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OF
SILVER
FLAMES

SARAH J. MAAS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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SILVER
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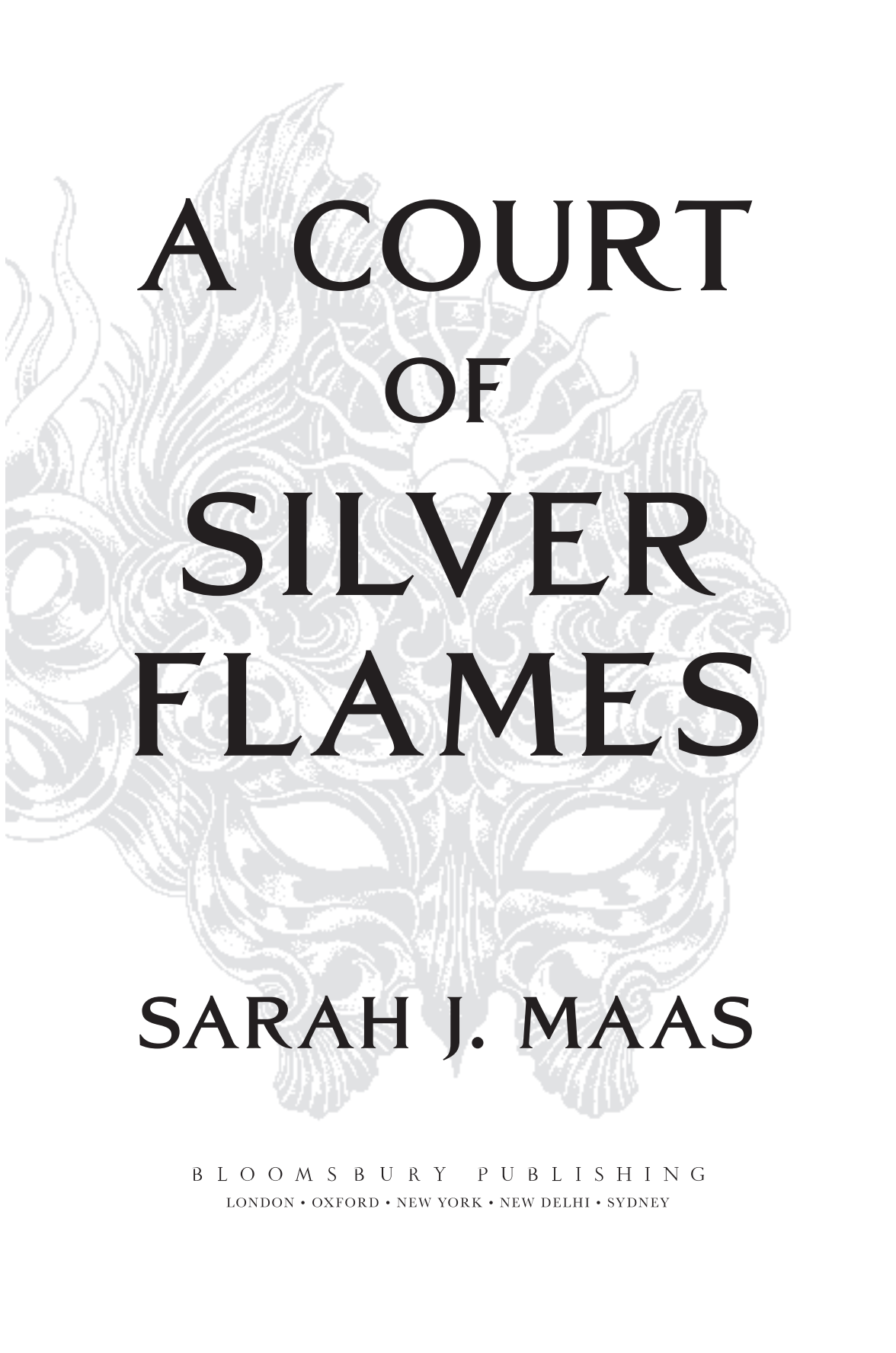
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SARAH J. MAAS

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*For every Nesta out there—
climb the mountain*

*And for Josh, Taran, and Annie,
who are the reason I keep climbing my own*



The FAERIE LANDS of
Prythian

NORTH

THE PRISON

ILLYRIAN MOUNTAINS

ILLYRIAN STEEPS

VELARIS

NIGHT COURT

COURT OF NIGHTMARES

DAY COURT

PALACE

DAWN COURT

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN

WINTER COURT

WEAVER'S COTTAGE

SUMMER COURT

AUTUMN COURT

THE FOREST HOUSE

SPRING COURT

THE WALL

FEYRE'S VILLAGE

ADRIATA

HYBERN

MORTAL LANDS



VALLAHAN

MONTESERE

RASK

FAERIE REALMS

THE WALL

SCYTHIA

MORTAL LANDS

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The black water nipping at her thrashing heels was freezing.

Not the bite of winter chill, or even the burn of solid ice, but something colder. Deeper.

The cold of the gaps between stars, the cold of a world before light.

The cold of hell—true hell, she realized as she bucked against the strong hands trying to shove her into that Cauldron.

True hell, because that was Elain lying on the stone floor with the red-haired, one-eyed Fae male hovering over her. Because those were pointed ears poking through her sister's sodden gold-brown hair, and an immortal glow radiating from Elain's fair skin.

True hell—worse than the inky depths mere inches from her toes.

Put her under, the hard-faced Fae king ordered.

And the sound of that voice, the voice of the male who had done this to Elain . . .

She knew she was going into the Cauldron. Knew she would lose this fight.

Knew no one was coming to save her: not sobbing Feyre, not Feyre's gagged former lover, not her devastated new mate.

Not Cassian, broken and bleeding on the floor. The warrior was still trying to rise on trembling arms. To reach her.

The King of Hybern—he had done this. To Elain. To Cassian.
And to her.

The icy water bit into the soles of her feet.

It was a kiss of venom, a death so permanent that every inch of her roared in defiance.

She was going in—but she would not go gently.

The water gripped her ankles with phantom talons, tugging her down. She twisted, wrenching her arm free from the guard who held it.

And Nesta Archeron pointed. One finger—at the King of Hybern.
A death-promise. A target marked.

Hands shoved her into the water's waiting claws.

Nesta laughed at the fear that crept into the king's eyes just before the water devoured her whole.

In the beginning

And in the end

There was Darkness

And nothing more

She did not feel the cold as she sank into a sea that had no bottom, no horizon, no surface. But she felt the burning.

Immortality was not a serene youth.

It was fire.

It was molten ore poured into her veins, boiling her human blood until it was nothing but steam, forging her brittle bones until they were fresh steel.

And when she opened her mouth to scream, when the pain ripped her very self in two, there was no sound. There was nothing in this place but darkness and agony and power—

They would pay. All of them.

Starting with this Cauldron.

Starting *now*.

She tore into the darkness with talons and teeth. Rent and cleaved and shredded.

And the dark eternity around her shuddered. Bucked. Thrashed.

She laughed as it recoiled. Laughed around the mouthful of raw power she ripped out and swallowed whole; laughed at the fistfuls of eternity she shoved into her heart, her veins.

The Cauldron struggled like a bird under a cat's paw. She refused to relent.

Everything it had stolen from her, from Elain, she would take from it.

Wrapped in black eternity, Nesta and the Cauldron twined, burning through the darkness like a newborn star.

PART ONE

NOVICE

CHAPTER

1

Cassian raised his fist to the green door in the dim hallway—and hesitated.

He'd cut down more enemies than he cared to tally, had stood knee-deep in gore on countless battlefields and kept swinging, had made choices that cost him the lives of skilled warriors, had been a general and a grunt and an assassin, and yet . . . here he was, lowering his fist.

Balking.

The building on the north side of the Sidra River was in need of new paint. And new floors, if the creaking boards beneath his boots as he'd climbed the two flights had been any indication. But at least it was clean. Definitely grim by Velaris's standards, but when the city itself had no slums, that wasn't saying much. He'd seen and stayed in far worse.

He'd never understood, though, why Nesta insisted on dwelling here. He got why she wouldn't take up rooms in the House of Wind—it was too far from the city, and she couldn't fly or winnow in. Which meant dealing with the ten thousand steps up and down. But why live in this dump, when the town house was sitting empty? Since construction had finished on Feyre and Rhys's sprawling home on the river, the

town house had been left open to any of their friends who needed or wanted it. He knew for a fact that Feyre had offered Nesta a room there—and had been rejected.

He frowned at the door's peeling paint. No sounds trickled through the sizable gap between the door and the floor, wide enough for even the fattest of rats to meander through; no fresh scents lingered in the cramped hallway.

Maybe he'd get lucky and she'd be out—perhaps sleeping under the bar of whatever seedy tavern she'd frequented last night. Though that might be worse, since he'd need to track her down there instead.

Cassian lifted his fist again, the red of his Siphon flickering in the ancient faelights tucked into the ceiling.

Coward. Grow some damned balls.

Cassian knocked once. Twice.

Silence.

Cassian almost sighed his relief aloud. Thank the fucking Mother—Clipped, precise footsteps sounded from the other side of the door. Each more pissed off than the last.

He tucked his wings in tight, squaring his shoulders as he braced his feet apart. A traditional fighting stance, beaten into him during his training years, now mere muscle memory. He didn't dare consider why the sound of those footsteps sent his body falling into it.

The snap as she unlatched each of her four locks might as well have been the beating of a war-drum.

Cassian ran through the list of things he was to say, how Feyre had suggested he say them.

The door was yanked open, the knob twisting so hard Cassian wondered if she was imagining it as his neck.

Nesta Archeron already wore a scowl. But there she was.

She looked like hell.

"What do you want?" She didn't open the door wider than a hand's breadth.

When had he last seen her? The end-of-summer party on that barge in the Sidra last month? She hadn't looked this bad. Though he supposed a night trying to drown oneself in wine and liquor never left anyone looking particularly good the next morning. Especially at—

"It's seven in the morning," she went on, raking him over with that gray-blue stare that always kindled his temper.

She wore a male's shirt. Worse, she wore *only* a male's shirt.

Cassian propped a hand on the doorjamb and gave her a half grin he knew brought out her claws. "Rough night?"

Rough year, really. Her beautiful face was pale, far thinner than it had been before the war with Hybern, her lips bloodless, and those eyes . . . Cold and sharp, like a winter morning in the mountains.

No joy, no laughter, in any plane of it. Of her.

She made to shut the door on his hand.

He shoved a booted foot into the gap before she could break his fingers. Her nostrils flared slightly.

"Feyre wants you at the house."

"Which one?" Nesta said, frowning at the foot he'd wedged in the door. "She has five."

He bit back his retort. This wasn't the battlefield—and he wasn't her opponent. His job was to transport her to the assigned spot. And then pray that the lovely home Feyre and Rhys had just moved into wouldn't be reduced to rubble.

"The new one."

"Why didn't my sister fetch me herself?" He knew that suspicious gleam in her eye, the slight stiffening of her back. His own instincts surged to meet her defiance, to push and push and discover what might happen.

Since Winter Solstice, they'd exchanged only a handful of words. Most had been at the barge party last month. They'd consisted of:

Move.

Hello, Nes.

Move.

Gladly.

After months and months of nothing, of barely seeing her at all, that had been it.

He hadn't even understood why she'd shown up to the party, especially when she knew she'd be stuck on the water with them for hours. Amren likely deserved the credit for the rare appearance, due to whatever bit of sway the female held over Nesta. But by the end of that night, Nesta had been at the front of the line to get off the boat, arms tight around herself, and Amren had been brooding at the other end of it, nearly shaking with rage and disgust.

No one had asked what had happened between them, not even Feyre. The boat had docked, and Nesta had practically run off, and no one had spoken to her since. Until today. Until this conversation, which felt like the longest they'd had since the battles against Hybern.

