been missing this?”

A small tremor went through her. He knew if he stripped off that dress, he’d find those glorious breasts peaked and ready for his tasting.

But she said, “I certainly do not miss that.”

“Too bad.” He flicked his tongue over her nape. She shivered. He did it again, a longer sweep, curving around her neck, up toward her ear. His cock was throbbing now, aching so badly that he knew he’d probably spill in his pants if she even touched him.

She let him reach her ear. Let him nibble on that velvet-soft lobe.

“Do you want me to bend you over this dresser?”

Her swallow was audible.

He smiled against her shoulder. “I could lift all these pretty skirts, Nes, and slide right into you. Did you even put on undergarments? Were you hoping I’d have the chance to find out?”

Her need wrapped around him. To deny them this pleasure would be agony, and maybe he’d been a stubborn, stupid idiot for keeping his distance these weeks, for holding on to this anger.

He skimmed a hand down her side, gathering fistfuls of silk skirt as he went, hefting it higher. “Just a taste before the ceremony, I think,” he purred against her neck, his words near-guttural. “Something to whet the appetite for later—”

She was there, in his arms, and then gone.

She might as well have chucked a bucket of water on him. Cassian could only blink, mastering himself, his body, his reality without her near, and so wet for him that he could smell it.

But Nesta was already striding to the door. She yanked it open and threw icily over a shoulder, "I find I don't have much of an *appetite* for Illyrian cock these days."

He gaped at her. What the fuck had just happened?

Nesta added with a taunting smile, "And I'm *not* wearing any undergarments. Though you're not going to benefit from that anytime soon." Unholy fire flickered in her eyes. "I've wanted to talk to you for the past couple days. *Talk*, Cassian. But you wouldn't even come home to give me the chance, couldn't even try to be around me."

He opened and shut his mouth, searching for words. She wanted to talk—at fucking last, she wanted to talk it all out, but—

Nesta stalked into the hall and slammed the door behind her.

Feyre

Nyx might have been a High Lord's son and presumed heir, but the High Priestess of Velaris's duties lay first and foremost with honoring the Mother. So Nyx's ceremony was wedged between the two rites of the Autumn Equinox, at sunrise and sunset. It was perhaps a gift of the Mother that the timing of our own ceremony fell perfectly between naps, a scheduling concern I'd never once considered before having a child of my own—yet one that now seemed to dictate a good chunk of my daily life.

Rhys had wanted a grand ceremony at the city temple, even though it was only to be us and our closest friends—and Elain, who had done most of the planning, had settled on something between reason and extravagance. Garlands of autumnal flowers had been artfully coiled around the towering pillars, and lest that seem too much of a nod to an enemy's court, she'd also made sure archways of jasmine spanned over the aisles, filling the temple with a familiar and comforting scent. White, magenta, and bloodred peonies bloomed in giant clusters at the end of every pew, and vines of honeysuckle, lilac, and roses traced over the lines of the vaulted ceiling. Flowers

everywhere—from each season and court, it seemed. Even bits of holly and snowdrop could be found.

It was lovely, if a bit pointless, as we were the only court here—we hadn't invited anyone from the other courts who might appreciate my sister's respectful acknowledgment. Except for Lucien, who didn't really seem to truly belong to any court these days.

But perhaps it made sense, I thought as I beheld the long aisle. I possessed the powers of all seven High Lords. It was too early to tell, but Nyx might, too. In that regard, he could be a child of all the courts of Prythian.

Not that I felt inclined to be proud of such a thing, given how yesterday at the Summer Court had gone. If I could have torn out the part of my magic that had originally belonged to Tarquin and shoved it in his face, I would have.

Elain was standing off to the side, smiling nervously as she waited for our verdict on her decor. She was lovely in gauzy blush pink, her hair loose, adorned only with an arc of bleeding heart flowers.

I grinned broadly at her, pushing aside all thoughts of Tarquin and our failure at the Summer Court. Today was for my son. I wouldn't darken it. "It's perfect." Nyx wriggled in my arms, his blue eyes wide at all the color and shapes around us. He reached a chubby hand toward one of the deep violet cones of lupine woven into the nearest archway, presumably brought from the mountain meadows around our cabin. "It's more than perfect, Elain."

Elain's smile broadened, her eyes lighting to a caramel hue as she watched Nyx paw at the lupine.

"Thank you," Rhys said, drawing his eyes from the spectacle and our gathered family at the far end of the temple, awaiting our arrival.

"The flowers will all be brought to infirmaries and orphans' homes after this," Elain explained sweetly. "As a gift from Nyx to his people."

Rhys nodded his appreciation. "Good thinking."

My mate and I had spoken little last night. I wasn't mad at him, and I knew Rhys wasn't mad at me, but we both needed a moment to piece ourselves back together after that conversation on the beach. We'd awoken this morning still tender, but clear-eyed. We were mates—we were in this together. And today was for our son, the most beautiful, perfect, wonderful

part of our existence. We'd make it a happy day, appreciate every second of it.

Elain smiled again, beaming at my mate's praise. "I should take my seat," she said, turning toward the aisle. But she halted. Went rigid.

"Elain," I started, but stopped. It occurred to me, too late, that I perhaps should have informed her already, but the damage was done.

Lucien strode into the temple, clad in a deep blue jacket cut close to his muscular body, the color setting the reds and subtle golds of his hair ablaze. He blinked at the surreal display—and then that mechanical eye whizzed right over to us. To Elain.

He went as still as my sister, if not more so.

And he must have seen, with perfect clarity, every trace of joy vanish from Elain's face. Seen the radiant smile—and how fast it withered upon seeing him. Lucien said nothing. Didn't so much as lift a hand in greeting to his mate. Or to me. He remained still, as if waiting for her to scream at him to leave, to go to hell.

But it was worse than that. Elain didn't even acknowledge him with her anger. Instead, her eyes slid toward mine. Something like betrayal shone there.

I said quickly into her mind, *I'm sorry for not telling you. We invited him when we saw him in the human lands. He's an important . . .*

Asset. Resource. Tool.

Friend to this court, I finished. I refrained from adding, *Please, if just for our sakes, say a kind word to him. Even a hello will do.*

Elain said nothing. The wall encasing her mind, one of pale stone and crawling vines and flowers, was down. But only silence lay on its other side.

I'll make sure he doesn't sit near you, I added pathetically.

She didn't answer me that time, either. She walked down the aisle without offering Lucien another look.

It was an effort to turn to greet him, knowing the pain that would be on his face. But I found that Lucien was instead smiling softly at Nyx while he approached, even as Rhys watched him like a hawk.

More like a fire-breathing dragon, really.

"He's beautiful," Lucien said to me, to Rhys. Calmly—like he was talking to an apex predator one loud noise away from ripping out his throat. Which Rhys was, though he appeared for all the world like the epitome of

male beauty and grace. I'd seen the talons of that predator rip out the guts of an enemy with a single swipe. He'd do it here, now, if necessary.

"Thank you," I said to Lucien, stepping pointedly on Rhys's booted foot.

My mate didn't thaw. But he'd allowed Lucien to enter this temple. And now allowed him to pass by us—even if Lucien gave us a wide berth.

"I'll sit . . . over there," Lucien said to me, still calm as he pointed to the other side of the temple from where Elain had found a seat near Nesta and Emerie.

Fortunately or unfortunately for Lucien, Amren sat right where he pointed, Az and Mor flanking her, all of them talking in low tones.

Amren, whom I hadn't spoken to all morning. Whom I hadn't wanted to see upon our return last night, leaving Rhys to find and talk to her. Maybe it made me childish, but if she'd shown any smugness when she heard we'd failed to secure Tarquin's alliance . . . I knew how well I'd have received it. About as well as Rhys had received my suggestion that he become High King.

Amren hadn't once looked back here—to me. She was surely as unwilling to speak to me as I was to her. When we'd begun planning this weeks ago, we'd wanted to invite Varian, but Amren had said if we did that, we'd have to invite Tarquin. And if we invited one High Lord, we'd have to invite them all.

Sometimes, being High Lady was a pain in my ass.

But after yesterday, I was glad I wouldn't be seeing Tarquin or the others anytime soon. And I wasn't above being glad that Amren was without her lover. Alone, even amongst us.

Lucien continued down the aisle, keeping his movements small and steady—and I wondered if inviting him here was more of a punishment than a nicety. Between Elain's and Rhys's reactions to his presence . . . maybe it hadn't been worth it. I wasn't at all surprised when Lucien found an empty bench several rows back from Amren and the others. Elain didn't once check to see where her mate had wound up sitting.

A tall, dark-haired figure emerged onto the dais, nearly impossible to make out with all the flowers choking the view. And as the High Priestess raised her hands upward in welcome, Rhys spoke into my mind. *Ready?* he asked.

This feels like a dream, I said, my throat closing up as I hefted Nyx higher.

A good dream, I hope. I'm looking handsome in it, aren't I?

I smiled slightly.

And you're looking beautiful—as always, Feyre darling.

I'd worn my favorite gown for the occasion: the dress he'd given me on our first Starfall together. Just as I had that night, I'd pinned my unbound hair back with combs of silver and diamond, and kept my cosmetics light.

I'd needed to adjust the dress slightly to accommodate my larger bust, but considering the number of times I'd caught Rhys glancing at me, it clearly hadn't taken away from its impact.

Sometimes I do worry that this is all a dream, I said to him, the only person I could ever really talk to like this. *Right now, I'm standing here, with our son in my arms, and I just . . . Part of me wonders if I'm still on that bed, bleeding out—*

You're not, he cut in. *You're here. He's here. We're all here.*

My throat closed up again, and Rhys cupped my cheek with a broad hand. *This is a joy I never thought I'd be honored to experience. You should savor every second of today. I know I will.*

He kissed me softly, once, twice. Yes, yesterday would be dealt with—for better or worse—but not today. Today was for us. For Nyx. For our family.

A throat cleared somewhere in the temple, and—right. The priestess. The ritual.

I smiled up at my mate, who kissed me a third time. Rhys then whispered to our son, "Start screeching when it gets too boring. We'll owe you a drink when you're older."

I laughed, kissing the top of Nyx's downy hair. Rhys laid a gentle, guiding hand on my lower back. And together, as a family, we walked beneath the woven flowers of Prythian to officially welcome our son to the world.

CHAPTER 14

Feyre

The usual assortment of prayers began the naming ceremony. I'd thought we'd walk up there, get blessed with a wave of the priestess's hands, and then be on our way to our luncheon, but no—we had to stand at the foot of the dais, Nyx squirming in my arms, for the entirety of a normal service.

I will kill you for this, I said to Rhys as I shifted Nyx's weight from one hip to the other. *Your son is going stir-crazy.*

I told her to keep it short, he said innocently, staring straight ahead at the High Priestess intoning her prayers atop the dais.

Even our mating ceremony wasn't this long.

Oh, it was. You were too preoccupied with thinking about getting me to the bedroom afterward to care.

I struggled to keep from smiling. *Maybe.*

At last, the priestess requested, "The binding thread, if you will."

Rhys nodded gracefully, pulling the velvet-wrapped bundle from a pocket in his black jacket. His wings were out today, resplendent and shining—and I knew he'd polished the tips to honor his son and their heritage.

I glanced to where my sisters sat in the pews.

Elain was pale, any trace of joy gone, her arms crossed and back so stiff she might as well have been sitting on a bed of nails.

Fantastic.

Cassian sat near Elain. Across the temple, Nesta was somber, but calm, at least. Emerie beamed beside her, likely the main contributor to Nesta's tranquility. While Emerie wore a plainer gown than most of us, she'd pulled her hair back to reveal the lovely angles of her face—an intriguing combination of softness and edges. Emerie kept peeking over at Mor, a blush on her cheeks.

But Mor, seated beside Az and Amren in the row across from Nesta's, was wholly focused on the ceremony, on us. Unshed tears of joy danced in her rich brown eyes. She knew how long my mate had waited for and dreamed of such a day. I'd wished for this for years; Rhys had yearned for centuries.

The High Priestess gasped softly as Rhys unfolded the black cloth to reveal Clotho's remarkable silver ribbon. "Exquisite," she breathed. But she mastered herself, gently taking the bundle and lifting it with both hands above her head.

Three blessings ensued. A pew creaked as Amren shifted in her seat, her favorite ruby necklace sparkling with the movement. I noted that Az, beside her, seemed to be watching her fidget with dark amusement, his shadows swirling at his shoulders, his wings.

Az caught my stare and flicked his eyes toward the priestess. *Pay attention, High Lady*, the shadowsinger seemed to say. I blushed and concentrated on the priestess again.

The ceremony was boring. Beautiful, but boring, despite the mandatory Equinox weighing with the silver scales atop the altar, each element endlessly explained and honored by the High Priestess before she placed it into one of the dishes. A gift of balance from the Mother for the year ahead.

At least we had the luncheon to look forward to. Even if the priestess had been invited, which would likely dampen any merriment and keep our revelry to a more respectful level.

"Bring the child forward, and place his hand between yours," the priestess finally ordered.

We obeyed, and I didn't fail to notice how Rhys's hand shook slightly as he placed it beneath Nyx's. I met his gaze, finding it lined with silver, stars twinkling within. Pure joy, boring ceremony or no.

I laid my hand atop Nyx's, his hand so soft and squishy-plump that I couldn't stop myself from giving it a little squeeze. Rhys's eyes glittered,

like he knew exactly how much restraint it took for me not to grab those little fingers and give them a playful nibble. Nyx just peered down at his hand sandwiched between ours, head angled to the side in curiosity—so similar to his father that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry with wonder.

The priestess began wrapping the silvery ribbon around our joined hands. "The Mother welcomes you to her world, Nyx, and offers her divine blessing." She handed me Clotho's ribbon, nodding her encouragement. "Hear the wishes of your parents, and know you are loved."

My own fingers were shaking slightly as I wrapped the ribbon around our joined hands a second time. The fabric shimmered like sunlight on the sea. "I wish you a life of joy," I said thickly as my son gave me a gummy smile. "Of courage and unending love." My throat closed up, my eyes stinging as I beheld that perfect little face. There was so much more I wanted to say, to offer him, but if I said one more word, especially with this impossible conflict brewing around us, I'd begin weeping. I opted to kiss his brow instead, deeply breathing in his sweet baby scent.

I passed the ribbon to Rhys, and his free hand was well and truly shaking as he wrapped it a third time around our joined hands. Nyx squirmed, but then grew fascinated by the silvery ribbon twinkling between us. "I wish you wisdom," Rhys said, so softly I could barely hear it. A tear slipped down his cheek. "I wish you strength—not only of body, but of spirit, too. And I wish you all the happiness that I've known with your mother. May you have the luck and honor of finding it for yourself one day."

I met Rhys's eyes, unable to stem my own tears as they slid down my cheeks.

No anger lingered from yesterday's fight on the beach. It was gone, forgotten, like a swift-moving summer thunderstorm. Here, now—this was what mattered most.

The priestess took the remaining length of ribbon from Rhys's fingers and tied it to the loose end she'd started with.

"Bound by love, by the hopes of your parents, we welcome you to the Night Court," the High Priestess declared. I leaned forward, kissing Nyx's warm, chubby cheek. He yanked on a section of my hair, suddenly curious about it.

"Your family and friends may step forward to extend their gifts of blessings and wishes," the priestess said, opening her arms wide to welcome them to the dais.

Mor practically shoved everyone out of the way to get to the front of the line. Tears ran down her face as she beamed at me, then at Rhys, and finally at Nyx before she kissed his round cheek and said, “I offer you the gift of truth. May you know it when you see it, and may you always know the truth inside yourself, too.”

I could have sworn magic fluttered as she gently laid her hand atop our bound ones, then stepped away.

Cassian came forward next, nudging Mor aside with a wing as he settled his broad palm over my hand. His hazel eyes were wholly fixed on Nyx and his voice was heavy with emotion as he said, “I wish you friendship—deep and true. Friends who will help you grow into the person you’re meant to be, and tell you when you’re falling short.”

With a wink at me and a clap on the shoulder for Rhys, Cassian backed away from the dais.

Nesta stood behind him, tracking her mate’s movements. Cassian didn’t so much as look at her as he returned to the pew.

For a moment, it struck me—what a miracle it was that Nesta was here. That she had not only come to this ceremony, but emerged as a person who *wanted* to be here. Who now beamed at my son, her nephew, with wondrous love in her eyes. Even if I could see her pain as her mate took his seat across the temple from where she’d been, still refusing to look at her.

Nesta glanced up at Rhys, whose face had hardened slightly. I tensed, but Nesta held his stare a beat—then looked at me. Smiled faintly. I could see it there, the genuine happiness for me. The gratitude that I was here, that Nyx was here. That she herself was here. She knew that for the miracle it was, too.

Nesta laid her hand atop mine, and Nyx gave his aunt that broad, unbearably cheerful smile.

“For you, little warrior,” she said, unable to stop her answering grin, “I gift you—”

She blinked.

It was instinct, imprinted deep in my bones, that knew that blink for what it was: a warning.

I whipped my head to the door. To the windows. Nothing but morning sun, yet—There. I could feel it. The ripple that had made Nesta pause.

Nesta’s hand slid from atop ours as she faced the doorway. “I . . .”

The hair on my arms rose. “Get this off us,” I ordered the priestess, voice low, tugging at the tied ribbon. “Right now.”

“What’s—” the High Priestess began, but still didn’t move.

“Now,” I commanded, heart beginning to thunder.

Rhys’s power writhed in a dark cloud, the countless blooms around us shuddering in its wake. “What do you sense?” he asked. The others were already on their feet, angling toward the door. None of them had worn weapons—it was frowned upon to do so in a temple.

Cassian’s and Az’s Siphons were gleaming, twin flames of red and blue, respectively.

The priestess tried to untie the ribbon, but its weave was like metal—and with the magic in it, I had a feeling only the magical knife-cutting at the end of the ritual would have removed it. Until then, it remained steadfast.

Elain was already on her feet, pale with fear. Lucien had slid a few rows closer to her, into a defensive position.

“What is it?” Mor demanded, her own magic sparking at her hands.

“I . . .” Nesta began again, brows knitting together. “I . . . I’ve felt it before.” As if in answer, a chill shivered through the temple. It was familiar to me, too.

Nyx began twisting, trying to pry his hand free from ours.

“Enough,” Rhys said to the priestess, and laid his hand on the ribbon. Magic flared, but the fabric held. “Get that knife.” He inclined his head to where it lay on the altar behind us, his words barely more than a growl. His eyes met mine, dark with power and that predator’s urge to start shredding apart any threat to me or Nyx. “We winnow out of here in—”

He didn’t have the chance to finish.

One breath, there was light. The next, there was dark. A darkness I had not seen in a long, long time. Not since I’d begged for its help in the bowels of the House of Wind. Not since it had fled into the wilds, freed from its restraints after I’d unleashed it upon Hybern.

I knew what that darkness brought. Knew what that darkness was crafted from.

Fear.

CHAPTER 15

Azriel

Azriel had been standing in line—Elain so painfully close that he savored her scent, even with her mate mere steps away—when Nesta picked up on something before anyone else. Before his shadows, even.

Not that his shadows were here. Elain had chased them away with her proximity, bright to his dark, scattering them beyond the temple's boundaries.

When the first scrap of darkness had appeared in the open temple doorway, for a moment he'd thought it was his shadows coming to extend their own blessing. Then the blackness had devoured everything.

He knew that darkness—knew its name: Bryaxis.

Its power was that of pure, unfiltered fear. One's deepest terrors personified and amplified to deadly effect. It took all of a second for someone—Elain—to scream. Not a scream of alarm, but of absolute horror.

Azriel's power erupted, blue light exploding outward to kill and to protect, but the darkness was impenetrable. It swallowed his Siphons' light with a single bite.

Cassian bellowed, a sound of gut-wrenching torment.

Had Rhys and Feyre gotten Nyx out? Had they sliced that ribbon off their hands so they could face this nightmare given form?

Elain screamed again, and Az whirled, Siphons illuminating the dark in a wash of blue. His shadows were gone—his shadows couldn't find him, couldn't come near, somehow—

Lucien was shouting for his mate, but that shout turned to a roar of agony.

Drawing from the Siphon at his right hand, Az shaped his power into a sword of blue light, and as he brandished it, the dark cleared. The scene it revealed turned him to stone. Into the living dead.

Bodies lay scattered on the temple floor, bloodied and broken. Rhys. Cassian. Feyre—and a tiny, fragile body lay half-covered by Feyre, blood leaking from Nyx's small hands.

Az looked down at himself. There was blood on him, too. On his own hands. On Truth-Teller, somehow back in his grip. He'd done this to them, as he'd done this to his kin long ago, with the same blade.

Yesterday, he'd been so sure that he didn't regret it—insisted, as he'd stared Ramiel down, that he didn't care. But this time, with his friends—that beautiful baby—dead at his hands, hands that were now unable to release Truth-Teller's blood-slick hilt—

This wasn't real.

Elain was crawling toward him through the gore, reaching bloodied fingers for his stained boots. "Please," she begged—to spare her or to end her pain, he didn't know. He'd done this to all of them; he'd gone to a place within him that he'd dreaded Rhys or anyone ever finding out about, a place as hollow as Ramiel. He couldn't let go of Truth-Teller. The knife was bound to his very flesh.

Rhys began screaming. Not the prone corpse before him, but off in the distance.

This wasn't real. But Rhys's scream of suffering was, and their temple, their city was under attack. Bryaxis, Fear itself, had come.

Feyre was sobbing somewhere beyond the unbearable field of death, too. "*No,*" she cried. "No, no, no."

He had to fight it. Had to stop seeing it. But there was Mor, inches away from his bloodied boots, her naked body brutalized again, a note nailed to her abdomen.

This time it read, *YOU DID THIS*.

Az dropped to his knees, Truth-Teller still in his right hand. Blood sprayed—so real he felt its wetness soak into his legs.

There was nothing worth fighting for. Not anymore. He'd destroyed everything. There was nothing left in the world to care about, either, if he was even capable of caring in the first place.

Then Nyx wailed in terror, again from that far-off place and not the vision before him, and the pain began.

So much pain. Az could feel it in his hands. He lifted the one not holding Truth-Teller, already knowing what he'd see. The oil slathered on what little flesh remained. Bone and tendons where it had melted away.

Nyx's wail turned into a shriek—a scream. It was the same scream that had once come out of Azriel's mouth, all those centuries ago, when his half brothers had doused his hands in oil. Then in fire.

Screams for a mother who could not come to save him.

His hands, his hands, his hands—

Feyre

My son was screaming, and I could not reach him.

I'd never known my child *could* make those sounds, never known that my happy, sweet boy possessed the capacity to be so scared, so hurt. He screamed for me, frantic, and every muscle in my body contorted, willing myself to move off the floor, to rise, to get to him—

He'd vanished. He'd been in my arms one moment, the ribbon binding us, and then he was gone, and then there was the fetid darkness, and my son was in pain and I could do *nothing*.

I tried and failed to get off the stone floor. To find him in this swirling, endless night.

His shrieks echoed all around me. Someone was hurting him, someone who had no mercy for how small he was, how helpless and innocent, and they would enjoy tearing him apart piece by piece, breaking limbs and wings—

My body wouldn't move. Couldn't move. I could do nothing to help him, nothing at all, and I would die from it, this despair and agony.

Please, I tried to beg that darkness. *Please.*

Anything. I'd give *anything* for him to be safe. My life, my territory, my —

Would you give that, too?

Rhys's agonized yells sounded, and I could tell, somehow I could tell that those shouts weren't *his* pain so much as a reaction to what he was seeing.

Would you trade your mate for your son?

I sobbed wordlessly, heaving. It had to stop. I knew it wasn't real, but it was. In a way, it *was*, and witnessing that unbearable possible future tore me apart. The cost of refusing to heed wise counsel from good friends, the cost of wasting what little time we had on fool's plans, the cost of choices that were mine and mine alone.

The darkness cleared. Before me lay my son. Or rather, what had once been my son.

And everything in my existence went silent.

CHAPTER 16

Nesta

None of this was real.

Nesta was on her knees, panting hard, and the darkness had dissolved to reveal . . . nothing.

It had formed image after image. Her father's neck snapping in Hybern's hands. Her mother, wasted away to nothing on her deathbed, bones jutting out from her sallow skin like dead growth beneath melting snow. Feyre bleeding out, Nyx still and silent across the room. Elain stolen, pleading for help.

She'd already seen all of it. Already faced it.

It showed her Cassian, aloof and distant. Loathing her very existence, finally aware that she wasn't worth it.

She shut her eyes against that one, but she was facing that already, too, wasn't she? She'd faced all of it and survived. Had faced every nightmare, seen every broken and miserable part of herself and accepted it.

Like hell would she allow this creature to bring her to her knees again.

Grunting, panting through her teeth, Nesta got to her feet.

Pure darkness lay around them—

No. That was a lie. She'd experienced real darkness, in the heart of the Cauldron. She'd survived it.

She'd survive this, too.

She closed her eyes, breathing in for three beats, then out. Again. Again. On the third release, the Mind-Stilling settling through her, she opened her eyes. Light streamed in.

Her friends, her family, were all scattered throughout the temple, on their knees or cowering, sobbing, screaming at whatever invisible horror they beheld.

Cassian was curled into a ball, wings wrapped tightly around himself like a shield, their delicate networks of veins and muscles illuminated by the flickering ruby glow of his Siphons.

Her head hollowed out. They were all lost in their worst fears, their unfiltered nightmares.

She'd seen it happen before. Bryaxis had been on that final battlefield against Hybern. Nesta had witnessed that dark cloud descending upon their enemies, leaving only shrieking madness and ugly death in its wake.

Nyx was screaming. He was still held between Feyre and Rhys, cradled close, all three bound by Clotho's ribbon—but both parents were lost to their own minds, their own terrors. And it was the sound of Nyx's terrified screams, that babe who was still too young to know what true fear was, that had Nesta's vision distilling to something lethally clear.

"You want to terrorize a baby?" she asked the darkness hoarsely. "Come pick on someone your own size."

A low, hissing laugh sounded from the arched ceiling. There, coiled in a corner like some great dragon made of shadow and smoke, lurked Bryaxis.

"You're dead," Nesta seethed, fingers curling at her sides. *"Dead."*

A long, sinuous tail thrashed like a cat's before a voice like wind through dry grass asked, "Am I? Come prove it to me, then."

Nesta dared a glance toward Rhys, her deadliest ally in this situation. But he was still bound to his son and his mate, a puddle of vomit to one side of him, tears running down his ash-white face as he beheld something on the ground, something beyond his worst imaginings. He didn't see the son or the mate in his arms—didn't feel them. He'd be of no use to her, not until he could work his way free of Bryaxis's net.

Nesta bared her teeth at the creature crouched by the ceiling. "Why are you here?"

Again, that long tail thrashed, brushing over the mosaic of stars and the moon on the domed ceiling. "Why do you stand before me while the others

cannot?" Bryaxis demanded, voice sharpening into claws on stone.

Nyx wailed again. It took every ounce of restraint Nesta had not to run to that baby, slice through that ribbon binding him to his parents, and take him in her arms. But to do that would leave her nephew dangerously exposed—and leave her fighting one-handed.

Not that she had any weapon to fight with. And in this dress, all these stays and skirts . . . how could she even move? Even if Rhys got free, how —

Something clattered nearby, and she dared take her eyes off Bryaxis once again.

Ataraxia lay on the ground in front of Rhys. He was shaking, vomit and spittle at the edges of his mouth, so unhinged that he looked half-wild, but —"*Kill it*," the High Lord snarled before convulsing in on himself again, a shattered scream breaking from his lips.

She'd bought him time to work his way out of Bryaxis's snare—but only for a heartbeat.

That heartbeat was all Nesta needed. She stretched out a hand, and Ataraxia obeyed. Its hilt met her palm as Bryaxis pounced.

Long, snapping jaws, a spiked tail, talons designed for shredding, all crafted of smoke and night—

Nesta blindly swung Ataraxia up.

Light ruptured, and the creature roared. Debris rained from the ceiling, flowers and petals with it. Bryaxis leaped away, landing atop the pews, as nimble as a shadow.

Nesta had all of a second to angle Ataraxia as the creature lashed its tail, aiming right for her head. Nesta ducked low, trying to roll—

Trying.

Her torso couldn't bend properly in the dress. Her legs could barely move. She smashed face-first into the nearest pew, her nose crunching. Warm blood filled her mouth with a coppery tang.

Bryaxis laughed again, the sound sending the remaining flowers shriveling into rot and dust.

"We helped you," Nesta panted, the words thick with blood as she heaved herself to her feet again, forced her shaking legs to steady. Forced her hand to pivot Ataraxia before her.

The creature tilted its serpentine head to the side, revealing a crest of great, spiked horns. "And yet you called for me today." Its voice was

nothing short of a nightmare.

Nesta spat blood onto the stones, showering the wilted flowers littered there. “I did no such thing.”

Another low laugh that raked along her bones. “I have come home to where sisters wait for me.”

In answer, Elain screamed. Then Mor. Magic pulsed past Nesta, spiraling toward Bryaxis’s squatting form. The shadow grew, engorging in answer. It was feeding on their terror.

Nesta glanced to Cassian. He remained hunched over himself, head in his hands, shaking and shouting, his Siphons guttering like candles in a gale under the cover of his wings. Lost to her.