Cassian said at last, "Feyre is High Lady. She's busy running the Night Court."

Nesta cocked her head, gold-brown hair sliding over a bony shoulder. On anyone else, the movement would have been contemplative. On her, it was the warning of a predator, sizing up prey.

"And my sister," she said in that flat voice that refused to yield any sign of emotion, "deemed my *immediate presence* necessary?"

"She knew you'd likely need to clean yourself up, and wanted to give you a head start. You're expected at nine."

He waited for the explosion as she did the math.

Her eyes flared. "Do I look like I need *two hours* to become presentable?"

He took the invitation to survey her: long bare legs, an elegant sweep of hips, tapered waist—too damn thin—and full, inviting breasts that were at odds with the new, sharp angles of her body.

On any other female, those magnificent breasts might have been enough cause for him to begin courting her the moment he met her. But

from the instant he'd met Nesta, the cold fire in her eyes had been a temptation of a different sort.

And now that she was High Fae, all inherent dominance and aggression—and piss-poor attitude—he avoided her as much as possible. Especially with what had happened during and after the war against Hybern. She'd made her feelings about him more than clear.

Cassian said at last, "You look like you could use a few big meals, a bath, and some real clothes."

Nesta rolled her eyes, but fingered the hem of her shirt.

Cassian added, "Kick out the sorry bastard, get washed, and I'll bring you some tea."

Her brows rose a fraction of an inch.

He gave her a crooked smile. "You think I can't hear that male in your bedroom, trying to quietly put on his clothes and sneak out the window?"

As if in answer, a muffled thud came from the bedroom. Nesta hissed.

"I'll be back in an hour to see how things are proceeding." Cassian put enough bite behind the words that his soldiers would know not to push him—they'd remember that he required seven Siphons to keep his magic under control for good reason. But Nesta did not fly in his legions, did not fight under his command, and certainly did not seem to recall that he was over five hundred years old and—

"Don't bother. I'll be there on time."

He pushed off the doorjamb, wings flaring slightly as he backed away a few steps. "That's not what I was asked to do. I'm to see you from door to door."

Her face tightened. "Go perch on a chimney."

He sketched a bow, not daring to take his eyes off her. She'd emerged from the Cauldron with . . . gifts. Considerable gifts—dark ones. But no one had seen nor felt any sign of them since that last battle with Hybern, since Amren had shattered the Cauldron and Feyre and Rhys

had managed to heal it. Elain, too, had revealed no indication of her seer's abilities since then.

But if Nesta's power remained, still capable of leveling battlefields . . . Cassian knew better than to make himself vulnerable to another predator. "Do you want your tea with milk or lemon?"

She slammed the door in his face.

Then locked each of those four locks.

Whistling to himself and wondering if that poor bastard inside the apartment would indeed flee out the window—mostly to escape *her*—Cassian strode down the dim hallway and went to find some food.

He'd need the sustenance today. Especially once Nesta learned precisely why her sister had summoned her.



Nesta Archeron didn't know the name of the male in her apartment.

She ransacked her wine-soaked memory as she returned to the bedroom, dodging piles of books and lumps of clothing, recalling heated glances at the tavern, the wet, hot meeting of their mouths, the sweat coating her as she rode him until pleasure and drink sent her into blessed oblivion, but not his name.

The male had already leaned out the window, with Cassian no doubt lurking on the street below to witness his spectacularly pathetic exit, when Nesta reached the dim, cramped bedroom. The brass-poster bed was rumpled, the sheets half-spilled on the creaky, uneven wood floor, and the cracked window banged against the wall on its loose hinges. The male twisted toward her.

He was handsome, in the way most High Fae males were handsome. A bit thinner than she liked them—practically a boy compared to the towering mass of muscle that had just filled her doorway. He winced as she padded in, his expression turning pained as he noted what she wore. "I . . . That's . . ."

Nesta tugged off his shirt, leaving nothing but bare skin in its wake.

His eyes widened, but the scent of his fear remained—not fear of her, but of the male he’d heard at the front door. As he remembered who her sister was. Who her sister’s mate was. Who her sister’s friends were. As if any of that meant something.

What would his fear smell like if he learned she’d used him, slept with him, to keep herself at bay? To settle that writhing darkness that had simmered inside her from the moment she’d emerged from the Cauldron? Sex, music, and drink, she’d learned this past year—all of it helped. Not entirely, but it kept the power from boiling over. Even if she could still feel it streaming through her blood, coiled tight around her bones.

She chucked the white shirt at him. “You can use the front door now.”

He slung the shirt over his head. “I— Is he still—” His gaze kept snagging on her breasts, peaked against the chill morning; her bare skin. The apex of her thighs.

“Good-bye.” Nesta entered the rusty, leaky bathroom attached to her bedroom. At least the place had hot running water.

Sometimes.

Feyre and Elain had tried to convince her to move. She’d always ignored their advice. Just as she’d ignore whatever was said today. She knew Feyre planned a scolding. Perhaps something to do with the fact that Nesta had signed last night’s outrageous tab at the tavern to her sister’s bank account.

Nesta snorted, twisting the handle in the bath. It groaned, the metal icy to the touch, and water splattered, then sprayed into the cracked, stained tub.

This was her residence. No servants, no eyes monitoring and judging every move, no company unless she invited them. Or unless prying, swaggering warriors made it their business to stop by.

It took five minutes for the water to actually heat enough to start filling the tub. There had been some days in the past year when she

hadn't even bothered to take the time. Some days when she'd climbed into the icy water, not feeling its bite but that of the Cauldron's dark depths as it devoured her whole. As it ripped away her humanity, her mortality, and made her into *this*.

It had taken her months of battling it—the body-tensing panic that made her very bones tremble to be submerged. But she'd forced herself to face it down. Had learned to sit in the icy water, nauseated and shaking, teeth gritted; had refused to move until her body recognized that she was in a tub and not the Cauldron, that she was in her apartment and not the stone castle across the sea, that she was alive, immortal. Even though her father was not.

No, her father was ashes in the wind, his existence marked only by a headstone on a hill outside this city. Or so her sisters had told her.

I loved you from the first moment I held you in my arms, her father had said to her in those last moments together.

Don't you lay your filthy hands on my daughter. Those had been his final words, spat at the King of Hybern. Her father had squandered those final words on that worm of a king.

Her father. The man who had never fought for his children, not until the end. When he had come to save them—to save the humans and the Fae, yes, but most of all, his daughters. Her.

A grand, stupid waste.

Unholy dark power flowed through her, and it had not been enough to stop the King of Hybern from snapping his neck.

She had hated her father, hated him deeply, and yet he had loved her, for some inexplicable reason. Not enough to try to spare them from poverty or keep them from starving. But somehow it had been enough for him to raise an army on the continent. To sail a ship named for her into battle.

She had still hated her father in those last moments. And then his neck had cracked, his eyes not full of fear as he died, but of that foolish love for her.

That was what had lingered—the look in his eyes. The resentment in her heart as he died for her. It had festered, gnawing at her like the power she buried deep, running rampant through her head until no icy baths could numb it away.

She could have saved him.

It was the King of Hybern's fault. She knew that. But it was hers, too. Just as it was her fault that Elain had been captured by the Cauldron after Nesta spied on it with that scrying, her fault that Hybern had done such terrible things to hunt her and her sister down like a deer.

Some days, the sheer dread and panic locked Nesta's body up so thoroughly that nothing could get her to breathe. Nothing could stop the awful power from beginning to rise, rise, rise in her. Nothing beyond the music at those taverns, the card games with strangers, the endless bottles of wine, and the sex that made her feel nothing—but offered a moment of release amid the roaring inside her.

Nesta finished washing away the sweat and other remnants of last night. The sex hadn't been bad—she'd had better, but also much worse. Even immortality wasn't enough time for some males to master the art of the bedroom.

So she'd taught herself what she liked. She'd obtained a monthly contraceptive tea from her local apothecary, and then she'd brought that first male here. He had no idea that her maidenhead had been intact until he'd spied the smeared blood on the sheets. His face had tightened with distaste—then a glimmer of fear that she might report an unsatisfactory first bedding to her sister. To her sister's insufferable mate. Nesta hadn't bothered to tell him that she avoided both of them at all costs. Especially the latter. These days, Rhysand seemed content to do the same.

After the war with Hybern, Rhysand had offered her jobs. Positions in his court.

She didn't want them. They were pity offerings, thin attempts to get

her to be a part of Feyre's life, to be gainfully employed. But the High Lord had never liked her. Their conversations were coldly civil at best.

She'd never told him that the reasons he hated her were the same reasons she lived here. Took cold baths some days. Forgot to eat on others. Couldn't stand the crack and snap of a fireplace. And drowned herself in wine and music and pleasure each night. Every damning thing Rhysand thought about her was true—and she'd known it long before he had ever shadowed her doorstep.

Any offering Rhysand threw her way was made solely out of love for Feyre. Better to spend her time the way she wished. They kept paying for it, after all.

The knock on the door rattled the entire apartment.

She glared toward the front room, debating whether to pretend she'd left, but Cassian could hear her, smell her. And if he broke down the door, which he was likely to do, she'd just have the headache of explaining it to her stingy landlord.

So Nesta donned the dress she'd left on the floor last night, and then again freed all four locks. She'd installed them the first day she'd arrived. Locking them each night was practically a ritual. Even when the nameless male had been here, even out of her mind on wine, she'd remembered to lock them all.

As if that would keep the monsters of this world at bay.

Nesta tugged open the door enough to see Cassian's cocky grin, and left it ajar as she stormed away to search for her shoes.

He strode in after her, a mug of tea in his hand—the cup probably borrowed from the shop at the corner. Or outright given to him, considering how people tended to worship the ground his muddy boots walked on. He'd already been adored in this city before the Hybern conflict. His heroism and sacrifice—the feats he'd performed on the battlefields—had won him even more awe after its end.

She didn't blame his admirers. She'd experienced the pleasure and sheer terror of watching him on those battlefields. Still woke with sweat

coating her at the memories: how she couldn't breathe while she'd witnessed him fight, enemies swarming him; how it had felt when the Cauldron's power had surged and she'd known it was going to strike where their army was strongest—him.

She hadn't been able to save the one thousand Illyrians who had fallen in the moment after she'd summoned him to safety. She turned away from that memory, too.

Cassian surveyed her apartment and let out a low whistle. "Ever thought of hiring a cleaner?"

Nesta scanned the small living area—a sagging crimson couch, a soot-stained brick hearth, a moth-eaten floral armchair, then the ancient kitchenette, piled with leaning columns of dirty dishes. Where had she thrown her shoes last night? She shifted her search to her bedroom.

"Some fresh air would be a good start," Cassian added from the other room. The window groaned as he cracked it open.

She found her brown shoes in opposite corners of the bedroom. One reeked of spilled wine.

Nesta perched on the edge of the mattress to slide them on, tugging at the laces. She didn't bother to look up as Cassian's steady steps approached, then halted at the threshold.

He sniffed once. Loudly.

"I'd hoped you at least changed the sheets between visitors, but apparently that doesn't bother you."

Nesta tied the laces on the first shoe. "What business is it of yours?"

He shrugged, though the tightness on his face didn't reflect such nonchalance. "If I can smell a few different males in here, then surely your companions can, too."

"Hasn't stopped them yet." She tied the other shoe, Cassian's hazel eyes tracking the movement.

"Your tea is getting cold." His teeth flashed.

Nesta ignored him and searched the bedroom again. Her coat . . .

“Your coat is on the ground by the front door,” he said. “And it’s going to be brisk out, so bring a scarf.”

She ignored that, too, but breezed by him, careful to avoid touching him, and found her dark blue overcoat exactly where he’d claimed it was. She opened the front door, pointing for him to leave first.