Emerie was down, too, her damaged wings splayed out on the floor. Even Amren was shuddering against a pew, hands over her eyes. Whispering over and over to herself, “You survived it; you got through it.” Her red lips shook with each word. “Monster, monster, monster.”

Nesta was alone in this, then.

Nyx wailed again, burying his face in his unseeing mother’s neck.

Bryaxis turned its mighty head toward the babe, toward Nesta’s sister and her mate. That great, spiked tail whipped back and forth, back and forth. “The suckling’s fear is sweet as honey.”

Something sharp as glass shot through Nesta. “Yours will be, too,” she said, and didn’t give Bryaxis time to react before she attacked.

Ataraxia met what might have been a clawed foot the size of her entire body. But the shadows blasted apart, and Bryaxis howled, debris again raining, tiles scattering on the floor, stones threatening to crush all these people she loved. Endangering Nyx, even within his parents’ arms.

She had to get it outside. But to unleash Bryaxis upon the city, upon all the innocents of Velaris—

Rhys roared toward her, once again battling through his own nightmares just enough, “*KILL IT!*”

Bryaxis recoiled like a striking asp, and shot for where Mor knelt on the other side of the temple.

Nesta winnowed as that talon of blackness plunged for where Mor lay, presumably to blast her soul apart with its horror. Nesta slammed headfirst into it. She dug Ataraxia into the closest thing she could find to a limb.

Light flared, and a force like an avalanche sent her tumbling.

No—it wasn't real. It was all imagined, that force. It couldn't touch her; it just made her *think* she'd been touched so she would reel back. She found her feet; her legs; her strength. Mind-Stilled in a single moment, settling into her body fully.

Nesta launched herself at the serpentine creature once more rearing up.

Bryaxis dove for her, those huge jaws yawning open. Nesta winnowed again, right to where its massive, crested head met its spine. She plunged Ataraxia down—

Nothing but air met the sword, and she plummeted with stomach-churning speed before colliding with a pew.

A crack radiated through her arm and shoulder, but she didn't feel it, not as she got to her feet, not as she whirled to find Bryaxis sweeping from the temple in a roiling cloud of darkness.

She gritted her teeth, blood tickling along her chin, and was only vaguely aware of how her left arm hung at her side as she vaulted over the pew—clumsily, thanks to her dress—smashing through all those flowers and ribbons Elain had so lovingly arranged. Now little more than withered obstacles in her way.

Behind her, in the temple, the screaming stopped. Not one of her friends made a sound.

But then the screaming in the streets began.

Nesta burst into the sunlight in time to see that dark cloud soar into the startlingly blue sky.

She didn't hesitate. She winnowed, right onto the roof of the building next door. Below, swarming through the streets, people were fleeing. It wouldn't do them any good. Not against Fear.

Bryaxis seemed intent on a destination, though—its dark cloud shot to the north, to . . .

To the House of Wind. And to the veritable font of fear that lived within it.

Home, it had said.

Nesta was running before she formed a plan, terra-cotta tiles slipping from beneath her flimsy slippers, dress hindering the length of each step. She reached the edge of the roof, catapulting herself across the narrow alleyway and onto the next, scrambling to her feet on the treacherous tiles, skirts getting in the way of her knees, her feet, her ability to rise swiftly.

Like hell would she let Bryaxis reach the mountain. Like hell would she let it get to the priestesses. It had lived with them for centuries—why did it now seek to feed on them? Why had it returned to wreak such pain and havoc?

Nesta cleared the next roof. The next. Every breath singed her throat. One of her arms, she couldn't bother to discern which, had a tingling numbness. It didn't matter. She had to make it to the House of Wind first. Had to winnow there; had to find the concentration to do so.

But to stop would give Bryaxis vital seconds ahead of her. And she'd winnowed so much already that her reserves had become a dried-up well.

Nesta landed on the next roof, scaling its steep gable and racing along the narrow strip. She couldn't winnow herself any farther. But Ataraxia . . .

If she timed it right, if she aimed right—

The edge of the roof revealed a jump that she couldn't possibly hope to make, not when she was this drained, not in this gown.

Nesta flipped Ataraxia in her hand, muscles aching as she pulled back her sword arm, sleeves tearing down the seams, her legs lurching to a stop.

With mere inches to the drop, Nesta used the whole of her momentum to hurl the sword through the air. And used what remained of her magic stores to rip open a hole in the sky. A sister-hole opened miles away, right in front of that racing shadow.

Spinning, Ataraxia sailed through both holes, emerging as a glimmer of light in the distance, plunging with all that force straight into Bryaxis's side.

Bryaxis bayed, arching, the sound like thunderheads breaking open—but Ataraxia tumbled earthward. The shadow twisted on itself, screeching toward Nesta with such hate that even from a distance, it seared her bones.

She hadn't stopped it. Ataraxia had inflicted a mere scratch, and there was nothing and no one left to defend the mountain.

With a mocking snap of that mighty tail, Bryaxis surged onward to the House of Wind.

Even with a sword that could kill the unkillable, Nesta had failed.

A hand grabbed her shoulder. Feyre, white-faced and tear-streaked. Somehow, she'd gotten that ribbon free and tracked Nesta here. Nyx had to be safely away now, likely with Rhys. "Hurry," her sister begged, and winnowed them.

They slammed into the wards above the House so hard that Nesta's breath knocked from her lungs. Feyre yelped, "Fuck!" and then they were

falling, plunging toward the unforgiving stone fortress far below.

Feyre blasted out a frigid gust of wind, slowing their fall enough that they landed easily on the veranda stones outside the dining room, the glass doors already opening, as if the House were urging them in. Nesta was running before she'd fully set foot on the ground, Feyre at her side.

There was no sign here of the dark, serpentine shadow creature.

"I think Bryaxis is heading for the priestesses," Nesta managed to say, her voice raspy and nasal-sounding. She barely noticed the numbness creeping through her body as she and Feyre launched through the dining room, into the hall and down the stairs, right down to the library doors.

The silence in the library was worse than screaming. The doors were open, and Clotho stood between them.

"Run!" Nesta shouted, voice breaking.

Clotho held up a gnarled hand.

"Bryaxis is coming," Feyre panted, her face still etched with the horror of what she'd seen, the devastation that her son had experienced. She didn't falter one step in her sprint toward Clotho and those doors. "Bryaxis is coming—"

Nesta eyed her sister's weapons. An Illyrian blade—she'd gotten one of those somehow. But if Ataraxia had done nothing to Bryaxis, then Feyre's sword would be more than useless.

Clotho still didn't move. Instead, a piece of paper appeared before her.

"*RUN*," Nesta roared, now feet from the High Priestess. No one stood behind her in the library. Not a sound issued from within. Where was Gwyn? She needed to warn Gwyn and rally the other Valkyries—

Words appeared on Clotho's paper. Skidding to a halt, Nesta had to read them twice to understand.

Bryaxis has returned to the lowermost level of the library.

"It's going to feed on you—" Nesta gasped out, righting herself. Feyre did the same beside her, reading the paper.

That is not a concern. We reached an agreement.

"Bryaxis just unleashed itself on us at Nyx's Naming Day ceremony," Feyre said between shaking breaths. "It cannot be allowed to live, to return here."

Nesta grabbed her sister's hand. Or tried to. Her own arm was somehow not moving. It was utterly numb. But she kept her eyes fixed on Clotho's paper as new words appeared: *I am sorry for your suffering—*

"My *son* was *screaming*," Feyre snarled, now shaking so hard Nesta could hear her teeth chattering. Shock was setting in. "I held him in my arms and didn't even know it. *He* didn't know I held him. We are going down there right now and I am going to fucking *obliterate* that *thing*—"

Power rumbled through the very stones of the House of Wind. Enough power that Nesta glanced at her sister. She forgot, sometimes, how deadly Feyre was.

But Clotho stood firm between the doors. Blocking their way.

The paper said, *I cannot let you enter. Bryaxis answered the call, and we shall honor it.*

"What call?" Feyre demanded, but a chill slithered down Nesta's spine.

"The song," Nesta breathed. "Calling lost sisters home."

Clotho's head bobbed in a nod. *Bryaxis has been a resident of this place for millennia. I will not deny her this return.*

"Her?" Feyre repeated.

But Nesta cut in, "She attacked us."

"I don't care what oaths you have here," Feyre bit out. "*She* went after my son, and I—"

The Mother has offered Bryaxis her protection. You shall not violate it.

Feyre stiffened. Power swarmed around her like a living mist.

Mere feet away, Nesta could have sworn something close to anger radiated from Clotho.

This is my home, Clotho wrote. *Your authority ends at this doorway, High Lady. I decide which souls pass over my threshold. Which souls are under my protection.*

Feyre slowly, slowly blinked. That power rolled.

Nesta gaped, unable to help it. For Clotho to take this stand for *Bryaxis*—

All the Mother's creatures have value, Clotho wrote. *Even when we cannot see it. She returned to the only place she knows as home. And I apologize again for your son's fear.*

Feyre's teeth flashed in the dim light. "You want to keep her down there again, *fine*. But if she comes out of this library, she's *dead*."

Nesta had no idea what to do. She'd arrived here frantic, furious, ready to kill a creature that could not be killed, ready to avenge her family's and friends' fear and suffering.

And now Clotho stood in her way. Defending that creature with her usual grace and strength. Putting the High Priestess on the other side of a line.

Turning her into someone Nesta didn't know.

Nesta asked, her jagged breathing evening out, "Are the other priestesses all right? Is Gwyn all right?"

Clotho's hooded head swung her way. *Bryaxis has agreed to harm none within these walls, unless they venture into her pit. The others have been made aware, and will stay well away, as they always have. They are currently sheltering in their rooms until you leave.*

"Until *we* leave?" Feyre demanded, power sparking like stirred embers.

I did not want them to see us at odds. The hood nodded at Nesta. *Gwyneth is fine—she did not take the news with any sort of shock. We will resume our ceremony and celebrations as soon as we are able*.

As soon as Nesta and Feyre were gone.

Feyre stepped forward, like she might betray that ancient promise of autonomy within these walls, and Nesta tried to grab her shoulder. Her arm wouldn't work, so she used the other one. Found her fingers filthy and coated in her own blood.

"Let's go," she said hoarsely, gently to Feyre. "Nyx needs you."

"Bryaxis went after my son." Feyre's words shook as much as her body. Her blue-gray eyes were wide—so wide. Like she couldn't shake the terror. Like it still ran rampant through her soul.

Clotho's paper revealed no more. The conversation was over.

With a final, withering glare, Feyre stalked for the stairs, power rippling in her wake. Nesta lingered a beat longer. Clotho stood so still, so silent.

"Please be careful," Nesta whispered. But the High Priestess just turned on her heel, pale robes swirling, and strode inside her domain.

The library doors shut with a resounding groan. It occurred to Nesta that she'd never seen those doors closed. Not once.

But as she followed after her sister, metal locks clicked into place.

CHAPTER 17

Feyre

Bryaxis had returned. Only Clotho's ribbon had kept Rhys and me tethered to Nyx while blinded by our own nightmares. Would I have dropped him otherwise? Would I have been unaware that he'd tumbled from my grasp—and been lost in my own terrors while Bryaxis fed upon him?

I supposed I should be grateful for Clotho, though she hadn't chosen to give it to us specifically to protect our son and couldn't have ever guessed we'd need the ribbon for such a purpose. But she *had* chosen to allow Bryaxis back into the House of Wind. To harbor her.

I was High Lady of every single inch of this territory *except* for that library. My power ended at those doors. But I'd realized today I didn't care, truly didn't care, about limits or boundaries or even right or wrong where my son's safety was concerned.

But Bryaxis would remain—for now. First, I needed to speak to Rhys, needed to piece myself back together.

The simmering rage, the unending echo of fear focused me. Helped me to remember that I had people other than myself to attend to. That I could not sink into the urge to wallow or withdraw or tear that damned mountain down stone by stone until there was no library left, no lines where my power ended, simply me and Bryaxis and the death I'd bestow upon her.

Her. Bryaxis was *female*, apparently. It didn't make a lick of difference.

Nyx, at least, was unharmed. It was only my motherly instincts demanding that I confirm he was all right that had turned me from those library doors, from shoving my way past Clotho.

I'd found him and Rhys at the river house. Nyx was unsmiling but calm. Rhys, however, wore a hollowed-out expression, splatters of vomit still coating his clothes.

Madja had arrived, and I'd nearly sobbed when she'd finished her thorough examination of Nyx and declared that he was fine, mentally and physically. What he needed, she said, was a good nap—to keep to his schedule. That, at least, I could offer my son. So I fed him, stroking his head over and over, fighting to keep my tears at bay as I gazed into his beautiful face, and sang him the sweetest lullaby I knew. Rhys stood beside my chair the entire time. He left before I laid Nyx in his cradle, and when I emerged into our bedroom, my mate was gone. Presumably to carry out the duties required of both of us—ensuring the city was secure, our citizens safe, our friends and family intact.

The thought propelled me from my room as well, remembering once again that I hadn't been the only one in that temple suffering under the weight of Bryaxis's visions.

A chill had crept over the garden, yet Elain did not seem to notice it—nor my approach—as I strode past the wilting flower beds still clinging to scraps of color. My sister remained in her gown from earlier, long-sleeved but certainly not warm enough against the autumn weather.

I understood, though. That numbness, so intense that a crisp afternoon became secondary, body and mind as distant as the stars.

In terrible silence, Elain snipped off a still-perfect rose near the base of its stalk, tossing it into the beginnings of a pile in a wicker basket at her feet. The last blooms before winter.

I cleared my throat. "Are those for dinner tonight?" My voice was still scratchy from screaming.

Elain looked over her slim shoulder, no surprise at my sudden arrival. Her brown eyes were as haunted and bleak as I felt. "You removed all the dining room decorations from earlier." The words were thin. Barely more than a whisper.

"They felt inappropriate after this morning." I hadn't wanted to see a single one of them upon returning. A wish, and the magic that ran our home

had made them disappear. Perhaps Rhys had gone to the temple to do the same; to repair any damage from Bryaxis.

Elain returned to the tangles of rosebushes. She clipped away withered brown snarls of thorns, tossing them aside until she found another bloom clinging to life, then snipped that one, too. Twin piles grew at her feet: one of dead things, the other of delicate life. One hideous and sharp, the other soft and gentle. My sister said with that awful emptiness, "Well, I thought you might want something on the table."

I surveyed the dying garden, so close to its winter sleep. Elain had already veiled some of the hedges in burlap to protect against the frost. "I don't want any flowers," I admitted reluctantly.

Elain clipped the rose stem anyway. "They'll rot away to nothing out here. Might as well use them."

"Fine," I said absently. If this was how Elain chose to cope with whatever she'd seen under Bryaxis's influence, I wouldn't get in her way. Even if I suspected that she'd place the roses right between her and Lucien at the dinner table, blocking her view of him.

Elain said softly, "Did you check on Nesta?"

"No." My mouth still somehow felt far away. "Madja's tending to her shattered arm." And her broken nose, but no need to lay out every gruesome injury our sister had sustained in saving us. "And besides, I didn't see a need." Of all of us, Nesta had withstood Bryaxis's darkness.

Elain said without looking back, "But you did see one for me?"

"You were screaming." Was Elain *mad* I was checking in on her? "I didn't want you out here, suffering with the aftermath all alone."

Another rose tumbled into her basket. "You think I'm pathetic."

"No. We were *all* shaken today."

Elain didn't answer, and I took this as acceptance enough.

"It's freezing out here," I said, some of that bitter chill sinking into my skin at last. "You should come inside."

"I'm perfectly all right. It's work that needs to be done anyway."

I frowned at the garden. "It's not so important that you have to be out here freezing."

Elain said, softly but not weakly, "It is important. I'm clearing away the old to make room for the new." She snipped a dried-out tangle of thorns for emphasis. "Death can bring about life. Without it, too many resources

would be diverted to unnecessary parts of the plant. With winter coming, they need everything they can get."

She was definitely reeling. But I didn't have the energy to debate whether she should be out here, or worry that I'd offended her by caring.

So I suppressed a sigh before I said, "I just wanted you to know that I'd rather have my sister warm and comfortable than pruning plants in the cold."

Elain didn't say anything else, merely continued snipping and clearing and gathering.

I walked away with a subdued, "I'll see you at dinner. Don't make the arrangement too big."

I'd taken only ten steps into the delicious warmth of the river house when I found the next person on my list of people to check in with coming down the grand staircase. Amren's eyes were downcast, her sleek black bob limper than usual. Even the rubies at her throat seemed dull, like their innate fire had gone out.

"You look how I feel," I said by way of greeting, unable to hide my wince.

Amren's head snapped up, her silvery eyes gleaming. "I was just checking on Nyx," she said with unusual quiet.

"He's still asleep?"

Amren glanced at her hand, gripping the polished railing. "Yes. Rhys is watching over him now."

She reached the bottom of the stairs, and though I'd known her for years, it still surprised me sometimes how short she was, how her head barely cleared my shoulders. I had the strangest feeling of gazing down at her from above as I said, "Are you all right?" I couldn't begin to imagine the horrors Bryaxis had shown my friend. She'd had more than fifteen thousand years to draw upon. Prey upon.

"Yes," Amren said, the word carried on a sigh.

We hadn't spoken since that ugly argument, which was why Amren had been near the top of my list of people to seek out. So I lifted my chin. Let some of the numbness I'd wrapped around myself fall away as I said plainly, "I'm sorry for how we argued after Storr. I'm sorry for what I said. It came from a place of fear. You deserve better than to be treated like that."

Sorrow glimmered in Amren's eyes. "You have nothing to apologize for, girl."

"No. I do. Everything you said that day was right. Today's events confirmed that." I shook my head. "The Summer Court visit was fruitless—Tarquin won't join us. And maybe I don't believe that Fomoria is our best route for an alliance, but I understand now what you meant about *time*. About needing to think and act on a bigger scale." I swallowed hard. "Today I felt exactly what you warned me of." I blocked out the images Bryaxis had shown me of my son. "I saw what you were trying to explain to me. I should have listened."

Amren held up a hand, her face genuinely pained. "There is only moving forward now. But for my part . . ." Her throat worked, her eyes like quicksilver. "I am sorry, too, Feyre. So very sorry."

Her apology—so rare from this fierce female—soothed something, steadied and settled me even after all we'd been through earlier. I knew what I had to do now, and could count myself lucky to have Amren there to help me.

I said thickly, "Will you come to dinner tonight? I want you to sit beside me and—"

"I'm going to see Varian." Amren looked anywhere but at me. "I . . . I need to see him."

Despite my disappointment, I nodded. "I understand." Whatever she'd endured today, she wanted to process it with the person she felt closest to, safest with. The male who had gifted her the rubies she rarely took off. "You'll be missed, though. And when you return"—I offered a grim smile—"let's discuss strategy."

Amren returned my smile with a sad, strained one of her own, let out a long breath, and walked toward the front door. She was just reaching for the handle when I blurted, "I'm grateful, you know." Amren halted, peering back at me. I explained softly, "To have an honest friend like you. One who isn't afraid to call me out when I'm wrong. To tell me the truth, even if I don't want to hear it." I put my hand on my chest, right over my heart, the tiny gems on my gown cool against my tattooed palm. "I'm grateful for you, Amren."

Amren just dipped her chin, silver eyes desolate. And without another word, she was gone.

Azriel

Seated at the dining table in the river house, Azriel had to keep checking his hands to make sure they weren't covered in blood, as he'd seen in the temple. That they weren't melted down to scraps of skin and glossy white bone.

Bryaxis was back. Fear itself.

Something had happened since the Hybern War. Wherever Bryaxis had gone, whatever it had done while out in the wilds, it had been twisted into something worse. What had once been a terror at the bottom of the library was now something different.

But it was contained, at least, back at the library—if they could trust Clotho. Mind to mind, in extremely clipped words, Feyre had explained to all of them what had occurred there.

As night had fallen, Rhys had dispatched messages to the city leaders that new wards would be going up, the sort that allowed no one, save for the Inner Circle, in or out. Not even a bird. If Bryaxis had entered without them knowing, what else might get through? What if Bryaxis had only been the first in a wave of assailants?

Amren had been shockingly affected by the morning's events—she'd apparently left in search of whatever solace Varian could provide. Az had never seen Amren's face so ashen, her lips so ghostly pale when they all came back to themselves after the terror of Bryaxis. She'd kept whispering to herself, "You survived it; you got through it." Over and over.

"This is going to be a depressing dinner," Feyre now said from one end of the dining table, "if we all stay silent and push our food around."

Azriel and the others had gathered in the dining room, if only because the food was already prepared and waiting. What else were they to do? Dwell on the nuances of their fears?

The thought of that dark essence lurking in the library again made Az feel faintly sick. Clotho's explanation that Bryaxis had been summoned back by the song that called lost sisters home baffled him. He couldn't imagine feeling any kinship for such a creature.

Bryaxis had snatched away what should have been an eternal memory of joy. The *why* of it was eating Az alive. He'd spent the hours since the attack scouring the city, circling above the House of Wind, willing his shadows to

learn whatever else they could. They'd reported nothing. Absolutely *nothing*.

They'd been useless against Bryaxis. He didn't know why he'd expected anything better from them in the aftermath of the attack, either.

"After the day we had," Rhys said to his mate, setting aside his fork with a courtier's grace, "you're really in the mood to banter?"

"No," Feyre said glumly, "but I'd be glad to get out of my own head a bit. So banter would be appreciated."

She had changed into a simple silver velvet gown, long-sleeved against the nighttime autumn chill, her hair coiled atop her head in a pretty swirl. No jewelry beyond her star-sapphire mating ring. None of the morning's stunning splendor.

Even Rhys had unbuttoned the top of his collar, letting his shirt and the tattooed chest beneath show. He'd changed, too, but his hair was disheveled, his skin salted with dried sweat. Az couldn't help but think that his brother looked like he hadn't really sat down until now.

The only person missing was Nyx, who was already asleep, according to Rhys. Az knew that both parents had their daemati skills focused with razor-sharp precision on the nursery beside their bedroom, alert for so much as a mewl.

It was hard to imagine any sort of darkness, even Bryaxis, getting into this lovely house, though. The twinkling faelights of the dining room gave off a warm, soft glow, shading the purple silk wallcloth a seductive amethyst. The fabric had been embroidered with gold and silver beading fashioned into stars, moons, and celestial swirls, and the moldings above and below it had all been intricately carved into an array of night-blooming flowers.

Az had avoided Elain when he arrived, though his shadows told him plenty. Or rather, their silence, their refusal to even set foot in the room, spoke volumes about her presence. She was here, which meant his shadows weren't—they were clustered just outside the dining room. Good.

It had nearly killed him not to go to her earlier, but he couldn't, not with Lucien there. All this day needed was a fight between allies to top it off.

"Banter, banter, banter, let me see . . ." Cassian drawled, tapping his fork on the table, and Az braced himself. When Cassian had that particular half grin and spark in his eye, the next words were sure to be pure mischief. If there was anyone who could feign normalcy after the attack, it was Cassian.

Cassian turned to Lucien and said, “You’re pretty unruffled for a male who beheld his worst nightmares today. Want to share what you saw?”

“That wasn’t the sort of banter I meant, asshole,” Feyre hissed as Lucien’s mouth flattened.

Az couldn’t help his smirk. He couldn’t antagonize Lucien—it would have made things far too obvious—but he was perfectly content to let Cassian bait the male.

Elain sat between Nesta and Mor, about as far away from Lucien as she could get. And since Azriel had placed himself as far as *he* could get from Lucien as well, he found himself seated directly opposite her. Not that Elain acknowledged him. Her eyes were fixed on her plate, those thick, dark lashes bobbing every now and then as she thanked Nesta or Mor in hushed tones for putting food before her.

What had she seen today? What nightmares had set her screaming so loudly? Had anyone asked her? She still wore her gown from earlier—did anyone notice the dirt stains on it? The scratches on her ivory hands? She’d been in the garden, then.

“Thank you for letting me . . . recover in your study,” Lucien said politely to Feyre, not taking Cassian’s bait. “The tapestry behind your desk is remarkable.” His face had been sliced open, though the cuts were already healing. It seemed like he’d been clawing at his skin. At the metallic golden eye. He was handsome, Azriel would give him that. His enchanted eye and the scar around it somehow only added to the effect. He dressed himself with as much care as Rhys—he was still in his cobalt-blue jacket with faint gold embroidery along the lapels, his long red hair a silken curtain draping down past his shoulders.

And Lucien could fight. The male knew how to handle himself, even if—like his eldest brother, Eris—he appeared more coddled courtier than anything.

“Thank you,” Feyre said to Lucien. “I’m glad you appreciate it.” She gestured to Mor and said, “I recently had it hung there. Since *some people* think it’s dreary, and advised me to move it from where I originally had it in my art studio. Claimed it would depress the children there.”

“All that black *is* dreary,” Mor protested.

“We live in the Night Court,” Feyre reminded her. “The tapestry is of our sigil.”

And yet Feyre had indeed moved it from her studio a few weeks ago. It was a beautiful piece, and a powerful one, but she'd said it would be better appreciated here. Certainly better protected from errant paint splatters.

Lucien added with that smooth politeness, "I think that's the point, though. The darkness in the tapestry is there to make that extraordinary silver thread shine." At Feyre's furrowed brow, Lucien tapped the skin beside his metal eye. "It became a river of light with this—even more spectacular." He glanced to Elain, who was ignoring him. Or at least not deigning to turn his way, even with the floral arrangement between them nearly blocking her view of him. That was likely intentional, too, Az thought with no small amount of smugness. Especially as Lucien looked back to Feyre, defeated, and said, "If you ever speak to the artist, please tell them the tapestry meant a great deal to me today, after Bryaxis. It . . . helped steady me in some way I can't quite explain."

Azriel suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. Lucien had always had the ability to spout pretentious nonsense at the drop of a hat.

Feyre nodded, though, and said, "I also found strength in it today."

A heavy, fraught silence fell. *Fear and dread and exhaustion—*

Azriel blocked out his shadows, realizing they'd crept close enough again to listen, to report, though they still stayed well away from Elain.

Lucien dragged a hand through his hair, a smooth, pretty movement. Some part of Az relaxed to find her still ignoring Lucien wholly, but his stomach gave an unpleasant twist at her untouched beef and creamed potatoes, both of which Mor and Nesta had piled almost comically high for her.

Lucien said to Feyre a shade awkwardly, like he'd just realized he'd possibly overstayed his welcome, "If you'd like, I can take my leave—"

"Stay," Feyre insisted.

Rhys leaned back in his chair, swigging from his wine before he said, "I don't object to having one more warrior here tonight."

"I thought we were going to attempt to make this a fun dinner," Cassian muttered into his own drink, draining it.

Regarding Elain over the roses so artfully arranged to block their view of each other, Lucien said, again with that trained smoothness, "I'm at your disposal."

Thankfully, Elain's mouth tightened. She clearly knew the words were meant for her, but she didn't look at him. And Az wasn't a good enough

male to not bask in satisfaction at the sight of how the light in Lucien's remaining russet eye guttered.

Lucien reached into his jacket pocket, though, and set a small wooden figurine on the lacquered table. "I'm sure presents are the last thing you care about right now, but I wanted to give this to you," he said to Feyre—and to Elain and Nesta. "Your father carved it on his journey with me."

They all leaned closer to see the finely wrought carving of a small rabbit.

Lucien explained with that ever-graceful manner of speaking, "He did it to pass the time at our various camps, but the work was so good that I kept it when he was done. I thought it would be a nice gift for you to give your son. To have a piece of his grandfather."

Az might have been inclined to ignore him had Feyre's throat not bobbed. His High Lady bowed her head in thanks as she picked up the figurine. "Nyx's favorite toy is a stuffed rabbit. It's like my father knew."

"He was a good man," Lucien said, his eye lingering longingly on Elain. "I admired him." Az ground his teeth.

Cassian shifted in his seat beside Az, and Az found his brother watching Nesta, who was rigid in her seat. *She doesn't know what to feel, what to say*, the shadows supplied. *Pain and anger and sorrow and guilt—*

Cassian poured himself another cup of wine, his back and wings stiff. Like Nesta's pain wasn't his problem, like it didn't matter one bit. Had they even spoken to each other since the attack?

Nesta stared at the wooden rabbit, though Az knew her attention was on her mate. *They barely speak, barely touch, and it is killing her, destroying her—*

Azriel blasted his shadows back, sending them scurrying again into the hall. He didn't need to know what was going on between two mates. If they had been enemies or even potential allies, yes—but Cassian and Nesta deserved privacy.

"Thank you," Feyre said to Lucien at last before tucking the rabbit into a pocket of her gown.

Lucien nodded and fell silent, eating his food with courtly elegance. Az couldn't help studying the fork and knife in his own grip. In the candlelight, the scars on his hands were all the more gruesome, his fingers a ruin compared to the clean golden-brown of Lucien's skin.

Az asked the Autumn Court lordling abruptly, "When you and Tamlin allied with Hybern, who was your contact?"

Everyone—except for Elain—whipped their heads to him. Lucien blushed slightly. Swallowed.

What the fuck are you doing? Rhys snarled into Az's head.

But Lucien met Az's stare, his metal eye clicking. "Why do you ask?"

It was time. "An envoy arrived from Hybern the other day with a message about Hybern wanting to meet with us regarding an alliance."