Cassian held her gaze as he stalked for her, then reached out an arm—

And plucked the cerulean-and-cream scarf Elain had given her for her birthday this spring off the hook on the wall. He gripped it in his fist, dangling it like a strangled snake as he brushed past her.

Something was eating at him. Usually, Cassian held out a bit longer before yielding to his temper. Perhaps it had to do with whatever Feyre wanted to say up at the house.

Nesta’s gut twisted as she set each lock.

She wasn’t stupid. She knew there had been unrest since the war had ended, both in these lands and on the continent. Knew that without the barrier of the wall, some Fae territories were pushing the limits on what they could get away with in terms of border claims and how they treated humans. And she knew that those four human queens still squatted in their shared palace, their armies unused and intact.

They were monsters, all of them. They’d killed the golden-haired queen who’d betrayed them and sold another—Vassa—to a sorcerer-lord. It seemed only fitting that the youngest of the four remaining queens had been transformed into a crone by the Cauldron. Made into a long-lived Fae, yes, but aged into a withered shell as punishment for the power Nesta had taken from the Cauldron. How she’d ripped it apart while it had torn her mortal body into something new.

That wizened queen blamed her. Had wanted to kill her, if Hybern’s Ravens had been correct before Bryaxis and Rhysand had destroyed them for infiltrating the House of Wind’s library.

There had been no whisper of that queen in the fourteen months since the war.

But if some new threat had arisen . . .

The four locks seemed to laugh at her before Nesta followed Cassian out of the building and into the bustling city beyond.



The riverfront “house” was actually an estate, and so new and clean and beautiful that Nesta remembered her shoes were covered in stale wine precisely as she strode through the towering marble archway and into the shining front hall, tastefully decorated in shades of ivory and sand.

A mighty staircase bisected the enormous space, a chandelier of handblown glass—made by Velaris artisans—drooping from the carved ceiling above it. The faelights in each nest-shaped orb cast shimmering reflections on the polished pale wood floors, interrupted only by potted ferns, wood furniture also made in Velaris, and an outrageous array of art. She didn’t bother to remark on any of it. Plush blue rugs broke up the pristine floors, a long runner flowing along the cavernous halls on either side, and one ran beneath the arch of the stairs, straight to a wall of windows on its other side, which looked out onto the sloping lawn and gleaming river at its feet.

Cassian headed to the left—toward the formal rooms for business, Feyre had informed Nesta during that first and only tour two months ago. Nesta had been half-drunk at the time, and had hated every second of it, each perfect room.

Most males bought their wives and mates jewelry for an outrageous Winter Solstice present.

Rhys had bought Feyre a palace.

No—he’d purchased the war-decimated land, and then given his mate free rein to design the residence of their dreams.

And somehow, Nesta thought as she silently followed an unnaturally quiet Cassian down the hall toward one of the studies whose doors were cracked open, Feyre and Rhys *had* managed to make this

place seem cozy, welcoming. A behemoth of a building, but still a home. Even the formal furniture seemed designed for comfort and lounging, for long conversations over hearty food. Every piece of art had been picked by Feyre herself, or painted by her, many of them portraits and depictions of *them*—her friends, her . . . new family.

There were none of Nesta, naturally.

Even their gods-damned father had a portrait on the wall along one side of the grand staircase: him and Elain, smiling and happy, as they'd been before the world went to shit. Sitting on a stone bench amid bushes bursting with pink and blue hydrangea. The formal gardens of their first home, that lovely manor near the sea. Nesta and their mother were nowhere in sight.

That was how it had been, after all: Elain and Feyre doted on by their father. Nesta prized and trained by their mother.

During that first tour, Nesta had noted the lack of herself here. The lack of their mother. She said nothing, of course, but it was a pointed absence.

It was enough to now set her teeth on edge, to make her grab the invisible, internal leash that kept the horrible power within her at bay and pull tight, as Cassian slipped into the study and said to whoever awaited them, "She's here."

Nesta braced herself, but Feyre merely chuckled. "You're five minutes early. I'm impressed."

"Seems like a good omen for gambling. We should head to Rita's," Cassian drawled just as Nesta stepped into the wood-paneled room.

The study opened into a lush garden courtyard. The space was warm and rich, and she might have admitted she liked the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, the sapphire velvet furniture before the black marble hearth, had she not seen who was sitting inside.

Feyre perched on the rolled arm of the couch, clad in a heavy white sweater and dark leggings.

Rhys, in his usual black, leaned against the mantel, arms crossed. No wings today.

And Amren, in her preferred gray, sat cross-legged in the leather armchair by the roaring hearth, those muted silver eyes sweeping over Nesta with distaste.

So much had changed between her and the female.

Nesta had seen to that—the destruction. She didn't let herself think about that argument at the end-of-summer party on the river barge. Or the silence between herself and Amren since then.

No more visits to Amren's apartment. No more chats over jigsaw puzzles. Certainly no more lessons in magic. She'd made sure of that last part, too.

Feyre, at least, smiled at her. "I heard you had quite the night."

Nesta glanced between where Cassian had claimed the armchair across from Amren, the empty spot on the couch beside Feyre, and where Rhys stood by the hearth.

She kept her spine straight, her chin high, hating that they all eyed her as she opted to sit on the couch beside her sister. Hating that Rhys and Amren noted her filthy shoes, and probably still smelled that male on her despite the bath.

"You look atrocious," Amren said.

Nesta wasn't stupid enough to glare at the . . . whatever Amren was. She was High Fae now, yes, but she'd once been something different. Not of this world. Her tongue was still sharp enough to wound.

Like Nesta, Amren did not possess court-specific magic related to the High Fae. It didn't make her influence in this court any less mighty. Nesta's own High Fae powers had never materialized—she had only what she'd taken from the Cauldron, rather than letting it deign to gift her with power, as it had with Elain. She had no idea what she'd ripped from the Cauldron while it had stolen her humanity from her—but she knew they were things she did not and would never wish to understand, to master. The very thought had her stomach churning.

“Though I bet it’s hard to look good,” Amren went on, “when you’re out until the darkest hours of the night, drinking yourself stupid and fucking anything that comes your way.”

Feyre whipped her head to the High Lord’s Second. Rhys seemed inclined to agree with Amren. Cassian kept his mouth shut. Nesta said smoothly, “I wasn’t aware that my activities were under your jurisdiction.”

Cassian loosed a murmur that sounded like a warning. To which one of them, she didn’t know. Or care.

Amren’s eyes glowed, a remnant of the power that had once burned inside her. All that was left now. Nesta knew her own power could shine like that, too—but while Amren’s had revealed itself to be light and heat, Nesta knew that her silver flame came from a colder, darker place. A place that was old—and yet wholly new.

Amren challenged, “They are when you spend that much of our gold on wine.”

Perhaps she had pushed them too far with last night’s tab.

Nesta looked to Feyre, who winced. “So you really did make me come all the way here for a scolding?”

Feyre’s eyes—mirror images of her own—softened slightly. “No, it’s not a scolding.” She cut a sharp glance at Rhys, still icily silent against the mantel, and then to Amren, seething in her chair. “Think of this as a discussion.”

Nesta shot to her feet. “My life is not your concern, or up for any sort of *discussion*.”

“*Sit down*,” Rhys snarled.

The raw command in that voice, the utter dominance and power . . .

Nesta froze, fighting it, hating that Fae part of her that bowed to such things. Cassian leaned forward in his chair, as if he’d leap between them. She could have sworn something like pain had etched itself across his face.

But Nesta held Rhysand's gaze. Threw every ounce of defiance she could into it, even as his order made her knees *want* to bend, to sit.

Rhys said, "You are going to stay. You are going to listen."

She let out a low laugh. "You're not my High Lord. You don't give me orders." But she knew how powerful he was. Had seen it, felt it. Still trembled to be near him.

Rhys scented that fear. One side of his mouth curled up in a cruel smile. "You want to go head-to-head, Nesta Archeron?" he purred. The High Lord of the Night Court gestured to the sloping lawn beyond the windows. "We've got plenty of space out there for a brawl."

Nesta bared her teeth, silently roaring at her body to obey *her* orders. She'd sooner die than bow to him. To any of them.

Rhys's smile grew, well aware of that fact.

"That's enough," Feyre snapped at Rhys. "I told you to keep out of it."

He dragged his star-flecked eyes to his mate, and it was all Nesta could do to keep from collapsing onto the couch as her knees gave out at last. Feyre angled her head, nostrils flaring, and said to Rhysand, "You can either *leave*, or you can stay and keep your mouth shut."

Rhys again crossed his arms, but said nothing.

"You too," Feyre spat to Amren. The female harrumphed and nestled into her chair.

Nesta didn't bother to look pleasant as Feyre twisted to face her, taking a proper seat on the couch, the velvet cushions sighing beneath her. Her sister swallowed. "We need to make some changes, Nesta," Feyre said hoarsely. "You do—and *we* do."

Where the hell was Elain?

"I'll take the blame," Feyre went on, "for allowing things to get this far, and this bad. After the war with Hybern, with everything else that was going on, it . . . You . . . I should have been there to help you, but I wasn't, and I am ready to admit that this is partially my fault."

“That *what* is your fault?” Nesta hissed.

“You,” Cassian said. “This bullshit behavior.”

He’d said that at the Winter Solstice. And just as it had then, her spine locked at the insult, the *arrogance*—

“Look,” Cassian went on, holding up his hands, “it’s not some moral failing, but—”

“I understand how you’re feeling,” Feyre cut in.

“You know *nothing* about how I’m feeling.”

Feyre plowed ahead. “It’s time for some changes. Starting now.”

“Keep your self-righteous do-gooder nonsense out of my life.”

“You don’t have a life,” Feyre retorted. “And I’m not going to sit by for another moment and watch you destroy yourself.” She put a tattooed hand on her heart, like it meant something. “I decided after the war to give you time, but it seems that was wrong. *I was wrong.*”

“Oh?” The word was a dagger thrown between them.

Rhys tensed at the sneer, but still said nothing.

“You’re done,” Feyre breathed, voice shaking. “This behavior, that apartment, all of it—you are *done*, Nesta.”

“And where,” Nesta said, her tone mercifully icy, “am I supposed to go?”

Feyre looked to Cassian.

For once, Cassian wasn’t grinning. “You’re coming with me,” he said. “To train.”

CHAPTER 2

Cassian felt as if he'd loosed an arrow at a sleeping fire Drake. Nesta, bundled in that worn blue coat, with her stained shoes and her wrinkled gray dress, looked him over and demanded, "*What?*"

"As of this meeting," Feyre clarified, "you're moving into the House of Wind." She nodded eastward, toward the palace carved into the mountains at the far end of the city. "Rhys and I have decided that each morning, you will train with Cassian in Windhaven, in the Illyrian Mountains. After lunch, for the rest of the afternoon, you will be assigned work in the library beneath the House of Wind. But the apartment, the seedy taverns—all of that is *over*, Nesta."

Nesta's fingers curled into fists in her lap. But she said nothing.

He should have positioned himself beside her, instead of allowing his High Lady to sit on that couch within arm's reach of her. No matter that Feyre already had a shield around herself courtesy of Rhys—it had been there at breakfast, too. *Part of my ongoing training*, Feyre had muttered when Cassian asked about the ironclad defenses, so strong they even masked her scent. *Rhys is having Helion teach him about truly impenetrable shields, so of course I have the pleasure of being the test subject.*

I'm supposed to try to break this one to see if Rhys is following Helion's instructions correctly. It's a new kind of insanity.

But one that had proved fortuitous. Even if they didn't know *what* Nesta's power could do against ordinary magic.

Rhys seemed to be thinking the same thing, and Cassian poised himself to jump between the two sisters. His Siphons flared in warning as Rhys's power rumbled.

Cassian had no doubt Feyre could defend herself against most opponents, but Nesta . . .

He wasn't entirely sure Feyre would hit back, even if Nesta launched that terrible power at her. And he hated that he didn't know if Nesta would sink low enough to do it. That things had become so bad that he even considered the possibility.

"I'm not moving to the House of Wind," Nesta said. "And I'm not training at that miserable village. Certainly not with *him*." She threw him a look that was nothing short of venomous.

"It's not up for negotiation," Amren said, breaking her vow to keep out of the discussion as much as possible for the second time in so many minutes. The eldest of the Archeron sisters had a talent for getting under everyone's skin. Yet Nesta and Amren had always shared a bond—an understanding.

Until their fight on the barge.

"Like hell it isn't," Nesta challenged, but didn't attempt to stand as Rhys's eyes flickered with cold warning.

"Your apartment is being packed as we speak," Amren said, picking at a speck of lint on her silk blouse. "By the time you return, it will be empty. Your clothes are already being sent to the House, though I doubt they will be suitable for training at Windhaven." A pointed glance at Nesta's gray dress, baggier on her than it had once been. Did Nesta notice the faint glimmer of worry in Amren's smoky eyes—understand how rare it was?

More than that, did Nesta understand that this meeting wasn't to

condemn her, but instead came from a place of concern? Her simmering stare told him she considered this purely an attack.

“You can’t do this,” Nesta said. “I’m not a member of this court.”

“You seem to have no qualms about spending this court’s money,” Amren countered. “During the war with Hybern, you accepted the position as our human emissary. You never resigned from the role, so formal law still considers you an official member of this court.” A wave of her small fingers and a book floated toward Nesta before thumping onto the cushions beside her. That was about the extent of the magic Amren now possessed—ordinary, unremarkable High Fae magic. “Page two hundred thirty-six, if you want to check.”

Amren had combed through their *laws* for this? Cassian didn’t even know such a rule existed—he’d accepted the position Rhys had offered him without question, not caring what he was agreeing to, only that he and Rhys and Azriel would be together. That they’d have a home that no one could ever take from them. Until Amarantha.

He’d never stop being grateful for it: for the High Lady mere feet from him, who had saved them all from Amarantha’s rule, who had returned his brother to him and then brought Rhys out of the darkness that lingered.

“So here are your options, girl,” Amren said, delicate chin rising. Cassian didn’t miss the look between Feyre and Rhys: the utter agony in his High Lady’s face at the ultimatum he knew was to be presented to Nesta, and the half-restrained rage in Rhys’s that his mate was in such pain because of it. He’d already seen that exchanged look once today—had hoped he wouldn’t see it again.

Cassian had been eating an early breakfast with them this morning when Rhys had gotten the bill for Nesta’s night out. When Rhys had read each item aloud. Bottles of rare wine, exotic foods, gambling debts . . .

Feyre had stared at her plate until silent tears dripped into her scrambled eggs.

Cassian knew there'd been previous conversations—fights—about Nesta. About whether to give her time to heal herself, as they'd all believed would happen at first, or to step in. But as Feyre wept at the table, he knew it was a breaking of some sort. An acceptance of a hope failed.

It had required all of Cassian's training, every horror he'd endured on and off the battlefield, to keep that same crushing sorrow from his own face.

Rhys had laid a comforting hand on Feyre's, squeezing gently before he looked at Azriel, and then Cassian, and laid out his plan. As if he'd had it waiting a long, long while.

Elain had walked in halfway through. She'd been toiling in the estate gardens since dawn, and had been solemn as Rhys filled her in. Feyre had been unable to say a word. But Elain's gaze remained steady as she listened to Rhys.

Then Rhys summoned Amren from her attic apartment across the river. Feyre had insisted that the order come through Amren, not Rhys, to preserve any sort of familial bond between Rhys and her sister.

Cassian didn't think there was one to begin with, but Rhys had agreed, moving to kneel at Feyre's side, wiping away the remnants of her tears, kissing her temple. They'd all left the table then, giving their High Lord and Lady privacy.

Cassian took to the skies moments later, letting the roaring wind drown out every thought in his head, letting its briskness cool his pounding heart. This meeting, what was to come—none of it would be easy.

Amren, they'd agreed, had always been one of the few people who could get through to Nesta. Whom Nesta seemed to fear, if only slightly. Who understood, somehow, what Nesta was, deep down.

She'd been the only one Nesta had truly spoken to after the war.

It didn't seem like a coincidence that in the past month, since they'd

argued on that boat, Nesta's behavior had deteriorated further. That she now looked like . . . this.

"One," Amren said, raising a slender finger, "you can move up to the House of Wind, train with Cassian in the mornings, and work in the library in the afternoons. You will not be a prisoner. But there will be no one to fly or winnow you down to the city. If you want to venture into the city proper, by all means, go ahead. That is, if you can brave the ten thousand steps down from the House." Amren's eyes glittered with the challenge. "And if you can somehow find two coppers to rub together to buy yourself a drink. But if you follow this plan, we will reevaluate where and how you live in a few months."

"And my other option?" Nesta spat.

Mother above, this woman—female. She was no longer human. Cassian could think of very, very few people who would defy Amren and Rhys. Certainly not in the same room. Certainly not with such venom.

"You go back to the human lands."

Amren had suggested a few days in a dungeon in the Hewn City, but Feyre had simply said that the human world would be more than enough of a prison for someone like Nesta.

Someone like Feyre, too. And Elain.

All three sisters were now High Fae with considerable powers, though only Feyre's were let loose. Even Amren had no idea whether Elain's and Nesta's powers remained. The Cauldron had granted them unique powers, different from other High Fae: the gift of sight to the former, and the gift of . . . Cassian didn't know what to call Nesta's gift. Didn't know whether it was a gift at all—or something she had taken. The silver fire, that sense of death looming, the raw power he'd witnessed as it blasted into the King of Hybern. Whatever it was, it existed beyond the usual array of High Fae gifts.

The human world was behind them. They could never return. Even

though all three of them were war heroes, each in their own right, the humans wouldn't care. Would stay far, far away, if they weren't provoked to violence. So, yes: Nesta might technically be able to return to the human lands, but she would find no companionship there, no warm welcome or town that would accept her. Wherever she was able to find a place to live, she would be essentially housebound, confined to the grounds of her home for fear of human prejudices.

Nesta turned to Feyre, lips pulling back from her teeth. "And these are my only options?"

"I—" Feyre caught herself before she could say the rest—*I'm sorry*—and squared her shoulders. Became the High Lady of the Night Court, even without her black crown, even in Rhys's old sweater. "Yes."

"You have no right."

"I—"

Nesta erupted. "*You* dragged me into this mess, this horrible place. *You* are why I am like this, why I am *stuck* here—"

Feyre flinched. Rhys's rage became palpable, a pulse of night-kissed power that tightened Cassian's gut, every warrior's instinct beaten into him coming to attention.

"That's enough," Feyre breathed.

Nesta blinked.

Feyre swallowed, but didn't balk. "That is *enough*. You're moving up to the House, you're going to train and work, and I don't care what vitriol you spew my way. You're doing it."

"Elain needs to be able to see me—"

"Elain agreed to this hours ago. She's currently packing your things. They'll be waiting for you when you arrive."

Nesta recoiled.

Feyre didn't relent. "Elain knows how to contact you. If she wishes to visit you at the House of Wind, she is free to do so. One of us will gladly take her up there."

The words hung between them, so heavy and awkward that Cassian said, “I promise not to bite.”

Nesta’s upper lip curled back as she faced him. “I suppose this was *your* idea—”

“It was,” he lied with a grin. “We’re going to have a wonderful time together.”

They’d likely kill each other.

“I want to speak to my sister. Alone,” Nesta ordered.

Cassian glanced at Rhys, who leveled an assessing stare at Nesta. Cassian had been on the receiving end of that same stare a few times over the centuries and did not envy Nesta one bit. But the High Lord of the Night Court nodded. “We’ll be in the hall.”

Cassian’s fist tightened at the implied insult that they didn’t trust her enough to go farther than that, despite the shield on Feyre. Even if the rational, warrior-minded part of him agreed. Nesta’s eyes flared, and he knew she’d understood it, too.

From the way Feyre’s jaw tightened, he suspected she wasn’t pleased at the subtle jab—it wouldn’t help convince Nesta that they were doing this to help her. Rhys would be getting the verbal beating he deserved later.

Cassian waited until Rhys and Amren rose before following them out. True to his word, Rhys walked three steps down the hall, away from the wood doors spelled against eavesdroppers, and leaned against the wall.

Doing the same, Cassian said to Amren, “I didn’t even know we had laws like that about court membership.”

“We don’t.” Amren picked at her red-painted nails.

He swore under his breath.

Rhys smiled wryly. But Cassian frowned toward the shut double doors and prayed Nesta didn’t do anything stupid.



Nesta held her spine ramrod straight, back aching with the effort. She had never hated anyone so much as she hated all of them now. Save for the King of Hybern, she supposed.

They'd all been discussing her, deeming her unfit and unchecked, and—

“You didn’t care before,” Nesta said. “Why now?”

Feyre toyed with her silver-and-star-sapphire wedding ring. “I told you: it wasn’t that I didn’t care. We—everyone, I mean—had multiple conversations about this. About you. We— *I* decided that giving you time and space would be best.”

“And what did Elain have to say about it?” Part of her didn’t want to know.

Feyre’s mouth tightened. “This isn’t about Elain. And last I checked, you barely saw her, either.”

Nesta hadn’t realized they were paying such close attention.

She’d never explained to Feyre—had never found the words to explain—why she’d put such distance between them all. Elain had been stolen by the Cauldron and saved by Azriel and Feyre. Yet the terror still gripped Nesta, waking and asleep: the memory of how it had felt in those moments after hearing the Cauldron’s seductive call and realizing it had been for Elain, not for her or Feyre. How it had felt to find Elain’s tent empty, to see that blue cloak discarded.

Things had only gotten worse from there.

You have your lives, and I have mine, she’d said to Elain last Winter Solstice. She’d known how deeply it would wound her sister. But she couldn’t bear it—the bone-deep horror that lingered. The flashes of that discarded cloak or the Cauldron’s chill waters or Cassian crawling toward her or her father’s neck snapping—

Feyre said carefully, “For what it’s worth, I was hoping you’d turn yourself around. I wanted to give you space to do it, since you seem to lash out at everyone who comes close enough, but you didn’t even *try*.”

Perhaps you can find it in yourself to try a little harder this year. Cassian's words from nine months ago still rang fresh in Nesta's mind, uttered on an ice-slick street blocks from here.

Try? It was all she could think to say.

I know that's a foreign word to you.

Then her rage had ruptured from her. *Why should I have to try to do anything? I was dragged into this world of yours, this court.*

Then go somewhere else.

She'd swallowed her own response: *I have nowhere to go.*

It was the truth. She had no desire to return to the human realm. Had never felt at home there, not really. And this strange, new Fae world . . . She might have accepted her different, altered body, that she was now permanently changed and her humanity gone, but she didn't know where she belonged in this world, either. The thought was one she tried to drown in liquor and music and cards, as often as she used those things to quell that writhing power deep inside.

Feyre continued, "All you have done is help yourself to our money."

"Your mate's money." Another flash of hurt. Nesta's blood sang at the direct blow. "Thank you so much for taking time out of your home-making and shopping to remember me."

"I built a room in this house for you. I *asked* you to help me decorate it. You told me to piss off."

"Why would I ever want to stay in this house?" Where she could see precisely how happy they were, where none of them seemed remotely as decimated as she'd been by the war. She'd come so close to being a part of it—of that circle. Had held their hands as they'd stood together on the morning of the final battle and believed they might all make it.