Someone's fork clattered onto their plate.

"Repeat that," Feyre gasped. Her face was so white that her freckles stood out against her skin. But Rhys demanded, "You were going to tell us this when, exactly?"

"Tomorrow," Az said, meeting his brother's stare and daring him to deliver a reprimand. "I didn't want to ruin today for you, but it's too late for that. Bryaxis got there first."

"On whose behalf did the messenger speak?" Cassian asked, hazel eyes already churning with calculation, wine now forgotten beside him.

"It didn't say. Just that Hybern had sent it." Az wasn't above nodding toward Lucien again. "So I thought it might be helpful to know who *you* contacted before the war with them."

This is beneath you, Rhys shot into his mind. *You really need to make this male look bad in front of his mate in order to feel better about yourself?*

Az blocked out his brother's words. Kept his expression mild, curious as he waited for Lucien's answer.

"We dealt with the king himself," Lucien said at last, voice a bit strained. "Tamlin knew him vaguely from his own father's alliance with Hybern during the Sundering War, so all it took was a message to initiate contact." The color on Lucien's cheeks darkened and spread.

Az pushed, "And then where did you meet? How did you communicate?"

Azriel. *Drop it*. Crackling power laced every word. Az ignored that, too.

Lucien cast his gaze around the table, settling finally on Elain. She was still staring at her plate, hopefully remembering once again that her own mate had brought about so much of her suffering. But Lucien said, with a steadiness that Az begrudgingly admired, "I can walk you through all of it, if you want. But perhaps after dinner." A gesture toward Feyre, whose face was still achingly wan. "We were given orders to banter, after all."

Down the table, Cassian was rubbing his jaw. He asked Rhys, apparently no longer inclined to obey his High Lady's request, "You think those assholes actually want an *alliance*?"

After the war, from what Azriel had gathered, a small group of lords had come together to rule Hybern—at least until a new king could be enthroned. He'd reported to the others that this group now operated out of the king's old castle, and though none of them had claimed the title yet, it seemed a young male had been making headway. Not that the people of Hybern had benefitted. Az had gleaned that Hybern had suffered a few bad harvests—and a distinct snubbing by other countries for trade. The country had seen better days, and deserved it.

Feyre cut in, picking up her utensils, "We'll talk about it tomorrow morning." Along with a report of what had occurred at the Summer Court, no doubt.

Az had a feeling it hadn't been good, given that neither Feyre nor Rhys had talked about it yet.

But now Feyre gave Az a glare that had him suppressing a wince of shame. "I'm not inclined to trust them."

Nesta grunted her agreement. Mor and Rhys had locked eyes, having some mind-to-mind conversation, Az suspected. They didn't include him.

Az stayed quiet after that, not trusting himself to say another word. Not daring. He glanced across the table to Elain. She'd barely moved an inch, her food still untouched.

As if sensing him, her lashes stirred, lifting slightly. Those doe's eyes met his. His skin tightened over his bones. She was so beautiful—so perfect and pure and as lovely as a spring dawn. Her high, delicate breasts lifted as she sucked in a breath—

Rhys's ire landed on Az like a brand.

Az immediately cast his attention to his own plate, even as his fingers clenched his wineglass.

Rhys had no fucking right to tell him not to look at Elain. Just as Lucien had no fucking right to be her mate, to her affections, or so much as a blink of attention from her. Az waited for the mental tongue-lashing from his High Lord, but none came.

Food was consumed, drinks swallowed down, and the candles burned low.

And though Feyre had insisted on tomorrow morning, talk again returned to Hybern. They were all adamant that Hybern could get fucked. There would be no response to their request. Not even a simple no. If Hybern needed allies, they had dug their own grave. It was time to wallow in it.

Az peeked at Elain once more before the meal was over.

Her gaze was already on him. And even with her mate sitting mere feet away, he didn't miss the way her tongue darted out over her lower lip.

Didn't miss the longing, the desire that heated her brown eyes to a molten chocolate.

Yes, he wished he could say to her, mind to mind. *Yes.*

Rhys could go to hell. So could Bryaxis and that vision she'd shown him.

It turned out, he did have something left to fight for.

CHAPTER 18

Nesta

"I'm shocked you're even staying here tonight," Cassian said casually to Nesta in the excruciating silence of their river house bedroom. "I thought for sure you'd run back to the House after dinner, Bryaxis or no."

At the attempt at teasing—so unusual these days—Nesta looked at him from where she sat in her nightgown at the dressing table, unpinning the coils of hair atop her head.

Well, then.

He'd already sprawled himself across the bed, shirtless, wings splayed beneath him. He knew precisely what picture he painted, with all those muscles gleaming in the golden faelights, that arrogant half smile on his lips. A veritable feast of Illyrian maleness.

She made herself return to her reflection, pulling free a ruby-topped hairpin. "Lucien's staying over."

"So?" Movement caught her eye, and she glanced over to see Cassian tossing and catching a knife as if it were a ball.

She clicked her tongue. "So I want to be here in case Elain needs me."

The motion stilled, and she found him holding the knife by its tip—like he'd caught it that way. "Elain needs you to protect her from Lucien?" His face was deadly grave. It didn't matter what the current state of their mating

bond was—if her sister needed help, he'd offer it instantly. No questions asked.

He was that sort of male. Good. Brave. True. Something deep in her chest wrenched.

She'd had all the words prepared last night, had her heart open wide and ready to burst, especially after the House had made it so clear with that pile of splinters that *she* had done this and only *she* could fix it, but he hadn't come back. And then he'd swaggered in this morning, and she'd been so mad at him, so *furious*, she'd wanted to just start screaming. Or crying. Or both.

"No," Nesta said thickly, placing her hairpin alongside the others in the drawer of the table. "But Elain's always on edge when he's around."

She could have ended it at that, could have fallen back into that tense silence, but she found herself trying. "I think it comforts Elain to know I'm close by. Especially after the day we had."

"Hmm." The knife flipping resumed.

Nesta shut the drawer and met her own stare in the mirror. Gaunt and hollow and—sad. She hated it. Hated everything about this warped, barbed bond between them.

He hadn't even been there this afternoon when Madja had healed her—the shattered arm, the broken nose. Not a trace of the injuries now remained. As if the horrors of Bryaxis had never happened.

But Cassian seemed to be at least attempting to talk normally. And he seemed to intend to stay here tonight. In their bed. Next to her.

"What did you see today?" she asked as she shook out her hair, scalp giving a quiver of pleasure at her freed tresses.

His knife stilled again. "I don't want to talk about it," he rasped.

"Was it the same thing you saw all those years ago in the library?"

"No. It was worse."

She met his eyes in the mirror. "In what way?"

His handsome face had paled, his eyes distant as he murmured, "The more you have in life, the more people you love, the worse your fears become."

She couldn't stand to see in his eyes the answer to the question she wanted to ask: *Am I still on that list of people?* So she refocused on the mirror and began to brush out her hair.

She didn't know what to make of today. Nyx, at least, seemed unharmed and unbothered, and Nesta could only pray it would remain that way. Dinner had been . . . fine. Not one of their most cheerful meals, but certainly not the somber misery she'd expected.

Amren hadn't been there, though. She'd gone to Varian to piece herself back together. Something Nesta had wished she could do with Cassian, but she hadn't been able to even find him until dinner. Or talk to him until now.

Cassian cleared his throat. She felt him searching for something to say. When he spoke at last, his voice was low. "What were you about to gift Nyx earlier?"

She met her own stare again. Noted every angle of her miserable face and empty eyes before she said, "Ataraxia."

Sheets rustled as he started. "Your *sword*?"

"No." She grazed a finger over the fine bristles of her brush. "I was going to wish for him to find *ataraxia*—inner peace."

Cassian fell silent as Nesta resumed brushing. Then he asked, "Are you . . . are you doing all right? After what happened today?"

She set down her brush. "Nothing happened." Her throat ached with the effort of keeping her words emotionless. "I tried to kill Bryaxis, I failed, the end."

He sat up in bed, swinging his legs around to the floor. But he stayed seated as he said, "No one expected you to kill her—"

"I expected myself to kill her."

Cassian ran his hands through his hair, almost to his shoulders now. "It's not a burden you need to bear."

She faced him fully. "So this failure is fine with you, but the success of saving Bryce Quinlan's world isn't?"

She couldn't help it. There it was.

His wings snapped shut, but he remained silent.

Nesta shoved out of her chair. Stalked to the bed. Came to a stop a foot away from him.

He tracked her every movement, eyes glittering with hot anger. "Let's have it out, then, Nes. Don't hold back now."

Her fingers curled at her sides, an involuntary twitch. He marked that, too.

"Go ahead," he goaded. "Put them around my throat and *squeeze*." He bared his neck.

Nesta lunged for him. Not to throttle, but to grab his face in her hands and haul his mouth to hers.

Cassian stiffened. She pulled back, fingers clutching his jaw as she demanded, "You really thought I'd *strangle* you?"

His eyes were so wide—stunned. Fury burned through her like a wildfire, and she made to leap off his lap.

His hands clamped onto her hips, holding her firm. "You want to have it out like this?" His voice was guttural in a way that had her core going molten. Her chest heaved, like it was struggling to contain all the words, everything she felt, and his eyes dipped to watch.

"How do you want it, Nes?" His thumbs traced idle circles on her hips, her waist.

Her throat closed up. She hadn't thought that far. Just seeing him there, the way he looked at her . . . she couldn't stand it anymore.

Cassian brushed his mouth against her neck. Her eyes nearly rolled back in her head at the gentle caress. "Do you want us to make love and cry about how much we've missed each other and how we'll never fight again?"

His teeth grazed the same spot he'd kissed, biting down slightly. "Or," he said against her skin, "do you want to fuck until we're both screaming, and whichever one of us comes first has to be the one to get on their knees and grovel about these past weeks?"

Her hands again rose to his face. Her nails dug into his cheeks, mirror to the bite he'd given her neck. She made him meet her stare. Saw all the desire and anger and longing in it. Knew the same lay within her own.

A year ago, she might have told him that she wanted neither and left—denying them both. Assuring herself that she was punishing him and had the high ground and that she'd won this particular fight.

But she didn't want to win fights against him. Didn't want to *have* fights with him—not like this. Teasing and minor ones, fine, but this . . . He hadn't been there today. When the pain in her arm and nose had sunk in. When she'd been reeling from Bryaxis. Even during Bryaxis's attack, he hadn't been there, and she hadn't been there for him.

To her mortification, her eyes burned with tears.

"Hey," he said, instantly gentling. "Nes—Nes."

She shut her eyes, as if that could somehow stop her from crying.

"*Nesta*," he said, and his hands were instantly on her face, tender and sweet. "Nesta—"

Her throat ached to the point where she couldn't keep the sound in, and on her next exhale, a strangled sob came out.

Arms and wings wrapped around her, Cassian's body curving about her own, pressing her into the muscle and the warmth and the scent that was pure home, things she'd missed so badly that every day had felt like dying.

"I love you," she said into his neck, her entire body shaking. "That's why I was mad at you this morning—because I needed you to come home last night so I could say it to your face. I love you, and I'm sorry about the Mask. There's so much I still don't know about the Trove, so much about it that terrifies me more than I can say, but it *felt* right to give it to her. Like I could sense that the Mask needed to go, even if it is the most powerful item in the Trove. Even if it unnerves *me* to be near it. So I'm sorry I didn't warn you before; I didn't have time, and I was trying to do the right—"

"Stop."

He pulled her head back a bit, making her look at him. And fuck, she didn't want to, certainly not as this crying, whimpering *mess*, but she did. She met his eyes.

"I was upset," he said, wiping away her tears. "I was upset because you did something *big*, and it scared me—scared me because we were a team, and you just . . . decided not to be anymore. Not just Rhys and Feyre and everyone else, but you and me. And yes, giving the Mask to Bryce Quinlan was impulsive and reckless, and I'm not entirely sure I would have done the same thing, but mostly I was hurt. It made me feel like you'd shut me out again."

"I didn't—"

"I know you didn't. But I still felt that way. And maybe that's all on me, and maybe I need to accept that there might *always* be a piece of you that you keep to yourself and that will never answer to anyone, but . . . everything was going so well after the Blood Rite. It all felt fucking *perfect*, and then it wasn't anymore." He shook his head. "I'm shit at explaining myself. But it threw me, and then all that turned into anger, and . . . I'm sorry for these last few weeks. And I trust you—fuck, after today, I trust you perhaps more than anyone else—to handle the Trove. You faced Bryaxis, got to your feet when no one else could. *That's* the kind of person I

want responsible for the Trove. I'm sorry for not understanding that sooner."

Her mouth curled up slightly. She pressed a kiss to his lips, then another to his cheek before she whispered in his ear, "Well, look at that. I didn't even make you come first and you're already groveling."

He pulled back, eyes wide—dancing.

Nesta grinned, and kissed him, light, teasing. "I think I stupidly believed that being mates meant everything was going to be perfect and happy forever."

"Too many romance books." Cassian's mouth twisted to one side in a crooked smile. "I'm going to write a strongly worded letter to Sellyn Drake about grossly misleading her readers."

She traced a finger over his smile—a smile for *her*. "You must be exhausted from all that flying back and forth to Windhaven just to avoid me."

He grabbed her hand and pressed a kiss to her fingertips. "There's a reason I'm in bed, you know." She lifted a brow and he clarified, "I'm so sore I can't move."

"Poor Illyrian baby," she crooned, and reached a hand to where the apex of one of his wings hovered above them. "Where do you want me to kiss first to make it feel better?" She stroked a finger down the center of his wing, and sure enough, his cock hardened beneath her.

"I'm pretty sure you can guess where," he said, voice guttural once more.

She dragged her nail along his wing this time, and a hiss burst from his lips. "I don't want to make love and cry, and I don't want to fuck until we're screaming."

His eyes had gone wholly black. "What *do* you want, Nes?"

"To touch you." She traced an idle circle on his wing. His throat worked audibly. "To relearn every inch of you." She peered down coyly. "I think there's a few inches already eager to be reacquainted."

"More than a few inches," he crooned.

She snorted and ran a hand down the hard length straining against his leather pants. Her core positively ached in response, and it required every ounce of concentration to keep her hands from shaking, her voice low as she said, "Let me see if it tastes as good as I remember."

She slid onto the carpet and spread his legs wide enough for her to kneel between them. Every magnificent inch of this male was *hers*. And she

planned to savor all of it.

"Here I was," he said, breath turning ragged as she unbuckled his sword-belt and started on his pants, "thinking you had no appetite for Illyrian cock these days."

"I don't remember saying those words," she said primly, even as her fingers shook while working the buttons on his pants.

His cock came free, and every word went out of her head. Cassian's chest was heaving, as he growled, "I want to be inside you."

"Too bad," she taunted, and let herself have the pleasure of watching his every minute expression as she lowered her mouth to him. She meant to note the tightening of his mouth, the way his eyes flared in pure pleasure, but gods, the *taste* of him, the size and hardness and warmth—

She'd intended to tease, to play, to lick him bit by bit. But the feel of him on her tongue had her taking him all, as much as she could, her hand wrapping around his base and squeezing hard.

His hips bucked off the bed, but she gently pinned him with her free hand, sliding her mouth up his length again.

"*Fuck*," he said, more of an exhale than anything, as she swirled her tongue along the broad head of his cock, lapping once, twice, at the slit in its tip. *"Nesta—"*

She took all of him in her mouth again, and this time, her core seemed to throb in answer, so desperate for any friction, any touch at all, that even the seam of her nightgown on her thighs was starting to drive her wild. She needed him in her now, needed him around and above her, filling her—

Strong, broad hands grabbed her under the shoulders. Pulled her mouth off his cock.

His face was taut with unbridled lust as he set her on her feet in front of him. Leaned forward with a groan, and with shaking hands, ran his fingers beneath her nightgown, up her thighs. Higher. "Still no underwear, Nes?" His desire-heavy words were barely discernable.

She didn't have a retort on hand, not as she stepped toward him—only to be stopped.

"Everything off," he ordered, and started on the buttons of her nightgown. He held her gaze the entire time. Like he knew exactly where each button was. Like he'd studied for this his whole life and could do it in the dark.

Her nightgown dropped away. Naked, looking down at Cassian still perched on the bed, cock jutting up in delectable invitation, Nesta's throat closed again.

She said hoarsely, "I don't know what to do."

He nodded toward his cock.

But she huffed a laugh, shaking her head, and found the words to explain what she'd realized yesterday on that cliff. "I don't know what to do *here*. In this court. With myself. My life."

He angled his head, giving her the gift of listening—of truly hearing her.

"I thought it would all click into place, and yet . . ." She rubbed at her chest. "It hasn't. I have all of *this*," she said, motioning to herself, the power of her magic, her body, her heart, "but for what purpose?"

His eyes softened. "You'll find that purpose. I promise."

She sniffed. "I know, but . . . I'm just so *unsure* of everything. Of what I'm meant to do." She tried to find the right words. "The only thing I'm sure about is that I love you. That I love Feyre and Nyx, and Emerie and Gwyn. And the others, too, when they're not pissing me off."

"So let that be the thing that guides you. Maybe that love is what will lead you to whatever you're meant to do."

"I missed you," she managed to say. "I could barely stand it. I just—I didn't know *how* to talk to you about it, or master myself enough to do it calmly."

"I suppose I can thank Bryaxis for that, at least."

"You can thank Gwyn, actually."

"Oh?" But Cassian registered the sorrow on her face. "What happened with Gwyn?" He'd known she'd stopped coming to training after the Blood Rite, but not anything else, granting her time and space to work it out with her friend. Or not work it out, as it were.

Nesta shook her head, her throat unbearably tight again. "I don't know. She pulled away, and I pulled away, and I said some things yesterday I maybe shouldn't have, even when I was trying to make everything all right with her again, but she didn't want to hear it. I couldn't bear it, not having her *or* you to talk to. Laugh with. I couldn't bear it," she whispered. "Not for another moment."

"Come here," he said, taking her by the hand. His fingers were so warm, so strong around hers. "You never have to doubt this, worry about this." He motioned between them. "We will have fights, and I guarantee this won't be

our last, but we'll always find our way back to each other. To this, Nes. Because I love you, and you love me, and even if we weren't mates, that would be true. Always—forever."

She nodded, beyond words, and he pulled her onto his lap. He held her stare as he guided himself to her entrance. As he tenderly bracketed her hips and lightly pushed her onto him.

The first nudge of his cock inside her body had her eyes stinging with tears again. Home, home, *home*—

He kissed her so lovingly that she was shocked her whole body didn't break from the intensity of it. She opened her mouth to him, letting him in, and as their tongues tangled, she sank onto him fully.

Cassian groaned, stilling. *"Fuck."* He leaned his head against her shoulder. *"Fuck."*

"Yes, that's what I'm trying to do," she teased, the edges of her mouth quirking upward.

He inhaled two more great, heaving breaths, wings twitching. Then he lifted his head. A wicked grin lit his face. He bucked his hips, driving deeper, and her gasp rang through the room. He covered her mouth with his own, as if he'd swallow the sound.

And at the next sweep of his tongue into her mouth, she began to move.

It had only been a few weeks, and yet she'd somehow forgotten how huge he was, how perfectly he filled her. Forgotten how it felt to have those arms holding her, so strong but always gentle with her, letting her set the pace as she wished.

Cassian groaned again, deep in his throat, and the sound reverberated through her body, her soul. His hands tightened on her hips, his only warning before flipping them.

The world tilted, and when it righted itself again, she was on her back, and he was above her, wings blotting out the faelights, his face inches from her own. "I love you," he said, withdrawing almost entirely. He plunged back in hard enough that she slid a few inches along the bed.

He gripped her knees, widening her for him as he thrust harder, deeper.

Oh gods, she was going to explode. She needed more, needed him inside her forever because nothing would ever feel this good—

Cassian hooked her leg around his middle, and did *something* with his hips as he stroked into her again. At the cry that burst out of her throat, he purred, "Good, Nesta. Good."

And the male satisfaction in his voice, knowing that she was his and he was hers, and that he and he alone could wring this kind of pleasure from her—

Release smashed through her, and she was distantly aware of her nails digging into his shoulders, of everything in her universe reorienting toward him. He pumped into her again, deep, steady strokes, and she knew he was close, knew he was dying to spill in her, but he'd keep going if she wanted another climax, he'd keep going forever if it'd please her.

That thought alone had her reaching between them, cupping the silken sac brushing against her sex with every thrust. She squeezed, looking up at him as she did. And had the pleasure of watching his throat work before a cry of pure release broke from him and he spilled everything he had in her.

The sight of it had her clenching around him, had her frantically meeting him thrust for thrust as he spent himself, and then she was crying out again, too, holding him against her so that their hearts beat together, a push-pull of a rhythm that would exist even when this world ended.

And when they had both stilled, when only their breathing filled the room, Nesta still held him there inside her. Cassian lifted himself on his elbows high enough to scan her face.

She smiled at him, in a way she rarely smiled at anyone. Kissed him once, twice, on the mouth. And whispered, "If I'd known giving away the Mask would get me sex like that, I'd have offered Bryce the Harp and the Crown as well."

He smirked and rose from the bed, lifting her easily in his arms. "Oh, I'm just getting started, Nes," he murmured in her ear as he carried her toward the couch.

Feyre

"He's still asleep," Rhys said softly, walking on cat-soft feet toward where I sat in the armchair before the fireplace in our bedroom. "From what I could sense, Madja was right earlier: His mind already reorganized itself to consider today to be some sort of nightmare. He won't remember it. The fear won't even leave a mark."

I watched the flames lapping at the fragrant logs. "I should go to the House of Wind and drag Bryaxis out of that library. Bring her right to the

Prison and throw away the key."

I'd pieced myself together this afternoon, and during dinner, yet that simmering, clarifying rage lingered. Only now, alone with my mate, could it come out.

Rhys sank into the armchair across from mine. Watched the fire as well. "I'd help."

"It's like Bryaxis *knew* the library was the one place she could hunker down where we couldn't get to her."

"She spent enough time with the priestesses, Clotho especially, to understand them. Perhaps she counted on their compassion."

I slid my eyes toward my mate at last. Didn't bother to look anything close to civilized as I said, "I will find a way to kill Bryaxis. I don't even care how or why she came today. I'll kill her."

"Of course—but consider what happened. She targeted us today. Did someone send her? She seemed . . . different than when she escaped after the war. Darker." His violet eyes were starless. "I'm willing to bet Koschei's growing influence in the world had something to do with that."

Another mark in favor of re-creating the wall. Making multiple walls. Our enemies were growing, adapting—worsening. And speaking of those enemies . . .

I asked, "But what about Hybern? They could have played some role in sending her today."

"They could have," he admitted. "They ask for a meeting about an alliance, we get *nowhere* with Tarquin and the Summer Court—so our own list of allies drops by one—then suddenly Bryaxis appears to terrorize us . . . Why? To drive home the urgent need for allies and lead us closer to agreeing to meet with Hybern?"

"If they're responsible for it, I'll turn that island into rubble," I promised darkly.

"Again, I'll join you. But let's wait until we know for certain. Maybe send Az or his spies to see what's going on in Hybern. The timing is too neat to ignore."

"I don't know if I can even stomach sitting at the same table with whoever's ruling Hybern these days."

"I don't think I can, either," Rhys confessed. "Certainly not after what I . . ." He trailed off, and my heart strained for him. But he pivoted. "Bryaxis wields her gift with alarming dexterity."

I could make a few guesses about what Rhys might have been presented with, but I asked, "What did you see today?"

His throat bobbed. "I need . . . a few days before I can talk about it."

I nodded, though horror curdled in my gut. Given what I had seen, I could only imagine my mate's nightmares.

Silence fell, and neither of us felt inclined to break it. What more was there to say?

A new entity dwelled in my body in the wake of the day's events, something that had carved out a vast chunk of my soul and now roosted within it. Every now and then, it would open its maw and roar—and the sounds that came out were Nyx's screams of pain. Over and over, they echoed, and the thing inside me dug itself deeper.

And as the fire slowly devoured the logs, as I let the wood collapse down to embers and didn't bother to add more, I wondered if Clotho had been right, and not all was as it seemed.

Hybern's involvement or no, Bryaxis's attack today was perhaps a gift to me. A gift I had not known how badly I needed.

Because I knew now what I had to do. And I did not fear it at all.

CHAPTER 19

Lucien

Lucien hated everything about Rhysand and Feyre's house.

Mostly because he loved everything about it.

If he could have designed a place for himself, it would have been this. The blend of sweeping yet cozy, the grandeur melding effortlessly with the intimacy. The Spring Court manor had been all hard marble and gilded finery. And while the river house was no less opulent . . . it was a home.

The Mother knew he hadn't had one of those in a long, long while.

As he lay in the bed in the lovely room overlooking the Sidra River beyond the lawn, the scent of his mate floated like a ribbon of spring in the air, reaching him all the way in the guest wing.

He'd smelled Elain the moment he'd set foot in the temple earlier.

He hadn't seen her since Winter Solstice, more than nine months ago. She'd frowned at his gift like he'd offered her poison, and left it discarded on the table beside her chair.

He didn't expect anything from her. He knew damn well he didn't deserve her. Why the Mother had made them mates, he had no idea. Elain clearly had no interest in him, and though he'd tried to get to know her . . . it hadn't gone well.

It didn't stop his mouth from watering whenever he was near her, his every predatory instinct rising to the fore, his blood roaring to find her, woo her, claim her.

He considered himself a reasonable, civilized male. What pumped through him at the thought of Elain, at her floral scent, was anything but. His straining cock was anything but.

Lucien flipped onto his side, gritting his teeth. Would it be a violation of her if he took care of himself? He'd never let himself do so when thinking of her, but this had been the longest stretch in his existence without sex—without any sort of physical contact. And seeing Elain today, even with the terror of Bryaxis still heavy upon them all, even though she hadn't spoken to him at dinner, hadn't even looked at him . . . Gods, he ached.

Lucien glanced at the fine molding around the ceiling, and the gold of his enchanted mechanical eye clicked. *Handmade beauty*, it informed him. No hint of enchantment.

The eye was a gift and a curse. It allowed him to see as he would have before Amarantha carved his eye out of his skull with her fingernail, but it could also see magic in its own strange way. Auras, usually.

Feyre's was a rainbow of colors—all the magics of the High Lords that had been handed over to her, and something silvery and radiant that was Feyre herself. It was different from Nesta's burning silver. Or Elain's sparkly gold and rose—like the dawn itself. No, Feyre's was something wholly unique.

Gone was that starved, sullen girl he'd first met. A High Lady, a mother, had been with him today, seen him to this room after dinner, wholly confident in her place here. Even her scent projected it—along with a newness.

The first layer of scent was small and soft—a baby scent—wrapped around what he could only assume was the sweet smell of her milk. Then Rhys's scent, and Mother knew that scent warned him and any other male to stay the fuck away from his mate.

Lucien thrashed onto his other side, kicking at the sheets. Did Feyre know?

He snorted. Of course she knew—at least, that mates had scents that deeply marked each other once the bond was accepted, but Rhys's was terrifying. Did she ever forget who she'd mated with? Who had fathered her child? What sort of monster lurked beneath that smooth surface?

Yes, they'd all become allies of a sort. Yes, he himself had witnessed Rhys's goodness, but he'd also seen what Rhys was capable of. His cruelty and scheming and utter lack of mercy. There was a reason people still shuddered to hear Rhysand's name, even after the Hybern War.

And finally, beneath all that, Feyre's own scent shimmered, her own innermost self. That silvery brightness, the smell that he'd first detected at their initial meeting at the Spring Court, which had only been amplified and clarified in becoming High Fae. High Lady. Her aura seemed to grow with joy at the family around her. The friends she'd made.

It pained him to remember that he had once been counted as one of them.

You gave up on me, she'd hissed at him all those years ago. *I begged you so many times to help me.*

He pushed past that old shame. At least his cock had calmed down.

Lucien exhaled deeply. He'd intended to tell them after the ceremony that he'd help them find proof of Koschei's involvement at his father's court. Part of him, a damned stupid part, had hoped that agreeing to manipulate the Autumn Court would get Elain to at least look at him without disdain.

But Bryaxis's attack had ruined his plans. It had felt wrong to bring it up when everyone's nerves were flayed raw, and he'd spent dinner wondering if Elain's screams at the temple had been from seeing a vision of herself chained to him forever.

The Mother knew Elain's screams had made him frantic with the need to protect her, even as his own nightmare had shredded his soul. Though he wasn't entirely sure that Bryaxis's illusions had been any worse than the reality he currently faced.

He didn't know how long he could keep this up—this balance he precariously maintained. What *was* his role for the Night Court, anyway? Did it have an end, or would he be forever navigating different lands: Spring, the human lands, and here? And now the Autumn Court, too.

But how could he say no? After what Rhys and Feyre had revealed about the impending invasion of the human lands on the continent, with two of his friends—his only friends these days—being human themselves, how could he *not* agree to help them?

He knew Feyre wouldn't push it if he said no. Rhys, despite everything, probably wouldn't push it. He was a monster, but one with a conscience.

Not that Rhys, for all his power, had been able to do anything against Bryaxis. Yes, Rhys had gotten a sword into Nesta's hands—a blade that had

quite clearly been *Made*, and no one had explained how or why—but even the High Lord of the Night Court was not immune to fear's grip.