Then she'd learned precisely how mercilessly it might be ripped away. What the cost of hope and joy and love truly was. She never wanted to face it again. Never wanted to endure what she'd felt in that forest clearing, with the King of Hybern chuckling, blood everywhere.

Her power hadn't been enough to save them that day. She supposed she'd been punishing it for failing her ever since, keeping it locked up tight inside her.

Feyre said, "Because you're my sister."

"Yes, and you're always sacrificing for us, your sad little human family—"

"You spent *five hundred gold marks* last night!" Feyre exploded, shooting to her feet to pace in front of the hearth. "Do you know how much money that is? Do you know how *embarrassed* I was when we got the bill this morning and my friends—my *family*—had to hear all about it?"

Nesta hated that word. The term Feyre used to describe her court. As if things had been so miserable with the Archeron family that Feyre had needed to find another one. Had chosen her own. Nesta's nails bit into her palms, the pain overriding that of her tightening chest.

Feyre went on, "And to hear not just the amount of the bill, but what you *spent* it on—"

"Oh, so it's about you saving face—"

"It is about how it reflects upon me, upon Rhys, and upon my court when my damned sister spends our money on wine and gambling and does *nothing* to contribute to this city! If my sister cannot be controlled, then why should we have the right to rule over anyone else?"

"I am not a thing to be controlled by you," Nesta said icily. Everything in her life, from the moment she was born, had been controlled by other people. Things happened *to* her; anytime she tried to exert control, she'd been thwarted at every turn—and she hated that even more than the King of Hybern.

"That's why you're going to train at Windhaven. You will learn to control *yourself*."

"I won't go."

"You're going, even if you have to be tied up and hauled there. You will follow Cassian's lessons, and you will do whatever work Clotho

requires in the library.” Nesta blocked out the memory—of the dark depths of that library, the ancient monster that had dwelled there. It had saved them from Hybern’s cronies, yes, but . . . She refused to think of it. “You will respect her, and the other priestesses in the library,” Feyre said, “and you will *never* give them a moment’s trouble. Any free time is yours to spend as you wish. In the House.”

Hot rage pumped through her, so loud Nesta could barely hear the real fire before which her sister paced. Was glad of the roaring in her head when the sound of wood cracking as it burned was so much like her father’s breaking neck that she couldn’t stand to light a fire in her own home.

“You had no right to close up my apartment, to take my things—”

“What things? A few clothes and some rotten food.” Nesta didn’t have the chance to wonder how Feyre knew that. Not as her sister said, “I’m having that entire building condemned.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“It’s done. Rhys already visited the landlord. It will be torn down and rebuilt as a shelter for families still displaced by the war.”

Nesta tried to master her uneven breathing. One of the few choices she’d made for herself, stripped away. Feyre didn’t seem to care. Feyre had always been her own master. Always got whatever she wished. And now, it seemed, Feyre would be granted this wish, too. Nesta seethed, “I never want to speak to you again.”

“That’s fine. You can talk to Cassian and the priestesses instead.”

There was no insulting her way out of it. “I won’t be your prisoner—”

“No. You can go wherever you wish. As Amren said, you are free to leave the House. If you can manage those ten thousand steps.” Feyre’s eyes blazed. “But I’m done paying for you to destroy yourself.”

Destroy herself. The silence hummed in Nesta’s ears, rippled across her flames, suffocating them, stilling the unbearable wrath. Utter, frozen silence.

She'd learned to live with the silence that had started the moment her father had died, the silence that had begun crushing her when she'd gone to his study at their half-wrecked manor days later and found one of his pathetic little wood carvings. She'd wanted to scream and scream, but there had been so many people around. She'd held herself together until the meeting with all those war heroes had ended. Then she'd let herself fall. Straight into this silent pit.

"The others are waiting," Feyre said. "Elain should be done by now."

"I want to talk to her."

"She'll come visit when she's ready."

Nesta held her sister's stare.

Feyre's eyes gleamed. "You think I don't know why you've pushed even Elain away?"

Nesta didn't want to talk about it. About the fact that it had *always* been her and Elain. And, somehow, now it had become Feyre and Elain instead. Elain had chosen Feyre and these people, and left her behind. Amren had done the same. She'd made it clear on the barge.

Nesta didn't care that during the war with Hybern, her own tentative bond had formed with Feyre, forged over common goals: protect Elain, save the human lands. They were excuses, Nesta had realized, to paper over what now boiled and raged in her heart.

Nesta didn't bother replying, and Feyre didn't speak again as she departed.

There was nothing to bind them together anymore.

CHAPTER 3

Cassian watched Rhysand carefully stir his tea.

He'd seen Rhys slice up their enemies with the same cold precision that he was now using with that spoon.

They sat in the High Lord's study, illuminated by the light of green glass lamps and a heavy iron chandelier. The two-level atrium occupied the northern end of the business wing, as Feyre called it.

There was the main floor of the study—bedecked in the hand-knotted blue carpets that Feyre had gone to Cesere to select from its artisans—with its two sitting areas, Rhys's desk, and twin long tables near the bookshelves. At the far end of the room, a little dais led into a broad raised alcove flanked by more books—and in its center, a massive, working model of their world, the stars and planets around it, and some other fancy things that had been explained to Cassian once before he deemed them boring and proceeded to ignore them completely.

Az, of course, had been fascinated. Rhys had built the model himself centuries ago. It could not only track the sun, but also tell time, and it somehow allowed Rhys to ponder the existence of life beyond their own world and other things Cassian had, again, instantly forgotten.

On the mezzanine, accessible by an ornate wrought-iron spiral staircase just to the left when one walked in, were more books—thousands in this space alone—a few glass cabinets full of delicate objects that Cassian stayed away from (for fear of breaking them with his “bear paws,” as Mor described his hands), and several of Feyre’s paintings.

There were plenty of those on the bottom level, too, some in shadow and meant to stay that way, some revealed by the streaming light reflecting off the river at the foot of the sloping lawn. Cassian’s High Lady had a way of capturing the world that always made him pause. Her paintings sometimes unsettled him. The truths she portrayed weren’t always pleasant ones.

He’d gone to her studio a few times to watch her paint. Surprisingly, she had let him.

The first time he’d visited, he’d found Feyre tense at her easel. She was painting what he realized was an emaciated rib cage, so thin he could count most of the bones.

When he spotted a familiar birthmark on the too-thin left arm beside it, he eyed the same mark amid the tattoo on her own extended arm, brush in hand. He merely nodded to her, an acknowledgment that he understood.

He had never been as thin as Feyre during his own years of poverty, but he understood the hunger in each brushstroke. The desperation. The hollow, empty feeling that *felt* like those grays and blues and pale, sickly white. The despair of the black pit behind that torso and arm. Death, hovering close like a crow awaiting carrion.

He’d thought about that painting a great deal in the days afterward—how it had made him feel, how close they’d all come to losing their High Lady before they’d ever met her.

Rhys finished stirring his tea and set down his spoon with terrible gentleness.

Cassian raised his eyes to the portrait behind his High Lord’s

mammoth desk. The golden faelight orbs in the room were positioned to make it seem alive, glowing.

Feyre's face—a self-portrait—seemed to laugh at him. At the mate whose back was to her. So she could watch over him, Rhys said.

Cassian prayed that the gods were watching over *him* as Rhys sipped from his tea and said, “You’re ready?”

He leaned back in his seat. “I’ve gotten young warriors in line before.”

Rhys's violet eyes glowed. “Nesta's not some young buck pushing the boundaries.”

“I can handle her.”

Rhys stared at his tea.

Cassian recognized that face. That serious, unnervingly calm face.

“You did good work getting the Illyrians back in order this spring, you know.”

He braced himself. He'd been anticipating this talk since he'd spent four months with the Illyrians, soothing the jagged edges amongst the war-bands, making sure the families who'd lost fathers and sons and brothers and husbands were taken care of, that they knew he was there to help and to listen, and generally making it very fucking clear that if they rose up against Rhys, there would be hell to pay.

The Blood Rite last spring had taken care of the worst of them, including the troublemaker Kallon, whose arrogance hadn't been enough to compensate for his shoddy training when he'd been slain just miles from the slopes of Ramiel. That Cassian had heaved a sigh of relief at the news of the young male's demise had lingered with him, but the Illyrians had stopped their grumbling soon after. And Cassian had spent the time since then rebuilding their ranks, overseeing the training of promising new warriors and making sure the seasoned ones were still in good enough shape to fight again. Replenishing their depleted numbers had at least given the Illyrians something to focus on—and

Cassian knew there was little he could add anymore beyond the occasional inspection and council meeting.

So the Illyrians were at peace—or as peaceful as a warrior society could be, with their constant training. Which was what Rhys wanted. Not just because a rebellion would be a disaster, but because of this. What he knew Rhys was about to say.

“I think it’s time for you to take on bigger responsibilities.”

Cassian grimaced. There it was.

Rhys chuckled. “You can’t honestly mean to tell me you didn’t know the Illyrian situation was a test?”

“I’d hoped not,” he grumbled, tucking in his wings.

Rhys smirked, though he quickly sobered. “Nesta is not a test, though. She’s . . . different.”

“I know.” Even before she’d been Made, he’d seen it. And after that terrible day in Hybern . . . He’d never forgotten the Bone Carver’s whispered words in the Prison.

What if I tell you what the rock and darkness and sea beyond whispered to me, Lord of Bloodshed? How they shuddered in fear, on that island across the sea. How they trembled when she emerged. She took something—something precious. She ripped it out with her teeth.

What did you wake that day in Hybern, Prince of Bastards?

That final question had chased him from slumber more nights than he cared to admit.

Cassian made himself say, “We haven’t seen a hint of her power since the war. For all we know, it vanished with the Cauldron’s breaking.”

“Or maybe it’s dormant, as the Cauldron is now asleep and safely hidden in Cretea with Drakon and Miryam. Her power could rise at any moment.”

A chill skittered down Cassian’s spine. He trusted the Seraphim prince and the half-human woman to keep the Cauldron concealed, but there would be nothing they or anyone could do to control its power if awoken.

Rhys said, “Be on your guard.”

“You sound like you’re afraid of her.”

“I am.”

Cassian blinked.

Rhys lifted a brow. “Why do you think I sent you to get her this morning?”

Cassian shook his head, unable to help his laugh. Rhys smiled, lacing his fingers behind his head and leaning back in his seat.

“You need to get out in the practice ring more, brother,” Cassian told him, surveying his friend’s powerful body. “Don’t want that mate of yours to find any soft bits.”

“She never finds any soft bits when I’m around her,” Rhys said, and Cassian laughed again.

“Is Feyre going to kick your ass for what you said earlier?”

“I already told the servants to clear out for the rest of the day as soon as you take Nesta up to the House.”

“I think the servants hear you fighting plenty.” Indeed, Feyre had no hesitation when it came to telling Rhys that he’d stepped out of line.

Rhys threw him a wicked smile. “It’s not the fighting I don’t want them hearing.”

Cassian grinned right back, even as something like jealousy tugged on his gut. He didn’t begrudge them their happiness—not at all. There were plenty of times when he’d see the joy on Rhys’s face and have to walk away to keep from weeping, because his brother had waited for that love, earned it. Rhys had gone to the mat again and again to fight for that future with Feyre. For *this*.

But sometimes, Cassian saw that mating ring, and the portrait behind the desk, and this house, and just . . . wanted.

The clock chimed ten thirty, and Cassian rose. “Enjoy your not-fighting.”

“Cassian.”

The tone stopped him.

Rhys's face was carefully calm. "You didn't ask what bigger responsibilities I have in mind for you."

"I assumed Nesta was big enough," he hedged.

Rhys gave him a knowing look. "You could be more."

"I'm your general. Isn't that enough?"

"Is it enough for you?"

Yes, he almost said. But found himself hesitating.