Lucien couldn't blame him, not for that. Not when the things he'd seen today . . . He locked out the memories. His face remained tender from where he'd clawed at it.

This wasn't how he'd expected his life to turn out the day they'd emerged from Under the Mountain, Amarantha dead and already becoming merely a stain on the memory of these lands. He'd pictured long, content years at the Spring Court, maybe one day finding a female who'd make him feel alive in a way he hadn't since Jesminda had died—

She hadn't just died. She'd been butchered. Executed by his father, while his brothers had done nothing to stop it.

Bryaxis had shown him that moment in vivid detail. Shown him worse—possibilities that his darkest nightmares couldn't conjure. He knew as he watched that they weren't real, and yet the stark clarity of it all, the inability to turn away . . . He'd found himself wishing Amarantha had gouged out his remaining eye, too.

He gritted his teeth again. And now he was to return to another sort of nightmare: the Forest House, where he'd been born. Where he'd been tormented, and where he'd lost everything. He hadn't set foot there since he'd seen the life vanish from his lover's eyes. It had ceased being a home in that moment. And he'd ceased to have a family when his brothers had hunted him, on their father's orders, to drag him home.

Lucien ran a hand through his hair. Tamlin had saved him. And then Lucien had rebuilt himself, his life.

Only for Feyre to bring it all crumbling down.

No, that wasn't fair. Tamlin had brought it crumbling down by joining with Hybern. But Feyre, in her rage and vengeance, had ensured that the trust between him and his High Lord was forever shattered. Even if it had been a game she'd played to erode that faith . . . she'd broken something between them.

Maybe Lucien had let it break, too. Choosing to go after his mate, leaving the Spring Court behind.

He'd hoped, so stupidly hoped, that he'd find Elain and . . . she'd smile. That maybe she'd also be seeking a home in the world and would be eager to find it with him. He didn't love her, certainly not yet, but he was at least open to the idea of it.

It had been two years, and she hadn't smiled at him once. Had exchanged barely more than a dozen words with him. His heart lay like a brick in his chest.

But had he tried—really tried to get to know her? He'd always erred on the side of being polite, giving her space, but maybe he should insist that they at least sit together and *talk*, and he'd explain that he expected nothing, but that he only wanted to see if there was something, anything worth building together.

At a minimum, he owed her a long-overdue apology for everything that had happened in Hybern. He'd been the one who'd brought this momentous change about for Elain. For Nesta. Through his own actions, they'd gone into that Cauldron.

And after the shadowsinger had mentioned it at dinner, Lucien had realized he'd never apologized to his mate for it. Did she, too, relive those dark days, loathing him for his role? Was *that* what she had seen today?

Lucien sat up, exhaling heavily once more. The clock had chimed twelve a few minutes ago, but maybe Elain was still awake. Some part of him whispered that she was.

If there was ever a time to do it, it was now—having faced their very worst nightmares, having been split wide open by them. Maybe it had granted Elain some clarity, too. Maybe she'd be amenable to hearing him explain his actions before the Hybern War; maybe she'd accept his apology. Maybe it would be the one thing she needed to hear.

He slid on his pants and shirt, but didn't bother with a jacket. Perhaps he'd seemed too buttoned-up. He'd always wanted to appear presentable, but maybe that wasn't what Elain needed or wanted. Maybe she needed a person, not a title or a role, but an actual *person* to talk to—

Lucien didn't let himself reconsider as he slipped into the hallway.

He followed her scent past the top of the grand staircase, then down another hall. The private hall for Rhys and Feyre's close family. Their scents were all mingled here—Mor and Cassian and Nesta and Azriel and Amren.

Elain's was the last bedroom after Nesta and Cassian's.

Lucien's heart thundered, throat drying out. Maybe this had been a terrible idea. Even the shadows pooling in the hallway seemed to be gaping at him, as if saying, *What the hell are you doing here? Go back to your room!*

He should wait until morning. Or until—never.

But no. He owed it to himself and this shot at a future to try.

Lucien fought past the shaking in his hand as he quietly, so as to not wake the others, knocked. A muffled female sound—Elain—answered.

He'd learned to master his pain. Had survived his father's cruelty and a grief so profound it had remade his very soul. After the horrors of today, he could certainly face his mate, and all that he had contributed to her suffering.

With a silent prayer to the Mother, Lucien opened Elain's bedroom door.

It took him a second to understand what he was seeing. That it was not some nightmare conjured by Bryaxis.

The monstrous, bat-like wings attached to a tattooed, powerful male body.

Elain under that male body, now turning her head Lucien's way, pleasure still flushing her cheeks, breasts he'd never seen, peaked and gleaming, where the male had been suckling on them—

Azriel was in his mate's bed, naked. And Elain was naked too.

CHAPTER 20

Azriel

How the hell had Lucien walked right into this room and Azriel had no fucking idea until the male was in the doorway?

He knew how. In the back of his mind, Az knew it was because his shadows had fled the moment he'd sought out Elain. They had gone to sulk in the hall, so they hadn't been here to warn him of the male's approach. And now it was too late to fade into a shadow himself, to deny this had happened.

"I . . ." Elain began, sitting upright, the blanket clutched to her chest. Covering those beautiful little breasts that he'd been exploring, the first steps in his journey toward what lay between her legs, which, despite their nakedness, he hadn't yet touched, tasted—

"Get out of her room."

Lucien's low demand was barely audible.

Az knew that growl. A predator descending into a level of primitive violence that would only end with spilled blood.

Az didn't take his focus off the male as he peeled his body from Elain's. As he stood, his hardened cock already subsiding, and set his feet into a defensive position. Braced his wings.

“This is,” Elain gasped frantically, “this is a misunderstanding—” She scrambled to her feet beside Azriel, and he extended a wing to let her slide back into her nightgown in privacy. Privacy from the male, her *mate*, still staring as if he didn’t quite believe what he was seeing.

“What’s there to misunderstand?” Lucien’s voice was cold, even as Az could have sworn red-hot flame flickered in his eyes.

Where the hell were his shadows? There—out in the hall. Watching everything.

Come, Az commanded them. They refused. Didn’t move one inch closer.

Lucien pointed at Azriel, flame simmering at his fingertip. Its light bounced off his mechanical gold eye. Or was that magic brewing there, too? “Get out.”

“I’m not leaving her alone with you.”

Lucien bared his teeth. “Get. Out.”

Searing power crackled from the High Lord of Autumn’s youngest son. Az’s hand curled at his side, the Siphon atop it flaring to life. But if he manifested that power, drew a weapon—

What worse could he do to Lucien? The male had already found Az in bed with his mate.

“I’m going to rip out your fucking throat.” Lucien’s voice was soft with menace.

Az couldn’t stop his snort. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Please,” Elain begged, stepping between them, nightgown white and pure as moonlight. Az hauled her back behind him.

Lucien snarled, the noise reverberating through the floors. “You don’t touch her—*you don’t touch her*.” Doors along the hall began opening.

Elain sobbed, softly and miserably, so at odds with the unmitigated pleasure she’d been lost to moments ago. Az hadn’t been able to stop himself from seeking her out, even with her mate under the same roof. His salvation—that was what Elain was, what he’d been willing to fight for.

Well, now it seemed he would.

Footsteps thudded in the hall. “What the *fuck*?” Cassian choked as he stepped into the room, taking in Az’s and Elain’s states of undress, scenting the desire still thick in the room. His brother’s eyes went as wide as Az had ever seen them. “What the fuck, Az?”

Then Nesta was there, shoving past Cassian, past Lucien, who had the audacity to try to stop her. That earned a warning glare from both Nesta and

her mate.

Nesta scanned Az's face as she neared, her own sharp with dismay and disappointment.

Az broke Nesta's stare first, focusing on the two males by the door.

"Let's take this into the hall," Cassian instructed Lucien, calm despite the Siphon atop his hand roiling with ruby fire.

"I agree," a dark voice rumbled.

Az steadied himself. Rhys had arrived, Feyre in tow. Mor was a step behind them, a flash of gold and color. Az couldn't bear to look at her.

Lucien turned on his heel, sparks trailing in his wake, and obeyed the High Lord. Leaving Az with his family in the suddenly too-small room. Even if his shadows had been willing to come to his hand, there would have been no hiding from this. From them.

"Put on your fucking clothes," Rhys bit out at Azriel from where he darkened the doorway.

"Watch your tone," Nesta snapped at Rhys, and Azriel blinked at her in surprise.

But Nesta had already sat beside Elain on the bed and placed a hand on her sister's back as Elain covered her face with her hands and trembled.

Some part of Az remained functional enough that he decided to spare Elain from any further ugliness, and he shoved his legs into his pants. He left his shirt and jacket on the floor.

On leaden feet, head feeling distant, he crossed the lush bedroom that smelled of brewing sex and emerged into the vast, dark hall that smelled of fury and death. His shadows at last rushed to him, twining about his ankles, his wrists.

He ignored them. Spineless, soulless traitors, all of them.

Feyre stood to his right, arms crossed, lips a thin line. She lifted her blue-gray eyes to him, full of nothing but pity.

Az bristled. He didn't need her pity, didn't need shit from any of them other than to—

"Did you know this was happening?" Lucien asked Rhys. The lordling seethed by the wall across from the door, nose crinkled with rage.

There was nothing Az could do as Rhys held the male's stare and said plainly, "Yes."

Cassian blew out a long breath that sounded an awful lot like *Fuck*. Az didn't look at either brother. Only at Lucien, burning with white-hot power.

But Lucien pointed at Azriel without so much as a glance in his direction. It took everything in Az not to grab that finger and snap it in two. "You let that male touch *my* mate under your roof, and yet you still asked me to do your dirty work?"

That male. That monster. That demon. Az might have bared his teeth had he not known it to be true.

A muscle ticked in Rhys's jaw. "Yes."

Lucien spat at Rhys's feet. Mor hissed from nearby. "You're despicable," Lucien raged. Pure loathing twisted his pretty features. "All of you." His gaze landed on Feyre, and his chest heaved once before he accused, "You knew, too."

Az hated the pain and worry tightening his High Lady's face. "I guessed." A grimace back toward Nesta. "We both did." And had apparently kept it between sisters. "But I . . . Lucien."

Lucien spat at her feet, too.

Rhys's growl drowned out the sound that ruptured from Azriel. Yet his brother's voice was terrifyingly calm as he informed Lucien, "Roar at me all you like, lordling, but do that again to my mate and you'll find yourself lacking a tongue to spit with."

"Lucien," Feyre tried again, ignoring her mate's threat. "Let's go downstairs. I know it's late, but we should talk about this—"

Azriel refrained from arguing that no discussion was needed. It was Elain's life, her body. It was hers to decide who she shared it with.

"I'm done talking to you," Lucien shot back, chest heaving. "I'm done with *all* of you. You want someone to help you find proof of Koschei's schemes? Want a spy in the Autumn Court? Go do it yourselves. I'm *done*." The Veritas orb appeared in his hands—and then thudded to the floor.

His heart is breaking, his soul is cleaving—

Az shut out his shadows. He didn't give a shit about Lucien's feelings.

"Lucien," Feyre pleaded. *"Listen."*

Lucien again jabbed an accusing finger at Azriel. Every muscle in Az's body tensed, wings tightening, readying to spring. But Lucien's words were eerily steady as he said, "I hope you get everything that's coming to you. Every moment of suffering you deserve."

Az gave him a mocking bow of the head.

Lucien turned toward the doorway, toward Elain, still crying on the bed with Nesta. "I won't be darkening your doorstep again."

“I don’t think she’s shedding tears over that,” Az couldn’t refrain from saying.

Lucien slowly turned. And Az knew Rhys could have stopped it—and yet his brother let it happen. Lucien exploded with flame.

Az had all of a second to cast a shield of blue light from his Siphon, easily taking the brunt of the fire, but Lucien had launched himself in that second, too. Faster than Az had anticipated.

Lucien tackled him into the wall with a slam that shuddered through the entire house. Plaster and wood cracked beneath his wings, his back.

Az’s shadows advised, *Feyre vanished to guard the baby; Lucien means to kill you; Rhys is debating letting him—*

Only a second lapsed before Azriel’s training kicked in. He slammed an elbow into Lucien’s face, so hard bone crunched. Blood sprayed, its tang coating the air, and Az ducked as another wall of flame blasted for his head.

Darkness snuffed out the flame.

Arms stronger than steel banded around Azriel’s bare middle, hauling him back. Az surged, but Cassian held firm, fuming in Az’s ear, “You dumb fuck.”

Az thrashed to no avail. Rhys was talking to Lucien on the other side of the wall of black. Flame licked at the ceiling.

And then it vanished. Only darkness remained.

Lucien is gone, his shadows supplied. *Rhys now turns toward you, speaks to you and you alone—*

“Get out of my house.”

Cassian loosened his grip on Az in shock.

Rhys’s voice became like thunder from behind that wall of darkness. Once the wall fell, it wouldn’t be his brother standing behind it.

A small female hand gripped his, tugging hard. Mor. Her eyes were wide with pleading. “You need to go. Right now.”

Az did no such thing. Let Rhys wipe him from existence, let his brother turn him into stardust splattered on the wall.

“Azriel,” Mor begged, and that was genuine fear in her face. Elain was still crying in her room. He started turning to her—

“Stupid bastard,” Mor spat, and before Az could stop her, she winnowed them both out of the house. Or rather, to the front door, where she dragged him, step by step, beyond the wards on the lawn.

Lucien’s smell lingered, ashes on the wind. He’d come this way, too.

But Mor grabbed Az by the back of the neck and hissed, “Idiot,” before she winnowed them again.

They plunged into black, roaring wind, but they didn’t go far, landing atop one of the city’s elegant bridges spanning the Sidra. At this hour, few people were on the streets to witness them standing there, Mor in her silken red nightgown, Az shirtless, pants barely buttoned.

She slapped him. The sound rang out across the city like pealing bells.

“Are you stupid?” she shouted. “Are you insane?” Az just stared at her, pain rippling across his cheek. Her brown eyes were agonized. “What were you *thinking*?”

“She’s not his property,” Azriel snarled, shoving down the pain with five centuries of training. Shoving back the shadows that now gathered, poised to reveal truths he couldn’t bear to hear. “She can do what she likes. She gets to choose who to share her body with.”

“She can and she does, but you couldn’t stay away? For one night? You couldn’t stay the hell away from her?” Mor had never screamed at him like this. “Is that why you baited Lucien about Hybern at dinner? You were that petty? That jealous?”

“What’s it to you?” He couldn’t stop the question. “You don’t care.”

Mor shook her head, unfairly beautiful in the moonlight, in her nightgown. “That you even have to ask tells me how clueless you are.” She looked him up and down, missing nothing. “I don’t—I don’t even know who this person is in front of me.”

He scowled, turning toward the river. It wasn’t enough to block out the disgust radiating off her in waves.

“I suggest you lie low for a while,” Mor said, frigid as the autumn night around them. “Go to the House of Wind. Go to the town house, actually, if you want to avoid the ass-kicking Cassian is going to give you.”

He didn’t care. Cassian could do what he wanted.

When he didn’t answer, Mor demanded, “Is this because of me?”

He whipped his head toward her. “What?”

She splayed her arms, pale as alabaster in the moonlight. “Is this because I don’t love you? Not the way you want, at least. So you’re on some insane path of self-destruction?”

“It has nothing to do with you.” His shadows skulked behind one of the lampposts along the bridge. “And since when does sleeping with someone count as self-destruction?”

"When it involves the mate of a key ally, who was about to aid us at great danger to himself. When you were told to find someone else. *Anyone* else."

"And if I don't want anyone else?"

Mor let out a broken laugh. "Don't worry—I'm sure some other equally unavailable female will come along to tempt you."

He glowered at her, so many words now spiking between them, sharp as knives and more lethal. Mor backed away a step—not in fear of him, but of those words. What remained unsaid.

And since he'd already started down this path to hell, Az growled, "Go ahead and say it, Mor."

She retreated another step, into the dimness beyond the pool of the lamppost's light, the hue of her nightgown darkening to bloodred. "I'm not going to engage in this absurdity with you. If Lucien evokes the Blood Duel, you're on your own."

With that, she winnowed.

The scant number of people on the streets had stopped to stare. With their keen Fae hearing, they must have heard every word. Az ignored them as he spread his wings and launched into the sky. His shadows trailed a few beats behind—farther than usual.

As if even they were repulsed by him.

He landed on the town house roof moments later, flinging open the door and half leaping down the stairs. His usual room on the third floor was stale from disuse—he'd need supplies. Clothes, weapons—

He glanced at Truth-Teller, still buckled at his waist—barely. Emerie had been right to caution him that it was fraying. One of the straps had now entirely severed, likely when Lucien had slammed into him. The knife dangled precariously, bouncing against his leg.

A useless, worthless weapon.

Az grabbed the remaining strap, the sheath, the knife, and snapped it off himself with one clean yank. Threw it across the room in the same motion, the blade slamming into the wall so hard it dented the plaster. As it fell to the ground, debris rained, burying it in a fine ivory coating.

That would be the blade's final resting place, as far as he was concerned. It could lie in that corner coated in dust until it turned to dust itself. Until the world had forgotten it ever existed.

If he got lucky, maybe the world would forget he'd ever existed, too.

CHAPTER 21

Nesta

Elain wouldn't stop crying.

Azriel and Lucien were both gone from the house now, and Feyre had returned to the room a moment ago, having ensured that Nyx remained safe and unbothered. Nesta knew it had been an instinctual precaution when two males trained for bloodshed were about to come to blows so close to her baby, especially after yesterday's encounter with Bryaxis.

Elain, weeping on Nesta's lap, hadn't moved from her spot on the edge of the bed. The bed that still smelled like Azriel, and sex—or rather, arousal. Nesta met Feyre's stare over Elain's head.

Worry shone in her youngest sister's face—along with a sharp edge that hadn't been there earlier. And then Feyre said, mind to mind, *What do we do?*

Nesta subtly shook her head. It had been unspoken between Nesta and Feyre—that they had marked how Azriel and Elain gazed at each other, how they behaved around each other. But this . . .

Nesta rubbed a comforting circle on Elain's slender back. "It will be all right."

"No, it won't," came Elain's muffled reply. "Nothing is right and nothing will ever *be* right. That's what that *thing* today showed me. The truth."

Feyre laid a hand on Elain's golden-brown hair. "Do you love Az?"

Elain cried harder. "I can't be here," she wept. "I can't *be* here."

"All right," Nesta tried, swapping an alarmed look with Feyre. "Tell us where you want to go and we'll take you there."

"There's nowhere to go." Pure misery laced every word.

Nesta rubbed her sister's back again. "We can talk in the morning. Try to get some sleep."

Where had Azriel gone? Was he all right? Was anyone checking on Azriel, as they were checking on Elain?

Feyre said into Nesta's mind, *I'd bring Elain to the mountain cabin, but I don't think isolation would be good for her right now.*

I could take her up to the House of Wind, Nesta offered.

Bryaxis is now lying beneath it, so no. Besides, it's too isolated as well.

Nesta raised her brows. *Didn't stop you from banishing me up there last year.*

Feyre's lips quirked upward, despite the situation. *You're made of steel—you're different than Elain*.

It was a compliment, and yet . . . Nesta's chest ached to witness her other sister, despondent and reeling. And though she wanted nothing more than to return to her own mate and nestle into his warmth and strength, to pick apart this entire disaster with him, she said to Elain, "Get under the covers. I'll stay with you tonight."

"We both will," Feyre said.

Elain said nothing, continuing to cry, but she did as she was told. Nesta and Feyre lay down with her, as they had once done in that war-tent the day of Elain's rescue from Hybern's grasp, as they had done all those years in the cottage.

A heavy sorrow settled upon them, as tangible as the down comforter they nestled under. After a time, the sounds of Elain's crying evened into the deep breathing of sleep.

Nesta remained awake. Knew Feyre was awake, too, likely musing mind to mind with her mate about how to salvage the diplomatic mission they'd been hoping Lucien would helm.

Had Cassian gone to find Az? Was Mor still with him?

And though Nesta knew her obligation was to the sister slumbering at her side, part of her wondered if Azriel needed someone at his side, too. He was her brother now, in a way. And she was willing to bet he was alone.

Azriel

Az landed on the veranda at the House of Wind carelessly, hard enough that his knees protested, but he walked off the spearing pain before it could register.

He'd come to retrieve some of his clothes and weapons—all he really had to his name that he cared to bring anywhere—and then he'd return to the town house. He had no interest in staying here, not when it was now so clearly Cassian and Nesta's home. Not when Bryaxis was dwelling at the roots of this mountain once more.

Not when he couldn't tell if it was his own mind or some tendril of Bryaxis's power wending its way up to him as he wondered if Cassian would throw him out in utter disgust, as Rhys had done.

Az aimed for the glass doors into the dining room, the fastest way to his bedroom a level below. He didn't know if he could survive both of his brothers loathing him. If he could survive Mor's disgust and disappointment.

You can't, his shadows whispered.

The House opened its glass doors before he could reach a scarred hand for them, warm air beckoning him in from the autumn chill—gods, he was still shirtless. It was freezing.

He embraced the cold, welcomed it into his bones.

He had little doubt that Elain remained with her sisters, who, unlike his brothers, did not seem inclined to kick her out of the house. Maybe he should have grabbed Elain and flown them off to—where?

And if Lucien learned Azriel had taken her, he had every right to crawl to his father, reveal all their plans, and marshal an army to bring her back.

Fuck, Lucien had every right to do that already.

Az's steps slowed to a stop before he crossed the threshold into the House. He closed his eyes, inhaling mouthfuls of stunningly icy night air. It pierced his lungs like shards of glass. He welcomed that pain, too.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

He scrubbed his face, wings drooping to the ground.

He'd done stupid things before, but all those times, it had been his own useless life he risked ruining. This time . . .

One of his shadows crept up, laying a tentative tendril on his shoulder. He flicked it off. Some fucking help they'd been.

He could have sworn another of his shadows let out a lovely, high-pitched snippet of song. A soothing, calming melody. He ignored it, too, and stepped toward the lit interior of the House, the movement infinitely heavier than the last had been.

His shadows sang again, more of them this time. A wordless note.

Az paused. Slowly turned. His shadows swirled and eddied at his heels—and the melody began again.

Not from them, though. They didn't make a sound. It came from somewhere nearby.

A female voice. Clear and yet rich, full-bodied.

Then the song began properly, and he moved instantly, a hand drifting to his side for the knife that wasn't there. Someone was in the House. And here he was, unarmed like a fool.

The voice flowed from the other side of the House—from a balcony hidden from view by the side of the mountain.

Az cut through the dining room, aiming for the hallway, as silently as the shadows that trailed him. The House opened the windows along the way, letting in the sound, guiding him.

It was otherworldly. Strange and yet familiar. A mere thought had his Siphon forming a knife of blue light in his hand. Not as good as Truth-Teller, but he could do some damage if he concentrated.

His shadows suddenly surged past his feet, a black tide racing ahead. They hit the approaching corner and eddied before cascading into the next hall.

Tell me what you see, he bade them.

But they didn't send a single image as they flowed up a narrow spiral staircase that led to the small balcony.

Starlight spilled down the steps, almost in answer to the song. He swiftly rounded the last corner, hand curling around his knife formed of magic and will—

A rock hit him in the head with a swift, resounding *crack*.

"Oh!"

The song broke off.

Gwyn stood there in her pale robe, hood down, hair shining in the starlight. His shadows had gathered around her feet, veritable dogs wagging their tails as if to say, *We found her. Do we get a treat now?*

"I—I'm so sorry," Gwyn stammered, wincing.

Az blinked, the knife of blue light vanishing.

Not a threat; not an enemy. Just Gwyn.

Rubbing the top of his head, he stooped to grab the offending rock. Heavier than he anticipated, the blue stone glittered with turquoise fire in the moonlight, casting the scars on his fingers in stark relief.

The Invoking Stone of a priestess.

He'd never touched one before. Never realized how much presence it seemed to have, like his Siphons, but wholly different, somehow. "Did you throw this at me?"

She choked on a breath. "No! I was just . . . fidgeting with it while I sang. Tossing it, mostly. May I have it back?"

Gwyn extended her pale, slender hand. She wiggled her fingers in silent emphasis.

Calming his racing heart and the instincts that had been howling to draw blood, Az tossed her the stone. She caught it gracefully before slipping it smoothly into her pocket.

His shadows lingered at her feet, peering up at her, evidently impressed by the easy movement as well.

This person was so far from the priestess he'd found at Sangravah. For a moment, even with everything crumbling apart around him, he could only marvel at the changes between the priestess she'd once been and the one before him now—the Valkyrie. There was no sign of her white ribbon, or even the necklace he'd left for her last Solstice, but he supposed neither mattered. She was a Valkyrie, with or without the ribbon. And as for that necklace he'd been so keen to get rid of, had so recklessly given away at the first opportunity after Elain had rejected it—

He forced himself to focus on the conversation at hand.

At a snap of his fingers, his shadows rushed to his side, clustering at his shoulders, apparently keen to obey him now. "What are you doing up here?" His voice was dull, even to his ears.

Gwyn's large teal eyes sparked with something like annoyance. "It's nice to see you, too, Azriel." She nodded toward his bare torso, nose crinkling. "A little cold out for that, isn't it?"

He tapped both Siphons on the backs of his hands and his scales of armor spread up his tattooed arms, over his body. The metal and leather lay bitingly cool against his already-icy skin, but he ignored the discomfort as

he asked again, his head throbbing where she'd nailed him, "What are you doing up here?"

This was the last thing he wanted to deal with right now.

She crossed her arms. "Nesta said I could come whenever I pleased. I didn't think anyone else was here." She stood with that Valkyrie's stillness, even as her eyes danced, lit with starlight. "Did my singing wake you?"

"It's past one in the morning," he hedged. His shadows poked their proverbial heads over his shoulders curiously. "You should be in bed."

Gwyn studied him, unimpressed and annoyed. "You're in a grand spirit."

She didn't know the half of it. "With Bryaxis back, how can I not be?"

"Well, she's not living in *your* house, is she?"

He gave her a flat look. "Is that why you're up here? Hiding from her?"

"No." She tossed her sheet of coppery hair over a shoulder. It had grown longer since he'd last seen her, falling nearly halfway down her chest now. "I'm not hiding at all." Something sharpened in the way she said *hiding*. "Clotho said Bryaxis won't disturb us, and I believe her."

A half-truth, his shadows revealed.

But Gwyn went on, "Are *you* afraid she'll unleash herself upon the city again?"

"It seems a distinct possibility, Clotho's word or no."

"Hence your arrival here looking ready to fillet an enemy?"

He didn't feel like smiling. "Yes."

Her bright gaze slid toward his hip. "Where's Truth-Teller?" Cauldron spare him, this female missed nothing.

He didn't have the energy to invent a lie, so he said, "It decided it didn't want me as its bearer anymore."

Az turned back toward the stairwell before she could respond, exhaustion weighing every bone in his body.

Maybe he'd sleep here tonight, then fly his things to the town house at dawn. Then figure out what the fuck to do with himself after that. "Good night," he said without looking back.

"Sorry for hitting you with the stone," she called.

"I deserved it," he muttered, setting a foot on the first stair.

"You see," Gwyn began again, closer now, and gods, she was following him. How did he politely but firmly extract himself from this? "I was up here tossing that thing around because Merrill wants me to rewrite an entire chapter with a different thesis—"

He kept his steps brisk, wings folded close to avoid the walls of the narrow stairwell.

"I think changing that chapter's thesis will actually contradict her overall thesis in this book, but she doesn't agree. She never agrees, even when it's to her own advantage."

How long was this stairwell? He didn't normally mind talking to her, but he wanted to be alone, Mother damn him, and—

"I needed to not be in the library for a while, so I came up here to see if the starlight would clear my head—help me figure out what to do. Not only about Merrill and her book, but about what I'm even *doing* down there. And I was tossing the stone while I thought, and maybe yes, I was avoiding wandering the hallways tonight while Bryaxis is getting settled, but . . . then you appeared. At precisely the wrong moment. Sorry."

Finally. The entrance to the hall with his bedroom. He paused at the archway. If Gwyn continued down the stairs, it'd take her back to the library. "Good luck with your work," he said blandly. "Stay away from the bottom of that pit."

The priestess didn't say anything as he started into the hall, and mercifully she didn't follow.

But right when he was about to turn into his room, he heard her say drily, "Good night to you, too. Thanks for the advice."

He shut out her words. Shut out any other words in his mind as he opened his bedroom door, his shadows slinking in with him. He should have offered to escort her back to the library—the Mother knew Bryaxis would have plenty to prey on with Gwyn—but he could barely manage to close his bedroom door. Barely manage to send his armor retreating into the Siphons on his hands. Or think of anything at all before he collapsed face-first onto the bed and passed out completely.

Gwyn

The shadowsinger had been in fine form.

Azriel was a male of few words, but that had been pathetic, even for him. Granted, she hadn't expected him to be *chatty*, but some form of pleasantry would have been appreciated.

Gwyn clicked her tongue as she fitted the golden key into the small door set within the pair towering above her. The library doors were closed. For the first time since she'd been here, the colossal doors were closed.

Clotho had given them each a key to this tiny entry, with the request that they lock it after themselves each time they came and went.

No one had the nerve to ask whether the locked doors were to keep Bryaxis in or keep others out.