"Oh, you're certainly hesitating," Rhys said. Cassian tried to snap up his mental shields, but found they were intact. Rhys was smiling like a cat. "You still reveal everything on that face of yours, brother," Rhys crooned. But his amusement swiftly faded. "Az and I have good reason to believe that the human queens are scheming again. I need you to look into it. Deal with it."

"What, we're doing some role reversal? Az gets to lead the Illyrians now?"

"Don't play stupid," Rhys said coolly.

Cassian rolled his eyes. But they both knew Azriel would sooner disband and destroy Illyria than help it. Convincing their brother that the Illyrians were a people worth saving was still a battle amongst the three of them.

Rhys went on, "Azriel is juggling more than he'll admit right now. I'm not dumping another responsibility on him. This task of yours will help him." Rhys flashed a challenging smile. "And let us all see what you're really made of."

"You want me to play spy?"

"There are other ways to glean information, Cass, besides peeking through keyholes. Az isn't a courtier. He works from the shadows. But I need someone—I need you—standing in the open. Mor can fill you in on the details. She'll be back from Vallahan at some point today."

"I'm no courtier, either. You know that." The thought made his stomach churn.

“Scared?”

Cassian let the Siphons atop the backs of his hands shimmer with inner fire. “So I’m to deal with these queens as well as train Nesta?”

Rhys leaned back, his silence confirmation.

Cassian strode toward the shut double doors, reining in a string of curses. “We’re in for a long few months, then.”

He was almost to the door when Rhys said quietly, “You certainly are.”



“Did you keep those fighting leathers from the war?” Cassian said to Nesta by way of greeting as he stalked into the entry hall. “You’ll need them tomorrow.”

“I made sure Elain packed them for her,” Feyre replied from her perch on the stairs, not looking at her stiff-backed sister standing at their base. He wondered if his High Lady had noticed the disappearing servants yet.

The secret smile in Feyre’s eyes told him she knew plenty about it. And what was coming for her in a few minutes.

Thank the gods he was getting out of here. He’d probably have to fly to the sea itself *not* to hear Rhys. Or feel his power when he . . . Cassian stopped himself before he could finish the thought. He and his brothers had put a good deal of distance between the stupid youths they’d been—fucking any female who showed interest, often in the same room as each other—and the males they were now. He wanted to keep it that way.

Nesta just crossed her arms.

“Are you winnowing us up to the House?” he asked Feyre.

As if in answer, Mor said from behind him, “I am.” She winked at Feyre. “She’s got a special meeting with Rhysie.”

Cassian grinned as Mor strode in from the residential wing. “I thought you wouldn’t be back until later today.” He threw open his

arms, folding her against his chest and squeezing tight. Mor's waist-length golden hair smelled of cold seas.

She squeezed him back. "I didn't feel like waiting until the afternoon. Vallahan is already knee-deep in snow. I needed some sunshine."

Cassian pulled away to scan her beautiful face, as familiar to him as his own. Her brown eyes were shadowed despite her words. "What's wrong?"

Feyre rose from her seat, noting the strain as well. "Nothing," Mor said, flipping her hair over a shoulder.

"Liar."

"I'll tell you all later," Mor conceded, and looked toward Nesta. "You should wear the leathers tomorrow. When you train up at Windhaven, you'll want them against the cold."

Nesta leveled a bored, icy look at Mor.

Mor just beamed at her in return.

Feyre took that as a good moment to casually step between them, Rhys's shield still hard as steel around her. Never mind that they'd all be real damn close in about a minute. "Today we'll let you get settled at the House—you can unpack your things. Get some rest, if you want."

Nesta said nothing.

Cassian dragged a hand through his hair. Cauldron spare them. Rhys expected him to play politics when he couldn't even navigate *this*?

Mor smirked, as if reading the thought on his face. "Congratulations on your promotion." She shook her head. "Cassian the courtier. I never thought I'd see the day."

Feyre snickered. But Nesta's eyes slid to him, surprised and wary. He said to her, if only to beat her to it, "Still a bastard-born nobody, don't worry."

Nesta's lips thinned.

Feyre said carefully to Nesta, "We'll talk soon."

Nesta again didn't reply.

It seemed she had stopped speaking to Feyre at all. But at least she was going willingly.

Semi-willingly.

“Shall we?” Mor said, offering up either elbow.

Nesta gazed at the floor, her face pale and gaunt, eyes blazing.

Feyre met his stare. The look alone conveyed everything she was begging of him.

Nesta stepped past her, grabbed Mor’s forearm, and watched a spot on the wall.

Mor cringed at him, but Cassian didn’t dare share the look. Nesta might not be gazing at them, but he knew she saw and heard and assessed everything.

So he merely took Mor’s other arm and winked at Feyre before they all vanished into wind and darkness.



Mor winnowed them into the sky right above the House of Wind.

Before the stomach-dropping plunge could register, Nesta was in Cassian’s arms, his wings spread, as he flew toward the stone veranda. It had been a long while since she’d been held by him, since she’d seen the city so small below.

He could have flown them both up here, Nesta realized as he alighted and Morrigan vanished from her deadly plummet with a wave. The rules of the House were simple: no one could winnow directly inside thanks to its heavy wards, so it was a choice to either walk up the ten thousand steps, winnow and drop a terrifying distance to the veranda—likely breaking bones—or winnow to the edge of the wards with someone who had wings to fly the rest of the way in. But being in Cassian’s arms . . . She’d rather have risked breaking every bone in her body from the plunge to the veranda. Thankfully, the flight was over in a matter of seconds.

Nesta shoved out of his grip the moment her feet hit the worn stones. Cassian let her, folding his wings and lingering by the rail, all of Velaris glittering below and beyond him.

She'd spent weeks here last year—during that terrible period after being turned Fae, begging Elain to demonstrate any sign of wanting to live. She'd barely slept for fear of Elain walking off this veranda, or leaning too far out of one of the countless windows, or simply throwing herself down those ten thousand stairs.

Her throat closed at the surge of memories and at the sprawling view—the glimmering ribbon of the Sidra far below, the red-stoned palace built into the side of the flat-topped mountain itself.

Nesta dug her hands into her pockets, wishing she'd opted for the warm gloves Feyre had coaxed her to take. She'd refused. Or silently refused, since she had not uttered a word to her sister after they'd left the study.

Partially because she was afraid of what would come out.

For a long moment, Nesta and Cassian watched each other.

The wind ripped at his shoulder-length dark hair, but he might have been standing in a summer field for all the reaction he yielded to the cold—so much sharper up here, high above the city. It was all she could do to keep her teeth from clattering their way out of her skull.

Cassian finally said, “You’ll be staying in your old room.”

As if she had any sort of claim on this place. On anywhere at all.

He went on, “My room’s a level above that.”

“Why would I need to know that?” The words snapped out of her.

He began walking toward the glass doors that led into the mountain’s interior. “In case you have a bad dream and need someone to read you a story,” he drawled, a half smile dancing on his face. “Maybe one of those smutty books you like so much.”

Her nostrils flared. But she walked through the door he held open for her, nearly sighing at the cozy warmth filling the red stone halls. Her new residence. Sleeping site.

It wasn't a home, this place. Just as her apartment hadn't been a home. Neither had her father's fancy new house, before Hybern had half-destroyed it. And neither had the cottage, or the glorious manor before that. *Home* was a foreign word.

But she knew this level of the House of Wind well: the dining room to the left, and the stairway to her right that would take her down two levels to her floor, and the kitchens a level below that. The library far, far beneath it.

She wouldn't have cared where she stayed, except for the convenience of the small, private library also on her level. Which had been the place where she'd discovered those smutty books, as Cassian called them. She'd devoured a few dozen of them during those weeks she'd first been here, desperate for any lifeline to keep her from falling apart, from bellowing at what had been done to her body, her life—to Elain. Elain, who would not eat, or speak, or do anything at all.

Elain, who had somehow become the *adjusted* one.

In the months leading to and during the war, Nesta had managed. Had stepped into this world, with these people, and started to see it—a future.

Until she'd been hunted by the King of Hybern and the Cauldron. Until she'd realized that everyone she cared for would be used to hurt her, break her, trap her. Until that last battle when she couldn't stop one thousand Illyrians from dying, and had instead been able to save only one.

Him. She would do it again, if forced to. And knowing that . . . She couldn't bear that truth, either.

Cassian aimed for the downward stairs, his every movement brimming with unfaltering arrogance.

"I don't need an escort to my room." No matter that his rooms were that way, too. "I know how to get there."

He threw a smirk over a muscled shoulder and strode down the stairs anyway. "I just want to make sure you arrive in one piece before I

settle in.” He nodded to the landing they passed, the open archway that led into the hall with his bedroom. She knew it only because she’d had little more to do during those initial weeks as High Fae than wander this palace like a ghost.

Cassian added, “Az is in the room two doors down from mine.” They reached the level of her bedroom and he swaggered along the hall. “You probably won’t see him, though.”

“He’s here to spy on me?” Her words bounced off the red stone.

Cassian said tightly, “He says he’d rather stay up here than at the river house.”

That made two of them. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He’s Az. He likes his space.” He shrugged, the faelicht filtering through the golden sconces gilding the taloned apex of his wings. “He’ll keep to himself, so most of the time it’ll be only you and me.”

She didn’t dare reply. Not to all that statement implied. Alone— with Cassian. Here.

Cassian stopped in front of a familiar, arched wood door. He leaned against the jamb, hazel eyes monitoring her every step.

She knew the House belonged to Rhys. Knew Cassian’s entire existence was paid for by Rhys, just as the High Lord bankrolled all of his Inner Circle. Knew that the fastest and deepest way to annoy Cassian, hurt him right now would be to strike for that, to make him doubt the work he did and whether he deserved to be here. The instinct crept up, a rising wave, each word selected to slice and wound. She’d always had the gift, if it could be called that. Yet it wasn’t a curse, not entirely. It had served her well.

He scanned her face as she stopped in front of the bedroom door. “Let’s hear it, Nes.”

“Don’t call me that.” She dangled the words like bait. Let him think her vulnerable.

But he pushed off the door, wings tucking in. “You need a hot meal.”

“I don’t want one.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not hungry.”

It was true. Her appetite had been the first thing to go after that battle. Only instinct and the occasional social requirement to appear like she gave a shit about anything kept her eating.

“You won’t last through an hour of training tomorrow without food in your belly.”

“I’m not training at that horrible place.” She’d hated Windhaven from the first time she’d seen it, cold and bleak and full of humorless, harsh-faced people.

The Siphon strapped atop Cassian’s left hand gleamed, a red band of light twining from the stone to wrap around the door handle. It yanked the iron downward, the door swinging open with a creak, then vanished like smoke. “You were given an order, as well as the alternative to following it. You want to go back to the human lands, be my guest.”

Then go somewhere else.

He’d likely have that preening Morrigan dump her over the border like so much baggage.

And Nesta would have called the bluff, except . . . she knew what she’d face down south. The war had done little to warm human sentiments toward the Fae.

She had nowhere to go. Elain, mourn as she might for the life she would have had with Graysen, had found a place, a role here. Tending to the gardens of Feyre’s veritable palace on the river, helping other residents of Velaris restore their own destroyed gardens—she had purpose, and joy, and *friends*: those two half-wraiths who worked in Rhysand’s household. But those things had always come easily to her sister. Had always made Elain special.

Had made Nesta fight like hell to keep Elain safe at all costs.

The Cauldron had learned that. The King of Hybern had learned it, too.

An old, heavy weight tugged her down, oblivion beckoning. “I’m tired.” Her words came out mercifully flat.

“Take the day to rest, then,” Cassian said, his voice a shade quiet. “Mor or Rhys will winnow us up to Windhaven after breakfast tomorrow.”

She said nothing. He went on, “We’ll start easy: two hours of training, then lunch, then you’ll be brought back here to meet with Clotho.”

She didn’t have the energy to ask further about the training, or the work in the library with its high priestess. She didn’t really care. Let Rhysand and Feyre and Amren and Cassian make her do this bullshit. Let them think it could somehow make a lick of difference.

Nesta didn’t bother to reply before she strode through the archway and into her bedroom. But she felt his stare on her, assessing every step over the threshold, the way her hand gripped the side of the door, the way she flexed her fingers before she slammed it shut.

Nesta waited mere feet inside the bedroom, blinking at the glaring light through the wall of windows at its other end. A scuff of boots on stone informed her that he’d left.

It wasn’t until the sound faded completely that she took in the room before her, unchanged since she’d last been in it, the connecting door to Elain’s old suite now sealed shut.

The wide space easily accommodated a mammoth four-poster bed against the wall to her left, as well as a small sitting area to her right, complete with a sofa and two chairs. A carved marble fireplace occupied the wall before the sitting area, mercifully dark, and multiple rugs lay scattered throughout, offering reprieve from the chilly stone floors.

But that wasn’t what she’d liked about this room. No, it was what she now faced: the wall of windows that overlooked the city, the river, the flatlands and distant sparkle of sea beyond. All that land, all those people, so far away. As if this palace floated in the clouds. There had been some days up here when the mist had been thick enough to block the view below, swirling so close to the window that she’d been able to trail her fingers through it.

No tendrils of mist drifted by now, though. The windows revealed nothing but a clear early-autumn day, the sunlight near-blinding.

Seconds ticked by. Minutes.

A familiar roaring built in her ears. That heavy hollowness tugged her down, as surely as some faerie creature wrapping its bony hands around her ankle and yanking her beneath a dark surface. As surely as she had been shoved under that eternal, icy water in the Cauldron.

Nesta's body became distant, foreign, as she shut the heavy gray velvet curtains against the light. Shrouding the room in darkness bit by bit. She ignored the three bags and two trunks set beside the dresser as she approached the bed.

She barely managed to toe off her shoes before she slid beneath the layers of white down blankets and quilts, closed her eyes, and breathed.

And breathed.

And breathed.

CHAPTER

4

Mor had already commandeered a table at the riverfront café, an arm slung across the back of a wrought-iron chair, the other elegantly draped over her crossed knees. Cassian halted a few feet from the maze of tables along the walkway, smiling to himself at the sight of her: head tipped toward the sun, unbound hair gleaming and rippling around her like liquid gold, her full lips curled upward, basking in the light.

She never stopped appreciating the sunshine. Even five hundred years after leaving that veritable prison she'd called home and the monsters who claimed her as kin, his friend—his sister, honestly—still savored every moment in the sun. As if the first seventeen years of her life, spent in the darkness of the Hewn City, still lurked around her like Az's shadows.

Cassian cleared his throat as he approached the table, offering pleasant smiles to the other patrons and people along the walkway who either gawked or waved at him, and by the time he sat, Mor was already smirking, her brown eyes lit with amusement.

“Don't start,” he warned, settling his wings around the chair's back and motioning to the owner of the café, who knew him well enough to

understand that meant he wanted water—no tea or sweets, both of which Mor had before her.

Mor grinned, so beautiful it took his breath away. “Can’t I enjoy the sight of my friend being fawned over by the public?”

He rolled his eyes, and murmured his thanks to the owner as a pitcher of water and a glass appeared before him.

Mor said when the owner had gone to tend to other tables, “I seem to remember a time when you enjoyed that sort of thing, too.”

“I was a young, arrogant idiot.” He cringed to recall how he’d strutted around after successful battles or missions, believing he deserved the praise of strangers. For too damn long, he’d indulged in that bullshit. It had taken walking these same streets after Rhys had been imprisoned by Amarantha—after Rhys sacrificed so much to shield this city, and seeing the disappointment and fear in so many faces—to make Cassian realize what a fool he’d been.

Mor cleared her throat, as if sensing the direction of his thoughts. She didn’t possess Rhys’s skill set, but having survived in the Court of Nightmares, she’d learned to read the subtlest of expressions. A mere blink, she’d once told him, might mean the difference between life and death in that miserable court. “She’s settled, then?”

Cassian knew who she meant. “Taking a nap.”

Mor snorted.

“Don’t.” His attention drifting to the glittering Sidra mere feet away. “Please don’t.”

Mor sipped her tea, the portrait of elegant innocence. “We’d be better off throwing Nesta into the Court of Nightmares. She’d thrive there.”

Cassian clenched his jaw, both at the insult and the truth. “That’s exactly the sort of existence we’re trying to steer her away from.”

Mor assessed him with a bob of her thick lashes. “It pains you seeing her like this.”

“All of it pains me.” He and Mor had always had this kind of

relationship: truth at all costs, however harsh. Ever since that first and only time they'd slept together, when he'd learned too late that she'd hidden from him the terrible repercussions. When he'd seen her broken body and known that even if she'd lied to him, he'd still played a part.

Cassian blew out a breath, shaking away the blood-soaked memory still staining his mind five centuries later. "It pains me that Nesta has become . . . this. It pains me that she and Feyre are always at each other's throats. It pains me that Feyre hurts over it, and I know Nesta does, too. It pains me that . . ." He drummed his fingers on the table, then sipped from his water. "I really don't want to talk about it."

"All right." The breeze ruffled the gauzy fabric of Mor's twilight-blue dress.

He again let himself admire her perfect face. Beyond the disastrous consequences for Mor after their night together, the fallout with Rhys afterward had been awful, and Azriel had been so furious in his own quiet way that Cassian had quelled any further desire for Mor. Had let lust turn into affection, and all romantic feelings turn into familial bonds. But he could still admire her sheer beauty—as he'd admire any work of art. Even though he knew well that what lay inside Mor was far more lovely and perfect than her exterior.

He wondered if she knew that.

Drinking again, he said, "Tell me what happened in Vallahan." The ancient, mountainous Fae territory across the northern sea had been stirring since before the war with Hybern, and had been both enemy and ally to Prythian in different historical eras. What role Vallahan's hot-tempered king and proud people would play in this new world of theirs was yet to be decided, though much of its fate seemed to depend upon Mor's now-frequent presence at their court as Rhys's emissary.

Indeed, Mor's eyes shuttered. "They don't want to sign the new treaty."

"Fuck." Rhys, Feyre, and Amren had spent months working on that treaty, with input from their allies in other courts and territories. Helion,

High Lord of the Day Court and Rhys's closest ally, had been the most involved. Helion Spell-Cleaver was unrivaled in sheer, swaggering arrogance—he'd probably made up the moniker himself. But the male had one thousand libraries at his disposal, and had put them all to good use for the treaty.

"I've spent weeks in that blasted court," Mor said, poking at the flaky pastry beside her teacup, "freezing my ass off, trying to kiss *their* cold asses, and their king and queen refused the treaty. I came home on the earlier side today because I knew any more last-minute pushing from me would be unwelcome. My time there was supposed to be a friendly visit, after all."

"Why won't they sign it?"

"Because those stupid human queens are stirring—their army still isn't disbanded. The Queen of Vallahan even asked me what the point of a peace treaty would be when another war, this time against the humans, might redraw the territory lines far below the wall. I don't think Vallahan is interested in peace. Or allying with us."

"So Vallahan wants another war in order to add to their territory?" They'd already seized more than their fair share after the War five hundred years ago.

"They're bored," Mor said, frowning with distaste. "And the humans, despite those queens, are far weaker than we are. Pushing into human lands is low-hanging fruit. Montesere and Rask are likely thinking the same thing."

Cassian groaned skyward. That had been the fear during the recent war: that those three territories across the sea might ally with Hybern. Had they, there would have been no chance at all of survival. Now, even with Hybern's king dead, its people remained angry. An army might be raised again in Hybern. And if it united with Vallahan, if Montesere and Rask joined with the goal of claiming more territory from the humans . . . "You already told Rhys this."

It wasn't a question, but Mor nodded. "That's why he's asking you

to look into what's going on with the human queens. I'm taking a few days off before I head back to Vallahan—but Rhys needs to know where the human queens stand in all of this.”

“So you're supposed to convince Vallahan not to start another war, and I'm supposed to convince the human queens not to do so, either?”

“You won't get near the human queens,” Mor said frankly. “But from what I observed in Vallahan, I know they're up to something. Planning something. We just can't figure out what, or why the humans would be stupid enough to start a war they cannot win.”

“They'd need something in their arsenal that could grant them the advantage.”

“That's what you have to find out.”

Cassian tapped his booted foot on the stones of the walkway. “No pressure.”

Mor drained her tea. “Playing courtier isn't all nice clothes and fancy parties.”

He scowled. Long moments passed in amiable silence, though Cassian half-heard the wind whispering over the Sidra, the merry chatter of the people around them, the clink of silverware against plates. Content to let him think, Mor returned to her sunning.

Cassian straightened. “There's one person who knows those queens inside and out. Who can offer some insight.”

Mor opened an eye, then slowly sat forward, hair falling around her like a rippling golden river. “Oh?”

“Vassa.” Cassian hadn't dealt much with the ousted human queen—the only good one out of the surviving group, who had been betrayed by her fellow queens when they'd sold her to a sorcerer-lord who'd cursed her to be a firebird by day, woman by night. She'd been lucky: they'd given the other rebellious queen in their midst to the Attor. Who had then impaled her on a lamppost a few bridges away from where Cassian and Mor now sat.

Mor nodded. “She might be able to help.”

He leaned his arms on the table. “Lucien is living with Vassa. And Jurian. He’s supposed to be our emissary to the human lands. Let him deal with it.”

Mor took another bite from her pastry. “Lucien can’t be entirely trusted anymore.”

Cassian started. “What?”

“Even with Elain here, he’s become close with Jurian and Vassa. He’s voluntarily living with them these days, and not just as an emissary. As their friend.”

Cassian went over all he’d heard and observed from his encounters with Lucien since the war, trying to contemplate it like Rhys and Mor would. “He’s spent months helping them sort out the politics of who rules Prythian’s slice of the human lands,” Cassian said slowly. “So Lucien can’t be unbiased in reporting to us on Vassa.”

Mor nodded gravely. “Lucien might mean well, but any reports would be skewed—even if he isn’t aware of it—in their favor. We need someone outside of their little bubble to collect information and report.” She finished off her pastry. “Which would be you?”

Fine. That made sense. “Why haven’t we already contacted Vassa about this?”

Mor waved a hand, though her shadowed eyes belied her casual gesture. “Because we’re just now piecing it all together. But you should definitely speak with her, when you can. As soon as you can, actually.”

Cassian nodded. He didn’t dislike Vassa, though meeting her would also entail talking with Lucien and Jurian. The former he’d learned to live with, but the latter . . . It didn’t matter that it turned out that Jurian had been fighting on their side. That the human general who’d been Amarantha’s tortured prisoner for five centuries had played Hybern after being rebirthed by the Cauldron, and had helped Cassian and his family win the war. Cassian still didn’t like the man.

He rose, leaning to ruffle Mor’s shining hair. “I miss you these days.” She’d been away frequently lately, and each time she returned, a shadow

he couldn't place dimmed her eyes. "You know we'd warn you if Keir ever came here." Her asshole of a father still hadn't called in his favor with Rhys: to visit Velaris.

"Eris bought me time." Her words were laced with acid.

Cassian had tried not to believe it, but he knew Eris had done it as a gesture of good faith. He'd invited Rhysand into his mind to see exactly why he'd convinced Keir to indefinitely delay his visit to Velaris. Only Eris had that sort of sway with the power-hungry Keir, and whatever Eris had offered Keir in exchange for not coming here was still a mystery. At least to Cassian. Rhys probably knew. From Mor's pale face, he wondered if she knew, too. Eris must have sacrificed something big to spare Mor from her father's visit, which would have likely been timed for a moment that would maximize tormenting her.