Gwyn slid through the narrow door, locked it, and then leaned against the ancient wood. At this hour, the library was dim and quiet, most of the priestesses asleep. Even Merrill had abandoned her research by this point in the night to crawl onto the pallet beside her desk.

Gwyn fished the Invoking Stone from her pocket, along with a coil of white ribbon. *Her* white ribbon, sliced in the training ring levels above. She carried it with her everywhere, tucked into her pocket with the stone. "Some help you were," she murmured to the stone. "You nearly cracked his skull open."

Her Invoking Stone seemed to flicker in amusement as she slid it back into her pocket, nestling it amongst the folds of white ribbon once more, Azriel's cedar and night-chilled mist scent still lingering in her nose.

She hadn't told him the rest of why she'd dared to venture upstairs. That while she'd known Nesta likely wasn't in residence, as the events of the Naming Day would have kept her at the river house, Gwyn had gone looking for her friend anyway. She'd felt a tingle on the charm bracelet earlier in the day, there and gone, and then Merrill had been so awful tonight that . . . She'd just needed her friend. Needed to tell Nesta that of course she'd help her write down everything she needed to and organize the information for future generations to clearly understand.

Gwyn had encountered only empty halls and rooms. They had pressed on her, vast and yet too small at the same time, and she'd needed air, needed starlight, so she'd found the first available balcony and gulped down enormous breaths.

When she'd finally calmed herself, she'd needed to think. And, as usual when she needed to think, she'd needed to *sing*. She'd picked a song at random, drawing from the well of ancient melodies Hana had uncovered through years of research, and she'd loosed it into the starry night.

A starry night that now seemed miles away from this mountain, this particular silence and gloom. The darkness stretched ahead into the library,

interrupted only by golden bowls of faelight shaped like cupped hands.

The dormitory lay five levels down. Five levels, and the only way to reach it was by walking the ramp around and around the giant pit in the heart of the library.

Where Bryaxis lurked.

Clotho hadn't provided many details beyond, *Bryaxis has come home. She will not harm any of you, so long as you do not venture down into her lair.*

Gwyn eyed the river of darkness between her and the dormitory, swallowing hard. How certain was Clotho about that? She trusted the priestess almost blindly, but this . . .

Gwyn pushed off the door and began the walk toward the spiral ramp, her steps too loud, too rustling.

Did Bryaxis even sleep? Was the creature squatting there now, gazing upward and listening to Gwyn's approach? Did the creature know the exact taste and shape of her fear? Gwyn's mouth dried out as she reached the railing at the top of the ramp.

Had the lights lining the descent always been this far apart?

"Stop it," she whispered to herself. And yet she peered down, down, down. Into a black darker than anything she'd ever beheld.

That wasn't true. She'd seen that darkness before, the night Hybern had torn apart her very existence. The very first night she'd met Azriel—or rather, had been found by him. Saved. Yes, the darkness had been there that night, too.

She knew the feel, the weight, the taste of that darkness. She knew its sounds—the terrified screams of children, the defiant roar of a sister ordering her not to tell that commander *anything*, the wet thump of a head falling to the kitchen floor, then the cruel laugh of a male—

Something warmed at her thigh, turquoise light glimmering in the corner of her vision.

Gwyn staggered back from the railing, from the darkness, fingers fumbling for the Invoking Stone in her pocket. It was glowing, and warm to the touch in a way that had nothing to do with its proximity to her flesh.

You are here, the stone seemed to affirm, *you are safe. The past cannot harm you.*

Gwyn shook her head. She was inclined to disagree.

The Blood Rite had shown her one thing only, she'd decided: that the world was full of hate, and perhaps she did not want anything to do with it. Not only the Illyrian males who had hunted and tormented her and Emerie and Nesta—but what she had found in herself when they did. The ease with which she'd killed the one male. Hurt the others. How much she'd enjoyed it.

She'd been a fool to think her Valkyrie training was merely for educational purposes. She'd been learning how to *kill* all those months, Mother damn her. In her mind, she'd dismissed it as theories and practice. She'd read about the Valkyries' efficient killing methods, but none of it had been real. None of it had really sunk in until the initial slash of her blade into that male's flesh. Until she'd felt the warmth of his blood, felt his bones reverberating against the knife, felt herself marveling at how easily skin and muscle could split apart.

And as if that wasn't enough, she'd taken his clothes when she was done. Discarded her blood-splattered, torn nightgown, peeled the leathers from his cooling body, and slid into them like some sort of parasite. She'd burned those leathers the moment she'd returned after the Rite.

It was better—safer—for her to be here. Even with Bryaxis lurking below the library.

Gwyn shoved the stone back into her pocket. It continued to glow, spilling muffled blue light down the ramp, but she ignored it. The thing had already caused her enough trouble tonight. Then she closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in deep, holding the breath, and then slowly releasing it. Mind-Stilling on the go.

She took another breath, focusing on the expansion of her ribs, the tautness in her torso.

I am the rock against which the surf crashes. Nothing can break me.

The words settled something deep in her, and before she'd finished exhaling, she was walking again, this time making a point not to look to her right, to the darkness at the very heart of the library.

But even as Gwyn descended, even as she mercifully reached the dormitory and curled up in her narrow bed, she was convinced she heard that darkness laughing. Like it knew the truth.

Like it knew it wasn't the only monster down here.

CHAPTER 22

Nesta

The Autumn Equinox had been the day from hell. If it was supposed to have been a celebration of the balance between light and dark, Nesta was inclined to believe that the *dark* part had hogged more than its fair share.

It was different from the glorious dark of the Night Court. Different from the star-flecked darkness currently pouring off that court's High Lord.

She sat in the chair across from his desk, his formal study barely lit despite the early-morning hour. She'd crawled from Elain's bed when Feyre did, minutes ago, hoping to steal some sleep in her own room for an hour or two, only for Rhys to say into her mind, *My study. Now.*

She was so exhausted, so hollow, that she didn't bother to snap a response about not ordering her around.

So here they were. Just the two of them. A cup of tea steamed on the desk in front of her. The cup in front of Rhys didn't steam—it wasn't tea inside.

"What do you want?" Nesta said at last, too tired to bother trying to sound nice.

She hadn't been alone with Rhys in days, since he'd hauled her out of the ocean and she'd puked up seawater all over this very rug. Then, his eyes had been alight with alarm and dismay.

Now, those eyes were as dark as she'd ever seen them. Not one star shone.

Ataraxia thumped onto the desk. The Mask, the Harp, and the Crown clattered beside it a moment later. Then the other blade she had Made. And finally, shining an unholy black, Gwydion.

Rhys's face was like stone. Like death.

"Keep them," he said.

"Why?" She didn't reach for the weapons.

"Because my having them cost you vital moments yesterday against Bryaxis. The next time someone decides to terrorize my son, I want you already armed." He jerked his chin toward the Trove. "And I want you to use these to obliterate them."

She held his stare. Let him see everything that lay within her own. "I will."

She didn't let herself think on it—that a few days ago, he'd been questioning whether she could be trusted. Whether to ever let her near the Trove again.

Rhys added, tone thawing only a fraction, "Cassian told me this morning what you said last night—about the Trove terrifying you. Especially the Mask."

It required a great deal of effort to keep her shock from showing. She'd confessed that to Cassian in confidence. She hadn't said explicitly to keep it to himself, but . . . he'd told Rhys?

Rhys went on, "I didn't realize you still had a healthy fear of it."

She shoved down the flicker of anger at her mate and said truthfully, "I've always been afraid of the Trove. I didn't give the Mask to Bryce Quinlan out of a lack of fear or appreciation for its true power. I understand it all too well." It frequently haunted her dreams.

Rhys nodded—though still no light graced his stare. "I understand that now. Which is why I'm giving it back to you."

Cassian had been trying to help by telling Rhys about her feelings regarding the Trove, no doubt. To get the two of them to this moment. It shouldn't have stung, knowing that, but—it still did.

She again pushed aside the small ache and pivoted, "Teach me how to make one of those pocket realms so I can store them. And teach me how to craft wards around things—the sort only you know how to create. I want to be able to *Make* them."

His chin dipped shallowly. A star, just one, returned to his gaze.

Nesta's chin lifted as she added, "And teach me how to kill with magic. Not with arrows of fire or swords of water or whatever everyone else does. Teach me the way *you* kill."

She needed to know how to explode an enemy into a bloody spray and shards of bone. To will it, and simply end someone's existence. If it helped her loved ones stay alive . . . she wanted to know how.

Rhys's lips pulled back from his teeth in a savage smile. "With pleasure."

Feyre

Nyx's shrieking, chirping laughter filled my study, as glorious as the midmorning sunshine streaming through the windows. I'd never appreciated the beautiful sound more.

Nyx lay on his belly on the ornately woven rug, propped up by his hands, little wings twitching as he gleefully watched Cassian bounce his beloved stuffed rabbit in front of him. Every time the rabbit got close enough to Nyx's chubby cheeks, it would "pounce" and give him a kiss right on the nose. And every time, right on cue, Nyx would shriek with delight, then bop his hands on the floor, demanding more.

I couldn't help but revel in it—the pure, simple joy and excitement that radiated from my son, his dark blue shirt hitched up over his round belly, his arms and back and neck starting to figure out how to work together to sit up fully.

Gone was any trace of fear from yesterday. He hadn't so much as whimpered while he'd slept. A small mercy from the Mother.

"Well," Cassian announced from his spot on the floor in front of Nyx, "at least one person in this house is happy today."

The rabbit booped Nyx on the nose again, and my son slapped his feet and hands on the silk rug, burbling with amusement. His grin was so broad it threatened to send my chest shattering into a million pieces, his almost feline curiosity about this stuffed rabbit prancing in front of him nearly propelling me to gather him into my arms and kiss him all over that soft, sweet-smelling body. I'd never loved anything or anyone as much as this happy little creature—and the force of that still took my breath away.

Yesterday had only made the feeling worse. Precious in a way that outright ached.

I slid a glance to Rhys, seated in an armchair a few feet from Nyx. He and Nesta had walked in together a few minutes ago, both quiet and pensive. But now, the same bewildered, overwhelmed look of wonder and love had bloomed across his beautiful face. Then Cassian's words seemed to sink in, because the stars in Rhys's eyes winked out as he said, "Last night was an unmitigated disaster."

Nesta, on the couch beside me, snorted. We'd stayed with Elain until my daemati senses had told me Nyx was stirring, though I'd been awake shortly before that thanks to my aching breasts informing me it was time to feed my son.

Nesta had slipped out with me, leaving Elain sleeping, and two hours later, here we all were.

Well, most of us.

Elain hadn't made an appearance yet, and Mor hadn't come back last night. When I'd checked in with her mind to mind, she'd just said she'd spent the night out and was currently sleeping it off. I knew enough of the tangled history between Mor and Azriel to understand that perhaps the former needed some time to herself before she departed for Vallahan.

And Azriel . . . I didn't know what to think. What to do. Knowing Az, he likely wanted space for a few days. Weeks.

Nyx reached a plump hand for the rabbit, and his uncle sweetly obliged. It went right into Nyx's mouth, where he gummed it with a ferocity that made me wince for my nipples. No wonder they were chafed all the time.

"Did Azriel end up staying at the House of Wind or the town house?" Nesta asked Rhys, as if her own thoughts had drifted in the same direction as mine.

"Does it matter?" Rhys stared out the window at the near-cloudless autumn day.

"Rhys," I chided. My mate turned toward me, pure thunder in his expression. I rolled my eyes. "We're not kicking Az out of this house. Especially not after Bryaxis's return."

Rhys's jaw tightened. "I warned Az at Solstice last year not to get involved with Elain. I told him there would be consequences if he crossed that line. He crossed it anyway. I've had it."

"Az has always done whatever he's wanted," Cassian reminded him. "You had to know he wasn't going to listen. Not if he was set on something."

"Am I not his High Lord?" A soft, deadly question.

I groaned. "Oh, please. Let's not start that nonsense." Rhys threw me an incredulous look, but I slid to the ground beside Nyx, unable to stop myself from tickling the round belly peeking from under the hem of his shirt. Nyx burbled with delight, chewing harder on his rabbit. "Maybe if you tried talking to Az as his *brother* and not ordering him about as his High Lord, this wouldn't have gone so far."

Rhys gaped at me. I didn't take it back.

Cassian added, "I'd also like to know why *I* wasn't told of any of this, when it's clear you three knew a good deal."

"Because you have the biggest mouth of anyone," Nesta said smartly.

Cassian chuckled, inclining his head. "Fair."

Despite everything, my heart lightened at their teasing. Something had changed between the mates—something vital had been repaired in the midst of all this fear.

I tucked away the cheerful thought as I advised Rhys, "Give it a few days. Az pretends he's cold as ice, but he's got a temper worse than you two combined." I nodded to him and Cassian, who shrugged, not denying it.

"And what about Lucien?" Nesta asked. "Does one of us go after him?"

"Not yet," Cassian countered. "We need to figure out how we'll approach him after this."

"Should Elain approach him?" I wondered. "Try to talk to him?" Perhaps it was worth a shot.

Nesta stiffened. "We can't ask that of her. I don't think she would, even if she could. Let Elain have some peace."

I nodded. I couldn't argue with that.

"Do you think," Cassian asked Rhys, "that Lucien will invoke the Blood Duel?" I'd never seen a Blood Duel, but I knew of the Autumn Court ritual, a formal fight to the death when one's honor was impugned. I hoped I would never see one.

Rhys slid onto the carpet as well, crossing his powerful legs beneath him, and pulled Nyx onto his lap. Nyx gurgled, beaming up at Rhys. And despite his next words, Rhys smiled at our son, kissing his dark hair. "I think Lucien is smarter than most people give him credit for. And I think he

knows that in a Blood Duel against Azriel, one-on-one, he would stand no chance of surviving." He kissed the top of Nyx's head again while our son picked at the silver thread along Rhys's jacket, entranced by the embossed, shiny buttons. "If Lucien is to retaliate, it would be from a position of strength."

"What could he do?" Cassian asked, incredulous. "Send Vassa after us?"

"Maybe," Rhys said gravely.

I winced, remembering the fiery hell she'd unleashed on Hybern's armada during the war.

"But I don't think Vassa would agree to it," Rhys said, gently prying a button out of Nyx's mouth before he could gnaw it off and choke on it. Nyx's little wings twitched in annoyance, and he tried again. Rhys offered him the rabbit instead while he went on, "Vassa, wild as she seems, wouldn't attack us, or risk hurting innocents. But the Autumn Court . . . Beron would love the excuse to attack us. Especially on behalf of his estranged son, newly returned to the fold."

"You know Lucien best," Nesta said to me, and they all turned my way. "Would he do that?"

I thought through all I knew about Lucien, all I remembered from my days at the Spring Court, and our time since. How the day I'd slipped into his mind, I'd felt such sadness, such pain and loneliness—

"I don't think Lucien's going to return to his father," I said. "As furious as he is . . . he's not that sort of male. He hates his father more than we do." Even if Beron wasn't Lucien's true father. Helion had that honor, whether Lucien knew it or not.

When that particular truth came out, perhaps at a time when Rhys chose to wield it to our maximum advantage . . . Gods, I didn't want to think about the explosive consequences across courts.

And as if in agreement with me, a horrific, bubbling *splat* came out of my son's backside. Right atop where he was perched in Rhys's lap.

Cassian gagged. I pointed immediately to Rhys. "Your turn."

My mate winced. "Considering that I think he managed to get some on me . . . I'll gladly go clean us both up." In a graceful, powerful movement, Rhys stood, Nyx in his arms, cheerfully pulling at my mate's hair. And yes—there was a giant, reeking wet patch on Rhys's pants. And one on the back of Nyx's. His little wings twitched happily, though. "I bet that felt

good to get out," Rhys murmured to our son, who clapped a pudgy hand on Rhys's face seeming to say, *Yes! It did!*

Rhys winnowed, leaving only the lingering stench behind.

Cassian waved at the air in front of his nose. "On that note, I'm going back to Windhaven for a few hours. I need to brief Devlon on Bryaxis's return, and establish additional patrols to monitor for any enemy movement. Especially any hint of trouble from Hybern." He jerked his chin to Nesta as he got to his feet, flexing his powerful wings. "Want to join, Nes?"

I could guess what might happen while the two of them were in the air. That is, if the deepening chill didn't prevent them from getting certain parts naked.

"After yesterday," Nesta said, blushing slightly, "I need a bit of a rest."

"What's got you feeling so sore?" he teased. "Finally got in a good workout?"

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

Nesta's blush deepened. But she lifted her chin and said to her mate, "If you see Emerie, check on her. She was rattled after yesterday and I didn't get the chance to speak with her before she left." Right—because my sister had been with Madja, getting her bones pieced back together.

My stomach twisted. Nesta had acted as if it were nothing, but she had done it without thought. To save us. Save my son.

Cassian nodded, a general receiving orders from his queen, and leaned to press a kiss to the top of Nesta's head. Then mine. "See you at dinner."

With a salacious wink at his mate that implied *she* would be his dinner, he shut the door behind him. I immediately whirled to my sister, grinning.

"Don't even start," Nesta grumbled, but a brightness remained in her eyes. Happy—at least about this. I held up my hands in acquiescence. Nesta's mouth quirked to the side, attention going to the windows and the sky beyond. Her amusement faded, replaced by contemplation.

She clearly wanted to say something, so I let her gather the words.

"I think you should go see Azriel," she said finally. "Someone should talk to him."

I weighed the worry on her face, so surprising to me, even now. The Nesta I'd grown up with, even the one of a year ago, wouldn't have thought twice about anyone other than Elain.

So I asked as casually as I could, "Why don't you?"

“You’re his High Lady,” Nesta said, brushing off my question. “Rhys acted like a tyrant last night”—fair enough—“and it might help Azriel feel . . . less alone if his High Lady talked to him.”

“All right,” I conceded. “But you—”

The door cracked open, and I was instantly on my feet. Elain entered, as tired and haggard as I’d ever seen her. She wore a simple pale rose gown, her hair tied back.

Elain shut the door with barely a click. Her voice was utterly empty as she said, “I’m going to finish preparing the garden for winter, but first I wanted to apologize for any disgrace my actions have brought upon my family and friends.”

“Disgrace?” I blurted. “Elain—there is no disgrace.” I looked to Nesta, but my sister had remained seated, and was watching Elain with the grave intensity she usually reserved for people *not* in her family.

Elain’s eyes met Nesta’s. Noted that expression. And Elain said in a tone I hadn’t heard her use before, “What?”

Nesta was clearly considering her words very, very carefully. Likely to avoid hurting or distressing Elain any more than necessary—

“Your mate was in this house, and you couldn’t even give him the dignity and respect of keeping your hands off Azriel.”

I choked at Nesta’s sharp words. At the fact that Azriel was somehow extended her grace and concern, but our own sister was not.

Elain’s mouth thinned into a straight line. “Lucien is *nothing* to me.”

“That’s not fair,” Nesta said with quiet venom. “You haven’t even tried to get to know him.”

“Why should I bother?” Elain’s laugh was vacant. Awful. “I didn’t want the mating bond with him. I’m not like you two, who just so happened to fall in love with the males who are your mates. I was *given* to him, like some piece of property, without any will or desire of my own.”

“I’m not arguing against that.” Nesta rose to her feet with a warrior’s grace and surety. “And you have every right to reject the mating bond—I will support that choice with my last fucking breath if I have to, Elain. But I’m talking about common decency. You are technically still *mated* to that male, and he treats you with the respect that mates give each other, and you . . .” Nesta shook her head slowly. Disgust limned her face, suffused every word as she finished, “The Elain I know and love wouldn’t have done something like that.”

Another dull laugh. “The Elain you know and love died in the Cauldron.” I’d never heard Elain speak like this, never seen her features so contorted with anger. “The Elain you know and love has been miserable these past few years, alone and forgotten, barely more than a secondary thought to *all* of you while you go off on your adventures and fall in love with your mates.”

“You want to go on adventures?” Nesta challenged, unfazed. “Fine. There’s the door. There’s a whole world of creatures out there who’d love a shot at killing you. In fact, here.” She snapped her fingers.

I startled as Ataraxia, then another blade clattered to the floor. They thrummed with magic—big, terrifying magic that only my eldest sister could have imbued them with.

“Take your pick,” Nesta dared. “Might as well go out there armed.”

Elain recoiled from the blades, step after step until her back was to the door, hissing at Nesta, “Put those away.”

Nesta did no such thing. Instead, a jerk of her chin, and—

Another sword thumped onto the carpet. Gwydion.

The black blade absorbed the morning light, and the others seemed to shiver in response.

Rhys must have given them to her. Why?

No matter the reason, it certainly hadn’t been for her to use them as a cudgel against Elain.

“You want a big adventure?” Nesta pointed to Gwydion. “Take that one out into the wilds. We haven’t had a chance to try it yet. Make yourself useful. We have plenty of enemies we’d be glad to get rid of.”

“That is *not* what I’m saying,” Elain said, pressing herself to the door so hard it was a wonder the wood wasn’t breaking. “I am talking about the fact that you all seem perfectly content to let me just watch the baby or garden or bake or plan your parties. I’m talking about the fact that those are the only things you *want* from me, and you never *ask* me to do anything more —”

“What does this have to do with you fucking Azriel?” Nesta snapped.

“Nesta,” I protested. My hands were shaking. I couldn’t entirely explain why.

Rhys said into my mind, *Everything all right?*

I knew if I asked, he’d arrive in a moment. He’d probably already handed Nyx to Ana, sensing my tension.

Just sisters having it out, I sent back.

I knew Rhys would likely remain in the nursery until this conversation was over, for the same reason I'd run there last night.

Elain had never demonstrated any power beyond her Seer's abilities, but she, too, had gone into the Cauldron. Had been given . . . gifts. We'd never pushed her far enough to see what might emerge. As far as I knew, she hadn't pushed herself to find out, either.

"What this has to do with my *fucking* Azriel," Elain said, spitting out the word, "which I did *not* do—"

"Looked like you were well on your way," Nesta cut in.

Elain's eyes welled with tears. "What do you want from me?" She splayed her arms. "I had a future before all this. I had a man that I *loved*—"

"Graysen didn't deserve you."

"That isn't your judgment to make," Elain shot back, slamming a fist against the door behind her, then laying that hand on her heaving chest. "I loved *him*, and he loved me—"

"That wasn't love, not even close," Nesta barreled on. "Not if your body changing from human to Fae could alter his feelings. Love doesn't crumble like that."

"No, it just crumbles when you betray your court and mate by handing over the Mask to a stranger," Elain retorted.

I didn't know whether to wince for Nesta or applaud Elain for getting in a blow. Even if it was a low one.

Power brewed in Nesta, a building storm that set the hair on my arms tingling. My own surged to meet it, intercept it—if hers came out as silver flames, then I'd smother it with ice straight from the heart of the Winter Court. But Nesta just said to Elain, "Cassian and I have moved past that."

Elain shook her head. Not at Nesta's words, but at herself. "I'm not supposed to be here," she said despondently, tracing the small dent she'd made in the heavy, carved wood of the study door. Unaware of the strength of her Fae body, even now. "I thought I'd found my place, thought I had a future with Azriel, but . . ." She bleakly surveyed me and Nesta. "Look at you two—it's like you were never human. Never lived below the wall."

"Elain," I urged as Nesta continued simmering, "why don't you sit? Yesterday was hard for all of us—not only last night, but I'm sure what Bryaxis showed you left you shaken. What you saw was a lie, nothing

more. Let's get some tea and we can *talk* about this." I slid a reproachful glance to Nesta. "We don't need to find answers today, but—"

"I don't want to be here."

"All right, we can go to the dining room—"

"No," Elain said, the word shaking. "I told you last night. I don't want to be *here*. In this house. This city."

"I'm afraid there's . . . We don't really have somewhere else for you to go."

I could see all the fight drain out of Elain, from her slumping shoulders to her drooping head. Even the color seemed to leach from her skin, her hair. "My life wasn't supposed to turn out this way," she murmured.

"Well, it did," Nesta said, even as that silver fire banked. "And you can either wallow in your misery or make something of it. But don't destroy everything for the rest of us in the process."

The brown eyes that lifted to Nesta were pure, frozen fury. I didn't recognize a shred of the warm sister I knew in them. "And what of the leniency *you* received for a whole year? Am I unworthy of that?"

"I was drinking and fucking my way through this city. Not jeopardizing key alliances when we're on the brink of war. We should have spent this morning discussing how to deal with Bryaxis and why she reappeared. Instead, we spent it trying to find a way to salvage the mess *you* made with one of our few allies."

I couldn't argue with that.

Elain slowly shook her head again. "I don't know who you are anymore. I don't think I even like this person."

Nesta picked at her nails, longer than they had been in the midst of her Valkyrie training. "The feeling is mutual."

Elain just whirled to the door. She slammed it on her way out.

For a moment, we said nothing. I dared a peek at Nesta to find her face pale, features tight. Gazing at the swords littering the floor as she dropped onto the couch.

"I don't agree with Elain, you know," I said tentatively.

Nesta's eyes lifted to me. She looked wretched. Exhausted.

"I know who you are, Nesta," I said, willing her to see the earnestness in my stare. "I see who you are becoming. Yesterday, the way you fought for us, for Nyx, the way you got up, ran after Bryaxis—I'm proud of you."

Nesta's throat bobbed. "And are you proud of that whole . . . display?" She waved a hand toward the space where Elain had been, indicating their argument.

"That," I admitted, sinking onto the couch beside her, "is not going to live on in history as one of our finer moments as sisters. But you spoke a lot of truth."

"Badly."

"It takes practice." I hesitated, but then damned caution to hell and took her hand in mine. Her fingers were ice-cold. I squeezed them. "I think Elain is so used to you defending her at every turn, no matter what, that she's not ready to face the Nesta who not only defends her sister, but also her friends —whose world has widened, become richer. Elain had you to herself for a long, long while. I think she walked in here expecting all to be forgiven, for you to defend her with no questions asked, especially after we all stayed together last night. And when that didn't happen, a lot more feelings about the matter came rushing out of her than she expected."

Nesta sighed, heavy and weary. "I think I was in shock last night about what happened. And then this morning, I just . . . I know it's not fair, to be concerned about Azriel's feelings and not Elain's, but after that initial shock wore off, there were so many things I *had* to say to her. I truly botched it, though."

"Next time you two talk, mention it," I advised. "It might make it easier if you both know that you're trying your best, even when you fall short of finding the right words."

Nesta stared down at our linked hands. Slowly, her fingers closed around mine.

"When did you get so wise?" she asked. "I know for a fact our mother never taught you this kind of thing."

I snorted. No, she certainly hadn't. I was keenly aware of that lack of love, of kindness, every time I held my son, every time I promised myself to do better, be better, than her. "It's been an intense few years," I hedged. I had a feeling we had another intense few years ahead. I took the carved rabbit Lucien had gifted Nyx out of my pocket. "Father taught me some of it, broken as he was," I admitted.

I watched Nesta's eyes trace the lines our father had lovingly and skillfully carved into the wood. This piece of him had been passed on to a

grandson who would never know him. “He’d be very proud of you,” Nesta said softly.

My throat closed up, and I squeezed her fingers tightly.

Then Nesta lifted her gaze to mine, all trace of that silver fire gone. “I’ve been teaching myself to winnow,” she blurted.

I coughed, but squeezed her hand. “Is that how you got that far into the city yesterday when you went after Bryaxis?” I’d been astounded at my sister’s speed, had thought she’d merely sprinted there, assuming the swiftness was due to her Valkyrie training.

Nesta nodded. “And how I got Ataraxia to fly that far into the sky. I winnowed the blade, too. A few days ago, I tried to winnow to the Prison, but I wasn’t strong enough and wound up nearly drowning in the sea instead.”

I let every word sink into me. *Nesta. Winnowing. Drowning.*

“Rhys found me—saved me,” she went on, the words tumbling out as if she couldn’t contain them. “But right before he did, I sensed something under the water. It wasn’t there anymore, but it was like . . . a ghost of something that had been there. It told me to find it.”

“What was it?” It couldn’t be good.

“I thought it was something like the Trove,” Nesta said, withdrawing her hand from mine. “But I think . . . I actually think the feel of it is something closer to *those*.” She pointed to the swords on the carpet.

I eyed them. “You’d better get rid of them, by the way.”

“Rhys finally let me have them, so no need to worry about him throwing a tantrum.”

I chuckled. “No. I meant before my baby comes back in here and impales himself on them.” Nyx’s stuffed rabbit was plopped right in the middle of the weapons.

Nesta snickered, and the swords vanished. Her face grew serious again. “Do you think I should go after whatever it was that I sensed?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “Do we *need* another magic sword, if that’s what it is? We already have three.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “But what if you were shown that magical echo for a reason? What if *that* is the Made object the territories are going after?”

Something tightened in Nesta’s face, as if the words had hit a nerve. But she said, “We should ask Amren when she gets back. Perhaps she knows of other weapons that might be out there.” Nesta scowled, considering. “It

could also be a trap—one of the kingdoms deliberately planting a Made object so we'd find it, and then they'd accuse us of continuing to arm ourselves."

It could also be part of Hybern's machinations, whatever they might be.

"Does that seem likely to you?"

"No." Nesta chewed on her bottom lip, then surprised me by saying, "You should come with me—to Valkyrie training."

"I thought you'd stopped going," I said warily.

"I did. But I'm going to start again." I angled my head to one side, curious. Nesta explained, "Yesterday, I was too slow, too frazzled, especially with that stupid dress." Her lip curled in self-disgust. "I need—I want to be in training again. And I think you should join me."

I considered. "Are you sure? I always thought your time with the Valkyries was, well . . . yours. Don't forget that I won't only be your sister to your friends—I'll also be their High Lady."

"Then don't act like a High Lady. Just come as Feyre. If they can put up with Azriel and Cassian strutting about, they'll be fine with you."

"Are they going to be teaching again?"

Nesta leaned back into the cushions. "After yesterday, I'm not sure Azriel should be left to his own devices for too long, anyway. Perhaps the training would be good for him. And as for Cassian . . ." Her mouth twisted in a knowing smirk. "He'll do what I tell him to."

If that was all Nesta was willing to divulge about her current situation with her mate, that was fine. It was enough that she felt able to confide any of this in me. And after yesterday, after spending all night with Nyx's screams still echoing in my ears . . . yes. I would happily join her at Valkyrie training and learn new ways to destroy my enemies and protect those I loved.

Nesta said suddenly, "Bryce Quinlan told me that she thought the eight-pointed star tattooed on my back was there for a reason."

I blinked. "Really?"

Nesta nodded, relief brightening her features—had she been holding this inside? "Right before she returned to her own world. That's what she said to me." Nesta swallowed. "And her mother, while she was here, told me that she thought . . . she thought I'd find my way."

I kept silent, letting her think it through, get to whatever it was she wanted to say.

Nesta's eyes met mine. Steel and silver fire. "I want to know if both of those things are true."

"Then let's find out. Your destiny is your own, Nesta."

My sister studied me for a moment before Gwydion appeared in her hands. "Take it," she said. I blinked again. Nesta went on, "I have more swords than I know what to do with. The other two, I Made, but this one . . ." She shrugged with one shoulder. "Bryce gave it to me, and now I'm giving it to you."

"This is a sword that once belonged to the High King and Queen of Prythian," I cautioned. "And wasn't it used to kill one of them?"

Nesta's smile was pure darkness. "Then maybe you can find a better use for it."

I beheld it, for a moment, in her eyes. The vision of the two of us, sisters, back-to-back and fighting our enemies. Protecting our family.

But I gestured to the blade. "Watch over it a little longer." I frowned toward the window, the world beyond. "Until the blood truly needs to begin spilling."

Until I did precisely what I needed to do.

CHAPTER 23

Azriel

Sweat dripped from Azriel's brow, his nose, his shoulders as he braced himself on his forearms and held a plank. Even with the crisp autumn day, the sun was merciless and had quickly set him perspiring soon after beginning his morning workout. His stomach muscles trembled, sweat dripping off them, too, and his back strained with the effort of keeping his wings from drooping onto the ground.

Seconds ticked by, one after another. He swallowed down the discomfort, the exhaustion. The sun seared his back, and he swallowed down the heat of that, too.

His shadows kept to the interior of the mountain, avoiding the sunny training area.

He'd awoken this morning hoping, in that second before he opened his eyes, that he'd be at the river house, in his bed, and nothing as catastrophic as last night had occurred. That the morning at the temple, with Bryaxis, hadn't occurred, either. But he'd scented the familiar red rocks of the House of Wind, felt the clearer sunlight streaming through the wall of windows—he hadn't bothered to close the drapes—and knew.

It had happened. The swarming fear. Then the desire, the need, the pleasure—and the implosion.

It seemed odd that Velaris, the world, was still standing. That people were going about their lives as usual far below. How could any of that be possible when his own life had been turned inside out?

His arms shook, but he shoved back his heels, willing strength through his legs, his whole body. His chest ached, and it wasn't just from the position he was holding.

"What happened to training?"

Az managed to lift his head enough to see Cassian leaning against the archway, arms crossed.

"They were done for the day when I got up here," Az grunted.

He began to lower himself to the dirt, but Cassian said, "Thirty more seconds."

A commander's voice. The general of the Night Court's voice.

Great. Another brother here to rip him to shreds. He refrained from telling Cassian there wasn't much left to tear up as he obeyed, holding the plank.

"Ten," Cassian counted down. "Nine . . ."

After his workout ended today, what then? What could he even do that wouldn't be considered licking his wounds?

". . . two . . ."

Az gritted his teeth, knowing that Cassian was dragging out the last second, getting five, then ten more seconds out of him, the fucking asshole —

"One," Cass declared, and Az let himself drop to the dirt. The grit and small stones scraped against his bare torso, little stings that he welcomed.

He buried his head between his arms, Siphons cool against his brow, and panted great, heaving breaths to steady himself.

His shadows remained crouched by the shade of the doorway. He'd never forgive them for last night, for not alerting him when Lucien had been approaching, for causing all this—

"You get thirty seconds down there, then we're doing another plank."

Azriel pulled his face off his arms to find Cassian pushing off the archway, stripping out of his own shirt. Lowering himself onto the ground beside Az.

Cassian threw him a grin, spreading his fingers to get into position. "You're in such deep shit."

Az blew out a breath through his nose, as close to a laugh as he'd get today. "I know."

Cassian easily heaved himself up, then settled into the plank, wings folding gracefully across his broad back. "Want me to work you into the dirt?"

Az snorted and hauled himself back into position. He didn't deserve his brother's kindness, didn't deserve this offer of normalcy to help him work through everything that warred in his mind. Didn't deserve a lick of it. And yet . . .

"Yes, please."



The exercise helped. Not entirely, but by the time Cassian was through with him, Azriel was so exhausted it took all his focus to reach his room.

Cassian swaggered down the steps as if barely winded. Bastard. Apparently, he'd told the others he was going to Windhaven for the day, and still intended to. But in addition to Cassian's preternatural strength, his brother was also an unnaturally good male—so he'd come here first to check on Az.

As he washed and dressed, Az kept thinking about how he didn't deserve Cassian's kindness. Especially as he dropped onto the sofa in his room at the House of Wind and willed his worthless shadows to disperse into the city, to hunt. And ten minutes later, summoned by those shadows, Erebos appeared.

Certain spies were suited for certain tasks. Certain deeds. Nuala and Cerridwen were best for political intrigue, for listening and waiting and blending in.

Erebos was a terror that made people start talking. The sort of creature that children dreaded lurking under their beds. And, more often than not, Erebos did—under their parents' beds, anyway.

There were some nightmares that had given the Night Court its fearsome reputation, after all. And who better than Az to wield them?

Crafted from pure shadow, yet not *wholly* shadow, Erebos had no discernable features. Though a lanky humanoid in shape, he bore no mouth, no nose—only golden eyes that simmered like hot coals.

Shadow-men, the humans had once called Erebos's people, millennia ago—shadow-*thing* was a better term, Az thought. Beings that traveled in

shadow and darkness, and fed on the fears both inspired. Beings that liked to toy with their prey, drawing out that delicious terror for as long as possible.

Az didn't enjoy dealing with Erebos—Mor had been telling him to get rid of the abomination for years now—but the creature was effective. Skilled, even. Able to resist his urge to feed on targets, while utilizing his horrific stalking instincts to glean as much information as possible.

And, given his people's ancient worship of shadowsingers, totally loyal to Azriel.

Erebos had been the one to find Az, centuries ago. Drawn by the darkness in him, Erebos had unequivocally pledged his lifelong services to Az and this court. An unsavory ally, perhaps, but one who had uses.

And for this task, Erebos was precisely who—what—Az needed.

Az's shadows seemed to recoil to the corners of the room, as if seeking any crack or crevice to escape through. To avoid being in Erebos's presence. The power of the Siphons atop Az's hands felt distant somehow—like it wanted to be far away, too. Even Bryaxis hadn't done that, he realized with no small amount of distaste. His own shadows and Bryaxis's were made of something different than what Erebos bore—what the shadow-thing was crafted from.

"Yes?" Erebos hissed, a splotch of solid, impenetrable black against the glare of the morning sun. The creature bowed low at the waist.

Suppressing a cringe at the way the word slithered over his skin, Az sighed, scrubbing his face. His arms ached just from the movement. But his sore body was the least of his concerns.

"Any news from Koschei's castle or lake?" Az had ordered Erebos there months ago.

"Nothing," Erebos said, sounding for all the world like he was bored. "I cannot get close enough to learn anything interesting."

"Station one of your underlings to watch it, then," Az said tightly. Erebos had shadows that worked for him, much like Az's own shadows. The similarities were too unnerving to dwell on often, but the differences at least proved useful. Erebos could leave them behind—*pieces of himself*, the shadow-thing had once called them—to report back to him. "I have a different task for you."

"Oh?"

Az might have ruined any chance of help from Lucien, but he had to ensure that the male wasn't going to do anything that would threaten this court. The Mother knew they already had one major threat within it.

"Go to the human lands," Az ordered, "and follow Lucien Vanserra. Where he goes, you go. Any movement out of the ordinary, you report back to me. He makes contact with the Autumn Court, you tell me immediately. Understood?"

Erebos's golden eyes flickered with twin flames of delight. "The lordling of Autumn will be an interesting target."

"Not target," Az warned. "Don't touch him."

He could have sworn Erebos pouted. Az's shadows clung to the corners of the room, more repulsed than terrified.

The creature's eyes slid toward them, slitting with pleasure—like he was well aware of their disgust. But he bowed again to Azriel. "As you will it, Shadowsinger." When Erebos straightened, he pointed to Azriel's side, darkness rippling off his finger. "Where is your blade? The one that sings."

Azriel knew he meant Truth-Teller. It was at the town house, still in the corner he'd chucked it into. Where it would remain forever. But Erebos's comment was intriguing enough that he found himself asking, "What do you hear when it's around, exactly?"

Erebos cocked his shadowy head, serpentine in his movement. "A dirge. A lament. A scream." All the more reason to ignore the blade. To never draw it again. Erebos shuddered with pleasure. "A Song of Songs."

And that was more than enough. "You're dismissed," Az said.

With a final sigh of longing, Erebos faded into shreds of black mist. "May the Mother's dark blessings be upon you, Shadowsinger." Then he was gone.

Az rubbed his eyes with relief. He trusted Erebos to not touch one red hair on Lucien's head, but . . . gods, he hated dealing with that thing.

Erebos had seen Truth-Teller plenty of times through the centuries, but had never mentioned *singing*. Was this another change Bryce Quinlan had brought about?

It didn't matter. Az would never use or even wear that blade again. He stalked back to the couch and collapsed onto it, his shadows now rushing to curl at his feet, his knees. He ignored them and instead stared at the age-worn carpet. As if he could see through it, through the mountain, all the way

to the pit where he prayed Bryaxis now slumbered. Or perhaps she was patiently waiting for her next victim.

Fear itself had returned home to the mountain.

Yes, a number of Valkyries now stood between that monster and the city, but if even Nesta had been ineffective against Bryaxis yesterday, what good would they do?

Worse, the last time Bryaxis had resided here, the House had been just . . . a house. Now Nesta had Made it into something more. Something sentient. Powerful. How would Bryaxis be affected by dwelling within that sentience?

There were too many possibilities, none of them good. And with Clotho having locked them out of the library for the time being, answers would have to wait. Not that they were in a hurry to confront Bryaxis. Only one of them had even been able to face her and fight, and that had ended with Bryaxis still intact.

Watch your tone, Nesta had snarled at Rhys the night before. As unafraid of the High Lord as she'd been of Bryaxis.

Something like guilt panged through him. She'd defended him last night. Gone toe to toe with Rhys, knowing full well the High Lord was dangerously close to violence.

Nesta shouldn't have wasted her breath.

And yet . . . perhaps she'd done it because she knew precisely how it felt to be on the receiving end of Rhys's wrath. To be shoved to the outside and forced to look in. Nesta understood, and even though he'd been a piece of shit to her recently, she'd fought for him.

He had no idea where that left him. Cassian, too, was still speaking to him, but the rest . . .

Mor certainly wasn't going to talk to him anytime soon. Nor Rhys. And Mother save him when Amren found out. Az rubbed his neck, his stomach muscles aching with the motion.

He should speak to Elain. Somewhere outside, perhaps, so he wasn't tempted in any way. But they should talk, and try to figure everything out. Even if he didn't really know what *everything* was, what he wanted, except for *her*.

Rhys couldn't understand, not really. So if Rhys wanted to banish him somewhere, fine. Elain would come with him. They'd leave, and good fucking luck to Rhys with the impending war.

To hell with all of them for trying to come between him and Elain, for not grasping what was so very obvious.

Some small part of him bucked and thrashed at that thought. Some small part of him wanted to shake himself by the shoulders and roar.

But what did he have left, really, if not this blisteringly bright thing with Elain? She made his shadows disappear—made them *run*. How could the others not understand what a gift that was to him?

He was death, and she was life. Where his soul was soiled and bloodied, hers was pristine, verdant.

Perhaps his father's hateful wife had been right: he was a demon who should have been drowned at birth. If Bryaxis had taught him anything yesterday, it had been that, deep down, he was still that monster, still capable of doing things his friends would never, not in a million years, consider.

His shadows curled at his shoulders, in his lap. *The world is dimming*, they cautioned. *The winter dark closes in on all sides—*

He banished them with a flash of teeth. They slunk back to the corners of the room.

He'd find Elain. He'd talk to her, after everyone had some time to cool off. Together, he and Elain would figure out a plan.

And then they'd make everything right.

CHAPTER 24

Nesta

Nesta inhaled through her nose, silently counting to three. The salt and damp of the sea filled her nostrils, along with the sweetness of morning grass and the faint rot of falling leaves.

Once again she stood on the cliff from which she'd attempted to winnow to the Prison days before. But a wholly altered vista greeted her.

The sea was calm today—a crushing blue and still as a mirror. Gulls circled above, crying to one another. Nesta exhaled through her mouth, the autumn sun resting against her back like a friendly hand.

She gathered her strength, her concentration, for this monumental jump over the horizon. She focused on her toes, warm within her boots, cushioned in the meadow grasses that stretched to the edge of the cliff.

No one knew she'd come here. She'd meant what she'd said to Cassian. She didn't know *what* her place was within this court—only that she loved many of the people in it. She'd thought that meant turning away from this horizon line, but what if it meant going toward it? What if what she sought —the way to save them, protect them—lay all the way out there, somehow?

If she could only make the final leap. Rally enough of her remaining power to cross all the way to the Prison and whatever secrets it might hold.

Rhys had told her to ask for his help in this, but she knew it was something she had to do alone.

Nesta breathed in again, focusing once more on her toes, the ground, the sky. Exhaled. Willed her well of power to refill, to steady. Willed her lungs to stop heaving, her heart to ease its thundering gait. A few more minutes—she'd rest here a few more minutes, then attempt the jump.

Even if a voice in the back of her mind warned her not to dare. She didn't have the power, the skill. She'd wind up beneath the ocean again, wind up dead this time—

"So Bryaxis attacks," mused a female voice behind her, "and the first thing you do is go stand in a meadow and *breathe*?"

Nesta whirled, hand reaching for Ataraxia at her side.

Somehow, Amren was there in the meadow, despite not being able to winnow. Nesta's shoulders slumped, a deep exhale bursting out of her.

"I needed a moment to myself," she lied. "Away from everyone. I needed to hear myself think."

Amren's red lips, back to their usual color, tugged into a grin. "It is often hard to do that with all those loudmouths running around the river house, isn't it?"

Nesta snorted. "Yes." She tucked an errant strand of hair behind an ear, hoping the female would keep believing the lie she'd been fed. "When did you get back?"

"Oh, I'm not back," Amren drawled. "Not yet, at least. Varian and I were winnowing to Velaris when I sensed you out here, thinking and breathing in the grass. I bade him to leave me over there"—a nod toward the rolling green meadow sloping away behind her—"and told him to come back for me in ten minutes. Though perhaps *you* could winnow me there." A wry look. "Since you seem to be capable of such things these days."

Nesta straightened. "I wasn't keeping it a secret. I just . . . didn't want anyone knowing until I could do it right." She hadn't told Cassian yet—though now that she'd told Feyre, she knew she should.

Amren waved a delicate hand. "We all keep secrets these days, don't worry."

Ah. "Is that why you're here?" There had to be some bigger reason than Amren sensing her and wanting to say hello. She'd sensed her *and* wanted to tell her something important—away from everyone.

"You could say that." Amren's eyes glimmered with a hint of that old, otherworldly silver. "Rhys gave you the Trove, didn't he?"

"And the blades." Nesta jerked her chin to where Ataraxia lay sheathed at her side. After the other day, she'd decided she'd wear it at all times—and if their enemies discovered that she had Made a magic blade . . . well, she'd make sure they didn't live long enough to tell anyone else. And if she failed, Rhys would see to it.

It didn't matter in the end, that Cassian had told Rhys that she was afraid of the Trove, but the knowledge lingered, like an open sore she couldn't stop picking at. Her mate answered to Rhys, though—reported everything to him as his general. She supposed she'd have to adapt her expectations of what confidences he'd keep, especially where her powers and the Trove were concerned.

"Good." Amren nodded her approval at Ataraxia. "With all the forces that gather against us, we cannot afford to have one of our greatest weapons"—she gestured toward Nesta herself—"disarmed and cut off from the very tools that might save us. Especially when you seem to be the only one capable of doing what needs to be done, even when it's a thankless, impossible task."

Nesta stilled. "What does that mean?"

Amren's gaze simmered. "You gave Bryce Quinlan the Mask, knowing it would earn you the fury and scorn of your family. You knew all that it would cost you, yet you did it because the risk to entire *worlds* was too great. You did not debate it, did not seek permission, did not *waste time*. You knew it would strain the ties most valuable to you, but you did it anyway. *That* is the kind of person we need wielding the Trove and those swords.

"And yesterday, against Bryaxis, your actions provided a needed reminder for Rhys to trust you again—to get those weapons back into your hands. He learned not only what having you at odds with him would cost, but also what locking up the Trove and swords could mean in the struggle against our enemies. He learned, with his son right there, that even a few seconds of having to decide whether to give them to you would risk that which he loves the most. And perhaps more important, Feyre is now determined. Focused. The great beast inside her has stirred again, realizing that nothing but total ruthlessness will protect her young. There is no force in any world greater than that—the love of a mother for her child."

Nesta slowly shook her head. “I don’t understand why you’re telling me this.”

“Because I want to ensure you fully grasp where I stand when I advise you that it is in the best interests of this court if you tell Rhys you’re sorry for what happened with the Mask.”

Nesta started. “You think *I* should apologize?” She’d never heard Amren utter the word *sorry* even once. And Nesta had felt, this morning with Rhys, that she and the High Lord were beginning to understand each other.

Amren shrugged, her gray silk blouse shimmering with the movement. “I understand your decision, but it was no small thing to hand over the Mask. There’s a vital trust that still needs to be rebuilt, girl.”

Nesta squared her shoulders. “If Feyre trusts me, that should be enough for Rhys.”

“I think,” Amren said, the wind ruffling her hair, “that if you had *asked* Rhysand about handing over the Mask, he would have eventually agreed with you. He’d have argued against it, but in the end, he would have relented. He wouldn’t have been able to sleep at night knowing he’d damned an entire world by not helping.” Amren studied her red, glossy nails. “But the fact that you *didn’t* ask, and went ahead and gave the Mask to Miss Quinlan . . . it frightens him. More than he’ll admit. So apologize and give him one less thing to worry about. He’s trusting you again, obviously, as he’s already given you the Trove, but he needs to know that you will obey when necessary. That will be a vital piece of surviving the evil that gathers around us.”

Nesta crossed her arms. “So it’s about controlling me?” Disgust and annoyance flared through her, and though the bulk of her power had returned to the Cauldron, she knew silver flame still flickered in her stare.

“No,” Amren said coolly. “It’s about where you fit into this court.”

“I’m a Valkyrie. That’s all anyone needs to know.” She’d sweated and bled for that title.

“But who do the Valkyries serve?” At Nesta’s suddenly neutral face, Amren added, “Are Rhys and Feyre your High Lord and Lady?”

Nesta had never sworn allegiance to either of them. As an individual or as a Valkyrie. At the thought of kneeling before Rhys and Feyre, however much she might care about and respect them . . . Her teeth clenched.

“I thought so,” Amren said a shade quietly. “And don’t believe Rhys hasn’t thought about that, too.”

“Feyre is my sister. I’ll always help her.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“So, what,” Nesta snapped, unable to help it, “I need to get on my knees and swear fealty?”

The wind dragged strands of Amren’s hair across her pale face. Her lips curved into a sharp smile. “No. But I think you already know where your path lies, Nesta Archeron.”

I think that eight-pointed star was tattooed on you for a reason.

Amren nodded, like she’d somehow heard the memory of Bryce Quinlan’s words echo through Nesta’s head. Her eyes turned to quicksilver as she cast her gaze toward the northern horizon, as if she could see all the way to the Prison. “So do it.”

How Amren knew, how she guessed—“It’s too far. I can’t rally the power to winnow all the way out there.”

“I would go with you, if I could,” Amren admitted, voice raw. But the female would never again set foot on that blasted island. From fear, from rage, from the threat of whatever forces might try to entomb her down there again. “But in lieu of that, I will tell you this: winnowing is as much a matter of will as it is of power.”

“But when the others winnow—”

“You are not the others. No rules need apply to you, if you do not wish to submit to them.”

Nesta swallowed hard. “Do you know why . . . What’s waiting out there?”

Amren answered gravely, “It’s for you to learn. And for you to decide whether to go that way”—she pointed toward Velaris—“to serve the court and family you love.”

“Or?” Nesta dared ask.

Amren pointed to the Prison. “Or to go there. To see if there might be more.”

“More *what*?” Nesta begged.

“More ways, other ways, to serve. To save those you love.”

Bryce’s voice echoed in Nesta’s head: *Through love, all is possible*.

“I will say,” Amren murmured, “the fact that you can and do love us, Nesta Archeron, is something of a miracle, and brings me a great deal of joy.”

Nesta’s throat closed up.

"Find a way to save us," Amren said. "Explore the forgotten tunnels and passages. Rhys has altered the wards to the Prison to allow our circle in—since *you all seem to keep winding up there*, he told me. Find what keeps calling to you, what keeps bringing you here to this cliff at the edge of the world."

"Maybe it's nothing," Nesta hedged.

"Maybe. But you'll never know for sure unless you go."

"You're not going to warn me not to enter the Prison alone?" As far as Nesta knew, no one in this court had ever risked such a thing.

"The others have not been called there, not as you have. Even your sisters are not Made quite as you are. So go explore. See what wants so desperately to be found. Maybe the Mother is throwing us a bone." She surveyed Nesta from head to toe. "And bring Gwydion with you."

Nesta reached a hand to the sword at her hip. "I have Ataraxia—"

"Gwydion found its way into your hand. Don't turn your back on its blessing."

Nesta swallowed, but nodded. A wish, and the legendary sword appeared, sheathed down her spine. Its power tingled along her back like a lover's breath over her skin. Rhys had shown her how to retrieve the blade and put it away earlier—and though it would likely take her a damn long time to figure out more complicated things, at least this had proved easy enough to master.

Amren's silver eyes gleamed with approval.

So Nesta turned toward the horizon, the vast, still sea sparkling between her and that island.

"*Will* it, girl. Focus that will into your power," Amren ordered, "and it shall be done."

Nesta closed her eyes. Rallied her power in the back of her mind. *The Prison. I will go to the Prison.*

In her mind, a blazing hand of power reached for her over that horizon. Nesta did not hesitate. She grabbed the hand. Wind and darkness and pressure, and—

Green. Mist. Quiet.

As easily as walking from one room to the next, Nesta stepped onto the mossy, chilled earth of the Prison's lowlands.

Its sole mountain rose like a tidal wave. There was nothing but mossy rocks and grass between her and her goal, near its summit.

The gates of bone.

Mist and wind wrapped around her, but her focus remained fixed on those distant gates now groaning open, as if pushed by phantom hands.

As if to welcome her in.

She was shaking by the time she reached the top of the slope, and not just from exhaustion. Had the bone gates always towered so high? Had the darkness within always been so thick?

It took a moment to get her numb, trembling fingers to properly latch onto Gwydion's black hilt. To draw the sword, as Amren had bade her, its black metal now glistening with starlight. Even that seemed to get sucked into the looming darkness of the Prison. But the radiance warmed her, somehow. Her grip steadied on the hilt. Strength flowed down her arm. Whether it was her own courage or the blade, she didn't care.

Exhaling a steadying breath, Nesta stepped through the gates. Into the dark.

Gwydion shone like a dark star in the obsidian silence. A few feet in, its illumination silvered the stone walls, the rocky path plunging downward. No faelights needed.

"All right," she said into the stillness. "Let's see what—"

Gwydion's light went out.

Darkness slammed in around her. Nesta yelped, instinct igniting a kernel of faelight as she dropped the sword like a novice—

But no clang of metal on stone rang out. She spun in a circle, fingers still wrapped around a hilt that was no longer there. The ground at her feet was empty. Only rock and dust.

It took her a heartbeat to understand.

Gwydion's light hadn't been extinguished—Gwydion had disappeared, right out of her hand.

The Prison had stolen it.

Mor

Despite Cassian's teasing, five trunks of clothing wasn't *nearly* enough. Mor had squeezed her things into every last crevice—not just the clothing, but also the jewelry, the hair accessories, the *shoes* . . .

For Cassian, it was easy. He walked into a place in all that armor and looked terrifying, and he usually got his way.

Her outfits—*her* armor—required more calculation, depending on who she was meeting, and what she wanted, what *they* wanted, and the location where they met.

She'd bidden her farewells at breakfast, not that it had been a particularly cheerful one. But she'd smothered Nyx with kisses all over his face—which had been covered in most of the mashed-up goop Rhys had been feeding him—and then deliberately kissed Cassian on the cheek, smearing said goop on him, and headed for the door.

Feyre had laughed. Nesta had stared at Mor with the wariness that only a female who'd just witnessed another female kissing her mate could conjure.

So Mor had winked at Nesta, as if to say, *Relax, he's all yours.*

If Nesta had been any other person, Mor might have quipped, *Been there, done that*, but they'd already dealt with one disaster mere hours before. And had endured Bryaxis hours before that. She didn't need to add a brawl with Nesta to the list.

Snickering at the memory, Mor stepped out the front door and onto the sun-washed front lawn. She preferred her goodbyes like this—no prolonged embraces or advice from the overprotective males in her life.

Even if the most overprotective of those males wasn't even here.

Her stomach twisted. She'd come as close as she'd ever dared to telling Azriel everything last night. Why she hadn't once returned the love and desire she'd seen in his eyes from the moment they'd met. Why it would have been so unfair of her, so cruel, to grant him that even once, knowing what he felt . . . and knowing where her heart usually lay.

What Bryaxis had shown her yesterday at the temple had cemented for her that she could *never* tell him, though. She'd barely slept at all last night thanks to seeing it play out, over and over again, in agonizing detail.

She rolled her shoulders as she crossed the lawn, the dew tickling her ankles. Her heavy gown—a thicker green silk, long-sleeved, and more modest than she usually favored—and fur-lined cape dragged in the grass behind her, both far too warm for the autumn weather in Velaris. But the moment she set foot in Vallahan, she'd be shivering if she wasn't dressed appropriately, and she couldn't afford to show them even that sliver of vulnerability.

She crossed the wards surrounding the property, their tingling the only sign of breaching the boundary. Her trunks were already held in that in-between pocket that was so useful for traveling—not as big as Rhys's, but she could certainly carry five trunks crammed with clothes—and all she had to do now was simply picture the visitors' landing space outside the golden walls of Thrudheim, summon nearly the entirety of her power, and winnow there.

One last attempt to stop this madness before it wreaked havoc on their world.

Feyre and Rhys had already planned out an alternate treaty, in case Storr failed. Mor would present it to Vallahan first, to see if the king found it any more palatable—as he seemed the most predisposed toward her. Or at least willing to lend her an ear.

She flexed her hands at her sides, working out the faint trembling in them. It was a fool's errand. She knew it—Rhys and Feyre knew it. Vallahan would know it, too. But she'd try. One last time.

Mor sucked in a breath, an ancient, night-kissed power awakening from its slumber deep within her. Different from Rhys's. Older. Her hateful father had tried to lord that over Rhys's father once—Keir had wound up with two broken legs as a result.

It had been one of the few times Mor had appreciated the former High Lord. And one of the first times in her childhood at the Hewn City that she'd smiled.

Keir had seen that smile, though. In his agony, he'd seen her in the shadows, laughing softly at his screams. When he'd recovered, he'd broken one of her legs and asked her if it was still funny.

She'd seen that yesterday, too.

Her mother had done nothing. And though Mor's Fae body had healed the broken bone—a straight snap across her shin—she hadn't smiled again for a long, long time. Until three arrogant, reckless Illyrian boys had overturned her life.

Gods, she'd left things a mess with Azriel. Maybe she should track him down and talk to him before leaving. The Mother knew when she'd be back, and—

"Take me with you."

Mor whirled. With the wall of wards, her senses had been muddled enough not to notice anyone approaching from the house.

But there stood Elain, immaculate in her heavy rose-colored dress and cloak. A small bag shook in her trembling hands.

Mor slowly blinked. "Excuse me?"

Elain's brown eyes were lined with silver, pleading as she crossed the wards. "Take me with you—to wherever you're going. I can't stay here."