"It doesn't matter to me." Mor waved off the conversation with a flip of her hand. He could tell something else was eating at her. But she'd let him in when she was ready.

Cassian walked around the table and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Get some rest." He shot skyward before she could answer.



Nesta woke to pure darkness.

Darkness that she had not witnessed in years now. Since that ramshackle cottage that had become a prison and a hell.

Jolting upright, hands clutching at her chest, she gasped for air. Had it been some fever dream on a winter's night? She was still in that cottage, still starving and poor and desperate—

No. The air in the room was toasty, and she was the lone person in the bed, not clinging to her sisters for warmth, always squabbling over who got the coveted middle place in the bed on the coldest nights, or the edges on the hottest summer ones.

And though she'd become as bony as she'd been during those long winters . . . this body was new, too. Fae. Powerful. Or it had once been.

Scrubbing at her face, Nesta slid from the bed. The floors were warmed. Not the icy wooden planks in the cottage.

Padding to the window, she drew back the drapes and peered out at the darkened city below. Golden lights shone along the streets, dancing on the twining band of the Sidra. Beyond that, only starlight silvered the lowlands before the cold and empty sea.

A scan of the sky revealed nothing regarding how far off dawn might be, and a long moment of listening suggested the household remained asleep. All three of them who occupied it.

How long had she slept? They'd arrived by eleven in the morning, and she'd fallen asleep soon after that. She'd consumed absolutely nothing all day. Her stomach grumbled.

But she ignored it, leaning her brow against the cool glass of the window. She let the starlight gently brush her head, her face, her neck. Imagined it running its shimmering fingers down her cheek, as her mother had done for her and her alone.

My Nesta. Elaine shall wed for love and beauty, but you, my cunning little queen . . . You shall wed for conquest.

Her mother would thrash in her grave to know that, years later, her Nesta had come dangerously close to marrying a weak-willed woodcutter's son who had sat idly by while his father beat his mother. Who had put his hands on her when she called things off between them. Who had then attempted to take what she hadn't offered.

Nesta had tried to forget Tomas. She often found herself wishing the Cauldron had ripped those memories away just as it had her humanity, but his face sometimes sullied her dreams. Her waking thoughts. Sometimes, she could still feel his rough hands pawing at her, bruising her. Sometimes, the coppery tang of his blood still coated her tongue.

Pulling back from the window, Nesta studied those distant stars again. Half-wondered if they might speak.

My Nesta, her mother had always called her, even on her deathbed, so wasted and pale from typhus. *My little queen.*

Nesta had once delighted in the title. Had done her best to fulfill its promise, indulging in a dazzling life that had melted away as soon as the debtors swept in and all her so-called friends had revealed themselves to be nothing more than envious cowards wearing smiling masks. Not one of them had offered to help save the Archeron family from poverty.

They had thrown them all, mere children and a crumbling man, to the wolves.

So Nesta had become a wolf. Armed herself with invisible teeth and claws, and learned to strike faster, deeper, more lethally. Had relished it. But when the time came to put away the wolf, she'd found it had devoured her, too.

The stars flickered above the city, as if blinking their agreement.

Nesta curled her hands into fists and climbed back into bed.



Cauldron damn him, maybe he shouldn't have agreed to bring her here.

Cassian lay awake in his behemoth of a bed—large enough for three Illyrian warriors to sleep side by side, wings and all. Little in the room itself had changed in the past five hundred years. Mor occasionally grouched about wanting to redecorate the House of Wind, but he liked this room how it was.

He'd awoken at the sound of a door shutting and been instantly alert, heart hammering as he pulled free the knife he kept on the nightstand. Two more were hidden under his mattress, another set above the doorway, and two swords lay beneath the bed and in a dresser drawer, respectively. That was just his collection. The Mother knew what Az had stored in his own room.

He supposed that between him, Az, Mor, and Rhys, in the five centuries they'd used the House of Wind, they had filled it with enough weapons to arm a small legion. They'd hidden and stashed and forgotten about so many of them that there was always a good chance of sitting on a couch and being poked in the ass by something. And a good

chance that most of the weapons were now little more than rust in their sheaths.

But the ones in this bedroom, those he kept oiled and clean. Ready.

The knife gleamed in the starlight, his Siphons fluttering with red light as his power scanned the hall beyond the door.

But no threat emerged, no enemy breaching the new wards. Hybern's soldiers had broken through more than a year ago, nearly getting their hands on Feyre and Nesta in the library. He hadn't forgotten it—that terror on Nesta's face as she'd raced for him, arms outstretched.

But the sound in the hall . . . Azriel, he'd realized a heartbeat later.

That he'd heard the door at all told him Az wanted him aware of his return. Hadn't wanted to talk, but had wanted Cassian to know that he was around.

Which had left Cassian here, staring at the ceiling, his Siphons slumbering once more and knife again sheathed and set on the nightstand. From the stars' position, he knew it was past three—dawn was still far off. He should get some sleep. Tomorrow would be hard enough.

As if his silent plea had gone out into the world, a smooth male voice purred into his mind. *Why are you up so late?*

Cassian scanned the sky beyond the wall of windows, as if he'd see Rhys flying there. *I have the same question for you.*

Rhys chuckled. *I told you: I had some apologizing to do with my mate.* A long, wicked pause. *We're taking a break.*

Cassian laughed. *Let the poor female sleep.*

She was the one who initiated this round. Pure male satisfaction edged every word. *You still didn't answer my question.*

Why are you snooping on me at this hour?

I wanted to make sure all was well. It's not my fault you were already up.

Cassian let out a soft groan. *It's fine. Nesta went to sleep right after we got here and stayed in bed. I'm assuming she's still asleep.*

You got there before eleven.

I know.

It's three fifteen in the morning.

I know.

The silence was pointed enough that Cassian added, *Don't butt in.*

I wouldn't dream of it.

Cassian didn't particularly want to have this conversation, not at three in the morning and certainly not twice in one day. *I'll check in tomorrow night with an update on the first lesson.*

Rhys's pause was again too pointed to ignore. But his brother said, *Mor will bring you up to Windhaven. Good night, Cass.*

The dark presence in his mind faded, leaving him hollow and chilled.

Tomorrow would be a battlefield unlike any other he'd walked onto.

Cassian wondered how much of him would be left intact by the end of it.

CHAPTER 5

“If you don’t eat that, you’re going to regret it in about thirty minutes.”

Seated at the long table in the House of Wind’s dining room, Nesta looked up from the plate of scrambled eggs and steaming bowl of porridge. Sleep still weighed her bones, sharpening her temper as she said, “I’m not eating this.”

Cassian dug into his own portion—nearly double what lay before her. “It’s either that or nothing.”

Nesta kept perfectly still in her chair, keenly aware of every movement in the fighting leathers she’d donned. She’d forgotten how it felt to wear pants—the nakedness of having her thighs and ass on display.

Mercifully, Cassian had been too busy reading some report to see her slink in and slide into her seat. She glanced toward the doorway, hoping a servant might appear. “I’ll eat toast.”

“You’ll burn through that in ten minutes and be tired.” Cassian nodded toward the porridge. “Put some milk in it if you need to make it more palatable.” He added before she could demand it, “There’s no sugar.”

She clenched the spoon. “As punishment?”

“Again, it’ll give you energy for a short blast, and then make you crash.” He shoveled eggs into his mouth. “You need to keep your energy level constant throughout the day—foods full of sugar or flimsy bread give you a temporary high. Lean meats, whole grains, and fruits and vegetables keep you relatively steady and full.”

She drummed her nails on the smooth table. She’d sat here several times before with the members of Rhysand’s court. Today, with only the two of them, it felt obscenely large. “Are there any other areas of my daily life that you’re going to be presiding over?”

He shrugged, not pausing his eating. “Don’t give me a reason to add any more to the list.”

Arrogant asshole.

Cassian nodded toward the food again. “Eat.”

She shoved the spoon into the bowl but didn’t lift it.

“Have it your way, then.” He finished his porridge and returned to the eggs.

“How long will today’s session be?” The dawn had revealed clear skies, though she knew the Illyrian Mountains had their own weather. Might already be crusted in the first snows.

“As I said yesterday: the lesson is two hours. Right until lunch.” He set his bowl on his plate, piling the silverware within. They vanished a heartbeat later, taken by the magic of the House. “Which will be the next time we eat.” He glanced pointedly at her food.

Nesta leaned back in her chair. “One: I’m not participating in this *lesson*. Two: I’m not hungry.”

His hazel eyes guttered. “Not eating won’t bring your father back.”

“That has *nothing* to do with this,” she hissed. “*Nothing*.”

He braced his forearms on the table. “We’re going to cut the bullshit. You think I haven’t gone through what you’re dealing with? You think I haven’t seen and done and felt all that before? And seen those I love deal with it, too? You aren’t the first, and you won’t be the last. What happened to your father was terrible, Nesta, but—”

She shot to her feet. “You don’t know *anything*.” She couldn’t stop the shaking that overtook her. From rage or something else, she didn’t know. She balled her hands into fists. “Keep your fucking opinions to yourself.”

He blinked at the profanity, at what she guessed was the white-hot rage crinkling her face. And then he said, “Who taught you to curse?”

She squeezed her fists harder. “You lot. You have the filthiest mouths I’ve ever heard.”

Cassian’s eyes narrowed with amusement, but his mouth remained a thin line. “I’ll keep my fucking opinions to myself if you eat.”

She threw every bit of venom she could muster into her gaze.

He only waited. Unmovable as the mountain into which the House had been built.

Nesta sat down, grabbed the bowl of porridge, shoved a lumpy spoonful into her mouth, and nearly gagged at the taste. But she forced it down. Then another spoonful. Another. Until the bowl was clean and she started on the eggs.

Cassian monitored each bite.

And when there was nothing left, she scooped up her plate and bowl and held his stare as she dumped her dishes atop each other, the sound of the rattling silverware filling the room.

She again rose, stalking toward him. The doorway beyond him. He stood as well.

Nesta could have sworn he wasn’t breathing as she passed, close enough that a shift of her elbow would have had it brushing his stomach. She said sweetly, “I look forward to your silence.”

Unable to help the smirk blooming on her mouth, she aimed for the door. But a hand on her arm stopped her.

Cassian’s eyes blazed, the red Siphon tethered on the back of the hand that gripped her fluttering with color. A wicked, taunting smile curved his lips.

“Glad to see you woke up ready to play, Nesta.” His voice dropped to a low rumble.

She couldn’t help the thundering of her heart at that voice, the challenge in his eyes, the nearness and size of him. Had never been able to help it. Had once let him nuzzle and lick at her throat because of it.

Had let him kiss her during the final battle because of it. Barely a kiss—about all he could manage in his injured state—and yet it had shattered her entirely.

I have no regrets in my life, but this. That we did not have time. That I did not have time with you, Nesta. I will find you again in the next world—the next life. And we will have that time. I promise.

She relived those moments more often than she cared to admit. The press of his fingers as he’d cupped her face, the way his mouth had felt and tasted, tinged with blood but still tender.

She couldn’t bear it.

Cassian didn’t so much as blink, though his grip on her arm gentled.

She willed herself not to swallow. Willed her surging blood to chill to ice.

His eyes again narrowed with amusement, but he let go. “You have five minutes until we leave.”

Nesta managed to step away. “You’re a brute.”

He winked. “Born and raised.”

She managed another step. If she refused to leave the House, Cassian or Morrigan or Rhys could just haul her to Windhaven. And if she flat-out refused to do anything, they’d drop her in the human lands without a second thought. The realization was enough to steel her further. “Don’t ever put your hands on me again.”

“Noted.” His eyes still blazed.

Her fingers curled once more. She selected her next words like throwing knives. “If you think this training nonsense is going to result