Mor backed up a step—then another. "I'm going into enemy territory on a diplomatic mission," she said as gently as she could. "I know you're upset right now, but . . ." She hadn't believed it last night, and still couldn't quite believe it now: Azriel and *Elain*. In bed together. This sweet, shy young female had been sneaking behind her mate's back to tangle with the shadowsinger, of all people. "I can't bring you with me. I have an estate in the countryside—Athelwood—if you want to use it. No one is there except my horse, Ellia. She's docile and sweet and you could ride her every day. You'd have the whole place to yourself, and it's warded to hell and back—"

"I don't want to go to an empty house. I don't want to be locked away and forgotten." Elain took another step, those doe-like eyes so wide, so searching. "Let me come with you. I won't get in your way. I won't talk to anyone, or do anything to jeopardize your task. I'll help tend to your clothes, fix your hair, whatever it is you need."

"You are the sister of the High Lady of the Night Court," Mor said, reeling. "Your presence will have a marked effect, and might make you a target."

"I can protect myself." Elain's chin lifted. Mor had enough decency not to scoff at the idea. "And as for being Feyre's sister . . . I think my presence will lend more legitimacy, more urgency to your requests for peace."

"How so?" Mor asked. She could humor her.

Elain glanced at the river house behind them. She definitely hadn't told anyone about this plan.

If Mor took Elain to Vallahan, who would kill her for it first? Rhys? Feyre? Nesta? Azriel? Lucien? The line of would-be Mor-murderers would stretch out the door.

But Elain explained, "It shows that Feyre is willing to send her flesh and blood as a sign of her goodwill. That she trusts them."

Mor crossed her arms. "Hmm."

Elain added sheepishly, "And there is also the fact that you and I are quite attractive."

Mor raised a brow. "What of it?"

Elain blushed. “That tends to make people agree to . . . things they might not otherwise agree to.”

Mor chuckled this time. “As flattering as it is that you think I—*we*—could deter this invasion from happening because we’re *that* good-looking . . . That’s not really how it works. These people are old and greedy enough that however tempting the thought of bedding one of us might be, the prospect of regaining vast swaths of territory is even more seductive.”

Elain grimaced, but tried again. “There’s also the fact that I’m Made.”

Mor stilled.

Elain pressed on, “And I am a Seer. I might not be privy to all your meetings, but I’m not a fool. I listen. I’m clever enough, even if none of you think of me that way.”

Something like shame twisted in Mor’s gut. But she made herself say, “So?”

Elain’s eyes shuttered. “So I understand what you fear is happening in Vallahan. That they either have or are about to attain a Made weapon. My sisters never bother to ask for my help, but . . .” A slight shrug. “Perhaps I could find it for you, figure out whether Vallahan already has it in their possession. Perhaps it would speak to me. Like calls to like. And I heard you need proof to present to potential allies—proof that these enemies are working with the one they call Koschei the Deathless. I can help find that, too, in whatever way I am able. People tend to forget I am there. Perhaps that’s not the most appealing asset, but it might be useful nonetheless.” The last words were barely more than a whisper. “I’m not skilled like my sisters are in so many things, but I can try. I *will* try.”

Mor said nothing. Just stared at her. Thinking.

Elain deflated. Her shoulders sank, head bowing. Like she already knew what Mor would say. What the others had said to her a hundred times these past few years.

It was awful. That crumbling, curling-inward motion.

“I can’t . . .” Elain said thickly. “I can’t stay here,” she repeated. “I *can’t*.” Her voice broke. “And I want to be useful. For once.”

Mor peered at the river house. They’d never, ever forgive her. It might even be worse than Nesta handing over the Mask.

“What about Az?” Mor asked carefully, a pang rocking through her at the memory of their argument on the bridge. No small part of her was actually relieved to be leaving, if only so she didn’t have to face him again soon.

Running away, a voice in her accused. *Like you always do*.

Elain's expression turned bleak. "I can't stay here," she whispered once more.

Mor inferred what she meant, the words Elain couldn't yet formulate. Elain needed time and distance—needed to be away so she could think and feel without anyone else swaying her. Mor knew exactly how it felt, how necessary it was, that leaving. That space. That need to run and run and not look back.

And beyond that, Elain was right. A Seer—a *Made* Seer—would be useful in Vallahan. They needed to find that Made object. To know if Vallahan already had it in hand.

Mor started, "If I take you—"

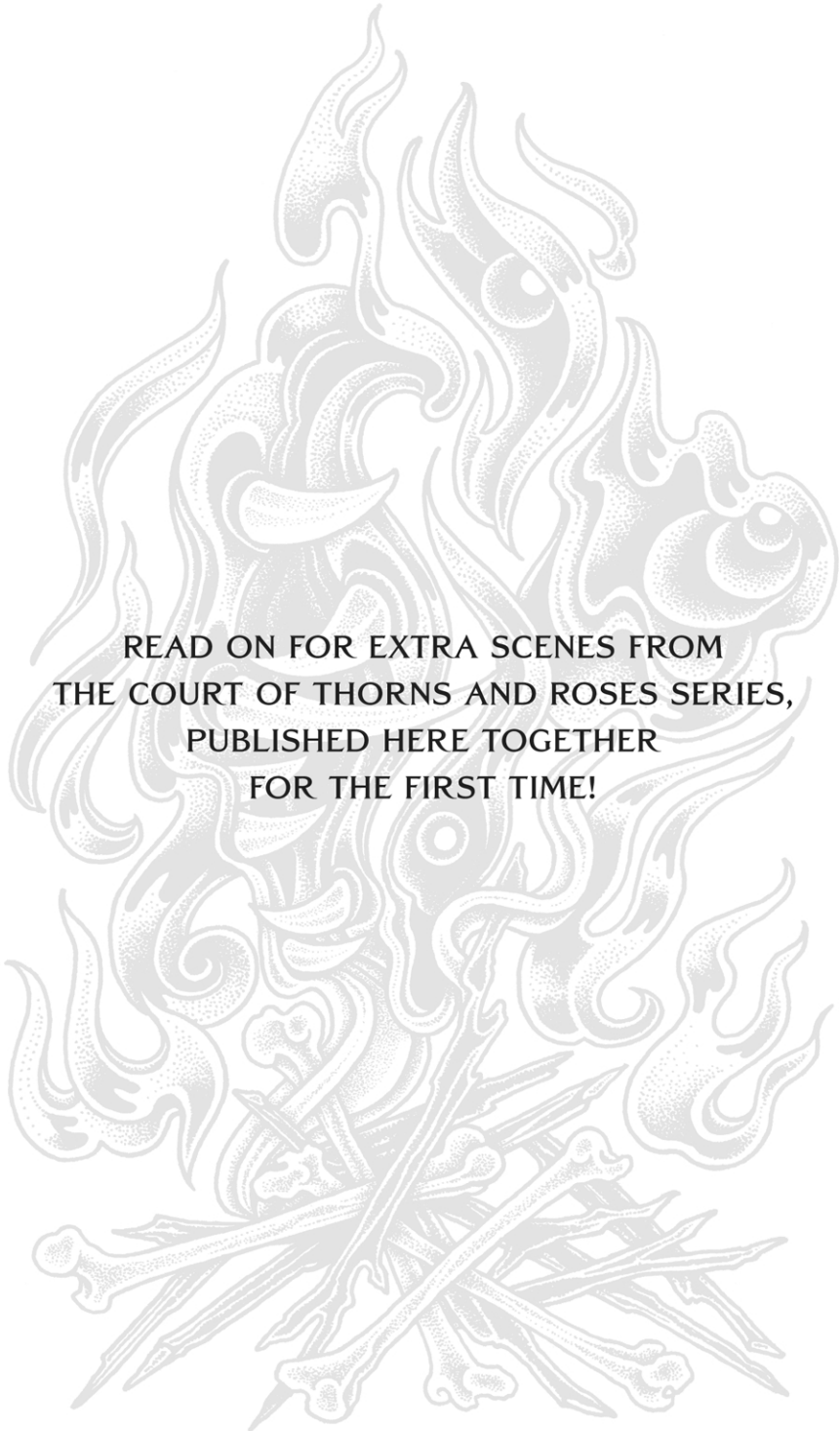
Elain's brown eyes turned nearly gold with hope. "I will do whatever tasks need to be done, I will listen to every order you give me, I won't get in your way—I promise."

Mor squinted at the blue sky and sighed. "Please don't make me regret this," she said—and held out her hand.

Elain beamed, tears of pure relief shining now, and grabbed Mor's hand. "Thank you." She squeezed tightly enough to hurt. "Thank you."

Mor sighed again, rallying even greater power this time, enough to carry two bodies across the world. She'd be drained to near-uselessness when they arrived at Thrudheim. "Wait to thank me until you feel how cold it is in Vallahan," she muttered.

And then they were gone.



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Nesta & Cassian

It wasn't that he was looking for a fight, Cassian told himself as he circled above the sprawling estate for the fifth time, despite the unseasonable, early spring chill so brutal it could steal the breath from even the most battle-scarred Illyrian warrior. Rhys *had* asked him to deliver his latest letter to the human queens, since Az was otherwise occupied trying to infiltrate whatever nasty defenses they held around their palace, and Mor didn't want to set foot in the mortal realm unless necessary. Amren, naturally, was out of the question—simply because she was Amren and it'd be like sending a plains-cat into a pen of lambs. So that left him.

Well, Feyre, too, but she and Rhys were . . . busy.

And, fine—maybe he'd agreed to come a bit *too* quickly, but . . . Cassian surveyed the estate, the muddy, thawing grounds, the distant village, and looming, budding forest. He'd left their first encounter here not entirely sure where he'd stood, or who'd had the upper hand. And, Mother damn him, in the past few weeks, he'd found himself turning over every word and look he'd exchanged with her, over and over.

None of it had been pleasant, every syllable from her mouth barbed and vicious, and . . . Cassian huffed a breath, hot tendrils ripping away in the wind. He couldn't tell what was worse: that he'd thought so much about it, or that he'd run here so damn fast. And was now . . . dawdling.

The thought sent him into a swift, near-reckless dive for the green-roofed estate, his magic's cloaking rendering him little more than a fell wind and a hollow boom of wings. The horses in the nearby stables thrashed and nickered at his approach, but their keepers scanned their immediate surroundings, found nothing of alarm, and resumed their work.

Cassian tried not to think about how easy it was—how that lack of awareness, that lack of instinct, would likely cost them their lives should the wall be shattered. Should someone like him turn this estate into a personal hunting ground.

He'd seen it happen in the last war—not that many humans had been wealthy enough to own property. But he'd witnessed what had been left of entire slave camps when one of the Fae decided to have some fun. The thought was enough for him to clench his teeth and hone his focus on the front door before him.

They'd sent word yesterday about precisely when to expect him. So when he knocked on the front door, it was a matter of a heartbeat before it was yanked open.

The sharp movement told him which sister had been waiting.

Yet with his magic cloaking him, Nesta Archeron and her unnervingly perfect face saw nothing but thinning patches of snow on the muddy lawn and the sloping drive cutting through it, the cobblestones gleaming with streams of melting ice. She casually opened the door for him to pass, and called to the insufferably nosy housekeeper that no one was at the door and the sound had only been the wind.

Right. Because emptying the house of all the servants so often would raise more suspicions than was safe. Especially with the other sister engaged to a Fae-hunting prick.

The housekeeper scuttled into the immaculate foyer to confirm for herself that no one was there, but Nesta merely informed her that she was going upstairs and not to disturb her for an hour. The woman opened her mouth to object, but Nesta, with rather impressive flatness, repeated her order and began her ascent up the grand, carpeted staircase.

The housekeeper's eyes thinned to slits as the young mistress strode away—and Cassian kept his steps quiet as death as he eased around the aging woman, then up the stairs as well.

He was focusing hard enough on keeping silent, on keeping his wings tucked in tight so they didn't rustle anything, that he barely took in the heavy, pale purple gown, simpler than others he'd seen Nesta in, tight enough in the bodice to show off her slim waist, the fitted sleeves displaying her slender arms. A thinner build than Feyre and Elain—discounting the generous breasts that he glimpsed as Nesta reached the top of the stairs and turned left.

Not that he looked at them. Much.

For all the world, Nesta was merely trudging to her room, perhaps a bit grumpy and groggy. But as soon as she entered the spacious bedroom, bedecked in velvets and silks of varying shades of blue and silver, and shut the oak door a moment later, the heavy, slow posture vanished.

Along with his cloaking.

A blink was her only tell of discomfort or surprise—and he may or may not have let his wings spread a bit wider as she looked him over.

"You're ten minutes late," she only said, moving toward the far end of the room, where a fire crackled against early spring's chill. Where the sound of the flames might cover their voices. Clever girl.

"I do have other duties, you know," he said with equal quiet, flashing a grin.

Like circling the house because he was compiling a list of choice insults to throw her way, responses to an invented argument. Like a complete fool.

"Here I was," Nesta said, a pillar of ice and steel beside the hearth, "thinking I heard you flapping around for ten minutes. It must have been a pigeon stuck in one of the chimneys."

Cassian just stared at her. She stared at him.

His temper rose with dizzying speed at the words, the absurd perfection of her. A blade given form—that's what she was.

He smiled, slow and vicious, precisely in the way he'd learned made her see red. A smile that he knew instantly unsheathed those lovely claws of hers. "Hello, Nesta. Nice to see you."

No reaction, no shift in her scent at the smile that usually made his enemies start running. Nothing, save for the delicate flare of her nostrils. "How is my sister?"

Healing, he almost said. *Trying to outrun the fact that she's falling in love with Rhys, and pointedly ignoring the fact that he's been in love with her for a damn long time. That all signs point to them being mates, but I'm not stupid enough to say it to either of them.*

So he merely said, "Busy."

A flicker of her throat. "So busy she cannot deign to visit, it seems."

"Feyre's got enough on her plate—with the situation with Hybern and outside of it."

The fire drew out the golden sheen in Nesta's hair as she angled her head. A predator sizing up a worthy opponent. "And what is your role in all of it?"

Cassian braced his feet apart on the floor. "I command Rhys's armies."

Her blue-gray eyes flicked over him in a sweep that might have cut off a lesser male's balls. "All of them?"

"The important ones."

A snort, and she looked toward the fire. As sure a dismissal and belittling as he'd ever encountered.

Cassian stiffened. "And what, exactly, do *you* do that's of importance?"

Her head snapped up. Oh, that had hit its mark.

"Why should I bother defending myself," Nesta said with lethal cold, "to a male who is so puffed up on his own sense of importance there's barely enough space in the room for his enormous head?"

It was his turn to blink.

Then he was stalking toward her, his long stride eating up the ornate carpet between them. She did not recoil, did not yield one step back. Only lifted her chin to meet his stare as he towered over her, spreading his wings slightly, and said through his teeth, "Do you have news from the queens?"

Her brows flattened. "Leader of the High Lord's armies, and yet the brute remains. You cannot cow me with words, so you seek to intimidate me through your hulking size."

"*Hulking*—"

"You need me far more than I need you. So I'd suggest you merely agree, tuck in those bat wings, and ask nicely."

He did no such thing.

But he did take a step closer, bracing a hand on the mantel, and leaned in close enough to breathe in that scent of hers.

It hit him in the gut so hard he could barely focus, and it took five centuries of training to make himself meet her eyes rather than let his own roll back into his head, to keep himself poised there instead of burying his face in the crook between her neck and shoulder, to keep from moving closer, from . . . *touching*.

No blush stained her cheek as he held the distance between them, hardly more than a hand's span between their faces.

She was young—twenty-two, twenty-three at most. But had she been with a man? He shouldn't have cared, or wondered, and it made no difference to him, but . . . normally, he could tell. She . . . Cassian couldn't read her at all. So he moved his head closer, his dark hair sliding over his brow, and purred, "There are other ways I could play nice, Nesta Archeron."



The Fae male—Cassian—was dangerous.

Of course, he was dangerous in the expected ways: tall, muscled, skilled in weaponry and war. Then there were those enormous wings, and the little fact that he was a deadly Fae warrior who served at the feet of the most powerful High Lord in history. A High Lord her sister was now entangled

with—falling in love with, if she'd read it right. The High Lord already loved her wildly, that much was clear.

But Cassian was dangerous for another reason entirely. Not the handsome face, but those hazel eyes . . . They had a way of assessing everything and everyone.

Standing flush against the mantel, the snapping fire was blazingly hot against her left side as Cassian towered over her, close enough to share air. Nesta counted her breaths. Held that gaze, willing him not to see too far, too deep. Better to keep him distracted with the barbed words, the utter dismissal.

Or—this. The offer he'd thrown her way, the test.

No doubt to find another weakness. Was there a way past her defenses in *that* regard?

Play nice. A small smile curved her lips.

"If I wanted a male pawing at me," Nesta said, refusing to let her chin lower, "I'd sooner ask one of the hounds."

That insufferable smile remained. And Cassian went right for the throat as he said, "Have you ever *been* with a male, Nesta?"

To lie or tell the truth—where did the advantage lie? So she merely said, "Have *you*?"

Cassian snorted, the breath of it caressing her lips. "I asked first, sweetheart." He angled his head, that night-dark hair sliding over his brow like silk. "Unless you prefer females?"

It was by no means an insult if she did, but there was taunt enough in it that she placed a brazen hand on his chest. Sculpted muscle lay beneath the tight fighting leathers, the warmth of him leaking into her palm. Fire—he reminded her of fire made flesh. She pushed gently on his chest, her hand somehow seeming smaller against the broadness of his torso.

Trained killer—predator by birth and training.

Arrogant by nature.

Cassian only straightened as she dared a step closer, forced to do so merely because if he hadn't, her mouth and his would have found themselves with no distance between them at all. "Who and what I prefer is none of your concern," she said. "Nor is—"

"You haven't answered my first question. Or are all these other questions a diversion?"

"What's it to you?"

“More questions.” A cocky grin.

And that easily, she found it—the answer she knew would claw at him.

Nesta brushed her body against his, barely more than a whisper of a touch, but it still made him stiffen. Still made his pupils expand to nearly devour those hazel irises. She crooned, “No, I haven’t.” The truth. Her hand dug into the leather-covered chest. “Why should I have bothered? By the time I came of age, I was surrounded by low-born brutes and bastards. I’d rather use my own hand than sully myself with theirs.”

Any amusement faded. She could have sworn she heard the arrow of her words strike their target. She’d picked up enough about his upbringing. So she’d told him the truth—and wrapped it in a bundle of blades designed to slice him if he thought too long on it.

No, she had not been with any male, Fae or human. Tomas had wanted to, and she . . . some part of her had known no future lay with him. Knew about his hateful father, and that he did nothing to prevent the man from beating his mother. She had barely let Tomas kiss her, and that day when she had ended it, he’d . . .

She swallowed, shutting out the memory of what he’d said and done. The sound of her tearing dress. No—it hadn’t gone that far, but . . . The blind terror in those moments he’d tried, before she’d screamed and clawed her way free. And never told anyone.

Something must have shown on her face, in her scent.

Because his annoyance vanished—no, it shifted. Into something else, something . . . Rage.

That’s what stilled Cassian’s face.

Pure, burning rage.

It robbed her of breath, of any sort of sense that she might indeed have the upper hand as he ground out, “Who.”

She hated Tomas, hated him enough that she sometimes hoped he’d get run over by a cart, but she wouldn’t wish on anyone the sort of death Cassian’s eyes promised.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, and made to withdraw her hand.

He gripped it, faster than she could detect, and pinned it there.

His heart was beating at a gallop now—a thunderous, mighty gallop.

Dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, this male.

If only for the fact that he made her feel so out of control. That she had no idea what he'd do—what *she'd* do—if he found her vulnerable for even a moment.

"Did someone hurt you," he said, his voice so guttural she could barely understand it.

The wrath, the utter stillness with which he stood—this was how he was when he was close to killing. *Wanted* to kill.

His hand pressed into hers, calluses scraping.

She hadn't answered him. "Would it change anything if someone had? Would it make you see me differently, treat me differently?"

"It'd make me hunt them down and shatter every bone in their body."

A shiver went down her spine—not at the fear of him, but at the truth in the promise. The sincerity.

"You don't know me," she said. "Why bother?"

Cassian snarled, inching closer, his hand gripping hers—then paused. As if the question sunk in. As if reality sunk in. He blinked. "I'd do it for anyone."

She knew he meant it—and that he would.

Perhaps that was what unnerved her, made her want to slice at him. The utter sincerity. That he honored his promises, and did not make them lightly. That he saw and spoke the truth, and when he'd seen her that first day, he'd weighed her . . . actions when they'd lived in that cottage.

Her cowardice, selfishness. The rage that had consumed her, so that she wanted them all to starve, just to see if their useless father would bother to save them. And then little Feyre had stepped in, and Nesta had hated her for it, too—that Feyre had done the unthinkable and kept them alive.

She didn't know what to do with it, that rage. It still burned and hunted her, still made her want to rip and roar and rend the world into pieces. She felt it all—too keenly, too sharply. Hated and cared and loved and dreaded, more than other people, she sometimes thought. Could sift between them all in a matter of moments, like she was trying on different sets of clothes, and no one could tell or care.

Except him. He could see it, feel it.

That first afternoon, he'd looked at her—not at the face and the body that human men marked, but *her*—and he had seen it all. She'd wanted to hurt him for it before he could reveal those things to everyone else, find a way to *break* him so he couldn't—

The hand pushing her own against his chest gentled. Cassian's thumb stroked the back of her palm, the pad of it rough with calluses.

A log shifted in the fire, snapping as embers exploded, flaring light into the room.

She'd been staring at him. He blinked, mouth parting slightly.

Cassian leaned toward her, and Nesta found herself tipping her head back, exposing her neck, granting him utter access as he grazed his nose against her throat.



Mother and Cauldron damn him both.

This woman.

Nesta.

Cassian couldn't bring himself to step back from the line that was so clearly drawn between them. One moment, he'd wanted to throttle her, then he'd read that terror on her face regarding her own past and he'd gone so murderously calm he'd scared even himself, then . . . then it had all stopped, the eye of a storm with them in it, and there she was.

And in those blue-gray eyes, he could see the thoughts swirling in her as if they were smoke under glass. The cunning mind at work behind that face —the one he hadn't been able to get out of his head these weeks.

So he'd just . . . moved.

And then Nesta had tipped up her chin, allowing him access to her throat.

Every instinct in his body came roaring to the surface, so violent he had to choke them with a brutal grip or else he'd find himself on his knees, begging her for a touch, for *anything*.

But he leaned in, and grazed the tip of his nose along the side of her neck.

Soft—her skin was so soft; so fragile. He could scent the mortal blood rushing just beneath. Cassian breathed in the smell of her into his lungs, stirring his cock as it latched onto some intrinsic part of him and sank its talons deep.

Nesta Nesta Nesta

Her eyes drifted closed, and a small, breathless sound came out of her as Cassian brushed his lips over where his nose had touched.

His knees nearly buckled as her slender hand dug into his fighting leathers. He tried not to think of what that hand would feel like on other parts of him. Gripping him; stroking him.

More more more, his body sang.

He angled his head and kissed another spot, closer to her jaw.

Her frantic heartbeat was like a hummingbird's wings, though her body remained tight and loose in all the right places, a flush spreading across those gorgeous breasts of hers. Big enough to fill his hands, to nuzzle until she was begging him—

Her pulse hammered right beneath his mouth. His tongue brushed it.

It was that touch that had her jolting back.

Nesta slammed into the wood paneling hard enough that he reached for her. But she was wide-eyed, livid, as she put a hand to her throat.

Cassian beat her to the venom about to blast from that throat and said, "Wound a bit tight these days, Nesta?"

She lowered her hand and hissed, "Is it some faerie magic of yours, to do such things?"

He barked a laugh. "No. Though I'm flattered you think so."

Nesta glowered, but let out a low, considering chuckle. "Well," she said, sliding past him and pacing for the window with smooth, calculated steps. "If that's what a bastard-born Fae warrior can do, no wonder my sister has become so entangled with the High Lords."

Bitch.

Bitch for the insult to him and to Feyre. "Did it bother you more that you wanted it, or that it was a bastard-born nobody who made you feel such things, Nesta?"

"It's been a long winter. Beggars can't be picky, I suppose." Wall after wall after wall snapped up, her posture going stiffer, and—

What did he care? What *did* he care? He had enough shit to deal with. Throwing in a mortal who would have a few more decades before things between them became awkward was . . . foolish. And then there would be the matter of explaining it to everyone.

To Mor. His blood chilled.

He wasn't stupid. He knew she and Azriel were . . . whatever they were. Knew Azriel had been in love with Mor from the moment she'd strutted into the Illyrian war-camp five centuries ago. And Cassian had been jealous —of Mor's shy glances at Azriel in those first few weeks, and the fact that his dearest friend and brother . . . was looking at someone else. That she'd appeared, and then Azriel had changed. Only slightly, but Cassian had known his friend did not belong solely to him and Rhys anymore.

So when Mor had asked him to bed her . . . He'd done it. A jealous, stupid prick, he'd done it, and regretted it at that very first thrust, when he'd felt her maidenhead yield to him, and realized the enormity of what she'd done.

But then she'd walked away, and Azriel hadn't made a move, and . . . Mor was still there between them. Somewhere between friend and lover. Dear to him as family, but . . . Cassian had hated himself for that look on Azriel's face afterward.

And then for what had happened to Mor at her family's hands.

He'd had lovers, some for a night and some for months, and Mor had never cared, but . . .

This woman standing before him like a pillar of steel and flame . . . Cassian didn't want to tell Mor about her. About how he'd touched her neck.

Cassian managed to say, "Since you were happy for a distraction, I'll assume the queens haven't been in touch and be on my way." Before she managed to completely castrate him. He flicked his fingers, Rhys's letter appearing between them. He chucked it onto a low-lying nearby table. "Mail that to the queens as soon as you can."

Nesta glanced between the letter and him, her shoulders squaring. "Tell my sister and that new High Lord of hers to send someone else next time."

Cassian bared his teeth in a feral grin. "Tell your *other* sister we'd rather deal with her."

"Elain stays out of this. The less association with your kind, the better."

"Why are you letting her marry that bigoted prick?" The question snapped out of him.

"He has good reason to hate your kind. As do we all."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"I thought you were leaving."

"You have a damned opinion on everyone else in the world. Why not tell Elain she's marrying a monster?"

"Perhaps all you males are monsters."

If she'd been harmed by one, he didn't blame her for that feeling at all. But his words were still sharp as he said, "She deserves better than someone like that."

"Indeed she does." Flat and cold.

He pushed, simply because he damn well couldn't stop himself, "And what do *you* deserve?"

A slow smile, indeed a plains-cat readying for the kill. Then, "Certainly more than a bastard-born nobody."

Bitch. But he drawled, "What a fine partner you are, Nesta. Remind me to bring a book on military strategy the next time. Maybe you'll stand a chance then."

A cold, flat look.

"It's easier, isn't it," Cassian breathed, crossing the distance again, not caring who saw them standing in the bay window. "To wield the words and the coldness as armor to keep everyone from seeing where and who you failed and how you did not care until it was too late."

Only hatred gleamed in her eyes, no hint of that slumbering lust that had addled his senses.

"Well, I see it, Nesta Archeron. And all I see is a bored and spoiled girl __"

She moved with impressive swiftness for a human, but still too slow to prevent him from blocking her.

Cassian gripped her raised knee, a mere inch from his balls, and squeezed tight enough to make her hiss.

"Cheap shot," he said with a half smile. "Come play with me, Nesta, and I'll teach you far more interesting ways to bring a male to his knees."

She tried to wrench herself free, but he didn't let go. She swayed back, and he caught her by the waist, hauling her closer to keep her from falling through the window. He snickered at the skirts around him. "What are you hiding beneath all this, anyway?"

Nesta steadied herself enough to wrench her knee out of his grip. "Get out of my house."

Cassian simply grinned at her.

She surged for him.

He thought she'd strangle him, which was precisely why he gripped her wrists, but—

Her hands, cool and steady, landed on either side of his face. Tugged his head down.

Cassian's breathing turned jagged as her eyes flicked to his mouth, as her body came flush with his, those breasts so soft against him. *Stupid, stupid, stupid—*

He didn't care. Didn't give a shit as she rose up on her toes, her mouth nearing his—

Pain exploded between his legs, knocking the breath from his chest as that gods-damned knee of hers indeed found its mark.

Cassian staggered back, swearing viciously. She snorted, looking down at him as he fell on his ass into an armchair, clutching his stomach, trying to reorder his brain—

"You're all the same," she said, imperious as the night and cold as the dawn. "Perhaps being an immortal makes you predictable."

"*You*," he gasped out.

A low laugh broke from those lips, which he'd been fully prepared to taste, to *devour*—

"No, the queens did not send word," Nesta said, drifting toward the door. "I haven't heard from them at all."

Cassian willed his legs to move, but the pain lingered, immobilizing his knees.

"I'll mail the letter tomorrow morning." Nesta paused with her hand on the knob and looked over a shoulder. "You know nothing about who I am, and what I've done, and what I want. And while we're on the subject . . . Send someone else next time. If I see you on my doorstep, I'll scream loud enough for the servants to come running."

He gaped at her, the pain ebbing enough that he could stagger upright.

But Nesta was gone, slipping down the hall, where some servant called out to her and she murmured a response.

A minute later, he left. Not by the front door, but by squeezing through her gods-damned bedroom window like a thief in the night. He launched himself into the sky before anyone could wonder at the rustle and boom of wings.

Cassian did not circle over the house. But he could feel Nesta's attention as he soared for the wall. Even shielded from sight, he could feel those blue-gray eyes on him.

The feeling chased him all the way back to Velaris.

Feyre & Rhys

Well, that went better than I thought," Rhys admitted after everyone had departed, leaning his head back against the arm of the study's large couch. Nesta and Cassian had returned to the House of Wind, where my sister had promised to find some way to begin looking for the Dread Trove. My mate added wryly, "Despite that disaster with Elain and Nesta."

I'd returned from talking to my sister about the baby—the *boy*— to find Rhys lounging on the couch, an arm flung over his eyes, apparently needing a moment of peace after enduring Cassian and Azriel's exuberant elation.

I plopped onto the sofa beside Rhys, lifting his muscular legs to wiggle beneath them. "Elain showed some teeth," I observed. "I wasn't expecting that." Or what she'd said about her lingering trauma. I'd meant what I'd discussed with Nesta—how many times had I focused solely on *my* terror during Elain's suffering?

Rhys watched me through half-lidded eyes, the portrait of idle grace. But he said carefully, "How do you feel about it?"

I shrugged, leaning my head back against the cushions. "Guilty. She directed all of it at Nesta, but I deserve it, too."

Elain and I had grown closer since the war with Hybern had ended. True, I might never go out drinking with her the way I did with Mor, and sometimes Amren, but . . . well, with a baby coming, I couldn't drink, anyway. And while I might never run to Elain first with problems or for advice, we had a peaceful, amicable understanding. I found her to be a pleasant companion.

I wondered if she'd resent that judgment. I certainly would.

Rhys asked, "Have you ever seen Elain act like that before?"

"No." I chewed on my bottom lip. Rhys's gaze tracked the movement. "I mean, she's been brave when she had to be, but she's never been confrontational."

"Maybe she was never given the chance to be that way."

I whipped my head toward him. "You think I stifle her?"

Rhys held up his hands. "Not you alone." He surveyed the study as he thought. "But I wonder if everyone has spent so long assuming Elain is sweet and innocent that she felt she had to be that way or else she'd

disappoint you all." He sighed toward the ceiling. "With time and safety, perhaps we'll see a different side of her emerge."

"That sounds dangerously close to what Nesta said about Elain finally becoming interesting."

"Sometimes, Nesta isn't wrong."

I glowered at Rhys. "You think Elain's boring?"

"I think she's kind, and I'll take kindness over nastiness any day. But I also think we haven't yet seen all she has to offer." A corner of his mouth tugged upward. "Don't forget that gardening often results in something pretty, but it involves getting one's hands dirty along the way."

"And torn up by thorns," I mused, recalling a morning this past summer when Elain had come into the house, her right palm bleeding from several gashes thanks to a stubborn rosebush that had pierced her gloves. The thorns had broken off in her skin, leaving sharp splinters that I'd had to pull free.

I didn't dare mention that if she had been wearing the enchanted gloves Lucien had gotten her last Solstice, nothing would have pierced them at all.

I sighed, absently rubbing my still-flat stomach. "Let's focus on helping one sister before we start on the other."

"Agreed," Rhys drawled.

I pinned him with a look. "Did you really need to give Nesta that death glare earlier?"

He sat up, the soul of innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about, Feyre darling." He leaned in, and the air shimmered briefly as the shield around me dropped away. His lips brushed over my cheek. "I'd never do such a thing. You must be thinking of your other mate."

"Yes, the cruel, overprotective, half-insane one." I smiled as he kissed my jaw, then my neck. My toes curled.

"Cruel?" Rhys purred the word against my skin. "You wound me."

I let him lay me down on the cushions, savoring the weight of him as he braced himself on his elbows. "You look happy," he said, his smile soft and tender in a way so few in the world beyond Velaris ever saw.

"I am happy," I said. "I'm happy that our family can share in our joy." Regardless of how difficult my relationship had become with Nesta, it had lightened something in my chest when she congratulated us.

"If you think I'm overprotective," Rhys said, his dark hair sliding over his face, "then just wait until Mor comes home from Vallahan. You'll never

leave the house without an escort."

"I thought Azriel and Cassian would be the ones to worry about."

"Oh, they'll be bad. But Mor will probably add a second shield to you *and* check in six times a day to make sure you're eating and sleeping enough."

I groaned. "Mother spare me."

"Hmmm," Rhys said, his eyes near-dazzling as he fiddled with the end of my braid.

For a long minute, we smiled at each other. I drank in every elegant plane of his face, every ember of warmth and happiness that radiated from him. "Cassian said you've been moody. Why?"

I believed Cassian, but Rhys hadn't been moody around me at all. Whenever my mate had looked at me lately, only pure love had gleamed in his eyes.

I'd never forget the moment we'd learned I was carrying our child, that beautiful boy that the Bone Carver had once shown me. I'd been sitting at an easel in the gallery late at night, painting a nightmare I'd had the day before.

The children had gone home, and I'd been the only one there—which was unusual these days—and I was left with some rare extra energy after the lessons. The things the children painted often left me in tears, though I was always careful to hide it. But despite the upswell of complicated emotions this daily work had sparked in me, it had proved gratifying in a way I'd never anticipated. In a way all of my considerable magic had never made me feel.

And the only thing to do with those feelings was to paint them out.

The nightmare had left me off-balance the entire day, lingering in my mind like some sort of bruise. I'd been back Under the Mountain, once more facing my second trial, those jagged spikes descending to impale me if I did not pick the correct lever in time. I'd somehow become illiterate again, unable to decipher the markings on the wall, forced to pick my salvation or doom at random. Rhys had saved me then—but in the dream, he hadn't been there.

Only Amarantha had been present, the King of Hybern a shadow behind her, and somehow no one knew where I was, that I'd been dragged back here because she'd learned I'd somehow cheated my way out the first time, and I'd never escape, never escape, never escape—

That was the last thought I'd had before forcing myself awake—damp with sweat, my heart thundering in my chest. Rhys had stirred, tucking me into his side, his wing sweeping over us both, and although I'd cuddled into his warmth and strength, true sleep hadn't found me again.

So I'd waited until the children had left the studio for the day before hauling over a blank canvas and my palette. I made myself a steaming-hot cup of peppermint and licorice root tea, and picked up my brush.

I'd been painting out that nightmare for nearly two hours, my back to the door, when Rhys entered. He remained utterly silent. It wasn't the contented silence he sometimes fell into while he observed me painting. It was pure, shocked silence.

I'd twisted to look at him just in time to see him crash to his knees.

And then he'd been weeping, and laughing, and all I could make out in his ecstatic babbling was one word: *baby*. I'd leaped off the stool. I was weeping too by the time I launched into his arms, knocking us both to the ground, and he'd put a hand to my stomach in wonder.

Something had altered in my scent since I'd bid him farewell that morning, perhaps even since I'd said farewell to the children. Life had taken root within me at last.

We'd lain together on the floor, our laughter and our tears mingling, and only when we'd calmed had I kissed him. Our clothes had vanished after that, and I'd ridden him on the floor of the studio, letting the light within me shine brightly enough to cast shadows through the room. He'd begun crying again as he watched me move, silent tears streaming through the star-kissed night pouring off him, and when I'd leaned in to lick them away, he'd climaxed so hard it sent me spiraling to my own peak.

And now, just as he had after that time in the studio, his fingers began tracing idle circles over my stomach, up to my breasts, already heavy and aching in a way that had nothing to do with the desire building between my legs. It had been one of the first signs, beyond the vomiting that lately had been nearly around-the-clock: my breasts swelled, and *hurt*.

Rhys circled one of my nipples, and it hardened beneath his touch. He watched it pebble through my shirt, like a cat watching a mouse.

"Rhys," I said when my question remained unanswered. "Why did Cassian say you've been moody?"

He closed his mouth around my breast, teeth grazing me through my shirt. "No reason."

"Liar." I tugged on his hair, forcing his head up. "Tell me."

He shook off my grip and nuzzled his face into the side of my neck, lowering his body just enough that he showed me precisely how this was going to end. I couldn't stop my hips from rising to meet him. Another early sign: I'd been ravenously hungry. Not only for food.

There had been nights when I'd barely waited for Rhys to enter the bedroom before I'd ripped his clothes off, before I'd dropped to my knees and taken his cock deep in my mouth, or asked him to fuck me against the wall. There were entire days when I'd found myself needing him inside me so badly that I'd used my daemati gifts to ask him to meet me at the town house during lunch, since it was closer to the studio than our new home.

This lovely, perfect home that we'd built—with a nursery that, Cauldron willing, would be occupied sometime late this spring.

Rhys had matched my relentless hunger with his own. Sometimes we went slow, savoring every inch of each other, the embodiment of making love. Other times—usually—it was pure, rough fucking. Just this morning, I'd been so swarmed with need that we'd barely gotten through a private breakfast in our room before I climbed into his lap and rode him until we were both senseless with pleasure.

I'd asked Madja about it yesterday—whether it was . . . normal to want him *this* much.

Yes, she'd answered, eyes sparkling. *Many expectant mothers do not talk about it, but it has to do with your body's altering essence. I can't tell you why that is, but it is normal. Enjoy every moment of it.*

Rhys said against my neck, "I've been moody because I'm not getting any sleep." He licked up the side of my throat, and his hand drifted into my pants. I didn't stop it, not when his fingers found the slickness waiting for him. He let out a pleased growl. "See?"

I knew he was hedging, and I let it slide. I'd learned that Rhys would tell me what was bothering him when he was good and ready. Maybe Cassian had been misinterpreting it—maybe it had been directed toward my sister.

I knew that was unlikely.

But as Rhys slid his fingers inside me, setting a wickedly lazy rhythm, I let it drop. It had always been part of our friendship: to give each other the space to decide when we were ready to talk.

And then there was our final bargain, inked on us since we'd defeated Hybern . . . I kissed him deeply, tongue tangling with his. We wouldn't

spend a moment in this world without each other. I could only pray that our child would find such love one day.

Rhys brought me to the edge of climaxing, and then his hand and my clothes were gone. He unbuckled his pants with taunting slowness, watching my face as he pulled his considerable length free. He watched my face the entire time he slid into me in a single, mighty thrust, seemed to savor each of my moans and breathless pleas as he moved deep inside me.

As if he were memorizing it—all of it.

When we were both panting, Rhys's face still buried in my neck, my fingers idly tangling in his sweat-damp shirt, I said, "It feels real now that the others know."

Rhys knew what I meant. "There's one person left to tell."

I smiled, tugging his hair to get him to look at me. Rhys obeyed, staring down into my face. "You want to break the news to Mor or can I?" He'd known her the longest, but I considered her my dearest friend. A sister, perhaps more so than my own.

"I think we should let *him* tell her," Rhys said, nodding down to my belly.

I arched a brow. "How?"

He smiled wryly. "The next time Mor's home, we'll drop the shield around you. See how long it takes her to scent you. And him."

I smiled back. "I like that." I already wished I had some way of capturing Mor's face in that moment. I brushed my hand through Rhys's silken hair. "Do you have any names in mind?"

Rhys grinned. "Oh, yes."

"I don't trust that grin for one moment."

"Why?" He pulled out of me, and with a wave of his magic, we were both cleaned. I stifled the rising hunger in me at the sight of him tucking himself back into his pants. "I'd never name him anything ridiculous."

"I don't believe you." I tapped his nose. "Your family name—"

"Let's not talk about my family name," he said, nipping at my fingertips.

I laughed. "Fine."

But his eyes dimmed. "What about naming him for your father?"

My heart strained. "You'd be all right with that?"

"Of course I would."

I had to swallow the tightness in my throat as I sat up, facing him fully. "Perhaps for a secondary name, but . . . no. I want our son to have a name of his own."

Our son. The words were foreign, yet lovely on my tongue.

Rhys nodded, face softening as if the words moved him as well.

I could already see the father he'd become—see him laughing as he tossed our child skyward, see him slumbering with the boy on this very couch, books left open in their laps. Our son would never, not for a moment, doubt that he was loved and cherished. And Rhys would go to the ends of the world to protect him.

I smiled at the daydreams, hands already aching to paint them.

Rhys let out a hum of contemplation. "What about Nyx?"

I blinked. "Nyx?"

Rhys pointed to one of the walls of books in the study. A leather-bound tome floated toward his open fingers. He wordlessly flipped to a page and then passed it to me.

I scanned the text inside. "An ancient night goddess?"

"From around the time of the Trove, actually," Rhys said. "She's mostly been forgotten now, but I like the sound of her name. Why not use it for a boy?"

"Nyx," I mused again, the name echoing in the silent study. I brushed my tattooed fingers over my stomach. Rhys's hand came over mine, and we both smiled at the little life forming within my body.

"Nyx," I said one last time, and could have sworn a flutter of night-kissed power rose in answer.

Rhys sucked in a sharp breath, as if he'd also felt that kernel of power.

Together, we gazed at our linked hands, my stomach beneath them.

Together, we gazed at our son, and I offered my silent thanks to the Mother for the beautiful future that bloomed before us.

Azriel

The river house had finally fallen quiet after the raucous Winter Solstice party, the faelights dimming to cast little pools of gold amid the deep shadow of the longest night of the year.

Amren, Mor, and Varian had finally gone to bed, but Azriel found himself lingering downstairs.

He knew he should get some sleep. He'd need it come dawn, for the snowball battle up at the cabin. Cassian had mentioned no less than six times tonight that he had a *secret plan* regarding his so-called *impending victory*. Az had let his brother boast. Especially since Azriel had been planning his own victory for a year now.

Cassian wouldn't know what was coming for him. And Az fully planned on capitalizing on the fact that Nesta likely wouldn't let Cassian sleep much tonight.

Az snickered to himself, to the listening shadows around him.

Sleep, they seemed to whisper in his ear. *Sleep.*

I wish I could, he answered silently. But sleep so rarely found him these days.

Too many razor-sharp thoughts sliced him any time he grew still long enough for them to strike. Too many wants and needs left his skin overheated and pulling taut across his bones. So he slept only when his body gave out, and even then only for a few hours.

Azriel surveyed the empty family room, presents and ribbons littering the furniture. Cassian and Nesta hadn't reappeared downstairs, though that came as no surprise. He was elated for his brother, and yet . . .

Azriel couldn't stop it. The envy in his chest. Of Cassian, and Rhys.

He knew he'd be swallowed by it if he went up to his bedroom, so he'd remained down here by the dying light of the fire.

But even the silence weighed too heavily, and though the shadows kept him company, as they always had, as they always would, he found himself leaving the room. Entering the foyer.

Soft steps padded from under the stair archway, and there she was.

The faelights gilded Elain's unbound hair, making her glow like the sun at dawn. She halted, her breath catching in her throat.

"I . . ." He watched her swallow. She clutched a small gift in her hands. "I was coming to leave this on your pile of presents. I forgot to give it to you earlier."

Lie. Well, the second part was a lie. He didn't need his shadows to read her tone, the slight tightening of her face. She'd waited until everyone was asleep before venturing back down, where she'd leave her gift amongst his other, opened presents, subtle and unnoticed.

Elain closed the distance, and her breathing quickened as she again paused, now a scant foot away. She extended the wrapped gift, her hand shaking. "Here."

Az tried not to look at his scarred fingers as they took the gift. She hadn't bought her mate a present. But she'd gotten Azriel one last year—a headache powder he kept on his nightstand at the House of Wind. Not to use, but just to look at. Which he'd done every night he'd slept there. Or attempted to sleep there.

Azriel unwrapped the box, glancing at the card that merely said, *You might find these useful at the House these days*, and then opened the lid.

Two small, bean-shaped fabric blobs lay within. Elain murmured, "You put them in your ears, and they block any sound. With Nesta and Cassian living there with you . . ."

He chuckled, unable to suppress the impulse. "No wonder you didn't want me to open it in front of everyone."

Elain's mouth twitched into a smile. "Nesta wouldn't appreciate the joke."

He offered her a smile back. "I wasn't sure if I should give you your present."

He left the rest unspoken. Because her mate was here, sleeping a level up. Because her mate had been in the family room and Azriel had needed to stay by the door the whole time because he couldn't stand the sight of it, the scent of their mating bond, and needed to have the option of leaving if it became too much.

Elain's large brown eyes flickered, well aware of all that. Just as he knew she was well aware of why Azriel so rarely came to family dinners these days.

But tonight, here in the dark and quiet, with no one to see . . . He pulled the small velvet box from the shadows around him. Opened it for her.

Elain sucked in a soft breath that whispered over his skin. His shadows skittered back at the sound. They'd always been prone to vanish when she was around.

The golden necklace seemed ordinary—its chain unremarkable, the amulet tiny enough that it could be dismissed as an everyday charm. It was a small, flat rose fashioned of stained glass, designed so that when held to the light, the true depth of the colors would become visible. A thing of secret, lovely beauty.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, lifting it from the box. The golden faelight shone through the little glass facets, setting the charm glowing with hues of red and pink and white. Azriel let his shadows whisk away the box as she said softly, "Put it on me?"

His head went quiet. But he took the necklace, opening the clasp as she exposed her back, sweeping her hair up in one hand to bare her long, creamy neck.

He knew it was wrong, but there he was, sliding the necklace around her. Letting his scarred fingers touch her immaculate skin. Letting them brush the side of her throat, savoring the velvet-soft texture. Elain shivered, and he took a damn long time fastening the clasp.

Azriel's fingers lingered at her nape, atop the first knob of her spine. Slowly, Elain pivoted into his touch. Until his palm lay flat against her neck.

It had never gone this far. They'd exchanged looks, the occasional brush of their fingers, but never this. Never blatant, unrestricted touching.

Wrong—it was so wrong.

He didn't care.

He needed to know what the skin of her neck tasted like. What those perfect lips tasted like. Her breasts. Her sex. He needed her coming on his tongue—

Azriel's cock strained behind his pants, aching so fiercely he could hardly think. He prayed she didn't peer down. Prayed she didn't understand the shift in his scent.

He had only allowed himself these thoughts in the dead of night. Had only allowed his hand to fist his cock and think about her then, when even his shadows had gone to sleep. How that beautiful face might appear as he entered her, what sounds she'd make.

Elain bit her lower lip, and it took every ounce of Azriel's restraint to keep from putting his own teeth there.

"I should go," Elain said, but made no move to leave.

"Yes," he said, his thumb sweeping in long strokes along the side of her throat.

Her arousal drifted up to him, and his eyes nearly rolled back in his head at the sweet scent. He'd beg on his knees for a chance to taste it. But Azriel just stroked her neck again.

Elain shuddered, drifting closer. So close one deep breath would brush her breasts against his chest. She looked up at him, her face so trusting and hopeful and open that he knew she had no idea that he had done unspeakable things that sullied his hands far beyond their scars.

Such terrible things that it was a sacrilege for his fingers to touch her skin, tainting her with his presence.

But he could have this. This one moment, and maybe a taste, and that would be it.

"Yes," Elain breathed, like she read the decision. Just this taste in the dead of the longest night of the year, where only the Mother might witness them.

Azriel's hand slid up her neck, burying in her thick hair. Tilting her face the way he wanted it. Elain's mouth parted slightly, her eyes scanning his before fluttering shut.

Offer and permission.

He nearly groaned with relief and need as he lowered his head toward hers.

Azriel.

Rhys's voice thundered through him, halting him mere inches from Elain's sweet mouth.

Azriel.

Unrelenting command filled his name, and Azriel looked up.

Rhysand stood atop the staircase. Glowering down at them.

My office. Now.

Rhys vanished, and Azriel was left standing before Elain, who still awaited his kiss. His stomach twisted as he pulled his hand from her hair and stepped back. Forced himself to say, "This was a mistake."

She opened her eyes, hurt and confusion warring there before she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"You don't—Don't apologize," he managed to say. "Never apologize. It's I who should . . ." He shook his head, unable to stand the bleakness he'd brought to her expression. "Goodnight."

Azriel winnowed into shadows before she could say anything, appearing at the doors to Rhys's study a heartbeat later. His shadows whispered in his ear that Elain had gone upstairs.

Rhys sat at his desk, fury a moonless night across his face. He asked softly, "Are you out of your mind?"

Azriel donned the frozen mask he'd perfected while in his father's dungeon. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Rhys's power rippled through the room like a dark cloud. "I'm talking about *you*, about to kiss Elain, in the middle of a hall where *anyone could see you*," he snarled. "*Including her mate*."

Azriel stiffened. Let his cold rage rise to the surface, the rage he only ever let Rhysand see, because he knew his brother could match it. "What if the Cauldron was wrong?"

Rhysand blinked. "What of Mor, Az?"

Azriel ignored the question. "The Cauldron chose three sisters. Tell me how it's possible that my two brothers are with two of those sisters, yet the third was given to another." He had never before dared speak the words aloud.

Rhys's face drained of color. "You believe you *deserve* to be her mate?"

Azriel scowled. "I think Lucien will never be good enough for her, and she has no interest in him, anyway."

"So you'll what?" Rhys's voice was pure ice. "Seduce her away from him?"

Azriel said nothing. He hadn't gotten that far with his planning, certainly not beyond the fantasies he pleasured himself to.

Rhys growled, "Allow me to make one thing very clear. You are to stay away from her."

"You can't order me to do that."

"Oh, I can, and I will. If Lucien finds out you're pursuing her, he has every right to defend their bond as he sees fit. Including invoking the Blood Duel."

"That's an Autumn Court tradition." The battle to the death was so brutal that it was only enacted in rare cases. Despite being an outsider, Azriel had wanted to invoke it when he'd found Mor all those years ago. Had been

ready to challenge both Beron and Eris to Blood Duels and kill them both. Only Mor's right to claim their heads in vengeance had kept him from doing so.

"Lucien, as Beron's son, has the right to demand it of you."

"I'll defeat him with little effort." Pure arrogance laced every word, but it was true.

"I know." Rhys's eyes flickered. "And your doing so will rip apart any fragile peace and alliances we have, not only with the Autumn Court, but also with the Spring Court *and* Jurian and Vassa." Rhys bared his teeth. "So you will leave Elain alone. If you need to fuck someone, go to a pleasure hall and pay for it, but *stay away* from her."

Azriel snarled softly.

"Snarl all you want." Rhys leaned back in his chair. "But if I see you panting after her again, I'll make you regret it."

Rhys had rarely threatened punishment or pulled rank. It stunned Azriel enough that it knocked him from his rage.

Rhys jerked his chin toward the door. "Get out."

Azriel tucked in his wings and left without another word, stalking through the house and onto the front lawn to sit in the frigid starlight. To let the frost in his veins match the air around him.

Until he felt nothing. Was again nothing at all.

Then he flew to the House of Wind, knowing that if he slept in the riverside manor, he'd do something he regretted. He'd been so vigilant about keeping away from Elain as much as possible, and had stayed up here to avoid her, and tonight . . . tonight had proved he'd been right to do so.

He aimed for the training pit, giving in to the need to work off the temptation, the rage and frustration and writhing need.

He found it already occupied. His shadows had not warned him.

It was too late to bank without appearing like he was running. Azriel landed in the ring a few feet from where Gwyn practiced in the chill night, her sword glimmering like ice in the moonlight.

She stopped mid-slice, whirling to face him. "I'm sorry. I knew you all were going to the river house, so I didn't think anyone would mind if I came up here, and—"

"It's fine. I came to retrieve something I forgot." The lie was smooth and cool, as he knew his face was. His shadows peered over his wings at her.

The young priestess smiled—and Azriel thought it might have been directed at his curious shadows. But she just hooked her coppery-brown hair behind an arched ear. “I was trying to cut the ribbon.” She pointed with her sword at the white ribbon, which seemed to glow silver.

“Aren’t you cold?” His breath clouded in front of him.

Gwyn shrugged. “Once you get moving, you stop noticing it.”

He nodded, silence falling. For a heartbeat, their gazes met. He blocked out the bloody memory that flashed, so at odds with the Gwyn he saw before him now.

Her head ducked, as if remembering it too. That he’d been the one who’d found her that day at Sangravah. “Happy Solstice,” she said, as much a dismissal as it was a holiday blessing.

He snorted. “Are you kicking me out?”

Gwyn’s teal eyes flashed with alarm. “No! I mean, I don’t mind sharing the ring. I just . . . I know you like to be alone.” Her mouth quirked to the side, crinkling the freckles on her nose. “Is that why you came up here?”

Sort of. “I forgot something,” he reminded her.

“At two in the morning?”

Pure amusement glittered in her stare. Better than the pain and grief he’d spied a moment before. So he offered her a crooked smile. “I can’t sleep without my favorite dagger.”

“A comfort to every growing child.”

Azriel’s lips twitched. He refrained from mentioning that he did indeed sleep with a dagger. Many daggers. Including one under his pillow.

“How was the party?” Her breath curled in front of her mouth, and one of his shadows darted out to dance with it before twirling back to him. Like it heard some silent music.

“Fine,” he said, and realized a heartbeat later that it wasn’t a socially acceptable answer. “It was nice.”

Not much better. So he asked, “Did you and the priestesses have a celebration?”

“Yes, though the service was the main highlight.”

“I see.”

She angled her head, hair shining like molten metal. “Do you sing?”

He blinked. It wasn’t every day that people took him by surprise, but . . .“Why do you ask?”

“They call you shadowsinger. Is it because you sing?”

"I *am* a shadowsinger—it's not a title that someone just made up."

She shrugged again, irreverently. Az narrowed his eyes, studying her. "Do you, though?" she pressed. "Sing?"

Azriel couldn't help his soft chuckle. "Yes."

She opened her mouth to ask more, but he didn't feel like explaining. Or demonstrating, since that was surely what she'd ask next. So Az jerked his chin to the sword dangling from her hand. "Try cutting the ribbon again."

"What—with you watching?"

He nodded.

She considered, and he wondered if she'd say no, but Gwyn blew out a breath, steadied her feet and balance, and sliced. A beautiful, precise blow, but it didn't sever the ribbon.

"Again," he ordered, rubbing his hands against the cold, grateful for its bracing bite and the distraction of this impromptu lesson.

Gwyn sliced again, but the ribbon remained unyielding.

"You're turning the blade a fraction as it comes parallel to the ground," Azriel explained, drawing his Illyrian blade from down his back. "Watch." He slowly demonstrated, rotating his wrist where she did. "You see how you open up right here?" He corrected his position. "Keep your wrist like that. The blade is an extension of your arm."

Gwyn tried the movement as slowly as he had, and he watched her self-correct, fighting against the urge to open up her wrist and rotate the blade. She did it three times before she stopped falling into the bad habit. "I blame Cassian for this. He's too busy making eyes at Nesta to notice such mistakes these days."

Azriel laughed. "I'll give you that."

Gwyn smiled broadly. "Thank you."

Azriel dipped his head in a sketch of a bow, something restless settling in him. Even his shadows had calmed. As if content to lounge on his shoulders and watch.

But—sleep. He needed to at least attempt to get some.

"Happy Solstice," Azriel said before aiming for the archway into the House. "Don't stay out too much longer. You'll freeze."

Gwyn nodded her farewell, again facing the ribbon. A warrior sizing up an opponent, all traces of that charming irreverence gone.

Azriel entered the warmth of the stairwell, and as he descended, he could have sworn a faint, beautiful singing followed him. Could have sworn his

shadows sang in answer.

He slept as well as could be expected, but when Azriel returned to the river house to gather his presents before dawn, he found Elain's necklace amid the pile. He pocketed it. Spent the rest of his day, even the blasted snowball fight, with every intention of returning it to the shop in the Palace of Thread and Jewels.

But when he returned from the cabin in the mountains, he didn't go to the market square.

Instead, he found himself at the library beneath the House of Wind, standing before Clotho as the clock chimed seven in the evening.

He slid the small box across her desk. "If you see Gwyn, would you give this to her?"

Clotho angled her hooded head, and her enchanted pen wrote on a piece of paper, *A Solstice gift from you?*

Azriel shrugged. "Don't tell her it came from me."

Why?

"Does she need to know? Just tell her it was a gift from Rhys."

That would be a lie.

He avoided the urge to cross his arms, not wanting to look intimidating. He blocked out the memory that flashed—of his mother cringing before his father, the male standing with crossed arms in such a way that made his displeasure known before he opened his hateful mouth.

"Look, I . . ." Az searched for the words, his voice becoming quiet. "If there's another priestess here who might appreciate it, give it to them. But I'm not taking that necklace with me when I leave."

He waited for Clotho's pen to finish writing. *Your eyes are sad, Shadowsinger.*

He offered her a grim smile. "I lost the snowball fight today."

Clotho was smart enough to see through his deflection. She wrote, *I'll give it to Gwyneth. Tell her a friend left it for her.*

He wouldn't go so far as to call Gwyn a friend, but . . . "Fine. Thank you."

Clotho's pen moved once more. *She deserves something as beautiful as this. I thank you for the joy it shall bring to her.*

Something sparked in Azriel's chest, but he only nodded his thanks and left. He could picture it, though, as he ascended the stairs back to the House

proper. How Gwyn's teal eyes might light upon seeing the necklace. For whatever reason . . . he could see it.

But Azriel tucked away the thought, consciously erasing the slight smile it brought to his face. Buried the image down deep, where it glowed quietly.

A thing of secret, lovely beauty.

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